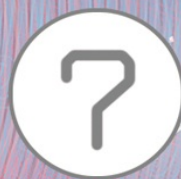


Iori Miyazawa



OTHERSIDE PICNIC

Funeral of the Moon

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Things With Frightening Names

A blue abyss. A valley cave. Wainscotting. Iron. Mounds of dirt. Lightning, and not only its name, is truly terrifying. Violent winds. Ominous clouds. Comets. Sudden showers. Barren fields.

Robbers, terrifying in all aspects. Sinful monks, frightening to almost all people. The wealthy, also terrifying in all aspects. Living ghosts. Mock strawberries. Devil's bracken. Devil's yams. Briars. Trifoliate oranges. Charcoal. Ushi-oni. Anchors—but not so much in name as in appearance.

The Pillow Book, #148

File 21: A Midterm Report on the Mysterious

1

“I decided to take Kasumi in.”

When Kozakura made that sudden announcement, I became still, fried chicken still in hand. Looking up, I saw Toriko was the same way: her eyes were wide and crumbs of breading were still around her mouth. She had her glove off, so her translucent left hand was covered in grease too.

We were in the familiar combined dining room and kitchen at Kozakura’s mansion. It was just the three of us—me, Toriko, and Kozakura herself—sitting around the table. Two days after we beat T-san the Templeborn, we stopped by here, as it had become our usual hangout. For an after-party, as usual. The main dish tonight was a box of KFC.

Every time we returned from the other world, Toriko wanted to drink and party like this. At some point, I found myself feeling uneasy if we didn’t do it. I guess that’s what you’d call a force of habit. It might have been a sort of ritual, as it brought us back from the abnormal to our ordinary lives.

I swallowed a mouthful of Red Hot Chicken so I could finally talk. With my lips tingling a little from the spice, I asked, “Take her in? Here?”

“Yeah.”

“In this house?”

“Is that wrong?”

“I don’t know if it’s wrong or not, but... What made you decide to do it?”

“We can’t just leave her with DS Research forever,” Kozakura replied curtly. Then, without a look at either of us, who had stopped eating, she grabbed another piece of chicken and tore into it.

Kasumi was the girl Toriko and I had brought back from the Otherside. At first

I'd thought she was a normal girl who'd wandered into the other world, but we were never able to identify her, so we decided to name her ourselves. She couldn't have been more than elementary school age. She wasn't telling us anything, though, so that was just a guess.

"I mean, yes, that may be true, but..."

"That place is too dangerous to have a kid loitering around. We don't know what might happen there. Even if she's fine, she'll give all the adults there stress ulcers from worrying about her."

Kasumi was able to travel freely between the surface world and the interstitial space. She'd been staying at the DS Research building ever since we'd taken her into our protection (?), but that ability of hers made it so she could go anywhere, and that was risky. The tightly sealed UBL artifacts storage and the sick rooms for Fourth Kind patients were like an open playground to Kasumi.

And on top of that, Runa Urumi was in the medical ward too...

When she went inside Runa's room, Kasumi covered her ears on her own, so she apparently knew Runa's Voice was dangerous, but we had no way of avoiding the Voice without both my eye and Toriko's hand. I couldn't imagine covering her ears would help.

If Runa became aware of Kasumi's ability, I had pretty much no doubt that she'd try to get her hands on it. She wanted out. Although she was staying put for now, she wasn't the type to sit there and let us keep her in captivity forever.

"No one can control Kasumi's power anyway, and if she's here, well, it's less dangerous than her shifting around inside DS Research."

Kozakura had taken to calling Kasumi's ability "shifting." It was a power that let her transition through the various phases, or maybe layers—I wasn't sure exactly what to call them, but facets of reality—without it seeming to take much effort. It was as easy for her to go back and forth from the interstitial space as pressing the Shift key on the keyboard to change the kind of letters you were using.

"You're okay with this?" Toriko, who had kept quiet until now, asked.

“With what?”

“I mean...” Toriko started to say, then trailed off.

Kozakura looked at her. Then, after looking one another in the eye for a few seconds, there was a strange silence. I didn’t like it, so I knocked back my can of lemon sour, then put it back down on the table. The dry sound from the empty can drew their attention.

“Even if we assume it’s all right for you to take her in, are you going to be able to communicate with her?” I asked.

“I think I’ll learn how,” Kozakura answered.

“She can only speak with borrowed words, right?”

“For now, yeah. But I can sense her desire to communicate. You must feel it too, right, Sorawo-chan?”

“Well, yeah.”

When Kasumi spoke with us, she didn’t use her own words, but fragments of conversations Toriko and I had in the past. I didn’t figure it out at first, but with careful listening, I started to think she was quoting them in ways that flowed with the current conversation. While I couldn’t wholly discount the possibility that we were just reading too much into it, her quotes were relevant more often than I was willing to chalk up to coincidence.

“There’s still a lot of mysteries, though. Like why does Kasumi know about our past conversations?” Toriko, who had resumed eating, said while munching on chicken. “It makes no sense, right? We’d never even met her before.”

I nodded, dipping a fry in the mentaiko mayo dip.

“I have no idea how she’s able to quote from conversations we had when not only was she not there, no one other than the two of us was either. Was she secretly following us all along, and remembers everything she heard or something?”

“Seems kind of unlikely,” I said.

“I know, right? That can’t be it.”

“No matter how out of it you two were, you’d have to notice,” Kozakura agreed, taking a sip of cola. She wasn’t drinking it hot today, but cold. She apparently drank it the normal way with meals.

“That’s not the sense I get from hearing her talk, you know?” Kozakura continued. “It’s not that she’s imitating words she’s heard, it’s more like...she came preinstalled with a dictionary of other people’s utterances.”

“She didn’t learn them, but came with them built-in, you mean?” I asked.

“That’s the sense I get.”

“Who installed them in her, and why?” Toriko wondered aloud, causing Kozakura to frown.

“To answer that, we’d have to figure out what Kasumi is first...”

We waited silently until Kozakura gave up and continued.

“I think that, like T-san the Templeborn or Michiko Abarato, Kasumi may be a sort of probe sent here from the Otherside. The word she’s said multiple times, ‘interface,’ may be indicative of that.”

“So you were thinking that too.”

I was of the same opinion as Kozakura. The Otherside entities we’d encountered thus far appeared in the forms of ghost stories from inside people’s heads, and often spoke in snippets of text copied and pasted right out of net lore. Kasumi’s method of communication used a different dictionary, but was very similar to the way the Otherside entities acted.

“Sorawo-chan, you were saying before that the ones that took on human forms were trying to approach us and make contact from the other side.”

“You think Kasumi’s a part of that approach?” Toriko asked.

“I think it’s highly likely,” Kozakura replied.

“And you’re going to take her in, knowing that?” I asked.

“Because I can’t just abandon her,” Kozakura responded, dropping the chicken bone that she had picked clean on her plate.

“You’re not scared?” Toriko asked.

“Of the girl? I dunno. In some ways, the two of you are scarier.”

“Uh, that’s not what I was getting at.”

“Because she’s connected to the other world, you mean?”

“Yeah...”

Seeing the confusion on Toriko’s face, Kozakura answered her seriously.

“There’s a lot of unknowns here, but I think the girl herself is human. Not some sort of pseudo-human created on the Otherside. I think that a genuine human may have been set up as an interface between the other world and humanity.”

“If that’s what’s going on, it’s a method we haven’t encountered before,” I noted.

Their past attempts to “approach” us flashed through my mind. The entities that existed beyond the Otherside, who we vaguely referred to as “them,” had tried to make contact with us through a variety of pseudo-humans before now. For the vast majority of them, we were able to figure out they were inhuman because of their creepy, illogical words and actions. That had been the same with the two most recent examples, Michiko Abarato and T-san the Templeborn too.

Michiko Abarato had me fooled at first. The surprise scenario of being asked by a woman who we’d heard had vanished to search for her disappeared husband may have impaired my judgment. The abnormal nature of the situation only became clear to me when we received that incomprehensible “We got married” postcard. When we met, I thought we were having a normal conversation, but were we really? Maybe distance had made it harder for her to keep up an appearance of humanness, or it could be that it was strange all along, and we just hadn’t noticed...

When T-san showed up later, his humanness was more refined. It wasn’t just me—he was able to interact with the other students in my seminar and the professor without arousing suspicion. Still, when T-san went places where we weren’t around, he started acting strange. Based on the traces we’d seen in his ruined apartment, he’d been walking in circles on the tatami mats with his shoes on, and when we spoke to him directly later on there was something that felt off about the way he talked.

In both cases, they hadn't managed to perfectly imitate a human.

By comparison, Kasumi was overwhelmingly more human-like than either of them. While her expression lacked emotion, and she could only speak the words of others, there was something fundamentally different between her and those pseudo-humans.

That said, I couldn't prove it. It was possible "they" might be learning to create more intricate replicas. If that's what was going on, then Kozakura would be letting their most advanced agent live in her house. That was fine when Toriko and I were around, but once they were alone, if Kasumi turned out to be a pseudo-human I had no idea what she might do to Kozakura and that scared me. What if Kozakura had been replaced the next time we met? Replaced? Oh, right, "they" might be learning to imitate humans so they can replace us and become residents of this side? Worse yet, the ones we've met may only be a small fraction of the ones out there, and they could be doing the same thing all over the world, and they bubble up everywhere and pop, pop, pop, replace us, and from above it looks like a bubbly pattern, and people with trypophobia must hate that, I mean, I'm fine with it, but sometimes it squicks me out, but when you raise your vantage point and look down on something from up really high, the overlooking view seems like a really, really big painting, but no matter how you think about it—

"Sorawo."

A touch on my arm brought me back to my senses. Looking up, I saw Toriko and Kozakura eyeing me with concern.

"Did it happen again...?" I asked, and they both nodded.

When I thought about "them," my mind would go blank and freeze for a little while. It seemed to push some strange switch inside my head. Normally, I tried not to think about them, but it affected Toriko too, so we tried to look out for it in one another.

Shaking my head vigorously, I found I'd lost track of whatever it was I was thinking, like when you wake from a dream.

"You okay?" Kozakura asked me.

“Sorry. What were we talking about again?”

“About Kasumi being human,” Toriko helpfully explained.

“I was thinking Kasumi’s human too, but...what made you think that, Kozakura-san?” I asked, trying to get back on track.

“She’s not trying to seem human.”

It caught me off guard how simple Kozakura’s answer was. “Yeah, that’s true... You have a point.”

“I know. Because humans don’t need to act human.”

Is that what felt human about Kasumi for me? I wondered, with the answer making a lot of sense to me. Beside me, Toriko’s brow furrowed and she had a complicated expression on her face.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Huh? No, I was just thinking, ‘Oh, I get it,’” she replied with a kind of vague tone before knocking back her can of beer.

“Are you suspicious of Kasumi?”

“Nah. She looks human to me too... She’s a little similar to you.”

I couldn’t help but smile at Toriko’s teasing comment. “Yeah, I can’t really deny that.”

I had some thoughts about the way Kasumi went where she pleased, unconcerned about the people around her. Like, *Objectively, I’m not so different from this kid...*

“Maybe it’s best if Kozakura takes her in. She’s good at looking after people,” Toriko said, earning us a scowl from Kozakura.

“It kind of pisses me off when you two say that.”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” I shot back.

“Now listen, if someone you loaned money to said you were very generous, what would you think? People have killed for less, damn it.”

“Are you taking in Kasumi because you’re an adult?” Toriko asked.

“Huh?”

“You’re trying to look like a responsible adult...”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. That’s it. Sure. Everyone around me is a child so I’ve gotta be the one to do it. It’d make things a lot easier on me if you two would grow up already, though.”

“Okay. We’ll work on it little by little.”

“Little by little? That’s really your response? You scare me.”

While Kozakura and Toriko squabbled, I idly thought about things.

Is that all it is? I wondered.

Was it just her sense of responsibility as an adult?

I could accept that Kozakura was concerned about me and Toriko because she was good-natured, and good at looking out for others, but what about Kasumi? She was an unidentified girl we’d brought back from the other world, she couldn’t hold a proper conversation, and she was always running off and disappearing. That put this on kind of a different level. If Kozakura really was taking her in because she couldn’t bring herself to leave her alone, that went beyond just being good-natured. She’d be a saint.

“What?” Kozakura glared at me. It looked like my thoughts were showing on my face again.

I looked down, mumbling, “No, it’s nothing,” as I reached for another piece of chicken.

You sure live in a big house, Kozakura.

I remembered what Kasumi said to Kozakura when we returned from our encounter with T-san.

But isn’t it a little too big to live in alone...?

I was startled by the look of surprise on her face then. It took some time for her to be able to respond to us after that, so she must have been pretty shocked.

If it wasn’t something I said, and it wasn’t something Toriko said, then it was

easy to guess who those words must have come from. That was something Satsuki Uruma had said to Kozakura. Was it really just Kozakura's sense of responsibility as an adult that was making her take Kasumi in? I don't think it was unreasonable of me to suspect otherwise.

Uh, not that I really cared about Satsuki Uruma at all.

If anything, my concern was more with Toriko's feelings. If I'd noticed it, then she must have too. I knew Toriko loved me now—I mean, at this point, after it had been made so abundantly clear to me, I could only say that—but what had she felt when she heard Kasumi mimicking the words of Satsuki Uruma, the one she had been so obsessed with before.

I stole furtive glances at her as I nibbled on my chicken, but her behavior gave me no insight into how she might be feeling. Toriko was much better at hiding her thoughts than I was. And, on top of that, I was a woman who had no idea how others felt. This was hopeless.

"The way she speaks by quoting phrases we know makes her seem strange at first glance, but the kid's not doing anything all that strange, really."

It looked like they'd gotten back on the topic of Kasumi at some point.

"The process of language acquisition in childhood has to start with imitating the adults around them. They connect sounds with meanings, build their vocabulary, and gradually learn to talk. Kasumi's the same. The difference is that her vocabulary isn't made up of words, but preexisting chunks of phrases."

"So it's only the source of her dictionary that's strange, but her communication is otherwise normal, you're saying?" Toriko asked.

"Exactly. So if we talk around her, she'll learn from what she hears, and should gradually change how she talks too. Once she understands the phrases she's been quoting, I'm sure she'll break them down into their constituent parts inside her head and rearrange them, which should make conversation with her more normal. So I'm not worried about being able to communicate in the future. It's gonna be tough at first, though."

"Makes sense! Let's talk around Kasumi a lot, then! Okay, Sorawo?"

"Uh, sure..."

“That may be the biggest thing you two can contribute—don’t teach her anything weird. And watch your mouths. Especially you, Sorawo-chan.”

“Am I that bad? I’m pretty sure I don’t curse or say vulgar things all that often... What do you think, Toriko?”

“Erm...”

“The problem isn’t that you’re foulmouthed or vulgar. It’s the way you’ll tell dark jokes, and then just keep on going with a goofy grin on your face because you can’t tell everyone else has been put off by it. Pretty common for otaku, really. You know how there’s people who like internet slang so much they use it in daily life? Yeah, you’re the same way.”

“Urgh... Gh...”

With a cold glance at me as I suffered some severe emotional damage, Kozakura continued. “So be extra careful in front of Kasumi. Got it?”

“O-Okay...”

“Y-You’ll be fine. I’ll be careful about it too, okay?” Toriko said, trying to make me feel better.

“You’ll be careful about it? How so, exactly?” I asked.

“If you say anything too off-color, then...” Toriko replied, punctuating it with a karate chop gesture.

“That’s abuse!”

“You’re a bad influence too! What’ll you do if Kasumi ends up being quick to hit people like that?” Kozakura asked.

“O-Okay... I’ll restrain myself.”

“Do you have such violent impulses that they need to be restrained?!”

“No! It’s not like that, it’s just... It’s an expression.”

As we bantered back and forth, we forgot what we’d been talking about. It took thirty minutes for the conversation to get back to Kasumi.

“But if you’re taking a kid in, aren’t there going to be all sorts of problems, like her family register and stuff?” Toriko asked as she grabbed some soggy fries.

“Well, yeah. Migiwa’s got contacts who’ll sort all that out.”

“What’s with that guy, seriously?” I asked.

“He’s a friend,” she replied.

“A friend, huh?”

“So he’ll prepare a new identity for her, then?” Toriko asked.

“That would be what it means, yeah.”

“Heh, that sounds neat!”

“What do you mean, ‘neat’?” I interjected.

“Like in a spy movie, where they’ve got passports with different names and stuff. Have you ever wondered what kind of person you could pose as?”

“I get what you mean, but I don’t even have my own passport...”

“Well, get one, Sorawo. You can’t go on trips overseas without one,” Toriko said.

“Whaa? I don’t need that kind of trip.”

“I mean, if we come out of the Otherside and we’re in another country, you’ll be in trouble, you know?”

“Urgh... Okay, yeah, that’s true.”

Toriko made a reasonable point. Distances in the other world were different from in the surface world, so I could easily imagine we might wander into a foreign country without realizing it. The furthest we’d gone so far was Ishigaki Island, but that was just a stone’s throw from Taiwan. One misstep, and that could have been the end for us.

“Okay, you got me. I’ll get one eventually.”

“Aw, yeah! That’s a promise.” Toriko clapped her hands with glee. It was something a little kid would do.

“But, if we do end up in a foreign country, won’t we be in trouble even if we have passports? Like, what do we say if they ask what we’re doing in their country when there’s no record of us having left Japan...?”

When I raised this objection, Kozakura seemed to remember something.

“Lately, I hear they don’t stamp your passport. They use facial recognition gates and stuff.”

“Really? Well, we’re good to go, then, huh?” Toriko said enthusiastically.

“Actually, I’ve heard that because of the lack of stamps, it’s become common for people to suspect you even when you’re there legitimately,” Kozakura explained.

“If there’s room for excuses, we can make it work!”

“Don’t talk like a bad student.”

“Well, I *am* a bad student,” Toriko said irresponsibly as she drained a can of highball. I thought the way she looked—tipsy, and with her hair a little disheveled—was super cool. Even though what she was saying was pretty awful. What the hell?

“How much can we decide about Kasumi’s, uh, new ID?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Like her name, age, nationality...”

“Dunno. I’ll have to ask Migiwa. They might use an existing identity, or they might fabricate a new one from scratch. I don’t know how it works.”

“Oh, yeah? You think we can choose a birthday for her, at least?”

“A birthday? Why?” Kozakura asked.

“You don’t get to choose your own birthday, right? So, if we have the opportunity...”

“Uh, you don’t get to choose *most* things about your identity.”

“Oh, right, my birthday’s coming up, by the way,” Toriko said.

“Oh, yeah?”

“It is, huh?” I interjected. “When?”

“June 6th.”

“Hmm, that’s next month.”

“Not that I expect you to be interested, Sorawo,” Toriko said, sulking.

“Fine, fine, let’s celebrate it,” I said, thinking she was being a pain in the butt. Toriko’s face lit up.

“Yeah! And let’s celebrate yours too!”

“You don’t have to bother with mine...”

“I *want* to celebrate it! When is it?”

“May 5th,” I answered, and Toriko froze up.

“May 5th?”

“That’s what I said.”

“What day is it today?”

“I forget. What was it?” I asked.

“Hm? May 10th,” Kozakura said, causing Toriko to shout out loud.

“I already missed it!”

It may be hard to believe, but this sparked a huge argument, and that was the end of the day’s after-party.

2

Two days later, while attending my cultural anthropology seminar, I only half listened to the other students’ presentations while I was thinking.

My internal debate was about Toriko, of course.

Toriko had been more upset than I expected at the fact that my birthday had already gone by, and I was just confused. I’d never taken her to be the type to care so much about important dates and that sort of thing, so it didn’t seem right to me. I mean, we’d never asked each other about our birthdays before.

I dunno. The way she got upset, it might have come from the same part of her that cared so much about having after-parties. It reminded me of how insistent she was about going to the beach in Okinawa. I felt like she had this sort of, I don’t know...obsession with not missing out on events we could experience

together.

Oh, jeez. What a pain in the butt. Just thinking about it made my chest tighten, and my head feel hot. I wanted to shout out loud.

I really wasn't good with this kind of stuff. You know... Thinking about other people's feelings.

I nearly started scratching my head, which was getting itchy, but then I remembered I was in class and just managed to stop myself.

It'd be easier if I could snap and say, *I don't care anymore!* and then disappear into the other world on my own. But I couldn't. Damn it...

I let out a sigh, quietly, so no one around me could hear. People are difficult. I just wasn't cut out for this kind of thing.

Once I knew for sure that Toriko's feelings for me were...affectionate, I didn't know how to respond, and I'd been searching for an answer ever since. In fact, searching's all I'd done. I worried and worried, but nothing had been resolved. Overthinking things can be as bad as doing nothing, and I had a feeling I was wasting time.

Still, Toriko's been so unstable lately... I was thinking, but then I reconsidered.

No, Toriko had always been that way. I just never noticed. I was blind, and hadn't been able to realize what kind of person Toriko was, despite being with her all this time.

The truth was, I still didn't know. Like, when I lost my memories after T-san got me, and I was saying all sorts of weird stuff, she hit me.

Thinking back on it, why...? Why did she hit me?

"Were we going out, or something?"

That's what I asked her. That was what made Toriko lose it.

Okay, yeah, it's something I'd never say if I was in my right mind, but was it something to hit me for?

She tried to excuse it, saying that slapping me had fixed me before, but it was still a weird response, wasn't it?

The day before yesterday, while she hadn't hit me, she did get super mad and throw a fit; I had no idea what she was thinking. Was missing my birthday something to flip out that bad over? It was only a few days past; if she'd wanted to celebrate, I wouldn't have minded it being a little late. Like, we could have gone for cake or something...

Celebrate, huh...?

When was the last time someone celebrated my birthday?

I didn't have to think long. It was back in elementary school. When mom was still alive.

My family fell in with the cult after that, which brought an end to any religious events we'd celebrated before, and birthdays ended up being canceled at the same time. I don't think celebrating birthdays is a religious thing, but I also started avoiding my family, so even if they'd offered to celebrate with me, I'd have refused.

From then on, birthdays were just another day to me—to the point I'd completely forgotten about mine until I was asked.

If I'd explained, would Toriko have been able to accept that? Probably. But I think she'd cry for me. The last time I told her about my past, Toriko was super sad. It's confusing, having someone get sad on your behalf when it doesn't really bother you, and I didn't want to make her cry. When I experienced Toriko's perspective in the interstitial space in the mirror, the way I'd made her cry really shocked me.

"Okay, could I ask you to go next, Kamikoshi-kun."

"Huh? Oh! Yes!"

I was pulled back to reality when the professor called my name. Today was my day to present. I regained my composure while my printouts were being passed around, then started to speak.

"Erm, I'm Kamikoshi. I believe, last time, I said I was going to study cute things, but I've reconsidered, and I'm thinking I'll do ghost stories like I originally planned..."

I gauged the responses of people around me as I began speaking. Professor Abekawa and the other students in my seminar were looking down at my printout and listening.

“Uhh, to start off... There’s a variety of different types of ghost stories, but we can largely divide them into fictional ghost stories and true ghost stories. There are other ways to break them up, but for convenience’s sake, that’s how I’ll be dividing them here. True ghost stories, as the name suggests, are ghost stories that are told as if the events in them truly happened, and these are the ones I’m interested in. That said, because ghost stories are generally told as stories that ‘really happened,’ you may find it strange to refer to these ones as true ghost stories.”

“But, if you started your story saying, ‘this is just some lie I cooked up just now,’ you have no idea how people would react, right? Even if you don’t go out of your way to say it’s untrue, you might say you heard about it from a friend of a friend... I think you’ll have heard stories like that. Ones that people tell you as if they’re true, but when you listen closely they’re vague about who they happened to, and they’ve just been passed on as rumors. The sort of thing we’d call urban legends. Those aren’t true ghost stories. The person who experienced things, and the people who heard and recorded the story, are clear. That’s different from traditional ghost stories. In the case of internet ghost stories, people are generally anonymous, which changes things a little. But you can tell where the story came from, like it was posted to this board at this time, which is a clear difference from urban legends.”

“The history of true ghost stories is shorter. The genre started in the early ‘90s, and gradually developed from there. Before that, there were collections like Miyoko Matsutani’s school ghost stories or Kunio Yanagita’s *Tono Monogatari*, and if you go back to the Edo Period, Yasumi Negishi’s *Mimibukuro*. They interviewed people and wrote down the stories of ghosts and other strange things they were told, so they feel similar in terms of overall flavor, but many of them are stories the interviewees had themselves heard from others, so they’re not, strictly speaking, the same.”

“Now, if I were to say they’re important works in the history of true ghost stories—although ‘works’ may not be the best word to use—there are the

following...”

My delivery was a little awkward at first, but once I got going, I was in my element. Following the outline on my printout, I explained conceptually what the genre of true ghost stories was.

“...and so, that’s what I’m thinking I’ll make my theme, but I don’t yet know how to approach it from the perspective of cultural anthropology. I haven’t finished sorting it all out yet, but that’s what I have.”

When I finished my presentation, Professor Abekawa spoke up, “Thank you. You have an interesting topic. I was happy to see you so animated talking about a topic that you clearly have a prior interest in.”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Let’s move on to questions. Anyone?”

At the professor’s urging, a number of my classmates raised their hands.

“Have you ever had a scary experience yourself, Kamikoshi-san?”

There was the question I knew was coming, and it came right away.

“I have.”

“What sort of experience was it?”

“I think it’s better if I don’t say.”

That response sent an excited murmur through the room.

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“It’s, uh, a pretty private thing. I’m sorry,” I said as meekly as I could.

“Oh...” People in the room seemed to get it.

This was the answer I came to after agonizing over how to respond to the question I was pretty much guaranteed to get asked. I thought it was a pretty smooth way of handling it myself. If I said it was a private matter, I didn’t have to go into the specifics, and I figured it would keep them from getting nosy. Let them imagine family troubles, physical and mental scars, trauma I couldn’t bring myself to talk about, or whatever else they liked. The ghost stories they’d seen themselves before now must have had those kinds of elements too. They’d

remember those, and conclude that something had happened. I don't want to toot my own horn, but I'm good at thinking when it comes to ghost stories.

It looked like I was right, and we naturally moved on to the next question.

"Um, calling them 'true ghost stories' just doesn't feel right to me... Sorry, I'm going to be blunt, but all ghost stories are fake, right?"

"What makes you think that?"

"What makes me think that? Because they're impossible. Like, there's no such thing as ghosts."

"First, not all ghost stories necessarily involve ghosts. In the case of true ghost stories in particular, the main defining characteristic is that a person who experienced inexplicable events relates the story without attempting to interpret them."

"What do you mean?"

"To give you an example, let's say there's a story where A-san experiences sleep paralysis, sees an old woman standing at his bedside, and passes out from terror. In a traditional ghost story, they'd say the old woman was a ghost."

"She isn't...?"

"We just don't know. Ghosts, vengeful spirits, bound spirits, protective spirits, living ghosts, youkai, hallucinations caused by sleep paralysis, there could be a variety of explanations, but those are all just our interpretations. All A-san experienced was seeing an old woman standing by his bedside while he was paralyzed. In true ghost stories, people write *what happened*."

"And...is that interesting? It all sounds pretty plain from everything you've said. I don't feel like that would be very scary."

"Just writing down the events isn't scary. It's making the reader make the connections between them, showing glimpses of the whole, that makes them scary. Basically, if a bad storyteller does it it's not scary, and if a good storyteller does it, it is. It's just a matter of technique."

"Isn't making those connections and hinting at things a form of interpretation?"

That was a weak spot. I thought about it as I answered.

“You have a point. If I were to be more precise, I’d say that simply recording the truth is impossible to begin with, and a certain degree of interpretation is unavoidable... It may be wrong to define whether or not something falls into the genre of true ghost stories based on the presence or absence of interpretation.”

“I thought so.”

“But what interests me about ghost stories isn’t whether they’re scary or not... It’s how much those accounts tell me about a world we can’t see. In that sense, my perspective is different from those of ghost story writers and tellers who focus on how well they can scare people. So... I hated it when something that added a texture of interpretation, like saying something was a ghost, was layered over the events. That’s what I wanted to say when I said they don’t interpret things...” I realized I’d started to say too much, and shut my mouth.

“I’m still having trouble seeing it. What are these ghost stories with minimal interpretation you’re talking about, Kamikoshi-san?”

“Well, for example...” I looked around at the faces sitting at the table.

“During our last seminar, there was another person in this room.” The looks they were giving me grew dubious.

“He was a male student, sitting here like any of you. Do you remember him? I don’t think so. He didn’t really do anything to stand out. I don’t think we have anyone marked as absent today either.”

“Was there someone like that?”

“Huh? Was he a zashiki warashi?”

“There was nobody like that.”

They each responded in their own way. I simply pointed.

“Okay, then why is that one chair empty? When we’re all packed in so tight too.”

In one corner of the square made up of long desks that had been pushed together, directly across from me, there was a single pipe chair that no one was

sitting in. Everyone was packed in so tight their elbows were almost touching, so the gap there was highly unnatural.

Hushed voices echoed through the room. Until I pointed it out, no one had thought anything of the empty seat.

As the murmuring continued, I said, "It can be explained, of course. Maybe it's just that no one thought to move that chair aside so it wasn't taking up space. But it's a strange experience, one that feels wrong to all of you, right? None of you saw a ghost yourselves, but you thought, 'Huh?' or maybe you shuddered... That said, it wasn't that intense of an experience, so I think you'll all forget it in no time. Interestingly, while mysterious experiences feel impactful in the moment, we tend to forget most of them quite easily. Picking up on them is another trait of modern true ghost stories."

I had been tense, thinking about how I'd handle T-san if he was still in the seminar room, but he'd vanished. Judging by the other students' reactions, they'd all forgotten him. He was probably never supposed to exist here, and when we defeated him it was made so that he "never was."

Benimori-san, who had come to talk to me before, and the other three who went on that test of courage with her, didn't react any differently to what I was saying than the rest. They didn't stare at me, have a change of pallor... Nothing. They were all just fine. I think Benimori-san was being made to follow the text of T-san's ghost story back then, so I wonder if the test of courage she talked about ever really took place. I didn't even know if her coming to me for advice was real or not.

While I was thinking about it, the whispers settled down, and the next hand went up.

"From what I'm hearing, these true ghost stories don't just come directly from the person who had a strange experience, but the people who hear and then retell their story are also important. Is that not correct?"

"I think you're right. That's a tendency in the broader genre of ghost stories, so I think how personal experiences are told is a key element of it."

"Basically, there are informants, and there are field workers. I think when you consider the problem of how to talk about the information from your sources,

it's very similar to the way anthropologists practice ethnography. I know you said you were considering how you should approach this topic from the perspective of cultural anthropology, Kamikoshi-san, but if you were to interview people who had these sorts of strange experiences yourself, couldn't you write an ethnographic report?"

"Yeah, that's right. I thought that would work too at first. But..."

I trailed off. Before I knew about the Otherside, I wouldn't have hesitated. I'd have gone on dreamily collecting ghost stories, in the hopes of capturing some small corner of the mysterious and frightening world that I'd glimpsed through true ghost stories for myself.

But now I'd encountered the other world. I'd become aware that an unknown world truly did exist in the most concrete way possible.

When I'd applied for the cultural anthropology program with the vague thought that maybe I could study ghost stories, the existence of the Otherside obviously didn't figure into that at all. Ironically, I found the answer before I could study it.

Well, what was I supposed to do here, then?

There was a time when I said that maybe I should drop out of university and make a living investigating the other world, but Kozakura seriously told me off for it. I was half-joking at the time, but also half-serious.

Kozakura's warning that if I didn't keep up some ties to the surface world it was going to cost me my life convinced me I should at least keep going to school, but that didn't resolve my troubles, and I'd been wondering what I should do ever since.

"But...?"

I came back to my senses when they pushed me to go on. "Even if I were to collect a bunch of experiences from people, I think that's all it would end up being. If I was going to become a teller of ghost stories, that would be fine, but if I'm going to approach this as a cultural anthropologist, I dunno... I don't think it works without a more academic core. Although, gathering a bunch of cases might let me see something..."

As I was mumbling through my answer, Professor Abekawa spoke up. “Kamikoshi-kun, the experience you mentioned earlier, the one you said was private and wouldn’t talk about. Is it tied to your reason for pursuing cultural anthropology?”

“Not directly, I don’t think. Before I started digging for ghost stories, I hadn’t had any particularly unusual experiences.”

“I don’t think you’ve told us yet why your focus is on true ghost stories specifically. Is it what you were saying before, about wanting to see a world you don’t know?”

“It’s because I found it interesting that people were talking about things that, if you think about them normally, are impossible as if they had actually happened. I found the fact that they weren’t uncertain rumors but had an actual person who experienced them reassuring.”

“Reassuring. It’s interesting you put it that way. In other words, Kamikoshi-kun, you were hoping for the mysterious happenings in ghost stories to be real.” I winced. The professor was pushing me harder than I expected. He wasn’t going to back off like the students just because I said it was something private.

“I don’t know that I was hoping for it, but I wanted to see for myself.”

“Whether they were true or not?”

“Yes!” The professor had touched on something I hadn’t wanted to talk about, so that came out more emphatic than I intended. I caught myself practically glaring at him. Even I was confused by that, and I lowered my eyes. He’d just been asking questions. Not picking a fight with me.

The professor didn’t seem upset. He continued on in the same tone as before. “Inexplicable things like curses and spirits have always been an important field of study in cultural anthropology. So your topic isn’t outlandish, by any means, Kamikoshi-kun. I saw a real curse myself in Africa a long time ago.”

Professor Abekawa said that so casually, then continued on.

“What one of the other students pointed out, about the format of true ghost stories being similar to ethnography was interesting. As you are already aware,

Kamikoshi-kun, there is the risk of simply collecting a bunch of episodic accounts. If you can come up with some sort of conclusion at the end, sure, you could make a thesis paper out of it, but it would be a waste. It's your job to find some sort of academic core, and you're welcome to take your time and consider it, but... Ah, yes, I recently saw a study on disasters and ghosts. It was focused on stories of ghosts seen after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami with a focus on ghost stories from the affected areas. Its theme addressed the anthropology of care. It's a field that's attracted a lot of attention recently."

"Oh..."

While I was aware of their existence, I hadn't personally been interested in disaster ghost stories—or rather, I'd avoided them. They felt too human. It made me feel awkward reading them. After reading one volume, I decided they weren't for me, the kind of person who got all giddy reading about ghost stories.

"To explain a little about the history, the anthropological study of witchcraft and spirits started with Westerners observing the customs of 'uncivilized' tribes from a perspective of modern rationalism. They assumed that the world that African and Southeast Asian shamans and mystics spoke of 'obviously couldn't exist,' and that they had these strangely irrational and uncivilized traditions. Later, when people were reflecting on the mistakes of colonialism, the view emerged that while, from an outside perspective, their beliefs seemed like irrational superstition, they were in fact rational and served a function within the context of their own societies. That they were part of a different system of reasoning than that of Western societies."

I nodded. I'd heard this several times in my first and second year classes.

"It's only recently, in the twenty-first century, that further objections have been raised to this view. Saying that it's the unique reasoning of non-Western societies may, ultimately, just be forcing 'rationality' onto them. It's possible that explanations that such and such custom has this or that societal function are just a way of translating things so they're easier for people from Western societies to digest. Now, if you're asking how we should put it, the argument is that rather than saying 'they believe magic and spirits exist,' we should think 'they live in a world where magic and spirits exist.' Outsiders mustn't translate it

into something rational. There's something untranslatable there. It may be similar to what you were saying about 'interpretation' earlier."

"You...could be right."

"What I found fascinating in your talk about true ghost stories was that 'experience' was the root of everything. If you only look at that aspect, it's rather stoic, but from what I can tell, the abilities of those who hear those experiences and retell them as ghost stories play an important part. You could likely expand the argument in that direction to include art and creativity, but that may not be what you want. I feel a more straightforward passion for the world these ghost stories are talking about from you."

The professor glanced down at an open folder full of loose-leaf paper in front of him, then gave me a meaningful look.

"I just so happen to have an 'experience' you'll likely be interested in right now. I hadn't paid any mind to that empty seat, the one you pointed out, until you mentioned it. I found it odd, so I checked the class list, and there's one name too many."

Excited whispering ran through the seminar room again.

"What was the name?"

"It seems to be written in my hand, but the characters are an illegible mess. I never noticed it either."

As the room went cold, he smiled.

"I see. Now I understand what you meant when you said that a ghost story can work even without seeing a ghost. It's interesting how you seem totally used to this kind of thing too."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess." As the one person who knew T-san was here until last time, I was struggling to figure out how to respond.

The professor waited for the students to quiet, then continued.

"Returning to the topic, in regard to your current dilemma, it may be best to face your own passion for the theme of ghost stories with the same frankness as you do the theme itself."

Unsure what he was trying to say, I asked, “Um... What do you mean by that?”

“It looks to me as if you’re hiding something.”

That made me jump a little. I stared back at him without saying a word.

“Either you’re hiding something, or trying not to see it. I don’t know if it’s this ‘private’ matter that you mentioned, and I have no intention of forcing you to talk about it. But when you take on any topic, lying about your motives is something you’ll only regret later. Even if you can’t tell others, be honest with yourself, at least, and do your best not to be vague about it. Why true ghost stories? Why did you want to see if ghost stories were true or not? If you think about those things, you may find what it is you want to dig into about this topic.”

“...”

“In cultural anthropology, we look at ‘things that are different.’ If we can say something is different from us, what we ourselves are becomes clearer at the same time. When we think others are different from ourselves, it’s impossible for the ‘self,’ our basis for judging that, to remain invisible. If we try to study others while that remains vague, we’ll only succeed in producing lifeless work. This is something I always tell my students.”

The professor looked down at his watch.

“That seems to be all the time we have. Let’s call it a day. I’ll see you all next week. Make sure you don’t forget if you’re presenting. Thank you.”

There was a clatter of chairs as students rose. I put my stuff for taking notes away too, then got up.

As I was about to leave the classroom, Benimori-san came over. “Kamikoshi-san, I wanted to thank you for last time.”

“Huh...?” I couldn’t help but stare at her. Benimori continued, lowering her voice.

“Things worked out after that, so it’s all good now. I just wanted to let you know.”

“Wait, hold on? What are you thanking me for?”

“Huh?”

For a moment, she gave me a blank look, then burst out laughing. “Ah ha ha, you know what,” she said in a warm, friendly tone, like I was playing dumb, then slapped me on the shoulder before leaving the room.

I headed out into the hall. Benimori-san was walking away quickly, catching up to a group of three other people who she left with, chatting and smiling. Those were...Arayama-kun, Doita-kun, and Cai-san. The ones who went to T-san’s apartment for the test of courage.

Based on their reactions during our seminar, they didn’t remember T-san, but maybe they remembered going for the test of courage? So she remembered something happening, and coming to me for help, then? Then what does she think about him vanishing like he was never here after coming to me to talk about him? I couldn’t imagine how it all fit together inside Benimori-san’s head.

Cocking my head to the side in confusion, I headed outside.

3

Unable to motivate myself to head back home, I got on a bus headed from the university to the station. I think I had it vaguely in my head that I was going to go check out a large bookstore, but as I rode along, my mind was preoccupied with what I’d been told during my seminar.

Professor Abekawa’s words weren’t premised on the existence of the Otherside, so he hadn’t hit the mark entirely. And yet, I still felt like he’d touched a sore spot.

There had been a lot of changes around me lately, and I felt like I’d been putting a lot of things off as I pressed forward. I gazed out the window as the scenery along the bus route rolled by, not really looking at any of it as I tried to sort out my thoughts.

The main reason I had jumped a bit when he said, “It looks as if you’re hiding something,” was obviously because I was keeping the Otherside a secret, but it was also because I felt like he’d guessed at a variety of other dark aspects of

myself too.

Like my feelings for Toriko. Kozakura's lectures. The way I interacted with the Otherside.

Kasumi. Akari.

Satsuki Uruma.

Whoever was on the other side of the Otherside.

I had all sorts of problems, all pushed off into some corner of my mind. Like I was hiding them in a hopelessly cluttered closet in an attempt to say my room was now clean.

He was right. I was hiding things. Not from others, but from myself. I was aware of that. But where was I even supposed to start? How could I sort any of this out? I had no clue.

The bus arrived at Minami-Yono Station. Still lost in thought, I got off the bus by sheer force of habit, headed up to the platform, and then realized: I hadn't decided what I was going to do next.

Normally, I'd hop the train to Ikebukuro, meet up with Toriko, and then we'd head for Shakujii-kouen or Jinbouchou, but... I just wasn't feeling up to it today. Judging from how she was the day before yesterday, Toriko was probably still in a bad mood and, frankly, after she snapped at me over such a nonsensical reason, I was still upset with her too.

As I was standing there, unsure what to do, a train headed in the opposite direction of Ikebukuro arrived. It was the Saikyou Line, headed for Oomiya Station. As I was looking at the destination, a thought occurred to me.

Oh, yeah, maybe I should check out what things are like there. I'm alone today, so it may be a good opportunity.

I got aboard, and the train immediately departed for Oomiya.

Oomiya was three stations north of Minami-Yono, and was the nearest major town in proximity to the university, so I'd been there several times when I was in my first year. I'd been heading into Tokyo all the time since meeting Toriko, so it had been a while since I'd gone back. But the place that led to us meeting

was a ruined building in Oomiya.

It took less than ten minutes for the train to reach Oomiya. In contrast to the west side of the station, where further development had yielded large buildings, the east side was still a sprawling town of small buildings and multi-tenant buildings, the same as it had ever been. It was on the east side, on the corner where two narrow streets met, that I came to a stop.

Pachinko parlors, ramen restaurants, taverns, parking lots... In between the various assorted buildings of the shopping arcade, there were many shops with their shutters lowered. Their signs had been taken down, and nothing was posted out front, so you couldn't even tell what kind of businesses they had been.

I casually approached the building and slipped into the gap between it and the neighboring one. The lock on the side door was broken, so I knew I should be able to get in. I'd been able to do so the last time I was here, at least.

Turning my body sideways as I proceeded down the gap, I put my hand on the sliding door. It got caught if you tried to move it normally, but if I put in some force, and lifted it up a little—there, it moved. I went in through the opening and shut the door behind me. It was surprisingly bright inside, the dust stirred up by my intrusion dancing in the light shining through the skylight.

Was that because it was early? I feel like it had been darker when I came here before.

The back room of a shop that had gone under. The ceiling and wallpaper were in poor shape and the sink and gas stove against the wall were dark with grime. There were chairs and a table in the center of the room, covered in dust.

It had been a while since I'd been back. The last time was on the day I met Toriko.

I'd found a gate to the Otherside here and, unable to believe my own discovery, came a number of times before finding the will to explore. Was it the second time? Or the third? I don't remember anymore... But anyway, on that day, I found the resolve to go inside, encountered the Kunekune, and then Toriko saved me.

What brought me to this abandoned building in the first place? Right. Back then, I had an interest in buildings where there'd been accidents. I found information on this place somewhere, and when I showed up I tried to get inside, and I could. Then I happened to open up the back door, and a grassy field spread out in front of me...

It all started here, yet my memories of it were vague, like they belonged to someone else. It had only been a year ago, so I was surprised by how I'd already forgotten nearly everything.

The me of then and the me of now were like totally different people. I could no longer remember what past me had been doing or what she had been thinking at the time.

In contrast to that, the memories of everything since I'd met Toriko were all so vivid. The difference was so stark when I compared them that it was like my monochrome world had suddenly changed to technicolor that day.

I crossed the room and approached the back door. The gate had been gone, but maybe it was back now...or so I vainly hoped as I grabbed the knob and gave it a turn.

Nothing so convenient happened.

I pushed the door open with trepidation, and on the side was just the back alleyway, as I'd expected. There was a puddle on the bare concrete surface fed by runoff from the external portion of an air conditioner. It seemed like a poor imitation of the swamp with the Kunekunes, and that made me feel sad.

When I learned my door to the plains of the unknown had become just another ordinary door, I think that hit me pretty hard. The path to the place I'd been seeking all that time had closed up right in front of me, after all.

At the time, Toriko offered to take me to the gate she'd found, but I refused. "It's fine, I'm all right," I remember saying as I rebuffed her. As if. If Toriko hadn't come out of her way to hunt me down at the university, I don't know what I'd have done after that. I might have gone on searching for a gate until I ended up like Abarato. Abandoning school to seek the Otherside, becoming more and more estranged from society... I definitely had all the motive and potential necessary for it. When I thought about it that way, I could see

Kozakura's concern.

As I gazed down at myself in the puddle, it occurred to me that, you know what? I'd never tried going in or out through this door.

I took a step out into the alley and looked towards the arcade. It was blocked off with an iron bar gate and a padlock. Turning the other direction, the alleyway came to an immediate dead end with the back doors of some other buildings. Oh, I guess it had never been possible to come in through here before. Had I been aware of that when I first came? I don't even remember.

I tried to go back in the back door, but came to a stop.

It was shut.

Huh...? Did I close it? Myself?

I couldn't imagine I would have, even unconsciously...

I approached, finding it strange, and tested the doorknob. It didn't budge. It was locked.

"Huh? You're kidding me."

Had I been shut out by an auto-lock? No, no, it wasn't that advanced. This was just a regular door that stayed unlocked once you opened it. Or was this door busted too, and it happened to engage the lock when it got pushed closed by a gust of air?

Well, shoot. I should've asked Migiwa for more information on that cheap tool, the whatever-it-was key he used.

I couldn't shoot out the padlock on the gate like I was in some movie, so...if it came to it, I'd have to quietly sneak out of here through the back of one of the other buildings with a door in the alley.

I sure screwed this up, I was thinking as I went to try the doorknob again, but then I heard a voice from inside.

"—did you see anyone else over there?"

I stopped in surprise. I knew that voice.

Even muffled by the door, it was unmistakable—that was Toriko's voice!

Did she come after me, and shut the door as a prank? I thought, but only for a brief moment, because there was another voice.

"I didn't. You're the first person I've met on the Otherside."

That was *my* voice.

I froze, unable to understand what was happening, and the conversation inside continued.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Are you looking for someone?"

"Yeah, kinda."

The memory came back to me. This was the conversation Toriko and I had after we first met, on our way back from the Otherside. We were returning from the other world excited by the unreality of the situation, yet feeling a sense of despondency brought on by just having escaped a dangerous place.

As I stared at the door, I heard my own voice.

"Right, you mentioned a name earlier."

What's this?

As I listened to our past conversation in our own voices, I suddenly felt dizzy, like I was losing consciousness. If I kept on listening, I was going to go nuts.

My next words were hesitant, probing.

"Satsuki-san... was it?"

Instinctively, I pounded my hand on the door.

Bam! The poorly hung door shuddered with a loud noise.

The conversation inside stopped. The sound echoed through the alleyway until it vanished, and a tense silence followed.

I couldn't hear anything from inside. I did sense something in there, paying attention to me, though.

I pressed myself up against the door, and looked in through the peephole. I knew I wouldn't be able to see inside. But if someone was in front of the lens on

the other side, I'd be able to tell because it would go dark...

I stayed there, breath still, looking for a while, but there was no sign of anything moving inside. I looked away from the peephole for a moment, testing the doorknob again.

It opened easily.

I see how it is, I thought. Was this another plot from the Otherside? What did they hope to accomplish by making me listen to a past conversation? Was there something they wanted me to see?

I suppressed my rising terror with anger and hostility. I didn't know what their game was, but I'd take them on. Steadying my breath, I pushed the door open all at once.

I had some inclination of what I'd find in there.

Were there pseudo-humans from the Otherside imitating me and Toriko from back then?

Or was it just our voices, and there was no one actually there?

Or had Kasumi secretly followed me, and she was mimicking us?

Based on past experiences, I figured it'd be something like that.

It wasn't any of them. I was wrong on all three counts.

There were two figures seated across from one another at the table inside.

One was me. I could tell at a glance—it was my doppelganger. The dark imitation of myself that I had seen a number of times before.

The other was a woman with long black hair, wearing glasses and dressed in black.

"Satsuki...Uruma."

The woman's name came out of my mouth. Neither of them looked at me as I stood there in the door. My doppelganger had her hands on the table, and she was staring at the woman sitting across from her.



Satsuki Uruma reached out with her right hand and stroked my doppelgänger's cheek. My cheek. Still the doppelganger didn't move. She stared into the woman's brilliant blue eyes, as if entranced.

I dug through my bag and pulled out the Makarov, then dropped the bag at my feet. It stirred up a cloud of dust. My eyes shot downward for a second, I pulled back the slide a little, and checked it was loaded. Even with my own shadow falling on my hands, I could still see the dull gleam of the casing.

I looked back at them. The two figures hadn't changed.

I disengaged the safety, and turned the barrel on Satsuki Uruma. Neither reacted. It looked like they couldn't see me.

Even when I focused my right eye on them there was no change. They stayed the same.

What kind of "phenomenon" was this...?

That's when, suddenly, a phone rang—my smartphone. The ringtone sounded out of place, echoing through the abandoned building. I pulled it out of my pocket, glanced at it, and saw it was from Toriko.

Neither the doppelganger nor Satsuki Uruma reacted. The gun still in my right hand, I answered it with my left.

"H...Hello?"

"Oh, Sorawo. Is now a good time?"

"Uh, sure."

That was reflexive. This was absolutely not a good time, but it was too late now.

Toriko, who couldn't possibly know my situation, continued on talking in a meek tone. "I'm sorry. About before. Getting mad at you all of a sudden like that."

"Nah, it's no biggie. Yeah, just forget about it," I said distractedly. My head was a mess, unable to keep up with the scene in front of me and the conversation I was having on the phone.

“No. It’s not fine. I want you to listen to me,” Toriko said, her voice serious. “There’s all sorts of things we can experience together...and I don’t want to miss out on any of them if I don’t have to.”

“Yeah, uh, I kind of know that.”

“Right, so let me tell you why...” Toriko trailed off for a moment, then, finding her nerve again, she continued. “Everyone who’s ever been important to me before now, all of them, they’ve just suddenly vanished on me.”

“Yeah...”

Like her parents. And like Satsuki Uruma...

“So, afterwards, I had regrets, thinking I should have done this or that. I don’t want to go through that again, so if there’s a chance for us to do something together, I never want to miss it.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Because of that, I wanted to celebrate your birthday properly this year. I missed my chance to ask it last year. Time just went by so quickly.”

Her voice was quivering, and that shook me up.

“But now I asked too late again, and it was too late, and it really shocked me...”

“Hey, don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying...” Toriko said, sniffing and then clearing her throat. “So that’s why I lost my cool. Sorry. I wanted to apologize. That’s all.”

As I listened to her voice, I watched the two figures facing one another down in front of me.

Toriko. One of those people from your past, the ones you cared about, is here right now, trying to screw around with me.

Here I am, chatting on the phone with you right in front of her, and she doesn’t even notice.

She doesn’t give a damn about you.

“I understand, Toriko,” I told her. “I’m sorry too. I never realized you’d care so

much about my birthday.”

“...”

“I’m not the type that pays a lot of attention to anniversaries and that kind of stuff, you know?”

“Heh. Yeah, I know,” Toriko replied with a laugh.

“And about your birthday... I remember it now, but I may totally forget it. So, sorry for that.”

“Hey, don’t apologize in advance.”

“But there’s one day I’ll definitely remember.”

“What? When is it?”

“May 14th. The day you and I met.”

“...”

“Did you remember it?”

“Of course,” Toriko responded instantly.

“For me, that day was sort of like a birthday.”

“Wha...”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t remember anything before that very well. So... It’s the day after tomorrow, you know? May 14th. Let’s call that our anniversary. And let’s celebrate.”

“...”

“How’s that sound?”

“Sorawo...”

Her voice was quivering, so I panicked a bit.

“I-Is that no good?”

“No...!” Toriko shouted. “It’s good. I’m happy. Thank you.”

“Y-You are? Good.”

Was it anything to get so emotional over?

“But! We’re still gonna celebrate your birthday separately, okay?”

“Oh, sure.”

Sensing the firm will behind that declaration, I couldn’t help but nod.

“Well, that’s that, then... Can we discuss the details later?”

“Sure. Oh, were you out right now?”

“Yeah, sorta.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you later, then.”

The call cut out. Toriko sounded so happy it was hard to believe she’d been ready to cry until just now, so I was glad I’d taken the call.

But... I still had a problem here.

I stuffed the phone in my pocket, holding the Makarov with both my hands once again. I’d had it aimed at Satsuki Uruma the whole time I was on the phone using just my right hand, but my arm was at its limit.

“What’re you showing up like a ghost for now, after all this time?” I muttered. “You’re not even human anymore, right? Just an empty husk. I dunno if you’re an agent of the other world, an interface, or whatever it is you’re supposed to be—but could you cut it out with that form? It’s not fair...”

I hesitated a moment before I continued.

“It’s not fair to Toriko.”

It happened when I said that: those ultrablue eyes moved beneath her glasses. With a sideward glance, Satsuki Uruma looked at me.

“Do you really think so?”

A tremor ran down my spine. That voice! Low and calm, deep and gentle, yet mesmerizing. It shouldn’t have had the sort of special power that Runa Urumi’s did, yet it felt even more intimidating. It was the voice of a woman who controlled people.

I reflexively pulled the trigger.

Click! The sound of the hammer striking metal echoed. It was a misfire.

Caught by surprise, I looked down at the gun in my hands. Or that's what I thought I was doing. Strangely, there was no gun. Only the surface of a dust-covered table.

When I looked up again, I realized I was sitting directly across from Satsuki Uruma.

At some point, I'd traded places with my doppelganger. My hands were resting on the table, like I'd never pulled my gun at all.

Satsuki Uruma's hand stroked my cheek.

Drawing closer to my face as I was frozen with shock, she spoke. "Do you really think that?"

File 22: Toilet Paper Moon

1

“Do you really think that?”

Satsuki Uruma was sitting across the table from me. Long-sleeved black clothes. Glossy black hair. Thick-rimmed glasses framing ultrablue eyes.

Her extended right hand was touching my cheek, and I couldn't move. I was frozen stiff, unable to even brush her hand away.

This wasn't the first time we'd met. I'd encountered this woman—this being that took the form of a woman—several times now. Sometimes as a flat vision, and at other times as just a heavy presence.

And at yet other times as a monster, bereft of humanity.

This was different from any of those times. The woman before me was frighteningly human.

It was like seeing life suddenly blown into what had been a mannequin just seconds ago. The palm of her hand, positioned a hair's breadth from my skin, touched my cheek with every shallow breath I took. It sent tingles through my skin and down my spine. I smelled human skin and felt her warmth.

“Satsuki...Uruma...”

As I barely managed to say her name, her eyes narrowed with a smile, as if to confirm it. “Sorawo Kamikoshi-san.”

When she said my name, I felt like I'd been punched. I pulled back sharply without meaning to. The chair creaked behind me.

I glared at Satsuki Uruma, her hand still hanging in the air.

“What are you trying to do now, after all this time?” I forced the words out through gritted teeth.

“I came to see you,” she said, her expression unchanged, in an amused tone of voice.

“Why?”

“You interest me.”

“You don’t interest me. Get lost. Now.”

“Get lost? That’s an interesting turn of phrase.”

Satsuki Uruma lowered her arm. The surface of the table was covered in a bunch of old, moist flyers and bills topped by a thick layer of dust. Despite that, she rested her hand on it, showing no concern about the filth. Noticing that helped me recover. She was acting weird. At the very least, I could say for sure that whatever was in front of me now, she wasn’t a sane human being.

As I tried to come to grips with the situation, my eyes fell to my own hands. They were both resting on the table, as my doppelgänger’s had been doing.

Where’s my gun...?

Looking to the side, I noticed my bag lying on the ground where I should have been standing. It had fallen on its side and the contents had spilled out. That unmistakable glimpse of dull, glossy metal was my Makarov. I was sure I’d drawn it, though. How much of this was real, and how much of this wasn’t...?

As I sat there, confused, the woman asked, “Are you listening to me?”

I glared back at her without responding, but Satsuki Uruma seemed unshaken by that. “I’m not listening.”

“You’re not?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m not interested.” The loathing I poured into each word was swallowed up by her inscrutable smile. Every fiber of my being was sounding alarm bells.

No. Don’t talk to this woman. She’s a monster. The shadow that walks down the road towards you at twilight. The knock at the door in the dead of night. The cheery voices in the ruined building. These are things humans shouldn’t get involved with. No matter what she says, you mustn’t respond. Even looking at her face might cause harm. You should pretend not to notice her, ignore

everything she says, and just hang your head and wait for her to go away. That's the kind of being this woman is. Even if she's a living, breathing human, at her core, that's what she's really like.

Just exchanging a few words, I understood that, because...

I shuddered as I became aware of a fact that I didn't want to accept.

Because I, as someone who hated her so much, and had done everything I could to not take an interest... I was already drawn to her, even after speaking to her just a little!

Seeming to sense that, Satsuki Uruma said, "I've wanted to meet you. Sorawo Kamikoshi-san."

"Don't use my name," I said reflexively.

"Why not? It's such a lovely name."

"Because—you and I, we're not close enough for you to act so familiar with me."

"We've already met so many times, though."

Her smile seemed to pull me in. Even as I recognized the abnormality of both the situation and the person I was dealing with. I recalled how Kozakura described Satsuki Uruma:

"She charmed anyone who came near her, using them as she pleased. A natural born alpha female."

I hadn't understood properly what that entailed, that there were women who could control others just by being there.

An alpha female. That was originally a term from the field of ethology. The female that stood at the top of a group of animals. That was the kind of woman I had in front of me now.

"Shall we talk a little?"

"We have nothing to talk about—"

"That door. It's a shame you can't use it anymore." Ignoring my resistance, Satsuki continued. "You'd finally found an entrance. Trying so hard all by

yourself.”

As I got annoyed about her talking as if she knew anything about me, she went on.

“I’m glad the elevator in Jinbouchou’s been so convenient for you. It must be tough, dealing with that long ladder.”

“...”

We’d gone to work on our plan to punch holes through the floors of the skeletal building to create a shortcut down to the surface during Golden Week. It was maybe a week ago, or somewhere around there. If she wasn’t mentioning that, it meant she didn’t know everything.

I was desperately trying to figure out how I should view the woman in front of me now.

Was she still a flesh and blood human? A Fourth Kind who’d been fully transformed? Or a “phenomenon” that only appeared this way in my brain? Were the Satsuki Urumas I’d seen before now the same as the one in front of me? Or had various Otherside entities just been borrowing the guise of her?

I focused my consciousness into my right eye. Her hidden nature...was not exposed. At least, she still looked the same. Like a flesh and blood human, in other words.

She was so very *human*...

As I glared at her with my mouth shut, Satsuki Uruma cocked her head to the side. Her long, silky, black hair streamed down behind her. “Do you want to ask anything?”

It was a deep, soft voice, one that made it seem like she would tell me anything. It had the tone of one who teaches and guides, admonishes, and then takes people to somewhere far away. My head swam.

I’d heard Satsuki Uruma was a tutor. That was how Toriko and Akari met her. How many kids had fallen for her the same way?

The thing that triggered the Ninja Cats to attack Akari was an amulet Satsuki Uruma had given her. If Toriko and I hadn’t intervened, who knows what would

have happened to her? It might be that Toriko had been set up for a fall in the same way, and the only reason it didn't happen was that Satsuki Uruma vanished.

I opened my mouth and asked her straight out, "What *are* you?"

"I am Satsuki Uruma."

"The real one?"

"Are you the real Sorawo Kamikoshi?"

In an unwavering tone, she countered my question with another question. That caught me off guard, and I didn't know what to say. Satsuki Uruma looked at me with a serious expression. It didn't seem like she was just messing around and teasing me.

"I think I am..."

"There's a ghost story about going to the mountains, you know?"

"What...?"

"You go to the mountains, and the mountains call to you. Called, you enter the mountains, and you never return."

"Yeah, there is. So what?"

"What happens to the people who don't return?"

"Who knows? They probably die, right?"

"Life and death aren't the issue. Once you get to that point, that is."

My brow furrowed.

"What do you think mountains are made of?" Satsuki asked, smiling.

"Trees and stuff?" I said without putting much thought into it. When I thought of mountains, the image that came to mind for me was the mountains of my home prefecture, Akita, covered in green.

"If trees were sapient, they wouldn't think of themselves as a mountain. Only as a single tree. It's the same concept. People who go into the mountains, regardless of their mental state, are still people. But the wind that blows

through the trees. The rocks. The birds. Every speck of dirt covering the bedrock. The beasts, hiding in their dens. The ancient mollusks sleeping in a geological fold. The morning dew in the spider's web. The bacteria and microorganisms in the soil, breaking down the body. None of these individual constituting elements is the mountain on its own, yet the mountain is made up of them. So it is for those called by the mountain. Living or dead."

She raised her hand, pointing all five fingers at herself.

"That is how it is for me."

Uncurling her fingers, she pointed at me.

"That is how it is for you."

I vigorously shook my head. "You're wrong. I'm different."

"No, you're the same."

"I'm not like you!" I was shouting despite myself. Satsuki Uruma's lips turned up, as if she'd been waiting for those words.

"I knew you'd understand."

I shuddered and the woman across the table seemed to grow. At some point, she had risen to her feet, and approached to the point where her face was looming over me, centimeters from my own.

"Do you remember the promise I made you before?"

"What—"

The woman's arms stretched out, grazing my cheeks, brushing my ears as they went past, then running through the hair. Big hands. Long fingers. Lips that opened in front of my eyes.

"Let me take you with me to the mountains."

The blood drained from my face. *She's gonna get me!*

I pulled back as hard as I could, trying to escape her grasp. The chair toppled, and I landed on my back. I crawled backwards using my elbows to get away. With the top of the table now between us, I couldn't see Satsuki Uruma's face. I could just see her black-clothed lower half under the table.

I felt for my bag on the floor. Feeling the cool sensation of metal, I pulled out the Makarov. Holding it in both hands, I took aim through the table.

Maybe I should just shoot now, I thought. The bullets would easily penetrate a flimsy table. But this was the surface world, and it passed through my head that there might be people walking by on the other side of the wall, so I stopped myself at the last possible moment.

I sat up cautiously, the gun still aimed towards her. Over the lip of the table, the woman entered my vision, and...

We must have stayed like that for ten seconds. I slowly lowered the gun, letting out the breath I'd been holding.

I'd lost sight of Satsuki Uruma. In her place, there was a large piece of fabric—a curtain, or a tablecloth, maybe, I don't know which—blackened with soot carelessly thrown over the back of a chair. I knew for sure it hadn't been there before.

I looked at it for a while, then kicked away my fallen chair. The poor chair that had become victim to my misdirected rage didn't go flying with my unimpressive leg strength, just slid across the floor and stopped at the wall.

"Damn it!" I shouted angrily. I was pissed.

Damn it, damn it, damn it. She'd played me for a fool.

Was this how she'd gone about seducing everyone else? No, it wasn't just a matter of her methods. The sense of distance, the subtle touches, the attitude, those things were all just extras. That thing felt less like a human and more like a lion, or a tiger, or even a bulldozer. No matter how strong-willed you were, resisting with everything you had, it meant nothing against her.

I engaged the safety on my Makarov, then picked up its holster from the bag on the ground. Even once I had stowed the gun, there was still a hot rage seething and boiling inside my guts.

She's tried to control me.

The biggest shock was that, at some point, I found myself almost wanting her to. That was what annoyed me the most. It wasn't like me...

By the time I noticed, the inside of the abandoned building was already pretty dark. I picked up my bag and dusted myself off. I'd come in my regular clothes, not my expedition gear today, so I should have been dirty, but it was hard to tell in the poor light here.

I got it now. Yeah, Satsuki Uruma was fit to be called an alpha female. She was born to be boss of whatever group of women she found herself in. Even now, after she'd fallen into the Otherside and was no longer human, that hadn't changed.

Normally, that'd be none of my problem. She didn't interest me. So long as she didn't get involved with me or Toriko.

When we'd encountered her during the incident with Runa Urumi's cult, she'd turned into nothing but a monster. Even Toriko seemed done with her at that point, so I thought we could finally cut her out of our lives.

But here she was, appearing again, talking to me like a person, so I had to respond appropriately.

"Damn it..." I muttered to myself again.

Screw it. There was only one choice at this point.

I had no choice but to *kill* Satsuki Uruma.

2

Come wearing something cute, had been Toriko's request. *I'll be looking forward to it*, she'd added, cutting off any way out for me, so now I had a real head scratcher. What do I wear to a hotel buffet?

May 14th: the anniversary of the day we met.

Toriko had apparently learned from what happened with the love hotel girls' party, so the day after we talked on the phone in Oomiya she'd already picked out a time and place. Seven o'clock at the dinner buffet at the Keio Plaza Hotel. She'd put in a reservation for a course for two.

But wasn't dinner at a fancy hotel expensive? We were still students, wasn't

this beyond our means...? I tried a few pitiful attempts to resist, but Toriko just mailed me a screenshot of the reservation screen and didn't say any more. The price was surprisingly reasonable.

"I made the call so you couldn't drag your feet anymore. That's okay, right?"

"Uh, right..."

"It's gonna be fun."

"Sure."

"Make sure you do this right. Do you need me to come by your house and pick you up?"

"No, no. I'll be fine. I'll go."

"Good."

There was nothing good about it. Looking at the hotel's website there was a dress code, but it wasn't any more helpful than a "don't turn up in a T-shirt and shorts."

I relied on the internet, as usual, and all sorts of ensembles came up: feminine, modern, casual, classic, and so on. Horrifyingly, none of them felt right for me. Not one. The only look I could see myself just barely pulling off was a parka, or some sort of outdoor wear, but even I knew that wasn't going to fly at a hotel restaurant.

I had a lot more knowledge of fashion now thanks to Toriko's influence, so I was at least trying my best within the limits of my abilities when we went out on the town together. But now that I came to a situation that demanded a proper outfit, well, everything I'd been doing felt haphazard and insufficient.

I lined up what little clothing I had, groaning to myself. It was already the day of our dinner by the time I'd settled on a combination that made me think, *Hrm, maybe this will work...* It was a super simple combination of just a cardigan thrown over top of a one-piece dress. They were both things I'd bought on her recommendation when we were out together before, so at least I wouldn't be making too horrible a mistake. It felt silly how much I'd agonized over it now. Wouldn't it have been faster to stop thinking, go to a clothing store, and just

buy whatever was on one of the mannequins...?

The other thing troubling me was my bag. I usually used backpacks, tote bags, shoulder bags, and other practical stuff, and I'd always been more than satisfied with them. But that was probably the wrong call in this situation. I needed something reasonably cute or it wasn't going to work.

I knew it would be tough if I left it to the last minute, so I ordered something early on. A simple leather shoulder bag, large enough for a tablet computer. When it arrived the next day, I'd checked it was large enough to hold my Makarov, and decided it would do.

As for makeup, I did the bare minimum, as per usual... This was the one area where I was never going to care to do more. I mean, if I was going to have *Toriko* right beside me, I felt like I could put in all the effort in the world and it wouldn't make a difference. I said as much to her once, and she looked kind of sad. She said something like, "That's not what makeup's about." I mean, yeah, I kind of got that it wasn't good for me to be comparing myself to others, but I just didn't feel motivated right now. I went all the way through high school without applying anything more than lip balm, so I wished she'd cut me a break.

With my preparations complete, I looked at myself in the small bathroom mirror.

Yeah, I dunno. I'm not confident in any of this. Is it going to be okay? I'm not missing something, am I? I might just be overthinking it... Oh, whatever. I'm just gonna go.

I decided it was too much trouble, so I was going to stop thinking and get out the door.

As I was standing in front of the door, I realized I'd missed something, and covered my face in embarrassment.

Shoes...

Oh, forget it! I don't care anymore!

After snapping angrily at myself, I stuffed my feet into my usual sneakers, and headed out indignantly. I was sure I had left the house with time to spare, but I still ended up barely on time. On my way there, my head had cooled, and I

decided that, no, just turning up in my everyday shoes without doing anything more wasn't going to cut it, so I bought some moist towelettes and swabbed my sneakers with them in the toilet at the station.

When I rushed into the hotel's second floor lobby, Toriko got up from the sofa and came over to meet me.

"Sorry, I'm late."

"No, you're right on time."

Toriko was wearing a long, black dress and had a light blue, almost white jacket hanging from her shoulders without putting her arms through the sleeves. She had gloves on both hands, also black. I guess you'd call them half gloves as they only covered halfway up the back of her hand. Instead of fully hiding her translucent left hand, she was deliberately leaving it revealed. Silver earrings shone in her ears. Sensing my eyes on her, she spread her arms a little.

"Well?"

"You're looking good," I answered honestly, and Toriko showed me a goofy, shy smile.

"You too, Sorawo. You picked out something cute like I asked you to."

"I don't look weird?"

"Not at all..."

Toriko eyed me up and down, stopping at my shoes. *Ahh, she's not letting that one slip past after all, huh?* I thought, but I was surprised to see Toriko grin.

"Yeah, of course that'd happen."

"Huh?"

"I had a hell of a time picking shoes too."

Looking down, I saw Toriko was wearing leather boots that came up to her ankles. Stylish, but still a solid pair of shoes, not pumps or sandals.

"I can't wear heels anymore. We never know when we'll be dragged into the other world..."

"I know, right?" I said after a brief pause. I nodded sagely, unable to fess up to

just never thinking of it.

“Well, let’s get going,” I said. “We take the elevator, right?”

“It’s on this floor.”

“Huh? It’s not a restaurant with a view?”

“The buffet here’s on the second floor. I told you, you don’t need to get all worked up about this.”

“Oh, okay...”

I’d been imagining a posh restaurant with a night view, so I was a little let down. Taking advantage of my surprise, Toriko casually reached out and took my hand.

As we were walking from the lobby to the restaurant, she leaned in close to me, grinning.

“Sorawo.”

“Hm?”

“You forgot the shoes, didn’t you?”

“...”

“Let’s go buy them together sometime. Something cute but easy to move around in.”

“Sure, I could use the help.”

“Okay.”

When I saw how much fun Toriko was having, I felt something squeeze tight inside my chest.

What was this? It felt weird.

If it got any stronger, I thought I was going to start crying.

When we got to the restaurant Toriko told them we had a reservation and we were guided to our table. Like she’d said, the place had atmosphere, but it wasn’t too stiff and formal. There were people getting up to head to the buffet.

“Should we go too?” I asked.

“We’re having the full course, so the appetizer comes first.”

“Oh, okay.”

For our first drink, we ordered a sparkling wine. It came at the same time as the appetizer, so we immediately clinked our glasses together.

“Erm, well...” I said.

“Congratulations on one year!”

“Congratulations.”

Was congratulations the right thing to say? Well, whatever. The sweet, bubbly, cold wine slid down my throat. After a short breath, we looked at one another again.

“Whew. It’s sure been a year,” I said.

“Yup.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Can’t believe what?”

“It feels like it’s been so long. Like, it’s gotta be a lie somehow that it’s only been a year. How about you, Toriko?”

“I feel the same way.”

“You know how a year felt so long when you were a kid? This felt even longer than that,” I said.

“I get you. What was with that?”

“For kids, everything they see and hear is new, so it’s a lot to take in. Once we grow up and learn more, it’s easier because—”

“There’s less load on the brain, so time goes by faster?”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“So... When kids feel like time is longer, they’re like a computer that’s lagging, then?” Toriko asked.

“Huh? Wait, isn’t that exactly it? They can’t process all the information that they’re receiving, and so time feels like it’s slower.”

“So, our brains were working harder during this one year than they had to when we were kids?”

“Yeah, I’d say they were working pretty hard. With all that Otherside nonsense.”

“That’s not good for our brains!”

“Sorry, brains.”

We both chuckled. We’d had some unbelievably abnormal experiences this year. No one else here had lived like we had. When I thought of it that way, I felt that mixture of guilt and superiority that a child does when messing around where the adult can’t see them.

Picking away at the appetizer of sakura shrimp and lily bulbs as we talked, our first glasses were soon empty.

“What’ll you have next, Sorawo? I think I’ll have a white wine.”

“I guess it depends what we’re eating next. Can we go get food now?”

“Yeah. You go first.”

“Okay, I’ll be back soon.”

I figured we’d be safe both leaving the table at a place like this, but, you know. Given I had a gun hidden in my bag, I was worried about the worst that could happen. We took turns heading up to peruse the buffet.

I gluttonously loaded up my plate with fresh fried tempura, mussels, foie gras with strawberry sauce, Berkshire pork and mountain vegetables fried in miso, and tom yum noodles. Toriko got a chicken stir fry with chili peppers, chicken liver and bamboo shoots in garlic, a bunch of Iberian ham, and more. It was a lot of meat, but she also had a Caesar salad and yuba maki rolls, so she still succeeded in having a somewhat stylish plate overall. We both had white wine to drink.

Toriko seemed to be enjoying herself, but she was acting fidgety the whole time. I noticed a lot of awkward pauses where it seemed like she was about to say something and then decided not to. For my own part, I had the issue of how I was going to handle Satsuki Uruma in the corner of my mind the whole time.

Because of that, I didn't pick up on it at first, but Toriko would occasionally look away all of a sudden, or get real quiet, so I gradually noticed.

There's something important she wants to talk about, I thought.

We'd gotten all dressed up for this anniversary, and come to a place like this, so it had to mean something. If it was important, then that meant she was going to say she loved me, or she wanted to go out... That kind of thing. Even I could figure out that much.

But if she said that to me, I had to tell her about Satsuki Uruma. She needed to know she'd come back.

I couldn't lie to her... I didn't want to. Even if I did lie, knowing me, it'd come out at some point. It had before, after all.

The fact was this wasn't something I could keep to myself. They talk about taking a secret to your grave, but, nope, not happening, I couldn't possibly. Toriko had a deep connection to Satsuki Uruma's disappearance. If the woman was back, and I kept it a secret from her, it wouldn't end with a simple talk about, "What do we do about it now?"

Ugh, I hate this. When I tell her about Satsuki, a cloud will fall over her pretty face, and she'll start crying again. Even though she's been looking forward to celebrating today. What gives that woman any right to come back? I just can't accept it. I don't want to make Toriko cry. But I gotta tell her. I must be a cruel person...

"Got something on your mind, Sorawo?" Toriko asked me, so I answered.

"I do."

"What?"

"Uhh... Lots of stuff."

"'Stuff' doesn't tell me anything."

"Stuff is...stuff."

"Hmm..."

When she gave me the opening, I thought for a second I should just come out

with it, but Toriko didn't press me, so I missed the chance.

I was almost done with my second drink. As I was looking at Toriko over the rim of the glass, she finished hers first. Laying the empty glass on the table, she seemed to make up her mind and opened her mouth. "Hey... There's something I wanted to ask you, Sorawo."

"Y-Yeah." I braced myself. Toriko continued, a tense expression on her face.

"Have you been to my house recently?"

"Huh...?" That wasn't the question I expected, so I sounded silly.

"No... I haven't."

"Yeah... I knew it."

"What...? Uh, what's this about?"

"So, listen, you did come. At night."

"I did? At night? When?"

"The day before yesterday."

"I didn't go, though..."

The day before yesterday was when I encountered Satsuki Uruma at the abandoned building in Oomiya.

"It was maybe two or three in the morning. I happened to wake up. I sensed someone there, and I was like, uh oh, and when I looked over, you were standing in my room."

"No. No, I wasn't. Not a chance."

"I was thinking you'd never come too, but there you were, a little way away from the bed, silently looking down at me. It really surprised me, so I sat up and asked you what was going on."

"And?"

"You hung your head and wouldn't answer me. There was something really gloomy about you. Like you were feeling down, or disappointed, or something."

"Scary..."

“Looking back at it, it should’ve been scary, but it didn’t feel that way at all at the time. It was more like, ‘Sorawo’s looking down. What happened? Is she all right?’”

“Y-Yeah?”

It was pretty common in true ghost stories to experience a situation that should have been terrifying but react to it without any fear for some reason. I wasn’t sure whether to think this was one of those cases, or if it was just Toriko’s own kindness, so I sort of vaguely nodded along.

“So, what happened next?”

“I thought there might be something you were having trouble talking about... So, I told you to come over. When I did, you obediently approached, and when I lifted up the covers, you got under them...”

“Wha?!”

“Then we laid down together, and I patted your head—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up. Stop right there.”

“The next thing I knew, it was morning. You were gone, and I thought it was a dream, but there were these blackish stains on the floor and sheets... Oh, and your scent was still lingering a bit.”

“Listen, you!” That was a bit rude, but I couldn’t restrain myself. Toriko seemed to snap to her senses and looked at me. For some reason her eyes were sparkling a little—wait, wasn’t she getting kind of excited here?!

“Wh-Why didn’t you say something before now?” I asked, and Toriko ducked her head awkwardly.

“Even if it was a dream, it was a little too convenient for me, so I was embarrassed to tell you...”

Yeah, I’ll bet you were!

As I clutched my head, Toriko pressed me one last time. “So, you’re *sure* you didn’t come?”

“I didn’t...”

“Okay. But it didn’t feel unpleasant enough for me to think it was something from the Otherside. I mean, I could only imagine it was you. Sure, you felt different, but...” Toriko trailed off, cocking her head to the side at me.

“Wait, is this sounding like something you recognize?” Toriko asked.

“I think...that was my doppelganger.”

“Doppelganger... Er, what’s that again?”

“Another you. It’s a thing where you get told you’ve been in places you haven’t gone, or you actually see yourself. It’s a phenomenon people have talked about since long ago, and in some stories if you meet your own doppelganger you’ll die.”

“That’s scary!”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Still... You don’t seem that surprised by it. Am I just imagining that?” Toriko asked.

“Nah, I’ve seen mine. Multiple times,” I asked.

“Huh?! This is news to me!”

“Pardon me, but can I get you ladies anything to drink? We have water as well, if you prefer.”

“Oh, well, I’ll have a glass of red wine. You, Sorawo?”

“Uh, I’ll have the same...”

“Very good.”

As the server walked away, we looked at one another.

“You think we were being loud?” I wondered.

“Maybe... Mind if I go get food?”

“Oh, sure.”

It was a good chance to recompose myself. We both went to the buffet and came back, having gotten gratin, paella, beef curry, and other heavy foods that would pair well with red wine.

We headed back to the table and said cheers again before we got back to talking.

“So, what’s this about you seeing her multiple times?” Toriko asked between bites of roast beef. It was the type the chef cuts as you watch, and I’d gotten some too. This was supposed to be one of their best dishes here and the taste reflected that.

“I wonder when it started... Right, back when you went off to the Otherside on your own. That was the first time she appeared. I’ve seen her two or three times since then too,” I replied.

“Why didn’t you say anything? You’d heard you’d die if you saw her, so weren’t you scared?”

“Hrm. It’s hard to explain this, but it kinda made sense to me.”

“Made sense?”

“You know how messed up my home life was in middle school, right? Well, sometimes I’d see myself doing things from an objective perspective, like I was watching someone else do them. I didn’t see a doppelganger, I was another me, watching myself... Is this making sense?” I asked.

“Yeah...”

“Oh, don’t make that face. It’s not a particularly sad story. Anyway, because I had that experience, when I saw my doppelganger, I was like, yeah, of course I’ve got one of those, makes sense to me. Thinking about it now, sure, it’s strange. But the other me’s been pretty useful, you know?”

“How so?” Toriko asked.

“My doppelgänger’s the one who brought me to you.”

Toriko’s eyes widened. “Huh?”

“My doppelganger seems to know stuff I don’t. Is she my unconscious self or something? I followed her, and there you were.”

“I never knew...”

“It was the same with Kasumi. She was pointing into the mound of trash, so I

went inside and found the kid there.”

“Oh! That’s right! You were able to see something I couldn’t see then!”

“Yeah, exactly.” I nodded, impressed she remembered.

“That’s how it’s been, so I was never all that afraid. There’s a theory that doppelgangers aren’t a paranormal phenomenon but a misfiring of the brain. So, the reason some people died after seeing them might be because they were hallucinations caused by a brain tumor...”

“That’s worrying in and of itself.”

“It’s just one theory. I mean, they gave my brain a thorough checkup at DS Research, so I figure I should be fine on that front.” I took bites from a little plate of beef curry as I continued. “The me you saw seemed gloomy, and she’s generally like that in front of me too. She’s like a concentration of all my dark elements, so she was probably pretty shocking, right?”

“Hmm... Wait, wait, hold on. If only you could see your doppelganger, we might have been able to write her off as a hallucination that helps you out from time to time, but doesn’t me being able to see her change things?”

“Yeah... It does.”

She was absolutely right. I’d been able to just barely explain her as a phenomenon inside my brain before, but now someone else could see her... And, what? She got into bed with her? Slept by her side? What was I going there to do? Toriko shouldn’t have let her do it, but there was something wrong with me too. No, not with me, with my doppelganger, but still. Even if she was a product of my unconscious, she was showing way too little restraint.

“I didn’t think that the other you was dark. She just seemed to be in a lot of pain. She didn’t say anything, but I think she felt guilty towards me.”

“Wait, why do you understand so much?”

“You thought I didn’t know?”

I’d asked with a half-smile, but she came back at me totally serious. Damn it...

Toriko’s eyes narrowed happily as she looked at me and spoke like someone certain they had the upper hand. “So? What are you feeling guilty about? Care

to enlighten me?”

“...”

“Sorawo.”

“...”

The conversation had bent in a weird direction, but I was going to have to tell her in the end, huh? I resigned myself to it.

“That afternoon, I was in Oomiya.”

“Oomiya? That’s unusual. What for?”

“I went to that place from the day we met, the abandoned building where—”

“Ohh! That place, huh? The one with the gate that disappeared.”

“Yeah. I went to check on it since it had been a while.”

“What a blast from the past. Huh? Had it come back or something?”

“Uh, no. What came back instead was...”

“Was...?”

“...Satsuki Uruma.”

Toriko froze up. With her eyes on me, I slowly nodded.

Yeah, that’s right. It’s Satsuki-san. Your precious monster.

“Satsuki...” Toriko murmured, not so much as blinking.

“Yeah.” I gave the bare minimum response I could manage. Would she cry, would she be happy, or what...? I was on edge because I didn’t know how Toriko would react.

“Satsuki showed up?”

“Yeah.”

“Was...” Toriko’s expression changed greatly. The corners of her eyes drooped, and she leaned in closer to me. “Was everything okay?”

This unexpected reaction left me confused. “Huh? Was what okay?”

“Were you okay? She didn’t do anything to you, did she? You’re not hurt or

—” Her hand, extended with concern, touched my cheek. I stared back at her vacantly, in the same position as I’d been with Satsuki Uruma that day.

“I was more or less fine.”

“Thank goodness...” Toriko’s face collapsed into a silly grin. Then she started rubbing my cheeks.

“Um?”

“Let me check to make sure you’re all right.”

“Uh, I am... I’m fine, as you can see.”

Normally, I’d have shaken her off, but I was just sort of sitting there, letting her get away with this. When she touched me in the same place as Satsuki Uruma, I felt a tension that had been there the whole time melting away.

Still, she was doing it too long. “That’s enough of that.”

When I pulled my face away, Toriko finally withdrew her hand. She looked like she hadn’t gotten enough rubbing in for her liking. On the rebound from the tension I’d been feeling, I was now too relaxed. I wanted to wet my dry mouth, so I downed the rest of my glass. I called over the server to order another glass of wine.

“I was expecting a different response from you, Toriko,” I said once I’d settled down.

“Because it’s about Satsuki?”

“Y-Yeah.”

Toriko smiled a little. “I’m sure I would have before. But...last time I saw Satsuki, she was like a monster. I think the person that I knew is gone now.”

The last time Toriko had seen Satsuki Uruma, she’d been a monster in human form, tearing Runa Urumi’s mouth and crushing both her mother’s eyes. Fair enough. Seeing someone do a thing like that might be enough to destroy any romantic feelings for them. But I wasn’t completely certain. For all this time, I’d been assuming that Toriko was still holding a torch for that woman.

I was wrong. Sorry, Toriko. I misjudged you. She was stronger than I thought.

She was someone who could put her past behind her.

“So, Satsuki showed up, and then what?” Toriko asked, her expression serious.

“She talked to me... Said some stuff I didn’t get.”

“Like what?”

“About mountains...”

I was about to say more, but recreating the conversation from that day wasn’t going to get the point across. Using my own interpretation to translate, I reworded what she’d said. “I think she was telling me that she went into the Otherside and became a part of it. That’s more or less what I thought already, so no surprise there.”

“Oh, I see...” Toriko lowered her eyes sadly. “Do you think she came to tell you that? And she appeared in front of you instead of me... Sorry, to be honest, that makes me sad.”

“Well, yeah, that’s gotta be what it was.”

“If she didn’t hurt you, it’s fine, but she really didn’t do anything? There are no gaps in your memory, are there?”

“Yeah...”

Toriko didn’t miss the momentary delay before I answered. “What happened?”

“She tried to seduce me...”

“Huh?”

“Satsuki Uruma tried to seduce me. *Me.*”

Toriko froze up for the second time tonight, and all I could do was watch. As we stared at one another, unmoving, the server subtly set down our third glasses in between us, then left.

“Huh...” Toriko said in a low voice. “Oh, did she now?”

“Um, are you mad?”

“I’m not mad.”

“Well, that’s good then.”

“Don’t misunderstand. I’m not mad at you, Sorawo.”

“Uh, okay...”

Toriko picked up her freshly arrived glass, draining it all at once. She laid it down when she was finished, then abruptly got up.

“I’m gonna go get food.”

“O-Okay.”

I watched, bewildered, as she strode over to the buffet table.

Scaryyy. Huh? Hold on. If you think about it calmly, I didn’t do anything she should get mad at me for, did I? Yeah, that’s right. What am I so tense about? I think I’m worrying over nothing.

That’s what I thought, but when Toriko returned I couldn’t look her in the face, and took my turn getting up as she got back.

I was already full, so more food was a pass. I got a tiny cake and a confection called nerikiri, then poured myself a cup of black tea. When I got back, I saw that Toriko had just gotten herself a bit of each thing she hadn’t tried yet.

As I took my seat, Toriko spoke up. “The course comes with a dessert, you know.”

“Huh? It does? Oops.”

“Well, you didn’t get that much. I’m sure you can pack it away.”

“I think you’re overestimating my stomach, as usual.”

“I’ve seen what you can do.”

“And whose fault is that...?”

Toriko was always ordering to her heart’s content and then passing off her unwanted food onto me, so I’d learned some not so good lessons as a result. Maybe I needed to force it all down her throat next time.

“Could you tell me how she tried to seduce you?” Toriko asked after a brief

silence, in a suppressed voice. We'd taken a break, but ultimately the topic hadn't changed. Given the seriousness of the issue, that was only to be expected, though.

"I think she was inviting me to join her on the Otherside. But she worded it a little differently," I said. Toriko leaned back in her chair and took a long breath.

Her eyes wandered restlessly beneath a concerned brow. She clenched her hands, which were resting on the tablecloth, tightly, knocking on the table with them. It was clear that she was shaken up. There was something she kept trying to say, but couldn't, and her lips just hung half-open.

I instinctively reached out, laying my hands on top of her fists. "I'm not gonna go."

Toriko didn't respond, only looked at me with upturned eyes. She had an awfully childish expression, her vulnerability apparent.

"Don't worry. Do you really think I'd take her up on the offer?"

"Yeah."

I'd been trying to reassure her, but it shocked me how easily she nodded. "Wh-Wha...? Trust issues much?"

"I mean, you made a promise. With Satsuki."

"I did what?"

"That time, when you were talking to Satsuki. You said you'd definitely come."

For a moment, I had no idea what she meant. That time? When I was talking to her? I'll definitely come...?

"Ah!"

Suddenly, the memory exploded inside my head. It was just after saving Runa Urumi, when we went through the gate out of the depths of the Otherside. When I cut my hair with the knife and turned back, I remembered exchanging some words with Satsuki Uruma who was on the other side of the gate.

When we were talking, it felt like we understood one another completely. But once I regained my sanity, I realized the words I'd been uttering were

meaningless nonsense.

In the middle of it, I'd said it:

"I will definitely come..."

When I whispered that, Toriko looked at me, frightened. "Did you remember?"

"Yeah. I did say that, didn't I?"

Toriko shook her head, like a child refusing to accept something. "I won't let you go."

"Toriko—"

"I won't let you go! No way!" Her voice sounded like she was just barely holding herself back, on the edge of exploding.

I was silent for a while, before I lifted my head. "Toriko. There's something I want to check with you."

She paused a moment. "What?"

"Since it's come to this, I'm just going to ask you straight out. You loved Satsuki Uruma, didn't you?" Toriko gulped. I felt her fists tense under my hands.

There was a long pause before, quietly, she responded, "I loved her," she said, her voice quivering.

I already knew. I nodded slightly, then asked another question. "But you love me now, right?"

Toriko's eyes widened and she looked at me. Then she nodded. "I love you, Sorawo."

Her voice was so faint as to be nearly inaudible. Her love for me was so palpable I could hardly breathe, but I couldn't afford to back down here. I needed her to make things clear.

"More than Satsuki-san?" I asked, knowing full well how cruel I was being.

Toriko screwed her face up like I'd just punched her in the nose. "Don't ask me that."

“Answer me.” She tried to pull her hands back, but I pinned them down. I was hurting her.

Toriko shut her pained eyes, forcing the words out. “I can’t compare you two. But you’re the one who’s more important to me now, Sorawo. You’re the one I love now.”

Her eyes opened. Tears shone on her golden lashes.

“Trust me,” she said.

“I trust you. I get it.” I loosened my grip, stroking the back of Toriko’s hands. Her tightly clenched fists loosened too.

“Sorry. I needed to hear that from your mouth. Until I did, we couldn’t talk about what’s next for us.”

“What’s next for us?!” Toriko’s face had been on the verge of tears, but now she blinked at me, her expression changing to one of shock.

Her expressions sure do change fast, I thought to myself as I nodded.

“I gave it some thought. If Satsuki Uruma keeps showing up like this, we’re going to be frightened all the time. I really hate that. And for you in particular: you’ll be tormented by a phantom of your lost friend and constantly worried she’s going to take me away, so...”

As I was talking, something suddenly occurred to me, so I asked. “Hold on, Toriko. Have you been worried about that ever since you heard me talking to her? You thought I might go off on my own?”

Her brow furrowed and she glared at me. “Yes. Did you only just realize?”

“S-Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I was just worrying on my own.”

Oh, come on, I didn’t remember... I was about to say, but I realized that was no excuse so I stopped myself.

“Well, anyway, if we’re going to solve this problem, we’re going to need to make it so Satsuki Uruma can never appear before us again.”

“Make it so she can’t...? How, exactly?”

“See, that’s what I wanted you to think about with me. What I’m trying to say is...”

For a moment, I considered wording it as inoffensively as I could, but decided dancing around the issue was too much hassle. Seeing the dubious look on Toriko’s face, I gave it to her straight.

“I’m trying to say: ‘Let’s *kill* Satsuki Uruma.’”

Toriko’s eyes widened. To make sure she understood I meant what I’d just said literally, I nodded without looking away. “Is that...what you meant by ‘what’s next for us’?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah.”

“I...”

“You...?”

“I was expecting something else!!!”

Just as she erupted indignantly, our dessert arrived. It was Crêpes Suzette, warm crepes in an orange sauce with coconut ice cream on top. There was an anniversary message plate too. They flambéed it in front of us. The words “Happy Anniversary,” written on the message card in English, were lit up by blue flames.

“They’re pretty,” I remarked.

“Yeah.”

“And tasty,” I added.

“It sure is.”

“That was good.”

“Let’s go.”

We left the restaurant. When we reached the lobby, Toriko stopped. “I need to go to the restroom.”

“Oh, me too.”

Unusually, we ended up going to the restroom together. When I opened the

door to one of the stalls, behind me, Toriko spoke. "You still haven't answered me."

"Huh?"

"What do you feel guilty about?"

When she said that, Toriko pushed me into the stall and, unbelievably, followed me inside.

"Wh... What, what, what?!"

As I panicked, she pushed me up against the wall and locked the door behind us.

"Whoa... Hey..."

"Answer me." Toriko placed her hand on the wall, leaning in to stare at my face. Her eyes scared me. "Hey. Why was the doppelganger that appeared in front of me making a face like that, I wonder?"

"I-I don't know."

"You don't? Didn't you say it was because you'd met Satsuki?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah! That's right. I did tell you. Ha ha."

"Would you feel guilty if all you did was meet her? You hate Satsuki, right, Sorawo? Then why would you have anything to hide? You said she tried to seduce you, but she just did that on her own, right?"

"Well, uh, y'know, it's, er, it's because I hadn't told you..."

"How is you keeping important things from me anything new?"

She said it so plainly that I shuddered.

"How about I take a guess? About why you feel guilty."

"Wh-What?"

"Sorawo... When Satsuki tempted you, you got all dizzy, right?"

"..." She'd hit the bull's-eye. I was speechless. Toriko smiled as if she saw right through me.

"It's okay. I get it. It's like that for everyone."

“Huh...?”

“Everyone’s like that with Satsuki. She’s special. It doesn’t matter how much you hate her, Sorawo. If anything, your interest in her just works in her favor. We’re all just prey to her.”

“Oh, I see...”

“So it’s okay. You have nothing to feel guilty about, Sorawo.”

“Uh, okay.” When she grinned, I couldn’t help but smile a bit too.

“But,” Toriko continued in a flat tone of voice. “I’m not going to let this slide. Satsuki tried to steal you from me.”

“Huh...?”

As I looked up at her, a half-formed smile on my face, Toriko brought her face even closer to mine.

As I watched her lips approach, I thought, *Oh, I’m going to get kissed*, but her face continued past mine, kept going, and just as I was wondering what was up —

“Ow?!”

I let out a sharp cry as there was an intense pain between my neck and shoulder.

She bit me?! She just bit me?!?!?!?

I was rigid with shock and pain with Toriko’s teeth still in my flesh. Seconds passed before, finally, she let go.

Once I could move, I instinctively touched my shoulder. I hesitantly looked at my hand. There was no blood, but the pain still hadn’t faded.

“Wh-Wha...What was that for?!”

Toriko seemed weirdly smug as I looked up at her, with an expression that seemed to say, *Yeah, I did that*.

“I put my mark on you. Just in case Satsuki tries to make a move on you again.”

Before I recovered from my confusion, Toriko unlocked the door and slipped out. Then I heard her enter another stall. The Otohime noise machine turned on, and the sound of babbling brooks and chirping birds filled the room.

“A...Are you insane?!” I shouted angrily, having finally got a hold of myself.

“We both are!”

I’ve got nothing on you!

I didn’t even know what to say at this point. My shoulder was throbbing. I used the facilities, got out of the stall, and looked at myself in the mirror.

I wasn’t bleeding, but there were distinct teeth marks, and I could faintly see blood had risen to the surface. *What am I gonna do about this?* I wondered, staring dumbfounded. Toriko washed her hands, and walked past behind me without a hint of guilt on her face.

Hold it. I went after her. Toriko was leaning against the wall just outside, waiting for me.

“That hurt, you know?”

“I wanted it to.”

“What the hell? Seriously...”

“Happy anniversary.”

“Huh?! ”

Toriko seemed to be in a combative mood or something. I didn’t get it, and had no idea how to respond. As I was hesitating, Toriko looked up towards the ceiling.

“I hear there’s a lounge on the fourth floor here.”

“A lounge...?”

“It’s got a night view and you can drink there.”

“So it’s a bar, then?”

“Yeah. I was thinking, after dinner, if the mood was good, I’d invite you up there.”

If the mood was good? What did that mean?

“But things spiraled off in a direction I wasn’t expecting...and I didn’t know what to do anymore.”

“Well, yeah, I can relate.”

“But I don’t want to go home like this, so you wanna go grab some drinks?”

“It always comes back to us drinking, huh?!” I couldn’t help but react. Toriko took me by the hand.

“What’s the harm? I can’t stay sober after a talk like that. If we’re gonna do any more serious talk, I need booze.”

“I don’t think we’re going to be able to talk seriously if we drink...”

Even as I said that, I was letting her pull me along. “It’s not showing, right? The bite mark.”

“It’s just barely hidden, so you’re good.”

“It hurt like crazy, okay?”

“Yeah, my teeth hurt too.”

“That’s gotta be a lie.”

We kept on exchanging that kind of light banter as we got on board the elevator to the sky lounge.

3

When we woke up the morning after, we stumbled out of the hotel with pounding headaches. Like I’d expected, there was no way we were getting any more serious conversation that night. We got a window seat in the lounge, enjoyed cocktails as we looked down at the gorgeous night view, and spent the night talking about a bunch of inconsequential stuff. Specifically, it was all complaints about how insensitive I was, and how I didn’t understand Toriko’s feelings for Satsuki. I let it pass in one ear and out the other as I gradually got intoxicated to the point where I had no idea what she was saying anyway. I couldn’t listen anymore, which meant we kept on drinking, and ultimately we

both ended up totally sloshed.

Just as I was thinking what a pain it was to go home, Toriko revealed she had conveniently reserved a room for us, so we checked in and I passed right out.

With the hangover kicking my ass, I just barely managed to drink a McDonald's coffee and got on the Yamanote Line at Shinjuku Station. I got off the train by myself to transfer at Ikebukuro.

"Well, see you later..."

"Nngh..."

I returned home with a groggy look on my face, then washed up in the shower when I got there, and went back to sleep when I couldn't take how awful I felt anymore.

I was a lot better when I finally woke up that evening. I gave Toriko a call and it seemed it'd been the same for her. I could just imagine her face, eyes only three-quarters of the way open.

"I recall you saying something about killing Satsuki. Am I misremembering?" Toriko asked in a kind of vacant tone of voice.

"That's what I said."

"Are you for real?"

"She's basically dead anyway."

When she heard my answer, Toriko was silent for a moment, then started again in an indignant tone. "Come on, you could show a little more delicacy."

"I've never bothered being delicate where Satsuki-san is concerned."

"Why?"

"I'm not going to tiptoe around trying to be polite when it comes to someone who's actively trying to hurt me. That's not a thing I do."

That wasn't limited to Satsuki Uruma—it'd be the same for anyone. Once I knew they had bad intentions towards me, I stopped being interested in the slightest. I wouldn't waste my energy hating or resenting them. I cut off all interest, and shut them out from my world.

If they kept trying to approach me in ways I couldn't ignore...then I needed to be ready to respond to that.

"But that's only after Satsuki started messing with us, right? You were pretty rude about Satsuki from the moment we met, Sorawo."

"Because you wouldn't shut up about her."

"I know. You kept getting all jealous."

"..." I decided to let that one pass without comment.

"Um, listen, Sorawo... I understand that Satsuki's turned into something super dangerous, and I've given up on her at this point. I'm scared of her coming between us, and I hate that. It shocks me that I'm thinking that way about someone I loved and worried about so much, but that's how I really feel. You're the one I love now, and that wouldn't change even if Satsuki came back the way she was before. I want you to trust that," Toriko said in a quiet voice.

"Oh, yeah?"

"But... When I hear you bad-mouthing someone I was so close to, I just..." Toriko trailed off hesitantly.

"You get mad?"

"No, more like...sad."

It made her sad? I guess I could see that.

"I get you. I'll try to tone it down."

"Sorry."

"I don't want to make you cry."

When I said that, Toriko chuckled. "So you can be delicate about that?"

"It's not like that." It kinda irked me, having my feelings evaluated by whether I was being delicate enough or not.

"Well, what is it then?"

"I dunno... I just don't wanna make you cry, that's all."

"That doesn't explain it."

“Urgh, whatever, just drop it.”

I heard her giggle. It seemed she enjoyed hearing me groan at my own awkwardness.

“If you don’t like the word ‘kill,’ what’s good then? Help her move on? Finish her off? Get rid of her?” I forcefully got us back on topic.

“Hmm...”

“Nothing feels right?”

“They all feel kinda scary.”

That was a vague rebuttal, but I gave it some thought. “Well... How do you feel about ‘exorcising’ her?”

“Exorcising?”

“If you think of it as an exorcism, it’s not that scary, right?”

“Oh... Sure. That might be good.” After that kind of absentminded response, Toriko suddenly said, “You know how Kasumi was holding a funeral?”

“Oh... At DS Research, right?”

“It made me think, ‘Y’know, I never had a funeral.’”

“For Satsuki-san?”

“I never considered doing it. Because I always believed she was alive. That she’d be coming back.”

“...”

“But whatever came back isn’t Satsuki. She looks like her, but...”

On the other side of the phone, Toriko fell silent.

When we first met, Toriko was so strongly convinced that Satsuki Uruma was still alive that it bewildered me. That time left such an impression on me that I didn’t notice she was doing a better job of getting over her than I’d thought.

“Was it the Runa Urumi incident that got you to give up on Satsuki-san?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why? You’d been chasing after her so long at that point. All you’d say about it then was that her hand was cold when you touched it.”

“You know how your eye can tell you at a glance if something’s not human?”

“Oh...”

“I touched her with my left hand, so I knew. Ah! She’s not the same anymore.”

Of all the things Toriko had said so far, that was the most convincing. There was no mistaking the distinct sensation when you perceived an Otherside entity. It was probably the same whether that was by sight or by touch.

I naturally let out a long sigh. The tension that had been inside me this whole time had melted away when I heard those words from Toriko.

“What? Is something up?” she asked.

“Nah... I’m just relieved.”

“Was there something to feel relief about in what I said?!”

“Sorry. Don’t sweat it. Go on.”

“You surprised me so much I forgot what I was talking about.”

“About funerals?”

“Oh, right, right... When I saw what Kasumi was doing, it occurred to me that even once I knew Satsuki was gone, I never had a funeral for her. That might be why my feelings were still up in the air.”

“I see how it is. Well, once we exorcise her, why not have a funeral?”

“If we did that, I’d probably be able to sort out my feelings, but...how are you planning to exorcise her? We probably can’t go to a temple or shrine for help.”

“We’ll have to do it ourselves,” I said.

“You’ve got some sort of idea, then.”

“...”

“Hm?”

“Not yet, actually.”

“Wha?”

There was a hint of criticism in that expression of shock, so I hurriedly added, “Uh, but I think it can be done. I mean, we’ve taken out all sorts of scary things together before now, haven’t we?”

“Yeah, sure we have. And?”

“Even if we’re up against Satsuki Uruma, it doesn’t change what we have to do. We can kill her just as dead as any of those other things.”

“...”

“Er, I mean... We can exorcise her, let her rest in peace...”

Toriko let out an exhausted sigh. “Oh, whatever. I get what you’re saying. So, do we just wait for Satsuki—the thing that looks like Satsuki—to come to us again?”

“We can’t let her come at us on her own terms. We have to be the ones to make a move.”

Toriko seemed dubious, so I continued explaining.

“It was the same way with T-san. It’s not good for us to be passive. We always go into the Otherside ourselves, right? Kozakura-san says it’s unbelievable that we do it, but I think we’re doing the right thing.”

“The right thing?”

“If we’d gotten scared and stayed put here in the surface world, we’d have either gone crazy or died by now. Once you’ve gotten involved with the other world to a certain degree, the way to survive isn’t to tremble as you wait for them to make their move, it’s to make a move on your end, like us and Todate-san have.”

“Abarato-san still got taken out, though?”

“He could still be alive. Kasumi didn’t do a funeral for him, after all...”

In the sunset town where Abarato had been hiding, all I’d found was a sleeping bag and some of his stuff. The idea that he might have had some interaction with Kasumi there was just something I was imagining, though.

“They always frighten us and try to drive us insane when they approach from the Otherside... This is just a theory, but I think they may be trying to drive us into an altered state of consciousness where communication is possible. Satsuki Uruma appearing before us is a part of that approach.”

“So instead of waiting for them to come to us, we go to them?”

“Yeah, you’ve got it. If we move from our side, we can stay comparatively sane. We won’t be leaving them in control of how fast things go. But it’s dangerous to make contact for too long, so we go in fast, take her out, and then scam. Based on past experiences, that’s gotta be close to the best solution... Or at least that’s what I think.”

“I feel like we’re discussing a heist here.”

I had to laugh at that one. Though, what we were doing was closer to an assassination. “I like the way you’re thinking. Let’s do this thing, partner.”

“Now you’re talking like a villain. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that thing about accomplices way back when,” Toriko complained, but then, returning to the topic at hand, she said, “I get that there’s a good reason for us to go to them. You wanna head over to the Otherside and try shouting, ‘Satsuki! Come out here!’?”

“Hilarious as it would be if that brought her to us, it’s obviously not gonna be that simple.”

“I tried calling her name like that several times before I met you...”

I pretended not to notice Toriko was getting all sappy. “Whatever we’re going to do, it’s bad not to have intel on our opponent. I mean, I don’t know anything about Satsuki-san. I think I’m going to go around to all the different people who knew her and ask them what I can.”

“Can’t you just ask me?”

“I’m sure there’s a lot of facets of herself she never showed you,” I said.

“Urgh... Yeah, I guess.”

“So, there you have it. I think I’ll hit up Akari first since she lives near here.”

Akari was Satsuki Uruma’s student once upon a time. She might know

something about the woman that Toriko didn't.

"What about you, Toriko? Want to come with?"

"I..." Toriko trailed off. There was a moment's hesitation. "Sorry. I don't think I could listen to her with a clear head," she said in a pained tone.

"That's okay. You don't need to strain yourself. I'll go by myself."

"Could you?"

"I'll let you know how it went later."

I hung up and tossed the phone down on my bed.

I'd only just woken up, but I was already exhausted. I'd had a vague inkling that taking on Satsuki Uruma would mean having to directly confront Toriko's lingering feelings for the woman, but the raw emotions I had felt over the phone had sapped my strength. I was bad at understanding other people's feelings, so I wanted to avoid situations like this, which involved a lot of delicate human emotions. Still, I couldn't run away from this one, so I was gonna have to deal. When I thought about how I was going to have to go through the same thing with everyone else involved with Satsuki, I felt fed up with doing it already.

Although, it was reassuring that I'd been able to see convincing proof in our conversations today and yesterday that Toriko's feelings for Satsuki Uruma had faded considerably. I'd expected a stronger rejection, so I was surprised—and relieved—that she got on board so easily.

Conversely, that also meant Toriko's feelings were going to be directed at me exclusively. I was going to have to decide what I was going to do about that...

Still, I had her consent. Now it was just a matter of pushing forward.

It was time to kill... Oops, "exorcise" Satsuki Uruma. So that she'd never show her face in front of us again.

Mustering the energy to call Akari, I picked my phone back up again.

“Whatcha want?”

It was evening the next day. In front of Akari’s house, I found a red-haired, work-clothes-wearing, stink-eye-giving, borderline delinquent blocking my way. Bewildered, I looked up at the two-story apartment behind her.

“Huh? This is Akari’s place, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, and?”

“Why are you here, Natsumi?”

“Is it a problem if I am?”

“Well, no, but... You seem kinda wary of me, huh?”

“Not really.”

“No, you are. What? Did I do something?”

“Heard from Akari that you had some business with her.”

“Yeah.”

“What’re you gonna do to Akari?”

“What is this about?” I was confused, but Natsumi wasn’t dropping the nasty attitude. “I’m just here to ask her some stuff. Do you remember Satsuki Uruma?”

“Akari’s old tutor?”

“Yeah, her. I’ve got a grudge against her, and I want to settle it. So I wanted to ask Akari what she’s like, since she was her student and all.”

“That’s really all you want?”

“That’s all! Wow, you just don’t let up!”

“Oh, yeah?” Natsumi reluctantly made way. When I started walking, she followed right behind.

“What? You’re coming too?”

“Can’t I?”

“Uh... Do whatever you want.”

What the hell? Does every woman around me have to be such a pain?

“Listen, let me just say, I’m not planning on doing anything with Akari. Even if she is kinda attached to me.”

“Real talk, that pisses me off too.”

“Why?!”

“Akari’s all friendly with you, but you brush her off. Makes me feel bad for her, you see what I’m saying?”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“The hell if I know!” Natsumi raised her voice in anger. “I want her to be happy. I hate how attached she is to you, so I want you to brush her off. But I hate how that’d make her sad... I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do here.”

“Sounds rough.” This sounded stupid, so I just gave that offhanded response. Natsumi glared at me.

“Lately, she’s been making a big fuss about how she got to help you with your work, but she won’t tell me a thing about it. I owe you, and you’re a friend of Akari’s, so I don’t wanna have to say this, but could you not drag her into anything too dangerous?”

“Let me be clear here, I didn’t call her, she sneakily followed me. I don’t want her getting caught up in this stuff any more than you do. It might be more accurate to say Akari saved me when I got in a jam.”

“I knew it... You’re involved with some dangerous stuff, then, huh?”

Natsumi went pale. “Wait, if Akari saved you, then there was a fight, right? Don’t do this to me. Yeah, I know Akari’s strong and all, but she’s a sweet kid.”

“Uh, I dunno about that... She nearly clobbered me once before.”

“The hell?!”

“To be fair, I’d basically picked a fight with her.”

“She’s never done that to me... Do I need to be as unrestrained as you to get anywhere with her?”

“I dunno what you mean by that, but doesn’t that just show she cares about you?”

“Does it...?”

What’s with her?

Ignoring the emotionally unstable Natsumi, I pressed Akari’s doorbell. There was a “Coming!” and the door instantly opened.

“Senpai! Thanks for coming out!”

“Sorry to spring this on you out of nowhere,” I said.

“Don’t be! Please, come on in!”

“Pardon the intrusion.”

“Nattsun came with you too, huh? You two sounded like you were getting real excited out there. What were you talking about?”

“Ask Natsumi.”

“Huh? Uh, it was nothing... Just, like, random stuff?”

“Oh, yeah?”

With Akari watching, Natsumi started trying to act all cool. What was she doing that for?

We headed inside and sat on some floor cushions around a low table. This was my second time coming to Akari’s room.

Akari served us tea from a little glass teapot. The scent of jasmine wafted into my nostrils. By the time I realized, *Come to think of it, I forgot to bring something with me*, it was already too late.

“So, you said you wanted to ask about Uruma-sensei...”

Natsumi was perched on the bed, watching me closely. I ignored her distracting stare and nodded in response to Akari.

“Yeah. What was she like?”

“Well, she was wonderful. Quiet, but not in a meek, reserved way. She had this silent intensity. She was this mysterious older girl, and since I was still

preparing to take my entrance exams, I was like, ‘Wow, she’s so mature.’”

“How did she end up tutoring you? Did she come to you?”

“Uh... I wonder. My parents set all that up, so I’d assume they just went to whatever kind of business you go to to get tutors.”

It felt weird, imagining Satsuki Uruma having signed up with an agency for private tutors. If she was living a normal life before she was swallowed up by the Otherside, that might not be so strange, though.

“She always wore all black, you know? Even in the middle of summer. But it suited her, so it never felt out of place. She had a low voice, and this subtle but pleasant odor... Was it perfume? It felt kind of flowery. She was tall, with big hands. I remember thinking that she’d be pretty strong if she took up karate.”

That’s one way of evaluating a person, I guess...

“Was it just school stuff you studied with her? She didn’t, uh...do anything weird to you, did she?”

“What the hell are you asking her?!” Natsumi shouted, making me pull back in surprise.

“What was that for, out of nowhere?!” I said.

“No, Senpai, that kinda question’s clearly sexual harassment.”

How?! I nearly shouted, but then I realized. “No, no! I didn’t mean it that way, Akari.”

Akari stared blankly at us as Natsumi and I panicked. “What way?”

Huh?

“Sorry. It’s nothing.”

My weird attempt to be considerate only ended up embarrassing us... I shot a glare at Natsumi as she awkwardly averted her eyes, then I continued.

“What I wanted to ask is, uh... Did she, like, invite you to explore abandoned buildings, tell you scary stories, that sort of stuff...?”

“Ohh, yeah. Nothing like that ever happened.”

“Did anything ever feel off, or were there things that seemed weird when you thought back to it later?”

“Nothing’s coming to mind...”

I could see Akari was trying hard to remember, but none of this seemed to be ringing any bells.

“If I really reach for something... There were a few times when she was sitting next to me, watching me study, where I happened to turn and look, and she was staring at me real hard, and it made me jump. Her expression didn’t change at all, but it was like she was staring at something deep inside me. I felt like she saw right through me. I’d be about to ask her what was up, but then she’d suddenly look away. The way she did it was so natural you’d think what I saw must have been a coincidence, or my imagination. But, you know, I do karate, so I realized, ‘Ah, she just fainted.’”

“Fainted?”

“When you face someone in a match, there’s a stare down. When you’re staring one another in the eyes, if you suddenly look away, you can lure the other person in. It made me think she was good at that sort of thing, and I shouldn’t let my guard down with her.”

I’d given her an opening to talk about karate, and now I didn’t remember what we were talking about in the first place.

“Well, if you didn’t let your guard down, that’s good... She gave you that cat amulet, right? That led to you being attacked by the Ninja Cats, so shouldn’t you be more angry at her?”

“I just can’t get mad about it.”

“Even though she gave it to you with bad intentions?”

“We don’t really know that she was being malicious... When she gave it to me, saying it was an amulet to help me on my exams, I didn’t get the sense she was.”

The way she was standing up for her made me furrow my brow. I had thought Akari would be less under her influence than Toriko or Kozakura, but that might

not necessarily be true.

Natsumi took this chance to butt in. “Whoa, hold up. When you were in trouble before, that was her fault?”

“Yeah,” I answered for Akari. Natsumi got mad.

“Why didn’t you say anything, Akari?”

“I thought it was better not to tell anyone...”

That answer made Natsumi raise her voice even more.

“Huh?! Why? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I asked her not to say anything,” I said, trying to cover for her. Natsumi looked from Akari to me, then back again, a look of utter bewilderment on her face.

“Why...?”

“Because...”

My tone grew harsher, irritated at being asked the same thing again. Or it started to, until I noticed Natsumi tearing up and I forgot what it was I was going to say.

I was the one who wanted to ask why. Was this anything to cry over?

As I stared at her, speechless, the tears rolled down Natsumi’s face. Without her usual defiant attitude, I was taken aback by how childlike and vulnerable she looked.

“Nattsun...!” Akari sprang to her feet, heading over to the bed where Natsumi was. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that,” she said soothingly.



“Like what...?”

“I wasn’t trying to leave you out. It’s just that I agreed it was dangerous to get you involved.”

“You were doing something dangerous, and you didn’t tell me...? Stop it, don’t do weird stuff like that,” Natusmi said between sobs. “Don’t do stuff you can’t tell me about.”

“Okay. Sorry. I’ll tell you about it, okay?”

With that, Akari turned to me. “Senpai, is it okay if I tell Nattsun?”

It was phrased as a question, but she was only looking for confirmation.

There’s no way it’s okay, I thought, but there was no way I could tell her that.

The me of one year ago would probably have stopped her immediately.

Even if I couldn’t have stated my refusal outright, I’d have shaken my head, or said nothing. Whatever I did, there was no way I would have allowed it. I didn’t want any more people learning about the Otherside. Akari was already one person too many. The idea of adding Natsumi on top of her was unthinkable. There was no way I wanted that.

But now, I had a feeling that I couldn’t really give that answer here... It was only natural to refuse, and I had good reason to, but I sensed I’d be losing something important if I did.

I closed my eyes and let out a long sigh.

“Okay...”

That was my reluctant, grudging, unenthusiastic response.

That said, hearing the explanation in Akari’s words did nothing to brighten Natsumi’s expression. The tears were gone now, but she seemed more and more dubious.

“Hold up, just a second... Let me sort this all out,” Natsumi said, pressing a hand to her forehead like she had a headache. “This Otherside... You’re not talking about the yakuza, the criminal underworld, or that sort of stuff, right?”

“I told you, it’s not like that. It’s a place that’s like another world, separate

from this one.”

“Are you for real? I’ve read that kinda stuff on my manga app. Like where they get reincarnated in a game world...”

“It’s not like that either. It’s weirder. Uhh, this is tough to explain,” Akari said, getting frustrated. “It’s like the normal world, but different. The buildings get all weird, and scary stuff comes out...”

“Scary how?”

“So far I’ve seen Ninja Cats and T-san the Templeborn...”

“This’s making no sense...”

Yeah, of course it doesn’t, I thought as I listened. I’d kept quiet this whole time, but just as I was thinking I should step in and add further explanation, Akari decided to try a different angle.

“So, when you go into the Otherside, it’s like a haunted house. Everything looks normal at first, but maybe there’s something unpleasant about it, or it looks deserted. It’s weird and scary.”

She must have been remembering the haunted house we ended up in while chasing T-san. If we were only talking about the interstitial space, Akari was right. She’d only gone that far, so that’s what she thought the Otherside was. It might be a good explanation.

Maybe she’ll sort of get it, I was thinking, but after some consideration Natsumi came back with a response I didn’t expect.

“Maybe I’ve been in there too?”

“Huh? When are you talking about?”

“Y’know, when that Sannuki, or Zannuki, or whatever it was showed up. I definitely remember feeling something was weird at the time. It was creepy, and the memory really stuck with me.”

Natsumi shuddered as she continued.

“Before that, when the monkey thing showed up, there was something sticky and unpleasant about the air. One bad thing happened after another, and I

started thinking I had to have an exorcism or something done to clear up the air. I remember now.”

“What do you think, Senpai?”

I was taken aback at having this question suddenly thrown over to me.

“I think she’s right,” I answered. “It’s like that when ghosts and monsters appear from the Otherside. And after Akari clobbered Sannukikano, the air changed, right?”

“Ohh, yeah, I guess it did. That’s right.” Natsumi nodded repeatedly, finally satisfied.

“Huh? So Akari can exorcise ghosts with her karate? That’s awesome!”

“Heh heh...” Akari smiled bashfully as Natsumi looked at her with eyes sparkling with admiration and pride.

“Ohh! I see! Basically, Akari can banish monsters with her karate, so she’s been helping you out, or something. I totally get it now.”

Natsumi was looking so much better that you wouldn’t have believed she was crying just moments ago. I felt deflated. Her worry hadn’t been whether or not the Otherside existed, but how Akari was involved with it.

“You satisfied now, Nattsun?”

“Yeah, totally. But isn’t it dangerous?”

“It’ll be fine. I’ve got Kamikoshi-senpai watching me. And Nishina-senpai’s there too.”

“Really?”

Despite being fed up with all the dubious looks cast in my direction, I told her, “I’ve said this repeatedly, but I generally don’t want Akari getting involved. I only asked her last time because I had no choice.”

“Sorry for imposing myself on you like that,” Akari said, ducking her head awkwardly.

“Is that true? I mean, you’re here today, aren’t you, Senpai?”

“No, I’m just here to ask some questions this time... Anyway, if you believe us,

that's great and all, but could you do me a favor and not tell anybody else? I don't want any more people learning about the Otherside."

"Uhh... Even if I told them, I don't think anyone'd believe me."

"Come on... I'm being serious here. I really need you not to tell anyone."

When I pressed the point, Natsumi pulled back, seeming a bit daunted.

"I get it. I won't say anything."

"Promise Akari, not me."

"Huh?"

"You're more likely to keep your word to her than to me, right?"

"Seriously...?"

"Come on, Nattsun."

At Akari's urging, Natsumi scowled but ultimately nodded. "I promise, Akari."

"Okay." Akari was satisfied and they shared an embarrassed smile. I watched this saccharine display, unable to take much more.

It was a pain having more people involved. I really wanted to keep the Otherside just to Toriko and myself. That hadn't changed.

But I also felt like there was no choice but to tell Natsumi.

During the T-san incident, I ultimately chose to involve Akari of my own free will. That had established for me that, at some point, she had become someone I couldn't throw away so easily—my one and only kouhai.

I could have pointed to her somewhat stalker-ish behavior as a reason. Akari never missed a chance to find openings to insert herself into my life. But that would probably be hiding the truth. Despite my constantly giving her the brush off, Akari pressed on with indomitable spirit in an attempt to be my friend, and I had given in...or gotten used to it, rather.

I think that once I decided Akari was my "cute kouhai" I started feeling a sense of responsibility for her. From that point on, I stopped being able to turn a blind eye to any trouble that happened between her and Natsumi because of me. That's why I couldn't turn down Akari when she asked to tell Natsumi about

the Otherside.

“Um, I dunno if I should be asking this, but...” Natsumi was glancing at me.

“What?” I asked.

“You know how we had that girls’ party in January?”

“Ah! Uh, yeah...” I mumbled, trailing off.

“I feel like things got weird then too... Was that the Otherside too?”

“I’d forgotten...”

“Huh?”

“Forget about it!”

5

“What’d you go and tell Natsumi about the Otherside for?” Toriko asked coldly when we gathered at Kozakura’s place so I could let them know how things went at Akari’s.

I averted my eyes. “It’s just, I didn’t expect her to start crying...” I mumbled.

“A little waterworks is enough to get you to talk, huh?”

“No, it’s not like that...”

“This, after you just said we should be the only ones to go to the other world not that long ago.”

“If you’re going to say not to tell anyone, and then you go and leak the information yourself, you’re beyond help,” Kozakura said in an exasperated tone. There was nothing I could say to that.

“The only thing Natsumi’s interested in is Akari, okay?”

“So it’s fine because she’s not interested in the other world? Is that it?”

“Yeah, you got it. If she thought Akari was in danger, she might’ve called the cops on us, right?”

“Sorawo-chan, it’s too late to change things now that you’ve already told her,

but since you have, you're going to need to look after her properly," Kozakura said.

"Well, yeah..."

After being told off for a long time, I was finally able to get back to the topic of Satsuki Uruma. When I explained that Akari didn't remember much of anything about her former teacher, Toriko seemed nonplussed.

"Really? I can't believe it."

"Yeah. I asked her a whole bunch of questions, but she'd only say things like she was pretty, or she was mature, or abstract stuff like that. It seemed like she had a reasonably strong sense of respect for the woman, so that surprised me."

The Uruma-sensei that Akari spoke of was this vague, low-resolution image, to the point where you'd doubt she ever existed. That was a marked departure from Toriko's stronger feelings.

"What do you make of it, Kozakura-san?"

"You're asking me? Well... Satsuki was involved with a lot of people, but she didn't interact with everyone the same way."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Maybe Satsuki wasn't that interested in Seto-chan? If she'd really wanted to seduce her, she could've done it in a second. Right?"

That last bit was directed at Toriko. She looked reproachfully at Kozakura, but said nothing.

"What she did with the amulet to help with her exams might not have been out of malice so much as...a test," Kozakura suggested.

"A test?"

"To see how Seto-chan would handle trouble from the Otherside."

"Kozakura, I can't believe she'd do something so awful..." Toriko objected, but Kozakura responded with a smile that only touched her lips.

"Oh, yeah? I wouldn't put it past her. She could do some pretty brazen stuff. It seems mysterious because she vanished before seeing the results of her

experiment, but I figure she was seeing how well she could ‘use’ the girls she set her eyes on, and if Seto-chan had passed the test, she’d have pulled her in real quick.”

“How pragmatic,” I said.

“Besides, she must have had a more promising subject at the time.”

She didn’t have to spell that one out. She was talking about Toriko.

“She didn’t test me like that,” Toriko said, her voice hard.

“Oh, yes she did. Taking you to the Otherside is the easiest test there is. If you didn’t get scared, that’d tell her she could use you.”

That must have triggered some memories, because Toriko’s face darkened and she got really quiet.

“What was it like for you, Kozakura-san?” I asked, and she glared at me.

“I failed Satsuki’s test.”

“You failed?”

“She took me to the Otherside through the elevator in Jinbouchou, the same as Toriko. I was totally hopeless. Nothing even happened, but I was too scared to take a single step. She gave up on me, and after a while she brought along Toriko.” Kozakura sneered at herself. “I thought we were still close friends after that, but I’m sure I was just an asset that had suddenly crashed in value to her. It’s only recently that I was finally able to swallow that.”

“That’s good,” I said, relieved, and Kozakura’s eyes widened.

“Did you just say it was *good*? Are you picking a fight with me?”

“No, I’m not. That’s not it... I meant it’s good that you’ve been able to come to terms with your feelings for Satsuki-san. I’ve been struggling with the question of how to convince you to accept what we’re going to do.” I’d chosen my words as carefully as I possibly could have, but Kozakura only scowled harder.

“Now there’s a preamble that does nothing but worry me. Just what’re you planning, Sorawo-chan?” she asked, and I was finally able to move on to the

main topic.

“Why don’t we have a funeral? For Satsuki-san.”

“A funeral...”

“You haven’t had one, right?”

“What do you mean by that? We go to the temple, have them read some sutras, and put her in a grave?”

“If that helps you get over her, sure, but first we need to exorcise her so she never shows her face in front of us again.”

Seeing the dubious look on Kozakura’s face, I explained my idea and what led me to it.

“Did you already hear about this, Toriko?”

Toriko hesitantly nodded in response to Kozakura’s question.

“Hmm...” Kozakura stared into midair, slowly swiveling her chair back and forth as she mulled it over. It was a more level-headed response than I’d expected. I had figured she’d really tear into me. “There’s a monster that looks like Satsuki out there, and she’s been trying to get her hands on Sorawo-chan, huh?”

“What do you think, Kozakura?” Toriko asked.

“About what?”

“About Sorawo’s idea. Is she right? I don’t think I can think about this clearly.” Toriko cast an irritated glance in my direction as she asked Kozakura that.

“I’m a little surprised by Sorawo-chan’s total lack of tact, but sometimes there are things that only people like her can say... It stands to reason that we need some sort of ritual to allow the living to sever their attachment to a person they understand isn’t coming back and to allow them to move on. In that sense, I’m in favor of it.”

Kozakura looked back to me and continued.

“But what you’re talking about isn’t a ritual to make Toriko or me accept the way things are, now is it? When you’re talking about exorcising her, what you

really mean is slaying her, right?”

“I got complaints when I was that direct about it.”

“Ha ha.” Kozakura let out a dry laugh. “I’ve got things I want to say, but whatever. What, precisely, are you proposing to do?”

“I only had a vague idea myself at first, thinking I’d go around to each of the people who knew Satsuki-san and see if I could find an opening that we could exploit. After talking to Akari, I’ve got something a bit more concrete.”

Toriko interjected. “I thought you didn’t learn anything, though?”

“About Satsuki-san, sure. This was something I figured out talking to Natsumi...”

I sorted through it in my head before I started explaining.

“First, I thought about how we were going to ‘exorcise’ her. It’s a word that’s been around since ancient times, and I tend to associate it with Shinto and other traditional religions, but once you peel off that religious texture, it’s all the same no matter who’s doing it.”

“Hmm?”

“When Akari tried to explain the Otherside to Natsumi, she said the air gets all weird. I think she ended up expressing it that way because she’s only seen the interstitial space, though. Anyway, after that, Natsumi asked if the exorcism was needed to take that weird air away, and that’s when I realized.”

They were both listening with dubious looks on their faces.

“That’s just how ghost stories are, right? Before something happens, the air changes. And unless the air changes again, the bizarre stuff keeps happening, and there’s no escape. Basically, to deal with a ghost story, you need to do something about that air, not a specific phenomenon—at least, that’s what makes sense to me.”

“To deal with a ghost story—is the right way to phrase it?”

“In our case, I think so. The Otherside entities approach us through the framework of ghost stories, so I think what we’re really facing isn’t the Kunekune, or Hasshaku-sama, or any other visible apparition but the framework

that they're a part of."

"If anything, that's their main body, huh?" Toriko said, looking down at her left hand. "Could that be what my hand touches? The framework of the ghost story?"

"Oh! Yeah, that could be it!"

A chill ran down my spine. Not of fear, though. I thought Toriko had hit on something essential. I felt all the disparate parts that had been scattered around inside my head coming together like a jigsaw puzzle.

"Hey, are you okay?" Kozakura called out to me, concerned by my sudden silence.

"Sorry, I got lost in thought there for a second. Erm..."

"We were talking about how we can exorcise Satsuki," Kozakura said.

"Oh, right. Like I was saying, if an exorcism is a matter of changing the air, then even if Satsuki Uruma shows up, what we need to do is find a way to change that air. I'm pretty confident in this... The truth is, there's sometimes ghost stories where people survived because the atmosphere changed."

"In what way?" Kozakura asked.

"The one I've heard a lot of is stories where they talk about sexy stuff," Toriko said.

The two of them looked incredulous, so I hurried to explain.

"No, it's true. There's stories where they were in a real bad situation, but then they started saying all sorts of lewd things and they survived. I don't tend to say that ghosts are this way or that, but sex is the source of life, so that makes it the polar opposite of ghosts, which belong to the world of the dead... At least, there's that sort of reasoning. It's an idea that's been around since ancient times. Hey, Toriko, do you remember? Runa Urumi's mother kept making that sign against evil towards me."

The memory made Toriko furrow her brow unhappily. "Oh... That's what that was?"

"It's called the *manu fica*, or fig sign, and it's said in Christianity and Judaism

to ward off the evil eye. That's why she used it towards me."

"I don't even know what to make of this... Ghosts are scared of sexual stuff? So, what, if Satsuki shows up, we all just suddenly start chatting about indecent things? That's hilarious," Kozakura said, half laughing. I almost laughed too, but shook my head.

"That's the reasoning, but I don't think we could actually do it once we've got her there in front of us. When it comes to Satsuki, honestly, I never really got it when I was just listening to the two of you, but now that I've met her myself, I do. She's...bad news."

The two of them nodded as if to say, *Go figure*.

"I don't know whether I should say I'm glad you understand now," Kozakura said.

"Up until now, I've encountered Satsuki's shadow, or another version of her, I guess you could say, a number of times. When she showed up in front of Runa Urumi, she was seriously bad news, but...the worst of all was the time she talked to me normally. It was almost easier to deal with her when she was a total monster that was impossible to communicate with."

"You talked to her directly this time, right, Sorawo-chan? And that still didn't make you think she's human?"

"Not in the slightest. She's assumed a human form, but I think this current Satsuki Uruma is something like T-san. A high-grade interface, you might say... Her appearance is the same as when she was alive, and I think she's inherited the same function for seducing people."

"A function, huh?" Kozakura murmured, her lips twisting. "If the woman who judged people based on their functional value to her was swallowed up by the Otherside and is being used for her functions, that'd be pretty ironic. I'm starting to think we need to have this funeral and lay her to rest too."

I thought Toriko would have something to say, but she made no comment, so I returned to the main subject.

"The thing about ghost stories is that for all its other indiscretions, it's an elegant genre in strange ways. There's not a lot of bawdy stories in it. Maybe

that's because if you're trying to scare someone, and then sexual elements get involved, it hurts the atmosphere. Anyway, I only brought up the sex stuff as an example of how the atmosphere can get changed. It's too weak to be her weakness. There's some real nasty ghost stories with sexual elements, and there are people who've had scary experiences at love hotels."

"Like the weird stuff that happened at our love hotel girls' party," Kozakura noted.

"Can we not talk about that anymore?"

I was sick of people dragging that story back up.

"Here's another famous one. They say you can exorcise spirits with Febreze. That seems connected to this idea of 'changing the air.' The scent has a direct effect on the air, after all. It's probably the same with burning incense. There's also the method of making sounds. You always have bells at temples, after all. I've seen stories where a ghost shows up and they turn on all the lights, put on music, and keep it up until morning too. They're all attempts to change the scary atmosphere."

"If it's just a matter of changing the atmosphere, I feel like traditional religious methods should be good enough. Burn some incense, read sutras, ring a standing bell..." Kozakura said.

"Yeah. But do you think that will be enough to exorcise Satsuki-san?" I asked. They both got bewildered looks on their faces.

"I don't," Toriko said.

"Me either," Kozakura agreed.

"Didn't think so. Now as for why, I think we'll all probably be overwhelmed."

"By the air around Satsuki, you mean?"

"That's right. I'm thinking airs can be stronger or weaker. And whoever has the stronger air dominates the room. It's hard for the weaker air to destroy a stronger one. That's not just limited to ghost stories. I think it applies to living people too. And one way of strengthening an air is rituals."

"That makes sense. You're starting to understand people pretty well, Sorawo-

chan.”

“Huh? Thanks.”

Was that a compliment? I wondered. Toriko frowned.

“I don’t get it. Are you saying Satsuki has a strong air, so we can’t resist her?”

“No, it’s like...let’s say there’s this rowdy kid at an elementary school. He’s noisy, won’t do what he’s told, and pushes the other kids around. But if he did the same things during a formal event like their graduation ceremony, which is a sort of ritual, everyone would look at him like, what does this guy think he’s doing, before the teacher had time to tell him off for it. He’d feel really awkward and ostracized.”

“I get what you’re trying to say. And?”

“Now what if, at that same graduation ceremony, a strange man showed up, and he was swinging around a butcher’s knife. Everyone would freeze stiff, right? No matter how quiet and dignified the occasion, there are times when one person can take over.”

“Maybe, but...isn’t that just a matter of if he’s using violence?”

“That’s certainly a part of it. I mean, violence is a highly effective means of asserting control of a situation. I think that’s why our guns have been so helpful in helping us avoid being swallowed up by the air on the Otherside.”

“But without your eye and my hand, the guns aren’t—”

“Right, they aren’t able to do anything. They’re just noisemakers. In our case, our abilities meshed in a way that made them work, but without that we’d have ended up in one of those horror movie scenarios where we run away as our bullets bounce off the monsters ineffectively.”

“I guess if the reverse was true, and you only had your eye, and had to rely on your wimpy punches instead of a gun, then it wouldn’t make any difference,” Kozakura noted.

“Yeah, that’s right. We wouldn’t be able to break the enemy’s air in that case.”

“So, what then? Do you just open fire, no rituals, no nothing?”

“If that would work, I’d be fine with it, but we already know that we can’t strike a decisive blow like that.”

“By which you mean?”

“I’ve shot things that looked like Satsuki-san several times now...”

They were both as taken aback by that as I expected. I continued.

“That’s what made me think a ritual’s necessary. We need to suppress the air around Satsuki Uruma with a stronger wind, then make it clear that there’s no place for her here anymore.”

“Can we do that...?” Kozakura tilted her head to the side doubtfully.

“The Otherside tends not to approach us the same way over and over. T-san hasn’t shown up once since that time. I don’t know if that’s because they’re trying different methods, or it’s just a matter of random chance, though... I think the reason Satsuki Uruma keeps showing up in front of me is that they’ve decided that’s an effective way to make contact with me.”

“You personally, Sorawo-chan?”

“I didn’t want to think so, but probably. When I think about why Satsuki Uruma’s been showing herself to me, and not to you or Toriko who have a past connection with her, I have to conclude that I’m the one she has her eye on now.” After I’d said that, I suddenly got worried. “Um, maybe you just haven’t been telling me, and she’s actually been showing herself to the two of you too?”

“No...”

“She hasn’t.”

Kozakura and Toriko both denied it with similar looks on their faces.

“Good. Okay, I just need to get her to stop stalking me, then. That makes things simpler,” I said casually, ignoring the complicated emotions on their faces.

“What kind of ritual are you trying to perform, Sorawo?” Toriko asked.

“I’m still thinking about that. The one thing I can say for sure is that I’ll need

both of you to help.”

“Of course I will.” Toriko was quick to agree.

“What? I don’t wanna...” Kozakura was not.

Toriko raised an eyebrow at Kozakura who was fidgeting unhappily in her chair. “This is Satsuki’s *funeral*. You have to be there, Kozakura.”

“No way. I just know it’s gonna be scary.”

“I don’t know for sure what’s going to happen, but there’s a good chance that you’re right,” I admitted.

“See? I’ll send incense, so you go ahead and do whatever you want without me.”

“If you don’t take this chance to cut your ties with her too, she may start showing up at your place next, Kozakura-san.”

Kozakura pressed a hand to her forehead. She was silent for a while before murmuring, “I can’t have that...”

“I know, right? If she showed up while you were alone in the house, I think that’d be ridiculously scary.”

“Yeah, it would, but it’s more than that... I wouldn’t know what to do if she turned back up at this point. It’s too late,” Kozakura said, letting out a long sigh. “Fine. When you figure out what to do, let me know.”

“Thank you.”

“What should I do?”

“You come to DS Research with me, Toriko.”

“What for?”

“There’s one more person with a deep tie to Satsuki Uruma, isn’t there?”

“Oh...” Toriko scowled as hard as she could. I nodded.

“Yeah. I’m thinking of getting Runa Urumi to help.”

“You came, Kamikoshi-san. Yippee!”

I don't see what there is to “yippee” about, I thought as I looked through the glass at Runa Urumi.

We were in a room in DS Research's medical ward that was brightly lit with fluorescent lights. It had been specially soundproofed, and Runa Urumi was smiling as she held a little whiteboard for writing messages to people outside.

It was just me and Toriko facing her on the other side of the thick acrylic glass. Migiwa was in another room, watching through security cameras.

Runa waved at Toriko who was standing beside me. It might seem like she was being polite, but you could tell that she was treating us like idiots. She wrote something on her whiteboard, then turned it so we could see.

“What brings you here today?”

I turned on the mic. “Can we come in?” I asked.

I could tell the answer even before I heard her surprised, “Huh?” There was no need to wait, so I pressed my hand against the fingerprint scanner on the door. When we came to check on the medical ward after T-san's attack, they'd registered our prints so we'd be able to open the door too. The door opened with a slight gust of air as the seal broke, and then we went inside.

The door closed behind us. Runa still looked nonplussed. “Wait, am I being released?”

It was a question said as a joke, but when we didn't laugh, her expression grew serious.

“What is this, out of nowhere? You're scaring me here. I mean, the way you're acting, you're either here to execute me, or release me... One of the two, right?”

“We came in because it's annoying waiting for you to write,” I said.

“What, what, what? This is scary.”

“There's something we want to talk to you about. Sit down.”

“Wh-What are you going to do?”

“We don’t have our guns. See? We’re just going to talk.”

Finally noticing we were empty-handed, Runa sat down on the bed, a look of suspicion on her face. We were still standing. “You can use the chair over there, Kamikoshi-san. There’s only one, so Toriko-san will have to stand. Sorry.”

Toriko didn’t move. She didn’t bite at Runa’s little provocations, just staying silent. Even Runa had to be a little unnerved by that. When Toriko just looked down at you, silent and expressionless, she was really intimidating. I knew from repeated firsthand experience.

“What do you want to talk about...?”

“Runa, how do you feel about Satsuki Uruma?” I cut to the chase. Runa gave me a goofy grin.

“Oh, gosh. What are you asking me? You know I just worship her. I’m so touched that they left these stigmata on my adorable face, and—”

“Enough of that,” I cut off the stream of drivel coming out of Runa’s mouth. “I know you’re pissed that she killed your mom. No need to act cute for our sake.”

The expression vanished from her face. I’d been half guessing, but it looked like I’d hit the mark. “Could you not talk like you understand?”

“Sorry, but I’m not able to act considerate.” I pulled up the only chair in the room and sat down facing Runa with the back of the chair in front of me.

“We’re having a funeral for Satsuki Uruma.”

“Satsuki-sama’s not dead, though, is she?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“I’ve got one question for you. What did you do the last time you called Satsuki Uruma?”

“It’s not like I called her, right? She came of her own accord.”

“Ultimately, yes. But you were doing a bunch of stuff before that, right? At the Farm.”

Runa Urumi had remodeled the Farm in order to make contact with Satsuki

Uruma and tried recreating a variety of ghost stories. Basically, she was testing out the theory that said: “When you tell ghost stories, ghosts will appear.”

“Well, sure, I did a whole bunch of stuff. What’s it to you?”

“In order to lay Satsuki Uruma to rest, we need to call her again first. I want to know what the decisive factor was.”

“Calling her to lay her to rest...” Runa looked at me dubiously. “This isn’t sounding peaceful. Are you trying to do something to Satsuki-sama?”

“She started this fight, okay?”

“Kamikoshi-san, are you planning to fight Satsuki-sama?”

“No holds barred this time. I’m gonna see to it that she never shows her face in front of us again.”

Runa was quiet for a while. Then, in a low voice, she said, “It’s not like you didn’t consider how I might react to hearing you say that, right?”

In the corner of my eye, I saw Toriko’s hand twitch. The air was tense.

“If you wanna keep covering for the woman who tore your cheeks open and murdered your mom, then that’s up to you. You can go on pretending to worship her all you like. I know it can’t be easy to have a change of heart so fast. But I think you’d benefit from being more honest with yourself.”

“I’d benefit?”

“Runa, do you want to live here the rest of your life?”

I gestured to the room. It was a sterile, white cell, cut off from the outside. Runa opened her mouth to say something, but I cut her off.

“Keep any insipid lies like, ‘It’s so comfy in here,’ to yourself. They’re a waste of time. I get that it’s become a habit for you, though. We’re here for some serious talk, and we’ve taken the risk of coming into your room to do it, so think good and hard before you say anything.”

She closed her half-open mouth, then hesitantly opened it before closing it again... It seemed like she didn’t know what to say, so I asked her again. “Do you want to be here?”

“I don’t...” Runa finally admitted. “There’s no way I want my life to end in this dump. I want out. But that’s not happening, right? My voice is too dangerous, so I know that’s too much to hope for.”

“The reason we haven’t let you out isn’t because your voice is dangerous.”

“What else is it, then?”

“We don’t know what you might do,” I said, pointing to my right eye as I continued. “My eye can drive people insane just by looking at them a little. You don’t need to think for long to see just how absurdly dangerous that is, right? And yet, unlike you, I haven’t been locked up. Why do you think that is?”

“Because you’re friends with the people here?”

“Because they think I won’t go driving people insane.”

“I wouldn’t either...”

“You already did. And I don’t see any sign that you really regret it.”

“So what? The problem isn’t that I’m a criminal, it’s that I’m not repentant about it?” Runa snapped at me.

“I don’t care if you repent or not. That’s about how you feel. If you want to do it, you go right ahead. No, what I want to know is if you’re gonna do the same thing again.”

“I don’t get it. What are you trying to say?”

“DS Research doesn’t know what they should do with you. They aren’t the police, and this isn’t a correctional facility. So they’re a private entity, not law enforcement, and they’re keeping a minor locked up. You aren’t sick either, so it’s not like you’ve been hospitalized. But since your Voice is so dangerous, they need to keep you under a ridiculously heavy amount of security. You don’t have any rich backers, so that means they’re the ones footing the bill for all of that. Nobody wants to keep you locked up for life.”

I was just repeating stuff I’d heard from Migiwa. As I was about to say more, Runa suddenly blew up at me.

“Oh, yeah?! The people here are gonna throw me out too, huh?!”

“Uh?”

Punching the bed that she was sitting on in anger, Runa spewed words in a fit of agitation. “Go figure! They want to get rid of me! Nobody wants me! Yeah, I knew that! Well, could they just leave me alone, then?! Let me out! Now! You don’t have to tell me to leave! I’ll go on my own!”

I didn’t see that response coming. Her face turned red as she shouted, making the white scars on her cheeks stand out more.

Toriko glanced at me, ready to step forward. I shook my head. Runa wasn’t using her Voice. She was just angry.

“Listen, I told you we can’t let you out because we don’t know what you’re going to do,” I said, rather than responding in kind.

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?! Promise I won’t do anything?!” Runa shouted in frustration.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“Huh...?”

“Can’t you do that? Promise you won’t do anything. Say, ‘I won’t use my Voice indiscriminately.’”

Runa stared at me, her mouth hanging open. “That’s...all?”

“Is there anything else you can do?”

She’d half risen from the bed, but she slowly sat back down.

“I just promise that, and you’ll let me out? I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet not. But that’s really what I wanted to say.”

“I know it’s weird for me to be asking, but... Are you nuts?” Runa looked from me to Toriko. “You agree with her, Nishina-san?”

“I was against it,” Toriko said, speaking for the first time since we’d entered the room.

“Go figure. Whew, I was thinking I’d lost my mind for a second—”

“I *was* against it. But if we need you in order to give Satsuki a proper farewell,

then maybe we have no other choice.”

“Wha...? You’re really okay with that?”

Runa looked at Toriko like she was creeped out. Toriko didn’t say another word, though, so I interjected.

“We talked it over at length. What we were going to do with you. Everyone figured that keeping you locked up indefinitely wasn’t going to work, but we didn’t know how we could let you out of here in a way we could feel safe about.”

“Seriously? I was betting you’d off me eventually.”

“If that’s what we wanted to do, we could have done it at any time. And if we weren’t willing to go that far, we could have surgically removed your vocal cords.”

“Scary. So why didn’t you?”

“Because we already saved you once, didn’t we? This is kind of a medical facility. And you’re still a kid, so it’d have weighed on our conscience.”

“You have a softer touch than I’d expected.”

“Toriko and I don’t really hate you enough to want to kill you. I dunno how the people you brainwashed or their families feel, though.”

“Okay, I’ll buy that you feel that way, Kamikoshi-san, but Nishina-san’s ready to kill me any time, right?”

“I didn’t want to seem like I was trying to make you owe us one, but it wasn’t just me who tried to save you after Satsuki Uruma nearly tore your jaw off. Toriko did too.”

“Huh?” Surprised, Runa looked closely at Toriko. Toriko frowned, glaring back at her.

“What? Should we have left you for dead?”

“...”

“Let’s not dwell on the past... Runa, I want your help too. I’ll let you out of here. But in exchange, I want your word that you won’t go around brainwashing

people at random ever again,” I said.

“What good is my word on that? It’d be all over if I broke my promise.”

“Yeah, but... You know, I think people like us have no choice but to put a lot of stock in verbal agreements.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because we’ve already stepped outside society and the law. If something happens, we can’t count on society’s systems to help us. That means we can only live by the promises we make to one another.”

“I’m not sure I get it...” Runa mumbled, looking confused.

“Well, the reasoning doesn’t really matter. Here’s what it boils down to: If you’ll be a good girl and help me, I’ll get you out of here. You may even get to see Satsuki Uruma’s face at the end of it.”

“I’d be helping you with this...funeral for Satsuki-sama?”

“Yep.”

“To lay Satsuki-sama to rest... Are you serious?”

“I wouldn’t go to all this trouble if I wasn’t.”

I stood up and returned the chair to its original position. “Think it over. Oh, and try to remember what you did to call Satsuki Uruma. Because I’ll be asking again.”

Runa watched in silence as we left the room. She didn’t use her Voice.

“That was exhausting...”

After leaving Runa’s room, we returned to the conference room where Migiwa was waiting, and I rested my head in my arms on the table. Toriko leaned a bottle of tea on the back of my defenseless head. It felt cold.

“Here, since you’re so tired.”

“Give it to me normally...” I reached up, took the bottle, and then raised my head. “Sorry for making you hold it in, Toriko. You wanted to clobber her the whole time, right?”

“I’m not that violent!”

I opened the bottle of tea as Toriko protested. The completely nondescript tea felt good as it spread through my body.

It was too dangerous being in the same room as Runa for any length of time. Her Voice was still a threat, and if she caught us off guard when either of us wasn’t focusing, we were done for. We needed to get it over and done with quickly rather than take things at her pace. That’s why I’d pushed her and pushed her, then left. I’d tried my hardest because there was no one else who could do it, but it was really exhausting because I wasn’t used to it.

I’d had a lengthy talk with Toriko and Migiwa about how I could get Runa to cooperate. I wanted to know what methods would be effective for summoning Satsuki Uruma and, if possible, to be able to use her Voice, but I realized as we were talking that she wouldn’t be that easy to use. There was a good chance she’d stab us in the back, so the whole idea of having her make a promise, letting her out, and then using her Voice at the right time seemed a little unlikely.

But I wanted to get her involved in the plan in some way. The major thing wasn’t her experience or abilities, but rather that I felt like it was a bad idea to leave someone with such a deep connection to Satsuki Uruma alone.

I was acting on a gut instinct, not anything logical, but I thought it was best to go with my gut on this one. The causes of ghost stories centered around the bonds between people and things. If we held a funeral for Satsuki Uruma without Runa, that would be like cleaning the viruses off a computer but leaving a gaping security hole unaddressed. As long as the hole remains open, the system will get infected again sooner or later. If we wanted to be safe, we needed Runa to participate in the funeral and finish things properly.

After further deliberations on how to do that, with an eye to possibly reforming her, we decided we needed to have DS Research release Runa Urumi and put her under our management. I hadn’t been exaggerating to Runa. The other plans were to keep her locked up for the rest of her life, kill her, remove her vocal cords, and other brutal options that the doctor with the shaved head registered a clear objection to.

“Even if her actions have been problematic, from the standpoint of professional ethics, I can’t approve of doing those kinds of things to a healthy individual, and a minor at that,” he’d told us.

This was the same guy who’d been shot by her cultists during the attack. What a saint.

“I can see that took a lot out of you. What do you think, now that you were able to talk to her?” Migiwa, who was sitting across the table from me, asked, closing his laptop.

“The conversation was kind of all over the place, but I think she got what I wanted to say...or at least I hope so.”

“Sorawo, do you think Runa’s really going to reform?” Toriko asked.

“Hrmm, it’s hard to define what it even means for her to do that. Like she said, we’ll never know what she’s really thinking. But if she cleans her act up, that’s good enough for me.”

“Aren’t you being soft on her?”

“I’m not interested in her. Don’t worry.”

“That’s not the problem.”

I think it was reasonable for Toriko to feel uneasy. I might have been acting naive. But what else could I do? The fact of the matter was that, dangerous as she might be, it wasn’t easy to just off another person. We weren’t the yakuza or some secretive governmental organization. Even if Migiwa felt like he could be a member of either of those...

“What do you think, Migiwa-san?”

“Even as a person who has done a lot of things myself, and who would do them again if I were placed in a situation where I truly had no other choice, I cannot say I am enthusiastic about this,” Migiwa said plainly. “As I have repeatedly told you, if we release Runa Urumi, we will be taking on a major risk from that point onward. Nevertheless, I will support your decision, Kamikoshi-san. The next issue is whether you two can manage her on your own.”

“Just for reference, I wanted to ask: in a situation like this, are there any sort

of established methods?”

“For?”

“Taking a dangerous person by the reins and keeping her under your control...”

That was exactly what Migiwa had been doing with me. I’d realized that when we put together the contract regarding management of the Farm.

“For a person with a position or family, you would normally use those weaknesses, but...”

“That’s going to be difficult, huh? Runa has nothing to lose.”

“I believe it is dangerous to threaten Runa Urumi to begin with. If she decides we are her enemies, we can reasonably assume she will eventually dominate and bring us under her control... Instead of a direct threat, one method would be to provide continuous financial assistance while putting her in a situation where the loss of it would be disastrous to her lifestyle. It might be effective to loan her land or a storefront and make it so that she is successful in business. She would be unable to run away from that.”

“Well, how about giving her a place to live? I bet she demands something super extravagant, though.”

“Well, I suspect letting her come and go from her room freely will be enough in the beginning. We can see how she reacts and think about what to do when the time comes.”

“What if she betrays us while we’re still waiting to see?” Toriko asked.

“I do not think there is any risk of her suddenly killing us,” Migiwa replied in a calm voice. “I expect she would use her Voice to brainwash us first. I will arrange for one of our people to contact you regularly, and you can assume that something has gone awry if that stops. You will need to come save us in the event that happens, so I will give you the authority to enter the facility for the time being.”

“The authority—”

“Specifically, I will give you a key to the input panel in the elevator and the

key code. There are a number of other preemptive measures we can take, so I will arrange things such that, in the event of an emergency, word will get to the two of you somehow. I would like nothing more than for my concern to be unfounded, but it will be a serious matter if anything does occur, so let us take every preventative measure possible.”

“Huh? You said it pretty easily, but are you sure you want to give us a key? Having one would mean we could come and go whenever we liked, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would.”

I was confused and turned to look at Toriko. “Okay, maybe it’s necessary, but are you really sure? We’re not DS Research employees. Not even Kozakura-san has a key, right?”

“I hope you will consider this a sign of my trust.”

When Migiwa, who was supposed to be so experienced and cautious, said that to me, I only worried more. If you looked at it objectively, Toriko and I were the same as Runa: Fourth Kind contactees with dangerous abilities. I wasn’t selfless or even a good person, and Migiwa had to be well aware of that fact.

“You find it strange?”

“Yeah, to be honest... I can’t see why you trust me so much.”

Migiwa smiled, amused by my response. “Indeed. Since this also applies to the incident with Runa Urumi, I will explain a little... Why do you think it is that antisocial groups often take on the form of an artificial family?”

“Antisocial groups... You mean like yakuza?”

“Yes. Criminal syndicates like the yakuza and the mafia often create pseudo-familial relationships like an ‘old man and his children’ or ‘blood brothers’ between members who are not blood related. There are a variety of reasons, but we could say that the most important is the logic that the ‘family’ comes before any rules from outside the organization. In a criminal organization that operates outside the law, violence and money decide who is right, but, at the same time, that also means there is a risk that same violence and money will lead to the collapse of the organization. If those things were truly the only

standard by which they made decisions, then the optimal move would be for anyone who amassed enough power and money to overthrow the higher-ups.”

Migiwa gave this explanation so smoothly it made me think he could teach at a university.

“No matter how powerful you are, you cannot keep those underneath you satisfied at all times. And in a group where might makes right, it becomes easy for people to push through unreasonable demands. That is why a system where people are evaluated on things other than money or the number of people who follow them is necessary. The framework of a family is effective because there is a taboo against opposing your ‘father’ or ‘big brother.’ They are looking after you, so you have to do your part as a member of the same organization.”

“That’s kinda like what Sorawo was saying to Runa earlier,” Toriko said.

“Huh? Really? What’d I say?”

“We can’t count on society, so we need to put a lot of stock in verbal agreements.”

“Ohh... Is that similar?”

Now that she mentioned it, maybe I did say something like that. I just kept saying whatever came into my head, not wanting to let Runa take control of the conversation, so I honestly didn’t remember that well.

Though, if I was saying something similar, that meant I was thinking the same way that antisocial groups did. I didn’t like that.

As I frowned despite myself, Migiwa continued.

“I believe you understand the essence of it, Kamikoshi-san. No matter how we were to try to control Runa Urumi, there would inevitably be times when that is not possible. If she uses her Voice, it is all over for us. She is simply too powerful. Without the two of you, there would be nothing we could do.”

I was gradually figuring out what Migiwa wanted to say. “So, if I’m getting this right, if we’re going to reform Runa or have her cooperate with us, we need to bring her into our ‘family’?”

“That is correct. Setting aside whether you actually use the word family or

not.”

I shook my head. “Nah, family is shit.”

Migiwa burst out laughing. “This is new, hearing you use a word like that, Kamikoshi-san.”

“Huh? Is it?”

“I was under the impression that you were holding yourself back.”

He was, huh? I’m supposed to be easy to read, so that’s a surprise. Though, maybe I’ve got it backwards. Maybe he feels that way because my face is like an open book, but I don’t say any of it.

“You may not like it, but the main takeaway here is how effective the framework of a family is with people.”

“That sucks...”

“You hate it that much?” Toriko asked and I nodded.

“I never had a good impression of the idea of family to begin with, but I hate it even more now.”

“I don’t think it’s all that bad...?”

“Yeah, you would say that, Toriko.”

Seeing the way her eyelashes drooped, I decided to tone things down. I didn’t want to insult the family that she’d lost. “Well, anyway, I get the point. Basically, we get her tied up in something that makes it hard for her to stab us in the back. And a family is an effective model for that.”

“Precisely.”

“Hey, we’re talking about reforming someone, right? I don’t know if this is the right way to talk about it...” Toriko, who was supposed to hate Runa, said, sounding hurt.

“You’re so gentle, Toriko.”

“You... You think so?”

Toriko thought about it for a while, seeming confused. “Speaking of family...

Have you heard Kozakura-san is taking Kasumi in?" I asked Migiwa, having remembered that.

"I have been informed, yes. It helps us out a lot. Did everything seem okay? I suspect it will be a lot of trouble for a woman who lives alone to suddenly have a preschooler who can appear and disappear on a whim moving in with her. I do hope she's not pushing herself too hard."

"She seemed pretty set on doing it."

"Did she? I suspect we will be asking for your assistance in regards to that matter as well. I am sure it must be an imposition, but please do continue to look after the two of them."

That was the end of the conversation. Migiwa said he still had some work to do, so we said our good-byes and left the conference room.

"Phew, I'm beat," I said, stretching. "What do you think Runa's gonna do?"

"If she used her ability, she could get her hands on money and a place to live herself, so she's probably gonna be demanding. Just giving her a one-room apartment might not be enough."

"I'm jealous. I mean, all mine can do is drive people crazy."

"Mine's even less useful. I can touch creepy stuff I can't even see. That's like, so what?"

"So, what do we do if she asks for a high-rise apartment in Minato?"

"I dunno about that. Maybe she'll want an old house out in Kamakura instead."

"That's way too tasteful. No way she's gonna ask for that."

With the tension finally broken, we talked about a bunch of silly stuff as we walked down the hallway to the elevator hall. Just before we got there, Toriko suddenly slowed down.

"What's up?"

"Hey, come here for a second." Toriko pulled me into the stairwell.

"What? What?"

Before I could process what was happening, she pushed me into a position where we weren't visible from the hallway and hugged me tight.

"Uh? Wh-What? What's this for?" I blabbered, caught off guard.

"You were so cool..."

"Huh? Oh, I was? When?"

"The whole time you were talking to Runa. I've been resisting the urge to hug you this whole time."

"And you couldn't hold it in anymore..."

"You were using this low voice, and you had this intensity about you. It's just not fair."

Hm? That matches Akari's description of "Uruma-sensei"...

When that thought occurred to me, it kind of made me want to bully her a bit. She had me pressed to the wall and I couldn't go anywhere anyway, so I brought my lips to her ear and deliberately lowered my voice. "You've got a thing for low voices."

Toriko jerked back in surprise.

Oh, it worked...?

She covered her ear, staring at me in disbelief. Looking closer, I could see she was quivering.

"What's wrong?"

"Th-That was foul play."

"Oh, was it?"

"You can't just do that, out of nowhere..."

"It's payback for you biting me."

"...!"

Just as Toriko, totally flustered, was looking for a comeback, we both noticed a little shadow standing right next to us.

As we screamed and jumped apart, Kasumi looked up at us suspiciously. She'd

been dressed in a fluorescent pink jumper that crinkled when she moved, so normally we should have been able to see her coming from a hundred meters away. I doubt it did much good with her, though.



“Whoa! You startled us,” I managed to say as I tried to calm my racing heart. It looked like Kasumi had caught Toriko by surprise too. Her head was down and she had a hand on the wall for support.

“Wh-What’s up? Are you getting along okay?” I asked.

“Woman.”

“Huh?”

Kasumi pointed down the stairs and said it again. “Woman.”

That’s all she would say, so I looked over the railing, wondering what the heck she was talking about.

A bit of the hallway floor was visible through the door at the bottom of the stairs. I could see a faint light shining in the darkness.

If I was remembering correctly, the floor below housed a bunch of research labs, but there were no regular staff and they were hardly used. Toriko and I had only been there twice. The first time was the Kotoribako incident, when we went to investigate Satsuki Uruma’s lab. The second was when Runa Urumi attacked the building.

A woman, she says?

I had a bad feeling about this. As I slowly looked up, my eyes met Toriko’s. From the look on her face, she was thinking the same thing I was.

We set our bags down and took out our Makarovs. We checked our ammunition, then made up our minds to head downstairs. When we reached the landing, I turned to look back. Kasumi hadn’t moved. She was crouched and looking down at us.

“Stay there,” I said in a quiet voice, though it was a bit late for that. Kasumi didn’t answer.

Does she get it? I wondered.

“Call the old man,” Toriko said to her.

“Who’s the old man?” I asked.

“Old man Migiwa.”

“Ohh.”

Kasumi tilted her head to the side, but still didn't move.

“Well... So long as she stays put, it's fine,” Toriko said. “Let's go take a look, and we can call if we need him.”

“Gotcha.”

The fact of the matter was, when it came to the Otherside, we were the “specialists,” not Migiwa. The word had seemed wrong to me when Akari first used it, not really knowing our situation, but now reality had caught up with her and we really were specialists.

We headed down the rest of the stairs, and peered into the dark hallway. One door in the middle of the hall was half-open, and the light spilled out of it in a fan shape across the floor.

“Hey, isn't that...”

“It's Satsuki's room,” Toriko said, her voice hard.

I knew it...

We carefully advanced down the hall. We looked for light switches as we went, but found none, so we were walking in the dark all the way. When we reached the doorway, I cautiously peeked inside. Nothing was out of the ordinary as far as I could see. The lights were just on. I signaled to Toriko with my eyes, then stepped into the room.

Nobody was there. Satsuki Uruma's lab was the same as it had been the first time we came. The room had a high ceiling, no windows, and a large desk surrounded by steel bookshelves. The board on the wall had maps, newspaper cutouts, and notes pinned to it... Runa Urumi hadn't ransacked this room. It looked like no one had touched it since then, and there was a thin layer of dust all over it. Aside from that, it was exactly as I remembered it.

Huh...?

Sensing something off, I suddenly furrowed my brow.

There was something weird here. Even though I was sure nothing had changed...

With our Makarovs in one hand, we checked every nook and cranny. I didn't see anything suspicious in my right field of vision. I started to worry I was overthinking things, but, no, I couldn't be. *This* room was the only one with the lights on, and Kasumi said she had seen something—a woman. Given the situation, it was impossible for something that seemed so significant to just be a mistake on my part.

There *had* to be something here. Some reason someone had drawn us in...

I circled around behind the desk, surveying the room once more. Ceiling... Walls... Shelves... Floor...

On top of the desk. As I looked down, I spotted it.

A thick B5 size notebook had been left out there.

Bound in black leather was...

Satsuki Uruma's notebook!

I'd figured out what felt off. It was that nothing had changed since we were last here. That, in and of itself, was abnormal. Runa Urumi had stolen this notebook and then it had vanished with Satsuki Uruma. It wasn't supposed to be here!

The top of the desk beneath it and the piles of research reports and writing tools around it were all white with a thin layer of dust, yet the notebook was nothing but black. As if it had just been left there.

"Toriko, this is it!"

I looked up. Toriko was by the wall right in front of me, her face frozen in an expression of shock. Her left hand was stretched out a little unnaturally to her side.

"Sorawo," Toriko said, her voice trembling. "Do you see someone beside me?"

Surprised by the seriousness of the situation, I hurriedly shifted focus to my right eye. Nobody was there. Just Toriko.

"No one's there."

“Yes, they are.” Toriko shook her head. “They’re holding my hand.”

“Huh?!”

I looked and I looked, but there was nobody beside Toriko. But her fear was palpable. The fingers of her exposed hand were spread for some reason, almost like she was forming claws. If someone I couldn’t see had their hand over hers, their fingers intertwined, that’s probably what it’d look like...

“This hand, oh, no way, I know this hand,” Toriko said, her voice a weak moan. “It’s Satsuki’s hand.”

That one word was all it took to snap me to my senses. I ran around the desk, and raced to Toriko’s side.

“Toriko!”

“Sorawo, what do I do? What should I do?” Toriko stumbled and I caught her. Her face was pale and drained of blood.

“Is she there? Is Satsuki Uruma there?!”

“She is! I’m sure of it! This feeling...it has to be Satsuki, but—” Toriko’s voice was nearly a scream. “Her hand—it’s cold!”

I stared at the space beside Toriko so hard that I could have burned a hole in it. It was no good. I couldn’t see her. No matter how much I focused on my right eye, nothing appeared.

I pointed my gun at the empty space, hesitating. Should I shoot? Would I even hit her if I did? Toriko was the one touching her, I couldn’t perceive her at all. This hadn’t come up before. Had the opposite happened, where I could see something, but Toriko couldn’t touch it? I didn’t think so.

Before firing, I swept my hand through the space. It passed through without resistance. Which meant... It wouldn’t work. My hand and my gun were both physical. Even if I shot, I wouldn’t hit.

“Toriko! She’s grabbed your hand, right?”

“She has! I can’t shake her off!”

“Shoot her!”

“Huh?!”

“It won’t have any effect if I do it, but you should be able to hit her!”

“I can’t—”

As Toriko hesitated, she suddenly pitched forward like there had been a powerful jerk on her arm. Since I was supporting her, I nearly fell over with her. Having somehow managed to hold my ground, I looked at Toriko’s hand and was shocked. It was vanishing. Her hand had already been translucent, but now it was melting into the air, fingers first, like it was being thrust into the surface of some water.

She’s gonna take Toriko away!

“Shoot! Hurry and shoot!!!” I shouted, driven by fear.

Toriko raised her gun, her finger hovering over the trigger.

Hurry! Hurry and shoot!

Despite my urgency, Toriko’s finger stopped. She was hesitating at the very last moment. Reflexively, I put my right hand over the hand she held her gun with. With a gasp, Toriko looked back at me. I nodded, and with our hands overlapping, I pressed down. Her index finger which had frozen stiff, the one on the hand beneath mine—moved.

The gun fired.

“Ah...!”

The hand pulling on her seemed to suddenly let go, and Toriko lost her balance, falling over backward. This time, I did fall with her, and we landed on our backsides.

The gunshot echoed, and the muzzle flash was burned into my retinas. Toriko raised her left hand, her fingers all there, right down to the tips. That was a relief, but we sat there a while, too dumbstruck by this unprecedented attack to do anything. When Migiwa, who had heard the gunshot, rushed to the scene (with Kasumi as an extra bonus), we still were.

“Satsuki’s notebook came back...?” Kozakura looked disturbed as she rose from her chair.

As I silently showed her the notebook, Kozakura brought her face closer to it, scrutinizing the black leather cover for a while without saying a word.

“Why...?” Kozakura slowly backed away, collapsing back into her chair.

“I think Satsuki Uruma came to DS Research and left it there... Probably.”

“Did you see her?”

“I didn’t see her. Or rather I couldn’t. But...” I turned back to Toriko, who nodded, her face quite pale.

“She grabbed me by the hand. I’m absolutely sure that was Satsuki.”

“Seriously...?” Kozakura said with a groan, crossing her legs again as she sat in the chair.

“Toriko nearly got dragged off somewhere.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“It was dangerous.”

“Why’d you bring the notebook here?”

“It felt like a bad idea to leave it there...”

“I don’t get it. Not at all. I’m amazed you can bring yourself to touch the thing.”

“You said you’d investigated it a lot yourself, didn’t you, Kozakura-san?”

When I pointed this out, Kozakura shook her head vigorously. “Not since then I haven’t. I’m scared to even see it.”

“Since when? The incident with Runa Urumi?”

“Yes!”

“I’ll ask, just in case, but do you want to see what’s in the notebook?”

“I’m not gonna look! Wait, you people looked inside it again?”

“Nuh-uh.” Toriko shook her head.

“We haven’t looked. She chucked a Kotoribako at us last time, after all.”

Initially, I kept quiet about what had happened that time, but once the secret came out I told the two of them everything. Or confessed, more like it. The part of the notebook I’d read was a trigger to summon Satsuki Uruma. Thinking about it later, I realized that probably wasn’t Satsuki Uruma herself, but a precursor to the vision that would later stalk me. Still, incorporeal though she was, that vision was far from harmless. She threw that Kotoribako like a grenade. It doesn’t get more malicious than that.

“If she went to the trouble of bringing the notebook back... Do you think it’s another trap?” I asked.

“That would be the normal thing to assume, yeah,” Kozakura agreed.

“I think it was reading it aloud that got us last time.”

“Don’t even try it. We don’t know what’ll happen if you try reading it in your head.”

“Yeah,” I said, but Toriko, who was next to me, seemed to notice something.

“Ohh... I think I might’ve figured it out,” she said.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“You were asking Runa what she did last time, when she called Satsuki, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Originally, she was doing all sorts of stuff at the Farm to try and call Satsuki, but Satsuki never ended up appearing there.”

“I’ll bet you’re right. If she had, Runa’d have acted all smug about it.”

“But think back. When Satsuki appeared in the DS Research warehouse, it was right after—”

I clapped my hands together as it hit me. “The notebook! After she read the notebook!”

That was right. I remembered that the Thank You Woman—Runa Urumi’s mother—had snagged Satsuki Uruma’s notebook from her lab.

“Huh? But wait. She hadn’t actually read it yet, right?”

“Hadn’t she?”

“I mean, she couldn’t have. Not without my eye... Yeah, that’s right. I remember now. She was trying to steal the notebook and take it to the Otherside where she could read it in an attempt to summon Satsuki Uruma.”

“Oh, yeah? So reading the notebook wasn’t the direct cause. Well, what made her come out, then? Now that I think about it, I don’t really understand that. We were suddenly on the Otherside, and Satsuki was standing in front of me... Huh? But you said she’d come right before that too...?”

Toriko seemed mystified, so I awkwardly explained.

“That’s because, uh... I was keeping it a secret that only I could see her...”

“Oh, that makes sense! So that’s why. Weren’t you the first to notice, Kozakura?”

“I don’t even remember,” Kozakura replied. “After I got hit by her Voice, I was in this hazy, dreamlike state the whole time until the shock of being thrown into the other world snapped me back to my senses.”

I had been at my limit psychologically as well back then, so the memories started coming back to me as I heard their perspectives. Toriko walked in front of Satsuki Uruma, and...I fell into a state of panic, but Kozakura shouted at me.

That’s not Satsuki! Quickly! Catch her! Toriko’s going to go away!

“Kozakura-san... You were the only one there who said it wasn’t Satsuki Uruma. It was Runa’s first time seeing her, so we’ll set her aside, but even Toriko was fooled. How were you able to tell the difference?”

“Don’t say I was fooled...” Toriko said, sounding displeased. A strained smile came to Kozakura’s face.

“She just wasn’t the Satsuki I knew,” she said.

“What do you mean by that...?” I asked.

“Satsuki didn’t treat people like people, but even with that and all her other faults, she herself was still very human. The thing that showed up there, it was

dressed up as Satsuki, but it wasn't. Everything I'd seen while I was with her was gone... She was an empty shell. You can tell that sort of thing at a glance."

"I...couldn't," Toriko said, her voice gloomy. Kozakura snorted.

"Don't beat yourself up over it. You were just a kid, after all."

"You don't have to say it like—"

"You worshiped an idol, so you got tricked by an idol. You weren't much different from Runa, in that sense."

I winced at how little Kozakura was holding back. Toriko bit her lip in chagrin as Kozakura continued to provoke her. "How about this time? Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm not like that anymore," Toriko replied, glaring angrily.

"Here's hoping. Those who like idols look for another to worship when their first breaks... It lets many of them get away with never having to wake up. You both seem like you're at risk of that, so watch yourselves or—"

Just as she was seamlessly transitioning into a sermon, her phone conveniently happened to ring.

"You've got a call," I said.

"Yeah, I can tell... It's from Migiwa," Kozakura said as she checked the screen of her phone. "Hello? Ohh, thanks for that. Yep. Uh-huh. Huh? They're here. Yeah. Have they told me what? If it's about the notebook—ohh, about Runa Urumi. Yeah, I heard. You're trying to reform her? Sounds rough. Nah, ha ha ha. No, no, you know I've already got my hands full with Kasumi... Whaa? Yeah? Huh? Wait, what are you saying?"

Kozakura leaned her ear to the phone, looking at us with questioning eyes. *What?* I had no idea what this was about, so I shook my head. That made Kozakura frown for some reason, and she looked at her PC monitors.

"A call...? You mean with video? Huh? You're seriously sure that's going to be okay? She's being cooperative? Hmm, well, that's great and all, but isn't it a bit soon for this? Even with a screen between us, it's still dangerous... Well, yeah, you have a point. Of course. And they *are* both here. It's good timing, in a way.

But still... No, okay, it's fine. I get it. We've gotta do what we've gotta do. Did I have your address? Oh, okay. Well, we'll be waiting then. Bye."

Kozakura hung up and then let out a sigh.

"What was he calling about?"

"Someone wants to do a teleconference."

"Migiwa-san?"

"No..."

There was a notification sound from the PC, and the invitation dialogue for a teleconference appeared on one of the monitors.

"Oh, should we be here too, then?"

"What're you talking about? Without you two, there's no point," Kozakura said irritably before clicking on the invitation. The teleconferencing program opened, and on screen was...

"Oh! I see you! I see you!" Runa, her voice full of excitement. Because of the scars at the corners of her mouth, it looked like a woman with a torn mouth that went from ear to ear was smiling wide.

"Kozakura-saaan, long time no seeeee!"

Kozakura turned back to look at me with a shudder and a look of exhaustion. "Hey, is this really going to be safe? Keep an eye on her, would you?"

"I-I'm looking, I'm looking."

"You too, Toriko."

"Okay."

When Toriko and I walked up beside Kozakura's chair and appeared on screen, Runa waved at the camera with both hands. "Yoo-hoo, Kamikoshi-saaan, Nishina-saaan. Can you hear meeee?"

Yoo-hoo? Seriously?

"Huh? Did I have it muted? Hellooooo."

"We hear you," Kozakura replied grumpily.

“Oh, good. Wow, I haven’t talked at a computer like this in so long! It’s like I’m streaming again.”

This was the head of a cult, someone who’d ruined the lives of so many people, acting all giddy, so of course I got annoyed.

“Do you understand the position you’re in?”

“Oh, gosh. Are you mad, Kamikoshi-san?”

“I told you I’d see about improving your conditions if you cooperated, but it’s not like if you just do the job that’s good enough. If I’m not convinced we can let you loose, the deal’s off.”

“You’re sounding like a school counselor.”

“...”

“I get it, okay? No need for the scary look. I mean, like, I’m gonna do my part right. You managed to convince me last time.”

“Did we really?” Toriko muttered almost too quietly to hear. I was really suspicious of her too. I knew I was making a dangerous gamble. We’d talked this over a number of times, and come to the conclusion that this was the only long-term solution, but now that we were actually going through with it I felt uneasy. What we were doing was like letting a highly toxic animal out of her cage, after all. We were doing this online, and Toriko and I were watching her, so even if she tried to use her Voice the effect would be limited, but still...

“Oh, right. I wrote down what you asked me about last time. Migiwa-san should be sending it to you.”

“Hmm...? What’d I ask for again?”

“Huh?! You asked me a favor, so isn’t it kind of awful of you to forget? You asked me about what I did to summon Satsuki-sama, remember?”

“Oh...”

“You said you’d be asking again, so I did my best to remember. It’s not everything. I mean, duh. I wasn’t in the room when the work was being done most of the time. But I wrote down everything I remember. Is that impressive, or what?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“If you act too uninterested, I’m gonna pout, okay?”

I ignored Runa’s lazy provocations and checked my email on my phone. There it was, just like she said. A file from Migiwa. Inside was a list of renovations Runa’s cult had made to the Farm and the ghost stories, accidents, and incidents they had used as motifs.

“An incident where someone died alone in the bath. They boiled until the water ran out.” “A house where they stepped on a gravestone every day.” “A child no one in the family knows? Or something like that.” “A shifting ceiling??? I forget.” “The toilet of a farm in the mountains.” “The round hole in the basement.” The list went on... Most of the entries were vague, and there were many blank spaces. Frankly, it was so sloppy I was hard-pressed to call it a list at all. That lack of skill actually made it feel more sinister in an unrefined way, like a child’s drawings of a ghost.

“See. I wrote it all down, right?”

Runa smiled proudly, seemingly unaware of just how childish an effort this was. Suddenly, it became a whole lot harder for me to deal with this. This cheeky ex-cult leader with an awful personality was still just a high schooler...

“Well, Kamikoshi-san?”

“Uhh, yeah. Thanks. I’m sure it’ll come in handy.”

Runa looked surprised. Toriko and Kozakura both furrowed their brows at me too.

“Are you not feeling well, Kamikoshi-san?” Runa asked.

“Nah, I’m fine.”

“Well, okay... I wasn’t expecting you to thank me.”

“Oh, shut up. When you do a good job I’ll treat you reasonably.”

I’d ended up acting combative to shake off my internal turmoil. I decided to move the conversation along before we could get into another argument.

“Runa, do you remember what happened to the notebook after you attacked

DS Research?”

“Satsuki-sama’s notebook? No clue. I haven’t seen it since I passed out.”

“It came back.”

“Huh?!”

When I held the notebook up to the camera, Runa’s mouth opened in surprise. “Why?”

“I don’t know either.”

I could only assume Satsuki had left it there, but if I said that this part of the conversation was bound to drag on, so I dodged the question.

“Give it to me,” Runa said.

“Huh? Why?”

“It’s a holy relic of Satsuki-sama. You don’t need it, right, Kamikoshi-san?”

“You’re still saying stuff like that?”

“What do you mean, ‘still’? I’ve always—”

I let out a sigh. “Runa, don’t you remember? Think about what happened to your mom when she read this notebook.”

On screen, I saw Runa fall silent. I didn’t stop though.

“Your mom got taken out. By her. Because she read it on the Otherside.”

“The idiot did that on her own.”

“She was trying to save you! To set her daughter free from your ‘Satsuki-sama’!”

Before I knew it, I was yelling. Runa looked away from the camera and hung her head.

“Uh... Sorry. I didn’t mean to raise my—”

“What do you even know?” Runa’s voice was quivering as she suddenly looked up at me. “What do you know, Kamikoshi-san?! Could you keep your mouth shut about family stuff that has nothing to do with you?! She tried to protect me?! Hah! If she was trying to act like a good mother right before she

died, it's too late! If you think that does anything to make up for her religious fanaticism, the money problems, what happened with dad, or anything else, you're dead wrong!"

There was a harsh glint in Runa's eyes. I'd never seen her so emotional before.

"Augh, I'm so pissed off! At mom! And Satsuki! And you! I wish you'd all just die!"

I turned to Kozakura. "Is there a mute button for her?" I asked.

"Huh? Yeah..."

With a click of the mouse, Runa's torrent of verbal abuse was cut off midstream. The room was quiet.

Runa quickly noticed and stopped her tirade. When we unmuted her, she had a serious look on her face. "You're unbelievable."

"You were too noisy," I said.

"Unbelievable. Do you even have a heart?"

I was about to say, *That's rich, coming from you*, but Toriko opened her mouth before I could.

"She does."

"Huh? Okay..." Runa said with a deflated sigh. "Fine, whatever. I'm tired. Let's get this over with. What do you need me to do?"

"Like I was saying last time, I'd like you to attend Satsuki Uruma's funeral. We'll come pick you up at DS Research and then head to the Otherside together."

"By the 'Otherside' you mean the Blue World, right?"

Oh, yeah, that was what Runa called it, huh?

"Yeah. When Satsuki Uruma showed up, we were in a big grassy field, remember? That's the place."

Runa's expression got a little grim. "So that really was it..."

“Is something wrong?”

“No. It’s just a little different from how I imagined it.”

You’re realizing this now? I thought and nearly burst out laughing. Just what delusions had she been holding onto about this Blue World of hers? That it was a serene, beautiful, blue world? That was probably it. It wasn’t really my problem, but didn’t she think anything of the gap between her image of the place and what she was doing to get there?

She was betrayed by the ideal she’d crafted for herself, paid no mind by Satsuki Uruma when she showed up, had her mother killed in front of her eyes, and then almost died too... When you list it all like that, it makes you realize nothing good ever happened to Runa when she went to the Otherside. That made me feel a little—only just a little—sorry for her.

“So we go there...and then what? You were saying before that we’re going to call Satsuki-sama, right? Are you going to try the methods on my list?”

I chased the sympathy out of my head. “Yeah, sure, they may be of some help too. But now that we have the notebook, we’re trying it first.”

I’d have felt bad belittling the work Runa put into making the list, so I ended up muddying my response. Even though I didn’t have to.

“So you’re going to do the same thing as back then? Won’t you get taken out too, Kamikoshi-san?”

“I’m not planning on reading it. It’s too dangerous. But I get the feeling she probably plans on showing up on her own if we take the notebook to the Otherside.”

“You get the feeling? Do you have any basis for that?”

“I’d actually like to turn that question back on you... I get why, as a fan of hers, you’d have wanted to get your hands on the notebook. But why did you think you’d be able to use it to summon her? Even if it did belong to her, isn’t that a bit too much of a logical leap?”

“I had a reason to believe it. First, I learned from Kozakura-san that Satsuki-sama’s notebook was in her lab, and when you read it, a Kotoribako showed up.

When I heard that, I was like, ‘Wow, it’s a spell book that summons things from the Blue World!’ So I was sure that if I could get my hands on the notebook and research your eye, I’d be able to find a spell to summon Satsuki-sama!”

“Oh, I see...” The answer came to her more easily than I’d expected and I didn’t know what to say in response. It made me look silly, always relying on intuition and dealing with things in the heat of the moment.

“She made me spill my guts, after all...” Kozakura said, cringing and covering her ears with her hands as she remembered what Runa had done to her with the Voice.

“Mom said we’d be able to read the notebook if we took it to the Blue World. She’d always been looking into all sorts of stuff for me, so that’s how she noticed. That’s why I thought we might be able to read it without you, but...well, that turned into a real mess, didn’t it? Ah ha ha.” Runa’s laugh felt a little hollow.

I remembered all the files that the Thank You Woman had stuffed into her bag. It all seemed like cultist nonsense, but if you look at how things went, she was closer to the Otherside than you’d have expected. Still, when I looked through what was left behind after the attack on DS Research, it all looked like nonsense to me. It seemed different people had made contact with the Otherside in a variety of ways, but what had worked for one might not necessarily be effective for another.

I noticed my thoughts digressing and got back on topic. “In the end, Satsuki Uruma turned up before she could read it. I think just holding it is enough to bring a person closer to her.”

“Hmm...? That feels like weak reasoning, but if it works for you, Kamikoshi-san, then sure, whatever. Even if I don’t get to meet Satsuki-sama, I’ll get to go for a nice walk outside.”

Runa seemed to only half believe this was going to work, but I shook my head.

“You’ll be able to meet her. There’s no way she wouldn’t show.”

“You’re awfully confident. Okay. Well, should I get ready to head out? When are we doing this?”

“Tomorrow or the day after. Something like that.”

“That’s pretty quick. Roger dodger. Any other questions for me?”

“If any come to mind, I’ll get in touch later. If you need anything, talk to Migiwa.”

“Oh, boo. You’re not letting me go right away?”

“Soon enough. Hold on for a day or two.”

“Tch, I was all set to go eat ramen... This thing’s connected to Kozakura-san’s place, right? I’m bored in here, so have her keep me company.”

“No way,” Kozakura immediately refused. “The moment you end the call, I’m blocking Migiwa.”

“Noooo, I don’t wanna end it. We’re talking already, so let’s chat a while, okay?”

“Not a chance! I’m busy.”

“Aww, I’m so lonelyyy.” Even as she said that, Runa started cocking her head to the side. “Kozakura-san, you know, you come across kind of differently when you’re on the other side of a screen.”

“Huh?”

“I get this vague feeling that I know your voice from somewhere. Have you ever streamed anywhere?”

“No, I haven’t,” Kozakura forcefully denied it.

“Oh, is that right? Maybe I’m imagining it.”

“Are you done? I’m hanging up.”

“Okaaay. Buh-bye, Kamikoshi-san, Nishina-san. Talk to you lateer.”

Runa waved to us and cut the call, acting so cheery you wouldn’t have thought we were arguing not that long ago. Maybe her old habits as a streamer hadn’t died out.

Migiwa took her place on screen. “Thank you for taking care of that. What kind of conversation did you have? She appeared rather worked up in the

middle of it.”

“What, weren’t you listening in?” Kozakura asked.

“It would be dangerous for me to listen, so I watched with the audio muted.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense, huh?” Kozakura said.

“I tried the auto-generated subtitles, but they were completely useless.”

“They’re really bad at understanding Japanese, yeah,” Kozakura said with a laugh, glancing over at me. “Sorawo-chan’s the one planning all this, so I’ll let her do the talking.”

“What do you think, Kamikoshi-san?”

“Oh, right. From the look of it, she seems willing to cooperate. She won’t shut up about Satsuki-sama this, Satsuki-sama that, but I’m sure Runa’s got her own issues with her... She got pretty mad in the middle there, and lost control of her emotions, but she didn’t use her Voice. That surprised me a bit.”

“That actually makes it harder to evaluate. If she is not truly in the process of reforming, that could mean that she has a terrifying degree of self-control and is able to mask her hostile intentions.”

Migiwa’s concerns were reasonable, but because of my right eye I had a slightly different perspective on it.

“I doubt she has that kind of complete control over her Voice. There was a time Kasumi suddenly brought the three of us into her room, and I saw the Voice inside her mouth for just a moment then. It seemed to come out reflexively when she was surprised. It wouldn’t have been strange for it to come out when her emotions were running high, but it didn’t. If she hated me, I think the Voice would leak out more and she wouldn’t be able to hide it.”

“Very well. I will abide by your decision on the matter, Kamikoshi-san.”

Kozakura frowned, a look of doubt on her face. “Is this really going to work? I know Runa already said this, but the whole idea that Satsuki will show up if we take the notebook to the Otherside is just a guess on your part, right, Sorawo-chan?”

“She’ll come. Definitely.”

“How can you be so sure?” Toriko asked, mystified.

“I mean, she went to all the trouble of leaving it there. She even chose a time when we were at DS Research!” I was so annoyed at Satsuki Uruma that I raised my voice without meaning to. “That had to be intentional! It’s a challenge! Showing up in front of me and provoking me like that, trying to kidnap Toriko without showing herself... I’m seriously pissed, okay?”

“You’re totally acting on a personal grudge here. Are we gonna be okay?”

“I don’t care if it’s a grudge or not, if I don’t do something in response she’s gonna take me lightly, and this fight’s going to get a whole lot worse. I don’t want to let her be the one who keeps taking the initiative. She’s dead. So dead!”

Kozakura pulled back, weirded out by my anger. “Wasn’t this supposed to be an exorcism?”

“Oh...! Yeah, it was.”

Kozakura let out a heavy sigh. “This is making me nothing if not worried, but whatever. If you say we stand a chance of winning, then we probably do. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you.”

Even as I thanked Kozakura, I was formulating a plan in my head.

The plan for Satsuki Uruma’s funeral.

File 23: Funeral of the Moon

The records all identify the yobukodori as a bird of spring, but none states definitively which bird it is. One Shingon text says that a soul summoning rite should be performed when the yobukodori sings. In that instance, it is a thrush known as the nue.

Essays in Idleness, #210

1

As we came down out of the station at Tameike-Sannou, we noticed Kozakura walking in front of us. Toriko chased after her, calling her name, and Kozakura turned around.

She was in mourning clothes. A black dress, stockings, and a jacket with no collar. There was a ribbon in the shape of a black flower on her chest. As for shoes, she was wearing a simple set of black pumps. When she saw us, Kozakura scowled. “What’re you doing, dressed like that?”

“I don’t have mourning clothes...” It only occurred to me last night that, since I said we were doing a funeral, I might want to wear something that suited the occasion. Honestly, this was only an excuse for me to lay Satsuki Uruma to rest permanently, so my thinking never extended to the formalities of it. I didn’t own any formal wear, and it was probably too late to rent any, so I decided it was too much hassle and came with my usual exploration kit.

Kozakura let out a sigh of dismay. “I figured as much. It doesn’t look like you’re wearing a mourning badge either.”

“At least I avoided bright colors or camo and went with a black parka.”

“That’s not the issue.”

“Is my outfit no good either?” Toriko asked, looking down at her own clothes.

She looked even more like her usual self than I did. Toriko had a wardrobe, and changed up her adventuring attire all the time, but this was one of her darker outfits.

“I thought you’d at least have dress clothes.”

“Well, in Canada, the dress code for funerals isn’t that strict, eh?”

“There you go, acting like a Canadian whenever it’s convenient for you.”

We reached the DS Research building as we were chatting. From there, we walked down the slope into the underground parking lot. I’d never once gone into this building through the front door.

At the back of the lot, I stopped in front of the elevator and called Migiwa. “I’m here. We met up with Kozakura-san on the way, so it’s the three of us.”

“Thank you for coming. I will be down right away.”

“Does he want us to go up?” Toriko asked me once I hung up.

“Nah, sounds like we can wait here.”

Five minutes or so later, the elevator arrived. The doors opened and Migiwa emerged with Runa Urumi in tow.

Runa was dressed the same as when we first met her, in a sailor suit and cardigan with a light-colored coat over top. She had a small backpack hung over her right shoulder. Since she’d spent all her time locked up in DS Research wearing a hospital gown that looked like a yukata, it was the first time in a long time that I was seeing her dressed in proper clothing. The clothes were the only thing proper about her appearance, though. Half her face was covered with a heavy-duty, black leather mouth gag.

“Congrats on getting out,” I teased, and she shot me a dirty look.

“Mmph.”

“Hey, it had to be this way. It’s clearly too dangerous to let you use your mouth freely here in this world.”

“Mmph!”

“If you keep quiet, I’ll take it off for you later.”

“Mmph...”

“You understand what she’s saying, Sorawo?” Toriko asked.

“Nah, I’m just guessing.”

“Mmph!!!”

“Quit messing with her and take this seriously.” Now I had Kozakura mad at me too, not just Runa. “You’re the one who decided that we’re gonna do a funeral, Sorawo-chan. I’m here because you convinced me you need the framework of a funeral service to lay Satsuki to rest. If you’re gonna mess around, I’m going home!”

“Uh, right...”

That serious scolding left me feeling awkward. I looked at Toriko, and she gave me a disapproving look too.

“Sorawo, it’s not good to get carried away like that. Or to tease someone who can’t argue back.”

“Urgh... Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me, apologize to her.”

With no other choice, I turned to Runa. “Sorry.”

“Mm.”

Runa responded with a look that said, *Oh, whatever...* It was so frustrating.

Still, their anger was reasonable. Out of the four of us who were going to attend a funeral, everyone but me had a powerful emotional connection to Satsuki Uruma. If I was the only one acting goofy, it wasn’t going to be received well. But she was just an irritating enemy to me, nothing more...

Migiwa, who was ignoring the awkwardness in the air, pulled out a little key. “I leave the key to her gag with you. Urumi-san’s other belongings are in her bag.”

“Her belongings? What else does she have?”

“Her wallet and student ID, which we retrieved from the Farm, as well as a change of clothes and some small personal items. Our nurse was the one to

handle them, so I am not aware of the precise details.”

Basically, she had everything she needed to head out, then.

“Got it. Well... We’re off, then.”

“Do take care,” Migiwa said with a polite bow.

“You’re up, Toriko.”

“Okay.” Toriko removed her glove and walked to a spot a short distance away. There was a white line, about three meters long, drawn in the middle of the floor, indicating the location of the gate.

We’d done this again and again, so she was used to it now. Toriko stuck her hand out in midair, moving her hand to the side like she was shifting aside a heavy curtain. The space warped, opening into a gate rimmed by silver phosphorescence.

“Let’s go.”

I took the lead and headed through the gate. On the other side was the basement of the Farm, fifty kilometers away, where a massive metal ring had been installed in the vast, concrete space. A dusty smell assaulted my nostrils. I could also feel it was just a little colder. It was pitch dark when I first entered, but the sensor next to the Round Hole detected me and the lights turned on. They were the kind used on construction sites; narrow, but strong, and felt awfully bright if you accidentally looked straight into them.

Once I’d taken stock of the situation around me, I turned back to the gate. “Okay. Come on through.”

Kozakura timidly entered the gate and Runa followed behind her unconcerned. Toriko brought up the rear, crossing the Round Hole and then letting go with her left hand, allowing the tear in space to close again.

“Oh, it’s this place...” Kozakura said, not happy about it. This was where Runa’d had her at her mercy, so she had unpleasant memories of the place.

“Mm! Mm!” Runa was gesturing with her chin. It looked like she wanted the gag off.

“I’ll take it off once we’re on the Otherside, so deal with it for now.”

“Mmph!”

With that angry grunt, Runa opened her backpack, and out came the whiteboard she’d used in the medical ward.

“Take it off. I’m not going to cause trouble now.”

“Why? Do you have something you want to say here?”

“Mmph!”

I looked at the other two. They both furrowed their brows, expressing their concern nonverbally.

“If it’s something you can communicate with that board, then write it down.”

“Mrrgh.”

Runa wrote furiously.

“What’s that?”

“That?”

I turned to look where Runa was pointing. By the rear wall, there was a large pile of construction materials and equipment.

“Ohh. You know how your cult was digging out the back of the building so you could bring cars down here? We’re thinking we’ll take over construction and make it so we could go up to the surface from here.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’ll be convenient to be able to bring vehicles in and out when we’re using this place. I mean, it *is* connected to the parking garage at DS Research, after all.”

“Use it for what?”

“For what? You guys created a whole bunch of gates for us, so...”

I got that far in my explanation, then realized Runa hadn’t had the basic premise explained to her yet.

“Oh, right. Sorry, sorry. So, yeah, this building? It’s mine now.”

Runa blinked at me.

"Huh?"

"It's mine now."

"You're making no sense. I never gave it to you."

"Well, you won't be needing it anymore."

"That's not the problem. It's mine, okay???"

"No, it's not *yours*. You made someone prepare it for you, and then used it as you pleased."

"Mmph."

As Runa groaned with displeasure, I continued. "I had Migiwa-san look into it, and he says no one else is going to object. So I took it for myself."

Runa looked at me in disbelief, her marker running across the whiteboard.

"You're kidding."

"No one's using the building, so you just took it over?"

"Did you come here from the Sengoku Period or something, Kamikoshi-san?"

"Pfft!" Toriko burst out laughing in a voice that didn't suit her face at all. That last shot at me must have really tickled her funny bone, as a fit of wheezing laughter left her unable to move for a while.

"Why are you laughing...?" I asked.

"B-Because! That's just how you are, Sorawo..."

"I get it. Sorawo-chan's got that sort of barbaric side to her, doesn't she?" Kozakura said.

"Mmph!"

"Kozakura-san... What do you mean, 'barbaric'? I don't think you should throw that word around so casually."

Kozakura snorted at my complaint. "It's touching to hear you starting to talk like a university student."

*"I *am* a university student. Have been for years."*

“Why shouldn’t she say it?” Toriko asked, having somehow recovered from her laughing fit.

“We need to learn the lessons of nineteenth century colonialism.”

“Maybe pick up on the fact that I’m saying you operate on the same logic as a nineteenth century colonialist.”

“Hey, it’s more recent than the Sengoku Period.”

“Mmph!!!”

I didn’t care what Runa’s complaints were, I wasn’t listening to them. The fact of the matter was that Toriko and I were the only ones who could properly manage the Farm.

“Listen... We can’t leave a place this dangerous to anybody else. The building next to this one was absolutely nuts. The rooms were all full of gates. There’s no telling what might happen if a normal person went in there.”

“Mmmm?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you couldn’t see them, but they were there, and the way things were going even you would’ve gotten hurt. Once we make it so we can come here directly from DS Research, we’re going to seal off the road that comes up here, and make it so no one else will come here.”

“Mmm.”

“And you’ve brought us to this crazy, dangerous place...?” Kozakura shuddered. “Let’s hurry up, get this over with, and get out of here. What do we do next?”

“We choose a gate upstairs and head to the Otherside. Then we summon Satsuki Uruma.”

“How?”

“That’s where Runa comes in.”

“Mm?”

“We’re going to have you call ‘Satsuki-sama.’”

The three of them were giving me dubious looks, so I filled them in on the

plan I had come up with.

“It’s been a mystery all this time what kind of ability Runa’s Voice is. It can brainwash people who hear it, and that would be more than powerful enough on its own, but...would coming into contact with the Otherside really end up giving her such a convenient ability?”

“You’re saying there’s side effects?” Toriko asked, looking at her own hand.

“Not quite. Take my eye, for example. Sure, it can drive people crazy, but that’s basically just a nice bonus. Its primary ability is to see through the layers of phenomena from the other world, allowing me to perceive something deeper, their true form. I think that driving people mad is just a coincidence. It’s what happens when you try to do the same thing to a human.”

“That’s the side effect, then,” Kozakura said with a nod.

“Yeah. I don’t know if the layers I see exist in reality or if they’re merely a texture being applied by my brain, though.”

“Then my hand is—”

“The same way, I think. It’s strictly an ability that allows you to perceive things from the other world through the sense of touch, and you’re coincidentally also able to use it to plunge your fingers into human bodies. We don’t know what applications that could have yet, so maybe we should look into it more.”

“R-Right...” Toriko replied noncommittally, clearly not that keen on the idea.

“Mmm?”

“Yeah, so, I figure it’s the same way with you, Runa. If my guess is right, your Voice is able to call entities from the Otherside.”

Kozakura’s eyes bugged out. “Sounds dangerous...”

“It sure is.”

“I thought brainwashing was crazy enough as is, but that’s...even worse.”

Toriko, who seemed to have noticed what I was getting at, spoke up. “Doesn’t that mean she could suddenly call up the kind of things we encounter in the depths of the Otherside...?”

“Yep, she might be able to call them the moment we enter the gate and are in the shallow parts of the Otherside.”

“That’s nuts...”

“So Satsuki-sama will come if I call?”

“I think there’s a good chance that something that looks like Satsuki Uruma will show up, at least.”

As I was trying to explain to Runa, Kozakura got this panicked look on her face. “Whoa, whoa, hold up. If your guess is right, Sorawo-chan, then some super scary thing from the depths of the Otherside will get summoned in the shape of Satsuki? Those things drive you crazy just by thinking about them a little...”

“That’s what I’m expecting, yes.”

“If one of them shows up, it’s just gonna go the same as before, right?! This won’t be a funeral, it’ll be all of us getting messed up and killed!”

“If we weren’t prepared to handle it, yeah.”

“...And are you?”

I nodded. I wouldn’t be carrying out a plan like this otherwise. “If the thing we call up is changed by our perception of it, then we should be able to turn that against it.”

“By changing Satsuki into something else, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“But even if the shape she takes changes, what’s inside won’t be any different, will it? Like how whatever was inside Satsuki last time was still a monster.”

“I agree...” Toriko piped in. “What do you plan to turn her into? A stuffed animal or something?”

“If we did that, we might have an experience so scary you’d never be able to look at stuffed animals the same way again,” I said before shaking my head. “I don’t think turning her into something ridiculous will help. Even if we could

force her into that sort of form, if it's not convincing enough to us, we'll just be taken in by her air and it'll all be over. Something scary's coming, and we'll just have to deal with that. So it's better to find a form that's just scary, but not harmful."

"A form that's scary but not harmful...? Is there anything that convenient?" Kozakura asked.

"There is. I've got just the story for it," I said, looking around at the three of them before continuing. "Have you ever heard of *Cow Head*?"

2

The ghost story that is said to be the scariest of all—*Cow Head*, or *Ushi no Kubi*.

A story so frightening it would shake anyone to the core.

Some said you would die mere days after hearing it, while others suggested speaking about it alone was enough to invite calamity. Now, if you're wondering what it was about...

Nothing.

It was about nothing.

The story called *Cow Head* had nothing to it.

—There's this super scary story. It's called *Cow Head*. You ever hear it?

—No, I haven't. Is it that scary?

—Yeah, it is. It's so scary, once you've heard it, you'll wish you never had... But worse than that, horrifying things happen to those who hear it, and who tell it. It's a really scary story...

Nothing more ever came out about the story.

Basically, *Cow Head* was a story we knew was scary, but didn't know anything else about it. It was a ghost story about ghost stories; what you might call a meta ghost story.

When I explained this, Kozakura, who'd had her hands ready to plug her ears at any moment, lowered them, looking almost disappointed.

"That's all...? Really?"

"There's nothing more to add. Don't worry."

"It's not so much a ghost story as a storylet."

"But depending on how it's told, it could be scary, right?"

I was happy to hear Toriko say that. "Yeah, that's right. That's why it's treated as a ghost story. If it ended with them just going, 'It's scary, it's scary,' it'd be disappointing, and you'd be like, 'What was that all about?' But a story so scary it's like nothing you've ever heard, and just telling it could bring consequences... If you handle that right, it could be pretty spine-tingling. That's why, while it's not a true ghost story, I happen to like this one a lot."

"Okay, so how do you plan on using this meta ghost story?" a sober-eyed Kozakura asked me.

"Oh, right..."

I'd gotten carried away talking about it. I cleared my throat, then started explaining again.

"First... Let's hypothesize that the Otherside reads our knowledge of ghost stories, then outputs phenomena in line with the text of them in an attempt to communicate through the medium of fear. The process up until now was for them to make contact with us. The phenomenon of Satsuki Uruma has been one part of that, and I think they've used her over and over because she's been so effective."

"Effective... Effective at what?" Toriko cocked her head to the side.

"We don't have nearly enough evidence to guess at how they might measure that, but to make it real simple I'll suggest maybe it's because we've had such strong reactions to her. They get complex responses, different from being ignored, or us unloading on them with firearms. They've probed us in a variety of ways, like with Michiko Abarato and T-san, and they noticed Satsuki Uruma always gets a reaction out of us."

Complicated expressions appeared on Toriko and Kozakura's faces. Runa, I couldn't tell. The gag made her expression hard to read. They didn't seem to have any questions, so I continued.

"But if Satsuki Uruma's form is only a temporary guise they assume, we should be able to influence it. If we don't get overwhelmed, and can modify our perception, then we should be able to get the phenomenon that's putting on a Satsuki Uruma display to change into another form. My eye's able to see the layers of the Otherside, so I've already tested this in other cases."

"Really? Haven't you told me that you've run into a bunch of monsters that didn't change when you looked at them, Sorawo-chan?"

"It's a weak point in my theory, I'll admit. Satsuki's form didn't change when I looked at her in Oomiya either."

"I'm uneasy about this."

"But when I look at monsters using my right eye, even if I see their 'true forms,' I feel like many of them still reflect the ghost stories they were based off of. The thickness of the layers of perception and the way they overlap isn't uniform, so there may be cases where I have to peel back many layers before reaching a different form. When you put it that way, I think this Satsuki Uruma's a thick, hard layer, and one it's hard to break through perceiving."

"And you're going to use *Cow Head* to break her down?"

"That's the plan. We force the phenomenon that appears as Satsuki Uruma to believe that, no, you're Cow Head. We turn a super scary woman into a super scary story that has no substance to it. Imagine it as one ghost story supplanting another."

"Hmm..." Kozakura touched her lips as she pondered this.

"What do you think?"

"It's easier to overwrite something scary with something that's scary but harmless than it is to overwrite it with something that's not scary at all... It's a neat idea. I almost forgot my fear for a moment."

"I know, right?"

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“We bail immediately. That’s why the plan is to do it right by a gate. If we think it’s failing, we’re gonna turn tail and run in an instant, so be ready for that.”

“I’m glad to see you’re still just barely sane,” Kozakura said in a monotone voice.

“Well, are we all good now? Let’s go. We’re going to go into the Otherside upstairs. I know a number of gates that it’ll be easy to retreat through, so even if Satsuki Uruma doesn’t appear at one of them, we can try doing it at a few different spots.”

With the prospect of going to the other world becoming more and more inevitable, Kozakura was getting pale. I put my hand on her shoulder, trying to reassure her. “It’s going to be fine. If you get too scared to move, I’ll drag you with us, so don’t worry.”

Kozakura just gazed at me resentfully, unable to respond.

“I’ll be watching Kozakura, so you look out for Runa, Toriko. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Toriko’s response was always perfect. When you consider how many feelings she had to be suppressing about this “funeral” I’d concocted this time, it felt like a human-shaped hole had opened up beside me, and I suddenly got scared. I shook off the feeling, and raised my voice.

“Okay, let’s go.”

We crossed the basement and reached the double doors. I pulled on the cool metal handles, then stepped into the dark tunnel that led to the stairs up. I noticed a silver phosphorescence in the corner of my eye.

“Hm...?!”

The moment after I let out that grunt of recognition, a warm, moist gust of air blew against us. My hair got in my eyes, and for a moment I couldn’t see anything. When I brushed my hair aside and opened my eyes, I gulped.

This wasn’t the underground tunnel. It was outside.

We were standing in a sparse woodland. The ground at my feet was grassy, and looking up to the sky there were low clouds that looked ready to start pouring on us at any moment.

It was quiet. Not a bug to be heard.

This familiar silence... I knew for sure that we had to be in the other world.

“Heyyy!” The silence was broken by Kozakura shouting. “We’re on the Otherside! Was this the plan? I don’t think so, right?!”

“I-It wasn’t, no,” I confirmed.

“Time to bail! Let’s head back!”

Yeah, but what about the gate...?!

I hurriedly turned to look, but all I found behind us was more nondescript woodland. Even with my right eye, I couldn’t find a hint of phosphorescence.

“The gate’s gone.”

“Of course it is! Shit!”

“Kozakura, shh!” Toriko put a finger to her lips as she shushed her. “When you shout like that, your voice carries a long way.”

Kozakura covered her mouth as she realized that. “That’s why I hate this place.”

As she muttered under her hands, someone poked me in the shoulder.

“Mmph.” Runa was pointing to her gag.

“Uh... Yeah.”

“Mmph!”

What she was trying to say was clear. *You said this thing’d come off as soon as we got to the Otherside!* But if she could express herself so well with grunts and gestures, did I really need to remove it?

“Mmm!!!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know...”

I took out the key Migiwa gave me and took another look at the gag. It had a

surprisingly complex design, made of many overlapping belts. I had to search a while before I finally found the lock. There was this little padlock holding together the metal fasteners of the belts where they met at the back of her head.

I inserted the key and turned it, then helped her remove the belts. The whole thing loosened, and once she was able to remove it herself I let go and left her to it.

“Bweh... Peh! Peh!” Runa spat out her spit after removing the mouthpiece that had been holding her tongue inside her mouth.

“Aghh, finally, I got this thing off.”

We watched, feeling tense, as Runa spoke in a hoarse voice. Even Kozakura was silent. Runa seemed unconcerned by the looks we were giving her, looking down hatefully at the gag hanging from her hand.

“Could you hold onto it for me?”

“Huh? Sure...” Kozakura reflexively accepted the gag as Runa unceremoniously passed it to her. Holding it by the belts as she stood there, unsure what to do, Kozakura stared down at the thing in her hand like a child who’d just picked a particularly sinister potato out of the field.

Runa opened up her backpack, taking out a bottle of water which she used to rinse her mouth before spitting it back out. She then took one more sip before putting the cap back on.

“I couldn’t talk, and it was hard to breathe, and it was making me drool, and it tasted weird,” she grumbled as she pulled out some moist towelettes. “I know I agreed to wear it, but this thing’s seriously nasty... Oh, I’m good now, pass it here.”

When Kozakura returned the gag, Runa carefully wiped the mouthpiece and other bits that had been in direct contact with her mouth.

“They won’t wash it for me if I just leave it like this, so I have to do it myself. It’s a pain in the butt, and kind of humiliating...” Runa looked up and scowled as if she’d just noticed I was looking at her. “What?”

“Nothing...”

I’d been taken aback by how used to doing it she seemed, but... If you think about it, they needed to make contact with her for tests and other stuff, so she probably put it on and took it off a lot. I felt some sort of a stirring in my chest again. I was secretly taken aback to realize it was something bordering on sympathy.

If I were in her shoes, I wouldn’t be able to take it. I’d try to run away as fast as I could, and I wouldn’t hesitate to injure anyone who got in my way. And yet she accepted it—even seemed inured to it.

What’s been getting into me lately... I wondered. I’d brought Kasumi in despite hating kids, accepted Akari despite not having any use for a kouhai, and now I was feeling sympathy for a nasty ex-cult leader, of all people? *I’m starting to feel uneasy about this. Have I lost it?*

“Sorawo?”

“Am I crazy?”

Toriko leaned in to peer questioningly at my face.

“Well? Am I as nuts as I think I am...?”

“Ah... That’s, uh... It’s a hard one to answer...” Toriko seemed to be choosing her words carefully. “I’ll say this at least... You’re a little weird to be asking that now.”

“Thanks. How about you, Kozakura-san? What do you think?”

“I must’ve told you you’re out of your mind a hundred times by now. Did you lose your hearing too?”

“You’re the craziest person I’ve ever met, Kamikoshi-san. Does that help?” Runa tossed a casual insult my way as she put the gag away in her backpack after cleaning it. It was a mistake to feel any sympathy for her.

“Hey, Sorawo, what do you think that is?”

Looking in the direction Toriko was pointing, I saw a tall, white, rectangular sign on the other side of the trees. There was something written on it in black characters.

“A sign of some sort...?”

Nothing stood out as suspicious to my right eye. I pulled out my binoculars and peered through them. On the sign was a thick arrow pointing to one side, and...

I shuddered, looking away from the binoculars.

“What?”

“You look.”

I passed the binoculars to Toriko who looked through them then stiffened in surprise.

“No way.”

“What? What? What is it? You’re scaring me here,” Kozakura said, unable to bear the suspense.

“You know how they put up signs in front of the station and other places, to show the way to a funeral? ‘This way to such and such family’s funeral site.’ That sort of thing,” I said.

“Yeah...?”

“Well, that’s what it is.”

Kozakura narrowed her eyes, squinting at the sign in the distance. “I’ll ask, just in case, but...whose funeral does it say it is?” Kozakura’s voice quivered as she asked the question.

“Satsuki Uruma,” Toriko replied.

There was a short silence, and then, with incongruous cheer, Runa said, “Looks like the cat’s out of the bag on your plan, huh, Kamikoshi-san?”

3

We cautiously approached the sign. I had to watch for danger in the area while also keeping an eye on Runa, so it was several times more nerve-wracking than usual. Toriko and I just had our Makarovs with us today. We’d left the rifles behind out of what, in retrospect, was a misplaced concern for how

appropriate it was to have them at a funeral, but that left us less encumbered, so it turned out it was the right decision.

Runa didn't look like she was going to rebel against us right away, at least. It might be that she was strictly obeying the paths I pointed out because I'd already impressed upon her that glitches were dangerous. She'd seen up close what the patients at DS Research looked like, so she had to understand that one careless misstep could spell death.

Brainwashing someone with her Voice wasn't instantaneous. There was an inevitable time lag of several seconds between her speaking the commands and her thrall answering them. That was fine against a defenseless ordinary person, but the two of us could detect and defend against her Voice, and we were watching her with guns in hand. Runa would've had a hard time against us.

[← Satsuki Uruma Funeral Site]

"Who put this up?" Runa wondered aloud as she looked at the sign tied to a tree with wire.

"I'll bet no one," I replied.

"Huh? But someone made a sign, brought it out here, and put it up, right?"

"These sorts of things may look man-made, but I think more often than not they're naturally occurring. If it was brought in from outside, that'd be different, though."

"Hmm...? How can you be sure about *this* sign?"

I pointed at it. "You can read it, right?"

"Yeah, of course I can read it."

"When you bring text from the surface world to this one, it becomes incomprehensible. If we can read what it says, that means it was written...or I should say formed, here on the Otherside. Try taking a look at the things you brought with you."

Runa made no attempt to hide her doubt as she pulled a bottled drink out of her backpack. She tried to read the label, and let out a cry of surprise.

"Gross! What's with this?!"

As Runa recoiled from the bottle in her hands, Kozakura succinctly explained. “Our brains are being affected right now. They’ve invaded our language processing faculties.”

“Wah, that’s nuts... Creepy.”

After she was done with her little outburst, Runa seemed to think of something. “So, what if we were to read this sign in the surface world?”

“It’d be incomprehensible over on that side instead. Like Satsuki Uruma’s notebook,” I explained.

“Oh! So since we were able to read her notes on the Otherside, that means...”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“Hmm. You wanna take this thing back too? I mean, we’re here already.”

“We shouldn’t. It’d cause bad stuff to happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, if you were to set it up on a street somewhere, it might lure the people who see it to a funeral they didn’t know about, or they might go home and find there was a funeral happening at their house, or the name on the sign might be theirs, or...”

“Hey! No scary stories!” Kozakura complained. Ever since we’d started moving, she’d been clinging to the hem of my parka and wouldn’t let go.

“Are there ghost stories like that?” Runa asked.

“I just came up with those off the top of my head,” I replied.

“I’m telling you, don’t make up scary stories!”

Unlike Kozakura, Runa seemed interested.

“Aww, but that stuff’s neat. So, if we were to come here, and make something similar, we could make all the cursed items we could possibly want?”

“Yeah, don’t do that... Your ideas are downright evil,” I said.

It shows that she was the one who coordinated the design of the Farm... I thought, so I decided not to give a straight answer. It might well be possible.

Making “cursed” items to carry the influence of the Otherside back to the surface world—was that what Satsuki Uruma had been doing? Her research notes were one example, and maybe the “amulet” she gave to Akari wasn’t something she’d just picked up somewhere, but something she made here in the other world...

We kept walking in the direction the arrow pointed and were soon out of the woods. There seemed to be a depression up ahead as the ground suddenly stopped and started going down.

Looking down from the edge of the steep slope, I saw a small village spread out below. It had a mix of crude wooden huts and thatched-roof houses, making it feel a bit like an old Japanese town in the mountains. At a glance, it didn’t seem inhabited. A number of collapsed houses stood out, and many of the remaining buildings were green, overgrown with ivy and moss.

Looking to the right, I saw there was another sign like the one before a little ways up ahead. The hill stretched down from there, descending into the depression.

“Can you see anything?” I asked Toriko as she used binoculars to survey the abandoned village.

“Nothing moving, but there’s a sign in the village too.”

“How conscientious of them, showing us the way there.”

I looked through my binoculars too. Taking a sweeping view of the area while focusing on my right eye, I was able to see silver phosphorescence dotted around. There wasn’t much of it in the village, but the surrounding slopes looked like they had glitches on them.

I lowered my binoculars and turned to look behind me.

“Let’s go. We’ll be fine taking the road, but it’s dangerous to go off it even a little. Try not to reflexively run away if something happens.”

“Something’s going to happen...?” Kozakura asked.

“I’d be more surprised if something *didn’t*.”

Although I was talking to Kozakura, it was meant just as much for Runa’s ears.

I didn't want her getting any stupid ideas now.

"I can't help but feel like...they're luring us in. Is that okay?" Runa asked. I nodded.

"We keep going. If the Otherside is reading my mind, then it's not so strange that they've prepared a funeral for Satsuki Uruma."

"Feels like a trap to me, though."

"Even if it is, that doesn't change what we have to do. We go in there and mess it up. Whether it's a human or a monster we're up against, it's all over the moment we let them spook us."

Runa shared a look of dismay with Kozakura. "She really is a barbarian."

"I know, right?"

With the two of them having come to that disrespectful conclusion, Toriko quickly joined in. "But even Sorawo has a heart."

"Toriko..."

Come on, she should have been able to come up with something a little better than that to support me. No, wait... Maybe she wasn't trying to support me. Was she being sarcastic? I couldn't tell which it was, looking at the side of Toriko's face.

Well, whatever. I didn't have time to sweat the small stuff.

We descended the hill and headed towards the village. It was a compacted dirt road, not a paved one. Kozakura had to walk slowly so as not to trip while wearing heels.

When we got close, it was readily apparent the village was deserted. Collapsed walls, broken glass, and rusty corrugated iron roofs. Was the mechanical wreckage under the collapsed eaves over there a tractor or an old-timey motorcycle? On some houses the storm shutters and shoji screens were all broken, letting you see right through to the other side. In the middle of all this rural decay, the brand new signs pointing to the location of the funeral were the one thing that seemed out of place.

There was a large tree in the middle of the village. The branches that spread

out above the gnarled trunk bore no leaves. At the base of the tree, there was a rock that had just barely managed to retain the shape of a Jizo statue.

A short, stone bridge passed over a dry canal. Next to it was what looked like a collapsed waterwheel house. The wooden waterwheel had fallen, its axle having rotted away, and was now no more than a green lump covered in moss.

We'd traveled through about two-thirds of the village, following the arrows, when a black and white striped curtain appeared up ahead. It looked like we'd found where they'd been pointing. We approached cautiously, keeping alert of our surroundings. Even now, there was no sign of anyone around, so we were apparently the only ones attending this funeral.

The curtain was awfully tall. Maybe five meters or thereabouts. We proceeded along the edge of the curtain, which continued for a long way like a hedge, until we finally found an opening in it.

I hesitantly peeked in, and was taken by surprise. There was a space the size of a house in there, wrapped all around with black and white stripes. The curtains even covered the roof. They seemed to be held up by bamboo poles running horizontally along the walls. It was strange enough to see a curtain so tall you had to look up to see the top of it, but one that covered the roof too made for an eye-popping experience. The floor was bare earth, with not so much as a blade of grass growing in it.

There was a small table by the entrance with a white table cloth draped over it, possibly intended to be where guests signed the registry book. Beyond it there were lines of pipe chairs, and then an altar set up at the very back of the room. On the altar, covered in so many white flowers that they overflowed, sat a plain wooden coffin.

4

"See anything?" Toriko asked as she stood at my side.

I carefully scanned the funeral site with my right eye. Nothing looked any different. The curtain flapped in the wind, letting in outside light that illuminated the inside of the building in an irregular way.

Turning back, I saw Kozakura and Runa standing around awkwardly. Kozakura's face was pale with fear, while Runa was tense but distracted.

"You okay, Kozakura-san?" I asked.

"No, I'm not okay," she responded, her tone stiff like she was numb from the cold. "Why am I even here again?"

"To attend Satsuki Uruma's funeral."

"Oh... Right, that."

Her eyes were glazed over, like she was in a dream. She might have exceeded her tolerance for terror. When I touched her arm, she clung to my arm, possibly without even meaning to do it.

Accepting this was just how things were going to be, I gave her a pat on the head and let her stay like that for a while, but she suddenly cried out and tore herself free.

"Oh, good."

"D-Did you just pat me on the head?!"

"Sorry, couldn't help myself."

"Well, help yourself! I told you never to do that again, didn't I?!"

After watching Kozakura throw a tantrum, a mystified Runa spoke up. "Kozakura-san's not good with horror, huh? Count me surprised."

"It really pisses me off when you ask that like I'm a streamer who plays horror games."

"You wanna do some horror games together some time?"

"Not a chance!"

Turning back to the front, I was greeted by Toriko looking somewhat less than satisfied.

"What?"

"Nothing..." Toriko turned her head away, focusing her eyes on the coffin by the altar, then let out a sigh. Kozakura seemed to have regained her senses, so I

shifted gears.

“Let’s go,” I said. I heard Kozakura wordlessly whimper behind me.

We stepped into the empty funeral site and approached the altar. The only sound was cloth flapping in the wind. The rows of pipe chairs on either side of us were uneven in places, leaving an impression like the attendees who had been sitting in them until a moment ago had suddenly vanished.

A sweet fragrance wafted from the flowers burying the altar. When they noticed it, Toriko and Kozakura gulped in unison.

“It smells like Satsuki...!” Toriko murmured to herself. I turned to look at Kozakura whose eyes were wide with shock. Based on Runa’s expression, it didn’t mean anything to her. It was only the two of them who’d known Satsuki when she was still human who were shaken up by it.

The coffin was open. I peered inside, gun held at the ready, and it was packed full of white flowers too. The body that should have been in there was nowhere to be seen. Like she’d gotten up to go for a stroll somewhere...

Lowering my gun, I looked at the others.

“Looks like she’s not here. What now?” Runa asked, looking up at the altar.

“She sets up a funeral site for us, then doesn’t show? What gives?” Kozakura asked angrily. I thought about it as I answered.

“This site is likely an attempt to approach us. It reflects our will more strongly than other areas in the Otherside,” I said.

“Approach us for what?”

“That, I don’t know, but I get the feeling she’s observing us... Seeing what we’ll do,” I said.

“She’s messing with us...” Toriko grumbled, more angry than I was.

“So they understand we’re here for Satsuki’s funeral... Though we don’t know how far that understanding of it extends,” Kozakura said.

“I think that’s a good way to look at it. But they didn’t place the woman we’re here to see here.”

“Why not? To provoke us?”

“I can’t imagine their intentions are that easy to understand. They may just feel it’s an effective scare tactic,” I replied.

“It’s true that the body being missing is more unnerving...”

“Can’t shoot her if she’s not here, after all.”

“There you go, talking like a barbarian ag—” Kozakura started to say, scowling, but stopped mid-word as if she’d realized something. “Do you think that could be why?”

“Huh?”

“After all the times you’ve shot them, maybe they’ve changed tactics? Because you two start shooting so easily...”

Toriko and I looked at one another without meaning to.

She could be right...

Recently, a lot of their attempts to approach us had involved sending pseudo-humans to the surface world. Considering that we’d responded to T-san with guns and karate, I had to conclude she might be onto something.

“If the monsters that appear in front of us are probes from the Otherside, then it wouldn’t be strange for them to see what they can do to change our response to them, right?” Kozakura asked.

“If that’s what it is, it doesn’t feel good,” I said.

“Does *anything* about the Otherside ‘feel good’?”

“If there wasn’t anything, we wouldn’t be here doing this,” I countered.

Kozakura shook her head vigorously. “Forget it. I should’ve known better than to ask you, Sorawo-chan.”

But I gave you a serious answer, I thought, a little miffed. Suddenly, Runa seemed to remember something.

“Come to think of it, Kamikoshi-san, you were saying Satsuki-sama would show up if we had the notebook, but it doesn’t seem to have done anything, huh?”

“Yeah, it looks like it’s not that simple. I guess just carrying it’s not enough, we have to use it.”

“You’re gonna read it...?” Runa said in a low voice.

“Nah. I’m not going to read it, there’s other ways to use it instead,” I said, setting my bag down on the ground. “Toriko, could you bring that table over?”

“The small one? Okay.”

When I pulled out the notebook and started preparing, Toriko went and fetched the table by the entrance that seemed to be for a guest book. It was about the size of the desks they use in elementary schools, which made it a perfect fit for what I had in mind.

Once she had the table set up in front of the altar, I opened up the notebook on top of it. Not from the front cover, but from the back. Two blank pages lay open on top of the tablecloth.

“We’re going to summon Satsuki Uruma with this. Work with me here.”

“With this...?” Kozakura said, looking at the blank pages dubiously, as if she expected something to crawl out of the lines.

“Yes. The four of us are going to do Kokkuri-san.”

Three sets of eyes looked back at me without any comprehension.

“What’s Kokkuri-san?” Toriko asked, tilting her head to the side.

We have to start there, huh?

“You know what a Ouija board is?” I asked.

“Ohh, yeah.”

“It’s like that, only Japanese.”

“Hmm.”

“Kozakura-san, can you get a ten-yen coin out real quick? My wallet’s in the bottom of my bag,” I said.

“Sure, but... Wait, wh-what are you talking about? Why’re we doing Kokkuri-san?”

“I spent a long time thinking about what we could do to summon Satsuki Uruma, and I think this is the best way. Kokkuri-san is simple, and it’s easy to make use of our special qualities. I considered ‘one-person hide-and-seek’ as another candidate, but that gets a little noisy, you know?”

“I don’t understand a word that comes out of your mouth at this point, Sorawo-chan.”

“That’s okay. You’ll figure it out quick. Everyone get around the table.”

I crouched over the notebook with a thin pen in hand, quickly writing down the characters we’d need for the ritual. The Japanese syllabary and numbers, then the words “Yes” and “No” above that, and a mark like a torii gate at the very top.

As I finished writing, I looked up and my eyes met theirs.

“Here, ten yen... Is that good?” Kozakura asked.

“Thank you. Okay, now everyone rest your fingers on it.”

The four of us put out index fingers on the ten yen coin that was placed over the torii gate.



“Oh, Toriko, you use your left hand.”

“Huh? Is that how it works?”

“Yeah. Take off your glove too.”

“Um... The ten yen coin’s a little crowded with four of us, right?” Runa objected.

“There’s no need to push down hard on it. You can just touch the edge lightly,” I said as our preparations were complete.

“Now, Runa,” I continued, “I’d like you to repeat after me...”

“Right...”

“I want you to use that Voice.”

“Huh? You *want* me to use it?”

“That’s what you’re here for. Ready? Here we go.”

I took a deep breath, then spoke.

“Satsuki Uruma, Satsuki Uruma, please come. If you are here, please move to the ‘Yes.’”

I looked at Runa.

“Say it.”

“Satsuki-sama, Satsuki-sama, please come.”

Here she was, mixing it up on me from the very start, but honestly her version sounded more appropriate to me. I didn’t call her on it, so Runa kept going.

“If you are here, please move to the ‘Yes.’”

I was watching Runa’s Voice with my right eye. It didn’t manifest the way I’d anticipated. Up until now, whenever I’d seen it, the Voice had been a silver stream rushing through the air towards her targets. What I was seeing now was more like phosphorescent fireworks launching out of her mouth. Was it because she had no specific target? Their trajectories and velocities were all over the place, and they melted away into the air.

“I’m not sensing anything,” Runa said.

“Keep going. Repeat it,” I told her, then added, “And try to find a place where you do feel something as you do. Search for Satsuki using your Voice.”

“Huh? Could you not make difficult requests all of a sudden?”

Despite her complaints, Runa repeated the words.

“Satsuki-sama, Satsuki-sama, please come...”

Her tone was no different from before to my ears, but my right eye could see the Voice changing every second. Runa was searching the space around us, like I’d asked her to. It looked like my guess that she could do something similar to what I could do with my eye and Toriko could do with her hand was right.

Suddenly, Toriko twitched. “It’s cold.”

The moment after she murmured that, I felt a change at my fingertip. Without warning, the ten yen coin slid across the page, moving off of the torii gate.

“Kamikoshi-san. My voice, it touched something, just now,” Runa said, surprised. “It feels super weird... What *is* this? Or who? It’s something really big, really scary, and completely inhuman...”

I recognized that description. I’d heard the same words from Runa’s mouth before. When, and where, though...?

Kozakura realized something and said, “Hey, that’s the thing from the ASMR.”

I remembered it at the same time. When we got abducted before, Runa had talked about it. Something big and scary that appeared inside a mysterious video titled Blue World.

“It’s God...” Runa whispered, her expression enraptured.

That moment, my finger on the ten yen coin suddenly felt a lot heavier. As if something I couldn’t see had silently come down from Heaven.

“Wh-What the hell...?!” Kozakura murmured. It looked like we’d all felt the same thing. The coin beneath our fingers shook as if under incredible pressure.

“Runa, keep going,” I urged her, and Runa hurriedly complied.

“I-If this is Satsuki-sama, please move to the ‘Yes.’”

The ten yen coin moved with a bizarre smoothness before coming to a

sudden stop on top of the “Yes.” We were all speechless. Even me, who had planned this whole thing out hoping that this would happen.

“None of you are doing this, right?”

We all shook our heads in response to Runa’s question.

“Toriko, can you sense what’s going on?” I asked.

“My left hand feels like it’s immersed in a cool flow. Kinda like T-san’s blue path...”

I focused with my right eye once more. There was definitely some sort of flowing power that was overlapping with the handwritten characters on the paper. Was the reason I couldn’t see it clearly because it wasn’t permeating the layer of reality very well?

With this flow connected, was it possible for us to communicate without going through Runa now? I decided to open my mouth and test that.

“Tell us your name,” I said. The ten yen coin moved. It moved to the syllabary, choosing one character after another.

—I...KI...SU...TA...MA.

Then it stopped.

What? I looked at the paper in confusion.

Ikisutama? Was that a word that meant something? In a foreign language, maybe...? It took a moment, but I finally made the connection. Ikisudama! A living spirit!

“Cool...” I whispered without meaning to. The other three looked at me with expressions that said, “Huh?!” I ignored them and asked the question again.

“Tell us your name.”

—A...O...I...ME. (Blue eyes.)

“That’s not a name. Tell us your *name*.”

—U...RU...MA.

Here it comes!

—SA...TSU...KI.

“She gave her name...” Toriko murmured, in a daze. I was excited too. We had a conversation going. We were communicating with something the Otherside was calling Satsuki Uruma using Kokkuri-san.

“Where did you come from?”

—A...O...FU...CHI.

I didn’t get it. Aofuchi? Blue... Edge? Spot? Wisteria?

Before I could ask a follow-up question, Toriko spoke. “Where are you now?”

The ten yen coin didn’t move. Toriko asked again, louder this time.

“Where is Satsuki now?”

—KO...KO. (Here.)

Something moved at the edge of my vision. I looked towards it to see one of the flowers that were spilling out of the coffin falling to the ground.

There was a soft rustling of petals, and then I saw a human figure rise up out of the coffin. In my right field of vision, it was pure blue, like a humanoid hole in space. The blue was the light leaking through that hole. I reflexively averted my eyes.

No—We can’t look at it! That thing will drive us insane!

“Don’t turn around!”

The other three jumped a little as I shouted.

“There’s someone there, but you absolutely must not look. Keep your eyes on the ten yen coin.”

There was the sound of hard soles on the ground. Whoever had emerged from the coffin was slowly walking towards us. When they were right next to the four of us, they began circling around behind us clockwise with steps like they were walking through water. I caught a glimpse of a black skirt in the corner of my lowered eyes. The offertory flowers smelled incredibly close.

“Satsuki...” Toriko said her name in a hoarse voice. There was no response.

“What’re we supposed to do about this?” Kozakura asked in a hushed voice.
“You managed to call her up... Now how do we exorcise her?”

Yeah, the important part’s just getting started.

I took a breath to calm myself before opening my mouth again. “Are you aware that you’re dead?”

No response. One more time.

“Are you aware that you’re already dead?”

—No.

“You were swallowed up by the Otherside, never to return. That’s right, isn’t it?”

—Yes.

Toriko was silent, shaking her head as if she didn’t want to accept it. Her breathing was ragged.

“Do you realize there’s no longer any place for you in the surface world?”

—No.

“Now that you’re no longer human, what do you think you are?”

—U...RU...MA...SA...TSU...KI.

“You’re not Satsuki Uruma anymore. I’m right, aren’t I?”

—No.

“You are not Satsuki Uruma anymore. Please say ‘Yes.’”

—No.

“Toriko, warp her answer.”

“Huh?!”

“Don’t let it go to ‘No.’ Make her say ‘Yes.’”

“Wh-What are you saying, Sorawo-chan? Can we do that?”

Without looking up, I responded to Kozakura. “We’re touching the flow of power that makes up the Otherside. I’m watching that flow, so Toriko’s hand

should be able to rewrite it.”

I remembered the ghost town we entered during the incident with the Time-space Man. In that town full of glitches, I jumped between layers of reality, and was even able to turn Kozakura into a flower by rewriting my perception. If we did the same thing here, we could forcibly change the answers Kokkuri-san gave us.

“No way... I’ve never heard of anyone hacking Kokkuri-san,” Kozakura murmured in awe.

“I’m asking again. You are no longer Satsuki Uruma. Please say ‘Yes.’”

The ten yen coin began moving towards “No,” but then another power began acting on it. Toriko’s finger was trying to change the course of the coin, and the entangled flows of power on top of the paper with it.

“It’s heavy...!” Toriko said through gritted teeth. Still, the ten yen coin was slowly moving. I stared, unblinking, as the ten yen coin came to a dead stop between “Yes” and “No,” not moving a millimeter.

“Is it no good? You can’t move it anymore?”

“It’s heavier than before... Is someone pressing down?!”

No way, I was about to say, but Runa, who had been silent for a while now, opened her mouth before I could.

“I am.”

“Huh?! What’re you doing?!”

Is she gonna betray us at the last second? I shuddered and prepared for the worst, but Runa continued without paying any attention to me.

“Satsuki-sama, I truly thank you for bestowing these stigmata on me. I had been longing to see you for so, so long, and it was such a huge, huge honor, so I was really happy.”

The words she was spewing made her sound like a fanatic, but her tone wasn’t filled with passion or excitement.

“But, I’m sorry, there’s just one thing, really, just one, that I’m gonna need

you to explain. Please, tell me.”

Runa continued, her tone still inscrutable.

“Why’d you kill my mom?”

The ten yen coin slid across the page, as if the resistance before meant nothing.

—NO...SO...N...TA.

“Nozonda? Who wanted it?”

There was silence, then Runa murmured...

“Me?”

—MO...U...I...RA...NA...I. (Didn’t need her anymore.)

As soon as the ten yen coin finished spelling that out, Runa shouted.

“I didn’t want that! I never wanted that!!!”

Her finger on the coin trembled with anger.

“Screw you! Who’re you to go around, killing people’s moms?! I never asked you to do that! Not once!”

Runa’s voice was shrill with rage.

“The hell is your problem?! Showing up out of nowhere to wreck my life! You didn’t need her any more?! Oh, yeah?! I see how it is! I get it. Hey, Kamikoshi-san! I’ve got a good idea. Why don’t we see if this voice of mine, my gift, works on Satsuki-sama?!”

“Runa, sto—”

“Just watch me, I’m going to try...”

As Runa raised her face, spurred by violent emotions, her words caught in her throat with a choking sound.

She’d looked directly at Satsuki Uruma.

I could only catch a sideways glimpse of Runa as she fainted, eyes rolling into the back of her head and vomit spewing from her mouth.

For a time, the only sound was the ragged breathing of the three of us who remained.

“She dead...?” I asked, my eyes still lowered.

Toriko tilted her head towards Runa a little before she answered. “She’s still breathing.”

“Is she on her back? Or her face?” a thoroughly terrified Kozakura asked, her voice as tiny as a mosquito’s. I checked with the corner of my vision.

“She’s on her side.”

“That’s fine, then...”

We wouldn’t have to worry about her drowning in her own puke, at least. Chasing any thought of Runa out of my head for the moment, I got back to the original question. *You’re not Satsuki Uruma anymore. Right?*

“Well, Toriko? Can you move it?”

“It’s no good. Someone’s pressing down on it again.”

“That’d be me...” Kozakura said weakly.

“Don’t look up, okay?” I warned. “If you look at her, you’ll end up like Runa.”

“I don’t need you to tell me. I’m not looking. Satsuki has no right to look me in the face anyway.”

Kozakura let out a long sigh.

“Satsuki, just give it up already. There’s no place for you here anymore. And that’s your own fault, just so we’re clear. Maybe if you’d shown a little more sincerity to people, it’d have been different, but... Yeah, no point in saying that now, huh? You were an inhuman monster from the beginning. You know what the difference between someone who’s human and inhuman is? Humans still have a place after they’re dead. Inhuman monsters like you don’t even get that. If you don’t treat people like people while you’re alive, well, that’s what happens to you.”

Kozakura continued on, as if talking to herself.

“If you’d treated anyone, just one person, like a fellow human being, that’d

have been enough. But you didn't choose that path. And it seriously could have been anyone. That's why you ended up like this. After screwing around with so many people's lives, you up and vanished without cleaning up after yourself. It's pathetic. You're such an idiot. That's what you are."

Kozakura let out a dry laugh.

"I thought I'd have loads more to say, but I guess not. I've got nothing left. No attachment to you, no regrets, nothing. I'm glad I could tell you that to your face. It felt good. See ya."

Kozakura suddenly finished talking. I felt the weight of her finger leave the ten yen coin.

"Will it move?" I asked.

Toriko shook her head.

"You're not pressing down on it, are you, Sorawo?"

"Huh? Me?"

I only realized once she pointed it out. It was true—unconsciously, I had been pressing down too, holding the coin in place. I was bewildered by my own unexpected reaction. Did it mean I didn't want Satsuki Uruma to cease being Satsuki Uruma?

"Yeah, no..." I tried to let the tension out of my finger as I said, "Go to the mountains by yourself, Uruma-san."

I wasn't sure what I'd have done if my hand refused to listen, but thankfully it did. Secretly relieved, I looked at Toriko.

"How about now?"

"It won't budge. Which means, basically... That, huh?"

I didn't say anything. Toriko needed to sort out her feelings on her own. She was quiet for a while before opening her mouth.

"Hey, Satsuki. I'm really grateful to you. You found me when I was all alone, and led me back out into the sun again. You took me all sorts of places. And taught me so many things."

Her voice was peaceful, gentle. I was shocked. I never thought I'd hear Toriko use such a warm voice, so full of emotion, with someone other than me.

I felt something squeeze tight in my chest. There was a strange pressure below both my eyes, in the area around my cheekbones and upper jaw. When I realized it meant I was on the verge of tears, that really freaked me out.

You're kidding me, right? Have I gone crazy after all?

"When you disappeared, I was really worried, and lonely, and I couldn't just sit around and do nothing. I tried my best to save you from the Otherside...but it was no good. I'm sorry I couldn't catch up to you. Really, I mean it."

Toriko stopped talking. I thought she might cry, but she didn't. When she opened her mouth again, her tone was a little low.

"But... You had other girls like me too, didn't you? You were pretty, and cool, so it's not that weird, but still. I was honestly shocked when I found out. I thought you were mine and mine alone. But it was never true. I was such a kid, huh?"

Yeah, you tell her! The woman's terrible.

Toriko continued, unaware that I was mentally cheering her on.

"But even knowing that, I still wanted to see you. I believed you were still alive, and I felt like I'd be able to accept it all once you came back. In fact, when we met again, I was so happy that nothing else mattered anymore. But... When we held hands, it was different."

Toriko shuddered. I felt it through the ten yen coin.

"I never knew just one touch could tell you so many things. In that instant, I knew that the Satsuki I knew was gone. I don't want to touch you now, and I don't want you touching me either. So, yeah... It was over. I mean, if I don't want to touch you, if that's how I feel, then... We're through, right?"

Toriko moved her finger's position on the ten yen coin a little so hers was touching mine. It was unusual for her to try to touch me with her ungloved left hand.

"When I heard you'd gone after Sorawo, I was mad. I don't want to touch you

anymore, and I don't want you touching the people I care about either. You and I are through. You're gone now, Satsuki. Don't show up around me anymore."

Then, in a whisper, Toriko added:

"Bye-bye, Satsuki—I loved you."

When I felt the strength leave her translucent finger, I immediately asked the question again.

"You're not Satsuki Uruma anymore. Right?"

This time, the ten yen coin moved. Smoothly, as if that was where it was going to go all along.

—YES.

Yes! We got through!

"Toriko, when I ask the next question, move it to say *Ushi no Kubi*."

Toriko silently nodded. I asked the next question.

"Tell us your name."

The ten yen coin moved.

—U...SHI...

Yes, it's working, or so I thought for the briefest of moments before the coin went on to spell something I didn't expect.

—O...NI.

Ushi-oni?

For a moment, I thought it was a mistake, and looked up at Toriko. When our eyes met, she vigorously shook her head.

"It wasn't me—It moved on its own!"

The moment after Toriko shouted, we both realized in unison that the Satsuki Uruma who had been circling us the entire time had come to a stop behind Toriko. The altar tilted, spilling the coffin onto the ground. The flowers, which had been arrayed up there without any gaps, slid off like water overflowing from a bathtub.

The exposed surface of the altar was completely covered in a rough textile like windmill palm hemp. The unknown mass moved slowly, as if waking from slumber.

It looked like a festival float in the shape of a beast so massive that you had to look up at it. The body that stretched out behind it was swollen, like a sake bottle laid on its side, and it held its head high like a waterbird as it looked around menacingly from behind a frightening oni mask. The gaping maw and two bull-like horns caught my attention. It was so big the tips of those horns were grazing the black and white striped curtain above our heads.

Obviously, this was no time for us to keep huddling around the table. We took our fingers off the ten yen coin. Kozakura had reached her limit, and collapsed without so much as a scream.

I searched my memory for any ghost stories involving a creature like this, but then realized it was something else.

This was an Ushi-oni. If I was remembering correctly, there was a festival float like this somewhere in western Japan.

“The horned face has come,” another voice, not either of ours, suddenly said.

At some point, right next to Satsuki Uruma—I had appeared. It was my doppelganger. Hood low over her face, head hung so she couldn’t see Satsuki Uruma. And yet, not leaving her side.

“I made a promise, so I have to go.”

It was the first time the doppelganger had spoken to me. Her voice should have been the same as mine, but it sounded so young, so childish. The voice of someone who’d gone cynical, made all sorts of walls, and become totally unlikable. But at the same time, that dissatisfied version of me was incredibly scared, and she hated it.

Satsuki Uruma extended her hand. The doppelganger slowly raised her own hand to take it.

No, I can’t. If I go with her, there’s no coming back.

Even as I thought that, for some reason, I couldn’t move. I was laid low by

resignation to the idea that I'd made a promise then, so I had no choice now.

Ohh, I'm going to take Satsuki Uruma's hand. She's going to take me away to the mountains...

As I watched, powerlessly, Toriko moved into action.

She strode forward, grabbed my doppelganger from behind, and dragged her away as far as the table. The doppelganger and I stared at one another with Toriko between us.

"Stop it, Satsuki! I'm not gonna let you lay a hand on Sorawo!" Toriko shouted at Satsuki Uruma. "I said bye-bye, didn't I?! You and I are through! I love Sorawo now!"

Toriko hugged me tight as she said that, pressing her lips hard against mine.

"Whoa, hold on...!"

I tried to get away, but I couldn't. As Toriko's lips made me go weak in the knees, I struggled to keep my wits about me. I could see my doppelganger watching from the other side of Toriko. For a moment, I wondered if the other me felt lonely, because I was the only one to get a kiss, but then I saw the smug sense of superiority on her face and all thought of that vanished.

Why you... The night I met Satsuki Uruma in Oomiya, you went to Toriko's room and got your kiss first, didn't you?!

I understood that in a second. I was dealing with myself here, after all.

"That... That's enough, Toriko! Hey! Stop it!"

Struggling to breathe, I pushed Toriko away. I shot a glare at her, but I couldn't stay mad when I saw the satisfied look on her face.

The sense of resignation I'd been struck by before was long gone now. That had to be thanks to the kiss, or my irritation at my doppelganger.

I looked towards Satsuki Uruma—no, the thing that had been Satsuki Uruma, carefully making sure not to look at it directly. There was the Ushi-oni, whipping its long neck around, and the woman in black, standing there. Come to think of it, I think I'd heard that in some of the legends of the Ushi-oni, it appeared together with another youkai, the Nure-onna. Maybe when we failed to turn

Satsuki Uruma into the Cow Head story, she'd settled into something close to it.

I couldn't help but associate this beast that danced wildly at the festival while wearing an oni mask with the lion dancers who'd crashed our love hotel girls' party. When I made that connection, I realized the Barong dance I'd been too drunk to remember had been a premonition, a sign of things to come, or perhaps even a dress rehearsal for this. Why? Because I knew the exact words I needed to say, here and now, to completely exorcize Satsuki Uruma.

Runa, Kozakura, and Toriko each had something to say to her. As a fellow attendee of her funeral, it couldn't end without me saying something too.

Still, I never saw myself having to say this...

With conflicting emotions, not sure I was wholly convinced, I opened my mouth and spoke to Satsuki Uruma.

"I'm gonna look after all the girls you messed with. So don't show that face in front of me again."

Now that we'd started this ritual, we had to finish it properly. I reached out over the table, placing my finger on the ten yen coin once more. Toriko did the same from the other side of the table. In some stories, they say you mustn't take your finger off the coin while doing Kokkuri-san, but it was just as prone to local rules as a popular card game was, so I decided to ignore the ones that worked against me.

Toriko and I traded glances, then I said the words:

"Satsuki-san, Satsuki-san, please return."

Toriko didn't wait for a response before forcefully moving her finger. The ten yen coin went to the "Yes," and then back to the torii gate. Then we said the last words.

"Thank you. Goodbye!"

Even though I hadn't told her what to say, Toriko's parting words matched mine perfectly.

One moment later, there was the loud sound of wind, and the curtain rolled up in the air. I covered my face as we were suddenly exposed to the wind

outside blowing against us.

When I opened my eyes again, the scenery around us had changed entirely. We were standing on an embankment overlooking the sea, no sign of an abandoned village anywhere. It was the surface world. The ushi-oni and all the pipe chairs that had been at the funeral site had also vanished. There was a lone school desk, likely exposed to the elements for many years, in front of us, and a gust of wind blew the notebook that was sitting on top of it shut.

Looking down at the sandy beach below, I thought I saw a woman in black clothes standing there, but only for a moment. When I looked again, she was gone, as if she'd walked off into the sea.

5

At a later date, I visited Kozakura's mansion on my own. After returning safely...or alive, at least, from the funeral, Kozakura still seemed to have lasting psychological damage, so I was worried about her.

When she met me at the door, Kozakura was far more energetic than I'd expected her to be. Still grumpy, as always, but she looked like she had a new lease on life.

When I told her as much, she nodded, saying I might be right.

"It was bugging me all this time, you know? Of course it would. Someone I was so close to just up and vanished. There's no way it wouldn't," Kozakura said as she sat on a chair in her comfy, den-like living room. Her tone was calm.

"I have to thank you for giving me an opportunity to sort my feelings out, Sorawo-chan."

"No, I don't think I really did anything you should thank me for..." Her meek words of gratitude actually made me feel more uneasy. "I just kept pushing things forward, figuring it was going to be okay. I knew the three of you had way stronger feelings about Satsuki-san than I did, after all..."

"So you *can* be considerate, after all, Sorawo-chan."

“It was just something I was thinking. I didn’t really do anything special to take care of you all.”

Her jabs at me were more restrained than usual, so I got worried. “Are you okay? I mean, really?”

“I’m totally fine. Toriko and Runa had it far worse.”

Maybe because of the strain put on her body by seeing the depths of the Otherside through her contact with Satsuki Uruma, Runa had been sent back to DS Research. She’d regained consciousness, but she was going to be laying around in her soundproof room again for a while until she recovered. I wondered if she was kvetching about how bored she was, or if she was in no state to even do that.

Toriko told me she’d been able to sort her feelings out, but she’d been keeping contact to a minimum since. If she was in mourning, though, that wasn’t that strange. It sounded like she was eating properly, so I was just going to give her some time.

“Things between Satsuki and me ended long before they did for Toriko. I’m not gonna get too depressed over this long after the fact.”

“Well, okay then.”

“The fact is, even now, she kept showing herself in front of you and Toriko, but she never showed her face in front of me, not even once. Like, even now that you’re a monster, you have no time for someone you can’t use for something, huh? It made me so mad.”

“You should be glad she *didn’t* show up. I mean, if her ghost turned up, you’d have been scared, right?”

“That’s a separate issue,” Kozakura said, her eyes focused somewhere in the distance. “We had our good times too. The two of us sat on that sofa you’re sitting on now, eating, chatting, just killing time together. We could each just be doing whatever we wanted, and the other person wouldn’t mind at all. We spent times like that together too...” There was a cynical smile on her face. “Well, since she was seriously inhuman, that didn’t last long, though.”

I took a fresh look around me. When I thought about how the sofa I was

sitting on all the time had once been used by Satsuki-san, it felt kind of strange. As I was looking, I spotted a single photo in the gap between the back of the sofa and the cushions. I pulled it out. It was a picture of Kozakura. I guess it was what you'd call a street photo? It was taken in front of the gate to her mansion and she was facing the camera. She wore a mature outfit consisting of a dress with a shirt over it.

The way her expression was relaxed told you she was with someone she trusted. It showed none of the grumpiness that she had when she was meeting with me or Toriko. Her natural, shy smile was genuinely cute. It looked like it was taken in spring. The sun was bright, creating a vibrant contrast with the shade of the mansion and trees behind her.

On the street, just in frame, you could see the shadow of the photographer holding the camera. I could just barely tell it was a long-haired woman.

"This was in the sofa," I said, passing it to her. Kozakura silently accepted the photograph, looking at it in silence for a time.

"It's a good photo," she finally said.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Here I was, thinking she wasn't going to show her face, and she sends me a photo instead? Talk about being the incarnation of ingratitude."

That was all she said before looking back down to the photo, as if she were silently reminiscing.

"U-Um... You're not going to cry, are you?" I asked, shaken up by the vortex of emotions I sensed in that silence. I was slowly starting to realize that I had a hard time handling it when people cried, got angry, or otherwise showed raw emotion in front of me.

Kozakura scoffed. "Sorawo-chan... You're really gonna ask me that?"

"Sorry."

"It's fine. Let me tell you a little something."

Kozakura smiled more placidly than I'd ever seen from her.

"The thing about being an adult is you don't cry in front of kids."



Works Referenced

This work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore as its motif. In particular, this section will note those which have been used directly. It will touch on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please tread carefully.

■ File 21: A Midterm Report on the Mysterious

This chapter does not use any particular ghost story as its motif. For the discussion on cultural anthropology, I referenced Part 1, Chapter 4: “Genjitsu to Isekai ‘Kamoshirenai’ Ryouiki no Fieldwork” [Reality and Other Worlds: Fieldwork in the Domain of If] (Miho Ishii) from the book *Bunka Jinruigaku no Shikouhou* [Ways of Thinking About Cultural Anthropology] (Keiichirou Matsumura/Osamu Nakagawa/Miho Ishii, Sekai Shisousha, 2019). In my own school days, I was enrolled in the cultural anthropology course, but I’ve since moved away from it, so this book, which draws from a variety of domains in order to introduce the most recent ways of thinking about cultural anthropology, was just what I needed. There are a variety of approaches to viewing humans, and cultural anthropology teaches us that rather than starting with “society,” we can also begin with the vague concept of the self, and carefully pay attention to individual examples. I think that anyone interested in what Sorawo and the other people in her seminar are doing should look into it. Cultural anthropology is fascinating, you know?

There is a model for Professor Abekawa: a cultural anthropologist named Toshiharu Abe who taught at Saitama University. I was just an ordinary student who attended his lectures, but even the small amount of contact I had with him was enough to convince me he was an incredible person. I was a poor academic, and didn’t advance to graduate school, so that was the end of my connection with the professor, but I still think back and wonder how things might have been if I hadn’t dropped out and became a scholar under Abe-

sensei's tutelage. Toshiharu Abe passed away in 2016.

■ File 22: Toilet Paper Moon

This chapter does not use any particular ghost story as its motif. The title was one the artist, shirakaba-san, left as a placeholder for the cover image (even though I hadn't specified anything), but I liked the sound of it so much I ended up using it. I almost wanted to make it the title of this entire volume, but I gave up on that because it didn't feature a single toilet ghost story.

I hesitated to write this here, but there's actually a model for Youichirou Migiwa: the cosplayer Bishoujo who passed away in 2021 (who was male, despite his name meaning "pretty girl"). When I decided how Migiwa would look, I said he should be lean and tall, with long arms and legs, and a gentlemanly but villainous appearance... I'd used him as a reference without asking permission, and I was never able to tell him that. That's partially because, while we were acquainted, we hardly ever talked, and I was embarrassed. He passed away suddenly, and I regret not telling him when I still had the chance.

■ File 23: Funeral of the Moon

As Sorawo notes in the story, "Ushi no Kubi" [Cow Head] is a ghost story that is said to be scary, but has no substance to it. It first came to public attention through Komatsu Sakyou's short story anthology, also titled *Ushi no Kubi*, but it seems the original had been discussed by writers long before that. (Refer to the online serial: "Yuuki Kishida no Irui Sousakuki vol. 6: Saikyou Kaidan Ushi no Kubi ni Kakusareta Himitsu" [Yuuki Yoshida's Oddity Search Log vol. 6: The Secret Hidden in the Ultimate Ghost Story Cow Head], Yuuki Yoshida, Shobunsha, 2020). Yasutaka Tsutsui heard about it from Aran Kyoudomari, so it may, surprisingly, have come from something related to sci-fi. If there's no way to trace it back any further, could Aran Kyoudomari have been the one to come up with it...? I like Aran Kyoudomari, so I think it would be neat if that were true.

Incidentally, there is also a ghost story told on 2channel called "Ushi no Haka"

[Cow's Grave]. This story from "Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?" [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 130, posts 518-529 (24/5/2006), takes place in a school where a story called "Ushi no Haka" [Cow's Grave] or perhaps "Ushi no Baka" [Cow Idiot] is being told. The reporter's friend investigates the story, only to discover that "Its curse only affects women who learn the truth of the story"... It's a fascinating story that resembles "Ushi no Kubi," but has a lot of fine details.

I know I always say this, but there are many other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken direct or indirect influence. Thank you for always enjoying and being frightened. And thank you especially to all the people, living and deceased, who have left a major influence on me. I hope this book is able to repay my gratitude in some small way.





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by Iori Miyazawa

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