

Creation Nia

Spirit No. 2

Astral Dress—Sister Type

Weapon—Book Type [Rasiel]

*Koushi
Tachibana*

Illustrated by
Tsunako

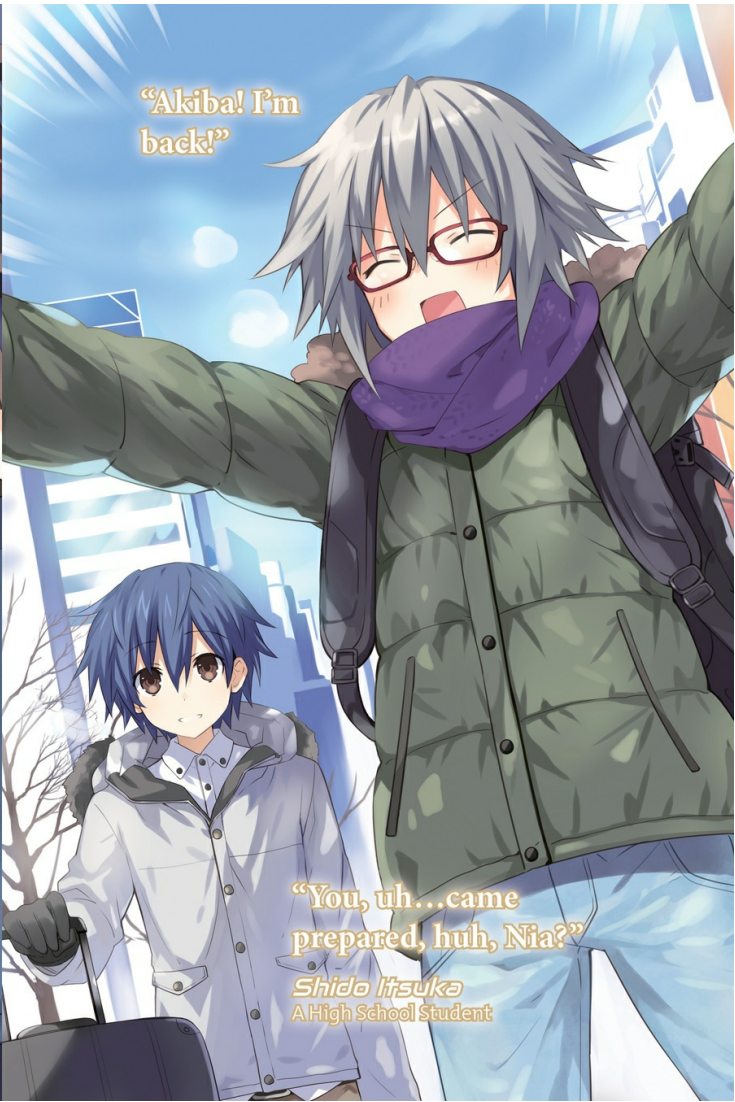
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Date A Live

Creation Nia







“...No problem.
This is fixable.”

Origami Tobichi
ASpirit

“...I'm...okay...”

Natsumi
ASpirit

“Disturbance.
Ink is bleeding
beneath the
ruler.”

Yuzuru Yamai
ASpirit

“Keh... Jet-
black tears on
the pure ivory
of this sacred
ground?!”

Kaguya Yamai
ASpirit



A-20.5
Ratatoskr

"Everyone,
thank you
so much
for always
cheering
me on!"

Miku
ASpirit

"The real contest
starts now."

Kotori Itsuka
Ratatoskr Commander

"This is a little
embarrassing,
but...I'm going
to work hard!"

Yoshino
ASpirit

"Ooh!
Welcome!"

Tohka
ASpirit

Ratatoskr

Original comic

"I won't
allow it"

Artemisia B.
Ashcroft
A Wizard

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New York

Copyright

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Translation by Jocelyne Allen

Cover art by Tsunako

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Spirit

A uniquely catastrophic creature existing in a parallel world. Cause of occurrence and reason for existence unknown. Creates a spacequake and inflicts serious damage on her surroundings whenever she appears in this world. A very powerful fighter.

Strategy No. 1

Annihilate with force. This approach is very difficult, since the Spirit is extremely powerful, as noted above.

Strategy No. 2

...Date her and make her all weak in the knees.

Creation Nia

Spirit No. 2
Astral Dress — Sister Type
Weapon — Book Type [Rasiel]

Prologue

And most importantly, there's not enough time.

Three AM—a time when everyone was normally sleeping quietly. A bright light still shone in a room of the Spirit apartment building next to the Itsuka house.

“Woh-kay... Page fifteen... Done!” Shido said. He had dark circles under his eyes and a cooling gel sheet plastered to his forehead to keep him awake. His head felt like it was full of cotton as he held up the manga page he'd just finished inking.

“...Page sixteen is complete, too,” Origami chimed in from a nearby desk.

“Kah. Kah-kah... You're slow. Dawdling, Shido,” Kaguya said weakly. “This child of the hurricane has already charged forward to the next page.”

“Collec...tion... I will scan and digitize your pages together with mine, so please give them to me...,” Yuzuru added.

The voices of the girls all lacked their usual liveliness, and Shido could hear a note of exhaustion bleeding into their tones. But that made sense.

He handed his page to Yuzuru and then stood up, leaned back, and stretched. *Crack! Crack!* His back sounded more like that of a pensioner than that of a healthy high school boy.

“Ow-ow-ow...” He rubbed his hip as he glanced around the studio. Several large work desks had been set up in the spacious room, their surfaces covered with inks, pens, rulers, and all kinds of art supplies. The Spirits were sitting at these desks, looking as sleepy as Shido felt. Put simply, the space looked like a manga artist's studio. “Haaah—” He bit down on the yawn that started to slip out and rubbed his eyes as he walked over to the fridge and grabbed two energy drinks from inside. He opened one and chugged it before he walked over to the desk at the back of the room to give the other to the Spirit working there, who was likely the most exhausted of anyone in the room.

“...Natsumi,” he said gently. “How about you go take a nap?”

“ ...”

The small girl seemed not to hear him. She had a ghastly look on her face, and just continued to bore holes into the page in front of her with her eyes while moving her pen carefully to sketch precise lines.

“...Helloooo? Natsumi!” He waved near her face.

“ ...”

Again, nothing. He opened the energy drink, slipped a slim straw into it, and brought it to her mouth.

“...Nnfp.” Without shifting her gaze even a millimeter, Natsumi grabbed at the straw with her lips and began to suck. Once she had extracted all the liquid in the bottle, she released the straw and immersed herself in her work again. The intensity of her focus was terrifying.

“Okay...” Shido gave her a pained smile before turning to go back to his own desk. “Guess I’ll get started on the next page...” He picked up his pen and stared at the penciled drawing before him.

Origami and the other Spirits also bowed their heads and began inking industriously once more.

They were working as one, applying themselves for the sake of a single objective: Making a manga.

Chapter 1

Remain calm. This is a Spirit's snare.

Vrrrrrr... The massive scanning device rumbled as it swallowed up the bed and the patient on it.

“Unh...” That patient—Shido Itsuka—furrowed his brow slightly and closed his eyes. He'd undergone this exam many times before, but that didn't mean he liked it. The whole thing made him feel as though he were being devoured by an enormous creature, igniting a primal fear deep inside his lizard brain.

Once he was completely encased in the machine, several beams of light passed through him, as if licking at his body. And then a few minutes later, the device finally spat him out again.

“Okay,” said a voice from above. “You're done, Shido.”

“Ngh...” He slowly opened his eyes.

A small girl was standing at his bedside, her hair tied up in pigtails with black ribbons and her eyes round like acorns. And a Chupa Chups in her mouth. The overall impression created by her features was one of a cute middle schooler. But the crimson military uniform she wore and the detached expression on her face gave her youthful appearance a strange gravitas.

As was only right. While Kotori Itsuka was Shido's little sister, she also happened to be the commander of Ratatoskr.

“How d'you feel?” she asked.

“Mm. Good, no issues. But...how many times are we going to do this? I feel like it's been over two weeks already.” He sat up, a pained smile on his face. He'd been subjected to intensive examination every time he sealed away the powers of a Spirit, but he felt like it had been particularly lengthy this time. He glanced at the machine he'd just been in, a massive cylinder on its side, which

was something like an MRI scanner. It made him think of a serpent with its jaw unhinged and mouth wide open.

Perhaps noticing his unease, Kotori sighed.

“Listen, Shido. I explained this, okay? Do you not understand the state you were in?”

“Uh...” Shido had no comeback to this.

At the beginning of the month, the paths between him and the Spirits had grown constricted, blocking the circulation of Spirit power, which led to that power wreaking havoc on him. Although he’d managed to come out on the other side more or less unscathed thanks to the combined efforts of the Spirits and Ratatoskr, Kotori had been keeping an eye on his physical condition more vigilantly than ever before.

“S-sorry,” he apologized. “My memories of the whole thing are kind of hazy. None of it feels real.”

“Hm.” Kotori averted her eyes awkwardly. “Hmph. I guess. Sorry.”

“Oh. No. I didn’t mean...” Shido scratched his head, feeling uncomfortable.

Their conversation stalled there for a few seconds. The usual Kotori would have come back with some retort or sarcastic remark, but she clearly felt some responsibility for this incident, and she seemed to wither a little before him.

“Gah,” he groaned. This was very unpleasant. He definitely didn’t love it when Kotori got mad at him, but as her older brother, it pained him to see her so lackluster now. He scooted to the edge of the bed and threw his arms around Kotori. “Come on. No sulking. You’ll make your big bro cry.”

“Wha—?!” she yelped. “H-hey! What are you doing?!”

“Mmkay, Kotori?” he cooed at her.

“Augh! Get off me!” Her face beet red, Kotori landed a karate chop on the crown of his head, a blow that let him know that his usual Kotori was back.

Pressing a hand to his head where he felt the dull pain, he chuckled.

“Dang,” she said, frowning at him. “That was creepy as heck. You sure that

incident didn't knock a few screws loose in your head?"

"Maybe," he said. "But that karate chop brought me back to my senses. Thanks, Kotori."

Her cheeks reddened further, as if she had picked up on what he really wanted to say, before she puffed them out and turned her face away. This was oddly adorable, and he felt compelled to reach out and tousle her hair. Her shoulders flinched up slightly, but she accepted his touch without complaint.

And then he heard someone clearing their throat.

"...Sorry to interrupt you two."

"...!" Kotori jolted in surprise and shoved Shido's hand away. "R-Reine. That was fast. You get the results already?" She turned in the direction of the voice, a trace of agitation bleeding into the expression on her face.

Shido followed suit and turned toward the speaker.

At some point, a woman in a Ratatoskr uniform had entered the room. Her hair was tied up simply, and she had dark circles under her eyes. A battered stuffed bear peeked out of her breast pocket, looking somewhat pinched, perhaps under pressure from her ample bosom. Reine Murasame, Ratatoskr analyst and Kotori's friend.

"...Mm-hmm. It might not be on the level of the one we had on *Fraxinus*, but the scanner is still equipped with a Realizer, after all," Reine said, as she flipped through the document on the clipboard she held. "...From what I can tell, the Spirit wave signal Shin's generating has fallen below the reference value. Outside of a comprehensive examination in a facility like this, you'd be hard-pressed to detect it at all. The paths between him and the Spirits also appear to be normal... I'd say we should be fine with just doing periodic checkups again."

"Really? That's great." Shido leaned back to stretch.

They were currently in an underground facility owned by Ratatoskr. He'd had to come all the way down here for every exam because the airship *Fraxinus* was undergoing repairs.

Also, it was already the end of December. Although school was out for the

winter holiday, it was obvious to him that he would soon have his hands full getting ready for the traditional New Year celebrations. Given that he ran the kitchen in the Itsuka household and food was key for New Year's, it would be a real blessing to get back the time he'd spent on frequent tests at this facility.

"...But," Reine continued, as if reading his thoughts. "...This really only applies to your physical condition."

"Huh?" Shido scowled automatically at her ominous comment. "Wh-what does *that* mean? You're not saying there's a problem with one of the Spirits?!"

"...No, it's nothing like that." Reine shook her head. "...We still have not dealt with the abnormal gym records from when the paths first began to constrict. Or the situation with Ai, Mai, Mii, and your teacher Ms. Okamine after you seduced them in your overheated state."

"Hrrrngk!" Shido choked. His memories of the whole incident were hazy as a side effect of the blockage of the Spirit power in him, but they'd told him after the fact that he had half-unconsciously acted in ways he would never have usually.

"...We're in the process of handling the records," she told him. "Your time for the fifty-meter run is giving us some trouble. But I think we'll go with something like a sudden powerful gust of wind. Or we could say the cold medicine you were taking was privately imported and contained the kind of ingredient that would be picked up on a doping test."

"I feel like that'll *cause* more problems than it solves," he said with a sigh. But that would still be a lot better than people finding out about the existence of the Spirits. He nodded as if to indicate his consent. His more immediate concern were the other loose ends.

Reine likely understood that.

"...The incident with Ai, Mai, and Mii wasn't so serious that you can't play it off as a joke. Plead your case the next time you see them. The real problem is Ms. Okamine. I went ahead and canceled the reservation for the wedding venue —"

"Hrrrnk!" Shido choked once again. "W-wedding...?!"

“...Mm-hmm.” Reine nodded. “I explained the situation to her, obscuring some of the details naturally, and she did understand the issue. But for the matter to be concluded, we’ll need you to tell her yourself that it was a mistake. Let’s take care of this over winter break. We’ll set up a time and a place for you to talk with her.”

“...I-I’m sorry for all the trouble.” Shido bowed, sweat beading on his forehead, just as an alarm beeped from the pocket of Reine’s military uniform.

“...Mm.” She frowned. “Already that time?”

“Do you have to go?” Shido asked.

“...Mm-hmm.” She nodded. “I have another appointment after this.”

“You do? Well then, I guess I should be on my way,” he replied.

“...Mm. Thanks.”

Kotori waved good-bye to him.

“I’ll probably be home in time for supper. You want me to call a car for you now?”

“Hmm.” He paused to think. “Nah. I’m good today. I might as well pick up some groceries while I’m out.”

“Yeah? Okay. See you later, then.”

“Uh-huh.” He waved and left the room.

After changing out of his hospital gown and into his street clothes in the changing room next door, he walked down the hallway, rolling his shoulders slightly. As he did, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked the time to find it was only two o’clock in the afternoon.

“Huh. It’s pretty early.” He frowned. “So, what am I going to make today...?” His head full of dinner possibilities, he kept moving, his feet against the hard floor of the hallway creating echoing footsteps. Before too long, he heard a corresponding echo approaching from ahead.

“Oh, Shido. Are you on your way home?” a well-built man in glasses called to him. He was accompanied by a woman with long bangs.

“Are you done with all the tests?” she asked.

White plastic bags hung from the hands of Ratatoskr crew members Munechika Nakatsugawa and Hinako Shiizaki. Perhaps they had also gone out to pick a few things up.

“Yes,” Shido replied. “I guess the numbers were all normal, so I’m finally free.”

“Ha-ha!” Nakatsugawa laughed heartily. “That’s great. Your body is your most important asset, after all.”

“That’s right,” Shiizaki agreed. “You have to take good care of it.”

“Ha-ha, I will,” Shido promised. “Were you out shopping?”

“Yes.” The older man nodded. “We couldn’t slip out so easily on *Fraxinus*, but in this facility, it’s quite simple to go aboveground.”

“Oh, true,” Shido said.

The entrance to this facility was inside a mixed-use building in Tengu City, making it relatively easy to come and go. As a guise, the building also housed company offices and the like, since they couldn’t have the general population finding out about Ratatoskr. For this same reason, Nakatsugawa and Shiizaki were not in their uniforms but rather wore coats over normal business attire. They even had fake employee badges hanging around their necks. No one would suspect that they were members of a secret organization just by looking at them.

“But that said, it is a bit dispiriting. There is no greater pride for a man than the fulfillment of his duties on a mechanical battleship in the sky! I pray for the immediate return of *Fraxinus* to the front lines of battle!” Nakatsugawa clenched his hand, which was enveloped in a fingerless glove, and his glasses flashed as they caught the light.

Shido gave this passionate outburst a strained smile. But he did have an inkling of how the man must have felt, being a boy himself.

“So then, what did you buy?”

The Ratatoskr crew members showed him the contents of the plastic bags

they carried.

“I got some snacks and something the commander asked me to pick up while I was at it,” Shiizaki told him.

“Chupa Chups?” Shido asked immediately.

“Oh! That was fast!” Shiizaki smiled at him. “No surprise coming from her big brother, I guess.”

“I also stocked up on supplies. And I purchased this.” Nakatsugawa pulled a book from his plastic bag. A shonen manga magazine, the cover depicted a boy brandishing a sword with the logo *Weekly Shonen Blast* above him.

“Hm?” Shido peered at it. “*Blast*?”

“Correct.” Nakatsugawa smiled, pleased. “The latest issue was released today. Have you ever read this magazine, Shido?”

“Yeah, well, sure. There probably aren’t too many people my age who haven’t read at least one issue, right?” He craned his neck to one side as if to say, “So what?”

Nakatsugawa smirked as he silently indicated the bottom left of the cover.

“What exactly is it—? Wait. What?” Obediently, Shido focused his gaze on the text there, and his eyes grew wide with surprise.

“Yes.” Nakatsugawa nodded with satisfaction. “The serialization of Souji Honjou’s *Silver Bullet*, long on hiatus, is finally returning to these pages!”

“Whoa, for real? I used to read *Silver Bullet*.” Shido paused thoughtfully. “If I’m remembering right, it stopped publishing out of the blue years ago, and no one’s heard a word from the artist since?”

“Exactly! All sorts of supposed reasons have been given for the lengthy absence of the series: the artist and the editorial department quarreled, the artist got sick, back pain. But there’s also been a plausible rumor that, as word would have it, ‘He’s just obsessed with a video game! Get to work, Honjou, you slacker!’ I too never dreamed that I would be able to read the continuation of *Silver Bullet* after all this time!”

“Huh. Wow! This takes me way back.”

As Shido and Nakatsugawa chatted excitedly about the magazine, Shiizaki abruptly arched an eyebrow, pulled a terminal from her pocket, and put it to her ear.

“This is Shiizaki,” she said. “Oh. Yes. I understand. I’ll be there right away.”

Apparently, something urgent had come up. She ended the call and turned to Shido with an apologetic look on her face. “I’m sorry. I have to go now. Could I ask you to give this to the commander?” She held out one of her shopping bags.

Shido nodded in agreement.

“No problem at all. Good luck with work.”

“Thank you so much. This is a huge help.” Shiizaki bowed neatly before trotting down the hallway and disappearing.

After watching her go, Nakatsugawa raised his hand in a sharp salute.

“I’ll also be on my way. I must read *Silver Bullet* before my break time is over!”

“Ha-ha! Okay, see you.” Shido waved as Nakatsugawa walked off in the opposite direction from Shiizaki. “Guess I’ve got a delivery to make.” Swinging the bag in his hand, he retraced his steps and opened the door to the exam room. “Heeeey, Kotori! Shiizaki asked me to—,” he started to say, and then froze in place.

But that was only natural. When he’d left, it had only been Kotori and Reine in the room, but now a small girl had joined them. And Kotori was panting with exertion as she tried to roughly remove the girl’s hospital gown and force her onto the bed.

“Eek! Eeeeeeeek!” the girl shrieked.

“C’mon!” Kotori snapped. “Stay still! You’re making it hard to get this thing off!”

“K-Kotori...?” Shido stammered, stunned by the scene unfolding before his eyes.

She gasped, as if she had only just noticed he was there.

“Sh-Shido?! I thought you left?!”

“O-oh. Shiizaki asked me to give you this...” He averted his eyes awkwardly. “I, uh, well... Sorry. But I think it’s not great to force someone to—”

“You have got the totally wrong idea, okay?!” Kotori shrieked, and adjusted the hospital gown on the girl so that she was fully covered once more before taking her hand and pulling her into a sitting position.

The girl was about the same size as Kotori, hair tied back in a ponytail, and she had a neat beauty mark below her left eye. While she was dressed in a hospital gown like the one Shido had sported earlier, her coloring was so healthy, he had a hard time believing she needed to be hospitalized.

As he stared at her, his eyes grew round in shock.

“Mana?!”

“Huh...?” She raised her voice in surprise. “Oh! Brother!”

Yes. Sitting there was the girl who claimed to be Shido’s biological sister, Mana Takamiya.

“Yup,” Kotori chimed in. “She’s really been overdoing it lately. So I figured I’d get her in here and put her through the hoops. But she’s so dang stubborn, keeps refusing to let us examine her.”

“Stubborn? Me?” The girl stared at Kotori incredulously. “The simple fact is that nothing’s wrong with me! I am extremely fine!”

“...” Kotori glared at her, and a bead of sweat trickled down Mana’s cheek as she offered up a pained smile.

This reminded Shido that it had been Mana who’d taken action against DEM when they’d tried to take advantage of the situation and attack while he had been rampaging out of control with all that extra Spirit power.

“Oh yeah.” He nodded slowly. “You did save me, after all. Thanks, Mana.”

“Brother...” She flashed him a grin and stood up. “Don’t be so formal. I’m always on your side!”

“Ha-ha! Right, I guess.” Her joy was infectious, and he laughed.

Then her bright smile abruptly became a serious expression. She walked toward him slowly, staring hard into his eyes all the while. “But Brother. There was something I wanted to ask you.”

“Hmm?” He raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“Yes. What you said that time—,” she began, but she was cut off by Kotori wrapping an arm around her shoulders and chuckling meaningfully.

“Maaanaaa?” she said in an exceedingly friendly, and yet somehow thoroughly icy, tone. “Are you using this little chat with Shido to slip away from me?”

“What?!” Mana’s face drained of color. “Oh. No. I wasn’t trying to escape or any such...”

Shido couldn’t see Kotori’s face very well from where he stood, but he could more or less tell that her expression was menacing.

But she merely sighed as she continued. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not angry, okay? I mean, who knows what would’ve happened if you hadn’t been there for us? I’m grateful. For real.”

“Kotori...” Perhaps taking the other girl’s words as an amnesty, Mana relaxed ever so slightly.

“Which is why you don’t have to be scared here.” Kotori tightened the arm she had around Mana’s shoulders. “It doesn’t bother me at all the way you fly around without any regard for your own self. Or how you go whole hog with the Realizer, never thinking of the consequences. Or how you up and disappeared. Or how you were secretly messaging Reine this whole time. I mean, it’s fiiiiiiiine.”

“Eeeep?!” Mana shook her head vigorously, tears welling up in her eyes as Kotori’s fingers dug into her shoulder.

“H-hey, Kotori,” Shido said. “You’re not gonna do anything reckless, right?”

“Is that any way to talk to your sister?” Kotori whirled her head around to glare at him. “And in any case, the two of you are utterly irresponsible, so it’s not like you’ve set a good example for me.”

“U-unh...,” he stammered.

“I...,” Mana started. They both fidgeted awkwardly; neither of them had much of a leg to stand on when she came at them with that.

Kotori sighed again and returned her gaze to Mana.

“Anyway! I’m not letting you get away this time. You are going to be very thoroughly examined, and you *will* let us treat you as necessary. Brace yourself, Sister. We’re going to look at parts you didn’t even know you had.”

“Aah! Nooooo!” Mana screamed and struggled against the tight grip Kotori had on her shoulders. “Brotheeeeer! Help meeeeeee!”

“Uh, no. You really should get checked out. I’ll see you later.” Shido set the bag of lollipops down and left the exam room, Mana’s shrieks at his back.

He walked along until he reached the elevator, took it to the ground floor, went through the set of three electronic doors they used to maintain tight security within the facility, and came out into the mixed-use building. Unlike the secret underground base he’d just left behind, the interior décor was completely average. He felt almost like he’d been deceived by a trickster fox from an old myth.

“Okay, then.” He referenced a mental map of the area as he started walking.

This building and his neighborhood shopping street were not too far from each other. After ten minutes or so, a familiar cityscape appeared before him. Although, more accurately speaking, the shopping street wasn’t as familiar as usual. It looked a bit different from when he’d seen it a few days earlier.

Though it was only one day after Christmas, decorations around the city had switched from Western to Japanese. The Christmas trees on display in storefronts were now bamboo *kadomatsu* New Year’s decorations, and the wreaths had been transformed into *shimekazari* straw rope ornaments. After dominating the landscape for a time, Santa Claus and his reindeer were essentially nowhere to be found now, and the only remainder was the strangely cramped display of Christmas cakes left over from the day before.

He witnessed the speed of this transformation and the fickleness of it all annually, but thinking about it again now, he found it fascinating. Everyone

crying out “Joy to the World!” only a day or two ago was asleep now, in New Year’s holiday mode. The Japanese people were truly stateless and faithless when it came to celebrations, but to have one huge holiday take place so hot on the heels of another in the mere span of a week meant a real flurry of activity. Everyone was no doubt reaching their limits.

Shido sighed as he observed the busy shopping street and all the people getting ready for New Year’s.

“I know it’s the same thing every year. But it happens so fast! I guess it just shows the power of capitalism.” He wasn’t complaining, however. In fact, if he had to say, he actually welcomed the change.

He loved to see the town so alive, and above all else, the shops were filled with decadent foods that weren’t normally in stock. Plus, practically everything was on sale. So from the perspective of the person who cooked for his family, just looking around was a pleasure.

“But what am I going to make today?” He put a hand to his chin as he flipped through his mental recipe book.

Since Christmas Day, he’d been putting a little extra effort into dinner, and in a few more days, it would be New Year’s Eve. Although Ratatoskr did cover the food expenses for the Spirits, it wasn’t very healthy to feast like royalty all the time. He decided to set his sights on a meal that wasn’t too deluxe but was still delicious.

“In which case, Japanese-style, I guess,” he murmured to himself. “We haven’t had fish lately.”

The time was two thirty PM. The sun was still high in the sky, but given that it was the end of December, it wasn’t that warm out. Happy that he wouldn’t have to buy the refrigerated stuff last like he did during the summer, he wandered through the familiar shops and picked up the things he needed as he went.

“Woh-kay! That should be good.” Half an hour later, he had all the ingredients for supper, so he left the shopping street behind him and set out on the road home. “...Hmm?” He turned a corner and stopped abruptly. But this was natural, of course. A girl was lying on the ground ahead of him.

“Wha—?!” He gasped as he raced over to the girl, set his shopping bags on the ground, and moved to help her up. “A-are you okay?!”

But then he stopped. He felt like he’d heard somewhere that you shouldn’t go moving people around willy-nilly if you found them collapsed on the ground. Apparently, it could be fatal to change their positions if they’d hit their head in a traffic accident or something.

While he was trying to figure out exactly what he should do, the girl’s fingers suddenly twitched. She lifted her head, and it wobbled uncertainly. Now he could see the face of this girl who had been kissing the pavement.

She was maybe a year or two older than he was and had eyes that turned upward and thin lips. Her features were fine, but her skin had the hue of deep fatigue. Hollowed cheeks, deep, dark circles under the eyes. He got the feeling her condition was better explained by sheer exhaustion than some kind of hit-and-run scenario.

Either way, the fact that she was conscious was a good thing. Shido wrapped an arm around her shoulders to support her and helped her sit up.

Now that he could see her from the front, he discovered that she was dressed like she had simply thrown a coat on over some pajamas. Despite the chill in the air, she had no socks on her feet, only a pair of sandals. Unless she purposely dressed in this exceedingly eccentric style, she was probably a resident of this neighborhood. Shido himself went out in similar outfits when he went to the nearby convenience store in the middle of the night.

She looked at him like she was trying to make her eyes focus. Her dry lips trembled, and she finally emitted a voice as soft as a mosquito’s buzzing.

“...m...gry...”

“Huh? Wh-what was that? What’s the matter?” he asked.

The girl repeated herself.

“...I’m...hungry...”

“...Uh?” He was shocked when the girl’s stomach made a long, low rumbling sound. *Grr...grraaaaaar...*

A few minutes later, he was carrying the girl on his back and following her instructions to her house.

“...Mm. Sorry, boy,” she said lifelessly.

After a bit of back-and-forth, he'd been more or less forced to take her home because while she was conscious, she insisted that she was too hungry to move.

“It's fine,” he sighed. “But are you sure you're all right, miss? I could take you to the hospital.”

“Nah, it's fine.” She waved dismissively. “I'm not sick or anything. And I'd be stuck waiting there forever. Takes way too long. Also, no need to be so polite. Take it down a notch. I'm bad with the whole respect thing.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Aah, see? You're still doing it.”

“R-right,” he replied, a drop of sweat rolling down his cheek.

In contrast with her rather delicate appearance, she had a bold personality, a rough edge to her. The fact that she wasn't a run-of-the-mill person was immediately apparent to him when he discovered that she had collapsed because of hunger in a country as prosperous and well-fed as Japan. He was so surprised by the unexpected sight that he hadn't yet asked her how she'd ended up in that position. What on earth could have happened to put her in that state?

“Oh! That building there, please.”

While Shido's thoughts were preoccupied, the girl on his back yanked her right hand up and pointed to a spot ahead of them.

He shifted his gaze to where the tip of her finger led, and his eyes flew open in surprise. The building she was pointing at was a high-rise condominium about twice the height of any of the surrounding buildings.

“Huh?” he said, stunned. “Here?”

“Mm. Yeah.” He felt the girl nodding against his back. “Oh, were you expecting more like a shack or something?”

“N-no, I mean, not really,” he stammered reflexively. Actually, she’d hit the nail on the head.

As a rule of thumb, the taller the condo, the more expensive it was. He was having a hard time connecting the girl in her pajamas and sandals and generally unrefined air with the luxury condo before his eyes.

“Eh-heh-heh!” she cackled. “It’s fine, whatevs. It’s like, um? Y’know, like a gap. Really hits you right in it, yeah? For a boy, I mean.”

“...Uh. Um. I don’t really understand,” Shido replied, frowning. It was less the unexpected combination and more that he couldn’t quite get a handle on who this girl was.

“Hey, kid?” she said. “Can I get you to take me up to my place? It’s just, like, weird. Can’t move my legs, y’know? I guess they atrophy if you don’t use ’em, huh?”

“Haah, well, I guess.” He sighed. “But are you sure you don’t want to go to the hospital?”

He didn’t particularly mind seeing her to her door. It wasn’t like he had anything pressing he needed to take care of right now. Plus, he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he left her here and she ended up collapsing again. If it were anyone else, this wouldn’t have been a concern, but this was a girl who had fallen into the gutter because she was too hungry to move, like something out of a manga. He couldn’t be too careful.

He shifted the girl on his back and walked toward the condo entrance. But he was brought to a standstill by the locked door and the intercom system.

“Whoops.”

Obviously, a condo of this caliber would have an intercom. But the resident with the entry code could currently only operate the touch panel over Shido’s shoulder. Security-wise, it probably wasn’t the best option, but the situation was what it was.

Shido called to the girl on his back, “I’ll close my eyes, so you go ahead—”

“Oh!” she interrupted him, casually. “My condo’s eighteen-oh-one, and the

code is one-two-three-four.”

“Uh, security?!” He produced an odd shriek.

“Huh? You actually shrieked,” she laughed. “Hilarious. Do it again. Come on.”

“No!” he cried. “You can’t just tell me your code!!”

“Huh? Why not?” she asked in response, surprised.

He fought the urge to cradle his head in his hands.

“Because of security, that’s why!” he told her in a lecturing tone. “If people who don’t live here know the code, they can come and go as they please! You don’t even know me. Plus, I’m a guy you just met; I mean, come on!”

“Oh!” The girl’s hand went to her mouth. “You do stuff like that, boy? Ugh. Didn’t see that coming.”

“I don’t!” he yelped. “I’m speaking in general!”

“...Ohhh, I get it.” She nodded slowly. “You *look* like the herbivore type, but you’re actually a wolf... So it’s like what you see isn’t what you get. Fun. I just got a little smarter.”

“Are you even listening to me?!” he cried.

“I’m listening, geez. I’m all ears.” He could practically hear her roll her eyes. “So, like, just for future reference, if you were to break into a girl’s room, what would you do first?”

“You aren’t listening, are you?!” His voice grew louder and louder as the girl tormented him until he suddenly felt eyes on him from somewhere. “Hmm...?” He looked around and froze in place.

There was a woman standing there. The superintendent? Or maybe she was what they called a concierge. From inside the lobby, she was looking at Shido and the girl having it out in the entryway with suspicious eyes, one hand resting on the phone, as if she was ready to call the police at any second.

“Ah... Ha-ha-ha...” A lifeless smile rose up onto his face, and he meekly inputted the condo number and code. The automatic doors swiftly slid open. “I’m going in.”

“Aye-aye!” the girl responded casually.

Shido sighed again and flashed the concierge a friendly look as he walked toward the elevator. After a short trip up, he went down a luxurious hallway and headed for the girl’s condo.

“...See?” he said, stopping in front of it. “Here we are. This good?”

“Mm. Thanks.” The girl lolled against his back. “But the state I’m in, I’m pretty sure I’ll collapse as soon as I go through the door.”

“...Uh-huh. So then, fine, give me the key. I’ll open it.”

“No can do. It’s in my back pocket. Slip it out reaaaal gentle, okay?”

“Why is it in your back pocket?!” he shouted, and the girl wrapped her arms around his neck as she continued.

“Don’t ask stupid questions. I’m trying to do you a solid, like a thank-you for picking me up back there. Go on, grab away. You’ve earned it. I’ll pretend not to notice if you accidentally slip your hand into my pants over my underwear.”

“What are you even saying?!” he shrieked.

“Hmm? Aah, I mean, y’know, I figured I should at least express my gratitude. Plus, I’ve had the ladies pressed up against you the whole time you’ve been piggybacking me, but you basically haven’t even noticed, mmkay? So then I was like, Oh! Maybe he’s a butt guy?”

“Your gratitude is filthy!”

“Oh! Are you a big-boob fundamentalist, boy?” she demanded. “The type that doesn’t recognize a bust less than eighty centimeters? Well, I’m sorry about that, then. You’ll have to make do with what I got here.”

“Could you maybe not go putting me into your weird categories?!” he shouted, tenser than ever, before he let out a long, heavy sigh. “Fine. Whatever. Just give me the key. Otherwise, I’m leaving you here.”

“Honestly. You’re no fun.” The girl shoved a hand into her back pocket. “Ah...! That’s so sudden... Ooh!”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make provocative noises while on my back,” he

said, with a hint of resignation in his tone.

“Oh, come *on*. You really are a wet blanket.” She pushed out pursed lips in a pout as she handed him the key.

Shido opened the door and stepped into the apartment. “Excuse me,” he said, to be polite as he entered someone else’s living space.

“You are excused.”

“...”

“Huh? No more witty comebacks?”

Ignoring the girl, Shido took off his shoes and stepped up out of the entryway. A hallway stretched out straight ahead, with piles of magazines and manga dotting the floor.

“So where’s your bedroom?” he asked.

“That way.”

He went into the room she pointed at. Just as he’d expected, her bedroom was buried in a staggering number of manga volumes. The walls had basically been turned into bookshelves, and yet they still couldn’t contain all the books in the room. Volumes spilled over into heaps on the floor.

The large bed was even worse. There was a clear space in the middle of it, big enough for a person to lie in, but the rest of it was covered in books. It looked like a coffin specially made for someone who had devoted their entire life to books.

“There we go.” The girl transferred from Shido’s back to the bed like slime spilling out of a container, neatly filling the empty space there like she was a puzzle piece snapping into place. “Mm. I really do feel better now.”

“Uh-huh...” As he heaved a sigh of relief at finally having gotten the girl down from his back, he caught sight of something that wasn’t books in the room. “Is that...?”

It was probably rude to be looking around in someone else’s bedroom, especially that of a girl he’d only just met, but his curiosity won out. He stepped toward the object and stared at it intently.

It was a large work desk cluttered with a variety of art supplies. A large fluorescent lamp was set up next to them so that it illuminated the entire desk surface. And on top of that surface, in the center of the desk, was a thick piece of B4-sized paper.

It was split up into panels, and drawn in these were characters and backgrounds and balloons for dialogue. The page had been inked, but the pencil of the rough sketches remained on the page.

Shido had never seen one in person before, but he was pretty sure he knew what this was: a manga page in progress.

“Oh! Are you a manga artist?” he asked, and the girl tucked into the bed like a peacefully resting corpse raised an annoyed hand.

“Mm? Oh, yeah. Pro, I guess. I was so focused on working that I forgot to eat, y’know? So I figured I better go to the store or something. But when I went out, I realized the earth’s gravity is surprisingly strong.” The arm she held up dropped heavily onto the bed.

“S-so that’s what happened.” He looked at her grimly, a pained smile on his face. “But if you’re a pro, don’t you have, like, assistants or...?”

“Mm. I mean, normally, yes,” she said. “But a lot of times, I just finish the whole thing up by myself. I mean, it’s easier being alone. Although I do sometimes almost die.”

“I think that’s kind of the important part,” Shido said, scratching his cheek, and dropped his gaze to the manga page on the desk once more.

Although he wasn’t one of those fanatics who read every single page of a manga magazine, he was nevertheless in high school and a casual reader of manga. He would even buy volumes of series that he particularly liked. So he was the teensiest bit excited at seeing an original page for the first time.

Judging from the art style, it seemed to be a shonen manga, one of those action ones for boys. Although it wasn’t finished, it did have the kind of power he’d expect from someone calling themselves a pro—

“...Hmmm?” He furrowed his brow and leaned forward to bring his face closer to the page. For a second, he wasn’t sure since it wasn’t complete, but he felt

like he'd seen this art somewhere before.

"...Is this actually *Silver Bullet*?!" he cried out reflexively. He was indeed staring at a page from the manga he'd been discussing with Nakatsugawa, *Silver Bullet*.

"Ah? You know your stuff. Are you a fan or something? Big thanks." The girl waved at him again.

But something else had caught his attention. He spun around to face her. "No. But hold up a minute. So then, that means you're Souji Honjou?"

"Mm-hmm. Yeppers."

"Y-you're not a guy?!"

"Oh, that? Pen name. Alias. Real name's Nia. Nia Honjou. Pleasure," the girl—Nia—said with a grin, and then continued. "There are plenty of us, y'know. Women artists who use a male pen name for shonen manga. You know Takajou? Does *Other Fake*? Woman."

"What?! Really?!" His eyes grew round as saucers at this impossible information, but he quickly landed on an even bigger question. The gender thing was all fine and good, but something was strange here. "No, whoa, wait. This is weird, though. I mean, *Silver Bullet*'s been running since I was in grade school. Which would mean Souji Honjou's debut itself was even further back..."

He looked at Nia's face once more.

However good she might have been at keeping herself looking young, as far as he could tell, she was eighteen or nineteen, or at most in her early twenties. If she looked like this in her thirties, beauty companies and TV stations would be knocking her door down to get her to tell them the secret to her youthful appearance.

Alternatively, maybe a young woman had mastered the art style of Souji Honjou perfectly and taken his moniker as the second generation of that professional name. This argument did indeed make sense of this whole situation.

But as if seeing the gears churning away in Shido's head, Nia shrugged and

chuckled.

“Sorry to say, but Souji Honjou has been me from day one. I made my debut maybe ten years or so ago.” Nia uttered this unbelievable statement ever-so-nonchalantly, and Shido looked at her dubiously.

“T-ten years ago...”

In the normal course of things, that was impossible. He was inclined to write the whole story off as part of grandiose nonsense on Nia’s part.

But the page set out on the work desk was clearly the artwork of Souji Honjou. Of course, she could very well have copied the art, but if this manga page showed up in the next issue of *Blast*, that would be proof that at the very least the manga she drew was the real deal.

While Shido was thinking about all this, Nia let out an exasperated sigh.

“Mmm. The way this is playing out isn’t quite ideal, but well, whatevs. I’ll let you in on my secret.”

“Huh?” Shido’s shoulders jumped up slightly. He was really curious, but he also felt weird in a way that was hard to describe. Like, should she really be telling whatever this secret was to Shido, a total stranger?

“Okay, truth is—,” she started before being rudely interrupted.

Grr... Graaaarrrrrr.

Her stomach grumbled louder than ever. This, combined with the sharp look on her face as she was about to impart some serious secret, made the whole moment seem surreal.

“B-boy,” Nia said weakly, limp on the bed.

“Yeah, yeah.” Shido felt the wind go out of his sails, and he scratched his head with a sigh. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“Kay...,” she half moaned.

Just as he was about to leave the room, he looked back at her. “I’ll ask just in case. Regular food’s good, yeah? No fresh blood to maintain your youth or anything?”

“Huh? You’d let me drink your blood?” Nia bared her teeth at him as she curled the fingers of both hands like some imagined predator. But she’d apparently run out of strength—there was no force to it.

“...If you still have the energy for that, you won’t die anytime soon, at least,” Shido said, rolling his eyes, and went into the kitchen.

Judging from Nia’s state, he’d assumed the sink would be overflowing with dirty dishes, but the room was surprisingly tidy. There wasn’t a single dish left out on the counter, and there were no food scraps in the scrap basket in the sink.

“Huh. That’s a surprise. I’d never say it to her face, but I’m surprised by how clean it is.”

But a second later, he was forced to revisit that assessment when he found that the counter was covered in a faint layer of dust. Meaning that it wasn’t the case that Nia carefully cleaned up after herself. She just didn’t use the kitchen in the first place. She probably lived on takeout, convenience store bentos, and instant meals.

“...” Speechless, he pressed a hand to his forehead and then got to work. He started by wetting a cloth, wringing it out, and wiping down the countertop. “Okay, then.” He rinsed off the dirty cloth and opened the door of the refrigerator against the wall. He’d hoped that there might be at least one thing in there he could use, but this hope was immediately dashed by the phalanx of beer cans jammed onto the shelves.

“...O-only beer?” Eye twitching, he tried opening the vegetable drawer. Several bottles of sake lay on their sides in there. “...” Silently, he closed the refrigerator, headed back to the entryway, pulled a couple of random vegetables from his own shopping bags, and went back to the kitchen. These groceries were supposed to be for the Spirits’ supper, but... He’d bought a lot more than he usually did. They would manage somehow. What would be worse was if Nia starved to death on him.

He washed his hands and started prepping a meal with accustomed ease. He couldn’t actually make anything particularly elaborate, though, not with the meager array of cooking implements stocking her kitchen, a stark contrast to all

the art supplies in her room. Not to mention that he didn't want to spend a whole lot of time cooking and make Nia wait to eat.

He filled the small, lone pot with water, added some uncooked rice, and let it soak up the water a bit before putting it on a burner. Once it was cooked, he put in some green onion, seasoned it with miso paste and sake nicked from the fridge, and finally, dropped an egg on top to complete a quick *zosui* rice soup.

This cooked up a whole lot faster than proper rice, and given that Nia was in such a state that she'd collapsed in hunger, he figured something easy on the stomach was the way to go.

"Okay. That's that, then," he said, then transferred the soup to a bowl and returned to the bedroom. "Here we go. All ready. It's hot, so be careful."

"Wow! Time to eat!"

Shido placed the bowl on a stand near the bed, and Nia clapped once before shoveling the rice soup into her mouth.

"Haaaat!" Nia jumped up where she sat on the bed. As he'd expected, the soup was hot.

"I told you...," he sighed.

"*Fwooo, fwooo.*" Having learned her lesson, Nia blew on the spoon this time before bringing it to her mouth. And then after wiggling her jaw back and forth like she was really relishing the *zosui*, she swallowed loudly.

"Aaah..." She exhaled at length, like an old man soaking in a hot tub, and scooped another spoonful, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Sho good... What even is whatever you're feeding me...? How can it be...?" she murmured as she quickly polished off the remaining soup. In the space of less than five minutes, the bowl was empty. "Phew. Thanks for that. Aah, that was some good stuff. I haven't had a hot meal in a week at least."

"A week..." Shido offered her a weary smile as he picked up the dishes and turned toward the door to return to the kitchen. "Okay, after I wash these, I'm leaving. From now on, make sure you eat before you collapse."

"Oh! Hold up!" Nia called to him from behind.

“Was that not enough?” He frowned. “Sorry, but these groceries are supposed to be for our supper tonight. If you’re still hungry, order some takeout.”

“Aah, no, that’s not it.” She waved dismissively, then flicked a thumb at the half-finished manga page on her desk. “Like I said, I don’t have any assistants, ‘kay? So you mind helping me out? You can just do the easy stuff. Please! I’ll make it worth your while.”

“...Huh?” His eyes went wide at the unexpected request. But he quickly realized that Nia’s demand was absurd. “Uh? Whoa, wait. What are you even talking about? I can’t.”

“Huh? Come on!” she pleaded. “You got something better to do?”

“No, that’s not the point.” He shook his head. “I’ve never so much as touched a pro’s pages. I couldn’t handle it if I mucked them up or something.”

“It’s fiiiine, you’ll be fiiiine. It’s just erasing. Takes a surprising amount of stamina is all.”

“That’s what you say, but...”

“Pretty please!” she begged. “With a cherry on top! I for real don’t have enough hands right now. If I don’t figure something out, I’m gonna miss my deadline.”

“...Haah.” He sighed loudly and resigned himself to his fate. “Honestly. Just the easy stuff, though.”

“You betcha.” Nia beamed happily. “Got it. Mmkay, how about we go to my office, then? Definitely a tight squeeze in here for two of us.”

She got out of bed and stretched. “*Hnnnngh.*” She’d been so weak earlier, but this girl was apparently quick to recover her energy stores.

“Your office?” He frowned. “You mean you have a studio somewhere?”

“Yeah. I was looking for a setup where I could just flop over when I felt like I was going to die, hence the sitch here. But I actually have a totally separate workspace!”

“Mm, you say that like it’s totally normal, but it’s pretty weird, okay?” Shido

said, rolling his eyes, but Nia paid this no mind.

She led him into another room.

“Mmkay, come on in.”

“Whoa...” Shido stared, stunned.

In the center of the room was a large work desk, the top of which was jammed with a variety of drawing and writing implements. Like the other room, the walls were covered in bookshelves, but these contained art books and photo collections that seemed to be reference materials. While it was also disorderly, there was nonetheless a certain starkness to it. The room did indeed seem to be a craftsman’s workspace.

“You can use that desk,” she told him.

“Huh? Are you sure?” he asked. “The whole vibe in here is like an artist’s sacred space, though.”

“Nah, just use it. Or do you like the desk in the bedroom better?” She turned to him abruptly. “You wanna smell me while you work?”

“Oh! No, here’s good,” he said flatly.

“Boo.” She pursed her lips together somewhat unhappily.

“So what am I supposed to erase?” he asked.

“Oh yeah. Okay.” Nia put on the glasses sitting on the desk before indicating several inked pages. “This right here, thanks. Once you erase the pencil sketches, color all the spots marked with an X black.”

“Hmm?” Shido cocked his head at the words that Nia said so casually. “Hang on just a minute! It’s not just erasing?! Even if it is just solid black spaces, I’m an amateur—”

“Relaaaax. Anyone with fine motor control can do this stuff,” she said placatingly. “All you gotta do is color ‘em in. Marker, pen, paint, use whatever you want. The trick is to do the detailed areas with a fine pen first, and then go nuts with a marker in the middle.”

“Hey, are you even listening to me?!” he yelled.

“I’m listening, geez. But I’m telling you, you’ll be *fine*. I’m guessing yes, but boy, you ever draw before?”

“Huh? Wh-where’d that come from?” Shido felt bewilderment color his face.

“I can tell?” Nia groaned. “Boy. Someone who doesn’t know *aaa*anything about manga doesn’t go around talking about ‘erasing’ or ‘solid black,’ okay?”

“...!” He gasped. “I—I mean...”

“My guess is, y’know.” She waved a dismissive hand. “You got real obsessed with this character you came up with in junior high and drew a bunch of illos and stuff. Nah, I get it. For real. At first, you were drawing in pencil in a notebook, but then one day, you stumbled on the manga pens and inks at some big stationery store or whatever, and you wanted to, like, give it a go, right?”

“—! N-no, I...”

“And then you were itching to try screentone, but you gave up on that, all, ‘No way! You can only use this the one time, but one sheet costs this much money?!’”

“H-hngh...”

“Then you found out you could draw on the computer, so you were like, ‘Oh! I could use all the screentone I want!’ But then your eyes nearly popped out of your head at the price of the software and a drawing tablet, yeah?”

“Ah. Aaaaaaaah...!” He cradled his head in his hands, his entire body trembling.

“And then—,” she started.

“...Okay,” he said, like a whispered curse. “Fine. I’ll do it, so just stop talking. Please.”

“Mmkay. I’ll leave you to it, boy. I’m gonna be working in the other room.” Nia grinned as she gave him a thumbs-up and then returned to the bedroom.

“I mean, come on.” Shido let out an exasperated sigh. But he’d made his bed; now he would have to lie in it.

Woh-kay. He rolled up his sleeves, sat down in the chair, picked up an eraser,

and started to carefully erase the pencil lines. And then he took a brush pen from the pen holder and got to work on the blacks. He outlined the areas marked with an X with the tip of the brush pen before filling in the rest of the space.

The work itself was repetitive, but the fact that the spaces to be filled in were of different shapes and sizes along with the pressure to avoid wrecking pages done by a pro put him on edge. He carried out the work carefully but also as quickly as possible.

And then after some undefined period of time, when he'd finished filling in the black spots for every page, Nia reappeared.

"Oh! All done?" She glanced at the pages on the desk. "Ooh, you're pretty good."

"...Uh-huh. I managed it somehow. Geez. Been a while since I had to focus like this." Heaving a sigh, he rotated his shoulders to try and release the tension from being hunched over in the same posture for so long. When he lifted his face again, he jumped a little. "Wha—?!"

And of course he did. Nia had for some reason changed from her casual loungewear into a maid's outfit with an excessive degree of exposure. The skirt was oddly short, and the collar was wide and open.

Shido swallowed hard. "Wh-what are you wearing?"

"Huh? Oh, this?" She glanced down at herself. "I bought it for reference ages ago. I figured I could use this to cheer you on and give you a treat at the same time. I mean, I said I'd make it worth your while, yeah? So? No boobs, but it's still not too shabby, yeah?"

"I don't think this is what 'Make it worth your while' means, though?!" he shouted as she wriggled her bottom in his direction.

"Kidding. Jokes." She waved an envelope at him. "This really is just a little treat. Here, your pay."

As she was about to give him the envelope, her eyes twinkled like she had been struck with sudden inspiration. A mischievous smile crossed her face as she stuffed the folded envelope into her maid uniform.

“Now, boy. Time. To. Get. Paid! ♪”

“He— What are you doing?!” he cried.

“C’mon, live a little. Go on. Grab it,” Nia said, and slowly moved toward him, throwing her shoulders back as if to emphasize her chest. And then the envelope slid out the bottom of her top. *Flop.*

“...”

“Ah!” Shido cried out softly.

“Ngh.” Nia crumpled on the spot as though in shock. “Is being flat-chested a crime?!”

“...Ummm. I should get going, so.” A bead of sweat rolling down his cheek, Shido started getting his things together. He had the feeling that if this kept up, he’d never get out of here.

“Huh?” She stared up at him. “What about your pay?”

“It’s fine.” He shook his head. “I don’t need it. This was a valuable experience for me.”

“Whaaaat? Don’t give me that. C’mon, take this and go buy yourself something yummy.”

“You make sure you keep yourself fed, Nia, whether it’s yummy or not,” Shido said, rolling his eyes, and Nia’s own eyes grew wide in surprise.

“Whoa. I feel like you just got one on me.”

“I wasn’t trying to ‘get’ you or anything. I’m leaving. Stay out of the gutters from now on, okay?” He waved and was about to leave when she hurriedly grabbed onto his shirt.

“H-hey, hey. Whoa there. You’re just gonna leave me hanging?”



“I kinda hafta go...” Shido scratched his cheek, a troubled look on his face.

Nia slapped her fist into her palm.

“Oh, so then, how about this? You free on Saturday, boy?”

“Hmm?” He frowned. “Why? Where’d that come from?”

“Once I’m finished with this chapter, I can take a day off. I’ll let you have a date with me. Oh! I’ll pay, of course.”

“Huh?” His eyes grew wide at her unexpected words. He never imagined she would propose something like that.

“But in exchange, let me pick the place. I haven’t been shopping at all lately, and I’d love to pop over to Akiba for the first time in ages.” She smiled with an impossibly relaxed air.

Sighing heavily, Shido ran his hands through his hair.

“Won’t that just be me carrying your bags?”

“Gulp!” Nia struck a pose of surprise that was very much an overreaction. He’d never actually heard someone say “*Gulp*” before.

“Haah.” He sighed again. “Sorry, but could you ask someone else? Why not get a friend to go?”

“...” For a moment, Nia’s face clouded over. But she was back to her usual self soon enough, scratching her head. “Oh, uh. Ha-ha! The thing is, I don’t have any friends.” She narrowed her eyes meaningfully. “And, like, are you really sure about turning me down?”

“Huh?” He furrowed his brow at the implications of her words.

The corners of her mouth slid up into a grin as she continued.

“I thought it was your job to make the Spirits weak in the knees, boy. Or should I say...Shido Itsuka?”

Shido gaped idiotically, unable to process what Nia just said.

“Whu...?”

Chapter 2

Akiba, I have returned.

It didn't take too long for him to realize that the chattering sound he could hear was his own teeth. It wasn't that it was cold. While it was true that the world outside was blanketed in the chill of December, the building's HVAC system was hard at work, maintaining a pleasant indoor air temperature. And yet Knox couldn't stop himself from shaking. His limbs, covered in bandages, trembled uncontrollably, and his breathing steadily grew more ragged.

And he wasn't the only one in such a state. The similarly bandaged man next to him, his subordinate Burton, also had a tense look on his face.

The reason was simple.

"...Hmm." The man sitting on the chair in front of them dropped his gaze to the papers in his hand.

"...!"

"...!"

This small act alone made both Knox and Burton break out into a sweat.

The man was White with distinctive, ash-blond hair. Eyes a color best described as *darkness* were outlined by eyelids that appeared to have been chiseled out of stone. He appeared young, in his midthirties at most. But for some reason, he radiated experience and authority in contrast with his youth, which kept him from looking his actual age. In fact, Knox hesitated to call him the younger man, even though he himself was turning forty-eight that year.

But this was, at the end of the day, only natural. The person before him was no ordinary man. This was the genius who, in a single generation, built DEM Industries into a global phenomenon, a monster of the financial world, Sir Isaac Westcott.

Normally, mere pilots like Knox and Burton would never even set eyes upon a man like this. Therefore, the fact that they were meant that there was a serious reason for it.

“...Knox. What’s going to happen to us?” Burton whispered, his voice almost inaudible.

“...Shh! Be quiet,” Knox replied in a voice too soft for Westcott to hear, carefully keeping his eyes forward.

“...” Burton stayed silent after that.

Knox understood Burton’s anxiety painfully well. But chatting about it here and now would not improve the situation. In fact, it was more than possible that this situation, which was bad to begin with, could get even worse. All they could do was stay silent as stone and await instructions.

He was certain they had not been called here for any celebration of their meritorious deeds, but rather an investigation into the fatal errors they had committed.

They had been transporting Material A, a Spirit captured by DEM, from an experimental facility on Neryl Island in the Pacific Ocean, when the Spirit had managed to get away after an attack by a mysterious foe. Naturally, they hadn’t *let* the Spirit escape. It had been an accident, the result of a series of overlapping mishaps and irregularities. But once Knox learned how fixated Westcott was on the Spirits, he quickly understood that the cause of the incident would have no bearing on how it was handled.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that Westcott could move the economy of a nation with the flick of a single finger. If he wanted to, he could easily cut Knox and Burton loose and end their careers permanently.

No. Knox rejected that idea in his head. He knew he needed to imagine the worst, and yet he felt this thinking was still too optimistic.

“...” Silently, he glanced at Westcott’s side.

Standing next to the man was a young girl with long Nordic blond hair that was neatly pulled back. At first glance, she looked like nothing other than a secretary, but he knew she was not. This was the Wizard who led DEM

Industries' second enforcement division, Ellen Mathers. A human being who had gone beyond the bounds of humanity to compete against the unparalleled power of the Spirits on more than equal footing. Were Westcott to issue the order, she would remove Knox's and Burton's heads without any compunction whatsoever.

Tick. Tick. The sound of the clock hanging on the wall echoed in the office. To Knox, it sounded like footsteps, climbing the stairs to the gallows.

"I see." Westcott lifted his gaze from the report. His dark, clouded eyes were turned on Knox and Burton.

"...Unh. Hngh." Knox felt this gaze imbued with physical power tightening around his body. He furrowed his brow at the indescribably unpleasant feeling.

But Westcott appeared to pay no mind to his discomfort. He tossed the report onto the desk, stood up, and walked over to the two men. Once he stood before them, he opened his mouth.

What would come out of it? A reprimand? A notice of dismissal? Or an instruction to Ellen to dispose of these useless husks?

Knox gritted his teeth and closed his eyes as he awaited the powerful man's verdict.

However.

"Good work, both of you. The Realizer should take care of those injuries of yours in no time. Take as much time off as you need to recover before you come back to work."

Knox couldn't believe what he was hearing. He and Burton glanced at each other.

"...What?" he said stupidly.

"I-is that all, sir?" Burton asked.

Westcott looked at them curiously, as though he didn't understand what they meant. But after a moment, he nodded as though in understanding.

"Oh, is that your concern?" he asked. "Naturally, you will be properly compensated for the work-related injuries, so rest assured—"

“Uh, it’s not that, actually!” Knox cried out reflexively, even though he should’ve just stayed quiet and let it go. But Westcott’s reaction was simply so far beyond anything he’d braced himself for. “We accidentally let Material A escape. Our punishment, sir...”

“Hmm?” Westcott arched an eyebrow at him. “Judging from what’s in the report, that could hardly be said to have been your fault. In fact, I must commend you on your composure during the Nightmare’s surprise attack. It would be foolish to lose such competent employees because of personal feelings, now, wouldn’t it?”

“I—I suppose so,” Knox agreed, sweat beading on his forehead.

“And we were planning to release Material A into the wild sooner or later,” Westcott added. “I intend to let her roam a little for now. I’m almost grateful to you that I no longer need to put on some deliberate show.”

“Hah...?” Knox gaped at Westcott. *Did this man have them bring Material A—the lone Spirit he’d captured at long last—all the way to Japan with the intention of releasing her?* “Sir, what exactly—”

But before he could finish his question, Knox felt a sharp tug on the hem of his jacket. When he looked over, he found Burton shaking his head furiously, his face ashen, and he realized he was putting his nose where it most certainly did not belong.

Knox hurriedly sat up straighter.

“Is that right, sir? Well then, if it’s all right, we’ll take our leave here.”

“Mm.” Westcott raised a hand in a friendly wave.

Knox led Burton out of the room. He was braced with nervous tension as he opened the door, waiting for a voice to call to them from behind, but...there was nothing.

Once they had gotten far enough away from the room that their voices would no longer be heard from inside, Knox and Burton simultaneously let out the breaths they’d been holding. Almost as though until that very second, they had been underwater, unable to breathe.

“What...on earth was that exactly?” Burton asked, wiping away the cold sweat beading on his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket.

“...No idea,” Knox responded, dabbing his own forehead. “Our brains are probably built differently. No use in trying to understand. Just the opposite, in fact.”

“Just the opposite, meaning?” Burton looked at him curiously.

Knox hesitated and then replied, “Nothing. Forget it.”

They were inside DEM Industries. There was no way he could blithely come out with the words that had popped into his head when the walls almost certainly had ears.

I can't just go around saying I doubt he's even human like we are.

It was like the man didn't even recognize Knox and Burton as members of the same species. Knox remembered how Westcott's eyes had seemed cold, like he was looking at reptiles or insects, organisms with totally different constitutions from his own, and he shuddered unconsciously.

“...Come on, Burton,” he said.

“Uh... Yes sir.”

With Burton in tow, Knox walked down the corridor while pondering a career change.



“What did you say?” Shido screwed up his face dubiously as he stared at the girl in front of him.

Nia Honjou. The girl who also claimed she was the manga artist Souji Honjou.

The question was more of a reflex than anything else. He'd heard what she'd said. He was simply baffled, unable to immediately process her meaning.

Just now, she'd said it—“*Spirit.*”

Creatures deemed the cause of the spacequakes, catastrophes eating away at this world, the Spirits' existence was kept secret from all except for a certain subset of the upper echelons in national facilities and military industries.

But not only did Nia know about the existence of the Spirits, she even knew Shido's name and the fact that he was trying to resolve the Spirit issue peacefully.

"Nia... How do you know all that?" he asked, wariness bleeding into his expression.

"Mm-hmm?" Nia removed the glasses she'd put on for work and pushed her bangs back somewhat languidly. "Mm, how *do* I know all that? So strange."

"D-don't dodge the question. Who exactly are you?!" Shido demanded, and Nia waved a playful hand.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. I promise I'll tell you, mmkay?" she said, her tone light. "Astral Dress Number Two—Yod."

"Wha...?!" He gasped.

The instant Nia spoke the name, light swirled up and twisted around her body.

"This is...!" he cried, squinting at the sudden light. There was no doubt. He knew with certainty that this was...

"An Astral Dress?!"

Yes. The absolute armor and castle the Spirits wore. A garment of light woven from concentrated Spirit power.

Eventually, the radiance subsided, and he could see that Nia was utterly transformed, no longer in the maid uniform of only moments ago.

Her Astral Dress was like a priest's robes, glittering faintly in a fantastical way. The prominent cross design and the habit that hung from her head were reminiscent of a Catholic nun.

"Do you get it now?" Nia smiled boldly as she gave a nonchalant shrug.

After looking her over from head to toe, Shido spoke in a shaky voice.

"Nia. You're...a Spirit?"

"Uh-huh. Although if you know any other creature who can pull off this kind of trick, I might be that instead," she joked, then laughed. But then she put a

hand on her hip and frowned, perhaps displeased with the surprise and fear that still colored Shido's face. "What? That's all you got for me? That's what I get for getting all fancy and trying to impress you."

"...Huh?" Shido frowned, perplexed by her attitude, the same casual tone as before. He could see the tension filling the room dissipate.

"C'mon!" she cried. "You gotta be more like, 'Whoa! What the heck?!' Or you could switch it up and be all hearts in your eyes when a girl suddenly transforms in front of you. I mean, check it out. This Astral Dress's pretty sexy, yeah? This slit practically goes all the way up to my waist. And the whole thing's made of some kind of mystery stuff that's half see-through, so you can kinda see my body under it." As she spoke, she lifted her left leg onto the nearby chair, and her pale thigh poked out from the daring slit.

"...!" Shido automatically blushed and averted his eyes.

"Ooh! There we go! That's what I'm talking about! Eh-heh-heh! Nice, very nice, boy. Maybe you're a leg guy? I get it now. You're young, you gotta be greedier!" As if to fan the flames, Nia beckoned him with a hand. Her costume was that of a chaste nun, but the person wearing it was the exact opposite.

"...Ah. Geez!" Shido ran his hands through his hair in irritation and turned his gaze to Nia once more. "Quit messing around. I'm confused. I don't understand what's going on. I mean, I get that you're a Spirit. But how do you know about me? And my connection with the Spirits?"



“Ohhh. That part?” Nia took her leg down from the chair and slowly lifted one arm up in front of her body. “Given the line of work I’m in, I don’t much care for spoilers. But... Well, I’ll fill you in just this once. As a little treat.”

As she moved her arm, she called the name “Rasiel.”

In the next instant, the space around her hand seemed to warp, and before Shido knew it, a book appeared above it.

It was a massive tome, similar to some kind of holy book. The cover was made of leather, metal, and an indescribable material, and it was decorated with a large cross, just like Nia’s Astral Dress.

“Is that...an Angel?!” he cried.

“Yup.” She nodded. “Mine. The all-knowing Angel Rasiel. This baby can see everything in this world.”

“Wha...”

Shido furrowed his brow. “All-knowing...? What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” She fixed him with a dubious look. “Just what the word says. Rasiel tells me about everything in creation. Like, what’s going on where, who’s doing what. For example... Oh, right. Like how you were gonna go down that road after you finished shopping.”

“Wha—?” He grimaced and shivered in fear, and she giggled as though she found this amusing.

“You didn’t actually think it was a coincidence, did you? You’re nice to a girl you find on the side of the road, and she just happens to be a Spirit? Nah, man, be serious. Not a chance. I wouldn’t even put something like that into a story.”

“...So you’re saying you assumed I’d help you and you were lying there deliberately?”

“Well, I guess, yeah. More or less,” Nia replied, with a theatrical nod.

Shido swallowed hard from nerves.

“So what was the point in getting me to help with the manga?”

“Oh, I just needed help. Normal stuff.”

“It’s not, though!” he shrieked. Actually, if the manga thing had been for some special reason, that would have been scary in and of itself. Nevertheless, her casual statement didn’t exactly cause anything to click into place for him.

Whatever else, though, it seemed to be a fact that Nia had known who he was right from the start and had lured him here. He shook his head to get himself back on track before turning to face her again.

“Okay. Nia. What exactly do you want? Why am I here?”

In contrast with Shido’s tense expression, Nia shrugged carelessly.

“Geez. You don’t have to be all on edge. It’s nothing so big as all that. I guess I just wanted to see you with my own eyes. Rasiel can tell me things until the cows come home, but that’s just empty information, y’know? Nothing beats seeing the real deal.” She stroked the cover of the book that hung in the air as she continued. “And... Yeah. I did maybe wanna thank you.”

“Thank me...?” He frowned dubiously. It was true that he had helped her, but if that was all part of her scheme, it seemed like a weird thing for her to say.

Perhaps guessing what he was thinking, she shook her head as if to put a stop to that line of thought.

“Oh, nuh-uh. Not for today. I mean, for how you helped me earlier this month.”

“Huh?” he replied idiotically. And of course he did. He’d only met her for the first time that day. In fact, earlier this month, he’d been out of control due to the Spirit power running rampant in him because of the path constriction. He’d been the one getting helped then.

“Oh-ho!” She raised her eyebrows at him. “You don’t remember? You answered my call and brought down that transport plane. That’s how I escaped.”

“Your call...? Oh!” He jolted with a sudden realization. He’d barely been conscious at the time, so his memory was hazy, but he did have the feeling that he had indeed been called by someone and had unleashed his Spirit power in response. “No way. That was you...? But a transport plane...?”

“The transport plane I was forced onto. It belonged to DEM Industries.”

“...! DEM?!” His expression grew hard at the name. DEM—Deus Ex Machina Industries. A massive corporation headquartered in England, their objective was to capture the Spirits, as opposed to Ratatoskr, the organization Kotori was part of. Shido and his friends had clashed with DEM on numerous occasions.

“Why were you on a DEM transport, Nia?” he asked, a hint of alarm creeping onto his dubious face.

“Hmm?” Nia said nonchalantly. “‘Cause they caught me, of course. Man, they kept me locked up underground for aaaaaages. ‘Cause of them, my joints are a mess. Plus, my series had to go on this long hiatus. Totally sucked.” As she spoke, she stuck a hand out from beneath the hem of her cape and ran her fingers through her hair.

Shido nearly let this slide because her tone was so very unconcerned, but then he digested the meaning of what she was saying, and his eyes went wide as saucers.

“They *caught* you?! DEM did?!”

“Yup. That they did. Guess it was about five years ago now? You know, um, what was her name again? That weakling?” Nia muttered and stroked the cover of Rasiel with the fingers of her left hand.

As if in response, Rasiel shuddered slightly, and its pages began to flip automatically, emitting a faint light. Nia dropped her gaze to the page and then slapped her fist into her open palm.

“Yes, right. Ellen. Ellen Mira Mathers. She got me good. I mean, it was really something. Ambushed me out of nowhere, all *bam!*”

“Ellen...” Shido’s tense expression grew even more so.

Ellen Mira Mathers. Executive leader of DEM Industries’ second enforcement division and humanity’s most powerful Wizard. Shido and Ratatoskr had their fair share of run-ins with her. As powerful as she was, she could indeed have captured a Spirit.

“A-are you...okay?” he asked.

“Mm. To be honest, I don’t remember it too well,” she said, and crossed her arms in irritation. “I mean, it was super annoying. They had all these machines hooked up to me and stuff. Oh! Wait. Correction. There was one thing I remember that seriously hurt. They wouldn’t let me draw manga at all while they had me locked up, y’know? Seriously. Not holding a pen for so long’s wrecked my instincts. And I doubt they’re gonna pay damages when my manga sales drop.”

A furrow popped up between Shido’s brows. Nia might have found this the most troubling part of her captivity, but he got the feeling that this treatment was very kind by the standards of the brutally cruel DEM. And something else was bugging him about the whole thing.

“So like, Nia,” he said, turning his eyes back on her. “You said your Angel knows everything. So how did you get ambushed?”

“Oh, yeah, no.” Nia waved a hand in front of her dismissively. “Doesn’t work like that.”

“Work like what...?” he asked.

“So Rasiel *is* an omniscient Angel, that’s true. But it can only pull out the information I ask for,” she explained. “It’s not like it can see into the future. And it doesn’t automatically detect danger. Basically, there’s no way for me to avoid things I’m not expecting. Think of Rasiel more like a super, extra-amazing, high-performance search engine.”

“Uh...huh.” Shido swallowed hard and then scratched his cheek. “I thought it sounded too incredible. But I guess the Angel does have its limits.”

“Mm-hmm?” Nia rolled her eyes at him. “Well, you went and did it now, boy. Seems like you don’t get Rasiel’s power at all here.”

“Huh?”

“Everything written in Rasiel is *fact*. Flip that on its head, and...” She grinned, then boldly and slowly raised her left hand above her head. She hooked a finger around the ornament attached to her cape and plucked it off. He saw that the hidden tip of it was in the shape of a pen.

Nia adjusted her grip on the pen and then started to write in the book

hovering before her.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“...Um, what are you doing?” Shido asked a few minutes later, when Nia showed no sign of being done.

“Hang on. Just a biiiit more,” Nia said, a serious look in her eyes, and returned once more to writing in the Angel. A few more minutes passed. “Woh-kay. That oughtta do it.” She finally lifted her face and slipped the pen back into its original position before tapping Rasiel with a finger. The Angel began to emit a hazy light.

“D-do what?” he asked nervously.

“You’ll find out soon enough.” She grinned. “See? Getting to be about time, maybe?”

“Huh? I mean—aah?!” He shrieked. But this was only natural. Because his body had started to move completely against his will. “Wh-what the—?!”

“Yup, that’s it. This way, over here.” As Nia spoke, she lay facedown on the spot. Shido’s own body straddled her, and he began to massage her back deftly with both hands. “Oh yeaah. Right there. That’s the spot.”

“H-hang on. What on earth—?!” Shido stared, baffled as his hands squirmed about and caressed Nia’s bottom.

“Eek!” she squealed. “You big perv!”

“N-no, I’m not me—?!” he cried, and then suddenly regained control of his body at last. He hurriedly leaped back and took deep breaths, shoulders heaving.

Nia sat up and cackled with laughter. “So that’s how it is, boy.” She lightly tapped the cover of Rasiel and turned the book toward Shido.

The page it was open to showed the manga she had apparently just drawn. When he looked at it closely, the characters strongly resembled him and Nia.

Not only that, the details of the story were exactly the events that had transpired a moment ago.

“Th-this is...,” he stammered.

“Future Record,” she said matter-of-factly. “I told you, didn’t I? Everything written in Rasiel is fact. Even the stuff that gets written in it.”

“...?! H-how...?!” He let out a stunned cry. And of course he did. She was saying that she could create the future according to her own whims and desires. This power was beyond awesome in the truest sense of the word; it almost made her a god.

But he was curious about one thing.

“...Why manga? Wouldn’t it be faster just to write it down?”

“Mm.” She nodded. “But I can’t quite *feel* it if I don’t create it as manga, y’know? Takes forever, though, to draw a scene that’s only a minute or two long. And if I have that kind of time on my hands, I really need to spend it on my work. So it’s not like I do it all the time.”

“...Ummm.” A bead of sweat rolled down Shido’s cheek. The power he’d witnessed twisted the very nature of truth in the world, but for some reason, when it was filtered through Nia, he had a hard time believing it was really all that serious.

“Oh.” Nia gave him an unhappy look, as if she’d guessed at what was going through his mind. “And now you’re looking down on me again. Boy, if you pull that attitude with me, I guess I’m gonna have to let you have another little taste. Show you just how terrifying it is that I can know everything that’s already happened in this world.”

“Huh...?” Shido frowned as Nia stroked the cover of Rasiel and flipped the pages.

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.” She put a hand to her chin. “I get it. Instant Flash Bomb? Huh. That’s kinda cool.”

“Pfft?!” Shido nearly choked at the words that came out of her mouth. Instant Flash Bomb was the name of the original special attack he had once dreamed

up.

Mouth twisting into a smirk, Nia let her gaze crawl across the faintly glowing page.

“And here’s the character you made! The black-clad fighter Leevan, huh? Oh, dang. Totally. Black’s so cool, right? But if you’re gonna put this guy in a story, you should give him a couple weaknesses. You want the readers to relate, y’know? Plus, narrative tension. And I get that maybe you were embarrassed to draw a girl back then—you were that age, after all—but the design of the heroine needs some oomph. I mean, blah, blah, blah, whatever. But it’s directly connected with sales, okay?”

“Can you not give me professional advice?!” Shido clutched his head in his hands and squirmed. Anyone who’d had the same experience would no doubt understand. Having the juvenile designs he’d once envisioned unearthed by another person was akin to having his guts gouged out with an invisible knife. After writhing in agony briefly, he stood up again, heavily panting.

“So?” Nia grinned, delighted. “You get how amazing Rasiel is now?”

“...Yes. It’s exceptionally incredible. I’m sorry for making it sound like it wasn’t,” Shido said, and bowed.

“Excellent.” Nia nodded, satisfied. “And well, that’s about it from me. Thanks to you, I escaped and got my series back. So like, I really am for real grateful.” She looked at him and continued. “But y’know, I guess it’s not like you are gonna be all, ‘Great, byyyye,’ huh? Ratatoskr...was it? Their whole thing is making Spirits weak in the knees to save them, yeah? Pretty neat. So you gonna seduce me, then?”

“I mean...”

That *was* probably what would happen. Although the Spirit Nia seemed relatively adapted to human society, he would actually prefer that she come under the protective umbrella of Ratatoskr, given that they never knew when a spacequake would occur. And she’d already been caught by DEM once. As she had no guarantee that it wouldn’t happen again, it was more dangerous for her to be alone like this.

She no doubt picked up on his thoughts from the look on his face.

“All fine and good.” Nia nodded theatrically. “Seems like that could be a blast. And like, a secret organization! Thrills and chills! Plus, I know I said this before, but I *am* grateful to you, mmkay? So as a thank-you, I’ll give you one chance.”

“One chance? Oh...” Shido’s eyes opened wide as he remembered what she’d said to him earlier—when her manga chapter was done, she’d be able to take a day off.

“But we go to Akiba. That’s my only rule. I was locked up for five years; my body screams for the two-dimensional. The withdrawal symptoms are something fierce. I wanna read the rest of that manga, the latest from that artist, so bad I’m literally shaking all over.” She hugged her own shoulders and very deliberately trembled and shook. “After that, I’ll have to work on the next chapter, and I’ll be busy with ComiCo at the end of the year. So I won’t be able to make time for a while, thank you very much. I mean, I am a top seller, after all.” Nia popped a finger up, posing cutely.

Sweat trickled down Shido’s cheek.

“C-ComiCo?”

“Comic Colosseum. A doujinshi market. I couldn’t get a space, so I figured I’d have to miss it this year. But I guess someone got sick suddenly and couldn’t get their book done, and they’re letting me have the spot. I’m gonna put out what I wrote before DEM snagged me. Aah, been a while since I was at ComiCo!” Nia crossed her arms as she nodded repeatedly with deep emotion. And then, as if she’d realized that she’d almost forgotten about Shido, she turned her face toward him.

“Oh, sorry, my bad. Well, that’s basically the long and the short of it.” She pointed at her own chest with a thumb, and grinned broadly. “I’ll let you have one chance. If you think you can make me weak in the knees, go ahead and try.”

“...!” Shido reflexively gasped at her preening confidence.

“Naturally, I won’t peek at your strategy meeting or whatever, so don’t worry. I hate dropping spoilers, but I reeeeeeeaaallly hate spoilers dropped on me. So

you can feel free—umm.” Nia looked at her Angel, and the pages of Rasiel flipped. “Oh, yes, right. Kotori. Commander at fourteen, holy smokes. You and your li'l sis go and plan to your hearts' content. But well, I know it's weird for me to say this about myself, but I'm a tough cookie, y'know? So make sure you come at me with your best shot, mmkay?”

She laughed out loud and then shooed him away with a hand. “So how about we call it a day now? I gotta finish that chapter, and you gotta make supper for everyone, right, boy?”

“Oh! Nia!”

“Now, now, all those stories you wanna share'll have to wait for the big day. I'll tell you when and where later. Oh! You mind if I look up your email address?” she asked considerately.

“Oh, uh... That's fine, I guess.” Shido was dizzied by how quickly the whole thing was settled.

“Yeah? Great. Okay, see you. We're gonna have so much fun,” Nia said, and sent him on his way.



“A Spirit held prisoner by DEM?”

When Shido put in a call to the underground facility after returning home and related the unbelievable events of the afternoon, Kotori returned to the Itsuka house immediately.

After he'd given her all the details, she frowned as she flicked the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth back and forth.

“And she was working as a manga artist in this world for years before that? It's hard to swallow right away... Well, given that we have precedence with Miku, it's not impossible...”

She groaned as she stroked her chin. Miku Izayoi was a Spirit whose powers had now been sealed by Shido, like Tohka and the others. She'd already had quite the following working as a pop idol by the time Shido and Ratatoskr had detected her existence. Compared to her, the case of Nia was perhaps a little quieter and less complicated.

“Mm...?” came a voice from behind them as they discussed the situation. “Shido, what are you and Kotori talking about?”

Standing there was a girl with long hair the color of night and fantastical eyes that reflected color like crystals, Tohka Yatogami. Another Spirit that Shido had sealed away, now his neighbor and classmate.

“Hey, Tohka,” he greeted her. “Mm. Just some work stuff.”

“Ooh, work stuff? Sorry. I didn’t mean to bug you.” Tohka bowed politely.

As if to pick up where she’d left off, two other voices came to them from the direction of the living room.

“Shido, our stomachs demand a sacrifice. Quickly, prepare the feast.”

“Translation. Kaguya says she’s huuunggggy and she wants to eat Shido’s nummy cooking.”

“Could you not make up weird words?!”

The faces of the two girls leaning forward over the back of the sofa were such perfect copies of each other, one of them could have been an actual reflection in a mirror facing the other. One girl was wearing a black shirt with red letters on it, and the other was in a pastel cardigan. Kaguya and Yuzuru Yamai, twin Spirits who lived in the apartment building next door to the Itsuka house, like Tohka.

“Oh yeah, sorry. It’ll be ready soon. Just hang on a bit longer,” Shido replied with a pained smile, and opened the fish grill to check on how today’s main dish, salted mackerel, was doing.

Yes. While discussing the Spirits with Kotori, Shido was also in the middle of preparing supper. He’d been wearing his apron the whole time, with cooking chopsticks in one hand and a ladle in the other. No one seeing this scene from the outside would think that they had been discussing matters so important the fate of the world might hang in the balance.

“Mmm, looks good. Heeeey! Could someone wipe down the table for me?” Shido called out.

““““Okaaay!”””” The collective response came from Kaguya, Yuzuru, Tohka, and

the two small girls who had been talking with Tohka in the living room.

One of these small girls had a gentle demeanor and a rabbit puppet on her left hand. Her name was Yoshino. The other was hunched forward with a distinctively unhappy look in her eye—Natsumi. Both were Spirits who'd had their powers locked away by Shido, like all the others.

Following Shido's instructions, the Spirits began to clear the table. They returned magazines and newspapers to where they belonged, wiped the table with a damp cloth, and set out chopstick holders, soy sauce, and small serving plates.

"...Still." Kotori sighed as she observed this scene. "Rasiel. An omnipotent Angel... Knows everything she wants to know, plus lets her overwrite the future even. That's one scary Angel we got on our hands."

"Yup." Shido nodded as he stared off into the distance. "And you have skeletons in your closet, too, huh, Kotori?"

"Uh?" Kotori frowned as her cheeks flushed. "Wh-what are you talking about?"

"You know," he said, crossing his arms. "Like, how you peed the bed when we were sleeping together that one time and you cried so hard that I said it was me who wet the bed, but when I think about it now, Mom and Dad could probably totally tell from the looks on our faces. And—"

"Eeee! Eeeeeaaaaah!" She let out an earsplitting shriek and threw a hand across his mouth.

The Yamai sisters, interest piqued by the scream, turned toward them at the same time.

"Hmm? What do you both speak of? You seem to be enjoying yourselves immensely."

"Agreement. I think I heard something about bed-wetting."

"H-he said...bad sweating! Anyway, look! If you're done clearing the table, let's get some food on those plates! Kaguya, you're fish, Yuzuru, the stew!" Kotori handed Kaguya a pair of cooking chopsticks and Yuzuru the ladle in a way

that brooked no argument.

“I-is that so?”

“Acknowledgment. Understood...”

Perhaps overwhelmed by her unusual behavior, the twins obeyed Kotori’s instructions and got to work setting out the food.

“...” After seeing them start on the task, Kotori whirled back around to Shido.

“Eep!” he yelped when he saw the terrifying expression on her face.

“...If you say that around people again... Well, you understand, don’t you?” Kotori warned, her tone glacier-cold.

When he really thought about it, Kotori held his past in her small hands, albeit not to the same extent as Nia and her Angel. Who knew what kind of retaliation he’d face if he made an enemy of her?

“R-Roger...,” he said, holding up his hands to indicate surrender, and she snorted indignantly before sitting back down on her chair.

“...That’s not what I was talking about anyway,” Kotori said finally. “I’m saying the existence of an Angel like that makes security meaningless. We’re not just talking leaking national secrets or military information. Depending on how the Angel’s used, it could easily bring about a full-blown war. The idea that such a thing was in DEM hands until recently... The thought alone horrifies me.”

“Tr-true... You’re right.” Sweat beaded on Shido’s forehead. After conversing with Nia, he got the distinct impression that she was unlikely to use her Angel for anything of that nature. But if her power was used by someone with malicious intent, the world would face a danger of a different sort from the spacequakes.

Kotori grabbed onto the stick of her Chupa Chups and waved the lollipop like a conductor’s baton as she continued.

“Also, and this is at most a tangent.”

“Hmm? What?”

“If she’s really got an Angel that can do all that, then we might finally learn

something about that Phantom we're chasing after," she said, holding up the Chupa Chups.

"Right...!" Shido's eyes flew open.

Phantom, the mysterious Spirit who had turned Kotori herself into a Spirit. They hadn't been able to find out anything about the elusive being so far, but maybe they could get somewhere with Rasiel.

"And...", Kotori started.

"And?" Shido asked in reply, and Kotori averted her eyes somewhat.

"...It might know the past you and Mana have forgotten."

"Oh..." Shido eyes went wide as saucers.

He and Mana were blood siblings...supposedly. But neither of them had any memory of their time together.

With a complicated look on her face, Kotori rested her elbows on the table.

"But I mean, this is all just castles in the sky. It's not like we're out here locking away the Spirit powers so we can use them ourselves. Our top priority is to get Nia into our care. Naturally, we'll be there to back you up, but you're the one who needs to take her down, Shido."

"R-right... Got it."

It was indeed just as she said. He was curious about Phantom and his own history, but those were secondary. If he put matters like that ahead of Nia, she would no doubt pick up on his impure motives.

He shook his head to clear away these extraneous concerns as he clenched his hands into tight fists.



Two days later, Shido was waiting for Nia outside of the ticket gates at the Electric Town gate of Akihabara Station. Despite it being a weekday, a fair number of people were walking around the station. He saw many foreigners among the crowd, maybe because the area had become a famous tourist destination in recent years.

Keeping an eye on the gates to make sure that he didn't miss Nia's arrival, he glanced around the area.

Although he had been there several times before, he found himself marveling at what a peculiar station it was. Most of the advertisements plastered on nearly every surface were related to anime or video games, and he almost felt like he had stepped into another, unfamiliar world. This trippy feeling, a voyage into the extraordinary, might have been one reason why people constantly gathered in this area.

"Testing. Can you hear me, Shido?"

Kotori's voice came through the earpiece in his right ear. The area around him was bustling and noisy, unsurprising for a train station ticket gate, but the miraculous Ratatoskr communicator transmitted her voice, crystal clear.

"Yeah, I can hear you," he said.

"It's almost time. Since we currently don't have access to Fraxinus, we can't instantly transport you from the city. From everything you told us, she doesn't appear to be a belligerent Spirit. But be careful out there."

"I will. Plus, she said she'll be busy after this, so I've gotta get my likability up today somehow," he said, and then heard Minowa's voice over his earpiece from the same temporary underground command center as Kotori.

"Commander, Shido. She's here! The target...Nia!"

"...! She's here?"

"Okay then, here we go, Shido. Let's begin our date."

"Okay!" he agreed, then pulled his finger away from where he had it pressed against his earpiece and turned his eyes toward the ticket gate, seeking Nia.

As he did, a flood of people appeared on the other side of the gates. A train had clearly just arrived, and the debarking passengers were all headed toward the ticket gates.

"Ummm, Nia is... Oh!" As he scanned the gates and the people tapping their pass cards on their way out, he found a familiar face. The Spirit he was meeting there that day, Nia.

Actually, *familiar* was perhaps not quite the right word. The Nia he saw today was not dressed like she had been the other day when he'd found her on the road, nor was she in her nunlike Astral Dress. Instead, she was wearing well-worn denim jeans and a beat-up jacket, with so much scarf wrapped around her neck that it nearly hid her mouth. With each breath she took, the glasses on her face clouded slightly.

What drew his eye more than anything else, though, were her accessories. She had a large backpack on, but it seemed empty; it flapped limply behind her. Her left hand was pulling a suitcase large enough to make him wonder if she was about to go on a trip abroad. And that wasn't all. When he looked very carefully, he saw a small, folded-up hand truck attached to the suitcase with a rubber belt.

"...Whoa." Shido smiled wryly. With that outfit and equipment, she seemed to have abandoned any idea of cuteness or sexiness. Her entire look had been honed and refined for the practicality of carrying stuff and nothing else.

She seemed to notice him then. Waving her free hand, she wheeled the suitcase toward him.

"Hey, hey, boy. Morning. Nice day, huh?"

"...Uh-huh. Yeah," he said. "You, uh...came prepared, huh, Nia?"

Her eyes grew round in surprise, and then she burst out laughing, shoulders shaking.

"Ugh, come on. I mean, seriously. We're on the hunt here, yeah?"

"R-right, I guess so," he responded vaguely, and he heard Kotori's voice echo in his right ear.

"Shido, we've got options."

The crew of the airship *Fraxinus* was assembled in the temporary command center in the Ratatoskr underground facility: Commander Kotori Itsuka in the central seat, Vice Commander Kyouhei Kannazuki at her side, and six crew members sitting in front of their individual consoles, focusing on their monitors.

On the large screen set up on one wall, Nia was displayed from the waist up in

her fatally unsexy outfit, and on top of this was a window with a selection of choices.

1. "THAT OUTFIT'S CUTE. LOOKS GOOD ON YOU."
2. "YOUR CLOTHES ARE NOT COOL. I'LL PICK SOMETHING NEW OUT FOR YOU."
3. "HUH... THE WAY YOU'RE DRESSED, IT'LL MAKE IT VERY WORTH MY WHILE TO TAKE THOSE CLOTHES OFF YOU."

While the current facilities didn't compare with the equipment they'd had on *Fraxinus*, they were still able to use the original options system thanks to the fact that the devices in the command center were connected with *Fraxinus's* AI even as the airship underwent repairs.

"All hands! Choices!" Kotori commanded, and the crew tapped away at the consoles before them.

The results were soon displayed on screen. Option (1) had the fewest votes, and (2) and (3) were neck and neck.

"Huh, didn't expect that. I mean, one's the safest choice and it's dead last," Kotori said, flicking the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth up and down, and the crew sitting in the seats to the front spoke up to explain.

"It's just, well, this is hard to say, but Nia's outfit is really so...," said Nailknocker Shiizaki, looking at the girl on the monitor thoughtfully.

"Yes. If we simply compliment her, it would sound sarcastic," Deep Love Minowa added, and pressed a hand to her chin.

Just as they noted, Nia's outfit could hardly be called particularly feminine or sexy, even to flatter her.

"In which case, isn't two the better choice? Start off with a critical statement and then let her glimpse a flash of kindness. This also opens the way for us to choose new clothes for her. This would absolutely work if you said this to a girl in a shop," President Mikimoto said, holding a finger up.

But as if to shoot that down, Dimension Breaker Nakatsugawa and Bad Marriage Kawagoe raised their voices.

"No, please think this through," the former said. "Nia is not here today to

purchase clothing! She came for manga and light novels, figures and Blu-rays! It's nothing short of torture to drag her into a boutique when she is here with an entirely different intent!"

"Quite," the latter agreed. "And according to what Shido told us, she's frank about matters of a more sensitive nature. A carefully crafted crude remark will be effective in closing the distance between them."

"Mm-hmm." After considering everyone's opinions, Kotori placed her hand on the mic that was connected with Shido's earpiece. "Shido, go with three."

"..."

Shido stiffened upon receiving this instruction from the command center. While Nia was laid-back, he did worry that she would be on guard against him for the rest of the day if he were to say something like that right out of the gate. But he couldn't stay silent forever, either.

He took a deep breath before looking Nia up and down, slowly, and stroking his chin.

"H-huh... The way you're dressed, it'll make it very worth my while to take those clothes off you."

"What?" Her eyes widened in surprise. "Whoa! Heh-heh! So, boy, you're planning to get that far with me today? You sure don't look it, but you're quite the predator." She elbowed him in his stomach.

"Ah-ha-ha," he laughed weakly. "No, I don't mean—"

"Wait." She stopped abruptly. "Do you maybe mean you have to go that far to seal Spirit powers? Oof, I assumed all it took was a kiss. Got that all kinds of wrong. Didn't get enough deets on that sitch. Hey, you mind if I go change my panties?"

"Wh-what?!" Shido let out a baffled cry, and Nia cackled once more.

"Kidding! It was a joke." She hit him on the shoulder. "I'm already wearing my game-night panties."

He shrieked once again.

"That's a joke?!"

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!” She clutched her stomach like she could hardly stand how funny it was. It seemed this too was a joke.

“She’s the life of her own party.” He heard Kotori’s exasperated voice over the earpiece. *“But she’s definitely not reacting badly to your comment. Let’s keep going like this.”*

“R-right... Got you,” Shido replied, lowering his voice so Nia couldn’t hear him.

But perhaps she noticed something was up with him anyway. She perked up and peered into his face.

“Hmm? Were you maybe talking to Command Central?”

“Huh?! No, I was—”

“So I guess you got cameras flying around me and stuff. Yay! Kotoriiii! Can you see me?” Nia made a peace sign as she looked up to the sky above. The curious gesture and her loud cry made passersby glance at her, but then they quickly looked away like they had lost interest.

“...Yup, I can see you. Verrrrry well.” Shido heard Kotori in his ear. He could practically hear the scowl on her face.

But this too was only natural. Whatever else, Nia already knew what Shido and his team were trying to do thanks to the power of her Angel Rasiel. His target understood he was trying to make her weak in the knees on this date and seal away her Spirit powers. He’d known this and thought he could handle it, but she was actually quite a thorny opponent.

While Nia looked up at the sky and made her peace sign, Shido sighed and said, “I guess they *can* totally see you.”

“Oooh. Amazing. I can’t see the cameras at all. High-tech,” she said admiringly, after waving her hand a few times in a fumbling search for the autonomous cameras. Then she leaned back in a light stretch and put her hands on her hips. “Woh-kay!” Nia turned toward Shido and bowed neatly. “Mmkay, here’s to today. Please seduce me however you want.”

“Uh...huh,” he replied, his cheeks coloring. It was somehow incredibly embarrassing to have her say it flat out like that. “Looking forward to it.”

But Nia seemed not to pay his discomfort any mind whatsoever as she turned her gaze to the city.

“So! Yup! ...Akiba. So many great memories.” She started to walk away with the suitcase wheeling behind her.

“Hey!” Shido called out. “Wait, uh. That’s gotta be a lot for you.”

“Oh, for real? Ooh-hoo, such a gentleman, boy!” She poked his arm, and he took the suitcase from her with a forced laugh. She opened and closed her hand. “So? I got an extra one now. What d’you wanna do? Hold hands?”

“Huh?” He opened his eyes wide in surprise. He’d never imagined she’d say something like that to him so casually out of the blue.

Seeing this reaction, she got an “Oopsie” look on her face and lightly slapped the side of her own head.

“Sorry, my bad. Forgot. That’s for the boy to say, yeah?”

“Y-yeah... I guess so.” Even as he felt another twinge of embarrassment, Shido held out his hand. “Nia... Did you wanna hold hands?”

She shrugged, put a hand to her mouth, and averted her eyes coquettishly.

“What? It’s so sudden. I mean, we only just met...”

“You asked first, though?!” he cried automatically, and Nia clutched her stomach as she laughed out loud.

“Aah, ha-ha-ha! I’m kidding! Joke central!”

And then she held out her own hand. She wasn’t wearing gloves, and he felt a slight chill from her skin as he wrapped his own hand around hers.

“Yoink. Mmkay, let’s go.”

“R-right.” Half dragged along by Nia, Shido began to walk, suitcase rolling behind him.

A voice criticized him shrilly via his earpiece.

“C’mon, Shido! She’s walking all over you!”

“Easy for you to say, but...” He frowned, troubled, as they strolled along.

They came out onto the street, and Nia stopped abruptly. She released the hand that she'd only just grabbed, trotted ahead, and took a deep breath in the middle of the street.

"Mmm! It's been so long! Akiba! I'm back!" Nia yelled, whirling around to take it all in. "Man, I'm gone for a while, and everything changes, huh? It's, like, all fresh!"

"Didn't Rasiel tell you how Akihabara has changed?" Shido asked, standing with the suitcase, and Nia groaned softly.

"Ah, the thing is, I try not to use Rasiel for stuff I don't really need."

"Huh? You do? But why, exactly?"

"Mmm..." She faltered at his question. But soon enough, she placed a hand on her hip and wagged a finger at him. "Tut-tut-tut! Come on! I told you, yeah? I hate spoilers. And all I can get from Rasiel is at best knowledge, dead intel. Doesn't begin to compare with the real deal. Seeing, hearing, smelling, the breeze on your skin."

"S-so that's it, then..."

"That is exactly it. Mm. So as planned, we'll start with books— Oh." Nia cut herself off and fell into thought as if she had remembered something. "Right. Mm-hmm."

"Hmm? What's up?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, you know, like, this is ostensibly a date to reward you, yeah?" she said. "So it's like, starting with my shopping is, you know."

"Oh, I don't mind or anything."

"Mm-mm! Not on my watch! So saddle up. This way!" she said; she grabbed his hand again and began walking briskly.

"Gah!" he cried, stumbling to keep up. "Wh-where are we going?"

"Eh-heh-heh! Wait and see!"

Eventually, she came to a stop in front of a building.

"Okay. This is it!"

“This...is what?”

“Mm-hmm. A cosplay shop.”

“Why?!” Shido let out a baffled cry, and Nia laughed, delighted.

“‘Why?’ he asks when he knows very well. Come on, get in there. Let’s go.”

“Gah...! D-don’t push.” Shido entered the shop, half shoved into it by Nia.

The interior was jam-packed with costumes of all colors. A wide variety of merchandise was on display, everything from anime character outfits to costumes sorted by profession.

“Oh-ho!” Nia’s eyes shone as she rummaged through the many outfits before returning to Shido with three costumes in hand. “Okay! Here you have options!”

“Huh?!” Her phrasing was so like the usual instruction from Kotori that he unconsciously jumped.

“Boy, which costume do you want me to wear?”

1. Nurse’s uniform.
2. Maid uniform.
3. *Valkyrie Misty* Midnight Final Form.

Now then, make your choice!” Nia shouted, and began to make a *tick-tick-tick* sound, as if mimicking a clock approaching an imagined time limit.

In her hands were a nurse’s uniform, a maid uniform, and an excessively outlandish costume made of glittery fabric.

“H-huh?” Shido stammered. “Uh. I mean, this is pretty sudden... And like, isn’t the last one from a totally different genre?!”

“*Shido, let’s just go along with Nia here. Make a choice!*” Kotori’s voice came through his earpiece.

“Aah, man. I don’t even know!” His mind in chaos, Shido snapped a finger out at one of the outfits Nia was holding. “Okay, one! I choose one!”

“One, hmm?” Nia arched an eyebrow at him.

“...Yeah.”

“You’re sure? You’re definitely not gonna regret this?”

“P-probably...”

“You’re really sure you don’t want to go with the Midnight Final Form?”

“Geez, if you wanna wear that one, you could just not do the whole choice thing!” he shrieked, unable to stand it anymore.

“Kidding.” Nia waved a dismissive hand. “It was a joke. We’re doing fan service right now. Which means your wish comes first, boy.”

“It’s not exactly a wish...,” he protested half-heartedly.

“So is that it, then?” She smirked. “Ever since you were teased by a beautiful nurse when you were in the hospital way back when, a white uniform somehow stirs up all these primal passions in you?”

“Could you maybe not go making up stories about me?!” Shido cried, and Nia laughed again.

“Okay, hang on a sec, then. I’ll go change.” With the nurse’s uniform in hand, she stepped into the changing room before them.

Right after she pulled the curtain shut, he heard the soft rustling of clothing being removed. He felt kind of weird about this and turned away, his cheeks coloring.

Before long, Nia’s voice emerged from beyond the curtain.

“Ah, boy! Hey, boy! If you’re gonna peep, now might be the best time for it. I just realized this looking in the mirror, but like, half-on nylons are, damn, wild hot.”

“No, seriously, what are you talking about?!” Shido cried reflexively.

“Huh? It’s just, like, you know. This is, like, incredible? Unexpected synergy, right here.” She had no sooner said this than she was pulling the changing room curtain open.

“Wha...?!” Shido froze in place.

Nia was still in the middle of changing. While she was wearing the nurse’s cap,

she had only slipped her arms through the sleeves of the uniform. The buttons were still undone, and her underpants were on display. On top of that, the nylons were only pulled halfway up her legs, so she looked, as she herself had said, seriously hot.

“Right?” She waggled her eyebrows at him. “Sexy, huh? Aah, learn something new every day.”

“Whatever. Just put some clothes on?!” Shido shrieked, and hurriedly closed the curtain once more.

“Woh-kay, so we’ve accomplished our first goal. How ’bout we go round the bookstores?” Nia said, full of cheer as they left the cosplay shop a half an hour or so later.

“...Y-yeah. Sure,” Shido responded, sweat trickling down his cheek. It was weird. Even though their date had only just started, he was exhausted.

But Nia paid his flagging spirits no mind as she put a finger to her chin and let her thoughts race. “So where should we start? ...Oh! I’ll ask just in case, but what’s your jam, boy? Mate? Game? Tora?”

“Uhhh...?” His pupils shrank into points at the sudden question.

“Not ‘uh,’ okay?” She rolled her eyes. “Animate or Gamers or Toranoana, man. Oh, are you maybe more into Melonbooks or Comic Zin or Shosen Book Tower or what?”

“...Ummm, how are all those different?”

“Mm, they’re surprisingly different, y’know? Well, sure, I mean, the books they have are more or less the same, but like, depending on the store, the extras are different, and the books they’re pushing are different, too. You get hand-drawn POPs or special displays that really show off the personality of the staff, so it’s fun to check those out.” Nia suddenly had a lot to say. “And if you want a backlist title, you’re better off with a bigger shop. Oh! Tora and Melon, they sell doujinshi and all that, but different branches carry stuff from different circles, so you gotta go to that particular branch to see whichever circle, which is cool, too.”



“O-oh really...,” Shido responded, sweat beading on his forehead.

“Well, if you’re not too fussy about that stuff, how about we do a round of a few of them?” she asked. “Cool?”

“Oh, sure,” he replied, and set out with her.

The first place she stopped was a shop a short distance from the station. New volumes of books featuring all kinds of different characters were piled up on display at the front of the store, and the walls were packed with manga and video game magazines, magazines with voice actors on the covers, and many more.

“*Fwoo... Waaaaah!*” Nia shouted as they stepped inside, her eyes shining. The shoppers looked toward them in surprise. But Nia paid no mind to the stares she was attracting and picked up a volume from the end of the manga on display.

“Whoa! Whoa... For real? Kasamura’s art style has changed!! And like, this is already up to volume twenty-five?! Time goes by so faaaaast!” She excitedly began to build a stack of manga, and then her eyes flew open with the thrill of sudden discovery. “Th-this is...a new book from Kurauchi?!”

“Oh, that?” Shido peered at the cover over her shoulder. “It’s being serialized now. You like Kurauchi’s work?”

“Nah, man, ‘like’ doesn’t even begin to cover it!” she cried. “For real, Kurauchi’s *Chronicle* changed my life, okay?! I mean, it’s the reason I decided to become a manga artist! Tokiya is my wife! The character’s a guy, but he’s my wife!”

Shido smiled faintly. *Chronicle* was a famous manga that had also been turned into an anime, so even a layperson like him knew of it. But he definitely wasn’t as passionate about it as Nia was.

She added this book to the pile and started toward the register in extremely high spirits. Her posture was stiff like she was carefully delivering a bowl of noodles.

“H-hey, whoa.” He raced over to her and took half of the mountain of books

in her hands.

“Hup-pup-up, thanks, boy.” She grinned at him.

“You’re buying all of these?” He stared at the enormous piles of books.

“Of course! I’ve been on hold for five years because of DEM. Work’s more or less settled for now, so I’m gonna have some fun today. Ah, but no point in getting only the latest volumes, obvi. So I gotta get all of the ones that came before, yeah?”

“Y-yeah,” he agreed hesitantly.

Nia paid for her purchases and tucked her new books away in the suitcase Shido was rolling.

“Mmkay, up we go,” she said finally. “To the top.”

They got onto the escalator and went up to the second floor. There were even more books there than on the first floor. Along with the displays of new books and special selections, there were bookshelves packed with all kinds of different manga.

“The first floor is basically all new stuff, mmkay? This is the main force up here... Ooh-hooo! This is out, too?! I gotta get it!”

“Wh-what are you— Wait.” Shido peered at the book in Nia’s hand and frowned. But that was also a natural reaction. She was holding a novel, which was all fine and good. But the cover was an illustration of two ridiculously beautiful boys half-naked and intertwined. Plus, it had a narrow paper wrapper with tantalizing blurbs full of expressions he had never heard before. What was *My Caledfwlch*? “Ah. Ohhh...” Shido didn’t know all that much about it, but he did at least know that this genre existed. Unsure of how to react exactly, he was at a loss for words.

Nia grinned broadly and then she sighed.

“Haah. Someone without the otome circuit in their brain couldn’t understand.”

“...I think you’ve got some words mixed up?”

“It’s a true gift. Pros in this world can look at any object and tell what camp

it's in," Nia said, and then put the book back on the shelf for a second to make a peace sign with both hands and peer at Shido through the gaps between her fingers. Almost as though she were analyzing him. A few seconds later, her eyes flew open wide, and she said, "Submissive, total *uke*."

"Hey, hold up! What did you just classify me as?!" he shouted. He didn't understand entirely, but he got the feeling he had been put into a not-very-favorable camp.

"Ah-ha-ha! You're fine, no worries. I'm not a pro when it comes to this stuff, so I'm not that accurate. Someone who'd really honed their skills would definitely tap into your hidden potential."

He had no idea what was fine, but her confidence carved away his desire to protest, and he simply sighed.

"But," he said. "It's like, you cast your net pretty wide, Nia. You read all kinds of genres, huh? I mean, you bought everything from shojo to hardboiled down there."

"Mm, I'm pretty omnivorous." She nodded her agreement. "Basically there's no genre where I'm like, 'Oh, I'm not touching that.' If I had to say, I guess I maybe prefer stuff where I can tell the artist was passionate about writing it."

"Passionate...huh?"

"Yeah, exactly. Like, this here's amazing. Fantasy world, it starts pretty standard with the prince and the knight. But it's actually this hard-core, cuckolding stuff. It's practically dripping with the author's passion. You can almost hear her screaming, 'I wanted to write this, you got a problem with that?!' Aah, the scene in volume three where Orpheus ends up a prisoner of his enemy is, oof, hot as hell. Never dreamed he'd use *that* like *that*..." She picked up the book from the shelf again and began to wax passionately about it.

Not especially knowledgeable about this topic, Shido could only reply, "O-oh, uh-huh."

"Aah, sorry. My bad." Nia stuck out her tongue playfully. "It's maybe too soon for this for you, boy. Hold up a sec. Once I pay for the stuff on this floor, I'll take you to a spot where you can have some fun, too."

“‘Have some fun’...?” He craned his neck to one side, and she grinned broadly at him before heading to the cashier with a mountain of books about as tall as the last one.

Then they left the store and walked down the road until she stopped in front of what appeared to be a computer shop.

“See? Here we are.”

“Here...” He frowned, hesitantly. “I’m not actually super into computers or anything, though.”

“Ohhh, no, no. *Here*,” she said, and she marched forward, leading him into the store. She stopped in front of one area in particular and looked back at him. “Mmkay, pick whatever you want, boy. I’ll treat you to one today, just special.”

She indicated the items on display there. And the packages with illustrations of beautiful girls in extremely suggestive poses.

He stared at them.

“Wh-what is this?”

“Mm. Eroge.”

“I’m only in grade eleven, though?!”

“What?! There are high school guys who *aren’t* playing eroge?!”

“What world do you live in?!” Shido shouted.

“Different culture!” Nia made a face like she was utterly and thoroughly shocked. “Right... I guess the times have changed.” She crossed her arms and nodded to herself thoughtfully. But soon she adjusted her expression. “But like, you don’t, you know? Huuuh?” Nia said, with an insinuating smirk as she jabbed him in the side with an elbow. “You’re a teenage boy. You’re telling me a part of you isn’t carried away by emotion and *feelings* in the face of all these treasures?”

“Hey!” He frowned. “Qu-quit it. Enough.”

“Eh-heh-heh! Whaaat? It’s nothing embarrassing, man. Lust is right up there with the need to eat and sleep, the big three desires, yeah?”

“Maybe that’s true, but—!”

“Human beings will die unless they eat and sleep, though. But no one ever died from not having sex. Lust’s weird,” she mused. “I mean, yeah, you need it to make all those descendants and stuff. But like, does that really make it one of the big three? It’s kinda like if one of the four great heavenly kings was actually a total boob, you know?”

“Wait. *You’re* the one who just said it was one of the three great desires.”

“If lust were an essential element of life, there wouldn’t be any virgins in this world.”

“Seriously. What are you even talking about?!” Shido shrieked, and Nia laughed merrily.

“Ah, sorry. Forget it. Guess I went off on a tangent there,” she said, seemingly nonplussed, and then put a hand to her chin and composed her expression. “So then what type would you be into, boy? Heart-wrenching? Dramatic? Or maybe the sexual stuff?”

“No, but—” As he scratched his head and started to reply, a voice echoed through his earpiece.

“Hang on there, Shido. We got choices.”

“Now?!” he cried out, heedless of the fact that Nia could hear him.

A few hours later, they stopped at a hamburger shop nearby for a late lunch.

“Haah!” Nia sighed. “I’m super satisfied. Really had my fill there!”

“Uh-huh,” he replied. “I’ve never actually explored Akihabara so thoroughly before, but it was surprisingly fun.”

Nia’s backpack was stuffed to bursting, and the suitcase Shido rolled was full, weighing several times what it had when Nia had arrived that day. Because they hadn’t been able to fit in all the bulky items like plastic figures, they’d deployed the folding cart and secured items with the rubber belt. They looked less like shoppers and more like industry insiders.

This was only to be expected, however. They’d gone to a number of specialist shops and bookstores to buy all of the manga, light novels, and reference books

that had been released while Nia was imprisoned. And then they'd bought stacks of anime Blu-rays, hunted for figures, and while they were at it, stopped by hobby shops and checked out the latest tabletop games.

Of course, Shido hadn't allowed himself to be simply dragged around by Nia. With the support of Ratatoskr, he'd taken a variety of actions to raise his likability with Nia and had drawn out the best reactions for each of them.

"Right?" she said. "You really gotta pick up your treasures and hold 'em in your hands before you buy 'em, huh? Online shopping's handy, but it can't compare to this."

"Yeah. I kinda get what you're saying." Shido nodded his agreement. Although in his case, it wasn't a bookstore that came to mind, but online grocery shopping. While it was extremely convenient to order online and have everything delivered to your front door, the time spent wandering the store and thinking about the meal to be made was one of the pleasures of cooking.

"Eh-heh-heh! You get it, boy," Nia said, and smiled winningly. "Convenience is great, but it can't beat handling the real thing."

What he had learned from spending this day with her was that Nia smiled a lot. Although she did toss him some conversational bombs he wasn't entirely sure how to react to, she was open and without malice, easygoing. He realized this when he saw her smiling face.

At the same time, he felt a renewed sense of mission, a sense of duty that had faded somewhat in the day's excitement.

Yes. Shido had to protect this girl. And to do that, he had to increase his likability and kiss her.

Almost as if she had read his mind, Kotori spoke in his ear, her tone joking. *"Looking good, huh? Like, it's been a while since a date went this well, hasn't it?"*

But when he thought about it, he really hadn't had any dates go as well as this, excluding dates that came *after* he'd done the sealing. His likability hadn't plummeted because of a mistaken selection, and she hadn't attacked him; they'd simply enjoyed shopping and conversation. In fact, although it had only

been for a fleeting moment, Shido had actually forgotten his mission.

However.

"...?! C-Commander! This—"

This mood was shattered by the baffled voice of a crew member.

"What on earth is it, Minowa?!"

"Please look at these numbers! It's the movement in Nia's likability... There's almost no change from the initial value this whole day! It's barely at the level of friends. Even if they did kiss, he likely wouldn't be able to completely seal her Spirit power!"

"Wh-what did you say?!"

"Huh?" Shido reflexively frowned. He hadn't been expecting that.

Nia appeared to notice the change in him, and her own expression shifted.

"Are Kotori and them maybe fighting about something?"

"Huh? Oh, uh," he stammered. She had managed to hit it on the nose.

"Mm." She got a look on her face like she had guessed at everything and scratched her head. "It's prob'ly that, yeah? Likability. The one where you have to get it above a certain point or you can't do the sealing thing."

"...!" For a split second, Shido wondered how she could know that. But he quickly remembered that there was no point in trying to hide anything from her.

"Aah," she sighed. "So like, I'm going through tough times here. I got these people after me, and if you could seal my powers away, I'd be okay with that. But...looks like that's not gonna happen, huh? Sorry for making you come out for no reason."

"D-did I do something wrong?" he asked.

"Aah..." She paused, scratching her cheek like she was reluctant to tell him before continuing hesitantly. "Um, it's not like that, man. It's totally me, or like..."

"Huh?" he said, baffled.

Nia gave him a wry smile.

“The truth is...I’ve only ever loved in 2D.”

“...Uh?” Shido was stunned.

Chapter 3

Excellent, then 2D it is.

“...You’re kidding. Is that even a thing?” Kotori murmured, tone tinged with despair, as she sat in her chair in the Ratatoskr underground command center.

But her despair only made sense. The Spirit they were currently targeting had told them she had only ever loved two-dimensional characters.

“Two dimensions,” she groaned. “So basically manga and anime characters?”

“I-it would seem so,” President Mikimoto said from where he sat in the lower level of the command room, sweat beading on his broad forehead.

“Wh-what exactly am I supposed to do?” Shido’s voice came over the speakers set up in the room.

The large monitor in the command center showed Shido in a stall in a washroom, as well as a panel with Nia in the hamburger shop. In order to speak with the command center, he’d stepped away from Nia.

Although if she felt like it, Nia could learn the details of this conversation in two seconds flat. But she hadn’t taken out Rasiel yet.

That didn’t mean that the situation had taken a favorable turn. Kotori groaned again, her hand on her chin. “I don’t know what to tell you. I mean... Miku’s hatred of men was one thing. I definitely did not expect this.”

“It’s quite common among young people these days.” Nakatsugawa spoke up in response. “The idea of having romantic feelings for anime or manga characters. In a certain sense, these characters are ideal people, given that they were created to be liked by readers and viewers. Not to mention, they’re all incredibly attractive. If that has developed as her baseline, then she might be hyperaware of the gap between those characters and actual people.”

“You sound like you’re talking from personal experience,” Kotori said, rolling

her eyes. And indeed, Nakatsugawa's nickname was Dimension Breaker—he was a romance master with one hundred 2D wives.

“Commander.” He wagged a chiding finger at her. “I can also go with voice actors, you know.”

“...Oh. Uh-huh.” Kotori sighed and shrugged. Nevertheless, there was some truth to what he said. With a look of contemplation, she continued. “The distance from reality, huh? It's not like any 2D character will do, though, right?”

“Of course not!” Nakatsugawa cried. “My beloved wives are all stunning beauties selected over the course of my more than two decades of otaku life!”

“Yeah, yeah.” She waved a dismissive hand at him. “Putting that aside for now. This means that Nia's into some character, yeah? She did mention something about liking a character?”

“*Chronicle's* Tokiya, yes. A cool type that's quite popular with women.”

“Mm-hmm. I see.” The corners of Kotori's mouth softened. “So basically, Nia could fall in love if it was that character, right?”

“...*Huh?*” On the other side of the screen, a bead of sweat trickled down Shido's cheek like he'd just had a terrible premonition.



“Mm.” Nia set herself down on the hamburger shop chair as she flicked the straw of her empty juice cup back and forth. She'd finished her burger and fries already and was more or less ready to leave, but Shido had just gone to the washroom for the second time. On top of that, it had already been nearly twenty minutes since he'd left his seat, and she was indeed a little fed up with waiting.

“Mm, I don't wanna talk smack about anyone's body, but he's taking a long time. Is he, like, powdering his nose or something?” Nia said to herself, waving the end of her straw, but she soon reconsidered that. “Oh, right. Maybe he's talking strategy with the command center?”

And if that was the case, she'd just have to sit tight. Whatever else, she had lobbed a fatal bomb at Shido and his comrades earlier.

“...So I guess I did do him wrong, then.”

She'd known from the start that she couldn't fall in love with a real, live human being and felt more than a little guilty about leading him on while being aware of this truth the whole time.

She hadn't been lying to him, though. She didn't particularly care if she lost her Spirit powers. If possible, she actually would like them to be locked away. Which was exactly why she'd made contact with this boy Shido who made Spirits weak in the knees and sealed their Spirit powers with a kiss. She'd had the faint hope that he could maybe melt even her heart.

But the result was exactly as expected.

It wasn't that she hated him or anything. In fact, she was grateful to him for destroying the DEM transport and helping her escape, and she'd had a wonderful time on their date that day. But it was no use. Even with someone like him, she was unable to take a single step forward.

“No matter how great the person is, when I think about them as 3D...I just can't.” She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. This was an unresolvable issue for her.

Abruptly, a presence appeared behind her. It seemed that Shido had finally returned from the washroom.

“Oh hey, you're back, boy. So how about we get go—” Nia looked back, and for a moment, her body froze. “Huh?”

Contrary to her expectations, standing there was a man outfitted like a wandering traveler, wearing a tattered cloak, bandages on his forehead and arms, and a sword hanging at his hip. He had long hair and a filthy face. There was no mistake. This was...

“T-Tokiya...?” she said, dazed.

Yes. It was Nia's first love, Tokiya from *Chronicle*.

“.....”

Standing before Nia, Shido willed himself to stay cool and perfectly composed to keep her from guessing how nervous he was. But his heart was pounding so

hard it threatened to burst out of his chest.

And why wouldn't it? His outfit wasn't the sort of thing seen outside of an anime event. Even in Akihabara, there were few who would go to these lengths—the people in the restaurant shot Shido deeply curious looks.

He was going to have to say something eventually, though. He took a deep breath and looked down at Nia, who was still staring up at him in amazement.

"I intrude upon you, woman." He lowered his voice and spoke a line that seemed like it could have come from *Chronicle's* Tokiya, who he did remember, albeit vaguely. He then moved to the chair next to Nia and sat down.

She gasped as if released from her paralysis and adjusted her glasses as she peered into Shido's face. "T-Tokiya...? How...?" And then her eyes flew open in realization. "Boy?!"

"You dare to call me 'boy'? You have no right," Shido said, looking at Nia coldly.

"...!" She gasped, and he thought her cheeks reddened a bit.

In the next instant, a surprised voice came over the earpiece in his ear.

"Th-this...!"

"What's wrong?"

"Sir! Nia's excitement index is reacting slightly!"

"Likability is also increasing, albeit a small amount!"

"..." So his act *was* getting results. He kept his relief from showing on his face.

"Ohhh... Huh..." Nia let her gaze roam very deliberately from the top of Shido's head down to the tips of his toes before posing like an art critic examining a painting and making appreciative sounds to herself. "Amazing. This is really well done. Material's not that cheap stuff. I've seen all kinds of Tokiya cosplay before, but I've hardly ever seen this level of quality."

And then she picked up the hem of the cloak, and her cheeks flushed with excitement... Although to be honest, it was hard to tell whether she was feeling warmly toward Shido or impressed with the construction of his costume.

That said, it did seem that his likability was going up, and his only choice now was to keep pushing the attack. He whirled around and brushed her hand away from his cloak. “You displease me, woman,” he said curtly.

“Uh-huh...” Her face turned bright red as she reared back.

“Further increase in likability!”

“We might just do this!”

The voices of the crew echoed in his earpiece.

His sole focus was acting as much like Tokiya as possible, and it did seem that this was resonating with Nia. Restless and unsettled, she began to move her hands as though to try and fix her messy hair.

Instantly, the sound of a fanfare came over Shido’s earpiece.

“Shido, now! Likability’s reached the range of sealing! Don’t let this chance get away!”

“...!” Shido’s entire body stiffened up at the sound of Kotori’s voice. *Don’t let this chance get away*—in other words, this was the moment for him to kiss her. They were in public, but if he missed this opportunity, who knew when his next chance would come along?



Resolving himself, he tried not to let the pounding of his heart show on his face as he slowly shifted positions so that he was face-to-face with Nia.

“Huh...?” She looked at him curiously. “What’s wrong?”

“Quiet,” he said flatly, and Nia obediently closed her mouth. With one hand, he grabbed her shoulder, while with the other, he tugged her chin up. And then he slowly brought his lips toward hers.

His methods were not entirely legitimate, but he should still be able to seal her Spirit powers.

However.

“...Excuse me?” Nia said, just as their lips were on the verge of touching, her voice unthinkably icy for how passionate she’d been up to that moment.

Over his earpiece, he now heard an alarm blaring to indicate a dangerous situation.

“Shido, likability is plummeting!”

“...Huh?” he said automatically, as Nia shoved him back.

“Listen, man.” She sighed as if exhausted and flicked her hair back. “What d’you think you’re doing?”

“Huh?” He gaped at her. “What do you...?”

“Tokiya would never lay a hand on a woman! Think about it! He’s on a wandering journey to avenge the murder of his little sister and lover Hibari! During his lonely travels, he meets Ryougo and Kotetsu and them, fights, and comes to know true friendship!” Nia shouted, like she was an entirely different person.

Shido was unconsciously overwhelmed and slid back in his chair.

“The basic ship is Toki and Ryou!” she continued her rant. “Personally, Toki and Ko works, too! The only ship with a woman is Hibari in a dream or reminiscence of the past! There’s no place for me to step into that beautiful world! I just want to watch! An independent observer! I’d rather be the wall, even!”

“Wh-whoa, calm down, Nia,” he said placatingly, and she fixed him with a sharp glare.

“Tokiya would never say that!” she snapped.

“Ngah...!”

“If you wanna make me weak in the knees, come at me when you’re actually 2D!” She kicked him and chased him out of the hamburger shop.



“...So that didn’t work,” Shido said with a heavy sigh after he’d returned from Akihabara to Tengu, compresses slapped onto his face and various body parts.

After the whole Tokiya thing, Nia had stormed out of the shop in a fit and gone home by herself, perhaps truly unable to forgive the desecration of her beloved character. Carrying all of her bags stuffed with books and merch, naturally.

Shido was currently in the command room in Ratatoskr’s underground facility. A giant monitor was in front of him, and Kotori and the *Fraxinus* crew were all in their seats.

“Oh dear,” Kotori sighed. “She really got you good.”

“And whose fault is that? Hmm?” Shido said, glaring at her.

“What else was I supposed to do?” She shrugged, exasperated. “Once she announced she’s only into 2D, our options were limited. And this might have ended up in failure, but your likability did actually go up there. That’s crucial data.”

“But I mean, that was actually likability for Tokiya, right?” he protested. “That same trick’s not gonna work again, and there’s not even any point in it anyway.”

“...No.” Reine, who was seated in the lower level of the control room, replied to Shido. “...We can’t say that with certainty. Basically, this result shows us that it is possible to attain a certain level of likability if it’s a character she liked once, even in its three-dimensional manifestation.”

“R-right... But isn’t it going to turn out the same way in the end? No matter how careful I am, I doubt I could act out the character well enough that Nia

would be totally convinced. And even if I did manage to seal her like that, I'm scared of what'd come after that..." Shido's expression was stern. Yes. That was where his concern lay.

Shido was not Tokiya. No matter how hard he tried, he would deviate from the ideal in Nia's head somehow, and when that happened, even if he did succeed in locking her powers away, her mental state would become unstable, and her powers would flow back into her.

But Reine nodded as if to say that Shido's concerns were quite reasonable. "... At any rate, there is a card we can play."

"A card...?" he asked.

"Yes," Kotori agreed, and indicated the monitor ahead of them. The figure of Nia was displayed there, captured through autonomous cameras. "What you say is true, Shido. At some point when playing a character, you're going to come up against a wall. But don't you think it'd be a different story if it was a character you could capture perfectly and even effortlessly maintain?"

"Huh...?" He scratched his head. "Well, I guess, sure, maybe. No such character exists, though."

"Well, you just watch," she said smugly. "Should be arriving soon."

"Arriving?" Shido parroted, and Kotori grinned.

"...Aah." Nia was lying down in her condo, buried in books. She slammed shut the manga she had just finished reading and hugged it to her chest.

She'd finally gotten to go and buy a mountain of new manga, so she should've felt cheerful at the very least, but she couldn't quite get worked up about any of it somehow. The new volumes she'd been so excited about felt weirdly...empty.

She did perhaps have an idea about why this might have been.

"Hmm." She added the manga in her hands to the pile of books next to her bed and hugged her pillow to her chest instead. "Maybe I shouldn't have just left him there," she murmured, and rolled around on the bed.

Because he'd been dressed as her beloved Tokiya and done things Tokiya would never have done, she'd exploded in rage. But when she thought about it

now with a level head, she realized she'd been pretty awful in many ways. As the older person, she should have been a little more magnanimous. After all, it wasn't like he'd done it for fun or to tease her or anything.

"I should've just let him have that kiss." She sighed and touched her index finger to her lips. "But there's that whole thing about how if my heart's not open, he can't seal my Spirit powers, so maybe it would've been pointless anyway."

She squeezed the pillow in her arms tighter.

She hadn't gone so far as to look into the methods Ratatoskr used to calculate likability, but she was pretty sure that her own numbers hadn't reached the range where sealing was possible.

Yes. She couldn't be vulnerable and open herself up to a three-dimensional human being.

"Aah, ugh. Whaaat am I supposed to dooo? Tell me, Rasie-mon!" she said, in a dramatic and careless monologue as she kicked and flailed. But of course, no one answered her.

Rasiel was an omnipotent Angel. But it neither guided Nia nor criticized her.

"..."

Looking up at the ceiling and the dust rising toward it, she slowly raised her left hand. If she gave the order in her mind, Rasiel would appear out of thin air before her. And if she opened it up, she could get all the information she desired. For instance—yes. What Shido was doing now.

"...!" She gasped and jerked her hand back.

The reason was simple. *Bing bong*. Her intercom was ringing.

"...Who could that be?" She sat up and walked over to the intercom screen. And then she pressed the TALK button and spoke. "Yeah, yeah. Who's there?"

"Tagawa Delivery. I have a package addressed to a Nia Honjou."

"Package?" Nia cocked her head and searched her memory. But she had no recollection of any package she was expecting. "Wonder what it is. Well, whatevs. Come on up."

“Thank you.”

She pressed a button on the intercom to unlock the lobby door.

Before long, the chime at her front door rang.

“Coming... Hey?” She opened the door to find the delivery person wearing a hat pulled down over their eyes standing there holding a small package.

“Could you please stamp or sign here?” they asked.

“I’ll sign. There we...go.” She finished with a flourish.

“Thank you. Have a good day.” The delivery person bowed and left.

She closed the door before ripping the package open. Inside was a game package with a beautiful boy depicted on the front and a piece of paper with a message written on it.

“Hm? What, what? ‘With great appreciation, we are sending you the special edition of our latest computer game’?” Nia scratched her head. Now that she was thinking about it, she felt like she’d answered questionnaires for this game company a bunch of times. Maybe this was connected to that somehow.

“...Well, why not,” she said to herself. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth and all that. I was feeling pretty down in the dumps, so maybe I’ll take this baby for a test drive.”

She walked down the hallway, opened the door to her office, turned on her computer, and inserted the disc. Soon enough, the installation started, and the game screen was displayed.

“Fall in Love: My Little Shidou Girl’s View? Huh. So I guess it’s like a school-based otome game or something?” She moved her mouse to click the NEW GAME button. A screen to input the protagonist’s name popped up.

“Hmm, no default name? Okay, I guess I’ll just go with Nia.” She entered her own name, and the game started.

The protagonist was apparently a transfer student, in grade eleven. She supposed that now she would meet the characters and go on to fall in love.

While her home ground was manga, she was an omnivore and loved video

games. This kind of romance-simulation game targeted at women was a blessing given that she couldn't love a three-dimensional human being. All she had to do was click, and a hot guy would be head over heels in love with her. At the end of the day, she was still just a girl. It wasn't that she didn't want to fall in love. In fact, she wished desperately that her heart would go pitter-patter.

"Hmm, hmm. Has a real orthodox feel to the structure. What counts now is the characters." She clicked and clicked and moved the story forward.

Classmates started talking to the protagonist, Nia. There was a boy with a kind, generous sort of vibe and neutral facial features. His name was...Shidou Itsuki.

"Hmm?" Nia cocked her head. She felt like this character sort of somehow resembled the boy she'd been hanging out with earlier. "Prob'ly all in my head."

She clicked to progress. Itsuki smiled as he started talking to her.

"Ha-ha! You're pretty funny, huh, Nia?"

"Whoa?!" Her eyes flew open in surprise when she heard his voice.

And that made sense. Because this character had called her by her name in the most natural fashion.

The protagonist's name was of course the one she'd only just typed in. Most times, when the protagonist's name was spoken in a game like this, it was a combination of recordings of individual character pronunciations. But there was no hint whatsoever of that synthesized, strangely off pronunciation.

"Huh! Wow! They sure made some advancements in tech while I was out." This alone made her interest in the game shoot up. Entranced, she continued the conversation with Itsuki.

Which went swimmingly, and they ended up deciding to go on a date on the weekend.

"Where do you want to go?" Itsuki asked.

However.

"...Whu—?!"

Normally, this is where a set of options would pop up, but...this game was different. A window was displayed on the screen, with the text PLEASE ENTER YOUR DESIRED DATE PLAN.

“Dang. It wants me to type on the keyboard?! There’s no way this can work...” Half in disbelief, Nia nevertheless timidly tapped at the keyboard. ““I want to go dig for doujinshi in Akiba’...”

And then as if to say “I’d like to see you try and come up with a response to that,” she smashed a finger down on the RETURN key.

Itsuki gave her a gentle smile. *“Doujinshi in Akiba? Ha-ha! That’s so like you, Nia. Sure, sounds great. Oh! But we’re still in high school, so no R-rated books, okay?”*

“Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!” Nia unconsciously leaped up from her chair.

She couldn’t believe it could handle such a specific request. Exactly what kind of technological revolution had happened during the five years she’d been locked up?!

“The power of science is amaaaaazing!” she shouted, and continued clicking to move the story forward.

“Huh. Who knew? So you like this kind of book, then, Nia? ...Oh? Nah, I don’t care. I mean, it’s kinda great to be able to lose yourself in something, y’know?”

Shido was wearing a headset and speaking these words as he stared at a screen in Ratatoskr’s underground command center. Displayed on the monitor was a game’s play screen. He was responding in real time to the text that was occasionally inputted onto it.

“...Hey, you sure this is going to work?” He waited for a moment when his lines ended, switched his mic off, and turned his eyes toward Kotori sitting behind him.

“Yes. Likability’s shifting very nicely. After we get Nia skilled enough at the game, you’ll be good to show up in front of her as Itsuki. This time, there’ll be no need for acting. Whatever else, this character is you yourself, after all, Shido,” Kotori said, and she grinned.

This was Ratatoskr's second strategy.

They would get Nia to like Shido by having her play a Ratatoskr-made game in which he acted as the main character... It was a bit of a complicated plan.

"Why do you even have a game like this anyway?" he asked. "Doesn't seem like the kind of thing you could whip up in a couple hours."

Reine looked back at him with sleepy eyes. "...Well, we had it just in case. Never hurts to be prepared."

"I am *very* curious about what you planned on using it for, though." He gave her a pained smile and scratched his cheek.

"Eyes forward, Shido." Kotori's voice came flying at him from behind. "No skipping out on your duties. You got more lines coming in."

"R-right." He turned to the monitor, switched his mic back on, and returned to the role of Itsuki.

The window on the left half of the monitor showed Nia playing the game and the transitions in her mental state.

Right. Just like Kotori said, everything's going smoothly.

But Shido frowned as he spoke his lines. He got the feeling that they had forgotten something critical.

"Aaah," Nia muttered to herself on-screen, grinning with utter delight. *"Totally wild, the games these days. And this is just the beta version. I'm gonna hafta get the real deal when it comes out."*

And then.

"Umm? When is the retail version coming out? And like, what other stuff does this company make?" She raised her left hand as she spoke and pulled a book out of thin air.

"...! Ah—" It was too late to even cry out in bewilderment.

When Nia touched the pages of Rasiel, her expression clouded over before his eyes.

"...So you're up to your tricks again!" She exhaled indignantly, stood up from

her chair, turned precisely toward the autonomous camera, and turned her rage-filled glare toward the command center. *“Listen. I get what you guys’ objective here is, yeah? But this is a bit much, don’t you think? It wasn’t enough to desecrate Tokiya, now you gotta go and toy with my pure heart?”*

“N-Nia, you’ve got it all wrong. This is—”

“Shut it, Itsuki!” Nia snapped at him. It seemed that she was already fairly into this game.

“...O-okay...”

“You pull something like this again, and you will not like what happens. And I also have the right to a little something called privacy, so could you not fly your little cameras into my house? End of rant. You break these rules, and you can assume there won’t be a next time,” Nia said, and spun away.



“...Thanks for coming, gang. I think you’ve already heard what’s going on. And well, we’re in a bit of a bind,” Kotori said that evening, a troubled look on her face as she propped her elbows up on the large, round table.

She was upset. The newly appeared Spirit had unprecedented particular tastes, and they’d seen two of their strategies in a row fail.

“Two-dimensional? You mean, she’s only ever fallen for characters from manga and stuff?” asked a girl seated at the same round table as Kotori. She had hair long enough to graze her shoulders and a doll-like face. One of the Spirits Shido had sealed, Origami Tobiichi.

It wasn’t only her. At the moment, Tohka, Yoshino, Natsumi, and the Yamai sisters—all Spirits whose powers had been locked away by Shido—were in Ratatoskr’s underground facility along with Shido and the Ratatoskr crew.

Kotori preferred not to involve the girls in an attack on a new Spirit, but with the arrival of this unprecedented Spirit on the scene, she had called the others in as advisers.

All the Spirits there, including Kotori herself, had their powers locked away by Shido. The theory was that they might be able to come up with a way to break through to Nia based on their personal experience.

“Most likely...yes.” Kotori confirmed Origami’s words, scowling, and the tall girl seated to her right nodded as if it made sense to her.

“Ohhh, I understaaaand. I know an idol like that.” She spoke in a beautiful voice as she twirled her long, purple hair around her index finger.

She, too, was a Spirit. She was also an idol boasting nationwide popularity, Miku Izayoi. Even though she’d barely finished at work, she’d come running in response to Kotori’s request.

“Publicly, she says her first love was Lord Siiiiieg. Oh! Lord Sieg is an anime character. Basically, it was part of creating her persona. Fans feel closer to you when you have overlapping interests, and you create a target of affection that won’t make them jealous. This particular girl has a boyfriend, though.” Miku laughed.

“...It would be great if Nia was like your idol... But looking at the numbers, it’s hard to believe she’s lying about this,” Kotori said, a bitter look on her face.

Miku’s eyes widened.

“Goodness!”

Beside her, Kaguya let out a pensive groan. “Hmm, to think that Souji Honjou is a woman. My eyes are usually not so easily deceived.”

“Oh, Kaguya, you know her manga, too?” Shido asked, and Kaguya nodded firmly.

“Naturally. The entertainment of the masses also amuses a child of the hurricane.”

“Incrimination,” Yuzuru said, with a hand cupping her mouth to whisper. “Kaguya mainly likes to read shonen manga, but she slips schmexy manga in between battle and sports manga to buy them.”

“Hey, Yuzuru?!” Kaguya cried out, her face turning bright red. “Could you not go saying that sort of thing?! And like, I mean...! The shojo manga *you* read have way more dodgy scenes!”

“Doubt. When you say ‘dodgy,’ how so? Please explain, giving specific examples.”

“L-like... A man and a woman in bed...”

“Repetition. I cannot hear you very well. Please say that again.”

“Unh. Ngh... Mmph...” Kaguya’s cheeks grew even redder, and a look of mortification crossed her face.

Watching their exchange, Kotori clapped her hands to draw everyone’s attention.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s great you two are so close, but do your little song and dance later. Right now we need to come up with a plan of attack for Nia.”

Everyone seated at the round table fell silent in thought.

After a while, Yoshino very shyly raised her hand. “Um... May I?”

“Yes, of course,” Kotori said, with a wave of her hand.

“So. I think it might be better. To take more time and get close to this person Nia. If Shido faces her sincerely, I think she’ll see. What’s so good about him.”

“Yoshino...,” Shido said, moved, and her cheeks flushed like she was embarrassed.

“True.” Kotori hummed thoughtfully as she placed a hand on her chin. “That would be the most solid way. Even if she says she’s never fallen in love with anything other than a two-dimensional character, it isn’t impossible that she’ll open her heart up to him if he keeps up that honest approach.”

“So then, do we shift to a more long-term strategy?” Shido asked, and Kotori’s expression became troubled.

“Worst case, we’ll have to,” she said slowly. “That’s a last resort, though. The issue is time. We can do the slow attack, so long as we’ve got a guarantee that DEM won’t sniff her location out in the meantime. Otherwise, we can’t really take our sweet time here.”

“S-sorry...” Yoshino shrank into herself apologetically.

“No need to apologize.” Kotori shook her head. “The truth is, I support that approach myself... I think if Nia really looked at Shido, she’d get that he’s just as good as any manga character.” She averted her eyes somewhat as she flicked

the stick of her Chupa Chups back and forth.

Shido scratched his head, his cheeks coloring, as he felt a bit uncomfortable at hearing this about himself.

Tohka, who'd had her head cocked and arms crossed the whole time, turned her gaze in Shido's direction.

"So, Shido? Why has Nia only fallen in love with two-dimensional characters?"

"Huh? Hmm... Well..." Her question was simple. But he had no answer to it.

This was indeed the heart of the issue. *Why* had Nia never fallen in love with anyone other than a two-dimensional character? Flipping the question on its head, why couldn't she love a three-dimensional human being?

Kotori had apparently also been wondering about this. She placed a hand on her chin. "I'm a bit curious myself. I'll have it looked into."

"Huh?" Shido stared at her. "Looked into?"

"One way or another, Nia's been working as a manga artist for the last ten years, right?" his sister said. "So whether she used to be a human being or she's a pure Spirit, I think there should be traces of her left in this world. And maybe that'll be our way in."

"Yeah, makes sense," he agreed, crossing his arms. Kotori was right.

"That said, though," she continued, "we won't necessarily find anything there. So we've got to put together our own guidelines for this one."

In response, Natsumi, who was sitting beside Yoshino, piped up in a soft voice.

"...Then isn't the only option for Shido to get interested in what interests her? That's gotta be the fastest way to do this."

"That's true, but... The cosplay plan and the video game plan both ended in failure, yeah? With a certain someone, we did do the cross-dressing-as-a-girl thing, but..." As she spoke, Kotori glanced in Miku's direction.

Noticing the other girl's eyes on her, Miku blew her a kiss. Kotori let out an exasperated sigh and turned her gaze back on the group.

“...Shido can do a lot, but the barrier to two dimensions is just too high,” she said.

“Could we get some kind of steamroller or something to flatten him?” Natsumi asked.

“H-hey, whoa...” Beads of sweat popped up on Shido’s forehead, and Kotori pointed a finger at Natsumi, like she had a point.

“...Oh. What if we transform Shido into a for-real manga with my Haniel...?” Natsumi suggested.

“Aren’t we getting a little too literal in trying to approach the two-dimension situation?!” Shido said, sweat trickling down his face.

Natsumi puffed her cheeks in a pout.

“...I—I was obviously kidding. Sorry. Geez. That’s what I get for making jokes when I’m totally not the type... Fine. I’ll shut up. I won’t say another thing...” She started to sink down in her chair like she was falling.

“N-no, that’s not what I meant,” Shido hurried to say. “Sorry.”

“Mm...” Natsumi sank down further.

“N-Natsumi...” Yoshino took her hand and pulled her back up in her seat.

“I see.” Origami abruptly lifted her face after considering the situation with a hand on her chin.

“What is it, Origami? You got something?” Kotori asked, and Origami bobbed her head.

“There might be potential in Natsumi’s proposal,” she said, surprising them all. “We get Shido to be a book.”

At this utterance, Shido opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“Huh? H-hang on just a sec. I mean, sure, Nia only falls in love with two dimensions, but we’re talking characters in manga and stuff, not the book of manga itself, yeah? Me turning into a book is just...”

Natsumi stared hard at him from one side.

“...Oh, you’ll listen to *Origami’s* opinion... Of course. Origami’s smart and I’m

not. Only natural that one of us would be more persuasive. That's fine. Doesn't bother me. I mean, it's only natural..." Natsumi began to sink once more, after having finally returned to her original upright position.

"N-no, that's not it..." Seeing this, Shido felt more sweat pop up on his forehead as he tried to explain himself.

Ignoring all this, Origami continued. "I don't mean in that way. Rather than Shido transforming physically into a book, we make a manga that features a character called 'Shido.'"

""""Wha—?!"""" Everyone assembled in the meeting room cried out as one. Except for Tohka, who was a beat late with her "Ha!"

"A manga with Shido as the main character...?" Kotori got a serious look on her face as she pressed a hand to her mouth. "That way, we could indeed say he was a two-dimensional character."

"Wh-whoa, whoa. Stop right there," Shido said with a grimace. "Assuming we could even do that, the me in the manga and the real me wouldn't be completely the same, though, right? Won't it just turn out the same way as today?"

As could be seen from that day's attempt, it was difficult to re-create a character that Nia liked. He felt like he'd have a serious identity crisis if she were to say something like, "Shido would never say that!"

But as if to argue against this opinion of his, the Yamai sisters spoke.

"Hmm. If this is a concern, then we must simply draw only the facts of the matter so that no divergence from reality arises, yes? Fortunately, various incidents suitable for the plot of a manga have occurred around Shido."

"Assent. If the manga depicts Shido as he is, then it will not be a deception to Nia like the game was. How impressive, Master Origami. This is a great idea."

"N-no, but I mean, Nia's got her preferences, right?" he protested. "The key part of this is whether or not Nia would read this book and actually fall for the character."

"I-it. Will be. Fine...!" Yoshino told him, as she gently stroked Natsumi's back.

“Y-Yoshino...?” Shido’s eyes widened at her unusually forceful tone.

She clenched her hand into a fist even as her cheeks flushed bashfully. “Shido, you saved all of us... If we can tell her honestly about. Everything you’ve done up to now. I’m sure Nia would fall for...you. Too...!”

“Uh. Uh-huh,” he stammered, perplexed. Yoshino was normally not prone to strong statements, and he felt awkward somehow at her stating this so clearly.

Taking this as a starting point, the crew and Spirits began to put forward ideas one after another.

“Would it be a documentary about Shido? Indeed, if we did that, it might be worth reading, hmm?”

“But making a manga like that basically means drawing the Spirits. Can we do that?”

“Why not? Nia’s the one reading it. And even if it did leak to the public, there’s not a person alive who would think it was nonfiction.”

“Oooh! Shido’s gonna be in a manga?! So cool! I wanna help, too!”

“Keh-keh-keh... It seems that we Yamais must offer our powers to assist.”

“Consensus. In our thirty-ninth contest, a battle to submit illustrations, we were published in a magazine together with the promotional angle of ‘Rare twin illustrations!’ so it ended in a tie, which means that this is a time for Yuzuru and Kaguya to shine.”

“...You two really will do anything, huh...”

“H-hey...” Shido hesitantly spoke up, but it seemed that his voice did not reach their ears.

Kotori rapped a clenched fist on the round table to bring the group to order. “Then we’ll take a vote. All those in favor of the Shido manga plan?”

“““Aye!!”””

Everyone except for Shido raised their hand.

“““ ... ”””

All eyes turned toward him.

“Unh...” He sighed before weakly raising his right hand, and a cheer rose up from the group.

“Excellent! The proposal is adopted by a unanimous vote! So let’s get right into plotting—” Kotori was abruptly interrupted by a beeping from the consoles built into the round table of the conference room.

“Huh...? What’s that sound, Kotori?” Shido asked as she turned her gaze toward her console with a frown.

“A transmission. And from an outside line...? I’ve never seen this number before,” she said dubiously, as she pressed the TALK button to answer the call.

“Sup. Making plans are you, boy?”

A familiar voice came from the speakers built into the conference room.

“Wha—?!” Shido and the others stared up into the air, stunned. “N-Nia?!”

Yes. The voice he could hear through the speakers was the very topic of discussion herself, the Spirit Nia.

“Impossible! The line for this underground facility is encrypted and can’t so easily be—,” Mikimoto shouted, but stopped midsentence. He had no doubt realized while he was speaking that for Nia and her omnipotent Angel Rasiel, encryption was absolutely no barrier.

“Well, well,” Kotori said. “So you know the whole deal, then... Is that it?”

“More or less. I fundamentally hate spoilers, so I really didn’t want to use Rasiel like this. But I couldn’t stand it if you went and toyed with Tokiya or my girlish heart again, so,” Nia said with a dry laugh. The tone of her voice caused a rivulet of sweat to run down Shido’s face.

The others had also picked up on her tone, apparently. They began to whisper to each other.

“Sh-she’s. Angry. Right...?”

“...Mm-hmm. Seems like she’s pretty upset.”

“She must reaaaally like that Tokiya character.”

Even if they were whispering, Nia likely overheard every word, but she

ignored their chatter and continued.

"...Well, looks like you've changed course, so that's good, at least. But this plan maybe has a big ol' hole in it?"

"A-a hole...?" Shido asked.

"Uh-huh. Have you talked about why I'd pick up this book of yours in the first place? I mean, even if you did manage to make a whole manga, why would I bother reading it at all?"

"Whu..." He opened his eyes wider in surprise. She was exactly right. Nia was a voracious reader of an infinite variety of manga, so they'd sort of been assuming she would simply read whatever they handed to her. Now, however, he was forced to admit that this thinking was rather optimistically based on the generosity of their potential reader.

"I mean, you get it, yeah? I'm super busy with work, and I can only read so many books. Truth is, I won't be able to read even a tenth of the ones I bought today. Plus, toooons of series I'm into came out with books while I was imprisoned. I don't have time for some amateur book put together with such impure motives! Okay, sure. Until earlier, I might have read it anyway, but I'm in angry mode now. I could take on the fighting demon Asura himself. As if I'd read your stupid book after you sullied my Tokiya!"

"B-but—" Yoshino looked about to burst into tears.

"Don't 'but' me. Don't even waste your time on this pointless crap! Nia out!!"

"Stop right there," Kotori commanded, just as Nia was about to end the call. She propped her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands.

"Mm-hmm...? Ohhh, you're Kotori? Guess this is the first time we've talked directly, huh? Nice to meetcha."

"You're so polite. I appreciate that," Kotori replied simply. "I'll get right to the point. From what I can understand, you're saying that if the book was worth reading, you'd make time for it, yes?"

"...Hmm?" Nia's voice took on a curious edge. *"Where are you going with this?"*

“Answer me,” Kotori said. “If the manga we create surpasses your manga in even one way, don’t you think it would be worth reading?”

“Ah-ha-ha!” Nia cackled with laughter. *“Well, yeah, I guess so. Touché. But ‘worth reading’ depends on the person, y’know? You can talk all you want about how this thing is so great, so interesting, but do you really think I’m going to think the same thing?”*

“You are exactly right. In that case, though, we can just use the sole, absolute standard that anyone and everyone would accept.”

“The absolute standard...?”

“Yes,” Kotori responded, with the utmost seriousness. “Sales.”

“Wha...?!”

Nia wasn’t the only one letting out a surprised cry at these words. The various members assembled in the conference room focused their gazes on Kotori.

“Mm-hmm. Interesting. So you’re seriously saying you’re going to sell more books than Souji Honjou?”

“Yes. If we win, then you’ll be quiet and read our book.”

After a few moments of silence, Nia laughed out loud, her voice echoing in the conference room.

“Okay. Go ahead and try.”

There was a click and the call ended. For a brief while, silence reigned.

“H-hey, Kotori. Have you lost your mind?” Shido asked finally. “We’re up against a professional manga artist here, okay?”

“Not like we have a choice,” Kotori said flatly. “She basically declared she wouldn’t read our book, after all.”

“Still, though...”

She held up the palm of her hand to check him. “Relax. It’s not like I don’t have a plan.” She flicked up the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth.



“...Hmm.” Lying back, Nia breathed a short sigh.

The sides of her bed were covered in tall piles of unread manga and light novels, but she just didn't feel like reading any of them at the moment. She wasn't working through an idea for her own manga, either. She was simply spacing out and letting her gaze wander across the ceiling.

She understood quite well the reason for this lethargic state—the information she'd peeked at earlier in Rasiel. And her call with Shido and his little sister Kotori.

They were going to draw a manga with Shido as the main character and get Nia to like Shido by making her read this manga.

"...They don't know what they're up against here," she murmured unhappily.

It was true that she loved manga and anime. And there was no word of a lie in her declaration that she had never loved anyone other than a 2D character. This did not, however, mean she would fall for any old 2D character.

This was a mistake that non-otaku normies tended to make. Local governments, for instance, saw fans visiting the settings of popular anime—the so-called sacred pilgrimages—so they would go all in on creating and promoting a simple moe character with the aim of revitalizing the local area, thinking that otaku would eat it up, but they almost never did. And of course they wouldn't. Otaku liked *interesting* anime; not just any random anime would do. Even a moe character needed some kind of depth.

This current situation was like that. Nia did indeed have several waifu characters (a man was also a waifu), Tokiya first and foremost among them. But she'd come to feel this way about them because they were excellent characters with interesting personalities to start with. Shido and his crew were way off if they thought her heart would go pitter-patter simply because she was confronted with a manga character. And above all else, there was no way her heart would be moved by a manga based on an actual human being.

"..."

Silently, she stroked the air with her left hand. In response, a book appeared out of nowhere.

Rasiel. Her Angel, the greatest and the worst, with knowledge of every

incident that had ever happened in this world.

“ ... ”

She looked at Rasiel’s cover without opening the book up and remembered a moment in the not-too-distant past.

She had appeared on the scene bearing the omnipotent Angel, but because she didn’t have any particular desires or ambitions, she never thought about using this power for evil. She would have been more than happy to have simply lived in peace.

In fact, Nia had managed to blend into human society relatively easily thanks to her sociable personality. Although, well, Rasiel’s power had indeed been very helpful in that process.

But at some point, curiosity had tickled Nia’s heart: How exactly had she come into being?

Thinking about it, this was the root of all her mistakes. If she hadn’t flipped through the pages of Rasiel then, unable to suppress her curiosity, she might have been able to be a more decent, upright Spirit.

But she had discovered the reason why she was the self she was now. And the self she had been before.

In the moment she had learned—no, more like remembered—this, she had reflexively ejected the contents of her stomach. But more than that, this had caused the poison of distrust to seep into her heart.

And the worst part of it all was that in her own hands, she held the Angel that knew all the secrets in this world.

Nia had done her due diligence on the human beings she encountered after she began life in this society. She’d looked into friends, acquaintances, even the clerks at stores she often frequented.

And she had ended up alone.

The more she investigated them, the more she learned about them, and the less she was able to withstand the ugliness of these human beings. No matter how kind their faces were, their true cruel nature always lurked beneath. They

spoke of love, but dark desires swirled deep in their hearts. Nia had run out of patience for these creatures.

That said, it was impossible to live in a society shaped by human beings without interacting with them at all. Which was why Nia had gotten good at wearing a mask.

She had decided not to use Rasiel more than necessary with people she was first meeting, and she'd learned how to act like a normal human being by interacting with them like NPCs in a video game. But in the midst of this, she'd come upon just one kind of person whose existence she could accept—the two-dimensional residents of a world different from the one she was stuck in.

Manga and anime characters did not require extra caution; she needed only to look into their eyes. They would not betray her.

At some point, she had been swallowed up by that world, to the point where she herself had taken a job creating it. Which was why it wasn't quite accurate to say that she had only ever fallen in love with 2D characters. The fact was, Nia couldn't open her heart up to a real, live person.

"So I mean...I can't." She looked up at the ceiling, dust dancing up to it, as she touched Rasiel with her left hand.

All she had to do was open the book with a particular thought in mind, and she would get all of the information she desired. For instance... Yes. The words Shido would spit out at her.

"...!"

She gasped quietly and fought her curiosity. She knew that what lay down that path was most certainly an unwanted end. She'd gone through this painful cycle any number of times. And yet this curiosity never failed to bewitch her heart and shake her resolve.

"...No. Bad Nia," she said to herself, and pulled her hand back. And then, in that instant when Nia sighed in slight self-disgust, she heard an unfamiliar voice in this room where there should have been no one else besides her.

"Oh me, oh my. Aren't you going to use that hard-won Angel?"

“...! Who’s there?!” She hurriedly leaped up from the bed. The mountains of books surrounding it toppled and slid to the floor like an avalanche.

Nia looked around warily and saw a shadow spread out on the wall like a splotch of ink. And then a girl appeared from within it.

Black hair tied up in asymmetrical bundles on either side of her head, contrasting starkly against her pale skin. Her slender body was clad in a dress dyed in the colors of blood and darkness.

Despite being so striking and memorable, these elements nonetheless paled in comparison to her handsome face, with lines so fine and features so delicate they could only be because she was beloved by a god or a demon. Enshrined in the middle of this visage were eyes of different colors. When Nia looked at them closely, she noticed a pattern like that of a clockface in the girl’s left eye with hands that *tick-tick*’ed the time away.

The sight was unreal, like something out of a dream—and a bad one at that. A normal person would have screamed or been stunned into silence if this girl had suddenly popped into being before them.

But Nia chose neither of those options. Lowering her center of gravity, she glared at the girl, never letting her guard down.

“So who are you, then? Pretty rude to waltz in here without so much as a knock on the door.”

“Hee-hee-hee!” The girl placed a hand to her mouth and giggled charmingly. “Please excuse my rudeness. But you needn’t be so very cautious. Regardless of my rude appearance, I come as your ally. For now, at least.”

“...An ally?” Nia narrowed her eyes suspiciously and flipped one hand up to call the massive floating tome to her. For some reason, the girl’s eyes began to shine when she saw this.

Facing the girl cautiously, Nia stroked the cover of Rasiel. The pages began to flip automatically, and hazily glowing text rose up from them. She ran a finger over this and let out a short sigh. “...Mm-hmm. I see. So you’re why there were no guards on that transport ship they shoved me into? *Kurumi Tokisaki*.” She put emphasis on the name as if to threaten the girl.

But contrary to her expectations, the girl—Kurumi—twisted her mouth into a lurid grin.

“How wonderful! So this is the omnipotent Angel, Rasiel.”

Nia stiffened.

“...Huh. So you’ve done your research?”

“Yes. Of course, I don’t have anything near the investigative abilities you yourself have. So it was a violent affair relying on numbers,” Kurumi said, and laughed, amused.

Numbers. Curious about this phrasing, Nia touched Rasiel once again. Instantly, the meaning of Kurumi’s words poured into her head.

“...So that’s it, huh? Avatars? Got another nuisance of a power right here,” she said, and broke into a cold sweat.

In response to her request, Rasiel had provided information on Kurumi’s Angel Zafkiel. So now she knew about the Angel’s abilities, so unilaterally powerful they seemed like cheating.

Keeping her eyes on Kurumi, she screamed inside of her head. *What the hell, an Angel that controls time?! There’s overpowered cheats and then there’s straight up broken cheats...!*

If used for malicious purposes, Rasiel was relatively dangerous, but if it came down to a one-on-one fight with this Spirit, Nia probably wouldn’t stand a chance.

Nevertheless, it would have been a poor move to let Kurumi see her unease. The other girl’s intelligence-gathering abilities were no doubt impressive, given that she could create any number of selves that she wanted, but there was simply no way she could have grasped the entirety of Rasiel’s powers.

In contrast, Nia knew all there was to know about Kurumi’s Angel, and Kurumi knew that. Kurumi was the one facing an unknown Spirit in this situation. The advantage in the intelligence battle was with Nia. In which case, she had to keep her cool.

Making this judgment, she exhaled slowly and tried to relax her tense

muscles.

“So what brings the most evil of Spirits to my doorstep?” she asked, and Kurumi’s mouth relaxed into a smile.

“I merely came to ask a single favor of the utmost simplicity.” She slowly raised her hand and pointed at Rasiel. “There’s something I’d like you to look up in this Angel.”

“...You want me to look something up.” Nia stroked her chin, putting on a show of nonchalance. “Well, if I help you, you’ll owe me one. So I am inclined to hear you out, but only so far. Unlike you, I’m big on peace. I’m not going to let slip any seriously dangerous intel.”

Kurumi giggled.

“You needn’t worry about that. This is ultimately a personal request. I swear no wars will break out, and no one will be devastated due to this information.”

“...Mm-hmm?” Nia looked at her with dubious eyes.

“So I would ask that you please tell me.” Kurumi moved lips like flower petals. “About the original Spirit that appeared in this world thirty years ago. About the cause and reason for this manifestation, the precise coordinates and times for her appearances, her abilities, and...how to kill her.”

“...Huh?” Nia’s brow immediately furrowed.



“Now then, this is the room. Go on in.” Kotori unlocked the door and jerked her chin in that direction to urge Shido and the others inside.

The room was located on the first floor of the apartment building where the Spirits lived next to the Itsukas’ house.

Shido exchanged a glance with the Spirits waiting behind him, then nodded and pulled the door open.

He went into the entryway, slipped off his shoes, and stared in surprise at the sight that awaited him there.

“What the...”

Several work desks were set up in the thirty-square-meter space with a variety of art supplies arranged on top of them. It looked almost like Nia's workspace made bigger. Although unlike Nia's studio, the desks and supplies were brand-new and showed no sign of use.

It had been about an hour since their meeting earlier. And apparently, in that brief time, the Ratatoskr crew had put together this work room. As always, they were an impressive organization.

"Ooh! This is... Wow!!"

"It's like. A professional's."

"Kah-kah! Oh-ho! You have indeed devised a space befitting the might of the Yamais' skill!"

Entering the room after Shido, the Spirits let out cries of admiration upon seeing the interior and equipment.

After taking in their reactions, Shido turned to Kotori.

"So you're really serious. I mean, going so far as to put together this room and everything."

"Oh, I'm serious," she agreed. "Dead serious. And like, to be honest, there actually isn't any other way."

"Well, that might be true..., " he replied, scratching his cheek anxiously.

Kotori crossed her arms as she marched into the center of the room before whirling around to face them all. Then she spoke in a loud voice.

"Listen up, gang. Our target is an event in two days. December thirty-first, the final day of Comic Colosseum. The day Nia's exhibiting."

She spread out her arms and continued, as though performing in a play.

"We will exhibit in the space next to her with the same number of doujinshi, and we will sell out before she does."

""Ooh!"" the Spirits murmured.

This was the idea Kotori had spoken of previously. Having learned from Shido's report that Nia would be taking part in the doujinshi market at the end

of the month, she had narrowed her focus to that and come up with a plan to strike a single blow with their full force.

“We don’t have much time,” she said sternly. “The Ratatoskr crew will assist with backgrounds and finishing touches, but if we leave the whole thing to them, we won’t be able to say that we made the book. We’ll have to do the story and art for the main characters at least. We’ve got a printer on standby, but we must get the complete book to them by three in the morning on the day of the event at the latest, or we won’t have anything in time to sell.”

“But I mean.” Shido frowned. “You really think it’s going to be that easy? We’re up against a professional manga artist, y’know?”

“Well, yeah, I don’t think it’s gonna be smooth sailing,” Kotori agreed. “But if this contest turns into a mainstream publishing thing, that’s exactly when our chances drop to zero. With a doujinshi, there’s a hard limit on the number of copies that can be brought into the event space. If we’re going to go after her, this is our best shot. And with a doujinshi, we can get away with fewer pages.”

“True.” He nodded. “But assuming we do sell out first, how do we know Nia will actually admit defeat?”

“I suppose that all depends on how proud she is and how we talk it up to her. But given that the penalty for losing is reading the book we made, I think there’s plenty of hope for us.”

“...Okay then, the real problem is...,” Shido started, a serious look on his face, and Kotori nodded, returning that same look.

“Right. How we can create a doujinshi that’ll hit Nia in her feels, and how we sell out of it before she sells out of hers.” Kotori stepped forward, the jacket hanging from her shoulders swinging, and walked over to the whiteboard farther back. “All of which is to say, we’ll start by divvying up the work. We’ll write the story together. The main issue is the art. So I’ll go ahead and ask. Has anyone here ever drawn manga or illustrations?”

She looked around at the Spirits, and several hands went up. Kaguya, Yuzuru, and the former human beings Origami and Miku.

“Okay, so that’s it, then.” Kotori nodded. “Everyone will show off their art

skills. Pick a desk and try drawing a picture of Shido.”

“Ooh! We’re drawing Shido. I got this!”

“Heh-heh, excellent. Watch and be astounded by my great skill!”

“Assent. Shido, please stand right there.”

“Daaarlliiing. Eyes on me, please. Eyes on meeee!”

“...”

The Spirits sat at whatever desk was nearby and began to run pencils across Kent paper.

“Oh, right.” Kotori’s eyebrows jumped up as though she had just remembered something. “You draw something, too, Shido.”

“Me?!” he yelped.

“Yes. Way back when, you used to draw all kinds of characters in your notebook, right? I’m pretty sure you—”

“Ah! Aaaaaaaaaaah!” He screamed to cut her off.

The Spirits turned toward him, surprised looks on their faces.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Shido?” Tohka said, eyebrows high on her forehead. “Why’re you yelling suddenly?”

“Th-that. Scared me...,” Yoshino half whispered.

“...Mm, it’s a whole thing. Just let him be.” For some reason, Natsumi placed a knowing hand on Yoshino’s shoulder. The other girl looked at her curiously, but she nodded nevertheless.

“C’mon. Hurry it up!” Kotori urged Shido on, flicking the stick of her Chupa Chups up and down. “I’ll draw something, too.”

“Ngh...!” If he continued to put up a fight, she might start spilling secrets again. He let out a vexed groan, sat down at a desk like Tohka and the others, and began to draw a picture on the paper there.

About half an hour later, all their pictures were finished.

“Okay,” Kotori said. “How about we go around in order and show them off?”

“Yeah! Look at mine!”

“I’m. Done, too.”

Tohka and Yoshino held up their finished pictures for everyone to see. The cute parts were indeed adorable. But both looked like something a grade-schooler might draw.

“I see...” Kotori nodded appraisingly. “Mm, very cute.”

“Really?!”

“Yes, but it’s not quite right for this doujinshi.”

“I-I’m sorry...” Yoshino slumped forward apologetically.

Shido patted her head with a pained smile.

“Okay, next. And this is mine.”

“Oh! I’ll show mine, tooooo! Ta-da!”

Kotori and Miku displayed their pictures. Although these were a little aged up, they were still less like manga and more like cute characters a junior high school girl might draw on the margins of her notebook.

But one point caught Shido’s attention. They were all supposed to have drawn Shido, but for some reason, in Miku’s illustration alone, he had long hair and was wearing a skirt.

“...Umm, Miku?” he said hesitantly.

“Yes?” She turned glittering eyes on him. “What is it, daaaarling?”

“...Oh, uh, nothing.” He felt an instinctive fear and averted his gaze. He got the feeling that if he questioned her any further, the real him would end up twisted to match the illustration. “Let’s just see the next ones. Next!”

“Keh-keh-keh. Then we shall proceed!”

“Display. Please take a look.”

The Yamai sisters presented their illustrations, looking extremely pleased with themselves.

“Whoa?!” Shido’s eyes flew open in astonishment. It only made sense given

that they had once competed in illustration, but the artistic abilities of both Kaguya and Yuzuru were on a level that far surpassed the other four seen so far.

While, naturally, the sketches were a little rough in places, they looked plenty manga-like. And the Shido that Kaguya had drawn was a hot-blooded youth in the style of shonen manga, while the Shido Yuzuru had drawn was a beautiful boy in the style of shojo manga.

“These are both incredible!” he cried.

“Kah-kah-kah! Obviously!”

“Assent. There is nothing we Yamais cannot do.”

The pair threw their heads back proudly.

Looking at their pictures, Kotori put a thoughtful hand to her chin and then turned her gaze on Shido and Origami.

“At the moment, our top candidates for the main art are the Yamai sisters. So then, can we see what you’ve got?”

“S-sure...”

“Roger.”

Shido and Origami held up their drawings, and everyone turned their attention their way.

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Might not be as good as Kaguya and Yuzuru, but your drawing’s not too shabby, either, Shido. And Origami’s is—eeah?!” Hand to her chin, Kotori peeked at Origami’s drawing, then let out a shrill cry.



The drawing Origami had done was photorealistic and exceedingly well-done, but Shido was stark naked and involved in a scene where he was intimately entangled with a similarly naked Origami.

“Whu...?!”

“...!”

As they set eyes on the illicit scene, the other Spirits also gasped. Except for Yuzuru and Miku, who broke out into smiles, their eyes shining.

“Wh-what did you draw, Origami?!” Kotori yelped.

“Shido,” Origami replied coolly. “With me.”

“Why did you add that last part in?!” Kotori cried, and flipped Origami’s drawing over. “Geez. I mean... The drawing’s good, so we’ll put you up as a candidate for the art. But you can’t do this kind of thing with the manga!”

“I don’t understand.” Origami’s brow creased ever so slightly. “We’ll never see solid doujinshi sales if we avoid any R-rated elements.”

“Our booth is in the general area, though?!” Kotori cried out, then let out an exhausted sigh. “Umm. So is that all of them? Then—”

“Uh. Um...” Yoshino timidly spoke up. “We still. Haven’t seen Natsumi’s drawing...”

“...! Oh! Uh. I...” Natsumi jumped and hid the drawing in her hands behind her back.

“Oh, you’re right,” Kotori said. “I’m sorry, Natsumi. Would you mind showing us?”

“...Wh-whatever,” Natsumi stammered. “It’s nothing special. You should just go with Kaguya or Yuzuru or Shido or Origami.”

“You went to the trouble of drawing it, so let us see it. C’mon.”

“...Uh. Unh. Um, the truth is, it’s super bad, so like, don’t go expecting anything, okay?”

“It’s fine. I mean, my drawing wasn’t that great, either, or anything.”

“The thing is, okay? I barely slept and I’m in terrible shape today. Plus, it’s been ages since I held a pen, so...”

“We get it already.”

“And I actually had real trouble figuring out the pose, so my drawing time was only ten minutes or so, and to start with, it’s been a while since I drew anything, and I haven’t been getting enough sleep lately; I’m in terrible shape—”

“Augh! Enough! I get it, just show me the picture already!” Kotori cried out in frustration and snatched the paper from Natsumi’s hand. She flipped it over, and her eyes grew as round as saucers. “Huh... This is...”

“I-it’s. Amazing,” Yoshino breathed.

“What did you say?”

The Spirits let out cries of surprise one after the other.

But that was understandable. Natsumi’s picture was on a level that would rival the work of a professional manga artist.

“This is amazing, Natsumi!” Kotori said. “Where did you learn to draw like this?!”

“...Oh, uh. I mean, like.” She looked down at the ground. “I was just kinda interested in drawing ages ago... And I copied a manga artist this one time, so...”

“Ah!” Shido’s eyes flew open.

Natsumi was originally a Spirit of forgery with the Angel Haniel. She transformed anything and everything, and even changed herself into forms she preferred. She was a genius of observation and mimicry, able to match her target’s behavior to the point where even close friends couldn’t see through her subterfuge so easily when she transformed into someone.

“It’s settled, then,” Kotori said, and exhaled at length. “Natsumi’ll be our main artist, backed up by the Yamais, Shido, and Origami.”

The Spirits all nodded firmly.

“Mm! Agreed!”

“This is amazing...Natsumi.”

“No objection.”

“Approval. We will let you have the glory.”

“Squee! Natsumi, later, could you maybe draw the love story of me and daaaarling?”

“Uh... Huh?” Natsumi looked around, bewildered.

“Please, Natsumi,” Shido said with a serious look in his eyes. “Help us to help Nia.”

“Whu?!” She hesitated for a few seconds and finally said awkwardly, “...J-just don’t come complaining about it later.”

Everyone applauded in celebration, and Natsumi’s face grew even redder as she hung her head again.

“So then.” Tohka cocked her head as if she had realized something. “What will we do, Kotori?”

“Oh, that’s riiight. Ah!” Miku wriggled excitedly, her eyes shining. “How about we give everyone very thorough massages when they’re tired from drawing? Or sleep alongside them and sing them lullabies?!”

Natsumi gasped with an “Eep!” and hid behind Shido.

“No, we’re not doing that,” Kotori responded, shoulders drooping in exasperation. “There’s something else you’ll be doing. In a certain sense, it’s maybe an even more important mission than the production of the manga.”

Miku, Tohka, and Yoshino met each other’s eyes and frowned curiously.

“An important. Mission?”

“What on earth could it beeee?”

“Wait and see,” Kotori said. “At any rate, let’s all get to work thinking up the story for the doujinshi.”

“Mm?” Tohka raised her eyebrows. “Isn’t it going to be about Shido?”

“Well, yeah, but we’re limited to a certain number of pages. Even with all the support Ratatoskr can offer, sixty-four pages is pretty much the max. That’s fifty-nine pages of story, four pages for the cover, and one for the credits. We

have to jam enough story into those pages to get Nia to fall for the character 'Shido.'”

“Mm... I get it.” Tohka crossed her arms, a troubled look on her face. “That’s gonna be pretty tough.”

Kotori walked to the back of the room and stopped in front of the whiteboard there. “So first off, we’ll talk it out. Then we’ll put together the storyboard today, take the whole of tomorrow to draw it, and finish the thing off.”

“...Looking at it again, this schedule’s pretty punishing,” Shido remarked. “Can we really make it in time?”

“We have to. It’s do or die here.” The cap of the marker squeaked as Kotori pulled it off, and she wrote the words *Shido Doujinshi Plan* on the whiteboard. And then she looked them all squarely in the eye as she announced in a loud voice:

“Now. Let’s begin our date.”

Chapter 4

When you give up, that's the deadline.

A shadow oozed out of the roof of the condo where Nia Honjou lived, and Kurumi spun up from inside of it, half dancing. She leaned back in a light stretch before turning her face slowly up to the sky.

She heard several familiar voices echo from inside the shadow spreading out on the roof under her feet.

“Now then, let’s see.”

“This is a troubling development, hmm?”

“Whatever shall we do?”

Shadows popped up all over the roof, with girls peeking their faces out. Strange-looking girls with their hair tied up on either side of their heads in asymmetrical bundles and clockfaces in their right eyes. It was only natural that their voices would have been familiar to Kurumi. Because they were all her voice.

The Kurumi avatars produced through the Eighth Bullet Het of Kurumi’s Angel Zafkiel were talking to her from the shadows.

“Indeed,” she replied with a sigh. Kurumi had at last met the second Spirit she had long been seeking and obtained information on the original Spirit through that Spirit’s Angel. But as a result, she had reached a single, weighty conclusion.

With a drawn-out and gloomy exhale, she shrugged her shoulders.

“Even if I were to accumulate the Spirit power required to go back thirty years, I would stand no chance against the original Spirit,” she said, and the chattering Kurumis fell silent at once.

“...”

With meek expressions, they watched her.

“Oh my?” She glanced at them and giggled. “Why such somber expressions, my darling me’s? Did you think I would be daunted over a little something like this? That I would waste the tens of thousands of lives I’ve accumulated thus far?”

She crossed the roof with a light, dancing step before kicking gently at it to jump up onto a corner of the railing. She glanced at the city spreading out below her and continued in a singsong manner.

“The power of the original Spirit is truly immense. But what of it? My dear Zafkiel is the most powerful Angel, manipulating time itself. Before the concept of time, all other powers are meaningless.”

Kurumi looked over her shoulder at the avatars behind her. Of all the information she’d obtained from meeting Nia, the most significant was not the original Spirit’s abilities, but rather the coordinates and cause of her appearance.

“It’s quite simple, really. The original Spirit did not exist in this world thirty years ago. In which case, all I must do is fly to a time before the appearance of said Spirit in this world and eliminate the cause of that appearance.” Kurumi stood the index finger and thumb of her right hand up to form the shape of a gun and pretended to shoot at the air.

At her words, the avatars started to chatter again.

“Although it would indeed be a lie were I to say that I don’t feel some lingering regret at the fact that I won’t be able to dispatch that hateful Spirit with these hands. But we will take this as an acceptable second best.”

Yes. The key was to erase the fact that these creatures called Spirits had been born into this world at all. Just as Shido had once done, she would return history to what it should have been. She lowered her eyes as if resolving herself anew and clenched her hands into tight fists.

A few seconds later, however, she let out a lamenting sigh.

“Still...”

Nia had told her the reason why the original Spirit had appeared in the first place. As she digested this information in her mind, she murmured to herself as if exasperated, “Isaac Ray Pelham Westcott. Ellen Mira Mathers. And Elliot Baldwin Woodman.”

The names of the three ringleaders.

“I suppose it’s not worth much at this late stage... But if we meet again, I might very well kill you,” she spat, then jumped from the fence and fell as if sucked into the ground.



Meanwhile, the battle began for Shido and the Spirits. After they decided on the storyline, they split up into art team and special team, then got to work.

Natsumi started drawing the storyboard—the manga blueprint, as it were—sketching that out, and the linework for the cover. This left her doing the bulk of the work. They had wanted to divide up the tasks further, but unless the artwork was done by one person, discrepancies would arise in the story and expression on the page, so they had no choice but to leave it all to Natsumi.

Left twiddling their thumbs while she was doing this, Shido and the others watched a simple video overview of the steps in manga production, and practiced drawing on Kent paper with pens to be ready to help with the final stages of the work of creating the manga.

By the time they were done with all of this, it was two AM on the thirtieth. Normally, this was the point when they’d all get a bit of sleep and then start on production in the early hours of the morning. But Natsumi proposed that they continue, so they decided to stay up all night, taking naps in turn to keep their efficiency from dropping as much as they could.

First, they would use a ruler and pen to draw frames around the sketches Natsumi had drawn and trace out the word balloons. And then the real work would begin—they would ink the characters that had been drawn in pencil.

However.

“...Gah! I went outside the frame!”

“Keh... Jet-black tears on the pure ivory of this sacred ground?!”

“Disturbance. Ink is bleeding beneath the ruler.”

“...No problem. This is fixable.”

Although Shido and his fellow assistant artists had some experience with drawing illustrations, they were still total amateurs. There was no way they could produce perfect pages right from the get-go.

But their powers of concentration and adaptability were fearsome. They stared so hard at the rough pages, they practically burned holes into them as they carefully moved forward with the inks, and before too long, they were able to follow the lines of the sketch more or less perfectly... Although Kaguya and Yuzuru got impatient with the process halfway through and gave up the dip pen for detailed work, shifting to a fine-tipped marker—a fine liner, basically.

The underlying pencil lines were then diligently erased from the inked pages, which were scanned and digitized before being sent to a support team lead by Nakatsugawa.

This was a speedrun dependent on the sheer strength of their numbers, but they wouldn't have been able to finish an entire manga in a mere two days working any other way.

This didn't mean, however, that the manga skills of Shido and the others improved. The work of inking Natsumi's rough pencil sketches wore them down mentally more than they had anticipated.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The sound of pen against paper echoed in the large room. They had put on a CD as background music, but it seemed that no one was actually soothed by it. At some point, who knew how long after the work had begun...

“Hey, gang. How's it going?”

The door opened abruptly, and Kotori marched in, her arms full of provisions.

“...Hey, Kotori,” Shido said weakly. “It's going, I guess.”

“...Man, I don’t see you all for a couple hours, and you age about ten years,” she said, putting the bags on the table. “I’ll leave the food here, so eat it when you take a break or whatever.”

“Kah-kah... An offering? You have a kind soul, Kotori.”

“Appreciation. Thank you very much, Kotori.”

“...”

The Yamai sisters expressed their gratitude, while Origami wordlessly waved in her direction. Then they heard a soft grunt.

“...Unh.”

Most likely, this was Natsumi’s answer.

Kotori walked over to Shido’s desk.

“...Shido, got a sec?”

“Hmm? What’s up?” He raised his eyes to look at her face.

“Need a quick word about Nia.”

“...! Did something happen?” he asked, panicked, and Kotori nodded firmly before speaking loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“Sorry, gang. I’m just gonna borrow Shido for a bit. I’ll make him work twice as fast once we get back.”

“Hey?!” he cried out, but Kotori paid no attention to this as she grabbed his sleeve and started walking.

“Hup, hup,” she said briskly.

Yanked along, Shido left the room like a dog being pulled on a leash.

Kotori kept going until they were out of the building entirely. The bright light of the sun was dazzling.

“Hngh.” He winced. “It’s already so bright out? Yikes. How many hours we got left?”

“The manga’s definitely important, but for now, just get in.” She pointed at the car stopped in front of the apartment building.

Following her orders, he got into the rear seat with Kotori. The car immediately pulled out and drove down the road.

“So...” He looked at the cityscape flowing past outside the window. “You find something new on Nia?”

“Uh-huh. We managed to get in touch with one of her manga artist friends.”

“R-really?! So then, if we can talk to them—”

“Exactly. We might be able to learn something about Nia’s past,” Kotori said, glancing over at him. He swallowed hard.

After they’d been in transit for about twenty minutes, the car stopped in front of a café.

“This is it,” Kotori told him. “Get out. Reine’s already in there handling things.”

“R-right.” Shido got out of the car and went into the café, feeling slightly nervous. He looked around and spotted Reine waving and beckoning to them.

“Hey, Reine.”

“Sorry for the wait.”

“...Aah, great, you’re here, Shido, Kotori,” Reine said, looking sleepier than Shido, despite the fact that he’d been up all night, and indicated the person sitting across from her. “...Let me introduce you. This is the manga artist, Hiroki Takajou.”

“Oh, hello.” Shido started to bow neatly, and then his body froze in place.

Given the name Hiroki, he’d pictured a man, but sitting before him was a woman in her late twenties wearing glasses with what looked to be a very strong prescription. But then he remembered what Nia had told him. Hiroki Takajou, the artist behind *Other Fake*, was also a woman who used a male pen name like Nia did.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Shido Itsuka.”

“And I’m Kotori Itsuka. Thank you so much for coming today.”

“Ooh, so well-mannered,” Takajou said, then put her hands on the table and

bowed her head. Then she looked up at the two of them over the rim of her glasses. “And today you want to hear all about Honjou.”

“Oh! Yes. That’s right.” Shido nodded. “Anything you know would be very helpful. Would you mind talking to us?”

“I don’t particularly mind, but...” Takajou adjusted the position of her glasses, making her lenses catch the light. “Exactly what is your relationship with Honjou?”

“Huh?” He stared blankly at her.

“Ah, my apologies.” She gave him a wan smile. “However, we are nonetheless popular sellers. I cannot exactly leak any information to outsiders.”

“Right...”

Indeed, this was only proper. That said, however, a decent explanation didn’t immediately come to mind. He set his brain to work for a moment.

“The truth is, *Nia*’s a distant relative of ours.” Kotori’s voice came from his side. “But we lost touch with her a few years ago. So we’re asking around about her.”

She fluently smoothed the whole situation over. Perhaps she had envisioned this development. Or maybe she was making it up on the spot. Either way, Shido couldn’t help but feel that given the way his little sister offered up this plausible story without so much as a second’s hesitation, she had a real talent for fraud.

“Mm-hmm. I see,” Takajou murmured, and then nodded firmly. She no doubt believed them because Kotori had used Honjou’s real name, Nia, which was not known to the general public. “I have understood the situation. I, too, have felt concern for Honjou. I shall offer you my utmost cooperation.”

“You will?! Thank you...!” Shido put his hands on his knees and bowed.

But Takajou scratched her cheek with a frown. “However...as to how much assistance I will be...”

“How so...?”

“The truth is, these last few years, I myself have also not met with Honjou.

And...it would seem that I am not well-liked by her.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” he asked, and Takajou scratched her head awkwardly.

“Oh. Approximately eight or nine years ago, Honjou allowed me the courtesy of becoming friendly with her after our meeting at a publisher party. But at some later point, her attitude toward me abruptly grew distant, and we have been estranged... I had selfishly thought that she was the artist I was closest to. Perhaps I was careless because of this, and I may very well have done her some rudeness while unaware of it myself.”

“Then it was...” Hearing this, Shido furrowed his brow slightly. When he glanced to his side, he saw that Kotori had a similar look on her face. Most likely, she had reached the same conclusion—the Angel Rasiel.

“Sorry?” Takajou cocked her head to one side. She no doubt found their reaction curious.

“O-oh, it’s nothing,” he said quickly.

“Hmm. Is that so? Well, at any rate, that is the long and short of it. I can share with you what I know, but I have no idea if it will be of any use to you.”

“That’s fine. Please do,” Shido said, and Takajou responded with a nod before continuing her story.

About forty minutes later, after they thanked Takajou and left the café, Shido and Kotori got back into the car and stared at the world through the windows.

They’d learned from speaking with Takajou that Nia was sociable and outgoing. However, she didn’t really like to talk about the time before she became a manga artist. Nia’s replies were especially vague when she was asked about any older friendships. And when a potentially close friend arrived on the scene, she would push them away so that they ended up estranged and ignored.

“...What do you think, Kotori?” he asked.

“Rasiel’s definitely involved,” she declared in response. “When you think about it, it makes sense. Anyone would at least check out the people in their

lives if they had an Angel that knew everything.”

“I guess so... But.”

“Yeah. Nia probably stopped trusting people because of that. And that makes sense, too. There’s not a person alive who’s a saint twenty-four seven. They’re talking behind people’s backs, getting into trouble when no one’s looking. It’s only natural you’d start to think human beings are ugly if you had Rasiel.” Kotori ran her hands through her hair. “The roots here go deeper than I thought. When I heard she was into two-dimensional characters, I was like, ‘Oh, you have got to be kidding me.’ But what that really means is that she can only open her heart up to someone she knows won’t betray her, yeah? And that’s...super sad.”

“...” Shido fell silent for a moment. What she was saying was exactly right. This was likely the deeper reason why Nia didn’t want to talk about old friendships and why she was focused on the two-dimensional. But there was one last point bugging him. In his heart, he couldn’t help but question why Nia had become estranged from Takajou.

“... Shido?”

“Huh? Oh...”

Kotori pursed her lips and frowned. “I get that you’re tired from working all night, but this is a serious issue. Could you not space out on me?”

“Right... Sorry,” he replied briefly, and clenched his hands into fists as he stared at the scenery moving by at a dizzying speed. “For now, at any rate, let’s make that doujinshi sell out. Whatever else, we’ll get nowhere unless we can create another chance to talk with Nia.”

Kotori nodded, a look of slight surprise on her face.



The final burst before the finish line, one AM, December 31. In the workspace on the first floor of the Spirit apartment building, Shido and the others, dazed from lack of sleep, inked pages with empty eyes.

“...”

Silently, Shido leaned forward as though clinging to the desk and carefully, ever so carefully traced the lines of the characters Natsumi had drawn. On his hands were gloves with the fingertips cut out so that he didn't get the pages dirty with his sweat and grime, and on his forehead was a cooling gel sheet to keep him awake. Empty energy drink bottles and coffee cans were lined up along one edge of the desk.

"...One o'clock..." he half moaned. "If we're going to send the files and get them finished...we're running up against...the deadline..."

"...Yah..."

"Res...ponse. I'm almost done..."

"..."

It had been basically a full day since the start of work. Shido had been working the whole time, leaving his seat only to eat, go to the washroom, and take a nap. He was weirdly tense, forced to pay careful attention to the finest of lines, so the whole endeavor was more mentally taxing than he'd expected. The face reflected in the mirror when he'd gone to the washroom earlier had featured tremendous dark circles on par with Reine's.

He was not the only one in this state, however. Kaguya and Yuzuru at the desk to his left were in similar shape, their heads wobbling on their shoulders. The only one who retained her usual composure was Origami, but even she would stop moving once every couple of hours like her batteries had run out.

But the one in the most dangerous condition at that moment was without a doubt Natsumi. She was working at the desk farthest back in the room, her long hair tied back artlessly. But because she hadn't taken a single nap since they'd started, her eyes were bloodshot and her fingers were trembling. No matter how many times Shido and the others told her to take a break, though, she refused to put down her pencil for even a moment. This tenacity bestowed upon the girl the awesome dread of a professional in a single night.

When confronted with Natsumi in this shape, Shido couldn't exactly complain himself. Mustering up the last of his stamina, he tightened his grip on his pen and went for the final lines on the page.

“There... Now...it’s finished...,” he murmured, his voice shaking, and flopped over on his desk. After pushing the penned pages aside, of course.

At about the same time, the Yamai sisters and Origami also finished their work. Kaguya and Yuzuru crumpled onto their desk like Shido had, while Origami stopped moving for a time, still sitting up straight with perfect posture.

Now they just had to wait for the ink to dry, erase the pencil lines, and send the pages to the assistant team. They’d be all right now entrusting the Ratatoskr crew to do the rest.

With perfect timing, the door of the studio opened, and Kotori and the others who had gone off on a separate mission came in carrying large cardboard boxes.

“...Here, Shido,” Kotori said to him.

“Hey, Kotori...” He looked up at her, and his bleary eyes automatically grew round.

His reaction was understandable. Kotori, Tohka, Yoshino, and even Miku all had the same drained appearances as Shido and the other artists.

“Gang... Why do you look so tired?” he asked, and they glanced at each other before turning their gazes back on him.

“It’s a secret, Shido,” Tohka told him.

“Look. Forward to it,” Yoshino chimed.

“Hee-hee-hee...,” Miku giggled weakly. “Normally, lack of sleep is the greatest enemy to beauuuuty, but we couldn’t exactly make you do all the work, darling.”

Their faces were gaunt, and yet they were all smiling happily. He frowned curiously.

“Anyway, how’s the book coming?” Kotori asked.

“Oh.” He nodded. “I finished inking just now. All we have left to do is erase the pencils and scan the pages, and then we can send them to the assistant team. I think Kaguya, Yuzuru, and Origami are finished, too.”

“Yeah? Nice work. Then the only one left is...” Kotori turned her eyes to the back of the room.

Yes. There was one girl in the room still working—Natsumi.

After using his desk as a pillow for a few seconds, Shido staggered to his feet and walked over to her with Kotori and the others. The Yamai sisters and Origami also stood to join the group around the small girl.

“Natsumi...?” he asked. “You okay?”

“...”

“Natsumi?”

“...! O-oh... Uh-huh...” She jumped in her seat and raised her head, her face colored with exhaustion. Her eyes were red and surrounded by dark circles. Anyone could see that she was close to her limit.

“We’re all finished, so we’ll take over,” he said gently. “You’re tired, yeah? Go ahead to sleep.”

“...Mm-mmm. It’s okay. There’s just a little more...” But Natsumi shook her head and kept working. Perhaps her eyes were blurring—she rubbed them hard. The ink on her hands transferred to her face, making her look like she’d lost a battle with a shuttlecock.



“A little more?” he replied. “Natsumi, you haven’t taken a single nap since yesterday. Plus, you’ve done the most work of all of us with the storyboard *and* the pencils.”

“This is fact. The main event is indeed the market itself. Allow us to complete this task, and let yourself be lured into the welcoming darkness of sleep.”

“Unity. You are working too much, Natsumi.”

“Rest is also important work.”

But even when the Yamais and Origami, who had been working alongside her, spoke up, Natsumi still did not stop drawing. She stared at the pages with empty eyes and remained wholly focused on moving her pen.

“...I’m...okay...”

“B-but...,” Shido protested, and Natsumi continued as she drew neat lines with shaky fingers.

“...I probably won’t be any use at the event. So like...this is about all I can do... So please let me. I never dreamed I’d be needed like this. I mean, I just want to be useful to you all...”

“Natsumi...”

“...It’s like, Shido—and all of you—saved me, and that made me really happy... And now we’re putting our strength together to save a different Spirit. That makes me...really, really happy. So I’m not suffering here. I’m having so much fun, I can hardly stand it. I want...that blockhead Nia to find out, too, as soon as we can show her.” She smiled faintly and slowly lifted the hand holding the pen. “Find out how great...friends are...”

As she drew the final line, she slumped sideways and fell out of her chair.

Shido reached out and caught her just before she hit the floor.

“Hey, Natsumi! You okay?!” he cried worriedly.

“...” She replied with a soft snore.

“...You really fought hard, huh?” he said, and stroked her hair with a smile.

“Oooh!” Miku stood behind him, eyes wet with tears. “It’s so emotionaaaaal!”

Darling, I'll put Natsumi to bed, so—"

"Shido, carry Natsumi up to her apartment," Kotori interrupted. "And don't forget to lock the door."

"Aaaw, Kotori, you're so meaaaaan!" Miku fretted and squirmed.

Kotori ignored this and picked up the inked pages Natsumi had left on the desk, nodding as she looked them over.

"Perfect." She turned her eyes on the rest of them. "Our manuscript, filled with Natsumi's passion. Now all our weapons are ready to go. We are absolutely going to win this contest, gang."

"Yeah!!" Shido and the Spirits cried out, pumping their fists into the air.



And then dawn came, and the battlefield opened its door at seven thirty AM. The exhibitors that had lined up at Tengu Square, the large convention center that was the venue for Comic Colosseum, poured into the hall. The sound of countless footsteps and the clattering wheels of pushcarts echoed through the previously empty space.

Comic Colosseum was a large-scale doujinshi market held twice a year, in summer and winter. It was held over the course of three days, during which manga and anime fans from all across the country gathered. The total number of visitors differed from year to year, but it was said that more than 500,000 people generally attended over the three days.

With this number of attendees, it was a massive event, and there were also a fair number of doujinshi collectives, known as "circles," offering up their self-published books for sale. The movements of those circles made the building shake with almost subterranean rumblings.

About an hour after the hall opened, when the wave of exhibitors had more or less subsided, Shido and the Spirits—together they formed the circle Ratatoskr—stood at last in front of the gate through which the flow of people had dwindled.

"Woh-kay," Shido said. "Here we go, gang."

“Mm. We’re ready for anything!”

“W-we can do this...!”

The Spirits assented enthusiastically. None of them could have been said to be in top shape, but because they’d gotten enough sleep to at least not collapse, they had recovered their strength to some degree.

When Shido had woken up that morning, Origami had been pressed up against him. And Miku had been holding the hands of Yoshino and Kotori, a truly ecstatic look on her face as she slept. Yoshino and Kotori had been groaning as if plagued by nightmares. Suspects Tobiichi and Izayoi had both denied the allegations and insisted that this was simply how they slept, but Ratatoskr deemed there to have been intent in their nighttime actions and were proceeding with an investigation.

At any rate, he needed to focus on the contest now. Leading the Spirits, Shido walked down the wide corridor until they arrived at the east hall and headed for their booth.

The hall was already jammed with exhibitors, all busily spreading cloths across their tables, setting up their books, and generally getting their spaces ready.

“Huh,” Shido said, looking around. “This is the first time I’ve come to this event. It’s actually amazing.”

“Assent. They have all come up with such clever ideas.”

“They really haaaave. The mood in here really feels like something at a concert.”

The Spirits checked out their surroundings with fascination as they squealed and giggled to each other.

When the wall of the hall came into view, Kotori raised her voice to them all. “There she is. Nia.”

A shiver of nervous tension raced through them.

Shido swallowed hard and then turned his eyes to the booths up ahead. Just as Kotori had said, he saw the Spirit Nia there. She was setting out books on a long table together with several staff members.

“...” He steeled himself and took a step forward.

Nia lifted her face, as if now noticing him and his circle.

“...Hmm?” She pushed the bridge of her glasses up her nose and stood up from her folding chair. “This is a coincidence, boy. Never imagined I’d see you in a place like this. Oh-ho! The whole gang’s here. Lotta you I never met before, I guess?”

Nia sent her gaze toward the Spirits standing behind him. Tohka, Origami, Kaguya, and Natsumi looked wary, while Yoshino and Yuzuru bowed slightly, and Kotori merely stared back at her as she crossed her arms.

Miku, meanwhile, placed a hand on her chin, her eyes sparkling. “Ooh, oh... A glasses-wearing, slender beauty. She’s fairly... This is a type I haven’t had before, hmm?” she said, not making much sense to Shido, but Natsumi took a few hesitant steps away from her.

“...So? What’s the deal? I mean, you’re free to come to ComiCo if you want, but general entrance starts at ten, y’know?” Nia told them with a shrug.

Kotori uncrossed her arms. “Appreciate the warning. But we’re not attendees, so.” She slowly raised her right hand and pointed at the booth next to Nia.

Nia followed her finger with her eyes, and a dubious look rose up on her face. “Hmmm...? Ohhh, I get it.” She let out a short sigh before picking up the map of the hall on her table. “I thought it was weird. That booth isn’t on the map, but I saw they added it once I got here. I just assumed the organizers messed up... But, huh. This was your doing, then.”

“Well... Basically, yeah,” Shido replied.

Nia looked unhappy with Shido and his group, but nonetheless interested in this unexpected turn of events.

“...Still, though, that’s some huge household you got there.”

“Oh, but you seem to have quite a number of people yourself?” Kotori remarked.

“They’re part-timers. Employer-employee, pretty sweet,” she replied. “They work, I pay ’em. Nice and straightforward.”

“...”

Shido and Kotori tightened their lips the slightest bit, Takajou's words from the day before passing through their minds.

“So?” Nia asked. “I mean, great, you're an exhibitor. But what are you selling? Far as I can see, you're waltzing in here empty-handed.”

“Mm-hmm.” Kotori snapped her fingers.

In response, three men came toward them from the service entrance with a dolly full of cardboard boxes. When Shido looked closely, he saw that they were Nakatsugawa, Kawagoe, and Mikimoto from the Ratatoskr crew.

“We're here with a delivery for the Ratatoskr circle!”

“Thanks. Just put it at the booth there.” Kotori waved a hand toward their table space.

“Sure thing!” The crew piled up the boxes at their exhibitor booth. There were in fact ten of them. Exactly the same number of boxes piled up to the rear of Nia's booth.

“Ten boxes with five hundred books in each,” Kotori mused. “Exactly as many as you brought, huh, Nia?”

“...Whoa? You really did your homework.” Nia raised an impressed eyebrow. “So then, you're saying you're going to sell faster than me? You sure thought this through. Okay, I guess if you did that, you could say that your sales were better than mine.”

“Great, you get it. That makes things easier.” The corners of Kotori's mouth turned up.

The exhibitors in the booths around them began to whisper. Shido thought that they'd maybe picked up on something from the somber air around Nia and Shido's group, but that wasn't it. Their gazes appeared to be directed toward Nakatsugawa bringing in their books.

“Hey. Is that maybe...”

“Yeah. Those gloves, those glasses, there's no mistake. That's Munechika, leader of the legendary circle Maimai Kaburi!”

“No way! You mean the guy who disappeared from ComiCo after the split in the group five years ago over the direction of *The Naming of the Lispng Younger Sister Is Older Brother or Master Older Brother?!’*”

Shido could hear this and other rumors swirling, and he and Kotori looked at Nakatsugawa with exasperation.

“...Maimai Kaburi?”

“Munechika...?”

Nakatsugawa smiled coldly.

“Please stop. That was a long time ago.”

“ ...”

Shido and Kotori glanced at each other, and with a look, decided to change the subject since it seemed like asking any further would only lead to trouble they didn’t want.

“Anyway, Shido.”

“R-right.” He walked around to the other side of their table, opened one of the boxes, and pulled out a book. It was slightly warm, perhaps because it had only just been printed. “Whoa...”

Now that he was thinking about it, this was the first time he was seeing the finished product. Natsumi’s linework was reproduced in beautiful color with the stylized title sitting above it. This definitely didn’t look like a book that had been slapped together in a mere two days.

He turned to face Nia, caught her eye, stood a little taller, and held out the book. “Looking forward to sharing this area with you today. I’m Shido Itsuka from the doujinshi circle Ratatoskr.”

“...!” Nia’s eyebrows jumped up. After a few seconds of hesitation, she held out one of the books arranged on her own table. “I’m Souji Honjou of the circle Honjoudo. Looking forward to it.”

They bowed to each other as they traded books. Yes. It was apparently the custom for exhibitors next to each other to exchange books in this fashion.

Nia got a bitter look on her face. “I don’t want to be rude here, so I’ll take this now. But today’s results will decide whether I read it or not.”

“Uh-huh. That’s fine. Let’s make this a fun day.”

“...”

Shido held out his hand, and Nia sighed before taking it. She shook it gently a couple times before letting go.

“What you’re trying to do is indeed interesting, but I think your chances of winning are slim, mmkay?” she said bluntly. “I am a pro, after all. And this is my first event in ages, so I’ve got five thousand copies at the ready. A brand-new circle that’s not even in the catalog, not to mention a book slapped together by a bunch of amateurs; I mean, it’s not even much of a contest to begin with.”

“Well, we’ll see about that.” Kotori smiled boldly and glanced back at the Spirits. “C’mon, gang. Let’s get ready.”

“Yeah!” Tohka, Yoshino, and Miku cried out.

Conversely, the four members of the art team furrowed their brows like they had no idea what Kotori was talking about.

“Ready...? Exactly what sort of preparation?”

“Doubt. Yuzuru has not been told anything about this.”

“...I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It’s fine, no worries,” Kotori said, pushing a reluctant Natsumi. “Just come with me. Shido, we’ll be back soon, so can you help Kaguya and them get the booth set up until then?”

Even though he was confused, Shido nodded his assent.

“Woh-kay... So then let’s get started over here, too,” he said, after seeing Kotori and the others off.

The crew nodded firmly and then brought in another large box from outside. From inside of this one, they pulled out a tablecloth, posters of the cover, and all kinds of items to decorate their space.

“Holy smokes!” He stared in amazement. “You even made posters?”

“Heh-heh-heh! Naturally. Whatever else, we are an unknown circle. We won’t get any traction unless we make ourselves stand out,” Nakatsugawa said, turning his head so that his glasses reflected the light and flashed at Shido. “Fortunately, we have a coveted wall space. In which case, we must indeed make effective use of the wall.”

Shido smiled awkwardly before joining Mikimoto to put up the posters. He was extremely embarrassed by the whole process since the poster featured a character modeled after himself, but this was not the time for complaining. He shook his head slightly and continued with the setup.

Before too long, he caught sight of people gathering in front of the booths against the wall. Eventually, they began to form lines. The one in front of Nia’s booth was especially long.

“Huh...?” he said to no one in particular. “The event hasn’t started yet, right? Who are these people?”

“Mm-hmm,” Nakatsugawa replied as he lined up their books. “They are exhibitors as we are. If one has an exhibitor pass, then one may enter the venue earlier than the general attendees. And thus, one can line up at the circles one is interested in earlier than the general attendees.”

“Is that kind of thing allowed?” Shido asked with a frown.

“Hmm. I personally couldn’t say,” Nakatsugawa responded vaguely as he crossed his arms. Shido could see in the look on his face something along the lines of “Strictly speaking, it’s not great, but I’ve also done it in the past...”

“Huh... But. Then?” he said dubiously.

“Yes. You finally get it?” Nia said, standing at the table next to them. “A doujinshi’s initial response is determined by early reviews. I was out of commission for a while, and me being here today was pretty sudden, so I’m not in the catalog. But I did announce it earlier on my blog. And more than a few attendees are gonna want to get my book first.” She peered over the frames of her glasses up at Shido. “So sorry, but you seriously never had a chance of selling out of the same number of copies first.”

“Wh—I mean—!”

“I wonder?” Cutting Shido off was the very Kotori who had left the scene earlier.

“Kotori? You—Gaaah?!” He turned his gaze in the direction of her voice, and then his eyes flew open in surprise. But that was only natural. Because what he found there were the Spirits clad in cute bunny costumes. “Wh-why are you...?”

“Mm! We’re called salesgirls, I guess!” Tohka told him eagerly.

“We. Made them. Yesterday...!” Yoshino followed up. “I’m a little embarrassed. But. I’m going to work hard!”

Now he got it. So *this* was what they were working on separately from the art team.

A stir rose up among the nearby attendees at the sudden appearance of the beautiful girl cosplay group.

“What’s *that* circle? They’re all super-hot girls.”

“Huh? There was nothing about them in the catalog.”

“Wait. Isn’t that Miku Izayoi?”

And some of them apparently recognized the idol Miku Izayoi. The commotion grew and spread. Shido could hear the phone cameras snapping from all around.

Normally, Miku wouldn’t condone this sort of behavior, but rather than reproach them, she even went so far as to pose for one girl.

Nia cocked her head to one side curiously.

“...Miku Izayoi?”

“Hee-hee-hee! So you saw through my disguiiiiise!” Miku threw her head back, satisfied with herself.

But Nia only furrowed her brow dubiously.

“Sorry, I have no idea who you are. What do you do?”

“Augh?!” Miku staggered back in shock.

“C-calm down, Miku,” Shido said soothingly. “Nia was locked up by DEM until

recently, so she doesn't know celebrities and stuff."

"Th-that's right... Thank you, daaaarling." Smiling weakly, Miku stood up straight again, and Kotori slapped her back as if to psych her up.

"Come on," she said. "Stay strong. It's about to start."

As if in response to this, the hands of the clock turned to ten, and an announcement rang out through the venue.

"Comic Colosseum is now open to the general public."

Thunderous applause filled the air, the force of which surprised Shido and the Spirits. They looked around with wide eyes.

But this was only the very beginning. Before the applause had died down, there came a rumbling roar in the distance, together with a slight shaking.

"Wh-what's this sound...?" Shido asked, his voice shaking, but then he quickly realized that it was the feet of the general attendees as they raced in from outside. "Wh-whoa...?!"

"...Cripes. What the...?" Kotori muttered.

People pushed in through the entrance like a tidal wave, like soldiers charging the enemy through the opened gates of a castle. The Spirits were stunned and merely gaped for a moment.

But they couldn't stand around shocked forever. The exhibitors lined up at Nia's booth ahead of the general attendees were already buying her book one after the other.

"I'd like one copy of your new book."

"That'll be five hundred yen."

"Can I have two of this one, please?"

"That's a thousand yen."

With an experienced air, Nia and her staff started selling to their customers. Nia glanced over at Shido and twisted her lips up, as if to say, "Go ahead and beat me if you can."

"Ngh!" he groaned. "We gotta get started, too!"

“Right. Okay, gang,” Kotori barked. “Just like we planned!”

“Yaaah!”

The Spirits deployed themselves in front of and behind their table. Perhaps drawn in by the impossibly gorgeous girls, attendees who had already gotten their top priority book began to stop by in dribs and drabs in front of their booth.

“Ooh! Welcome!”

Tohka called out to a young man who looked at the cover of the book while he was passing by.

He jumped in surprise. “Oh. Uh...”

“It’s five hundred yen for one copy! How about it?!”

“...Oh. Uh. Then I’ll take one, please.” The man looked uncertain about the purchase, but he apparently couldn’t say no to Tohka’s sunny smile. With a pained grin, he held out a 1,000-yen bill.

“Ooh, thank you! Your change is five hundred yen!” She offered him his change and the book and then waved vigorously, beaming at him.

The man looked embarrassed and yet somehow pleased as he gave her a tiny wave in return and left.

Watching this exchange, Shido smiled automatically. “Ha-ha! So I guess that kind of thing’s...okay?”

“Naturally!” Nakatsugawa laughed out loud from where he was sorting through the boxes to the rear. “Whatever else, this is a contest to sell out the fastest. No matter how excellently drawn a book might be, that is no guarantee that it will sell. Reach and promotion are critical factors. Honjou no doubt understands this well. Put another way, it would be impossible for an unknown creative circle to sell five thousand copies of a book without doing at least this much.”

“M-makes sense...,” Shido agreed, a bead of sweat trickling down his cheek. And it did. While this was a self-publishing event, a market was apparently still a market.

Drawing a crowd with its showy salesgirls, the circle Ratatoskr began to sell more and more books, using the slightly foul play of knocking customers out with the Spirits' smiling faces.

But while Honjoudo next to them was not pulling any such tricks, they still had already sold several times the number of copies as Ratatoskr. Plus, as time went on, the line in front of that booth grew ever longer. At this rate, Nia would easily outsell them.



“Ngh.” Shido gritted his teeth. “If this keeps up—!” Her pace was on a whole other level. He scowled as he watched Nia sell one copy after another.

“Quit with the long face, Shido.” Clad in her cute costume, Kotori flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups up. “The real contest starts now.”

“Huh?” He cocked his head to one side. And then he opened his eyes wide. People were steadily gathering in front of the Ratatoskr booth. And they weren’t simply passersby like before. They were forming a line specifically to buy their book. “Wh-what?!” he cried out in amazement.

“Heh-heh! I told you.” Kotori crossed her arms smugly. “Kaguya! Yuzuru! Get the ‘end of line’ sign and put this line in order!”

“Kah-kah! Agreed!”

“Roger. We’ll take care of it.”

The Yamai sisters mobilized and began to manage the line in front of the booth.

There, Shido’s eyebrows jumped up. Faces he’d seen somewhere before were mixed in with the others in the line. Yes. The personnel of Ratatoskr.

“...Isn’t this what they call a plant?” he said to Kotori, lowering his voice so that Nia couldn’t overhear him.

“Okay, first—rude.” Kotori snorted and rolled her eyes. “Second, our *friends* have come to see us at our big event. It’s the most natural thing in the world for friends and family to come buy your self-published book. I also asked everyone to call their friends, too.”

“W-well, I guess when you put it like that,” he agreed slowly, and then he frowned. Something she’d said had caught his attention. “...Everyone?” he asked, with a sense of foreboding, and in the next instant, he heard a trio of familiar voices.

“Yoo-hoooo! Tohkaaaa, we’re heeere!”

“Wow! Look at all the people!”

“Takes me back to the swamp war in the Congo!”

Three girls arranged in a row came forward to the front of their booth.

Seeing them, Shido let out a squeak. They were his classmates, Ai, Mai, and Mii.

“Oooh! You all came!” Tohka cried out happily.

The three girls smiled and giggled.

“Well, of course. We could never say no to you, Tohka.”

“Mm-hmm, yeah. And we were curious about ComiCo, too.”

“...Ah! Captain! I’ve found the mysterious pickup man!”

“What?!”

As soon as they saw Shido, the three girls dropped into fighting poses. He let out a resigned sigh before greeting them.

“...Hey,” he said weakly. “Been a while...”

“Watch out, ladies!”

“He’s planning to seduce a girl again!”

“If you’re not careful, he’ll get you pregnant!”

“...”

Shido’s facial muscles twitched and spasmed. It seemed that his attempt to seduce them at the beginning of the month when he’d been out of control was having lasting effects. He knew he would have to fix the whole mess at some point, but he’d never imagined he would run into them in a place like this.

Regardless, he and his circle were currently in a race against time. No doubt with this in mind, Kotori turned to the threesome in the most businesslike manner.

“One copy is five hundred yen,” she said briskly. “I assume you would like three?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah. Please and thank you.”

“Whoa! The cover’s amazing. Who drew it?”

“And like, this character, doesn’t he kinda look like Itsuka?”

They bought their books and waved at Tohka before going on their way. They were rather excitable and easily carried away, but it seemed that they did at least have some basic common sense. They had apparently determined that it would be an inconvenience if they caused a fight in a place where so many people were lined up.

Whatever the reason, they had left without having that fight, so Shido let out a sigh of relief and returned to selling books.

Before long, another group of three women visited their booth, this time different in both age and stature. One was tall and in her late twenties, the second was a small-statured girl, and the third was a blond who appeared to be of mixed heritage. They looked toward Origami in the booth.

“Oh, there she is. Origami!” the tall woman said. “What’s up? Why’d you call us out of the blue?”

“Captain,” Origami responded.

Shido clapped his hands together with a cry of “Oh!” This was the captain of the SDF anti-Spirit team Origami had belonged to. He was pretty sure her name was Ryouko Kusakabe. Apparently, like Tohka, Origami had invited people she knew to the doujinshi market. The two girls with Kusakabe also seemed to be AST personnel.

“Origami! It’s been a hundred years!”

“Ohhh! Did you maybe get your hair cut? You just went for it, huh?”

“Mikeh. Mildred.” Origami said their names, dispassionately.

The girl she called Mikeh made a gesture like she was wiping away tears. “Wah, uuugh, whoo... We’ve been so sad ever since you quit the AST, Origami. Please come back to ussssss.”

“She’s right. And why’d you quit so suddenly aaaanyway?”

“I had no choice,” Origami said matter-of-factly. “I’m sorry, but I have no interest in returning to the AST.”

“You don’t? That’s too b—ouch!”

Ryouko poked Mikeh in the head. “Listen, you two. What’re you blabbing

about the AST for in a place like this?”

“Oh...! I-I’m sorry. It just came out...”

“It’s fine. No one’s paying attention here,” Origami noted, in her even tone, and Mikeh stared at her curiously.

“...And like,” she said slowly. “Origami, you seem kinda different...?”

Origami slid her arm through Shido’s. “Because of him.”

“Whu—?!”

“Eeee! What? Is *that* what was going on?!”

Mikeh was flabbergasted while Mildred’s cheeks colored at Origami’s electric announcement. But just as the pair was getting worked up, Ryouko pressed a hand down on each of their heads.

“All right, simmer the hell down,” she told them. “We came all the way down here. Let’s at least buy the book. Can we have three for the time being?”

“Thanks.” Origami coolly accepted her money and handed over the books.

As she did, Ryouko looked over Tohka and the other Spirits with a suspicious expression on her face. “...Hey, Origami? I feel like I’ve seen these girls someplace be—”

“All in your head.”

“Maybe. I just—”

“All in your head.”

“No, but—”

“Thank you very much.”

“...”

Origami bowed in a way that brooked no argument, and Ryouko sighed like she’d given up on pursuing the matter before leading Mikeh and Mildred away. As they left, Mikeh pointed at Shido and cried, “I-I’m not giving up!” Shido was unsure as to how to respond to that.

But there was still something he didn’t understand. The line stretching out in

front of the Ratatoskr booth was long enough that it clearly couldn't be explained away by plants alone.

"There's nothing mysterious about it." Nakatsugawa spoke up from the rear, where he was organizing the boxes, as if he'd guessed what Shido was thinking. "This booth is indeed not listed in the catalog. But to put that another way, we are a phantom circle that has suddenly manifested. Once learning of its existence, plenty of people would grow interested in it."

"W-well, yeah, I guess so," Shido said, scratching his head. "But I feel like the tough part would be getting them to know we're here at all."

"Have you forgotten, Shido?" Nakatsugawa pushed his glasses up firmly. "That we are occupying the space next to the tremendously popular circle Honjoudo?"

"Oh!" His eyes widened. Nakatsugawa was right. It wasn't the least bit strange that the people who came to buy Nia's book would be curious about the mysterious circle next to her. And...

"Is this it? The circle that's not in the catalog?"

"But like, how'd a brand-new circle score a wall out of the blue?"

"Oh yeah. I guess that super scout Munechika's with them."

"No way! All the circles he sets his sights on go on to be major players. The artists he backs are basically guaranteed fame and fortune in the mainstream industry! You're talking about *that* Munechika?!"

"What?! Munechika, the legendary seventh moe anime champion?!"

"You're telling me that galactic super leader Munechika is back?!"

"..." Shido could hear bits and pieces of these conversations from the floor. He turned wordlessly to Nakatsugawa, and the man got a slightly troubled look on his face.

"I am currently a humble crew member," he said stiffly.

"Uh-huh." Shido got the feeling that he shouldn't push too deeply into this world.

At any rate, it was finally starting to feel like a real contest. The long, winding line attracted other people, and those general attendees who had finished buying the books they'd come for came from all over the hall to stand in the line for Shido's circle.

"Woh-kay!" Kotori called out as she accepted additional books from Nakatsugawa. "Now's the time for the full-court press. Nia's circle's got two selling, two managing the line, and one handling stock and random errands. A total of six people. In contrast, we've got twelve, including Kaguya and them. If we're talking the number of people who can sell at any one time, we're way ahead!"

The Spirits cheered and sold book after book. The cardboard boxes piled up behind them disappeared one after the other. Eventually, the circle Ratatoskr succeeded in reducing their stock to the level of Honjoudo, which had such an overwhelming head start.

"Heh-heh." Crossing her arms, Kotori sent her gaze over to the booth next to them. "So how d'you like that, Nia? We caught up. And since you can only handle so many books at one time, it looks like we've got the advantage when it comes to speed, huh? Or is doing it like this some kind of heresy, maybe?" The corners of her lips turned up into a challenging smile.

Their opponent was a Spirit, and Shido thought that maybe they shouldn't provoke her too much, but... Most likely, Kotori was trying to send a not-too-subtle advance warning, in light of the possibility that Nia might renege on her promise once the contest was decided.

But Nia replied, completely indifferent to this goading:

"Hmm? Oh, I wouldn't say that. Sometimes, you draw a good book and it doesn't sell. You gotta do everything you can... Although, well, it's true that I didn't think you would go this far." She made a show of applauding them. "But it's maybe a bit early to get too cocky?"

"...What?" Kotori furrowed her brow, and a half an hour or so later, a change came over the venue.

The line in front of the Ratatoskr booth started to steadily grow smaller, while in contrast, the line for Honjoudo was still as long as ever.

“Wh-what...is going on?” Kotori asked, bewildered.

“What do you mean? Balance is just returning to normal, is all,” Nia told her. “Cute salesgirls, boatload of plants. A bunch of buzz. And sure, those are maybe effective at catching people’s eyes, but that stuff’s transient at best. Doesn’t have the power to move five thousand units. I said before that sometimes you draw a good book and it doesn’t sell, but like, what the people here want in the end is a good book. Sure, I didn’t publish anything for a while there, but I’ve proved myself over the years. The biggest difference between me and you is exactly that. I’ve got a track record, but no one knows what the heck you’re gonna draw. And that’s not the sort of thing you can make up for overnight, yeah?”

“Ngh...!” Kotori gritted her teeth in vexation.

But Nia was correct. Shido’s circle had been simply relying on projectile weapons to propel themselves onto Honjoudo’s coattails.

The people lined up in front of the Ratatoskr booth finished buying their books and went away. But they still had four boxes of stock left, a total of more than two thousand copies.

“Sh-Shido,” Tohka whispered nervously. “There are no more people.”

“...Wh-what are we gonna do?” Natsumi asked uneasily.

Shido desperately set his mind to work. “There’s... There’s gotta be something...! I mean—!” But not a single effective method came to mind.

Even while he fretted over their own sales, Honjoudo continued to sell books to a steady stream of customers. Before too long, one of the four remaining boxes was emptied.

“Hngh!” He clenched his hands into fists. “What are we supposed to—?!”

If this kept up, Nia would sell out first. Meaning that Shido and the Spirits would lose their chance to seal away her Spirit powers.

But no matter how he panicked, no brilliant ideas came to mind. Staring at the passersby, he slumped over onto their table.

But in the next instant, when he had sunk into despair, a gentle hand settled

onto his.

“Huh?” He lifted his face, and the owner of that hand—Miku—smiled brightly at him.

“Hee-hee-hee! It’s not like you to give up, daaaarling?! The contest isn’t over yet. In fact, it’s only just beginning.”

“Miku?” He was bewildered. From the way she spoke and the look on her face, it didn’t seem like she was simply trying to cheer him up.

Miku nodded slightly before turning her gaze on Nia.

“Okay, Nia. It’s on,” she said, snapping a finger out at the other Spirit.

“...?” Nia got a curious look on her face. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but isn’t it going to be pretty hard to recover from this?”

“Hee-hee-hee!” Miku giggled. “I do wonder about that. I heard you were held by DEM for a long time, so maybe you don’t know about a little thing called SNS?”

“Oh, you mean social networking services?” Nia nodded. “I’ve heard of ’em at least. I am the host to an omnipotent Angel, after all.”

“...But you didn’t know who I aaaaam,” Miku reproached her. “You weren’t interested enough to look into it? Hmmm?”

“...Ah, seriously. Sorry,” Nia muttered, and Miku shook her head as though to shift out of grudge mode.

“Anywaaaaay! More than half of the population uses SNS now. And given the age demographics of the people in the venue, I’d say that percentage is even higher here, maybe?”

“...! Miku, you didn’t actually—?!” Kotori cried out, as if realizing something, before pulling her phone from her pocket and tapping at the screen. A few seconds later, she gasped.

“H-hey, Kotori. What’s going on?” Shido asked, and Kotori turned the screen of her phone toward him.

“This.”

Tohka, Yoshino, and Origami joined him in peering at her phone.

Displayed there was the homepage of a certain social media site open to a post with Miku's profile pic next to it.

MIKU IZAYOI: I'M AT COMICO HELPING SOME FRIENDS OUT! SELLING BOOKS AT RATATOSKR IN EAST HALL A-20.5! PHOTOS ARE OKAY~!

"Wha...?! M-Miku?!" Shido stared at her, stunned.

"You all are working so hard for this, daaarling!" Miku grinned as she jabbed his chest with her index finger. "I couldn't not pull out aaaaall the stops! I mean, just like Natsumi, I want to be useful!"

"Miku...!" he cried out, honestly moved.

She lowered her eyes momentarily and then jerked her face up and turned toward Nia. "It's maybe true we can't beat you playing the game the standard way. So then we'll add heresy to heresy and crush your logic!"

She snapped a finger out challengingly before continuing.

"I'll show you what I mean, Nia. A woman's power, the kind you've never understood. I'll carve my name into your heart! Me, Miku Izayoi!!" She threw out her arms like she was about to perform at a concert.

It couldn't have been in response to this gesture, but in that instant, Shido heard feet thundering toward them from the entrance to the hall, just like when the venue had opened.

"It's showtime!" Miku shouted in English, then threw her hands up and snapped her fingers.

The crowd that thronged into the hall charged toward the Ratatoskr booth.

"Ah! Miku's really here?!"

"For real?! It's her?! Why would she be—?!"

"Uh. Um. I heard you were selling books. Is that... true?" one boy asked ever so timidly.

Although Miku paused briefly at the sight of a boy, she was quick to smile at him. "Yes, it's truuuuue. Thank you so much for always cheering me on!"

“Whoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!” the gathered attendees roared, like a battle cry. One after another, they pressed toward the Ratatoskr booth.

“...! Kaguya! Yuzuru! Get the line! Kawagoe and you all, restock the books! Take care of the people who’ve paid!” Momentarily stunned, Kotori put her commander face back on and let fly the orders. “Shido, Tohka, Origami, Yoshino. You keep collecting money with me! Natsumi, you sell, but when Miku gets tired from dealing with people, you let her hug you to recharge her battery!”

“Wait,” Natsumi protested. “Am I the only one with the weird job?!”

Although the jobs weren’t exactly evenly distributed, the Spirits nonetheless set to work on their individual tasks.

Seeing this, Nia furrowed her brow slightly.

“Hmm. You’re working it, huh? So this girl really is famous.”

“...Yeah. Impressive, right?” Shido said. “She’s our incredible idol.”

“You’re not gonna say we’re cowards or anything at this stage, yeah?” Kotori said, returning her look.

Nia shrugged and nodded.

“Of course not. But you think you can catch up now?” Her gaze grew sharper as the corners of her mouth turned up.

“Yup!” Shido nodded forcefully. “I’m coming for you! For the sake of everyone here helping me out! And for your sake, too, Nia!”

Nia laughed as she sold books.

“Well, thanks. But I won’t be giving you any bonuses for saying that!”

“No worries!” he called back. “We just have to win!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Right, true! If you can, that is!” And then she abruptly stopped laughing.

For a moment, he was confused, but then he quickly understood the reason why she’d stopped.

A woman with thick glasses had come along to her booth.

“T-Takajou,” Nia said, stunned.

Yes. It was the manga artist Shido and Kotori had talked to the day before, Hiroki Takajou.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Takajou smiled brightly. “It’s been quite some time, Honjou. I heard that your circle was exhibiting for the first time after a long absence, and so I have arrived.”

“Oh. Uhhh. Well, thanks...” Instantly, Nia got an awkward look on her face and began to stammer.

“I apologize for my sudden appearance.” Takajou stared at Nia through the thick lenses of her glasses. “If this offends you in any way, I beg your pardon. But there is one thing I would ask of you?”

Nia averted her eyes awkwardly.

“...Have I committed some blunder without awareness of it? If so, I would ask that you allow me to apologize,” Takajou continued, and bowed neatly.

“Th-that’s just...” Seemingly panicked, Nia looked anywhere but at her. “How could you have blundered?!” she half shrieked. This response was a little different from Nia’s special brand of carefree.

“Is that indeed the case?” Takajou’s eyes grew round in surprise. But Nia’s reply was evasive.

Silence reigned for a brief while until, perhaps judging that she couldn’t block the booth any more than she already had, Takajou let out a short sigh, bought a book, and bowed neatly once more.

“Even assuming that you do dislike me now,” she said, “I will look forward to your books, Honjou.”

“Ah...” Nia started to say something, but in the end, she didn’t know how to continue, and she simply bowed her head.

“...” When Shido saw this, he felt like the question on his mind after listening to Honjou speak the day before had changed into a certainty. “Nia.”

“...! Oh. Boy,” she sighed. “I wish you hadn’t seen that. But the contest—”

“So you *like* her, huh?” he said, cutting her off.

“Huh?!” Her eyes flew open. “Wh-what are you talking about, boy?! I don’t swing that way.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that. I meant, like, as a person. As a friend.”

Yes. This was the feeling he’d gotten yesterday.

It was a fact that Nia was disappointed in human beings because of what she’d seen through the power of Rasiel. Which was exactly why she’d sought solace in the two-dimensional characters who could not betray her. To the point where, eventually, she’d become a manga artist.

But there was one way in which she differed from a Spirit who despaired of humanity. Given that she had made a success of herself in human society, she had acquired some bare minimum level of communication ability.

He was sure this was the true nature of that dissonance he felt.

Kotori had said that maybe Nia had grown estranged from Takajou because she’d used Rasiel to look into Honjou. But it seemed to him that she would have actually been able to continue their relationship in a dry, surface way if Takajou was just another human being she’d grown disappointed in after learning the truth about her.

When he considered this, a single possibility floated to the surface in the back of his brain.

“Nia, were you...maybe scared?” he asked gently.

“Huh? Wh-what are—,” Nia started in response, and he cut her off just as gently.

“If you kept getting closer to Takajou, your curiosity would win out at some point and you’d use Rasiel,” he said. “And you didn’t want to lose faith in the friend you’d finally made, so you pulled away?”

For a second, Nia was at a loss for words, and then she turned away.

“Ha! I seriously don’t know what you’re talking about, boy!” she replied sharply, as she sold a book. “Oh, that’s five hundred yen.”

“So then, what was that?” Shido demanded. “If it was someone you hated, you’d actually be able to be normal with them, right?! Thank you very much!”

Nia and Shido glared at each other as they simultaneously interacted with their customers... In the end, it turned out to be a strange argument.

“God! Enough already! Focus on selling! Oh, the end of the line is back there!”

“Sorry, but I can’t do that! I want to win this contest because I want to help you! It’s all pointless if I let this go! Oh, you can pick up your book over there!”

“Ngggaaaah...!” Nia groaned in irritation. With her hands still busy selling books, she cried out in frustration, “Fine! So what if I am scared?! I mean, I want friends, too! But what am I supposed to do?! There’s no way a jerk who can peek at a person’s whole life with a super-high-definition camera could ever make any friends! That’s from one thousand yen?”

When he heard this, her isolation suddenly made sense to Shido. She worried that she might give into her own curiosity and look up the other person in Rasiel, and she also felt guilty about the fact that she could peep freely at the other person. Her supernatural abilities, on par with the power of a god, created a mental anguish in her, a loneliness because no equal to her existed. This was something that someone who did not have the powers of a Spirit could not understand.

But regardless, Shido said to her, “Well, you won’t know that until you try, now, will you?!”

“Ha! Easier said than done, Mr. Smooth Talker!” she shrieked. “Let me pose the question to you, then, boy. Could you really, honestly be friends with someone who could peep on you twenty-four seven—on the toilet, in the bath, someone who could dig up a past you wished would stay hidden?!”

After being momentarily stunned, Shido started to laugh loudly.



“Ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Wh-what’s so funny?!” she asked, baffled.

“Sorry.” He exhaled at length and ran his hands through his hair. “I’ve just so... been there, done that! Aaah. I finally get it now. You and me, we’re like two peas in a pod! Privacy?! Sounds incredible, I’d love some! In fact, you’re like an angel to me, worrying about this on my behalf!”

“H-huh?!” Nia furrowed her brow like she didn’t understand what he was talking about.

Looking at her out of the corner of his eye, he continued, “If you want to peep, peep to your heart’s content! If you wanna dig, dig all the way to the bottom! Even still! I won’t hate you!”

“...!” Nia gasped. But then she gritted her teeth in vexation. “Whaaaaaaat?! You don’t get to say that! I’m pretty sure if I peeped in on every corner of your life, *I’d* be the one hating *you*, okay?!”

Even while the two of them were sniping back and forth at each other, another surging wave of customers crashed over them. The circles Ratatoskr and Honjoudo sold one book after the other, the line of buyers never ending.

While Honjoudo had five hundred copies over them in terms of stock numbers, Ratatoskr was faster with the checkout thanks to their greater numbers. One person sold the books, one person managed the line, and another was occasionally hugged by an idol tired of giving books out. They shouted. They got teary. In the midst of this passion and fervor, they each fulfilled their duties.

And then...

““Thank you so much!””

At exactly the same moment, the voices of the two people who had bought the last of Shido’s and Nia’s books rang out.

“...!”

“...?!”

Panting, Shido turned to look at Nia. She had similarly sent her gaze his way. Both of their faces were steaming, despite the fact that it was the dead of winter, and large beads of sweat had formed on their foreheads. Nia's glasses were slightly fogged up.

Once they got their breathing under control again, they called out from their respective booths.

"Ratatoskr is sold out!"

"Honjoudo is sold out!"

Yes. The two neighboring circles had sold out of their books at exactly the same moment.

When they proclaimed their new lack of stock, the attendees still in line let out disappointed cries and dispersed. Not a single person came forward to argue with them or voice their dissatisfaction. Given that they couldn't get the book, there was simply no longer any point in them being there. In which case, they might as well go look for other books.

Watching them go, Shido and Nia sighed heavily at the same time and flopped down onto their metal folding chairs, making them clatter.

"...Welp. I guess it's a draw, then." Kotori turned toward Nia with a somewhat hard look on her face.

"..." A few seconds later, Nia leaned back in her chair and threw her head back toward the ceiling, took off her glasses, and wiped away the sweat on her face with a sleeve. And then she fixed Shido with a glare before digging around underneath her table and pulling out the doujinshi she'd traded him for earlier. "Fine. Your reward for making it this far. I guess I'll go ahead and read it."

"...!"

The members of the Ratatoskr circle looked at each other and let out a shout of joy.



About an hour after they'd sold out of their doujinshi, once Shido and his team had packed up their booth, the Spirits changed clothes, and they all

headed out to a corner of the park that was right behind Tengu Square. If they were going to talk about Spirits, then it would be better if the Honjoudo staff, who knew nothing about the situation, was not there, which led to them quickly taking their leave of the event.

In addition to her salespeople, Nia also paid about five people in cash under the table to secure the doujinshi she was after. Which made sense. He'd thought it was strange for the manga-loving Nia not to go and buy other people's doujinshi, but she had apparently had it all sorted. She would have liked to go around and buy them herself, but because she couldn't exactly leave her booth in the hands of someone else, she was forced to hire people to get her doujinshi for her.

"So then, I'll go ahead and read it," Nia said, and sat down on a park bench with the Ratatoskr doujinshi in hand.

Although their contest had ended in a draw, they'd managed to get her to read their book anyway. But this was the highest hurdle that needed to be cleared. Unless Nia fell for Shido, the main character of this book, the real human being Shido wouldn't be able to seal her powers.

"..."

Naturally, he and the Spirits all stared at Nia on the bench.

Frowning, she looked up at them. "It's kinda hard to read when everyone's staring at me."

"O-oh... Sorry." Shido scratched his cheek and deliberately averted his eyes. As if following his lead, the Spirits also turned away.

"That's not quite what I mean, but, well, whatever." Nia sighed, and then her eyes narrowed. "And like, let me just say one more time. The only thing I agreed to here was to read this book, got it? After that, who knows? So don't go getting your hopes up or whatever, mmkay?"

"...Yeah. I know," Shido said, his nerves showing on his face.

Nia shrugged slightly before waving at him and the Spirits in a shooing motion.

“Mmkay, so go away. When you’re reading manga, the whole thing is that you gotta be free and let it give you new life without anyone bugging you.”

“O-okay...?” He didn’t really get that last part, but he got that she was basically saying to leave her alone. He led the Spirits to a place a little ways off from Nia.

“Haah. Honestly.” Once she was alone on the bench, Nia sighed softly. “...That damned boy, going and talking out of his ass.” She remembered what had happened at the doujinshi market earlier and scowled in annoyance.

But for some reason, she understood exactly why she was annoyed—everything he’d said had been right on the mark.

“...He couldn’t stop going on and on about this stupid book. I’ll cut him down a few sizes if it’s only lukewarm.”

She blinked repeatedly as if to put herself in a new headspace and adjusted her glasses, before dropping her gaze to the doujinshi in her hands.

The character on the cover seemed to have been modeled after Shido. She’d thought this the first time she’d seen it a few hours ago, but while the lines were a little rough, the art clearly went beyond the work of an amateur. Had they hired a professional manga artist?

“Hmm. Well... But the crucial part is the content,” she murmured, then opened the book and started reading.

The art was... Well, for a doujinshi, it got a passing grade. There was some variation in the linework from page to page, but it was still good enough that she could read it without stress.

The story started with the boy Shido Itsuka meeting a Spirit. Boy meets girl with a truckload of power who has been continually rejected by human beings. And then the boy meets a bunch of other Spirits, and thanks to his straightforward intentions, the Spirits all open up to him.

“...Okay, I get it.” Having finished reading the book a few minutes later, Nia groaned.

To start with the conclusion, Shido’s book went well beyond what she’d

expected. At the very least, no one would have believed that this book had been created in a mere two days by a bunch of amateurs.

But...put another way, that was it. The book was indeed well-done. But whether Nia would fall in love with its protagonist, Shido Itsuka, was another story.

First, there were simply too few pages. Maybe because of the time constraints, this was inevitable, but it was all she could do to follow the story. The appeal of the protagonist, the key to the whole endeavor, was not fully fleshed out in such a slim volume. And above all else, this protagonist Shido Itsuka lacked a sense of reality.

Given that the book had been drawn in order to make Nia weak in the knees, this was perhaps only natural, but Shido was drawn too much as the hero. So even if she did fall for this character on the page, she would most assuredly be disappointed in the gap between him and the real Shido.

“That’s too bad, boy. Looks like you really went all out here, but you’re not taking me down with this,” she muttered with a sigh, and clapped the doujinshi shut.

But there was still one thing nagging at her. Whirling her head to look at her surroundings, she checked to make sure there was no one nearby before raising her left hand into the empty air and manifesting Rasiel. And then she ran a finger over the cover, with a wish in her heart to know more about Shido and the others drawing this book.

Yes. Although the content itself had not won her over entirely, as a manga artist, she was very curious about how they had managed to create a book of this quality in such a brief time.

The pages of Rasiel shone, and when a shining text rose up, she gently touched the page. Instantly, information on the process of making this book poured into her head.

“...Uh-huh, okay. So after they wrote the story together, this girl Natsumi did the drawings, and they divvied up the rest of the work... Not too helpful, this. Not very realistic to have that many digital assistants. I guess that’s Ratatoskr for you, though. Going the extra mile...”

Satisfied with the information coming in from Rasiel, she abruptly arched an eyebrow.

“I want...that blockhead Nia to find out, too, as soon as we can show her. Find out how great...friends are,” she heard Natsumi say in her mind.

“...Hmph.” Nia scowled, displeased. “Yeah, yeah. Thanks for the feedback. But sorry. Your manga just isn’t—”

Nia’s eyes widened.

“Huh?”

The reason was simple. Because new text had been inscribed on the page of Rasiel her hand was touching. At the same time, a new scene poured into her head.

A vision from when Natsumi had possessed her Spirit powers. The process of Natsumi, who harbored a distrust of people, opening her heart up to the kindness of Shido and the others.

“Wait. This is...,” she uttered, stunned. But she did actually understand what was happening, even though it had seemed ambiguous and unclear at first.

Rasiel was an omnipotent Angel. But it could only pull out the information she desired. Most likely, she had wondered somewhere in her heart what exactly had led Natsumi to utter those words that she could barely bear to hear.

But that wasn’t all. Bits of text popped up one after the other on the pages of Rasiel, and in response, information flooded into her head, dazzling her brain.

Origami, Miku, Kaguya, Yuzuru, Kotori, Yoshino, and Tohka. Their hearts once so tightly closed off, these girls had changed when they’d encountered this warm light that was Shido.

Aah. The sight was not so different from the story in the book she’d only just been reading.

“Ah... Ah...,” she moaned.

Yes. There was not a hint of dramatization in that book. This boy Shido Itsuka really did throw his whole heart into saving the girls without regard for even his own safety.

He would have faced more than one or two issues in associating with the Spirits—the darkness in their hearts, their gloomy pasts, potentially even their cruel natures. But even in the face of these issues, Shido didn't give up. Even when it seemed that he might be broken, he got back onto his feet.

Now she could understand. There wasn't a word of a lie in what he had said to her earlier. For her, he was without a doubt a hero.

Plip. Plip.

Drops of water fell on the pages of Rasiel and bled a hazy radiance.

“...!”

It was only after Nia took her hand away from her Angel that she realized these were her own tears.

“...” Waiting on a bench on the west side of the park, Shido swung his legs back and forth restlessly.

“Shido, you're being rude,” Kotori noted.

“O-oh. Sorry.” Shido stopped his unconscious fidgeting. But when he looked at her closely, Kotori was also fussing in her own way, flicking the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth back and forth.

This was to be expected, however. Because they were waiting to find out from Nia if she would let them seal her Spirit powers or not. And this decision would also determine whether she came under the protection of Ratatoskr, allowing the organization to protect her from DEM.

“Shido!” Tohka abruptly cried out.

He jerked his head up and saw Nia walking slowly toward them from where they'd left her earlier.

“...! Nia!” he cried.

“Keh-keh! And so she comes.”

“Nervous. What will the result be?”

Shido and the Spirits held their breath.

But when she was finally standing in front of him, he frowned. The eyes he

could see through her glasses were red and bloodshot.

“Nia...?” he asked. “What’s wrong?”

“... Oh, uh, nothing,” she replied, and sighed.

When she said that, he couldn’t really push it any further. Plus, there was something that concerned him even more at the moment.

“So...how was it?” he said, tentatively. “Our book.”

“...” Nia glanced at the doujinshi in her hand, wordlessly. And then she shrugged. “It’s pretty well-done, but you were maybe a little too optimistic to think you could take me down with this one book. Sorry, but I’m pretty sure I’m not that cheap of a date.”

“Ngh... Hngh...” Shido gritted his teeth and clenched his hands into fists. A sense of helplessness washed over him.

“B-but...”

The Spirits got similarly tragic looks on their faces and hung their heads dejectedly.

However.

“But, well.” Nia averted her eyes as she continued. “I guess you might just have a future with me. Or something? I could give you another chance at any rate.”

“Huh...?” he replied, his eyes wide as saucers, and Nia’s cheeks reddened, like she was embarrassed.

“...I’m telling you that I’ll let you have another date with me, mmkay?” she snapped. “If you’re really a man, make your decisive victory happen, then.”

“...!” Shido got goose bumps all over his body. The strength that had started to drain from his body returned, and he had the sudden urge in the depths of his gut to shout out loud.

“Shido!”

Tohka and the others apparently felt the same. They flew toward him the way a soccer team would celebrate the striker who scored the winning goal.

“Eek! Darling, you diiiiiiid it!”

“This is. Amazing!”

“Obvious. The gift of your appeal, Shido.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Seriously, quit it, you guys.” He scratched his head awkwardly. “And like, Miku and Origami, could you actually quit it for real? Um, it’s a little...? Are you actually trying to take advantage of the confusion and get my clothes off?!”

“Whaaat? We would never. Right?”

“I’m not doing that. Even if that was the end result, it is simply an unfortunate accident. It’s no one’s fault.”

“Eee! Eeeaaaah?!”

“H-hey, come on. Both of you! What are you doing to Shido?!” Stunned, Tohka tried to stop Miku and Origami. This spurred the other Spirits into the fray, and now it was a whole thing.

Shido ended up shoved around the circle of them, jostled about.

“...Pfft! Ha-ha! Ha-ha Ha-ha ha!” Nia burst out laughing. “Man, I dunno. It’s like, yeah, you guys are all right. Hey, boy. Maybe it if was you—,” she started, and then everything got weird. Nia gasped abruptly as her whole body began to shake, and she dropped to her knees, clutching her head. “Huh? Ah. Ah. Aaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaah?!” Her face twisted up in agony, and she began to shriek like her throat was being ripped open.

“N-Nia...?!” Shido cried, ready to charge to the side of the suddenly struggling Nia. What had happened to her?

But an inky black Spirit power spilled out of her body and ate into the ground. A heartbeat later, alarms began to blare around them, perhaps picking up the signs of a spacequake from this concentrated Spirit power.

“Wha—?! Is this...?!”

“Nia! What’s wrong?!”

Shido and the Spirits cried out in confusion.

Kotori pressed a hand to her right ear and began to speak. She was apparently getting a message from the command center through her earpiece.

“What?! Meaning?!”

“Kotori! What’s happening?! Nia’s—!” Shido cried.

“...Spirit value, category E,” Kotori replied, a shiver of fear coloring her face. Her next words were ones of despair.

“Nia’s inverting!”

Chapter 5

What's yours is mine.

In the rear seat of a car driving through the city of Tengu, Isaac Westcott, managing director of DEM Industries, smiled with delight as he stared at the screen of the small terminal in his hand.

"Decent progress here," he said. "Knox and his copilot really did do good work for us. If we had taken any action, there would inevitably be a stink left behind."

"You speak of Material A?" Ellen asked from the seat next to him as she glanced at the terminal.

"Yes." Westcott nodded dramatically. "Although we'd do better to call her by the code name 'Sister' now."

"..." Ellen was silent as if considering this before continuing. "That's excellent news. But isn't it actually quite risky to release a Spirit into the wild after capturing her?" she said, knitting her eyebrows slightly as if displeased.

This "Sister" was in fact the sole Spirit DEM Industries possessed, captured five years earlier by Ellen herself. It wasn't hard to imagine that she would feel some opposition to this strategy.

But Westcott found her expression, so like that of a sulking child, strangely adorable, and his cheeks automatically softened into a smile.

"What," she demanded flatly.

"Oh, no," he said. "It is indeed just as you say. There is most certainly the possibility that we will lose DEM's most prized asset in vain. But it's also a fact that we were at a dead end, yes?"

Ellen frowned.

"Well...yes."

“For five years, we inflicted on Sister every physical and psychological torment we could come up with. But even with all of that, she never reached a completely inverted state.”

He glanced at Ellen and continued.

“But the advent of Princess’s inversion right in front of us three months ago was truly magnificent. Even though we ourselves had inflicted no injury to her.” Westcott’s voice was tinged with exultation as he lowered his gaze, ruminating on the figure he had once seen.

September of that year. He would never forget it. Westcott and Ellen had succeeded in inverting the Spirit Princess. And the trigger for that inversion had been none other than the boy with the ability to seal away Spirit powers, Shido Itsuka.

That ability had led to his discovery by Ratatoskr, the anonymous organization that was DEM’s rival. Shido had used it to open up the hearts of one Spirit after the other and lock away their powers. But the trusting relationship between the boy and the Spirits born from this process had been the very cause of Princess’s inversion.

“Which is precisely why I decided to let Sister, this precious, valuable Spirit, escape from our hands briefly. After embedding a micro-Realizer in her brain and wiping her memories of everything that happened to her during the last five years, of course.”

This was the special “treatment” Westcott had ordered carried out on Sister. No doubt, she had not a single memory of the fact that her stomach had been opened up while she was still alive, or that holes had been drilled into her skull, or that her limbs had been sliced away one millimeter at a time.

The reasons for this treatment were roughly divided into two groups. One was very simple. Due to the long period of experimentation and torture, her psyche had been essentially destroyed. If they hadn’t dealt with her memories, she would have had a hard time even maintaining a proper sense of self.

And the other was...

“...Oh-ho?” Westcott noticed a change in the numbers displayed on the

terminal in his hand and arched an eyebrow.

“What’s the matter?” Ellen asked.

“It seems there’s some turmoil in Sister’s mental state. Just as expected, Shido Itsuka has apparently expertly bound her.” The corners of Westcott’s lips turned up. “Five years earlier, when we captured Sister, she had already turned her back on human beings. Sad, but perhaps inevitable with that power of hers?”

“But things are different now. She met Shido Itsuka and discovered the warmth of the other Spirits who came before her. She found a ray of light in a world she had long given up on. Isn’t that wonderful?”

The smile on Westcott’s face grew lurid as he looked over at Ellen.

“Well then,” she said.

“Yes. Let’s get to it. Ready yourself. At my signal, the Realizer inside of Sister’s brain will be activated. Once it is, she should recall in vivid detail all the memories of those five years that she has forgotten in an instant.” He smiled as he looked at the numbers displayed on his terminal.

Yes. She had found hope. She had learned that human beings were not without value. Without knowing that this would be painted over with despair.

“It’s painfully simple. A glass marble is more easily broken when dropped from an even greater height,” Westcott said, and looked up. “Now then, shall we go, Ellen? To attain what we’ve so long desired.”

“I suppose we should... Ike,” Ellen replied in a quiet voice.

Westcott nodded as if satisfied and shifted his gaze to the person in the passenger seat of the car.

“I’m counting on you as well,” he said. “Assist Ellen as best you can.”

“...” The girl nodded silently.



“Ah. Aaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

As Nia screamed in anguish, masses of sludge-like Spirit power oozed from her body. The ground it touched melted into a sludge itself, like a mountain of

salt meeting water.

That wasn't the only thing. Cuts and injuries appeared all over the body of the screaming Nia—her forehead, her hands, her legs—gushing copious amounts of blood.

Shido couldn't see anything at all that could inflict these kinds of injuries on her. But the wounds opened like flowers blooming on her skin, like her body had suddenly remembered the existence of these injuries. It was reminiscent of the stigmata arising on the body of a person of deep faith.

And eventually, this blood and Spirit power enveloped Nia entirely and began to transform her.

The nunlike silhouette Shido had seen previously became something sinister, quite unlike the Astral Dress in his memory.

“Ni...a...” He stared at her, stunned.

For him—actually, for everyone there—this scene was familiar.

Sefirah inversion. A conversion of existence that happened when the Spirit was plunged into a deep despair.

But he couldn't understand.

Tohka and Origami had both inverted previously, just as Nia was doing now. For Tohka, it had been because Shido was about to be killed before her eyes. For Origami, it had been because she learned that her parents had been killed by her own hand.

But there was no such reason for the inversion of Nia happening before him now. It really was out of the blue. It had in fact been in the instant that she was about to take a step toward them that this despair had manifested.



“Wh-what is going on? Out of nowhere...”

“Nia...! Why...”

Natsumi and Yoshino screwed up their faces at the intense waves of Spirit power radiating from Nia.

In the next instant, a shudder ran through Nia’s body, and she lifted her face like a puppet whose strings were being pulled.

“Ah. Aaaaaaaaah!” Screwed up in intense pain and anguish, her visage dyed red with her own blood was reminiscent of the holy virgin with tears of blood running down her face.

In a hoarse whisper that was barely a voice, she called, “Be...el...ze...bub!”

A massive book manifested before her. Just the sight of it made Shido feel an overwhelming pressure like he was physically bound by gravity. There was no mistake. This was the same type of Demon King he’d seen before with Nahemah and Satan.

Motionless in midair, Beelzebub automatically opened its mouth, and its pages began to flip at an incredible speed. And then they lifted away from the book’s spine and danced up into the air like a snowstorm.

“Wh-what the...,” Shido gasped.

“Careful, Shido,” Origami said coolly, her words nevertheless full of warning. “That’s part of a Demon King. It’s no regular storm of paper.”

As if in response, the pages of Beelzebub shone with a dark light, scattering into magic symbols around Nia.

“Wha...?!” Shido’s eyes went wide in shock.

Several grotesque monsters like darkness given material form crawled one after the other from the pages of Beelzebub.

“—!”

Howling, screaming in voices that were not entirely there, the abominations kicked at the ground as one and came after Shido and the Spirits.

“Whoa...?!” He froze like a deer in headlights.

But before one of the monstrosities could reach Shido, it was swallowed up by light. Half of its body was sent flying, and it melted away into the air.

He quickly figured out what had happened. Origami had manifested her limited Astral Dress and shot through the monstrosity with her Angel Metatron.

Actually, it wasn't only Origami. All the Spirits there except for Kotori were clad in limited Astral Dresses and had manifested their Angels as they turned their gazes on Nia, who was still generating darkness and anomalies born from it.

"Gang...!" he cried.

"I don't really get what's going on!" Tohka cried. "But I get that we can't just leave her like this!"

"Please let us deal with these little peeeeests! Darling, you save Nia!" Miku shouted, and dropped into a battle-ready posture.

In contrast, the pages of Beelzebub danced, releasing a myriad of monstrosities from within.

"Hngh..." Scowling at Nia's ever-expanding army, Shido dropped his center of gravity. He was the only one who could seal away the power of a Spirit. Which meant the only way to end this was to press in directly on Nia. And he himself had no objection to that.

But he did have one concern.

"...Will I be able to turn Nia back to normal by kissing her?" he asked himself.

With Tohka, the first inverted Spirit Shido had gone up against, he'd succeeded in bringing her mind back to this side through a kiss. And Origami, the second inverted Spirit, had been awakened by his call from the outside and the voice of another Origami from within.

But compared with Tohka and Origami, the connection between him and Nia was simply too weak. He wasn't entirely clear on the reason she had inverted, so he had no idea if he could actually return her to her former state using the same method he had up to now.

Kotori likely picked up on this anxiety of his. She snorted defiantly. "No idea.

But we don't have any other options, so you'll just have to do it. All we can do is have faith in everything we've done so far and trust that your voice will reach Nia."

"...Right. I guess so." The tension in him eased somewhat, and he turned his gaze on Nia. She looked abnormal and malevolent and like she was screaming in pain. "I'm going to save Nia. Gang... I'm counting on you!"

"Yeah!" the Spirits shouted in response to Shido's cry.

"I regret to inform you, that will not be happening," he heard someone say from somewhere.

And then a girl wearing shining, platinum mechanical armor appeared from the sky and descended to stand on the other side of Nia.

Nordic blond, arms and body hazy. A transcendental being with the utmost faith in herself being the strongest of any living creature.

The girl looked down on Shido and the others as she continued, "Because I am here."

"...! Ellen...!" Shido called her name with a scowl.

Ellen. Ellen Mira Mathers. The world's strongest Wizard, working for DEM, a human being who went beyond the domain of humanity to reach the realm of Spirits.

Alarm bled onto the faces of the Spirits as they gazed upon her.

Ellen turned away from them and smiled as she observed Nia being swallowed up by darkness.

"I see," she said briefly. "You have truly taken on a magnificent form, haven't you, Sister? I knew Ike could do it."

Kotori's expression twisted unhappily.

"Your timing's a little too good to be true. So you all are behind this?"

"Yes. DEM originally had ownership of this Spirit. How fortunate, hmm? I must accomplish my task now. If you bravely leave this place of your own will, then I shall overlook you for today," Ellen said, and made a gesture like she was

shooing them all away.

Shido clenched his teeth.

“Not a chance! As if I’d ever let you take Nia!”

“I have no intention of discussing the matter with you.” Paying absolutely no mind to Shido’s words, Ellen grabbed the hilt and drew the sword equipped on her back. The dense magic of the blade shone to create a sword of light. The laser blade Caledfwlch, Ellen’s specialized equipment.

Perhaps in reaction to this movement, the monstrosities writhing around Nia launched themselves at Ellen as one.

She merely frowned ever so slightly before manipulating the Territory deployed around her and dispatching the swarm of anomalies in one go.

“The power of the Demon King is a bit troublesome. I shall make short work of it, however,” she said, as she manipulated her Territory to move her body back before raising Caledfwlch and flying toward Nia.

However.

When Ellen approached Nia, Caledfwlch’s blade was knocked back with a flash of light.

“You’ll have to go through me!” Tohka cried, after kicking at the ground and defending against Ellen’s attack.

“So you intend to interfere? I don’t mind. but in that case, I will show no mercy.” Ellen’s gaze grew sharper, and she launched a slicing attack so fast it was nearly invisible to the eye.

“Hngh...!” Tohka took the blow with a grimace. But she couldn’t wield her full Spirit power. She was at a disadvantage against the most powerful Wizard. After exchanging a few blows, she was gradually pushed back.

“Tohka!” Shido cried.

“Tch! She can’t win this on her own!” Kotori called out from where she was watching the situation to the rear. “Kaguya, Yuzuru, Miku! Back Tohka up! Yoshino, Natsumi, Origami! Clear those black things out of the way and make a path for Shido!”

The Spirits shouted their acknowledgment and, following Kotori's instructions, they split into two teams: one to stop Ellen and one to take out the monsters popping up around Nia.

"Up against Ellen, Tohka and the others won't last long," Kotori told Shido. "You have to finish this sooner rather than later!"

"Right! Let's do this! Yoshino, Natsumi, Origami!" Shido shouted, and the three Spirits nodded firmly as they brought out their individual Angels.

"Please. Step back!"

"Hey, y'all! You're seriously in the way!" said Yoshino.

Yoshino manipulated the enormous rabbit puppet Zadkiel to freeze the moisture in the air and stop the monsters in their tracks.

"Metatron."

"...Haniel!"

Seizing the moment, Origami shot through the remaining anomalies with Metatron, while Natsumi changed the Beelzebub pages scattered on the ground into leaves with Haniel, neatly eliminating part of the army writhing in front of Nia.

Naturally, there were still monstrosities nearby, and so long as Beelzebub was there, their enemy would never be exhausted. But with the support of the Spirits, it was actually possible to render Nia defenseless in the span of a few seconds.

However.

"...?!"

Shido heard a voice like someone swallowing their breath from the left and automatically looked in that direction. And unconsciously furrowed his brow as he witnessed something impossible.

Origami had turned the tips of her Angel Metatron toward herself and released its beams of light. Her Astral Dress peeled off, and an expression of anguish rose up on her face as she pressed a hand to her bleeding side.

“Origami! What—?!” he cried.

“Eek...?!”

“Gah! Wh-what is this?!”

But it didn’t stop there. Yoshino and Zadkiel had their feet bound to the ground by their own icy air, and Natsumi had been transformed into an unattractive mascot character as if repelled by the light of Haniel.

All three Spirits had been attacked by their own Angels. Shido couldn’t help but be perplexed at this strange situation. And then he felt his own body stiffen up and stop moving.

“Wha...?!” he gasped.

“I—I can’t...move?!” Kotori cried out from beside him. The same thing was apparently happening to her.

The sensation was somewhat different from that of a Wizard Territory binding him. It was almost as though his own body had decided to ignore the instructions from his brain and stop moving.

“This is ridiculous!”

It was then that Shido realized part of Nia’s Astral Dress had changed into a writing tool and was autonomously writing on the pages of Beelzebub.

“...! Future Records...!” he gasped.

An ability of Rasiel that Nia had shown him. Given that he and the other Spirits appeared to be hostile toward her now, she was most likely overwriting their future actions in Beelzebub.

But the speed with which it was overwriting that future didn’t begin to compare with what Nia had shown him. This was like they had taken on a god who could rearrange the future on a whim.

“Hngh. Ngh!” Shido mustered all his strength and tried to take a step forward. But it was as if his body from the neck down had its own will, and his muscles didn’t so much as twitch.

While he was struggling, Nia produced monstrosities from the pages of

Beelzebub and replenished the troops that Origami and her companions had eliminated. Those monstrosities advanced slowly yet certainly on Shido and his friends.

“Dammit! Move! Go!!” he cried, spurring himself on. “If I don’t do this here, who’s gonna save Nia?!”

An inky black anomaly stretched a hand toward his head.

“Ungaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” he yelled.

His body grew hot like a sudden fever attacking, and a ferocious gale blew up with him at its center.

The monstrosities surrounding him were knocked away as one, and at the same time, the binding that had stopped him in place was released.

“What the...?!” He was stunned by what had just happened. But he soon understood this wind was without a doubt due to the Spirit power of the Yamai sisters.

“Shido!” Kotori called out to him from behind. But it seemed that the binding on her body had not yet been released. Origami and Yoshino were still stuck. Natsumi was still in the form of a strange character.

Seeing this, Shido guessed that this power was most likely the same as Miku’s voice. Beelzebub’s future record controlled the movements of the people noted in it, but the results were not perfectly manifested for those with the Spirit power that made it possible to fight back.

In which case, this situation now made perfect sense. While Shido was a person, he also harbored within himself the power of eight Spirits.

“Here I go!” he cried, and charged forward.

Naturally, as if in response, the monstrosities swarmed around him. But for some reason, they didn’t seem like much of a threat to him now.

“Zadkiel!” he shouted, and stomped on the ground. The area around him froze with his heel as ground zero, and the feet of the monstrosities were fastened to the earth.

Yoshino’s Angel Zadkiel. He’d somehow felt that he could tap into its power

now.

Oh, that's right.

He finally grabbed hold of the edge of a sensation he'd had when he'd been only half-conscious.

At the beginning of that month, he had lost control because of a constriction of the paths between him and the Spirits, and those Spirits had saved him. And while he'd been running wild, he'd freely wielded all their Angels. The sensations from that time remained in his muscle memory, in the depths of his heart.

Naturally, it was nothing more than fleeting power. He was nothing compared to the real Spirits when it came to handling each of the Angels. But for now, it was enough.

Knocking aside the anomalies, he opened a path toward Nia. The seven Angels housed inside of him were more than enough power to make this happen.

“—!”

The monstrosities used their compatriots held fast by ice as stepping stones and chased after Shido in hot pursuit.

He raised his right hand, focused his mind, and called out a name.

“Sandalphon!”

In response, a large sword materialized out of thin air. Shido swung this sword—Sandalphon—out in a slashing motion.

“Haah!”

The light filling the blade carved out a crescent moon arc and shot forward to cleave the bodies of the monstrosities in two.

Naturally, this tremendous force put an incredible burden on his body. Muscle fibers ripped apart, and his bones squealed in protest. To recover from these injuries, Kotori's regenerative flames enveloped his body in a blaze.

Intense pain and incandescent heat rolled over him. And so Shido screamed.

“Aaaaaaaahh!”

A song of pain relief sent by Miku’s Angel Gabriel. Miku would probably rebuke him for calling something like this a song, but the voice that entered his ears and penetrated his entire body did in fact ease the pain and heat to some extent.

He mowed down the monstrosities lined up before him, fighting his way to Nia, who was on her knees in the midst of all the inky sludge.

“Nia!” he cried. “Are you okay?! You gotta stay with me!”

“Aah. Aaaaaah! Aaaaaaaahh!!” She didn’t respond to his calls. She merely continued screaming in anguish as though ruled by a pain devouring her entire body.

Shido had a sudden thought, and his shoulders lifted as he gasped. He took a deep breath and shouted, loudly, ***“Nia!”***

Yes. The song of Gabriel he’d used on himself earlier. He took the force of the song and called out her name.

“...!” For the first time, Nia shuddered slightly as if in response to his voice.

“...! Nia?! Can you hear me?! I’m going to help you now, okay?!”

“Shi...do...,” Nia said, her voice hoarse, blood-covered cheeks twitching.

From this reaction, he guessed that the cause of her current state was the pain she was feeling, although he didn’t yet know the reasons for it. So if he could eliminate this pain with his pain-relief song, he might be able to pull her mind back to the here and now. With this thought, Shido reached out a hand toward her once more.

However.

Just as his hand was on the verge of touching her shoulder, he heard a voice saying,

“I won’t allow it.”

He’d barely registered this when something flew in from the distant sky at incredibly high speed and exploded in front of him to produce a stunning burst

of light.

“Whoa?!” Rocked by the sudden impact, he teetered backward. But he couldn’t exactly go rolling around on the ground here. He quickly righted himself and turned his gaze on Nia.

“...Huh?” he said, stunned, eyes wide open.

At some point, a girl arrived on the scene. Most likely, she was the something that had flown down from the sky.

Blond hair, half-up. Eyes like reflections of the sky. Almost transparent pale skin. The girl seemed to be the personification of the word *cute*. But there was nothing in the way of expression on her face, and her body was clad in metal armor that indicated she was a Wizard. Her wiring suit was the same type as Ellen’s, and the flowing lines of her CR unit, colored white and purple, were reminiscent of a medieval knight’s helmet and armor.

But what caught Shido’s attention was not the form of this cute girl. It was the double-edged laser blade she gripped in her hand.

And Nia pierced by the tip of it, pinned to the ground like a butterfly specimen.

“Ni...a? Nia!” he cried, as blood spilled from her mouth. “You! What did you do to Nia?! Let her goooooooo!” He tightened his grip on Sandalphon and swung the sword at her with a ferocious cry.

However, the instant before his blade could touch her, the Territory that enveloped her stopped his attack.

“Wha...?!” he yelped.

Her Territory was too strong, too concentrated. And the precision with which she wielded it was on par with Ellen’s.

The girl narrowed her eyes and expanded the range of her Territory in the blink of an eye, easily knocking Shido back and sending him flying.

“Ngh!” he grunted.

“Shido!”

As ripples spread out in the ground from the pre-impact, Origami caught him before the worst could happen. Apparently, Nia being injured had cut short the effects of Beelzebub.

“Th-thanks, Origami. You really—” Shido cut himself off. Because as Origami held him up, a shiver of fear colored her face, and she glared at the girl pinning Nia down with her sword. “Origami...?”

Eyes still firmly on the girl, Origami opened her mouth and demanded...

“What are you doing here, Artemisia Ashcroft?”

“...” The girl Origami called Artemisia didn’t so much as glance her way. Instead, she tightened her grip on the laser blade and pulled it out of Nia’s body.

Nia jolted upward, and blood gushed like a fountain of water from the spot in her stomach the blade had pierced.

“Nia!” Shido cried, and tried to run over to her, but he was repelled by the dense Territory and unable to approach her.

Artemisia slowly raised one hand and brandished it directly above Nia’s chest. She had no sooner muttered something than a change came over the Territory wrapped around her. At the same time, Nia’s body began to emit a black light.

“..., ..., ...”

Nia was no longer able to even make a sound, and the tips of her fingers just twitched.

In the next moment, an object materialized from her chest, something like darkness collected and condensed into a gemstone. At the same time, the Astral Dress covering Nia’s body turned into a black mist and vanished.

Shido opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“...!”

“A Sefirah?! But that color...”

Origami and Kotori cried out in shock.

The object that appeared from Nia’s chest looked very similar to the gem

Phantom had used to turn Kotori into a Spirit.

“...?!” Shido almost reflexively shifted the direction of his gaze.

Perhaps his senses were sharper because he’d activated the Spirits’ powers. Or maybe the person who had appeared simply had an overbearing aura. He couldn’t decide which it was, but either way, he knew very clearly that a previously absent foreign object had slipped into the mix.

It wasn’t just Shido. All of the Spirits turned their eyes in the same direction.

A man leisurely advanced toward Nia and Artemisia, so all eyes were on him. Dark ash-blond hair, jet-black suit. Eyes the color of rust.

“Isaac Westcott!” Shido cried as he fixed the man with a murderous gaze, and the man—Westcott—smirked.

“It’s been a while since we met face-to-face, hmm, Shido Itsuka. So happy to see that you’re well,” Westcott said, as he came to a stop before Nia. He stared at the obsidian gemstone floating directly above her, and a mad smile like nothing Shido had ever seen before spread across his face. “Marvelous. A Qurifah.”

After scrutinizing it almost affectionately, Westcott glanced at Artemisia.

“Good work, Artemisia. I made the right call to have you waiting in the wings. Shido, Itsuka, members of Ratatoskr. I will say a word of thanks to you as well. Because of you, I was finally able to take a step toward my long-awaited dream,” Westcott said, as if announcing this from on high, and slowly reached his hand out toward the gem.

“What are you—?!” Shido cried.

“What? Ha-ha!” Westcott laughed out loud. “*You’re* asking *me* that? You, the boy who has gained the power of eight Spirits so far?”

“Wh-what do you...?!” Shido said, furrowing his brow.

Westcott grabbed onto the Qurifah and then pressed it toward his own chest.

“Wha—?!”

“Nngh. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

An inky black flash centered on the Qurifah crackled like lightning and scattered throughout the area. Almost as though night had fallen on this strip of Earth alone for an instant, it painted over the surroundings.

And then a few seconds later, this “night” concentrated on Westcott, as though being sucked into him.

The Qurifah was gone.

“Phew.” There was only a spectacularly burned suit jacket and Isaac Westcott shrouded in Spirit power.

Yes. Almost like a Spirit.

“Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” He threw his head back and laughed loudly.

A shiver of fear ran across Kotori’s face. “No... It can’t be! He absorbed the Sefirah...?!”

“Absurd. That’s just—,” Shido started, and then gasped. The words Westcott had uttered earlier flitted through his mind. “The power of a Spirit...?”

Westcott turned his gaze toward Shido, in high spirits. “That’s exactly it.” He raised his hand into the empty air and called out, “Beelzebub.”

The name of the most powerful Demon King.

“Wha—,” Shido cried in confusion.

The book that had disappeared appeared now in Westcott’s hand, and the man’s eyes flew open as if in surprise.

“Oh-ho?” he said. “What a curious thing. I’ve never touched a Demon King before and yet I can tell that I’ve obtained this power and even the authority over it. Like this, perhaps?”

Westcott waved a hand like he was conducting an orchestra, and the pages of Beelzebub danced up just as they had with Nia. The black forms of several anomalies crawled out from them.

“What...?!” Shido yelped, shocked. Even assuming that Westcott had absorbed the Spirit’s power the way Shido had, he hadn’t expected him to learn

to control the Demon King right away.

“I see.” Westcott nodded to himself. “So this is the physical manifestation of the beings noted in the book. Ha-ha-ha! Just as one would expect from the name Demon King, the power twists the logic and reason of the world. Don’t you think that’s marvelous?”

“Hngh...” Shido gritted his teeth and glared at Westcott.

Behind Westcott, Ellen descended from her battle with Tohka and the other Spirits.

“Ike,” she said.

“Mm, Ellen.” He nodded at her. “You’ve also done well here. Behold. This is the sublime light of the Demon King that will illuminate our path.”

“Wonderful. But still.”

“Mm. This alone is not enough. One will not suffice. Not to fulfill our long-held desire.” Westcott turned a gaze sharp as a knife on Origami and the others.

Tohka and the Spirits with her raced to Shido’s side, out of breath. Apparently, like Ellen, they had witnessed everything that had happened and returned to this spot.

“Shido! Are you okay?!” Tohka cried.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “But Nia’s—!”

Things couldn’t possibly have gotten worse. They were up against Ellen, the most powerful Wizard in the world, and Artemisia, whose power was likely as great as Ellen’s. Plus Westcott, who had obtained the Demon King Beelzebub and countless wriggling black monstrosities. No matter how many Spirits they might have had on their side, their enemy was simply too strong.

Actually, given that above all else, they needed to treat Nia first and foremost, they didn’t have the time to be fighting Westcott and his team. What exactly were they supposed to—?

Shido racked his brain, beads of sweat forming on his forehead, and Westcott twisted his lips up into a smirk.

“But I have indeed achieved my ultimate purpose in obtaining the Demon King. Shall we leave things here for now?”

“...?!” Shido furrowed his brow at Westcott’s words and tightened his grip on Sandalphon. This man was a weaselly one. He braced himself for the possibility that Westcott was trying to lull him into carelessness and encourage Ellen and Artemisia to attack.

But behind him, Ellen cocked her head.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. As mighty as I may be, I doubt that I would last very long after incorporating numerous Demon Kings into my person all at once. And...” Westcott twisted his face up into a smile. “It would be a waste if I didn’t fully relish each and every one of those pleasures.”

“...!”

Shido felt the Spirits all gasp as one, and the sensation of something being off that he’d felt when he’d met with Westcott previously grew even stronger.

This man was something beyond what could be expressed with the words *cruel* or *ruthless*. If Shido had to sum it up in a single word, it would have been *alien*.

The vaguely terrifying true nature he could sense in this man elicited not so much terror in the face of a person with ultimate power, but the unknown of a being outside the boundaries of common knowledge.

“Understood. Well then,” Ellen said.

“Mm. Let’s go,” Westcott agreed, and the two girls nodded slightly before kicking at the ground. As if wary of the Spirits, they contracted their Territories, and the three of them rose up into the air at the same time.

“We’ll meet again soon enough. Shido Itsuka, Spirits,” Westcott said, by way of farewell. “Enjoy what little time you have left.”

“Hey— Wait! Where are you—?”

“Shido!”

Shido started to chase after them, and Kotori grabbed onto his shirt. In the moment when his attention was taken up by her, Westcott and his Wizards disappeared into the sky.

“I get how you feel, but simmer down! You’re not gonna accomplish anything chasing after them now! And...” Kotori turned her gaze on Nia lying on her back on the ground.

Shido gasped.

“Nia!” He raced over to her where she lay sunken in a sea of blood.



The wounds all over her body were painful to look at, but the wound on her stomach where she'd been pierced by Artemisia's sword was especially awful. No matter how optimistic Shido tried to be, this was a fatal wound. Air was just barely wheezing out of Nia's throat, and it was obvious to anyone looking on that she wouldn't last much longer.

"Dammit!" he cried. "Kotori! We need a Realizer!"

"Already called for one!" she barked in reply. "But we can't transfer anything with *Fraxinus* out of commission! You're gonna have to wait until I can get a car out here! But...Ratatoskr's never treated a Spirit who's had her Sefirah stolen! I don't know what's—"

"Ngh!" Shido grimaced.

Origami stepped out from his side. "She's in danger here. We have to stop the bleeding."

"R-right." He nodded. "But how..."

"Difficult without specialized facilities when there is significant blood loss from the abdomen," Origami replied dispassionately. "The usual first-aid treatment is to press on the wound with fabric. But that is unlikely to be effective here."

"So then, what exactly are we supposed to do...?!" Shido cried.

"Calm down," Origami said. "Natsumi."

"Huh?!" Natsumi cried out in surprise at her name being suddenly called. "Oh. R-right...!" A heartbeat later, she realized what Origami was getting at and trotted over to Nia's side.

"Haniel!" she shouted, and held the broom-shaped Angel over Nia. The mirror hidden in the tip flashed with light and erased the painful wounds inflicted on Nia's body.

She hadn't actually treated the injuries. With the power of Haniel, she had simply transformed Nia's battered body into an intact one.

"I think...this'll be a little better," Natsumi said. "But the blood she lost's not coming back, and it's not like her internal organs are all better, easy-peasy."

Unless she gets actual treatment soon...”

As Natsumi noted, Nia’s condition was steadily worsening. While her wounds had been closed, the color was gradually draining from her face, and even her labored breathing was growing fainter and fainter.

“Dammit. Nia! Can you hear me?! The car’s on its way, okay?!” Holding Nia’s hand, Shido spoke as if praying.

But his shouting was in vain; her hand grew colder and colder. He slammed a fist into the ground out of frustration and anger and a sense of helplessness.

“...! Wait, Shido!” Tohka bent down next to Nia and stared at her, sharpening her gaze as if to sharpen her senses, before lifting her face with a gasp. “I knew it! Shido, Nia’s still got a tiny bit of Spirit power left!”

“What?!” His eyes flew open in surprise, and Kotori swallowed hard like something had just clicked for her.

“Right,” she said. “Just before she was stabbed by that girl from above, Shido had managed to pull her mind back, just a bit! And in that moment, the inversion stopped being complete!”

“M-meaning?” Shido stammered.

“Meaning the Sefirah Westcott stole might not have been in a complete state!” Kotori crowed. “There’s probably like a sliver of Sefirah still left inside of Nia!”

“...!” Shido’s shoulders jumped up.

A fragment of the story he’d heard earlier about how they’d gotten him under control again at the beginning of that month flitted through his mind.

“Kotori, you said that the Spirit power’s always cycling through the invisible paths that connect me and the Spirits, right?” he asked.

“Uh-huh. That’s—” Kotori seemed to catch on to what he was thinking. Her own eyes grew round as saucers. “Shido, you can’t mean—?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Sink or swim. I’m sealing Nia...!”

The flow of Spirit power took form between Shido and the Spirits whose

power had been sealed. In which case, if he could create a path between himself and Nia, his own Spirit power and that of the Spirits might be extended to Nia, too.

Naturally, he had no idea whether his likability with Nia had risen to the level where sealing was possible. But just as Kotori had said earlier, all he could do now was believe that all their feelings could reach Nia.

“Nia, please,” Shido begged. “Let me in. I don’t care if you take all my power! So please!”

With everyone watching over him, he slowly brought his face close to Nia’s and touched their lips together.

Instantly, his face stiffened at the lifeless chill of her lips. But immediately after that, he felt the faintest hint of warmth flowing into him.

“...!”

This was without a doubt the same sensation as when he sealed the power of a Spirit. He pulled his lips away and called out to her, “Nia! Nia!”

“You have to wake up, Nia!”

“Please. Nia!”

Echoing Shido, the other Spirits also raised their voices.

Eventually, Nia’s eyelids twitched ever so slightly. And then she spoke in a hoarse voice. “...You...don’t have to...shout... I—I can...hear...you...”

“...! Nia!” Shido cried.

Nia lowered her eyes once more and moved her small lips. He couldn’t hear her voice, but it looked to him that the shape of her lips formed the words *thank you*.

Epilogue

You know, Nia?!

“...Oh?”

In the Japan branch office of DEM Industries, Isaac Westcott was in high spirits, sitting in a chair, his eyes on the book in front of him.

A massive tome floating in the air. The ominous look of it brought up feelings of unfathomable terror in those who saw it.

“I see. This is interesting,” he said, chuckling. “The information I seek pours into my mind. So this is the Demon King Beelzebub. It seems I drew the winning ticket. Thanks to the Demon King, I’ve learned some truly fascinating things.”

The girl in the suit standing before him—Ellen—cocked her head to one side. “Fascinating things?”

“Mm. Come over here.” He beckoned her with one hand.

“All right...” With a curious look on her face, Ellen walked toward Westcott.

He stood up from his chair and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“...! What...?” She opened her eyes wide in surprise.

The information Westcott had gained from Beelzebub was transmitted to Ellen through the contact with his hand. Inside her own head, a torrent of images flooded in.

“...Changed history? You mean that the world we’re in now was rewritten once before?” she said, with a dubious expression.

Yes. This was what was inscribed in Beelzebub. Changing history. A grand pipe dream, a deed forbidden through a fear of God.

But Westcott and Ellen knew that this phenomenon was not necessarily impossible.

“Yes.” Westcott nodded. “It seems that Shido Itsuka got a hand from Nightmare and went back in time to change the history of Origami Tobiichi... Ha! He really is a daring one.”

“Impossible. There’s no—” Abruptly, Ellen cut herself off, pressed a hand to her chest, and looked visibly anguished. “Unh. Hngh...?!”

A few seconds later, blood began to seep through her white blouse. Grimacing, she dropped her gaze to her hand and the blood on it. “What...”

“Mm, it would appear that gaining your memories of the world before the change has reproduced the wounds you suffered,” Westcott said, the corners of his mouth turning up.

This would likely have been unthinkable for an ordinary human being. But Wizards used Realizers to re-create in reality the visions in their heads. As Ellen was the strongest of Wizards, with her imagination given free reign, she half-automatically materialized this intense image.

“...I see. So I was dealt such a blow by her in the previous timeline. While there was also the interference of Ratatoskr, this is displeasing,” Ellen said, furrowing her brow unhappily.

This was no wonder. If Westcott’s memory was correct, there had only been one person besides Origami who had inflicted this kind of serious injury on Ellen.

“...Heh!” Ellen frowned slightly. Instantly, a Territory was deployed around her. Most likely, to stop the bleeding and dull the pain. Her face and posture quickly returned to normal. “However—ah, yes. It does seem that is a power suited to the Demon King named Beelzebub.”

“It would seem so. But...” Westcott shrugged slightly. “The Demon King is apparently not yet in a completed state.”

“Not completed?” she parroted.

“Mm. A few moments before Sister was struck down, Shido Itsuka seems to have pulled back a part of her mind. He, too, is becoming quite accustomed to the handling of the Angel’s powers.”

“... My apologies. If I had done it myself...,” Ellen said, a vexed look on her face.

But Westcott only shrugged exaggeratedly.

“No need to be so upset as all that. I’m quite satisfied with the day’s results. While it may be incomplete, it is nonetheless one definite step toward our long-held desire. At some point, we will take that missing part, hmm? I’m counting on you, Ellen.”

“Yes, sir.” Ellen stood a little taller and nodded.

Westcott then turned his gaze on the girl waiting by the entrance to the room.

“And on you as well, of course, Artemisia.”

“...Yes, sir,” Artemisia Belle Ashcroft replied in a soft voice.



The Spirits were all gathered in the break room of Ratatoskr’s underground facility for one reason. They were waiting for Nia’s treatment to be finished.

After the kiss, Nia had lost consciousness once more and been hurried to this facility, where she was now undergoing treatment with a medical Realizer. Because the process took a while, the Spirits had all been instructed to go home for the time being. But they were all so worried about Nia that none of them could go back to their apartments or the house.

But they had been through more than their fair share with the all-nighter, the doujinshi event, and the battle with DEM on top of that, so they were practically falling over with exhaustion. They did whatever they could to stay awake, but their eyelids kept growing heavier and heavier.

“Mm...” Tohka rubbed sleepy eyes.

“You okay?” Shido let out a wry laugh. “If you need to, you can rest in the nap room.”

“Mm.” She shook her head. “No, I’m okay. I decided I was gonna stay awake until Nia wakes up.”

“Yeah? Well then, let’s try and hold out a bit longer.” Just when Shido said

this, the door opened and Kotori stepped inside, yawning hugely.

“Haaah... Oh, hey. You guys’re still awake?”

“I could ask the same of you,” he said. “That was one heck of a sleepy yawn. You don’t have to push yourself, y’know?”

“Sh-shut up.” Kotori jerked her face away as she crossed her arms.

“C’mon, don’t sulk... Anyway, how’s Nia?” Shido asked, and Kotori exhaled slowly through her nostrils before looking at him and the Spirits again.

“Well, at any rate, she’s out of the woods,” she said. “The first aid with Haniel and the cycling of Spirit power through the path were huge in that. She’ll probably make a full recovery. The medical Realizer treatment’s finished, so I think she should be waking up any minute now.”

“Ooh, really?”

“Yeah. So—,” Kotori started, when the terminal in her pocket began to beep. “Speak of the devil.” She checked the screen and pointed toward the door. “Looks like Nia’s awake. You wanna see her, yeah?”

“...!”

At Kotori’s words, the Spirits who had been on the verge of dropping off into sleep opened their eyes wide as one, and they nodded firmly.

Smiling wryly at this reaction, Kotori urged them on. “She’s this way. Follow me.”

They followed Kotori out of the break room and down the hallway to the intensive care room. And then when Kotori further urged them on, they went inside.

It was a spacious room with a variety of devices set out on the white floor, a number of cords running along the walls.

Nia was in the large treatment pod at the very back of the room. The lid of the pod was already open, and Reine was just in the process of removing the oxygen mask from Nia’s mouth.

“...Oh...Hi.” Nia cracked her eyes open and looked at them.

“Nia!” Shido cried out, and trotted to her side. Following his lead, the Spirits also came over and surrounded her.

“Are you. Okay?”

“Kah-kah! You appear robust indeed!”

“Assent. We’re so glad it’s nothing serious.”

The Spirits spoke one after the other, and Nia slowly looked around at them, her mouth softening into a smile.

“Eh-heh-heh... This is something. When did I become the life of the party? Line up for autographs,” she joked, before exhaling shakily and turning her eyes on Shido. “...Sorry, boy. DEM—”

“...!” Shido squeezed Nia’s hand to get her to stop speaking.

“Boy...”

“It’s okay. We’re good now. Thanks for staying alive,” Shido said, with tears in his eyes, and Nia lowered her gaze momentarily before letting out a bashful laugh.

“Ha-ha-ha... Well, now what? I’m not too good with the whole sentimentality thing.” She yawned sleepily. “Oh, weird. And I was just sleeping until like two seconds ago.”

“Ha-ha! Well, it’s no wonder. It’s already pretty late,” Shido said, and checked the clock on the wall. “Oh!”

After letting his thoughts race for a moment, he turned his eyes on Reine.

“Um, I’m sorry. Would it be okay if we took Nia out for a little bit?”

“...Hmm? Well, her condition’s stable now. I think it’d be fine for a short time. But where are you going?”

“That...is a secret,” Shido said as he held up a finger to his lips, and all the Spirits including Nia cocked their heads curiously.

A few minutes later, Shido and the others were on the roof of the mixed-use building that was the entrance to Ratatoskr’s underground facility.

It was dark out and so cold that it seemed like it might start to snow at any

second. Everyone was bundled up in coats and equipped with mittens and scarves.

“Eeeah! It really is coooold out!” Miku, who had shot out into the lead, cried out in an excessively excited voice. “Say, Yoshino? I bet you’re cold. I bet you want to take some warmth from human skin?”

“N-no, um...” Yoshino gave her a pained smile like she’d been backed into a corner, and Natsumi grabbed onto her sleeve as if to protect her.

“You’re not cold, Nia?” Shido asked, as he pushed Nia’s wheelchair.

“Mm. I’m okay.”

While they had gotten permission to go outside, walking would still have been a bit of a trial, so they’d ended up doing it with a wheelchair.

“So... What are we doing here?” Nia asked.

“Right. Should be almost now...,” Shido said.

And.

A slight change started to come over the sky. Light shone between the buildings, and the pitch-black sky began to grow brighter.

“Ooh...?!”

“This is. Amazing!”

The Spirits opened their eyes wide and cried out in admiration. Nia also got a surprised look on her face and stared at the sun gradually coloring reality before looking up at Shido’s face.

“Boy, is this...?” she asked.

“Uh-huh.” He nodded. “I figured it was just about time for the sun to come up. We forgot in all the chaos of getting ready for ComiCo, but today’s January first. So it’s our first sunrise. Bring on your fresh start, Nia.”

“...Ha-ha! What a load!” Nia said, laughing, and then faced forward again to stare at the sunrise.

After a minute or two, she spoke slowly.

“...Boy.”

“Hmm?” he asked.

“Seriously... Thanks. For everything.”

“Don’t worry about it. I mean, they all help me out in many different ways, too.”

“...Once I’m back in top form, I think I wanna see Takajou one more time.”

“Mm. Sounds like a plan,” Shido said. “She’s a good person. Probably.”

“Probably?” Nia laughed again. “I dunno. Having DEM steal my power pretty much sucks, but I feel weirdly okay. I’ve been hanging out with Rasiel thick and thin for nearly thirty years, but... Man, that power was just too much for me.”

“Thirty years? You became a Spirit that long ago?”

It wasn’t Shido who reacted to Nia’s words, but rather Origami.

“Uh-huh. Well, more accurately, it was maybe twenty-seven or twenty-eight years ago. Anyway, it’s like rounding up or whatever. So? For all that, I look pretty young, huh?” Nia touched her own cheek playfully.

Kotori turned her gaze on Nia. “Your Spirit power probably kept the aging of your somatic cells in check. But that power’s been locked away now. You’re gonna start getting older from here on out. Brace yourself.”

“Whoa! Now that you mention it, I guess. Aah, I take it back. Thanks for everything, Rasiel,” Nia said, and Kotori laughed merrily.

And then Nia looked around at all of them. “Actually, that reminds me. When did you all become Spirits?”

“Right,” Kotori replied. “Five years ago for me, and like, not quite a year for Miku? Origami just recently, and everyone else’s a pure Spirit.”

“Huh?” Nia got a curious look on her face. And then, cocking her head, she continued speaking.

“Pure Spirit? But Spirits are all former humans as a rule, right?”

“Huh...?”

Everyone gathered there went wide-eyed in shock.

Afterword

It's been a while. Koushi Tachibana here. I'm bringing you *Date A Live, Vol. 13: Creation Nia*. How did you like it? I'd be quite happy if you enjoyed it.

Once again, we have a new heroine making her appearance on the scene: the manga artist, otaku Spirit, Nia. Despite her Astral Dress being in the style of a Sister, she is quite a part of the everyday world. The design of her Astral Dress is really marvelous. The basics are of a nun, but there is so much detail—the design on her veil a pen and feather duster, the beam parts of the Astral Dress like ink, and the lines at the center of her Astral Dress like the panel lines in a manga.

A new heroine appears in nearly every edition of *Date*, but Nia was a fairly risky character in terms of creation. Naturally, there are exceptions to every rule, so I can't say this is an absolute, but generally, it's a bit difficult to give a heroine in a light novel short hair and glasses. Even with Nia, the glasses are only worn when she's in street clothes. The reason for this is simple—it's harder for such a character to get traction. Flat chest? That's status.

When creating characters and heroines in particular, I mix my own preferred elements with elements the majority of readers are likely to accept, but the balance here is a bit tricky. If I put in too much of what I want, the character is too particular, and readers won't accept them, while if the elements that the majority of readers will accept are too strong, the character turns into one you've seen somewhere else before.

If I had to say, Nia leans toward a combination of more of the former elements, and thanks to that, I think I've managed to produce a character we haven't yet seen in *Date*. I had a strange sort of fun writing her.

Incidentally, this is just sort of a “neither here nor there” impression, but I feel

like the more volumes I get to write, the easier it is for characters with more of my preferences to appear. Because I want a diversity and range when all the heroines are together, I'm able to come up with a character like Natsumi. I really love that kind of negative character, but I think someone would have stopped me if I'd tried to make Natsumi the main heroine. Gulp.

Now then, the feature film *Date A Live: Mayuri Judgement* that I announced in the last volume has at long last opened in theaters!

Of course, I went to see it as well, and aaah! That big screen really is incredible! It's so full of excitement—Miku's concert at the start, the various dates, all those battles that truly pack a punch! Tohka's special form is super cool!! I think these designs would look good in 3D, so how about it, Producers?

And to continue discussion of *Date*, the next book to go on sale is set to be volume two of *Qualidea Code*. What will Shino do when she starts to doubt her mission? What's the relationship with Hime? And what is Hotaru up to?

I think we will most likely be able to bring this to you this winter, so I'd appreciate you checking this one out as well!

Well, to wrap things up, this book was created through the efforts of a number of people. Illustrator Tsunako, thank you for all the wonderful illustrations once again! It's so very you to have incorporated all those manga elements into the Sister Astral Dress. To my editor, I apologize for causing you so much trouble with every single book. I am going to try and finish up the next one a little earlier.

To my book designer, Kusano, everyone in the editorial department, at the publisher, in logistics, and in sales, not to mention all of you reading, my deepest gratitude.

I hope we next meet in volume two of *Itsuka Sekai o Sukuu tame ni—Qualidea Code* or *Date A Live, Vol. 14*.

Koushi Tachibana

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