

**Koushi
Tachibana**

Illustrated by
Tsunako

06

Lily Miku

Spirit No. 9

Astral Dress—Diva Type

Weapon—Organ Type [Gabriel]



Date A Live

Lily Miku

*Date
A Live*

Lily Miku






“You just don’t liiiisten, do you? Won’t you just immediately disappear? Your existence is unpleasant. Do you know why I don’t stomp on your hand and force you off this stage? Because I would rather not touch you at all, not even with the sole of my shooooe.”

Miku
A sixth Spirit

“Uh. Um...
What was that?”

Shido Itsuka
A high school student




“My name is, um,
Itsuka... Uh, Shidomi...
No, let’s see... Shiori.”

Shiori Itsuka
Shido’s...cousin?

“Good. Great.”

Origami Tobiichi
Shido’s classmate

An anime-style illustration of two young women. The woman on the right has long, straight, light purple hair and is wearing a dark blue school uniform with a white collar and a white bow. She has a yellow flower-shaped hair clip with a blue gem on her head. She is looking down at the other woman with a slight smile. The woman on the left has long, straight, dark blue hair and is wearing a yellow school uniform with a white collar and a red bow. She has a green flower-shaped hair clip on her head. She is looking up at the first woman with a surprised expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus purple and pink.

“Are you
perhaps...
a Spirit?”

Miku Izayoi
Tenou Festival planning
committee chair

“Huh?!”



“Oath. Please
let Kaguya and
Yuzuru help
you now.”

Yuzuru Yamai
A Spirit

“What’s the
matter, Shido? If
you don’t cheer up,
we won’t be able to
win, you know?”

Tohka
A Spirit

“Keh-heh... Well then,
shall we play? A melody of
death, an invitation to the
underworld itself!”

Kaguya Yamai
A Spirit

“...Yeah...!”



“No, it’s nothing. I just
had a bad feeling.”

Mana Takamiya
Shido’s biological sister

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Date A Live

Lily Miku

06

Koushi Tachibana

Illustrated by
Tsunako

 YEN
ON
New York

Copyright

Date A Live 06

Lily Miku

Koushi Tachibana 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.

Lily Miku

Spirit No. 9
Astral Dress = Diva
Weapon = Organ Type [Gabriel]

Prologue

Girls' Tryst

A youthful energy filled Tengu Square. The Tenou Festival, an annual joint event for Tengu high schools, was being held in a local convention center. Its large exhibition halls were lined with booths, displays, and students wearing a wide variety of uniforms calling out to the potential customers walking by. The space was like a distillation of all the sweat and tears of adolescence.

“Hee-hee-hee! Soooo...where should we go next?”

Shido Itsuka was wading through this chaos with a cute girl.

She looked elegant in her navy sailor-style uniform. Her long hair was tied back with a scrunchie, and her beautiful face was painted with a bright expression. Her proportions were absolutely exquisite, but rather than proudly showing them off for all the world to see, she wore a proper knee-length skirt as required by her school.

But if anyone had asked him to state the most striking thing about this girl, Shido wouldn't have chosen any of that.

What stood out most was her voice. So melodic and beautiful that even this casual conversation would plunge him into hopeless yearning for her; if he let his guard down for a second, he'd experience...a kind of intoxication, like an auditory narcotic. The girl—Miku Izayoi—possessed such an incredible voice that in a different era, the emperor himself would have summoned her to the imperial palace as a singer or storyteller.

“I'm a teeeeeny bit hungry. Do you want to get something to eeeat?”

But as the owner of this miraculous voice, she simply tilted her head to one side, a carefree smile spreading across her lips. Shido automatically smiled slightly in return.

This was the legendary school-festival date, an event with a happiness saturation rate of 120 percent—the stuff of dreams for many a high school boy. More than one person in the crowds of students and visitors had glanced over at him as he walked around with Miku. Some people had even taken their picture without asking.

But Shido more or less understood that they weren't doing these things because they were jealous or they wished they were him. The reason was extremely simple.

“Aah.” He heaved a great sigh. And then he sighed once again at the *high-pitched* voice that came out of his own throat. It sounded far more feminine than he cared to admit. “What am I doing...?”

He also looked quite different than he usually did. Long hair tickled his back, and natural-looking makeup covered his face—foundation, blush, mascara, lip gloss. His outfit was a navy dress and extremely frilly apron. It was the so-called French maid style.

Put quite simply, there was no escaping the fact that Shido looked like a girl.

“Hey, *Shiori*? Do you like creeeeepes?” Miku asked cheerfully, with no way of knowing the torment in his heart.

Shido sighed once more and answered her in his feminine voice.

Chapter 1

Incomprehensible Spirit

September 8 heralded the end of summer break. It was a sunny afternoon, still trapped in the summer heat, and a strange mood hung over the Raizen High School gym.

“Exactly one year ago today...we learned a great many lessons,” his classmate at the podium, Ai Yamabuki, said into the mic, fists clenched.

Her best friends, Mai Hazakura and Mii Fujibakama, stood “at ease” to either side, like royal sentries or bodyguards. School flags hung next to them toward the edge of the stage. When taken together with Ai’s weirdly intense tone and posture, the whole affair had the air of a country’s leader about to declare war.

“The bitter humiliation of our loss... The icy chill as we crawled across the barren earth,” Ai snarled, her hands trembling, and yanked her head up. *“Ladies and gentlemen. Pitiful vanquished soldiers, I ask you this: Must we continue in torment? Are we worms? Will we forever be trapped in the despair of defeat?!”*

Bam! Ai slammed her fist down on the lectern. Feedback from the mic squealed through the hall.

“No! We will not! They have made a fatal error! They gave us the time to sharpen our fangs! And now the appointed hour has arrived! Rise, Raizen! Onward to glory! We shall surge forward with all our combined might and tear out their throats!!”

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Ai thrust a fist into the air, and the students crammed into the gymnasium cheered as one. The windows shook, and the lingering echoes of this powerful shout almost made his ears hurt.

“Ha-ha! She’s really getting into it.” Shido Itsuka grinned as he watched his

classmate onstage giving this address. And it wasn't like he didn't understand her passion. After all...

"Shido, what is Ai talking about? Are we going to war?" came a dubious voice from his right.

He looked over to see Tohka Yatogami standing next to him.

Waist-length hair the color of night. Eyes like sparkling crystals. She was so beautiful, it was hard to believe she was real. But the expression on her face was one of deep confusion.

And of course it was. Anyone who didn't understand the situation would undoubtedly be confused by this speech. Ai sounded like the triumphant hero in some war for independence or the leader of a self-help seminar.

"It's that time of the year," he told her. "You know, the month of the Tenou Festival."

"The Tenou Festival?" She frowned. "What's that?"

"Mm, well, put simply, it's a super-huge school festival."

"School festival?" Tohka's eyes glimmered. "Ooh, I've seen that on TV. That's the one where your school sets up all the food stalls, right? It's like a magical dream come true!"

"Hmm, you're not wrong, but..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"Oooh, is that it? We're having a school festival? That's great! I can't wait!" A look of ecstasy crossed her face, and then she frowned again. "Hold on. So why do we have to have a pep rally like this for a school festival?"

"Tenou Festival's different from other festivals," he explained. "It's a joint festival for ten high schools in Tengu City."

"Joint...? Ten schools?" Her eyes grew wide.

"Mm-hmm." Shido nodded.

Tengu, the city where they lived, was a region stretching from south of Tokyo into northern Kanagawa Prefecture. It had been redeveloped after the devastation of the Great Southern Kanto Spacequake thirty years earlier and

now had a sizable population befitting a test city equipped with the latest technology. However, at the start of redevelopment, the area had been gripped by extreme instability and had very few residents compared with the size of the area or the abundance of facilities, perhaps partially due to the threat of spacequakes that still hung over the region. That was what initially inspired a joint school festival known as the Tenou Festival.

“Basically, they came up with this plan to celebrate all together since there weren’t very many schools or students. And it just kept being held, even now when a lot more people live here.” Shido shrugged with a dry smile.

What had once been a modest affair put together by the few high schools in a desolate region was now a major three-day event that completely took over the Tengu Square halls.

The festival couldn’t be done away with after it had grown into such a huge spectacle, and the city had apparently given the event their seal of approval. Regardless, considering the TV stations that came every year to cover it and the number of tourists who visited from outside the city, more than a few junior high students decided on their preferred high school after seeing the Tenou Festival. The fact was the event generated such economic activity, it no longer fit neatly into the category of *high school festival*.

But as more and more people took part in the festivities, this event that had started with the ideal of the different schools joining hands to celebrate had taken on a new meaning.

“This is the year! This year, we Raizenites will seize the crown and rule as kings!” Ai shouted from the stage, and the crowd roared in response.

They were hearing correctly. The top school was selected at the Tenou Festival by popular vote in the booth, exhibit, and performance categories, and the grand-prize winner ruled as king for the following year.

They could dress the event up in whatever pretty ideals they wanted, but as long as there was this element of competition, it was only natural that the student bodies’ normally dormant fighting spirit and school pride would be roused. It was kind of like how people who usually didn’t care at all about soccer transformed into fans who fervently waved the flag whenever the World

Cup rolled around.

Shido explained all this to Tohka, and then he heard a voice from behind.

“Keh-keh... I see. I fully comprehend the reason why Ai and the others tremble with such emotion.”

“Understood. If that is the case, we must not lose.”

He looked back to find two identical girls had come to stand there at some point.

One had a determined look, hair tied up on her head. She was so slender, she looked as though she would break in half if squeezed tightly, but she was haughty in a way that didn't suit this fragility.

The other had her hair in a braid. Her beautiful face was adorned with eyelids that naturally hung low, and her stunning proportions seemed to pull Shido's attention this way and that.

“Kaguya. Yuzuru. What are you doing here?”

Yes. These were the Spirits whose power Shido had locked away two months ago: the sisters Kaguya and Yuzuru Yamai. They had transferred into the neighboring Year 2, Class 3 at the start of the new term.

They were going to transfer into Shido's Class 4 at first, but their mental states were quite stable as long as they were together, unlike Tohka, who grew anxious when she wasn't with Shido. As such, the decision was made to admit them to the neighboring class.

This was an assembly, though, so they were supposed to be split up by class. The Yamai sisters should have been off to the side with the rest of Class 3. But he quickly realized why they weren't. With the zealous students repeating Ai's Raizen call, there was no meaning in things like class divisions.

“Keh. That said, however, so long as the Yamai sisters stand with you, Raizen's victory is assured.”

“Agreement. Yuzuru and Kaguya are the most powerful duo. Invincible against any enemy.”

“Keh-keh, yes, exactly. Yuzuru here is master of all the arts, whatever they

might be.”

“Affirmation. Not to mention that the perfect Kaguya stands here. Her loss is outside the realm of reason.”

“Oh, you! Hee-hee! How embarrassing, Yuzuru. Poke, poke!”



“Smile. You too, Kaguya. Poke, poke.”

They poked at each other’s arms, grinning happily.

“Ha-ha!” Shido laughed as he watched the two of them. The sisters were so affectionate with each other now, like a new honeymoon couple. Who would believe they had been fighting so violently two months ago that they dragged everything around them into their conflict?

He shifted his eyes from the Yamai sisters and their own private world back over to Tohka.

“I get it,” she said, nodding thoughtfully. “So then that means there’ll be lots of places selling food?”

“Well. Yeah. Mm. I guess,” he said with a smile.

“There will? Mm-hmm. I see.” Tohka stroked her chin, snorting eagerly. “Hee-hee! It’s so exciting, Shido. What kind of stores will there be?”

“Hmm. Well—”

“Allow me to explain!”

Before he could say anything, he heard a voice from ahead of him. He looked up to find his classmate Hiroto Tonomachi standing there, striking a pose like a *tokusatsu* TV show hero.

“Tonomachi. Where’d you come from?”

“I appear whenever a lady cries out for help. You want to know what kind of booths there’ll be at Tenou Festival, yes?” Tonomachi asked.

Tohka’s eyes grew wide. “Ohhh, you know?”

“Of course! I checked it out just for you, Tohka!” He pulled a notebook from his pocket and flipped through it. “These pages contain information on the planned attractions for all ten schools participating in the festival, featuring approximately ninety booths in total!”

“Ooh!”

“You want me to tell you, Tohka?”

“Yes! I want you to tell me!”

“Then you gotta ask nicely!”

“Please, Shido’s good friend!” she said with a carefree look. Not a drop of malice could be found in her expression.

Tonomachi no doubt noticed this. Complicated emotions ran across his face as he shot a look at Shido.

Shido sighed and whispered Tonomachi’s name to Tohka.

“Ohhh... I get it. Please, Tonomachi!” she cried.

Tonomachi’s face brightened immediately. “O-one more time!”

“Please, Tonomachi!”

“Use my given name!”

“Please, Hiroto!”

“Use an intimate nickname!”

“Please, Hiro-pon!”

The nickname sounded more like a dangerous chemical than a sweet nothing, but Tonomachi was apparently satisfied. He squirmed with delight and dropped his gaze to his notebook.

“When you ask me like that, how can I refuse?! Let’s see... Eibu Nishi High has gotten top results every year with their booths. I guess their home ec department’s powerful. The cooking club’s on another level. Their doner-kebab booth last year was so good, it was hard to believe it was made by students for a school festival.”

“Oh yeah.” Shido nodded. “Now that you mention it, that was a thing.”

“This year’s star is ‘Meat War Between North and South! Fried-Meat Special,’” Tonomachi continued. “Rare treats that require no sauce, using Japanese Black beef from Hokkaido and Berkshire pork from Kagoshima.”

“Wh-what...?” Tohka said, hands shaking. Her eyes shone, and drool dripped from the corner of her mouth.

“And... Well, I guess there’s Senjo. They’re affiliated with a university, so they don’t have to deal with entrance exams, which means they don’t drop out of the festival as twelfth graders.”

“Hmm,” Shido said. “Guess they’ll be the favorite, then.”

“What are you talking about?” Tonomachi wagged an admonishing finger. “Have you forgotten? The king, Rindoji Girls’ Academy.”

“Ohhh...” Shido scratched his cheek. Last year’s champion. He had actually completely forgotten.

“They’re bringing some stiff competition again this year, man,” Tonomachi informed him. “They’re plain unfair. They know they’re the hottest girls in the entire city. Plus, their food’s top-of-the-line, seriously delicious. But where they really snatch up the votes is with their incredible customer service. I mean, last year’s booth was like an idol-group event. They served every single meal like it was an event, looking right into your eyes. I can’t even remember how many times I lined up for that.”

“Don’t go lining up for them.” Shido glared at him.

Tonomachi cleared his throat. “W-well, anyway, they are fearsome young ladies. And there’s one more rumor about Rindoji this year.”

“Rumor?” Shido arched an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Tonomachi replied. “You know. It was on the news at the beginning of April? That new transfer student they got.”

“April?” He furrowed his brow, digging through his memory...but he couldn’t find anything. His mind had been preoccupied with the whole Tohka thing in April, though, and he hadn’t had the space to think about anything else.

“For real?” Tonomachi said, surprised. “You don’t remember? Miku, man. Miku.”

“Who’s that?” He had zero memory of this.

But apparently, this was just impossible for Tonomachi to believe. His face stiffened into a look of stark shock.

“Wait,” Shido said. “What’s that look all about?”

“I could ask you the same thing! You’re not actually telling me you don’t know the mysterious idol Miku Izayoi?! Aah? Is that it? You’re all ‘I don’t care about this idol everyone’s screaming about’? You pretending to be some kinda hipster or something?”

“I’m just telling you the truth! I’m sure loads of people don’t know—”

“No! There! Is! No! One! Else! Shido! Itsuka! Is the only idiot who doesn’t know super national idol Miku!!”

“Oh, you wanna bet?!” Shido shouted. “What’ll you do if I find someone else doesn’t know who this Miku is?!”

“Ha! I’d bow at your feet while eating spaghetti with my ass!”

“Seriously?!”

“Damn right!”

“Hey, Tohka, do you know Miku Izayoi?” Shido asked, and Tonomachi grabbed his shoulders.

“You coward, Itsuka! You bastard!”

But Tohka wasn’t even listening to them.

“Mm...” Absentmindedly, she pantomimed holding something. She opened her mouth wide, chomped at the air, and then moved her jaw in a chewing motion with an ecstatic look on her face.

An impossible air *menchikatsu*. Her movements was so convincing that even Shido and Tonomachi could see the shadow of a delicious cutlet.

“Ooooi, Tohka?” Shido said, poking her shoulder.

She shuddered and gasped, and then she wiped away the drool. “Mm. What’s wrong, Shido?”

“Oh, uh...”

When she looked at him with those carefree eyes, he couldn’t really bring himself to drag her into their argument. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Tonomachi heaving a sigh of relief.

“But... Oh yeah, that’ll be great. Hey, Shido, let’s go get one on the big day!”

Tohka eagerly raised the little finger of her right hand, a grin spreading across her face.

“Hmm?” He looked at her curiously.

“Reine taught me!” she said. “I guess it’s called a pinkie promise!”

“Oh...right.” Shido scratched his head before raising his pinkie as well. He felt the eyes of Tonomachi and several boys in the area stab into him.

“Great! So then!” Tohka brought her hand toward Shido’s.

A shadow suddenly rose from the ground and wove her pinkie gently around Shido’s, while at the same time grabbing Tohka’s finger and pulling it back as far as it would go.

“Ngh!” Tohka jumped up and yanked her hand back.

“O-Origami?!” Shido’s eyes grew wide upon learning the identity of the intruder who had appeared between him and Tohka.

Silken hair reaching to her shoulders, a face like a doll’s, and an expression on it that was just as unreadable. There was no doubt; this was Shido’s classmate and Tohka’s mortal enemy, Origami Tobiichi.

“Now that we’ve hooked our pinkies together, you have to take sleeping pills in my apartment if you lie to meeee.” she said, her voice completely monotone, and shook their two hands, which were connected by their little fingers.

“Why sleeping pills instead of the usual thousand needles?” he cried. “What’s your plan? What are you thinking?!”

“I’m thinking *Takahashi* would be a good name for a boy,” Origami replied immediately. “If it’s a girl, *Chiyogami*.”

“Seriously, what’s your game?!” he shouted.

“Y-you!” Tohka glared at Origami with sharp eyes. “What are you doing?!”

“It’s none of your business. Shido and I have made a promise to go walk around together at the Tenou Festival.”

“Wh-what?!” Tohka shouted. “This is no joke! That was *my* promise!”

Origami snorted triumphantly as she jerked her chin at the fusion of her little

finger with Shido's. Her finger was holding his with viselike force, and he wasn't going to be able to pull free so easily.

"Ngh! L-let go!" Scowling, Tohka grabbed their wrists to try and pull their hands apart.

"Separating these fingers now is the 'cutting of the pinkies,'" Origami told her. "In other words, it indicates the completion of the promise."

"Wha—?!" Tohka gasped. "D-don't let go! You can't let go!"

"Oh," Origami said, her face void of expression, and nodded slightly. "If you say so, then I have no choice. I will never let go."

"M-mm. That way, the promise won't be complete. Now." Tohka let out a sigh of relief and then quickly furrowed her brow again. "Wait just a minute! That means Shido'll never be able to get away from you, doesn't it?!"

"Act of God. Can't be helped."

"Y-you planned this from the very beginning?!" Tohka spat, looking stunned.

"Hold on, you two..." Shido's face stiffened as he felt his little finger and his wrist gradually lose all sensation.

Then a faint change appeared in the enthusiasm that enveloped the gym.

"Remain calm, my friends. We have heard your will. Now we have one request," Ai said and then took the mic in hand before continuing, *"Beloved brethren, Student Council President Kirisaki and his confederates have fallen before our moment of ultimate victory. Thus, we seek to invite like-minded souls to take up the banner of our lost comrades. If you are such a soul, step forward and name yourself!"*

A murmur passed through the crowd of students. In all likelihood, none of them actually understood what Ai was saying.

Before too long, a student standing near the front raised their hand. "Um, so what does that mean exactly?"

"Umm." Ai scratched her head and dropped the exaggeratedly theatrical tone. *"Well, basically, the prez and the others keeled over from all the stress and the extra work, so we need people to fill in for them. Anyone wanna be on the*

Tenou Festival planning committee?”

The loud roar that had filled the gymnasium dropped away into complete silence.

No doubt thinking this was not a good sign, Ai kept going, gesturing the whole time.

“Oh, but, like, the work’s basically all done, okay? For real. Totally. The only thing you gotta do is show up at the meetings! We’re a super-chill committee, no lie! You’ll even gain a new skill set!”

That last part sounded more like something that normally came from a recruiter for a company that wasn’t entirely on the up-and-up.

The previously fiery passion of the students was rapidly cooling. They all looked away to keep from meeting the gazes of Ai and her friends onstage.

But Shido was too busy to worry about the shifting mood in the gym.

“Oh, I know!” Tohka opened her eyes wide in sudden realization and twisted her little finger around the one on Shido’s left hand, opposite Origami. “How d’you like that?! Now it’s a tie!”

“Carrying out a pinkie promise with the left hand means the end of the relationship and indicates that you will never be involved with that person again,” Origami said in a monotone voice.

“Wh-what?!” Tohka gasped, fear in her voice. She looked to Shido, then to their entwined fingers, then back to his face. Her own face said she was about to burst into tears. “Sh-Shido! Th-that’s not what I intended!”

“Um, I’ve never actually heard of anything like that,” he said, and her eyes grew round as saucers.

“Y-you swindler! Not once, but twice!” she shouted and yanked hard on Shido’s little finger.

Not to be outdone, Origami tugged on Shido using his pinkie as a fulcrum.

“Owwwwwww!” he yelped. “St-stop it!”

If this were one of the squabbles from that TV show *Ooka Echizen*, his cry

would have made at least one of those hands let go, but reality was not so kind. Both girls pulled even harder.

“Keh-keh... You there, what selfish act do you commit without our involvement? It’s quite obvious that Shido would want to enjoy this sort of jolly festival together with us.”

“Warning. Shido is the shared property of Yuzuru and Kaguya. Master Origami is no exception to this rule. In the event that you wish to use him, please submit a formal request in writing a minimum of one week in advance.”

Even as they flirted among themselves, the Yamai sisters picked up on the commotion and inserted themselves into the conversation. Taking the fact that Shido couldn’t move as a good thing, they approached from both front and back.

“N-ngh! Kaguya! Yuzuru! You too?!”

“If you don’t want to die, you should move away immediately.”

His hands were yanked even harder, fingers stretched to the breaking point.

“Ngaaaah?!” he cried.

“You...! Shido’s in pain! Let go!”

“I would say the same to you. You should let go of him right now.”

“Keh-keh, you both may go ahead and continue your futile struggle.”

“Unity. While you do, Yuzuru and Kaguya will take our prize.”

And the worst part was they were drawing a lot of attention now that all the other chatter had been silenced by Ai’s announcement. Tonomachi and the other boys turned sharp eyes on him, their jaws dangerously clenched, and the girls were starting to whisper.

Glaring hatefully at Shido, Tonomachi suddenly whirled around and held his hand up high. “Chairperson!” he shouted.

“Yes, *Tonomachi?*”

“I nominate Shido Itsuka for the Tenou Festival committee!”

“Wha—?!” Shido’s eyes flew open at this sudden betrayal from his best

friend. “T-Tonomachi! What are you—? Owwwwwww!”

His protest was interrupted by the powerful winches on his left and right.

The other boys called out in support of Tonomachi’s nomination one after another.

“Seconded! You have to do this, Itsuka!”

“Thirded! Itsuka’s the only one we can trust with our noble cause!”

“Fourthed! Work yourself to the bone and get hospitalized, goddamn you!”

“Hey! You’re letting your true feelings leak out there at the end!” Shido cried.

There was no end to the boys shouting their support. And then the girls jumped on board and began shouting for Itsuka, too.

“*Quiet!*” Ai called from the stage.

For a fleeting moment, he thought she would talk them all down. But of course, he was being far too optimistic.

“We have heard your petition! By popular endorsement and universal agreement, Year Two, Class Four’s Shido Itsuka is hereby appointed to the Tenou Festival planning committee!”

“Hey!!”

“““Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”””

Shido’s voice was drowned out by the cheer that rocked the gymnasium.



Sitting perfectly composed on the sofa in a suite on the top floor of the Imperial Hotel East Tengu, Isaac Westcott let out a short sigh. He lifted his chin, setting the ends of his dark ash-blond hair in motion, and narrowed his eyes, sharp like whetted knives, even further.

His keen gaze was focused on a bundle of papers held together with a binder clip. The edges of his mouth curled up as he shifted his gaze to the left.

“I see. A boy who handles the Spirit power of the AAA-rank Spirit Princess. It is indeed very interesting that both of them attend the same school.”

“Yes.” Waiting patiently before him was the very girl who had prepared the documents, Ellen M. Mathers. Humanity’s most powerful wizard, the pride of DEM Industries.

“And there is also the fact that Ratatoskr’s airship was on the scene.”

Ratatoskr. This name was very meaningful to both Westcott and Ellen.

This was the organization that held the nonsense ideal that they could control the occurrence of spacequakes through peaceful means and try to shelter the Spirits who were the cause of these celestial tremors. It was the sort of rubbish only drunkards would dare claim openly.

Unable to hide his grin, Westcott held a hand over his mouth. “Heh-heh, oh, is it? I’m a bit delighted. To think that youngster would get the jump on me.”

“Is that so? I only feel unease, personally,” Ellen replied right away.

Westcott found this funny as well and covered his face with the hand hiding his mouth as he chuckled. Although her expression didn’t change, he could tell that Ellen was annoyed with his reaction.

He waved his hand almost apologetically and continued, “And how is *that* going?”

“All is proceeding apace. Adeptus Three and nine others have been assigned to the active squad as of today.”

“Good.” He nodded, satisfied. Several bribes had been necessary to push this deployment through, but well, that detail wasn’t important.

Setting up entirely new systems and structures would definitely have been more effective in mobilizing the wizards who were extensions of his own limbs. But that would have required an enormous amount of time and resources. Using the official military apparatus within Japan was the fastest and most certain way to get this done.

“Shido. Itsuka.” Westcott dropped his gaze to the documents once more and read aloud the name written there, and then he gave an exaggerated shrug. “However, there is no photo. Important. Quite unlike you.”

Yes. Several photos taken from afar were attached to the princess Tohka

Yatogami documents, but there were none of the boy.

“I never imagined that documentation on anything other than Spirits would be necessary,” Ellen responded. “I will arrange for those immediately.”

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “I’d rather meet the boy right away.”

She let out a short sigh. “Understood. It will be arranged.”

“I’m counting on it,” Westcott said and stood up from the sofa, leaving the documents on the table. “Oh yes. One more thing.”

He walked slowly over to Ellen and set a hand on her shoulder.

“If Ratatoskr is involved with them...don’t you think we should give them a grand welcome?”

“A welcome?”

“Yes, exactly. An unparalleled greeting that’ll surely knock some sense into those arrogant pacifists.” Westcott chuckled.



The sun had descended. Seven thirty PM. Shido trudged along the dark road.

“I-I’m so tired...”

In the end, he’d been unable to fight back against the violence and was formally appointed a member of the Tenou Festival committee. He’d essentially been railroaded into taking the job and forced to get to work right away.

Too much had been jammed into his head all at once—booth placement, budget allocation, communication devices, to name a few—and so the mental exhaustion was much deeper than any physical weariness. He got it now. With his brain trying to digest this mountain of information, it was no wonder his stomach hurt from all the stress. He couldn’t believe Ai-Mai-Mii were so full of energy after all this.

He plodded onward, schoolbag in one hand and a grocery bag in the other.

He had done the shopping today not at the supermarket, but on a shopping street nearby. One reason he hadn’t wanted to deal with the grocery store was because he was so tired, but the real reason was...

“It’s almost Tenou Festival season. We’re counting on you this year! Go ahead and take these green peppers.”

“Too many grams of ground meat? Ha-ha! We need you to eat a lot and build up your strength.”

“Here! Take this. No, no, take it. Just give it to that girl you always come with.”

The people he knew there would give him far too many extras.

People came from all over for the Tenou Festival, not just within the city, so the shops in town spared no effort during the event. In fact, this was the time of year when they made the most money, outside the New Year holiday season.

He smiled quietly as he looked at the colorful Tenou Festival posters pasted to the wall alongside the road. With this week’s specials alone, the Tenou Festival was making a serious contribution to the Itsuka household budget.

“Hmm?” He stopped in his tracks.

On the road ahead, he could see a small shadow illuminated by streetlights.

It was a tiny girl wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and a light-colored dress. Her beautiful blue eyes and the rabbit puppet that adorned her left hand were particularly striking. She was apparently looking at a poster on the wall. She opened her wide eyes even wider, deeply fascinated.

“Yoshino?” he called.

“...!” The girl—Yoshino—jumped and turned her gaze toward Shido. “Oh... Shido.”

“Oh! Found! Youuu!” came the high-pitched shout from the puppet on her left hand, Yoshinon.

“What’s up? What are you doing here? It’s dark.”

“Uh, um...I. Went to. Your house. But...you were late. Going home, and Kotori...was worried...so...”

It seemed that she had come to check on him. Shido scratched the back of his head.

“Oh, yeah? But it’s already dark out. You shouldn’t be wandering by

yourselves.”

Yoshino’s shoulders slumped apologetically. “O-ohhh...”

“Don’t be mad at her. Yoshino didn’t mean to cause any trouble. She’s just worried about you!”

“I know. Thanks, Yoshino.”

“S-sure!” She bobbed her head up and down. Because of the large straw hat, her face disappeared and reappeared in Shido’s view.

“You haven’t had supper yet, I bet?” he said. “It’ll be a bit late, but stay and eat before you go home.”

“Okay...thank you very much. And, um, I wanted to ask you something...” She slowly pointed at the poster she’d been looking at. “What...is this...?”

“Hmm? It’s the Tenou Festival.” Shido explained the event in the same simple terms he had with Tohka.

Yoshino looked fascinated. “So you have...that kind of thing...”

“Whoa, sounds like fun.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot of fun,” he said. “You guys should come, too.”

Yoshino’s eyes grew wide as dinner plates. “A-are...you sure...?”

“Of course. My school’s going to be doing a bunch of stuff. Come, hang out.”

“Oh, wow! That’s great, isn’t it, Yoshino?”

“Y-yeah...!”

Yoshino poked at Yoshino’s cheek, and she nodded happily.

He was pretty thrilled to see her so pleased. More or less cheered up, he headed in the direction of his house with her.

“I’m home!” he called out down the hallway after getting Yoshino to open the door for him since his hands were full.

He set his bags down in the entryway and took off his shoes, when the living room door flew open with a *bang*, and a girl with her long hair tied up with black ribbons leaped out.

“You’re laaaaaaate!” she shouted and launched a magnificent drop kick at his solar plexus.

“Hgah?!”

The sudden attack easily knocked him to the ground. Rubbing his aching stomach, he got back to his feet and found his little sister standing there in a daunting pose, looking very displeased.

“Hmph... ‘Hgah,’ he says. Go and do karaoke or something.”

“Wh-what was that for...?”

“I could ask you the same thing. Why are you so late, I wonder? And without a single phone call.”

Shido scratched his cheek. True, he was late, but it was still not even eight o’clock.

“Sorry. I suddenly got put on the festival committee.”

“Festival committee...” Kotori let out a sigh for some reason. “So it wasn’t that you got sick or anything like that?”

“Huh?”

“...Never mind. Anyway, what’s the big idea asking Yoshino to go meet you? The sun’s already set here.”

“No, I didn’t—” He began answering her earlier question and then stopped himself. “Mm, right. Sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

“Oh... Uh, um. Kotori, Shido didn’t...” Yoshino tried to defend him.

But Shido stopped her. “It’s fine.”

For some reason, Kotori twisted up her face in further dissatisfaction. She snorted indignantly and walked toward the living room.

Once she was out of sight, Yoshino bowed her head apologetically. “I’m sorry... This is my fault...”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. Today might have been an extreme example, but now that he was thinking about it, he felt like Kotori had been weird ever since he got back from his school trip last month.

Nothing in particular had changed, but if Shido looked the least bit tired, she got strangely restless for some reason.

He stood rooted to the spot, scratching his head before picking up the bags and walking toward the living room. Yoshino trailed after him.

And then he noticed that the living room door was slightly ajar. Through that gap, an eye was peeking, or rather, staring intently... It was Kotori.

“Wh-what? Is there something else?” he asked and heard the adorable rumbling of a stomach coming from the other side of the door.

“...” Kotori’s cheeks reddened.

Shido put his bags down and let out a sigh of relief, his expression softening. “Do you have any requests for dinner?”

“...Hamburg steak.”

“Now?” This was a pretty time-intensive dish. Shido checked the clock on his phone and saw that he had missed several calls from Kotori. She had apparently been quite worried.

“...”

He tucked his phone away and walked toward the living room, rolling his shoulders. “It’ll take a while. Is that okay?”

“...Mm-hmm.” Kotori ran away with a sullen look on her face and dived into the sofa.

He looked over and saw that there was someone other than Kotori in the living room. After going to the apartment building next door to change her clothes, Tohka had come over to sit in front of the TV, clutching a video game controller.

She said she would wait until Shido’s committee meeting was over, but he’d had a hunch the meeting would run long. So he’d ignored her request and sent her home ahead of him.

“Oh, Shido! You’re back! Kotori! Hurry and come help me!” Tohka shouted, bobbing and weaving with the action on-screen.

But Kotori kept her face buried in a cushion. “Hmm. Yoshino, take it,” she said.

“H-huh...?” Abruptly assigned a new role, Yoshino raced over to Tohka’s side in a panic. “Uh, um... What...should I...?”

“When they run up just go *wham* and do the whole *whup*, then you gotta *pow!* There!”

“Uh, um...I...”

“Well, you basically need to just dive in. Don’t bother trying to figure it out. I’ll take the left, you get the right, Yoshino.”

“O-okay...”

Yoshino and Yoshinon grabbed the controller and joined the game.

“Ha-ha!” After watching this, Shido went to wash his hands and then reached out for the apron hanging over the back of a chair.

Around the time he started peeling the onion, Kotori abruptly lifted her head from her facedown position on the sofa. “Hey, Shido. You’re sure nothing’s wrong, right?”

“Hmm?” He arched an eyebrow. “What? You worried about me?”

“N-no! Oh. Um. Tohka. Tohka! It’d be terrible if something happened to you and Tohka’s mental state deteriorated! That’s why I’m saying you gotta take proper care of yourself!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Shido said, smiling.

Kotori sat up and stared at him with a frown.

“What?” Tohka called out upon hearing her name. But a boss character appeared a second later, and she quickly turned her focus back to the game.

Kotori exhaled, leaned back against the sofa, and continued speaking, her voice just quiet enough to keep from being heard by Tohka and Yoshino. “Seriously, though, be careful. Lot of annoying stuff going down these days.”

“Like?” he asked.

“A few things.” Kotori nodded. “But for now, I guess it’d be Phantom.”

“Phantom? What’s that? A Spirit code name?”

“The ‘something’ that came to us five years ago,” she said. “It’s awkward to keep calling it ‘something.’ So we gave it a code name at the last meeting, for convenience.”

“Oh... Um.”

Five years ago, a mysterious being gave Kotori Spirit powers and sealed both of their memories, and they didn’t even know if it was a Spirit or not.

This was indeed an important unresolved issue. All the more so because its identity and objective were completely shrouded in mystery.

“And one more,” she continued. “That company.”

“You mean...DEM?” Shido asked, and he could see Kotori nod.

That was a more recent event. Shido’d gone to a certain island for his school trip, where he encountered a duo of Spirits, Kaguya and Yuzuru Yamai. And then he’d been attacked by the wizard Ellen Mathers, mechanical dolls equipped with CR units, and, on top of that, an enormous airship.

Behind it all was DEM—Deus Ex Machina Industries.

The company had made advances into a number of fields, but their roots were in the munitions industry, which allowed their rapid growth. The general public was not aware of this face, but this very DEM was the manufacturer of the Realizers for the Self-Defense Force’s AST.

“But...it doesn’t feel real somehow,” he said. “The idea that DEM would do a thing like that.”

“Open your eyes,” Kotori snapped. “If they had any morals whatsoever, that whole thing with Mana—”

“Huh?” Shido’s eyebrow arched up. “Mana? What happened to Mana?”

Mana was the girl who’d come to them and said she was his biological little sister. But she’d been seriously injured in a fight with a Spirit and was currently hospitalized, receiving treatment.

Kotori’s face made it clear that she had let too much slip, and she pursed her

lips together as she averted her eyes.

“H-hey! What do you mean? What’s going on with Mana?” He definitely couldn’t let this go. He set the onion down on the cutting board and took a detour around the dining table into the living room, wiping his hands on his apron.

But just when he came to stand before Kotori...

Vwxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxmmmmm.

“...! Wha—?”

...the spacequake alarm began to sound, making the large living room window shake.

Kotori leaped to her feet, skirt swinging, and slipped past Shido.

"Ah! H-hey!" he protested. "We're still—"

“Talk later,” Kotori cut him off. “You get ready, too, Shido. Time to get to work.”

She pulled a Chupa Chups from the candy holster fashioned onto her skirt, peeled the wrapper off, and popped the lollipop into her mouth.



Earlier at the SDF Tengu Garrison.

“Master Sergeant First Class Origami Tobiichi. Your suspension is over as of today. You may return to general AST duties and training.”

"Yes, sir." Origami saluted her superior.

Ever since she caused that fatal scandal in June, she'd been prohibited from Realizer use or any involvement in SDF activities. Naturally, she hadn't neglected basic training during this time, but since she wasn't allowed to touch a Realizer, she couldn't do any Spirit battle training. And so she'd spent more than two months feeling incredibly frustrated and helpless.

That said, she could have easily been facing criminal penalties in addition to a dishonorable discharge, so it was something of a miracle that she was even able to rejoin her squad at all.

“There won’t be a next time. If you act out like that again, assume you will not be returning to duty.”

“I understand,” she replied briefly, when the door opened without a knock.

“...?”

She looked back, confirmed the intruder’s identity, and furrowed her brow dubiously.

“...Captain Kusakabe?”

Yes. Entering the room in a state of excessive excitement was the AST leader who was so fussy about budgets and decorum, Ryouko Kusakabe.

But belying this expectation of Origami’s, Ryouko marched into the room and slammed the stack of documents in her hand down on her supervisor’s desk.

“What is the meaning of this?!”

“Wh-what in the...?” Major Tsukamoto was overwhelmed by Ryouko’s menacing attitude and leaned back, unable to rebuke her for her lack of etiquette.

“What’s wrong?” Origami asked, and Ryouko finally noticed her there.

“Oh... Origami,” she said. “Right. You’re back today. Perfect timing. What do you think of this?”

She brought over the documents she had just slammed down onto the desk. Origami looked down at the papers.

“What...?” Her eyebrows came together slightly at the incredible details written on them.

“This deployment is simply ridiculous! Ten foreign members... And on top of that, you give this independent squad special discretionary powers in times of emergency? What on earth are the brass even thinking?!”

Ryouko slammed her hand down on the desk again, and Major Tsukamoto jumped.

Detailed in that document was information on supplementary personnel for the AST. That wasn’t a real issue in itself.

But there were ten of these additions, and all of them were on loan from DEM Industries. Not to mention the fact that the entire group was made of foreigners, which changed the situation slightly. Moreover, they had the right to step out from under the umbrella of Ryouko's leadership as needed. This was the same as buying up every single share to take over a company.

"The AST is not a baseball team! It can't actually be possible for people from outside the country to enlist! And then to give them this kind of sweeping authority, I can only assume something is very wrong here!"

"Th-that's...", Tsukamoto muttered.

Ryouko scratched her head impatiently and was about to turn on her heel as if to say there was no talking to Tsukamoto.

But once again, the door opened, slowly this time. And ten foreigners filed into the room one after the other.

"Well, what do we have here?"

The redheaded woman in the lead twisted her lips up at the sight of Ryouko and Origami. She was maybe the same age as Ryouko. And she was somehow reminiscent of a fox, perhaps because of her almond eyes.

"So you've seen the papers, then. AST captain and...yes, Origami Tobiichi, is it?" she said with an accent, her smile deepening as she spoke.

"And who might you be?" Ryouko asked.

The woman nodded exaggeratedly as she extended a hand. "Jessica Bailey, joining the AST as of today. Looking forward to working together!"

"Hmph." Ryouko screwed her face up unhappily, thrust her hand out as if to push the other hand back, and shook it. "I don't know what exactly you all came here to do, but I won't let you have the run of the place here. As long as you're in the AST, you'll follow my orders."

Jessica's eyes grew round in surprise, and she glanced at her subordinates behind her before shrugging. "Will we be able to defeat a Spirit if we follow your orders, I wonder?"

"...What did you say?" Ryouko hissed.

“I’ve heard all kinds of things about your team. You’re the anti-Spirit squad in a region with the most spacequakes in the world, the play-pretend team that hasn’t yet caught a single Spirit.”

“Wha...?” Ryouko scowled.

Jessica shifted her gaze toward Origami. “I’ve heard about you. You moved out on your own to kill a Spirit and got punished for it. Ha-ha-ha! You just might have what it takes to be one of us. Almost.”

When Origami remained silent, Jessica brought her face in close.

“But you’re no good. Not worth talking about. You went and tried to use a defective model like White Licorice, but in the end, you couldn’t do anything at all, hmm? Hee-hee, how unsightly,” she said, grinning, and the team behind her started to giggle.

“Captain, you just have to feel sorry for her.”

“You can’t measure these wretches in the Far East against our standards, I’m telling you.”

“That’s right. I mean, it’s not like she’s weak because she *wants* to be.”

A girl with freckles, a girl with large lips, and a girl with small eyes spoke one after the other, scornfully.

Origami gritted her teeth, the look on her face unchanging.

“Oh dear, did I make you mad?” Jessica laughed. “Ha-ha-ha! What’s being angry going to do? You all can’t even take down a Spirit, and you think you have a chance against us, the DEM Adeptus Numbers?”

“Hey, you’re basically—,” Ryouko started.

A shrill alarm rang out.

“...! Origami, get ready to mobilize!” she snapped. “Your skills are still sharp, yeah?!”

“Of course,” Origami replied and was about to run out of the room when Jessica and her team began to smirk again.

“If you can’t kill a Spirit, does it really matter whether they’re sharp or not?”

Jessica asked.

“...” Origami glared at Jessica.

Ryouko stepped in front of her. “Stop it, Origami. Now’s not the time for that.” She turned to the new squad. “We’re moving out. Whatever you say, we have to protect this town. And what exactly are *you* going to do?”

“Oh, us? Right. Okay, this is good timing. We’ll go on the attack, too. We’ll teach you how it’s done. But...” Jessica held up a finger. “We’ve been entrusted with a special mission. That takes priority over everything else.”

“Special...mission?” Origami said, brows furrowing. For some reason, she sensed something ominous in those words.



“Ngh...” Shido frowned as a sudden buoyancy enveloped him, like he’d jumped into a high-speed elevator, and his field of view changed from the gloomy interior of the airship to the road at night.

He’d been transported in an almost instantaneous shift with the transporter on *Fraxinus*. He pressed a hand to his forehead to stabilize himself, but he felt like he had been drugged, and he dug his heels into the ground.

Once the haze disappeared, he took stock of his surroundings.

He’d come down to stand in the plaza in front of Tatsunami Station on the west side of Tengu.

Because it was the closest station to the multipurpose Tengu Arena, the area was crowded with people on days when there were concerts or other events. He’d actually been surprised before at the number of people around when he’d passed through the area, not knowing that a popular band was holding a concert.

But there wasn’t a soul in sight in that plaza now. And that was as it should have been. Before his eyes was something like a crater, the majority of the plaza gouged out like a bowl. Only part of the fence remained.

Spacequakes. The anomalous catastrophes eating away at humanity. A wide-ranging tremor that erased all within its area of effect in the span of an instant.

“Looks like you’ve arrived safely on the scene,” he heard Kotori say through the small earpiece in his right ear.

Kotori, the Ratatoskr commander, was currently monitoring him from the airship *Fraxinus*, which was hanging fifteen thousand meters above him.

“The Spirit signal is moving south from ground zero. Hurry up.”

“Roger!” He started running.

Spirits. These creatures were so incredibly dangerous that they had earned the moniker *world-killing catastrophes*. A spacequake was one aftereffect of a Spirit appearing from a parallel world.

“Whoops!”

He continued to run, nearly losing his footing and collapsing in the process. Maybe there’d be a concert or event of some kind—the illuminated streets were scattered with colorful pamphlets and hand fans with pictures plastered on them. For a moment, he thought the spectators had been some rude customers, but with the sudden ringing of the spacequake alarm, they would have been forced to drop whatever they held in their hands and flee.

“Kotori, where’s the Spirit signal?!”

“Hang on. Getting a precise—”

His eyebrows jumped. Ahead—from the direction of Tengu Arena, he could hear something.

“It’s...singing?”

Yes. Blocked by the walls, he could only hear the sound faintly, but there was no mistaking the musicality of it.

Was there actually a singer continuing alone onstage even though the spacequake alarm was ringing and all the spectators had evacuated? The image briefly popped up in his head, and he quickly shook it off.

Shido pushed open the large door half in a daze and stepped inside the arena. He walked forward until he had a view of the stage.

Instantly, he felt like he’d been pinned in place by a sharp gaze.

The center of the arena. The performers and staff had no doubt left the stage as it was when they evacuated, and in the middle of the dark venue, the stage rose up like a tower, illuminated by several spotlights from below.

A girl stood in the center, dressed in a dazzling outfit that looked almost woven out of particles of light, her voice echoing throughout the venue. A quiet tune like a lullaby composed of words he'd never heard before reached his ears.

"Ah..." He let slip a cry of admiration.

She wasn't accompanied by any instrumentation. Or using a mic or any other device to amplify her voice. Her song was completely unadorned.

But the power of it was so overwhelming that it nearly caused him to hallucinate—like it was passing through his ears and penetrating his brain stem.

"That can't be...Diva?!"

"...!"

Kotori's sudden shout in his right ear brought him back to his senses. Shido lowered his eyes and shook his head. He clenched his jaw slightly and refocused.

Right. This was no time to be engrossed in a song. He had an extremely difficult and important job to do.

"Diva... Is that her code name?"

"Yes. A Spirit confirmed just once, about six months ago. She was registered in the database at any rate, but we have basically zero detailed information on her, including her personality and temperament. Not to mention her abilities or her Angel. Be extra careful when you make contact."

"G-got it." Shido gulped and turned his face toward the girl once more as he stepped forward.

Klak. A dry sound rang out.

"Ah..." He froze with one foot forward.

He had apparently kicked an empty can on the floor.

Hearing this, the girl abruptly stopped singing.

“Oh deaaaar?” she said, drawing out the vowel. Her voice sounded different from her singing voice.

“Idiot. What are you doing?”

“Sorry... It’s dark, and I can’t see my feet—”

But Shido didn’t get to finish excusing himself. Because the girl kept speaking as she swiveled her head, looking out at the arena.

“So there *is* someone in the audieeeeeence? I thought I was alone.”

Her voice was gentle and relaxed. The audience seating was too dark for her to see Shido, it seemed.

“Where are yooooou? I was just getting boooored all by myself. If you don’t mind, maybe we could talk a bit?”

“Kotori—”

“Doesn’t look like she’s the sort of Spirit to attack without warning. We got your back here with the conversation, so how about moving up to a place where you can speak with her more easily?”

“Roger. I’m going in,” Shido assented, clenching his fists, and climbed the stairs to the stage.

But just as he was about to take that last stair, he heard Kotori’s voice in his right ear, checking him.

“Hold it. We’ve got some options. Let’s see... Looks like we’re going the full-confidence route.”

Light from several displays lit the dim, semielliptic space.

Kotori was on the bridge of the airship *Fraxinus*, suspended in the night sky, vertically separated from Shido in the Tengu Arena by a distance of fifteen thousand meters.

Inside, Kotori stood up from where she had been leaning back in the captain’s chair, a Chupa Chups stuck in her mouth. Her crimson jacket and the hem of her skirt still swinging from the motion, she roared to the rest of the bridge.

“All hands! Make your choice!”

The crew assembled on the bridge began to tap at the consoles before them.

On the main monitor, a window was displayed with three options on it.

1. I WAS JUST CAPTIVATED BY YOUR BEAUTY.

2. YOUR SINGING IS INCREDIBLY LOVELY.

3. THE VIEW FROM BELOW IS AMAZING.

This was the method of attacking Spirits derived by the *Fraxinus* AI that was monitoring said Spirit's mental state.

Kotori licked her lips, and her crew's responses were thrown up on her small display. The largest number of votes was for option two.

"I see... Not too shabby," she said.

The crew spoke up from the lower level.

"One is also good, but well, it's a bit too on the nose, so two is better here."

"She is just standing and singing, after all. She probably wouldn't be offended by a compliment."

They were exactly right.

"I suppose." Kotori nodded. "What do you think, Reine?"

The woman seated to her left turned toward her, eyes adorned with dark circles.

"...Mm, right. Seems reasonable. At any rate, we have very little information on Diva. It wouldn't be a bad idea to look for clues on where we go next based on her reaction to this question."

"Makes sense," Kotori agreed. "All right, we'll go with two. By the way, Kannazuki."

Before she gave the instruction to Shido, she glanced at the screen. Among the majority of votes for two and the others for one, there was just one member of her crew who had selected three.

A tall man with a face like a mannequin stood rigidly immobile behind her. This was the ship's vice-commander, Kotori's second-in-command, Kyouhei

Kannazuki.

“Yes, sir!”

“Which do you prefer, the mountains or the beach?”

“Hmm? Are we discussing a trip with you, Commander? In that case, the beach with the greater exposure—”

“Good. Then I will give you the Sleep with the Fishies Regimen.”

Kotori snapped her fingers, and two brawny men appeared from a door behind her and seized Kannazuki’s arms.

“I-I’ve been framed!” he cried. “Framed like a damn photo! I selected *two*!”

“What did you say?” Kotori tapped at her console to display a breakdown of the choices. And she learned that indeed, Kannazuki’s vote had been for two. “So then who on earth...?”

She looked doubtfully at the vote for three and saw the name *Nakatsugawa* written there.

“So it was you, Nakatsugawa!” she barked.

“Hyah?!” Dimension Breaker Nakatsugawa jumped in his seat. “Er... Wh-what is it, Commander...?”

“Don’t ‘what is it’ me. Now, I’m not telling you not to pick three. I do want a variety of opinions. But you will at least explain to me the reason for this choice.”

“What? Three? ...Er?” Nakatsugawa twisted his head around like he didn’t understand the words being said to him before dropping his eyes to his personal display and letting out a surprised cry. “I-I’m so sorry! I pushed the button without looking at the options at all!”

Kotori frowned. “Nakatsugawa, do you realize what you’re doing here? Your decision could very well put Shido in danger, you know?”

“F-forgive me! I’m prepared to accept whatever punishment you see fit! B-but...”

“But what?” she demanded.

Nakatsugawa glanced at the main monitor before continuing. “This Spirit—Diva—I feel like I’ve heard her voice somewhere before.”

“...What? What do you mean?” Kotori furrowed her brow dubiously, just as Shido’s voice came to them over the speakers.

“H-hey! Where’s that choice?”

“Oh, sorry. It’s two. Compliment her singing voice,” Kotori said, and on-screen, she could see Shido nodding before he climbed the last stair up onto the stage.

Kotori took a deep breath to collect herself and sat back down in her captain’s chair. “Well, fine. The attack right now takes priority. I’ll hear what you have to say later, Nakatsugawa.”

“U-understood, sir!” He snapped a salute at her and then turned back to his console.

At the same time, she heard a weak voice from behind. It was Kannazuki, his arms still held by the muscular men.

“Haaah... I’m relieved that this misunderstanding has been cleared up.”

“Sorry about that,” she said. “It’s just because your usual behavior is so incredibly awful.”

“No, no, everyone makes mistakes,” he said. “The important thing is to reflect on these mistakes thoroughly. Let’s see... I know. How about we settle it with your freshly removed socks, Commander?”

Kotori snapped her fingers, and the men dragged Kannazuki off the bridge.

“Commander! I—I understand! Your insoles! The insoles from your shoes would be fine!”

The door closed with an electronic *whrr*, and his voice could no longer be heard.

“Sounds pretty lively up there. Did something happen?”

“It’s nothing. You just focus on the Spirit in front of you,” Kotori said, sounding very much like there really was nothing going on.

But he felt like he'd heard Kannazuki shrieking... Well, he wouldn't worry too much about it. He scratched his cheek, sweat beading on his forehead.

He couldn't split his focus in a situation like this. He took a deep breath and then raced up the stairs to come out on the stage.

Illuminated by too many spotlights, the stage was as dazzlingly bright and hot as a summer's day. But he couldn't afford to close his eyes. He made sure to open them wide and direct his gaze at the girl standing onstage.

She slowly looked over her shoulder, having heard him come up. "Oh, you went to the trouble of coming all the way up heeere? Good evening. I'm—"

The Spirit whirled around, a bright smile on her face until she caught sight of Shido and froze.

"Huh?"

"Shido. What are you doing?"

He was baffled for a second, but he had to say something. He cleared his throat and opened his mouth.

"Oh, hi there. I didn't mean to eavesdrop. You have a beautiful—"

A shrill alarm began to ring on the other end of his earpiece.

"Th-this is... Likability, mood, mental state—all her parameters are plummeting! What is going on?! Shido, you're not flashing her or anything, are you?!"

"Wha—? No! I'm not!" he said, glancing down just to make sure. Nothing was pulled down, and there wasn't anything scandalous exposed. But then why on earth...?!

"We'll just have to try a different option. One! Compliment her looks!"

Bzzt! Bzzt!

"Likability's dropped even further!"

"It's reached the point where she's actually feeling hatred for Shido!"

"Wh-what did you say?!"

He heard the emergency alarm followed by the panicked voices of the crew and Kotori.

“O-okay, final option! Three! Tell her the view from below is amazing!”

“Below?”

Bzzt! Bzzzzzzt!

“I-I’ve never seen numbers this low!”

“This likability is lower than a cockroach’s!”

“He didn’t even finish speaking!”

The cries of the crew pounded in his right ear.

While all this was going on, a sudden change came over the frozen girl before him.

Kree, kree... She turned her neck like a rusted machine, threw her head back, and took a deep breath.

“Uh. Um...,” Shido said, but the girl ignored him. The shrill alarm was still going off in his ear.

And then the girl finished breathing in and glared at him.

“Ah!!”

She cried out at an incredible volume.

“Hngah?!”

A shock wave slammed into his chest, stomach, limbs, and face. The invisible pressure could only be described as a wall of sound. It knocked the air out of him, and he was sent flying through the air, coughing up what felt like blood.

“Shido!”

“...!”

As if spurred into action by Kotori’s voice, he grabbed onto the edge of the stage just as he was about to fall right off it. He managed to somehow withstand the wall of sound as it passed by, making his entire body sting and shake, and keep his upper body at least onstage.

“E-eeeek!” He glanced down and discovered that the stage was surprisingly high up. He would definitely break a bone or two if he fell from this height. And while he was under Kotori’s protection, pain was still pain.

He desperately kicked and flailed to try and pull himself back up onto the stage.

Diva approached at a leisurely pace. She stopped in front of him and smiled peacefully, like a goddess.

However.

“Hmm? Why would you hang ooon? Why didn’t you faaall? Why didn’t you diiiiie? Please leave this stage in this world in this stochastic spacetime as eeeeexpeditiously as possible.”

“Huh...?” His eyes grew wide at the difference between the look on her face and the words coming from her mouth. “Uh. Um... What was that?”

“What are you taaaalking about? Please stop. It’s creeeeepy. Please don’t speak. Please don’t let your spittle fly out of your mouth. Please don’t breeeathe. Don’t you understand that you simply existing here is contaminating the air? You don’t, do youuu?”

“...”

How much better it would have been if this were a silent film. The incredibly bizarre behavior of the girl made his mind ponder such idiotic things despite the obvious danger he was in.

“Uhhh. Y-you’re...”

“You just don’t liiiisten, do you? Won’t you just immediately disappear? Your existence is unpleasant. Do you know why I don’t stomp on your hand and force you off this stage? Because I would rather not touch you at all, not even with the sole of my shoooe.”

The gorgeous face. Beautiful voice. Liling speech. The only sharp edge to her lay in her words.

“...!”

The roof of the arena twisted unnaturally and then exploded with a

tremendous roar. The massive spotlights hanging from the ceiling crashed to the ground in pieces.

“Wh-whoa?!” The world around Shido trembled, and he clung to the edge of the stage to keep from being shaken off.

“Oh deaaar?”

“Wh-what the...?” He looked up. There was nothing left that could be called a ceiling anymore. In its place, the night sky showed its face, colored with the light of the moon and drifting clouds.

Wait. That wasn’t all. He could see several human shapes in mechanical armor moving in the darkness.

“The AST!” he cried, a tremor in his voice. His time was up, it seemed.

The AST members danced nimbly through the sky as they entered the arena. He’d been told that CR units were fundamentally unsuited to indoor fighting, but in a place this large, that clearly wasn’t an issue. Several wizards quickly spread out to surround the stage, weapons at the ready.

But Shido noticed something wasn’t quite right. Yes, this was the same old AST he’d come to know. But for whatever reason, there were a number of unfamiliar Western faces in their ranks.

“Shido! We’ve done enough. Pull out for now!” Kotori shouted through his earpiece.

“R-right...” He nodded and then frowned. The alarm that had been ringing in his ear all this time had stopped. “Huh?” He glanced over at Diva.

“Well, well!” She looked completely different. Her hands were clasped together, and her eyes shone. “Isn’t this niiice? Isn’t this wonderful? Yes, this is the audience I want! Yes, deeeefinitely. Especially...”

With an earsplitting shriek, Diva vanished from the spot.

In the next instant, she appeared without a sound behind one of the AST members—Origami. She set a familiar hand on her shoulder and brought her mouth to her ear like an intimate partner.

“Aah! Good, gooood. Say, would you like to hear me sing?”

“...!” Origami jumped and swung her laser blade.

“Aah! Now, nooow!” Diva said in a sweet voice as she dodged Origami’s blow.

Origami appeared to be excessively hurt by this reaction. She sliced and slashed at Diva over and over. But just when these follow-up attacks were in striking range of Diva, they were blocked by something like an invisible wall.

“You’re getting nowhere. Out of the way—,” said a redheaded girl, floating on the opposite side of the stage, but she cut herself off when she caught sight of Shido. “That’s...”

She gestured like she was talking with her comrades over her communication device and then, for some reason, fired her thrusters not in the direction of the Spirit but toward Shido.

“Huh?” he cried out, stunned. For a moment, he thought maybe she was trying to protect a civilian who had wandered onto the battlefield, but somehow, Shido could tell that wasn’t what was on her mind.

She pulled an enormous stun baton off her hip and turned it toward him. Almost like she was planning to knock him unconscious and take him...

“...!”

Origami appeared in front of Shido abruptly, before the red-haired girl could lay a hand on him. Her laser blade slammed against the girl’s weapon, sending up a shower of sparks.

“Um, hello?” the red-haired girl said. “What are you doing?”

“I would ask you the same thing,” Origami replied. “He is not a Spirit. What were you going to do to him?”

“You don’t have the clearance to know. Orders from upstairs. Step aside.”

“I cannot accept that. Explain it to me.”

“You just don’t get it.” The girl brandished her weapon once more.

Origami readied her laser blade to meet the attack.

A powerful shock wave rippled through the area.

“Wh-whoa?!” In the next instant, Shido’s field of view went dark. When he

came to, he was back inside the dim ship.



Chapter 2

Male/Female

About an hour after Shido disappeared, the members of the AST returned to the garrison following an unsuccessful attempt to kill or capture the Spirit and having her flee on them, as per usual.

“...”

But for some reason, this wasn't sitting right with Origami.

Normally, when a Spirit got away, it meant that the Spirit had been Lost to the parallel world. But not a single person had witnessed the moment when Diva vanished into empty air. She had shouted in an incredibly loud voice and disappeared when they all flinched at the shock wave. But there was no Spirit signal in the vicinity, so she'd been deemed Lost. Still, Origami couldn't shake the feeling that Diva had purposely created an opening so that she could run and hide from them.

She shook her head slightly, and the look in her eyes grew sharper. Right now, she had something more important to deal with.

Once the exhaustion after releasing her Territory had lessened to some degree, Origami moved slowly and came to stand before Jessica where she was chatting with her team. “What exactly are your intentions?”

Jessica raised an eyebrow and looked back at Origami. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“Don't play dumb with me. Why did you try to attack Shido?”

“Oh my! Is he a friend?”

“Answer me,” Origami pressed her.

“A civilian wandered onto the battlefield. I tried to protect him.” Jessica shrugged exaggeratedly. “Is that a problem?”

“...” Origami glared at Jessica with daggers in her eyes. This was an obvious lie. She very much doubted she had misread the other girl’s actions.

But Jessica clearly didn’t care if Origami believed her or not. The look on her face said she knew Origami wouldn’t be able to touch her as long as she went through the motions. And indeed, there was actual no proof that Jessica had tried to attack Shido.

“We’re done here. Go away. We’re busy,” Jessica said with a sniff.

But Origami kept going. “Does it have something to do with this special mission you’ve been tasked with?”

“...”

Jessica and her team twitched. And then she clicked her tongue in irritation and grabbed onto Origami’s bangs.

“Ngh...”

“Little girl. You won’t live very long if you start whispering about things that don’t concern you,” she spat and thrust Origami away. Still not completely over her fatigue, Origami fell flat on her backside, and Jessica and her team giggled.

“You there! What’re you doing?!” Ryouko ran over, flustered at the commotion.

Jessica averted her face as if to play dumb and then walked off, her team trailing behind her.

“Hey, you okay, Origami?” Ryouko asked, offering her a hand.

“...No problems.” Origami took the hand and pulled herself to her feet as she glared hatefully at Jessica’s receding back.



“Why...on a Saturday...?” Shido yawned sleepily as he walked along, flanked by Tohka and Origami as if under arrest.

September 9. A night had passed since his encounter with the Spirit Diva.

They’d had a meeting on *Fraxinus* afterward to discuss the mysterious drop in likability. He’d been forced to attend since he had no school the next day

anyway, and of course, the meeting lasted well into the night.

He rubbed his eyes, and another yawn slipped out.

But he'd gotten a call that morning from Ai saying there was a joint meeting for the Tenou Festival schools, so *"please and thank you!"*

"Hey, you. You're too close to Shido. Get back."

"You're the one who should move away. Shido also says that your body odor is so powerful, it is impossible to endure."

"Wh-what?!"

Tohka's voice came from his right, Origami's from his left, and both made his groggy head throb.

"Tohka... Origami, just be quiet, okay...? Your voices are echoing in my brain."

"Understood. Be quiet, Origami Tobiichi. Shido also says you're too loud."

"The sound of your breathing and your heart pounding is an affront to the ears. You're the one who should be quiet right now."

"No, seriously..." He let out a long sigh.

It was only the three of them on their way to the venue; committee members Ai-Mai-Mii were nowhere to be found. They had to practice for the band performance they would be doing for the stage division on the first day of the festival, so they couldn't attend that day's joint meeting.

"It's fine, you'll be fine. We got subs," he was told, and when he arrived at the meeting spot, he found Tohka and Origami glaring at each other like cats in a turf war.

Shido grumbled to himself as they passed a tall stone wall, and the school where the meeting was being held came into view.

Decorative iron lattices spread out from both sides of the stately red brick gates, and green hedges poked out through the gaps. From there, a path also paved in red brick stretched out in a straight line toward a magnificent building that looked more like a castle than a school.

The private Rindoji Girls' Academy. Extremely prestigious, it was the

preeminent school in Tengu, attended by the daughters of many notable families.

The ceaseless bickering around him stopped abruptly. He looked over to find Tohka gazing up at the school.

“Ohhh. Wow, Shido,” she said in awe. “This is a school, too?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Well, let’s go inside anyway.”

“Mm!” Tohka replied.

“...” Origami nodded.

After showing their student IDs to the security guard, they stepped onto the campus, went into the school through the guest entrance, and got permission to be in the school from the staff in the teacher’s office. Then they walked down the hallway toward the meeting room that was their destination.

“Conference room number two. This is it?” he said and opened the door.

A number of students in a variety of uniforms were already inside. Nameplates had been set up to show where people from different high schools should sit at the long tables arranged in a square. However, since there was still some time before the start of the meeting, many of the students were standing and chatting rather than taking their seats.

Having only been appointed to the committee the previous day, Shido obviously knew none of them. He quickly sought out their seats and sat down.

Soon after, there was a knock on the door of the conference room.

“Hmm?” He cocked his head to one side, and the students from the other schools lifted their faces as one. “Wh-what the?”

He unconsciously braced himself at this reaction from the others. What exactly was on the other side of that door?

But the voice he heard next was so gentle, it was anticlimactic.

“Excuse meeee.”

The door slowly opened, and a group of girls dressed in navy sailor-style uniforms stepped quietly inside. And they lined up in two rows to either side of

the door, hanging their heads, almost like peasants welcoming the procession of a great lord.

While Shido gaped, another student walked leisurely down this path, like an empress.

Her long pale hair was tied back loosely, and when it caught the light, it shone a deep purple. Her silver eyes glittered like crystals. Although she was wearing the same sailor uniform as the girls around her, her overwhelming presence made her stand out in a way that needed no explanation.

“Wha...?”

“...!”

Shido and Origami gasped in unison.

This girl was indeed beautiful. If he passed by her on the street, he might have unconsciously turned to look at her. But that wasn’t why he gasped. There was an altogether different reason.

“Helloooo. Thank you so muuuch for coming, everyone,” the girl said, her voice relaxed, and bowed neatly.

When he heard her voice, he was sure of it. This girl.

“I’m Miku Izayoi, head of the Rindoji Girls’ Academy Tenou Festival planning committee.”

She was the Spirit Shido had encountered the previous day—Diva.



“Now, heeere we go. Join me, everyone.”

A lazy voice came through the speakers on *Fraxinus*, accompanied by cheerful music and shrill cheers. The main monitor at the front of the bridge showed a girl in a frilly costume singing and dancing, with a carpet of purple glow sticks spreading out before her.

The picture quality was bad, and it was clear that this was not an official concert DVD released for general sale. It was a bootleg video that Nakatsugawa had obtained by making use of his many connections.

“...”

Standing next to the captain’s chair, Shido gaped at the video. Or to be more precise, at the girl dancing happily in the center of the screen, singing in that beautiful voice. There was no doubt—this was the Rindoji girl he’d come face-to-face with that day and the Spirit he’d encountered the day before, Diva.

“Miku Izayoi...hmm? I never dreamed she was a Spirit,” Kotori said, staring at the video from the captain’s chair.

“You know her?” he asked.

“Well, her name anyway. And a few of her songs from commercials and TV shows.”

“Y-yeah?” Shido scratched his cheek. It seemed that Tonomachi had not been mistaken.

But Kotori ignored him and dropped her eyes to the profile page by her hand, frowning.

“She made her debut about six months ago. She’s had one smash hit after another. Her singing’s amazing, and her voice is so beautiful, some people even go so far as to call it an audible narcotic. She’s this mysterious idol who never does TV appearances, no pictures in magazines, nothing. Seems like she’s the kind of idol to have a big cult following.”

Kotori put a hand to her chin and sighed.

“The Spirit is an idol. At the very minimum, she’s been living unnoticed in this world for six months. And living a life like this? Ah! Kurumi’s got nothing on this one.”

Shido twitched at the name *Kurumi*. That Spirit had transferred into his class as a human being. But now he had an option he hadn’t possessed back then.

“So is she also a human being given Spirit powers by Phantom like you, Kotori?”

“...Mm.” Kotori jumped a little in her seat. “I can’t deny the possibility. And if that’s the case, then it’s no mystery why she stayed in this world. But then the reason for yesterday’s spacequake becomes the mystery.”

“Oh...” Shido opened his eyes wide in understanding.

A spacequake was the aftershock of a Spirit coming from the parallel world to appear in this one. Some Spirits like Kurumi could make spacequakes happen of their own will, but it seemed unlikely that Miku would do that when she had a life in this world.

He groaned as he scratched the back of his head. It wasn't that he was personally invested in the idea of her being human, but if they rejected the possibility, then they were back to square one.

And there was one other huge problem.

“We still don't know the reason for the sudden drop in likability, either,” he said slowly.

Yes. The nightlong meeting had amounted to naught. They hadn't managed to come up with an explanation for this.

But Kotori shook her head. “Actually, about that, we did come up with one theory, even if we can't say for sure that that's it.”

“Huh?” he said. “We did?”

“Yes. I had my suspicions after looking at the results of yesterday's monitoring, but now that we know Diva is Miku Izayoi, I'm sure of it.”

“Wh-what exactly was it, then?” Shido asked intently.

Kotori held out her hands as if to rein him in. “I'll walk you through it. Reine?”

“...Yes. Look at this,” Reine said from Kotori's left, and a graph popped up over the concert video of Miku on the main monitor.

“Aah!” Nakatsugawa shrieked, his dancing along to the music interrupted, and glared at Kotori silently.

Shido smiled at this and then turned his eyes toward the graph. “What is it?”

“...Mm-hmm. It shows Miku's mental state yesterday. Right up around the middle is when you started talking to her.”

He looked at the area. It was a sudden drop like something from a roller coaster ride. He couldn't even see the scale toward the end of the curve.

“...She hates me even more than I thought, huh?”

“...Well, we’ll put a pin in that for the time being. Take a look at what comes after that,” Reine instructed.

He did as he was told and saw that the mood at the bottom of the graph abruptly began to shoot upward.

“What...?”

“...That corresponds with when the AST showed up.”

“And when it reaches this maximum value?” he asked.

“...That’s the moment she touched Origami Tobiichi.”

“Um... So then?” Shido’s mind was racing.

Kotori pulled the lollipop from her mouth to snap it toward the lower part of the bridge. “Nakatsugawa.”

“Yes, sir!” Nakatsugawa snapped to attention. “The revolutionary idol Miku Izayoi stepped onto the stage like a shooting star. But the truth is, she never appears in public. Her idol work is limited to regularly released CDs and secret concerts for a select handful of fans. Although she’s currently one of the most famous people in Japan, very few people have seen her face. To the point where some doubt her very existence.”

“Uh-huh... So she’s very thorough.”

“That doesn’t even begin to do it justice. Not a single photo of her face has made the rounds in this age of information and the Internet,” Nakatsugawa said passionately. “It’s abnormal. Virtually impossible. Do you realize how difficult it was for me to obtain this concert video?”

“But she *is* an idol, right?” Shido scratched his cheek, nonplussed. “Why would she go to such lengths to avoid people?”

“I obtained this information from the Internet,” Nakatsugawa said. “But it appears that Miku hates men with a violent passion, such that she can’t stand to even shake a man’s hand. They say that only female fans are allowed into these secret concerts.”

“Only female fans?” Shido asked in response.

“Yes.” Nakatsugawa’s breathing became fevered with his enthusiasm as he continued, “And according to the rumors, she will take home her favorites of these women fans after the concert.”

“Th-that’s...”

“Yes. In other words...” Kotori returned her Chupa Chups to her mouth and snapped a finger up. “It’s quite possible that Miku Izayoi is attracted to girls.”

“Wha—?” Shido was filled with a deep despair.

He didn’t care in the slightest for anyone else’s preferences. He was in the eleventh grade now, after all. He wasn’t so childish as to reflexively think less of anyone just because they were different from him, and he understood that love in this world came in myriad forms.

But it would complicate things if a Spirit was only interested in girls. Extremely so.

The reason was simple. Shido and Ratatoskr were attempting to secure the Spirits while also avoiding spacequakes by sealing each Spirit’s power and putting them into a stable state. Shido’s own power was critical to making this plan workable—specifically, the ability to seal Spirit power inside himself with a kiss.

And simply pressing his lips against a Spirit’s wouldn’t be enough. He had to raise his likability with the Spirit to the point where she’d consent to his kiss, at the absolute minimum.

“S-so then there’s nothing we can do!” he groaned despondently. He’d had his share of difficulties in attacking Spirits before, but he couldn’t break through the wall of a physical obstacle like this.

But Kotori’s eyes widened with curiosity. “What are you talking about? You’re on the Tenou Festival planning committee, right? Which means you’ll have plenty of chances to talk with Miku before the festival.”

“Sure, fine, but Miku’s not interested in guys, remember?”

“It’s not that she’s not interested,” Kotori said. “It would be more accurate to

say she hates them.”

“That’s even worse!” Shido shouted.

Kotori shrugged in exasperation. “Did you think I would say something like that with no thought behind it? We’ve come up with a countermeasure.”

“Countermeasure?” he parroted.

Kotori nodded and snapped her fingers. From out of nowhere, Kannazuki appeared...soaking wet for some reason.

“Kannazuki?” Shido frowned. “Why are you wet? And why do you smell like fish?”

“Oh! Ha-ha! I just went out for a little swim.” Kannazuki gave a carefree laugh.

Still frowning, Shido returned to the topic at hand. “So then this countermeasure...”

“Is this,” Kannazuki replied. He pulled his hands out from behind his back and thrust them at Shido.

“...”

He was holding a Raizen High School uniform.

But it was a *girl’s* uniform.

Whoa, whoa, Kannazuki’s finally lost it, Shido thought briefly, but then he noticed something strange. This uniform was new. And rather large.

Yes. Large enough that it might be a perfect fit for a girl about the same height as *Shido*.

“...Um.” He took a step back, with a very bad feeling. But something blocked his way.

In the next instant, grasping hands seized his arms and pinned them against his back. He whirled his head around and found Bad Marriage Kawagoe and President Mikimoto there.

“Hey! Wh-what are you doing? P-please let go of me,” Shido said, a cold sweat popping up on his face.

Nailknocker Shiizaki appeared in front of him, makeup tools wedged between the fingers of both hands like throwing daggers, while Deep Love Minowa held up an assortment of wigs next to Kannazuki.

“Wh-what is this?!” he shouted.

But heedless of his cries, Kannazuki inched closer with his two subordinates. “It’s all right. You needn’t be afraid. You might feel some tingling at first at your feet, but that will change to pleasure soon enough. My colleague says it’s the case, so there’s no doubt.”

“K-Kotori?” Shido turned pleading eyes toward Kotori like a soldier on the losing side of a war, begging for his life.

“Good luck...Big *Sis*.” She grinned adorably as she pronounced his death sentence and gave him a thumbs-up.

Three hours later.

“Wh-who are you?!” Shido cried out unconsciously when he looked into the mirror.

And that was only natural. Looking back at him was a *girl* he’d never seen before. Long hair adorned with a cute hairpin tickled his back. A light layer of foundation had been applied to his face, while his eyes had been made to look bigger with mascara and an eyelash curler, and his lips were colored cherry pink. None of his features were those of a boy any longer.

His chest was also stuffed, and he had been forced into a bra. His legs had been completely shaven, including any peach fuzz, and rendered beautifully smooth and shiny. He might indeed have been a little tall for the average girl, but perhaps the fact that he had always had a slightly feminine face helped here. No one would have known he was actually a boy unless someone mentioned it. On the contrary, upon hearing this claim, some people might have actually laughed in disbelief. At the very least, few people would have been able to tell it was Shido at a glance.



“Suits you better than I thought it would,” Kotori said with a whistle, her eyes wide.

Shido stared at her resentfully. “You’ll pay for this.”

“Tut-tut, a girl mustn’t talk like that. Right, okay, put this on for the finishing touch.”

“Uh?” He frowned as he took what appeared to be a small bandage from her.

“Put it on your throat,” she instructed.

“Hmm? Like this?” He stuck it onto his throat. “So what’s it—? Wh-why does my voice sound like this?!” He pressed a hand to his neck in confusion.

The moment he affixed the plaster, his voice had changed into that of a cute girl.

“Whaddaya think?” Kotori smirked. “That there’s a super-high-performance voice modulator, made possible thanks to Ratatoskr’s cutting-edge technology. If you fiddle with the settings, you can even make your voice sound like a certain famous detective.”

“Um, I think I’ll pass on that...,” he said.

“Well, anyway, now you’re perfect. At the very least, no one’s going to think you’re a guy.” She snorted with self-satisfaction, and her crew agreed enthusiastically.

“We did a hell of a job if I do say so myself. You’re very cute, Shido.”

“Dammit, you’re a boy, so why does makeup look so good on you? Is this the power of youth...?”

“Ha-ha-ha! I almost want my son to marry you.”

“Hey, so how about fifty thousand yen?”

“This is even better than I anticipated, Shido. I’ll take you to a nice restaurant one of these days. What? There’s no need to worry. The staff are all comrades.”

Bmpf! Bmpf! Mikimoto and Kannazuki patted him on the head.

“Now it’s just a matter of whether or not Miku falls for this version of you.”

Kotori glanced at the idol displayed on the main monitor. “When will you see her again, Shido?”

“Huh? Uh... Um...” He counted the days off on his fingers. “I think we start setting up after school next Monday, so I’d probably see her then.”

“Yeah? Hmm. That doesn’t give us a lot of wiggle room, but it is what it is.” Kotori turned on her heel and gestured to Shido and the crew. “Tomorrow, you will practice the whole day so that you can transform into girl mode by yourself, Shido! Shiizaki, Minowa, teach him how to do his makeup. And you have to study feminine mannerisms and how to talk with your fellow girls! Our full-scale attack starts Monday after school!”

Shido sighed heavily. “Roger.”



The familiar sound of the ending bell echoed in Shido’s ears. But the chime that normally signaled his freedom from classes now sounded like an ominous warning on par with the spacequake alarm.

Because it was the eleventh of September. Monday. Today, the general student population of each school began to prepare for the Tenou Festival, and the committee members had to go to the venue, Tengu Square, and get things sorted out there.

“Okay, it’s time. Hurry and get ready.” Kotori’s voice came to him through the earpiece in his right ear.

“...Right.” Shido reluctantly stood up from his desk and started walking toward his locker.

“Mm? Shido, where are you going?” Tohka called out to him curiously. “Aren’t we going to see the Tenou Festival venue?”

“Oh,” he said. “Something came up. You go ahead and get ready.”

“Mm? O-okay...” She looked like she still didn’t really understand, but she nodded at any rate and watched as Shido walked off.

Origami sent a similar stare his way, but he pretended he didn’t notice and walked out of the classroom. He pulled a large bag from his locker and walked

farther into the school.

“Here’s probably okay.” He stepped into the boys’ bathroom at the far end of the school, entered a stall, and locked it before opening his bag.

Inside was a neatly folded girl’s school uniform. *My life will seriously be over if anyone spots me right now*, he thought as he pulled it out and began to change. A cardigan was deployed to hide the lines of his body somewhat. It was a bit hot, but he did what he had to do.

Next, he pulled out a mirror and made up his face using the techniques beaten into him the entirety of the previous day. Finally, he put on the wig and voice modulator, and the transformation was complete.

“Okay... Good to go.”

“*Shido, your tone,*” Kotori chided.

“...I suppose this will work,” he said in a feminine voice. He kind of wanted to die. But he couldn’t allow himself to harbor negative thoughts. If he didn’t have confidence in himself, he wouldn’t be able to do what he was best at.

He put the uniform he’d been wearing into the bag, shouldered it, and opened the stall door...

...and found someone at the urinals. It was Tonomachi.

“Sup, Tonomachi,” he greeted him lightly in the way he always did as he walked past.

“Sup— Wait. What?”

Shido let out a slight “ah.”

“Wh-who are you? A-and why are you in the boys’ bathroom...?” Tonomachi said, shocked, his face turning red as he turned his back to Shido.

“Oh. Uh. Um... Hee-hee-hee-hee!” Shido tried to laugh it off as he raced out of the washroom at top speed.

“Why, today of all days, would he come all the way to the boonies...?!”

He checked to make sure Tonomachi wasn’t following him and then immediately slowed down. When he ran, his skirt flapped back and forth, and it

felt kind of gross.

“I can’t believe girls can actually walk around outside with just a skirt wrapped around their waist like this. If you take too big a step, people can totally see your undies.”

Shido was currently wearing shorts under his skirt. As for what was inside those, he’d prefer to not comment.

“This is a good chance for you to learn a little about what girls go through. For the future, too.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied lifelessly and walked toward the exit.

Ai-Mai-Mii were already there, shooting the breeze.

Shido swallowed hard and put a hand to his chest to calm himself. *Fwum*. A strange sensation. And he remembered that he was wearing the superaccurate chest pads carefully produced by Ratatoskr. The sensation was so realistic that his cheeks grew a bit hot.

“Honestly... I’m worried about what happens next. Anyway, let’s do it just like we planned.”

“R-right.” He shook his head to get himself back together and took a deep breath as he turned to the three girls. “Uh. Um!”

“Hmm?”

“Huh?”

“Hah?”

Each of them expressed their curiosity in their own way as they turned to stare hard at Shido. Would they figure it out? If he got caught, would the rumor *Shido Itsuka’s a cross-dresser* burn through the school? Negative thoughts filled his head.

He waited nervously for them to speak, and the trio cocked their heads curiously to one side.

“What’s up? You need something?”

“You’re tall! Like a model!”

“Aren’t you hot with that sweater on? Do you have poor circulation or something?”

It seemed they didn’t realize it was Shido. He let out a sigh of relief. “Um, you’re Yamabuki, Hazakura, and Fujibakama, right? The Tenou Festival planning committee?”

“What...? Where’d you get that intel?!”

“Impossible. A spy from an enemy nation?!”

“What’s your objective?!”

They struck strange poses as they yelled. They didn’t appear to be too alarmed, however.

Shido smiled weakly. “Um, I have a message from Shido Itsuka. He says he wants to take today off from the planning committee...”

“What the hell?!”

“That bastard slipped away!”

“Start a fire! We’ve got a witch!”

He might very well be burned at the stake the next day, but he decided to ignore these comments for now.

“Uh... Um... He told me to go—I mean, to please take his place. If it’s not a problem, do you mind taking me along with you?”

“Huh?” Ai’s eyes widened. “Hmm. Well, that’s no problem. It’d actually be helpful for us.”

“But who are you to start with? And what’s your relationship with Itsuka?”

“Now that I’m thinking about it, you sound pretty chummy with him. Ohhh, is this the appearance of a love rival for Tohka?!”

The trio were instantly excited and began whispering. Shido hurried to interrupt them.

“N-no, I’m not that sort of— W-we’re cousins. Cousins!”

“Cousins...? What class are you in? What’s your name?”

“Huh?” Caught off guard, Shido let his eyes race around the area. “Class...One. My name is, um, Itsuka... Uh, Shidomi... No, let’s see... Shiori.”

Once he gave them a random fake name, the trio huddled.

A few seconds later, they broke out into a circle and patted his shoulders in a strangely familiar way for someone they’d just met.

“I feel like there’s a lot that still doesn’t make sense, but sure, whatever.”

“Nice to meet you, Shiori.”

“We’re gonna work you hard!”

“O-okay!” He let out a sigh of relief. He had apparently cleared the first hurdle.

“I know you did this! Tell me, where’d you hide Shido?!”

“I would ask you the same. You will regret concealing this from me.”

He didn’t need to look back to know that Tohka and Origami had arrived. He had wondered why they weren’t already at the meeting spot, but apparently, they had been looking for him.

“Oh! Tohkaaa! Origamiiii! Over here!” Ai waved to them, and Tohka and Origami turned in this direction.

“...Hmm, hmm?” Tohka’s eyes grew wider when she caught sight of Shido. And then she lowered her gaze and began to twitch her nose, like she was smelling something. A few seconds later, she yanked her face up and stared at Shido like she had confirmed something. “What are you doing, Shi—?”

“...!” Shido hurriedly slapped a hand over her mouth and whispered in her ear so that Ai-Mai-Mii couldn’t hear. “Sorry, Tohka. I have a reason for this. Can you just pretend you don’t know it’s me?”

“Mm...? Y-you do? Mm, okay, got it,” she replied quietly and then said in an excessively loud voice, “M-mm! Nice to meet you, girl who isn’t Shido!”

“...Y-yes, it’s nice to meet you, too.”

He shook her hand, sweat running down his cheek. Although the trio looked slightly doubtful, they more or less accepted it as Tohka being Tohka and didn’t

pursue the matter any further.

And then.

“...?!” Shido reflexively closed his eyes.

The reason was simple. The sudden flash from below, accompanied by a *snap*.

“Huh? What?” He was baffled, not understanding what had just happened, and the noise came again several times in quick succession. He looked over suspiciously and quickly discovered the culprit.

He didn’t know where she had pulled it out from, but Origami held a small digital camera in her hands and was striking a slightly cool pose as she pressed the shutter down over and over. Naturally, her subject was Shido. She wore her usual uninterested expression, but for some reason, he felt like she was breathing somewhat heavily, like she was a bit excited.

“Uh. Um...”

“Don’t move,” she demanded and pressed the shutter down again. From the right, from the left. Sometimes calm, other times passionate. She captured pictures of Shido with the force and single-mindedness of a professional.

“Look this way.”

“L-listen...”



“Good. Great.”

“Er...”

“Take the sweater off.”

“I—I wish you would stop.”

He would have preferred not to leave any detailed records of him looking this way, but he very much doubted Origami would listen to him if he said anything. He turned his face away, as if embarrassed, and waited for her to be satisfied.

Watching all this, Ai-Mai-Mii began to whisper.

“Hey, so wasn’t Origami gunning after Itsuka?”

“Did she always swing both ways?”

“Maybe she’s fine with anyone named Itsuka? Is it his bloodline she’s after?”

They went on and on, thoroughly dissecting the situation, but Origami paid them absolutely no mind whatsoever. She laid down on the floor and slipped a hand between Shido’s legs.

“Hey, what—?” He pressed his skirt to his legs and stepped back.

But Origami grabbed onto his leg with her free hand.

“Wh-what are you doing?!”

So she *had* figured out the truth. Tohka got a hold of Origami’s legs and tried to pull her away from Shido. Viewed from the outside, the scene was no doubt extremely surreal.

But Origami held Shido’s ankle with a force that seemed impossible for such a skinny arm while she snapped the shutter repeatedly. Serious rapid-fire shooting.

“Hey! Sto— Nooooooooo!” His face turned red, and he let out a more feminine scream than any girl could (or at the very least more feminine than Origami).



Tengu Square, the venue for the Tenou Festival, was a large convention center located in the heart of Tengu City. The layout was a central stage in the

middle, with large exhibition halls spreading out around it. For the festival, they were mainly using halls numbered one through four in the eastern block.

“So, Kotori. Where’s Miku?” Shido said into his earpiece, lowering his voice just in case.

He was hiding behind a pile of materials in a corner of Hall Two, getting the lay of the land.

He’d slipped out with the excuse that he was going to the bathroom, but Origami’s eyes had glittered at this, and she had followed him, so he’d lost time and energy in his attempt to lose her.

“So you’re finally alone? Miku’s in Hall One setting up the Rindoji booth.”

“Hall One... Roger. I’m heading over there now.” He stepped out from behind the pile and ran to Hall One, being careful not to be spotted by Origami or the other girls.

Miku was easy to find. There was a group of girls clad in navy sailor uniforms at the far end of the hall, and Miku was standing in their center.

“She’s with other students,” he said. “Well, I guess she would be.”

“I expected this, but it is annoying. If you approach her now, the other girls might form a circle to guard their queen, so you won’t be able to make direct contact. I wonder how we should play this.”

“Can we get Miku alone somehow? Like, have one of your crew join—”

“Hang on a sec! She started moving.”

Shido looked over. Just as Kotori said, Miku had left the Rindoji group and was walking off somewhere by herself.

“Huh? Bathroom maybe?”

“Either way, this is your chance. Follow her.”

“Yup. Got it.”

“More ladylike.”

“...Understood.”

Now that she mentioned it, he had totally gone back to boy mode while talking with Kotori. Warning himself that he had to make sure his usual speech habits didn't slip out at a do-or-die moment, he started tailing the idol.

After a few minutes, Miku passed right by the nearest bathroom, left Hall No. 1, and headed for the central stage in the middle of the square. She slipped through the audience seating, ducked under the rope with the sign that read No UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL, and went backstage.

"Ah..."

"Go after her, Shido."

"R-roger." Steeling himself for whatever might come next, Shido also slipped under the rope and followed Miku.

Despite being separated by nothing more than a single wall, the area was almost shockingly different from out front. In total contrast with the bright and showy stage, this was a space of odds and ends. Boxes and objects were stacked up on either side of the dim hallway, narrowing a path that hadn't been that wide to begin with.

He walked down it, taking care not to trip, and ended up at a door that he assumed led to the stage. He peeked out through it and let out a quiet cry unconsciously. "Ah..."

Miku was standing in the center of the stage, looking out on the audience seating.

Déjà vu. The same sight he'd seen in the empty arena.

Was this the impact of a Spirit? Or was it the aura of an idol? Overwhelmed, he took a step back and heard an exasperated sigh through his earpiece.

"You can't be nervous when you haven't even come face-to-face with her yet."

"I—I know. It's okay for me to talk to her, right?"

"Yes. If our theory's correct, she won't handle you so roughly this time."

"...And if it's wrong?"

"I'll give you a nice funeral."

“...Oi.”

“Kidding. Looking at the data, in all likelihood, Miku Izayoi hates guys is not wrong. But whether or not Shiori will measure up to Miku’s standards is a different story. And it’s plenty possible she’ll realize you’re a guy from the get-go. Be careful.”

“Y-yup— I mean, I will.” He took a deep breath, put his game face on, and stepped onto the stage.

Hearing his footsteps, Miku turned around.

“Oh-ho?” She opened her eyes wide in surprise and fixed her gaze on Shido inquisitively.

Maybe she could tell he was a boy. Tension wrapped cold fingers around his heart.

“And you are?” she asked.

“Huh?! Oh man, I mean—”

“Shido, you idiot!”

Flustered by the sudden question from Miku, he’d accidentally slipped back into his usual way of speaking.

“...?” Miku cocked her head to one side in slight confusion.

“Oh! Um. It’s...,” he mumbled, trying to cover somehow. If she found out he was a guy now, all his work would have been for nothing.

But Miku only offered a gentle smile. “You do have a strange way of speaking, hmmm. Hee-hee-hee! But it’s so wonderfully quirky.”

“...! Likability and mood are both steady! They’re not dropping!”

He heard a crew member shout in his right ear.

“Looks like she’s taken your masculine way of speaking as a quirk,” Kotori said. *“You’re lucky. Okay. We’ll keep going like that, then.”*

“Y-yup...” He let out a sigh of relief. But he couldn’t just stand here and wait for Miku. He opened his mouth to at least introduce himself.

But then Kotori's voice came through the ear piece to stop him. *"Hang on. We've got some options."*

A window had popped up above the video of Miku and Shido displayed on the main monitor.

1. "YOU'RE MIKU IZAYOI, RIGHT? CAN I HAVE YOUR AUTOGRAPH?"
2. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"
3. "EXCUSE ME. WOULD YOU SELL ME THE PANTIES YOU'RE WEARING FOR THIRTY THOUSAND YEN?"

"Choices, people!" Kotori barked, and the aggregate results were soon displayed on her personal monitor.

The majority of votes were for two...and, next surprisingly, for three.

"Two, hmm? Well, it's a reasonable start, but... Why is three so popular?"

"Oh, well, if a man said it, he'd be a pervert," one crew member remarked. "But Miku did just mention he was quirky, and I thought a question with more impact might be better for Shiori mode."

"I'd like to throw something tough out there right at the start and see her reaction," another noted. "With Kurumi, we had success with all kinds of things, didn't we?"

Kotori put a hand to her chin thoughtfully. "Well... I suppose so. I *would* like to establish Miku's tolerance level."

She pulled the mic close and gave Shido instructions.

"Wha...?! Have you lost your mind?"

"You're a girl right now. Play it off as a joke. It's important for you to connect with her, even if that means you have to play the role of a weird girl."

"I-is it, though?" Something didn't quite click into place for him, even after hearing this explanation, but it wouldn't be good to make Miku wait any longer than he already had. Shido made up his mind and opened his mouth.

"Hey...you."

"Whaaat?"

“W-would you s-sell me the...panties you’re wearing for thirty thousand yen?”

“Huh?” Miku’s eyes grew wide as saucers, and she cocked her head to one side. She stared at Shido and then asked curiously, “Um, why?”

“Why? ...Now that you ask...,” As Shido trailed off, a smile spread across Miku’s face.

It seemed like a cheerful grin at first glance. But it made Shido jump. She had worn this same expression the other day while showering him in verbal abuse. But instead of filthy language or vile slander to break Shido’s spirit, a somehow delighted voice came from Miku’s mouth.

“Hmm...weeell. I couldn’t give them away for money, but perhaps if we traaded, I’d consider it.”

“Wh-what?!” His face turned red, and he pressed the hem of his skirt down.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Miku giggled adorably. “I’m kiiiidding. And isn’t that the reaaaction / should have had?”

“Y-yeah... S-sorry... I was just kidding, too.”

They laughed together for a moment. But then silence quickly fell once more.

His time was limited. Shido searched for some topic to broaden the scope of their conversation somehow.

“H-hey?”

“Whaaat?”

“I-isn’t the stage...off-limits?” he asked.

“Hee-hee! It iiis. I’m sorry. I did something a little bit bad,” she said with a charmingly mischievous look, and Shido’s heart skipped a beat. “But that means that you’re a bad girl, too, hmmm?”

“Huh? Oh...” Now that she mentioned it, that was true. He waved a hand to try and excuse himself. “Oh, um. Actually. I...”

“Hee-hee! It’s fiiiine.” She walked toward him at a leisurely pace and stopped when she was close enough that they could hear each other breathing. She held up a finger in front of him. “Shh! How about we make this our little secret? A

promise between two baaaad girls.”

“Huh... O-okay!” Shido agreed, taking a step back, almost bouncing off her, and Miku smiled with delight once more.

The face was the same. The voice was the same. The girl before his eyes was definitely the Spirit he had encountered the other day. But the reactions of this Miku and the icy queen in his memory were so utterly removed from each other that he almost wondered if there were two Spirits with the same face, like with the Yamai sisters. How could her behavior be so different just because she was speaking to a person of a different gender?

While Shido was considering this, Kotori’s voice came at him to give him a kick in the ass. *“Get it together. You have to be on your guard.”*

“Yup... I got it.”

“Is something the maaatter?”

“N-nah, it’s nothing...”

Miku was indeed too close for him to be replying to Kotori. He could hear Kotori’s exasperated *“Honestly”* over the earpiece.

But this time, he didn’t respond. Or rather, it might have been correct to say he didn’t have the time to respond. Miku had come at him with a question, head tilted to one side.

“So about that uniform—you’re a Raizen girl?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I am.”

“Hmm.” She frowned. “Were you at the meeting two days ago?”

“Um... I wasn’t feeling well, so.”

“Ohhh, is that sooo?” Miku said before extending her right hand toward Shido. “Well then, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Miku Izayoi from Rindoji Girls’ Academy. It’s a pleasuuure. Let’s work together to make the Tenou Festival a success.”

“Y-yeah. Nice to meet you!” He held out his right hand and shook hers. It was small and a little cool. He held it lightly, making sure not to put too much

strength into his grip.

“...?” Miku raised a curious eyebrow, smile still on her face.

Not really understanding what she was doing, he made the same gesture in return, and a sharp voice rattled his eardrum.

“Idiot. Why would you not tell her your name when she just introduced herself?”

“Oh...” He hurriedly continued, “I’m Shiori... Shiori Itsuka.”

“Shioriiii? What a loooovely name.”

“Th-thanks,” he replied with a vague smile.

Now Miku dropped her gaze to her hand in his. “Wow, your hands feel so rooough. Do you play sports?”

“...! Oh. Um, a little volleyball, that sort of thing...” He reached for a sport that seemed like it would callous the hands, and Miku nodded.

“Ah, that makes sense, then.”

“Huh?”

“You’re so tall and coool, after all,” she purred.

“Oh... Ha-ha! Sorry that I’m not so ladylike.”

“Oh, no, that’s not true at aaall. I think you’re very cute.”

“...Y-you do?” He was glad that she was complimenting him, but it was a rather complicated mental space to exist in as a boy. He decided to simply accept it as flattery, or proof of this incredible performance made possible by the miracle of modern cosmetics. *Boys of the world, do not be fooled.*

“...Hmm. The numbers aren’t bad. We should be good as long as you don’t mess up spectacularly. I want a bit more reaction data from her. Ask her some questions.”

“Uh. Um. So...” He managed to muster up a question. “...Miku, what were you doing here?”

Miku released his hand and twirled around to face the audience seating.

“Well, I simply adooooore the stage.”

“The stage?” he asked.

“Mm-hmmmm. When I’m onstage, everyone wants to hear my song. This space is veeery special to me. So when I saw the stage on our way in, I simply had to staaand on it. ”

“You...did...”

Miku smiled adorably. “Shiori, you’re a raaaare person.”

“Huh?” he said. “Wh-why?”

“Have you not heard my name before?”

“Uh...um.” He was pretty sure she wasn’t talking about Miku Izayoi of Rindoji Girls’ Academy, but rather the mysterious idol Miku Izayoi.

When he struggled to decide how he should respond, Miku shook her head slightly.

“Ha-ha-ha! I’ve gotten you all flustered, hmmm? Please don’t worry about it.” She skipped past Shido and headed toward the wing. “Now then, should we be retuuurn?” She turned her head neatly to look back at him.

“I’d actually like to talk with her a bit more, but...it’s not good to force her to stay,” Kotori said. *“Welp, let’s try to make a pretense to see her again before she joins back up with the other students.”*

“Roger,” Shido responded quietly and turned back to Miku. “I guess... Let’s go. If anyone found us here, we’d get in trouble.”

“Nooo.” She shook her head. “I’m not particularly concerned about that.”

“Huh?” He cocked his head to one side, and Miku put a finger up in front of his face again.

“Shh! It’s our little secret, isn’t it? Just between uuus.”

“...!” Caught off guard, he felt his heart start to pound. He was sure his face was turning red.

Realizing what she had just done to Shido, or perhaps not, Miku smiled and danced ahead.

"Come on. Don't just stand there breathing heavily. You don't have that much time alone together."

"R-right..." He took a deep breath to calm his heart before following Miku into the wing and walking down the hallway behind the stage.

But maybe because he was walking fast to try and catch up with her, he wasn't as careful as he had been when he came this way the first time. And so...

"Wh-whoa?!" The skirt he still wasn't used to got caught on the edge of something, and he fell down. "Owww..."

"A-are you all riiiiight?" Miku walked over to him, looking concerned.

Shido hurriedly pulled his skirt back down. Although he was wearing shorts underneath, embarrassing was still embarrassing.

"Give me your hand."

"O-oh... Thanks." He took her hand and was about to stand up. And then Shido furrowed his brow. "Ach..."

He automatically pulled back at the sudden, slight pain. He'd scraped his palm.

"How teeerrible." Miku frowned as she pulled a lace handkerchief from her pocket and wrapped it around his hand.

"Oh, but it'll get dirty," he protested. "It's just a scra—"

"What are you talking abouuut? A volleyball player can't take a hand injury lightly. This is the best I can do here, but you wiiiill disinfect it once we get back, won't you?"

"Th-thanks."

"Think nothing of it. Now, give me your hand."

He accepted the offered hand in his uninjured hand and stood up. Miku looked relieved finally and led the way as they started walking again.

At the same time, he heard a quiet sigh in his right ear.

"Oh, my, my! She's quite the marvelous escort, hmm?"

“Ngh...”

“I’m not saying this is bad or anything. This time, at least, you’re a girl. Judging from her reactions, Miku’s the type who prefers to take the lead. A bit of a surprise, that.” He heard Kotori snort with satisfaction before continuing, *“And happily, you’ve also found your excuse to see her again. I’d tell you what a good job you did if you actually fell on purpose.”*

“Huh?”

“I’ll explain later. Don’t make Miku wait!”

“R-roger...”

It was just like Kotori said. He couldn’t keep Miku waiting. Making sure not to fall this time, Shido went down the hallway, passed the rope barring entry, and came down into the audience seating of the central stage.

“Sorry. Thanks a lot.” He bowed and expressed his gratitude to Miku.

She smiled gently and waved a dismissive hand. “No, no. Please don’t even worry—”

But her words were cut off there.

He thought it strange for a second, but the reason soon became clear. He didn’t know when they had arrived, but Origami and Tohka were now standing between Shido and Miku.

“Get back, Shiori.” Origami spread her arms out as if to protect Shido while she turned sharp eyes on Miku.

“Oh dear, you’re... Oh, I know. From that tiime.” Noticing that Origami was glaring at her, Miku raised her eyebrows as if she had just remembered something. “So you attend Raiizen High School, too?”

“That time” was obviously not referring to the general meeting two days earlier. She most likely meant before that—the time of the spacequake.

“What are you plotting?” Origami demanded.

“That’s no way to talk to someooone. I have no intention of harming any of you.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that?”

Miku gave her a pained smile.

But Origami didn’t drop her guard as she glanced back toward Shido. “Shiori, what happened to your hand?” Her voice gained an edge at the sight of his injury.

She probably thought he had been hurt by Miku or gotten hurt because of her. Shido shook his head vigorously to clear up the misunderstanding. “No, no, I got this—”

“Shiori.” Miku stopped him. She held up her index finger again and winked at him, as if to say, “That’s a secret.”

“Oh...”

“...What’s going on?” Origami said, slightly put out.

Miku giggled and walked off toward Hall No. 1, her skirt swinging.

“...” Origami glared after her, looking like she wasn’t happy about any of this. But at least she didn’t seem like she was going to go chasing after the idol.

Once they could no longer see Miku’s back, she turned to Shido. “I want an explanation.”

“Well... Umm...” He felt like things were about to get complicated.



After school the next day, Shido was standing in front of the Rindoji Girls’ Academy gates, waiting for Miku to come out.

“*Shido, can you hear me?*” Kotori said over his earpiece. “*Classes just finished at Rindoji. She should be out soon.*”

“Got it,” he replied and pulled a freshly laundered lace handkerchief out of his pocket.

Yes. This was the method of contacting Miku that Kotori had mentioned. And indeed, returning the borrowed handkerchief was the perfect pretext. It was possible, of course, that she would simply take it from him, and that would be the end of that, but... They would just have to make it work somehow with

Ratatoskr's guidance and Shido's quick wits.

He stood patiently, waiting for Miku to come through the gates. But because he was the lone student in a different school uniform in a sea of girls in sailor-style outfits, he was attracting unwanted attention. He tugged on his skirt nervously as he brought his legs together.

"What? You gotta pee?"

"...No." He rolled his eyes at Kotori's lack of tact. "And, like, Miku's on the Tenou Festival planning committee. Won't she have work to do—?"

"Don't go worrying your pretty head. We did our due diligence. She is indeed on the committee, but we found out she always invites a girl she likes home for a happy little teatime once a week."

"Huh. Sounds fancy," Shido said, and then he spotted a group of students walking out from the school. Miku and her hangers-on.

"There she is. Let's go. Considering the numbers we got yesterday, she shouldn't give you a terrible reception."

"R-right." He gulped and checked for the feel of the handkerchief in his pocket before stepping out to block Miku's path. She was surrounded by girls like a royal procession or a doctor making the rounds with students.

And those girls noticed him. They stopped moving and stared at Shido.

"...? Did you need something?" the girl in the lead asked, raising a dubious eyebrow.

"Uh, um," he stammered. "Yesterday at Tengu Square, Miku Izayoi—"

"Ohhh." The girl shrugged the moment he said Miku's name, like this happened all the time. "You're a fan of Miss Miku?"

"M-Miss Miku...?"

"You can't go doing this," she chided him. "It's not that I don't get how you feel, but this is her private life. If you're a fan, then you understand that, don't you?"

"Oh. Uh. That's not it. Her handkerchief..." Shido tried to explain, a frown on

his face, and he heard a surprised voice from behind the girl.

“My, myyy! Shiori?”

He looked over and saw Miku with a hand to her mouth, eyes widening in surprise. He quickly offered a neat little bow.

The girl blocking his way immediately began to dart her gaze about, looking panicked. “Y-you know each other? I’ve been inexcusably rude...”

“N-no, it’s fine.”

The girl and Shido got into a bowing war, and Miku stepped forward.

“Is something the maaatter? We don’t have a meeeeeting today, you know?”

“Oh... I. Here.” He pulled the neatly folded lace handkerchief from his pocket.

“Oh dear.” Miku looked at Shido’s face in surprise. “You didn’t need to go to all this trouuuuble.”

“I couldn’t not,” he said in a clear tone, and Miku giggled happily.

“Well then, I shall accept it. Hee-hee! But I am a bit disappointed,” she said as she took the handkerchief from his hand.

“Huh...?” He cocked his head to one side. “D-did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s not thaaat,” she continued, a mischievous smile crossing her face. “I was just hoping ever so slightly that you would ask me out for tea or something, Shioriiii.”

“...!” Shido felt his heart leap up. He was sure his face was bright red. He didn’t know if it was deliberate or it came naturally to her, but this power of hers was incredibly destructive. What little remained of his brain power coolly passed down the judgment: *I need to learn from her...*

“What are you spacing out and getting all giddy for, you teapot?” Kotori’s sharp voice hit his eardrum. *“She’s speaking playfully, but she is actually asking you out, okay? Can’t you at least say something?”*

His shoulders jumped up, and he looked into Miku’s eyes. “Uh. Um.”

“Yes?” she prompted him.

“So...I’d love to thank you for the handkerchief,” he said slowly. “How about... tea together?”

Miku gave him her most charming smile yet. “I’d be delighted, of course.”

Miku’s house was less than a five-minute walk from Rindoji Girls’ Academy. It was a distinctive Western-style bungalow with snowy-white walls and a navy-blue roof. All kinds of flowers bloomed in the carefully maintained garden, and he almost felt like it was another world on the other side of the fence.

It wasn’t hard to imagine the reaction of any girls who were invited here for the first time. Shido himself made a show of being amazed by it all, although he was a bit more deliberate about it.

Miku’s gentle smile in response provoked a “*pft*” of contained laughter from his earpiece.

“...”

After being shown into the parlor of this house, which looked straight out of a picture book, he sat down on the sofa, nervous by himself.

Although he’d been the one who invited her for tea, she’d ended up reversing that invitation to bring him to her house.

“It’s just... It’s all moving so fast. It’s kinda scary...”

“It’s good, though,” Kotori said. “Cutting to the chase. The numbers are going up nicely, too. Shiori’s unscheduled visit is proving more effective than we anticipated. It’s looking positive.”

“Then we’re fine, I guess,” he said and then realized something. “Hey? I know it’s a bit late for this, but Miku hates guys, right? Assuming I manage to seal her power in Shiori mode, what happens when I go back to my usual self?”

Even after her powers were sealed away, if the Spirit’s mental state was significantly disturbed, part of that power would flow back into her. What would happen when the man-hating Miku found out Shiori’s true identity? Just thinking about it made him tremble with fear.

“...” Kotori was briefly silent before she said, *“You can have the uniform and the makeup, Shido.”*

“Hey!”

“Is something the maaatter?” He heard Miku’s voice from behind.

He smiled vaguely and made an excuse for his sudden shout. “Oh, there was a cat outside...”

“Oh dear, oh deaaar!” she said cheerfully as she set the tray in her hands down on the table and then poured black tea into expensive-looking teacups.

“I feel kinda bad,” he said. “I asked you out, but you’re doing everything here.”

“No, nooo. I have some wonderful tea leaves, so I’m delighted,” she reassured him. “And just being able to have teatime with you, Shiori, that’s more than thaaanks enough.”

“Oh, but... I feel bad for that girl, too.” He recalled the student who had been with Miku earlier.

She had apparently been the one originally asked to Miku’s house, and the instant Miku responded to Shido’s invitation, her face had turned into the very picture of Picasso’s *Weeping Woman*.

But Miku waved her hand as if she wasn’t the least bit bothered. “Please don’t even conceern yourself with that. She’s a very reasonable giiirl. More importantly, how is your hand?”

“Huh? O-oh. Totally fine now.”

“Hee-hee hee! People who play sports really aaaare strong, hmm?” She leaned back in the chair across from Shido and took a sip of her tea.

Following her lead, Shido thanked her for the tea before bringing the cup to his lips. An incredible flavor spread out inside his mouth, passed through his nostrils, and exited his body.

“Whoa...”

Miku appeared extremely pleased with this reaction. She giggled and took another sip.

“Mm, not bad. Your likability with her is gradually increasing. Huh. At first, I

thought she'd be a tough nut to crack, but we might be able to take her down surprisingly quickly. No need to rush things. For now, keep chatting."

Shido nodded slightly and selected something appropriate from the meager list of conversational topics in his head and began to speak. He really didn't have anything good to talk about. All the subjects that came to mind were the sort that would probably be forgotten in a few hours.

But because Miku thoughtfully said the right things in the right places, he got strangely carried away. Talking with her was unusually fun, so much so that he didn't realize the sky was growing dark outside the window.

When he did notice, the hands of the clock were already at eight PM. He had been sitting in her parlor for quite a long time.

"Oh dear!" Miku cried. "Is it already so late?"

"I'm sorry. I got lost in the conversation." Shido hurriedly moved to get his things and go, but Miku shook her head gracefully.

"No need to apologize. I had a lot of fun," she said, staring right into his eyes.

He felt embarrassed somehow and smiled vaguely as he averted his gaze.

But Miku continued to stare at him for a while. "Mm-hmm, you'll do, actually. You're a type I haven't had before." She sounded satisfied somehow. "Shiori, I've taken a liking to you. Please start attending Rindoji as of tomorrow."

"...Huh?" His eyes grew wide in confusion. He didn't get what she was talking about for a second. "Rindoji...?"

"Yes. Please transfer."

"Umm..." He tapped his earpiece twice, at a loss for what to say.

"...We're not getting any reaction here," Kotori said, soon enough. "At the very least, it doesn't look like she's kidding."

Shido was even more perplexed. What exactly was Miku up to?

"I wonder what she wants. I'd prefer not to put her in a bad mood, but the risk is too great. We'll figure something else out, so politely refuse."

Shido nodded to show his understanding.

Perhaps mistaking his lack of response for contemplation, Miku continued speaking, gesturing all the while. “Naturally, you don’t need to worry about money or academic ability. That’s fiiine. I’ll ask to have everything taken care of. Oh! Would you tell me your address and measuremeeents? I’ll have a uniform sent to you today.”

“H-hang on a second. I can’t decide something like that so quickly,” he protested.

The corners of Miku’s mouth turned up as she stood and moved to sit down directly next to him. And then she gently took his hand and brought her mouth to his left ear.

“***Please***,” she said in a sweet, quiet voice.

“...?!” Shido closed his eyes. The moment her voice reached him, he was overcome with a powerful dizziness.

It was almost like the word invaded his body through his ear to directly assault his brain. Something like a wild intoxication filled his mind, and he very nearly agreed to her request in a trance.

But he got the sense that this condition was dangerous. He bit the side of his cheek and held firm. “I—I appreciate that, but...”

“Hmm?” Miku looked at him with wide eyes, as if this was wildly unexpected. She pursed her lips together briefly in thought and stared hard at him. “Shioriiii?”

“Wh-what...?”

“***Please take your clothes off***,” Miku said in that same mysterious voice.

“Wh-what...?!” A heartbeat later, he registered the words she’d said, and his face was grew even redder. “I—I can’t do that...”

He didn’t know what her intention here was, but the one thing that was clear was that the moment he took his girl’s uniform off, the Shiori magic would be undone.

Miku straightened as though she’d understood something. “So you really

won't do as I saay."

"Sorry. But that's just—," Shido started.

But she didn't wait to hear him out.

"Are you perhaps...a Spirit?"

"Huh?!" This question shook him even more than the mysterious voice she'd spoken in a moment ago. His whole body froze at the sudden utterance of the word *Spirit*. "Why would you—?"

"*Shido!*" Kotori shouted, and he gasped.

He waved a hand to try and defuse the situation. "Wh-where'd that come from? Are you talking about a video game or something? That's a surprise. You don't seem like the type—"

"Ha-ha-ha! It's fiiine. You don't need to play dumb. I mean, you clearly don't hear my *please* so you can't possibly be a regular peeerson," Miku said, and her usual gentle smile spread across her face. "In fact, if you are a Spirit, I'm quite pleaaased. I've wanted to meet one other than myself. There are a number of us, yeees?"

"Wha—?"

"Hey, Shiori? Who exactly aaare you? Are you really a Spirit? Or are you friends with those wizards or whoever they are?" She sighed briefly before continuing, "Is it merely a coincidence that you and I met? Or is there something larger at work?"

"Th-that's..."

"She's starting to get annoyed. If you keep playing dumb, that good mood we worked so hard for will go to waste," Kotori said when Shido was stuck for words. *"We've got no choice. It's a gamble, but let's shift to direct negotiations. Shido, tell her."*

"...Got it." He gulped and turned back to Miku. He braced himself and opened his mouth. "Miku. I'm not a Spirit. I'm not a wizard, either. I'm human."

Miku sighed in a show of slight disappointment. "That's too baaad. That you would lie—"

“But I have the ability to seal Spirit powers.” He cut her off in a quiet voice.

The eyes she lowered were now opened wide, and she stared at Shido’s face again. “Seal...Spirit power? What do you meaaan?”

“Well...”

Slowly, Shido told her. About how he didn’t know why, but he had this power in him. And if he used it to lock away a Spirit’s power, the AST would no longer target that Spirit, and she could live peacefully in this world.

When he’d finished explaining everything, he looked directly into Miku’s eyes and opened his mouth again. “If... If you believe what I’m telling you, Miku, I want...you to let me help you.”

“...”

Miku had listened to him quietly, without a comment of any kind, and now she narrowed her eyes and put a hand to her mouth, as though considering the whole situation.

Silence filled the parlor. The regular *tick* of the clock and the pounding of his heart felt ridiculously loud.

After a stretch of time had passed, she let out a short breath. “I understaaand. I believe you. You didn’t sound like you were lyyying.”

“...! Rreally?!” Shido’s own eyes grew round, and his voice jumped an octave. To be honest, she might have been a Spirit, but he hadn’t thought that she would so easily accept such an absurd story.

Miku smiled wryly. “Why are you surprised? It’s almost like you thought I wouldn’t belieeeve you, Shiori?”

“No, I mean—”

“Hee-hee-hee! I’m sorry. I was just teasing you a biiiit,” she said as she stood up and walked slowly toward the window. “It’s true, I was surprised, but looking at you, I just can’t believe you’d lie, Shioriii. And our meeting might have been contrived, but when you tell me it was because you were trying to help me, well, how could I nooot be happy?”

“H-ha-ha-ha...” Feeling embarrassed somehow, he scratched the back of his

head.

“So have you, perhaps, already sealed away the powers of a Spirit?” she asked.

“Huh? O-oh. Yeah, I have. Four—no, wait, five, I guess.”

“...! Have you really? I had no idea that that many Spirits were living heeere. I’d love to meet them. Do you think I could?”

“O-oh. Of course! They’d definitely be friends with you, Miku!” he said excitedly. It was a huge help that she was such a gentle Spirit. And so amicable —

And then Shido realized he still had one little problem.

He hadn’t actually told Miku how he sealed Spirit power. According to Kotori, the numbers for likability and mood weren’t bad, but he didn’t know whether or not she’d happily accept a kiss from him. The thread of tension he’d felt relax snapped tight again.

“So about how the sealing of powers happens,” he started timidly.

“Ohhh, that’s fine,” she told him. “I don’t need to know.”

“Huh...?”

Miku lowered her eyelids as she continued, “I believe what you said. But I don’t want you to seal my Spirit pooowers.”

“Wha...?!” Shido was at a loss for words.

At the same time, he heard Kotori’s voice in his right ear. *“Tch! So that’s where we are, then.”*

Perfectly composed, Miku moved lips like cherry petals. “I meeean, of course I am. I’m leading a perfectly satisfying life even with my Spirit powers at the moment. I don’t have any reason to offer them to you. I’d like us to be good friends, naturally, but this and that are two different stooories.”

“Th-that’s...,” Shido stammered. Now that she mentioned it, she might have been exactly right.

The objective of Shido and, in turn, of Ratatoskr was to seal Spirit power and

have the Spirit live a peaceful life. But this Diva, Miku Izayoi, had been living in this world for nearly six months without any assistance from Ratatoskr.

“Get a load of this moron,” grumbled Kotori. “A Spirit who caused a spacequake just a few days ago doesn’t get to say that.”

“Oh...”

“And those AST jerks don’t give a damn about a Spirit’s intentions,” she continued angrily. “They see a Spirit signal, and they attack without mercy. Now that her identity’s known to Origami Tobiichi, they’ll absolutely be monitoring her. We don’t have time for this. It’s no use trying to cajole her, Shido. If we leave Miku with her powers intact, it’ll end with everything she loves being destroyed.”

Shido clenched his hands into fists. She was right. If he yielded here, it would bring unhappiness down on Miku and all the worlds connected with her.

“Miku, four days ago, you caused a spacequake in front of Tatsunami Station, right?” he said. “Doesn’t that mean that you can’t totally control your own power?”

“Oh dear.” Miku looked surprised. “I can’t believe you knooow about that.”

“Huh? Oh... Well, Origami told me,” he lied to cover himself.

She frowned but didn’t pursue it any further.

“It really is dangerous to leave your Spirit power inside you,” he pleaded, looking into her eyes. “You might end up hurting your friends or your fans. Please. Let me seal your powers!”

But she let out a short sigh and slowly shook her head. “I appreciate your concern, but there’s noooo need.”

“Wh-why?” he asked.

“I meeean,” she said, without any particular enthusiasm. “I made that spacequake happen on purpose.”

“Huh?” For a second, he didn’t get what she was saying, and he stared at her in shock.

He already knew of one Spirit who could make a spacequake happen on demand. In which case, it wasn't strange that another Spirit—the Diva before him—also possessed that ability.

But even as Shido digested this revelation, the question mark didn't disappear from over his head.

"Wh-why on earth would you...?" An elementary question. But he had zero idea as to what would motivate Miku to do something like this.

She played with her hair as she began to speak in exactly the same manner as before. "I told you when I met you, Shioriiii. I looove the stage."

"...Right." He nodded. It was true that the first time he'd met her as Shiori, Miku had said that.

"I happened to be passing Tatsunami Station, and some baaand was playing a show at Tengu Arena. And so theeeen I suddenly realized it, you know? I'd never sung at Tengu Arenaaa."

"...Huh?"

"And then I suddenly wanted to sing. So I just went *hiiiyah*," Miku said, smiling adorably.

"...! For a stupid reason like that, you—" Shido screwed up his face like he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Wow, what do you mean by stupid reason?!" She pouted. "That's so mean!"

"I mean...there were a lot of people there, you know? If they didn't manage to get away—"

"Well, I can't help that, caaaan I? After aaaall, I wanted to sing, okaaaay?" Miku said, and he couldn't see anything resembling guilt on her face. In fact, she didn't seem to even register the act as a bad thing.

"...! It doesn't matter to you? B-but causing a spacequake is..."

"What's the proooblem...?"

"If your friend— If the girl you'd been walking home with today had been there, she could have died, you know?! And then what would you have done?!"

Shido half shouted.

Miku let her gaze roam for a moment as she thought this over before turning her eyes back on Shido. “I...wouldn’t like that.”

“Right?! That’s why—”

“I’d have to do all that work just to find another girl I lllike.”

“...Huh?” He doubted his ears.

Kurumi—who had deliberately taken the lives of any number of people—had been scary. Her malice and murderous intent had ripped Shido’s heart apart.

But this girl. This Miku Izayoi was clearly of a different nature. She was one step ahead of such thinking. There was no malice, no murder in her words and deeds. Her values, her views on life and death, her ideas were totally divergent from his own.

“This is...unexpected,” he heard Kotori say, troubled. But he didn’t have the extra brainpower to even answer her.

“You,” he said. “You wouldn’t be...sad? Not even if a friend who adores you that much...died because of you?”

“No, of course I’d be saaaad. She’s one of my favorites. But...” Miku put her index finger to her chin and continued, “Look. She looooves me. Her greatest joy would be to die for my sake, wouldn’t it?”

This really was the limit.

He slammed his fists into the table and leaped to his feet. His hands were clenched so tightly they were on the verge of bleeding.

“Shido, calm down! You can’t go losing your temper!”

He heard Kotori yelling, but he didn’t feel like he could control himself any longer.

He glared at Miku with sharp eyes and half groaned, “Because she...likes you...?”

“Yees. It’s not just her, you know? Everyone looooves me. They’d do anything I asked them to.”

“Is that right...?” He lifted his face. “Well, I...hate you.”

“...Oh deeeear.” Miku’s eyebrows nearly leaped off her forehead.

“You’re arrogant, presumptuous, and intolerable. Everyone likes you? Ha!” Shido raised his hand and shot an accusatory finger at her.

“If everyone in the world affirms you like this, then...I will *reject* you and your actions ten times more!”

Stunned, Miku stared at him blankly for a few seconds, but eventually, she put a hand to her chin and narrowed her eyes.

“Hmm, you haaate me?” she said, the corners of her mouth twisting up luridly. “When you say something like that, it makes me want you that much mooore. It makes me want to teeease you until you collapse with tears running down your cheeks, until you finally say, ‘I love you.’ Hee-hee-hee! I wonder how long you’ll be able to say you haaate me, Shiori.”

“...I told you. I’m not going to be your plaything,” Shido snapped, and Miku looked even more pleased, an innocent smile spreading across her face.

“Buuut you want to seal my Spirit power. Don’t you?”

“...”

Yes. That was Shido’s weak point. He had gotten carried away and lost his temper, but the fact remained that if he couldn’t lock away Miku’s power, then nothing would be resolved.

She could probably read these thoughts on his face. She clapped her hands together as though struck by a sudden thought. “I knooow. How about we have a little contest?”

“What do you mean?” he repeated.

“Yes.” She nodded. “You want to seal my Spirit power. I want to make you mine. But neither of us will agreeeee to the other’s desire. We can discuss iit all we want, but we’ll never come to an agreement, don’t you think?”

“...”

Taking his silence as a response, Miku continued:

“Soooo we have a contest. Let’s see... Since it’s coming up, how about I agree to let you seal my power if Raizen takes the grand prize on the first day of the Tenou Festival?”

“Huh?” he said. “At the festival?”

“Yes. How about it? Don’t you think it would be fuuuun?”

“Um... So then if Rindoji wins?” Shido asked.

Miku giggled adorably. “At that point in time, you and the five Spirits whose powers you’ve locked away will become mine.”



“Th-that’s ridiculous! There’s no way—” He gasped, and then he frowned with another question. “Hang on a second. Why on...the first day?”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it?” She grinned. “If I make sure to win on the first day, then I get to enjoy the Tenou Festival with the Spirits on the second and third daaaays. And...” She paused and then continued, “Well, I believe the main event on the staaage the first day is the musical performances.”

Shido felt a chill in the pit of his stomach. “...! Wait, you can’t actually mean —”

Miku smiled even more broadly. “Yes. I’d prefer not to show myself to people too often, but if it’s for the sake of the Spirits, well, that’s special. I will stand onstage on the first day.”

“Wha...?!” He was stunned. Not only would he be up against Rindoji, the annual champion, but if a certain mysterious and reclusive idol were to perform there and reveal herself to the world at last, it would be a huge deal. He wouldn’t be surprised if Miku fans, who would never normally come to the Tenou Festival, mobbed the place. And Rindoji’s victory in the performance division would be secured.

“Hee-hee-hee! Since we’re doing this, let’s go with a direct face-off. You have to perform, too, Shioriiii.”

“Wh-what...? Aren’t the odds a little too stacked in your favor?!” he yelped.

“Aaare they?” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “I don’t think so, personally. The fact that I would compete at all is a concession. I dooo want you, Shiori, but I won’t be terribly inconvenienced if I don’t have you. But what about youuuu?”

“Ngh...” Shido gritted his teeth.

What Miku was basically saying was: If he wanted to seal her Spirit power, then his only option was to accept the incredibly unfair terms of this contest.

“Now then, what will you dooo?” she asked with a smile.

Shido could only nod.

Chapter 3

Edit Time

“Well? Do you have anything to say for yourself, Shido?”

That night. The instant Shido left Miku’s house, he was scooped up by *Fraxinus*’s transporter device and immediately shown to the briefing room. Waiting for him there was the displeased face of his lady sister, even more oppressive than usual.

“I have brought you dishonor,” he said, a cold sweat popping up on his face as he knelt and prostrated himself, still in Shiori mode.

He had been made to sit in the middle of the round table, showered in the gazes of the crew members seated around it. He felt like a defendant on trial.

“I *told* you not to lose your temper. Just when the Spirit’s likability’s about to go up, you say ‘I hate you’ of all things? ‘I reject you’? You’ve really outdone yourself here.”

“B-but,” he argued, “it’s weird! She doesn’t even think about people’s lives?! And you know... People like Miku because of that ‘voice,’ so she probably doesn’t have anyone who would tell her when bad things are bad. So I—”

“There was no need to say what you said,” Kotori told him flatly. “At least, not in that moment.”

“Hngh...” He groaned.

“It’s true that Miku Izayoi’s values diverge from the norm. She’ll need some serious education after her power’s sealed. But that’s exactly why we have to lock away that power as soon as possible, isn’t it? Why would you deliberately antagonize her, you cross-dressing pervert?”

“Uh. I’m dressed like this because of you, though.” He raised his voice in protest of the absurd abuse, but Kotori paid him absolutely no mind. Although

he felt like something wasn't quite clicking here, he decided it wasn't important in the moment and continued, "And, like, you say that, but how were Miku's likability and mood? I didn't hear any alarms through my earpiece at the very least."

"True." Kotori snorted. "Miku's likability and mood didn't drop that far. She was unstable for a second there, maybe because she was surprised at being rejected, but the numbers came right back up."

"See! So then—"

"Yes. There's no problem. *If* you can beat Miku in the performance contest, hmm?"

"...Haaah." He had only just lifted his head as a sign of defiance, and now his head fell forward once more.

"At any rate." Kotori let out yet another sigh and recrossed her legs. "Now that you've accepted her challenge, we can't change that. We'll take care of your committee work one way or another, so tomorrow, you go and negotiate with the performers and make sure you can get up on that stage."

"Y-you'll help me?"

"Obviously," she snorted, crossing her arms. "What do you think Ratatoskr is even here for? Now that it's come to this, we'll do everything we can to win. Have I made myself clear, crew?"

""""Yes, sir!"""" the crew responded as one.

"That said, we're up against popular idol Miku Izayoi," Kotori continued. "Beating her will be no easy feat. What's your school doing for their first turn on the stage, Shido?"

"Huh? Umm..." He rummaged through his memory. He was pretty sure Ai-Mai-Mii had said they were going to be part of it. "I think...it's a band performance."

"Band, hmm? I see. That's good, isn't it? You're good at that."

"What?" He cocked his head to one side, not really getting what she was talking about.

Kotori tapped at the console before her to display a video on the large screen set up in the room.

“Eeek?!” He shrieked without realizing it upon seeing this.

Shown there was his own bedroom. A younger Shido was sitting on the bed, playing a used guitar. He wasn’t particularly skilled, but he definitely wasn’t terrible. In fact, for a kid in junior high, he was practically a master.

That, however, was the issue. Caught up in his own little world, he was humming a song of his own creation over a clumsy melody of his own making.

Yes. When he was in junior high, aggravated by adolescence, there had been a time when Shido played at being a boy with a troubled past, a hint of darkness. He had been the *only my guitar understands me* type. Naturally, this was a past he’d suddenly been embarrassed by and tucked into the furthest recesses of his mind once high school entrance exams drew near.

“Isn’t this the—*pffft*—perfect time to show off the—*hnngk*—skills you worked so hard to perfect? ...Ha-ha...!” Kotori’s shoulders shook as she desperately tried to hold back her laughter. He looked around and saw that the rest of the crew also had their faces turned away, their bodies shaking.

“H-hey! Where’d this video come from?!” he demanded.

“Well, I thought it might come in...handy... *Pfft!*”

The Shido in the video began to sing. He stood up suddenly and began playing his guitar like a rock star onstage, fully losing himself in the moment. Unable to hold back any longer, Kotori exploded in laughter.

“St-stop, stop, stop, stooooooooop!” Shido cried, clutching his head, and the performance abruptly ended.

He looked at the screen, thinking he was finally free of this hell, and saw himself there sitting on the bed again. The Shido on-screen began speaking to no one, as if he were being interviewed.

“*Yeah, I’m not much of a talker... So I let this do the talking for me. For me, it’s not about playing the guitar; it’s more like I’m speaking with this...*”

“Stop! Just stop the video alreadyyyyyy!” he pleaded, tears in his eyes and

goose bumps all over his body, and the video was finally turned off.

A few seconds later, after somehow managing to breathe again, Kotori snapped her fingers. “Well, it’s not like you’re a total novice or anything. Naturally, we’ll get you the best teacher. From today until the Tenou Festival, you need to practice until you can play this song in your sleep. And—Mikimoto!”

“President!” Mikimoto, to the left of Kotori, began to tap at the console before him. “Yes, sir! I will ensure that we have nothing but the best.”

Kotori nodded slightly and turned her gaze back on Shido. “And what’s the song they’re playing?”

Shido chanted positive words in his head and somehow managed to get back on his feet before opening his mouth. “Oh, I don’t really know the details... But I think it’ll probably be a cover of something?”

“That’s not going to sway any voters. Minowa!”

Deep Love Minowa, seated to her right, began to tap at her console now. “Putting in requests to professional artists immediately. We’ll have a contest to determine the song to be performed.”

Kotori nodded and asked yet another question. “And how much do we know about the enemy camp?”

“Oh... I haven’t actually...”

“Mm-hmm. Shiizaki!”

Just like Mikimoto and Minowa before her, Nailknocker Shiizaki sprang into action. “I’ll have a spy sent into Rindoji Girls’ Academy and scope out the details of their performance that day. What shall we do about putting down obstacles?” Shiizaki asked, sounding dangerous.

Kotori paused thoughtfully. But she soon shook her head. “That might indeed increase our chances of victory, but there’s also the risk of Miku’s mood turning. Ideally, Miku gives it everything she has and falls just short of a win. An absolute requirement of our victory is that she feels good about losing.”

She gave orders in rapid succession, and Shido stared at this exchange

between the Ratatoskr members, half-stunned.

“This is kind of...amazing,” he said.

“I told you. We’re going to win, full power. We’re taking on an actual idol, you know? It’s only natural to lay this kind of foundation. A certain *someone* went and made a rash promise, so our backs are up against the wall here.”

“Urk... I-I’m sorry.”

“Hmph. Whatever. It’s true that there wasn’t any better alternative in the moment. And.” Kotori popped her Chupa Chups out of her mouth and averted her eyes abruptly. “When you lost your temper at Miku...it felt a little good.”

“Huh?” He gaped at her.

Kotori waved a dismissive hand at him and pushed her lollipop back into her mouth.



“You can’t be serious?” Ryouko growled, glaring at the group before her.

There were currently about twenty people in the briefing room of the SDF Tengu Garrison. Seated on Ryouko’s side were the regular AST members. And lined up across from them was the group dispatched from DEM Industries and attached to the AST as supplementary personnel.

“Of course we are,” Jessica sneered, sitting in the middle of the dispatch team. “If you don’t believe it, I can have signed documents prepared for you, you know?”

“I’ll rephrase that. Have you lost your minds?”

Ryouko’s question could have been perceived as rude, but Jessica smiled, as if thoroughly delighted.

Ryouko’s face twisted up in indignation, and she dropped her gaze to the documents before her. They contained the details of a mission that seemed impossible to her at first.

A mission to capture the Spirit Princess. They were to seize the municipal Raizen High School student Tohka Yatogami because she had been confirmed to be a Spirit.

But Ryouko knew that part of the story. She had been told before that this Tohka Yatogami did strongly resemble the Spirit Princess, and if a Spirit signal had been detected, they couldn't just walk away.

"For the sake of argument, let's say this is fine. I agree that a Spirit attending school is a dangerous situation that cannot be overlooked." She slammed a hand down on the documents. "But what is *this*?"

"This?" Jessica said. "Meaning?"

"Don't play dumb with me," she snarled. "Why would a regular human being be included in the targets for capture?"

Yes. One other target was noted in the documents besides the girl suspected to be Princess: Shido Itsuka. Details: Classified.

"Are you saying this *boy* is a Spirit, too?" Ryouko demanded.

"The details are classified," Jessica replied. "But I will tell you that he is an extremely important target."

"Seriously...?"

"Let me put it another way. You don't have the clearance to know," Jessica said bluntly.

"Ngh..." Ryouko glared at her. "Tch!" She clicked her tongue deliberately, loud enough for the other woman to hear, and glanced at the next item.

"So then explain this. The day of the mission, Saturday, September twenty-third. The location is Tengu Square, the literal venue for the Tenou Festival! What on earth are you even thinking?! The Realizer is a secret technology, yes? In the middle of all these people— Wait, no, even before that, you're planning to have a shoot-out with a Spirit in a place where this many people will be? Do you realize how absurd what you're saying is?!" Ryouko shouted, almost shrieking. Her problem wasn't just with the target for capture.

In all likelihood, the place where the most people would be gathered in the city of Tengu that day was the Tenou Festival. And these orders had the AST charging in there to capture Tohka Yatogami and Shido Itsuka in front of all of them.

On top of that, the team executing this mission would be composed solely of the DEM dispatch personnel, while Ryouko and the other regular AST members would be placed to the rear to guard the area and do information control. They wouldn't even approach the scene of the actual mission. Which meant she wouldn't be able to stop Jessica's team from running wild.

"I don't understand!" Ryouko cried passionately. "Why on earth would you do something like this?!"

In contrast, Jessica was subdued as she let out a sigh. "This is a ceremony. A greeting from us to a beloved enemy. So we have to make a grand show of it. Even if that carries a little risk."

"Huh? Enemy? Greeting? What are you—?"

Jessica didn't wait to hear Ryouko out to the end but, rather, stood up with a grin on her face. "I don't care if you agree or not. If you've got objections about the mission, take them upstairs. If the orders are withdrawn, we'll obey that."

"Hey! Stop right there!" Ryouko called out, and Jessica halted abruptly. But Ryouko quickly realized that this was not because of anything she'd said.

"Oh, right." Jessica turned her head toward the other woman as if she'd just remembered something. "I forgot to mention. Make sure not to inform Master Sergeant Origami Tobiichi of this mission."

"Origami?" Ryouko frowned. "Why the hell not? She's key firepower for the AST. What would be the point in deliberately—?"

"I'm telling you that there's a possibility she'll get in the way with this one," Jessica cut her off. "And none of you regular AST are going to see actual battle anyway. Her absence shouldn't have too much of an impact, right?"

"I—I don't recall you having final say over our formation," Ryouko stammered.

"Don't get the wrong idea. This isn't my say; it's the order from above. Okay, then. Have a good one," Jessica said and exited the room. The other DEM members followed after her.

"Ngh! What the hell was that?!" Ryouko clenched her fists in frustration and

powerlessness and slammed them down on the table.

The papers before her flew up, and several fell to the floor.

And then.

Dropping her gaze to the paper with *Shido Itsuka* written on it, Ryouko frowned. “Hmm? Now that I’m thinking about it, I’ve heard this name before...”

And she remembered what Jessica had just said.

“Origami...is not allowed to take part. So— Oh!”

Ryouko’s eyes grew wide.

Shido Itsuka. That was the name of the “lover” Origami had mentioned.



“Hey, Itsuka? Love...sure is nice, huh?”

It was after school on September 13, the night following the declaration of the contest between Shido, posing as Shiori, and Miku.

Tonomachi appeared before him suddenly with a look of ecstasy on his face, appearing as though he had taken some kind of dangerous drug, like the nickname Tohka had bestowed upon him.

Shido sighed as he replied, “Where’d that come from?”

But Tonomachi didn’t seem to even notice Shido’s gloomy expression as he continued excitedly, “I... I think I just met my soul mate.”

“Uh-huh... You run into a cute girl or something?”

“Yeah,” he said. “After school the day before yesterday. I met this girl who’s just my type...”

“Hmm.”

“...in the boys’ bathroom.”

“Hrk?!” Shido choked.

But Tonomachi took this reaction a different way. He crossed his arms while nodding, as if that was the expected reaction. “I know man, I know. But it’s true. She ambushed me in the boys’ bathroom.”

“She did not ambush you!” Shido shouted.

“Mmmnope, there’s no mistaking it. I mean, she knew my name, dude.”

“No, but I mean...” Shido scowled, but Tonomachi ignored him and continued his passionate rambling.

“I seriously felt like it was fate, okay? I mean, wanting to be alone with me, so she ambushes me in the bathroom at the end of the hallway with no one around? I wish I’d gotten her name, though.”

“Uhhh... Hmm... Oh.”

“Ahhh, come on. You still think I’m making this up?” Tonomachi asked. “I’m telling you it happened. She was about as tall as you. Kinda had your build... But it felt so comfortable being with her, like we’d been together a long time even though we’d never met before. Oh, yeah! Almost like with you, Itsuka.”

“...”

The thought that Tonomachi actually had realized the truth flitted through his head, but looking at his friend’s happy face, it didn’t seem like that was the case.

Still, it wasn’t like he could hang out here with Tonomachi forever. He jumped to his feet.

“Uhhh...where ya goin’?”

“I’ve got the stupid planning committee *you* nominated me for, you jerk,” Shido said.

“I said I was sorry.” Tonomachi laughed awkwardly. “But I’m counting on you, man. Everyone’s real serious this year. We’re gonna get you standing up on that awards stage, yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah. Go ahead and count on me,” he said as he left the classroom and went to his locker to pull out the bag with his change of clothes in it. He had to transform into Shiori mode and go negotiate with the performers who would be standing onstage.

But Shido stopped in the hallway. He had a bigger problem to deal with first.

“Where am I going to get changed?” he murmured.

“Can’t you just use the same bathroom as yesterday?” came Kotori’s voice in response.

“Ah, but that didn’t actually work out too well.”

“So then just go into the girls’ restroom and change there.”

“...Isn’t that extra risky?”

“What are you talking about? The issue is basically that you don’t know if there’ll be someone there when you come out of the stall, right? With the girls’ bathroom, so long as you’re careful going in, you’re good to go.”

“No, it’s not that—”

“Look. Just hurry. I’ll forbid you from wearing shorts under your skirt.”

“...Roger.”

That was the final line, something he’d begged desperately for and been granted. He couldn’t stand it if this were taken away from him now. Shido headed for the girls’ bathroom on trembling legs.

“No one’s...in there, right?”

He peered into the girls’ restroom at the farthest edge of the school and checked there was no obvious sounds before stepping inside.

Bang, bang, bang. In that moment, the doors of three stalls opened in quick succession.

“Aah, what a relief!”

“I always thought we didn’t need a bathroom way out here, but I guess it’s actually useful, huh?”

“We very nearly turned into high school girl maniacs there!”

The trio of Ai-Mai-Mii appeared, looking deeply relieved. And then each of them sounded off “Hmm?” “Hmm?” “Hmm?” as they turned their eyes on the boy committing the grave crime of infiltration.

He hurriedly fled the scene. And heard powerful screams and curses from

behind.

“Unnnngaaaaah?!”

“P-perveeeeeert!”

“Maniaaaaaac!”

“Come on! Why at the very moment when I try to go in?!”

Shido raced down the hallway, practically in tears.

In the end, he changed on *Fraxinus*.

Shido was sad that he hadn't realized there was such a simple solution to the problem, but there was no point in regretting that now. He slapped his cheeks to get his mind back on the right track.

After transforming into Shiori mode, he had come to stand in front of the music room on the fourth floor to negotiate about the stage performance for the first day. He'd been told this was where Ai-Mai-Mii were practicing.

That said, however, Ai-Mai-Mii and everyone else in the band had been practicing hard all this time. He didn't know if they'd happily agree to his request to be added to the roster.

As he considered this, someone grabbed his shoulders firmly from behind.

“I finally found you, Shido. Where'd you go?”

“I'm not letting go.”

“Tohka... And Origami? Wh-what are you doing here?” he asked, eyes growing wide in surprise.

Yes. The hands on his shoulders belonged to Tohka and Origami, who were supposed to still be in the classroom.

“Mm. You disappeared all of a sudden, so I came to find you. I was worried that Origami Tobiichi had abducted you.”

“I thought Tohka Yatogami had done something horrible to you. I'm glad you're all right.”

The two girls exchanged a look before sniffing indignantly and turning their

faces away from each other.

Shido smiled wanly at them and then cocked his head to one side. “Hmm?”

From the other side of the door to the music room before him, he heard something like music clamoring to an awkward halt, followed by voices in argument.

“What the...?” He gently pulled away from Tohka and Origami and approached the door to find out what was going on.

In that moment, the door was thrown open abruptly and slammed into Shido’s nose.

“Aungh?!” he cried in pain.

The perpetrators guilty of this egregious anti-door violence appeared not to notice Shido, however.

“Whatever. Then you guys can go ahead and do whatever you want!”

“Exactly. We’re done!”

The two unfamiliar girls shouted, very clearly angry, and stormed off down the stairs.

“Sh-Shido! Are you okay?!” Tohka came over to him a second later, a worried look on her face.

With tears in his eyes, Shido waved her away with a hand. “I’m okay...”

And then he heard voices from the music room again.

“Pft! Fools! As if we’d go begging jerks who’ve got no spirit!”

“Honestly, Ai... What’ll we do? It’s just the three of us now.”

“The instruments are one thing, but the lack of vocals is serious. Oh-ho?”

Mii saw Shido, Tohka, and Origami standing in front of the music room and raised her eyebrows. In the next instant, that information was also transmitted to Ai and Mai.

“Get ’em!” the trio shouted and came charging at Shido.

“I seeeee. We had no idea that went down like that,” Ai said, head dropped to

one side, like she had slept on her neck wrong.

It wasn't that she was confused about anything or making fun of Shido and the girls. She had simply been neatly hit with Origami's joint-lock technique when she'd flown at them earlier.

In the music room now were Ai-Mai-Mii, as well as Shido, Tohka, and Origami.

After Shido told them that he wanted them to let him be in the band that would perform onstage, he deftly hid the critical elements of the story and explained that Miku Izayoi had issued him a challenge.

"Wohkay! We're not monsters. For the sake of Shiori's virtue, we have to lend a helping hand!" Ai slapped her chest, but she might have put a little too much oomph into the gesture. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she groaned like a strange animal.

"There you go again. Even though we're the ones in trouble because we don't have enough people."

"Well, it's all good, right? Here's three additional members! We can make this work."

"Huh?" Shido cocked his head at Mii's words. "Oh. No. Tohka...and Origami just came with me, but..."

"Oh yeah? For all that, though..." Mai pointed behind him.

Origami and Tohka were there, already picking out their instruments.

"Uh. Umm... You guys—I mean, the two of you," Shido said with a wry smile, and the girls bobbed their heads up and down.

"I don't know how it got to this point, but we can't lose this contest."

"Mm. I got this!"

They spoke at exactly the same time, then met each other's eyes and whipped their faces away.

"Well, well. You two are pretty tight, hmm?"

"Yes, let's do it. We'll take down Rindoji together."

"For Shiori!"

Ai-Mai-Mii spoke one after the other, and the two girls begrudgingly agreed to work together. Shido let out a sigh of relief.

He didn't know how well Origami and Tohka could play, but it would be a real issue if they were off fighting somewhere he couldn't see during practice or the actual performance. Having them in the band with him might actually turn out to be a mental lifesaver.

"But if all the planning committee members are in the band, then isn't that actually really bad?" Mai asked, stroking her chin.

"Please don't worry about that," Shido said. "I've asked some friends to help out."

"Oh yeah? I guess we're good, then." She consented readily, much to his surprise. And he didn't *not* think that it might have been better for her to show a little more concern as a member of the committee. But if she did follow up and ask for details, he couldn't exactly explain the whole Ratatoskr thing, so he simply left it at that.

"So...I want to get right into practicing. Can any of you play an instrument, though?" Ai turned her gaze abruptly on Shido. "I'm bass, Mai's keyboard, yeah, and Mii's playing drums."

"Uh-huh... So then.....I—I can play guitar a little."

Naturally, he no longer treated the guitar like a soul mate, but Shido felt like he had expended a huge number of calories just saying the word *guitar*. If he wrote a book touting this as a new diet method, it just might sell.

But the trio's eyes shone at this.

"Whoa!"

"Nice, a guitar girl."

"So cool! Do it. You have to do it."

"So what about you two?" Mii asked Tohka and Origami.

"Guitar. Same as Shiori," Origami said without the slightest hesitation.

"Ooh, you've got experience, too, Tobiichi?"

Origami shook her head vigorously from side to side. “If you give me a day, I’ll learn to play.”

“Y-yeah...” Ai scratched her cheek.

This was a bold declaration, but when Origami said it, it was strangely convincing.

“What should I play?!” Tohka lobbed this question at Ai-Mai-Mii with shining eyes.

“Right. You have any experience with an instrument?”

“I don’t!”

“Umm. So you have a favorite artist or anything?”

“I don’t!”

“Hmm. In that case—”

“I don’t!” Tohka replied cheerfully, jumping the gun a bit at the end.

The trio talked among themselves before pulling out a small box at one end of the music room.

And then they spoke in an excessively solemn tone.

“Tohka... We entrust this to you.”

“An instrument of legend that cannot be mastered by mere commoners.”

“But you can, Tohka. You’ll do it for us, right?”

Tohka gulped. “M...mm.”

The trio opened the box. An incredible light gushed from within. Or that’s what it felt like.

“Here,” Ai said as she pulled the instrument from the box and handed it to Tohka.

With its round frame surrounded by small metal discs, this was... Well, any way you looked at it, it was a tambourine.

“Th-this is...the instrument of legend...”

But Tohka's hands shook, as though she were trembling in trepidation, and she ever so timidly moved the hand holding the tambourine. *Kssh*. It made a lovely sound.

"O-ohhh!"

Tohka's eyes lit up, and Ai-Mai-Mii got looks of surprise on their faces.

"I-incredible. From the moment you lay a hand on it, you can make it sing!"

"Of course you can, Tohka! You of all people would be able to master it!"

"The doorway to heaven has opened! A master musician is born!"

They were saying super-random things, but Tohka seemed satisfied with their haphazard comments. She began to shake the tambourine happily.

Ai-Mai-Mii swiveled their heads and shifted their gazes from Tohka to Shido.

"So, well, since we've basically settled on who plays what..."

"We don't have the guitars set up, so I think the real practice will start tomorrow."

"But there's something we have to decide before that."

"Which is?" Shido asked, and the trio scratched their cheeks awkwardly.

"Mm, well, to be honest, it's the vocals."

"The truth is, none of us are good singers, you know?"

"And, like, it's gonna be pretty tough going up against Miku Izayoi and all."

They sighed. And then Mii spoke up.

"So normally, in a band, the guitarist or the bassist would do the vocals, right? Ai, you do it! You can cut loose during the show and show off your striped panties!"

"What?! Don't just go deciding stuff. I mean, the keyboardist could totally sing, so Mai, you do it!"



“That’s the end of it! You’ll look so cute!”

“Hey! If you’re going to talk like that, then the drums could work just fine. I mean, you wear glasses and play drums, so why can’t you sing, Mii?! Don’t stop the romance!”

They began to argue heatedly.

“O-okay, whoa, calm down...,” Shido said, and then he remembered something. “I know... Speaking of vocals.”

He dug around in the pocket of his uniform and pulled out the CD Kotori had given him that morning. He put it in the CD player in one corner of the room and pressed the PLAY button.

An upbeat song began to come out of the speakers, and Ai-Mai-Mii stopped fighting with curious looks on their faces as they turned toward him.

“Who’s this? There aren’t any lyrics, but it’s pretty good.”

“Uhhh. One of my relatives is actually in the music business. And they gave me this unreleased song,” Shido told them, making it up as he went.

Ai-Mai-Mii gasped, their faces lighting up.

“For real?! That’s, like, amazing!”

“What? So then you mean we can use this song?”

“Shiori, will you, like, sing for us?”

“Huh?! Umm...” Shido instantly became flustered, and in the blink of an eye, a stage was set up.

Tohka and Origami followed along and dropped down to sit in front of Shido, entering audience mode.

“Okay, ready? Music!”

“Huh? Ah! Hey!”

Ignoring Shido’s protests, Mai pressed PLAY. He quickly pulled the lyrics sheet out of his pocket and began to sing, a little behind the beat.

And then approximately five minutes later.

“Ooh!” Tohka clapped wildly.

“...” Origami nodded silently. At some point, a voice recorder had magically appeared in her hand.

But in contrast, Ai-Mai-Mii groaned with complicated looks on their faces.

“Mmm...”

“She’s not...bad.”

“But she’s not...good.”

He couldn’t help but grin at this incredibly vague assessment. When he’d sung for Kotori, he’d gotten pretty much the exact same evaluation.

Which was exactly why Kotori had given him the *plan*.

“Umm. I have a version with a pro singing it, too. So we could also just play that on the day of the performance...”

“You mean...lip-syncing?”

“I guess that wouldn’t be right, huh?” Shido furrowed his brow. Kotori had entrusted him with this plan, saying that it was about the only way they could beat Miku, but well, it wasn’t a method he was particularly proud of. The trio might not have been happy about it, either, not after they’d been practicing to stand onstage themselves.

“Nah, we’re cool with going for the win no matter how it looks.”

“Yeah, totes. But the issue is how we can play it on the big day.”

“We’ll probably get found out, and it’ll all be over for us, you know?”

Ai-Mai-Mii groaned. They were apparently struggling with a different issue.

That said, however, it was a fact that there was no other way. Although Ratatoskr would maneuver to help them to the extent possible, it would all be pointless if Miku didn’t personally accept her defeat. They could wager on the persuasive power of less-than-perfect vocals.

This time everyone groaned, and then Origami abruptly stood up.

“Shiori,” she said, “play the song one more time.”

“Huh?”

“I cannot allow you to lose.”

Shido’s eyes widened as Origami stepped briskly up to the podium and took the mic. It seemed that she was going to attempt to sing.

He was about to push PLAY on the song again, just as she’d instructed, and then it hit him. He held out the lyrics card.

“Origami, here.”

“No need. I memorized them.”

“Y-you did what...?” He smiled awkwardly and pressed PLAY.

When the opening ended, Origami began to sing.

“Huh?” he heard someone say quietly behind him.

And Shido immediately understood the feeling in that surprised utterance. Origami’s singing, in spite of the ever-neutral expression on her face...was good enough to put a professional to shame.

“Wha...”

When she finished her impeccable rendition, Ai-Mai-Mii clapped and cried out in admiration.

“Whoa! What? Wow!”

“Were you always this good, Origami?!”

“Huh? Could this actually work?”

The trio were bubbling over with excitement. And it wasn’t that he didn’t understand how they felt. There indeed might have been a strange gap between her performance and her everyday expression and behavior, but setting that aside, she was a much better singer than the average person. Perfectly in tune. Just the right amount of projection. Absolutely unparalleled accuracy, like they were listening to a CD.

“Origami...” Shido swallowed hard and took a step toward her. “Please. Will you be the vocalist instead of me?”

“If it’s for your victory, Shiori,” Origami replied immediately, and Ai-Mai-Mii let out a cheer.

Someone tapped on Shido’s shoulder. He looked back to find Tohka standing there, impatiently eager.

“Me too! Can I sing, too?!”

“Huh? Oh, sure,” he said and handed her the lyrics sheet.

She quietly accepted it. Apparently, she hadn’t completely memorized the lyrics from hearing the song once the way Origami had. And then with mic in one hand and tambourine and lyrics sheet in the other, she stepped up to the podium.

Now that he was thinking about it, Shido hadn’t actually heard Tohka sing before. Her humming was one thing, but this was the first time he would experience her performing and singing with lyrics and everything.

Tohka was a Spirit, too. Even if it wasn’t on par with Miku’s, maybe she had a magical singing voice that could bewitch people in a similar way.

However. Even after the introduction ended, Tohka did not start singing.

“Mm... Mmm?” Furrowing her brow dubiously, she beckoned to Shido.

“Is something wrong?”

“Mm... How do you pronounce this character?” she asked, a troubled look on her face as she pointed at the lyrics sheet.

“Ohhh...”

Maybe we’ll just go with Origami on vocals, everyone silently agreed.

“O-okay, we don’t have much time, so how about we get practicing?!”

Ai took the lead, and everyone else, including Tohka, threw a hand up into the air at the same time.

“Yeah!”



At the same time, at Rindoji Girls’ Academy.

“Okay, everyone, please listen. I’ve decided to go on staaaage the first day,” Miku announced, and the meeting room erupted.

“M-Miss Miku! Really?!”

“You hate appearing in front of so many people, though.”

“But there’s no doubt that this will secure our victory on the first day! I mean, you’ll be singing for us!”

The girls grew excited and babbled in shrill voices. Miku looked out at them happily and giggled.

“I’d ask that you start to prepare right awaaaay. I’d like to have a new costume, and I want some goooooood props. Oh! And we haaave to select my backup dancers from the student body.”

Everyone crossed their arms and leaned back, carried away by the image of this performance that appeared in their minds. However.

“Pl-please wait a moment!” A girl in glasses seated to the left slammed a hand on the table and stood up.

“Yees? What’s the matter?” Miku turned her gaze in that direction, and the girl in glasses flinched but then clenched her hands and continued:

“With all due respect... If you’re performing, then what happens to the brass band that was our original entry for the performance division?”

“Mm. Uunfortunately, we’ll simply have them step down this time. But that’s fine, isn’t it? If I make an appearance, we’ll definitely win.”

“B-but!” The girl in glasses scowled. “Everyone’s been practicing so hard for the Tenou Festival, you know?! This is simply too much!”

A wave of unrest rippled through the room. Everyone wanted to see Miku perform. But they also thought that their classmate made a good point.

And then a student with short hair sitting across from her raised her hand nervously. “Uh. Um. If we have to prepare for Miss Miku’s appearance, then what about work for the other divisions?”

“We won last year, didn’t we?” Miku said. “I’m telling you, there won’t be any

issues if you simply do the saaaame thing as last year.”

Yet another student opened her mouth. “This is extremely difficult to say, but...we just don’t have the budget to prepare a new costume and get props for the performance...”

The meeting room exploded into cross talk and whispers.

Miku sighed in exasperation and narrowed her eyes.

“It’s fine. Please do as I say.”

In an instant, the clamor dropped away into silence.

“Now then, please and thaaaank you. It’ll be all right. I’ll take care of everything somehow,” Miku said with her curious drawl, and the students replied as one:

“Yes, Miss Miku.”



September 22. Origami Tobiichi had come to the garrison for equipment-maintenance work. Although the Tenou Festival was the next day, she couldn’t exactly go neglecting her duties as an AST member.

After finishing the operations check, she changed from her wiring suit into some work clothes and inspected the CR units lined up in the hangar, checking off the items displayed on the terminal in her hand as she went along.

“ ... ”

In the middle of this job, Origami felt a strange sense that something was off and furrowed her brow slightly.

She could see other AST combat personnel and mechanics in the hangar, but they seemed different from usual. She felt something like a...sense of urgency from them. The atmosphere in the hangar was unpleasantly tense.

“ ... ”

She silently set her mind to work. But she couldn’t recall any orders for an upcoming mission. Just in case, she double-checked her terminal, but the result was the same.

She heard the sound of rushed footsteps coming from her left. When she turned her gaze that way, she saw a blond, blue-eyed girl in glasses trotting along with documents in her arms, her oversized white lab coat flapping behind her.

AST mechanic Sergeant First Class Mildred F. Fujimura. Nickname: Milly.

Perfect timing. Origami waited until Milly passed in front of her and then grabbed her by the scruff of her neck.

“Nyaaah?!” Milly shrieked like a cat. Though her overall stature was smaller than Origami’s, her bust was much greater, and it visibly heaved as she flailed. “Wh-what are you doing?! You could’ve broken my neck!”

“Mildred, I wanted to ask you something,” Origami said quietly, and Milly finally realized who the culprit was.

She rolled her eyes and puffed out her cheeks. “I’m sick of the way you treat me! You need to do better!”

“I will consider it,” she replied briefly.

Milly let out a sigh of resignation. “Well? What is it? I’m very busy, you know.”

“Is there some kind of special mission coming up?” Origami asked.

“What do you mean?” Milly’s eyes grew wide. “We’re obviously preparing for tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Origami repeated dubiously, and Milly nodded. “No one told me anything. What is tomorrow’s mission, exactly?”

“Huh? Really? Ohhh, maybe there was a communications error? Honestly, that Ryouko. She acts so high-and-mighty, but she slips up on the big things!”

“Tell me. What’s happening?”

“Yeah, yeah. Tomorrow—”

But Milly stopped before she started. Or to be more precise, Jessica appeared behind her to gently press her hand over Milly’s mouth and interrupt her.

“Stop. Miss Mechanic. Anything further is top secret.”

“Huh? Wh-why?” Milly asked, surprised, but as Jessica whispered in her ear,

the look on her face grew increasingly troubled. “Hmm. I’m sorry. It seems that with your clearance level, Origami, you’re not allowed to know.”

“Meaning?” Origami narrowed her eyes dangerously, and Jessica shrugged, feigning innocence.

“Heh-heh. Just like she said. Don’t give me that scary look. You’re welcome to complain to the brass if you don’t like it,” she said and walked away.

And then Milly ran off with her papers, an apologetic look on her face.

What was going on? Origami looked around at the other AST personnel in the hangar.

But when they met her eyes, they all averted their gazes and very deliberately focused on their work once more.

“ ... ”

It was a mysterious and uncomfortable atmosphere. Origami sniffed unhappily, finished her work, and left the hangar.

That was the end of her duties for the day. Although a number of things didn’t make any sense, there wasn’t anything she could do about that, not when she’d been told she didn’t have the clearance to know.

Rather than focus endlessly on this undefined anxiety, it would be more constructive to hurry and change out of these work clothes, go home, rehearse the song, and get ready for the following day.

Alone, Origami opened her locker and was removing her work clothes when she heard the sound of the door opening behind her. She glanced back and saw that Ryouko had come into the locker room.

“Captain Kusakabe.”

“ ... ”

Ryouko didn’t answer her. Instead, she proceeded into the center of the room at a leisurely pace, sat down on a bench with her back to Origami, and pulled the tab on the can of coffee in her hand. She took a sip and then let out a tired sigh.

“...”

It seemed that the squad leader didn't want to talk to Origami.

Once she understood this, Origami showed no other particular reaction as she silently continued to change. But when she took her blouse off the hanger, she heard an abrupt voice ring out from behind.

“Aaaah, I'm so tired of having to deal with those unpleasant foreigners again today. I can't keep going unless I rant about them. Looks like no one's in the locker room, so maybe I'll just talk to myself to get it all out.”

“...?” Origami looked back, brow furrowing slightly.

The whole “talk to myself” bit sounded strangely like a very transparent excuse. No matter how tired Ryouko might have been, it was impossible that she wouldn't have noticed Origami when she came into the locker room. With that kind of inattentiveness, she wouldn't have been able to handle the duties of an AST squad leader and the near constant danger the AST courted.

“Tomorrow, September twenty-third at fifteen hundred hours, Combat Squad Three will storm Tengu Square. The objective is to capture Tohka Yatogami, the girl suspected to be the Spirit Princess.”

“Wha—?” Origami let out a quiet cry at the words that spilled from Ryouko's mouth while her bottom lip was pressed to the edge of the steel can.

Combat Squad Three was the new squad made up entirely of DEM dispatch personnel. And the objective was to capture Tohka Yatogami? In the middle of the Tenou Festival the next day?

It didn't make sense. The sudden information she'd been given made Origami forget to slip her arms through the sleeves of her blouse, and she turned toward Ryouko.

But Ryouko's “rant” didn't end there.

“And to capture Raizen High School grade eleven student Shido Itsuka.”

“...?!” She gasped at the name that came from her captain's mouth. Before she knew it, she had grabbed hold of Ryouko's shoulder. “What is the meaning of this? Tohka Yatogami is one thing, but why Shido—?”

“...”

But Ryouko did not react to Origami at all. She felt like she had become a ghost.

The captain sighed softly, stood up, and downed the rest of her coffee before walking toward the door she had come in through.

“Aaah, what a hassle, this mission tomorrow. I’m just so exhausted, I *might forget to lock the back door to Hangar Two*. Well, I doubt there’ll be any unexpected trouble, so it’s probably fine.”

And then.

“I’m counting on you, Origami,” she said and left the locker room.

“...”

Left alone there, Origami stared at the door that Ryouko had disappeared through, baffled.

“...!”

And then she clenched her hands into fists.

Chapter 4

Enjoy the Sound

“The twenty-fifth Tengu joint high school Tenou Festival is now open!”

As this announcement from the planning committee chair blared over the speakers near the ceiling, each hall erupted in applause and cheers.

Saturday, September 23, the day the high school students of the city had been eagerly awaiting, the start of the Tenou Festival.

Halls numbered one and two near the main entrance were mostly filled with booths selling food and drinks, while halls numbered three and four farther back featured simple attractions such as haunted houses and a variety of informative exhibits.

Shido was currently in Hall No. 2, at the food booth that was key to Raizen High School’s potential victory. But despite being at this critical location, he was curiously pushing a hand against the ground, a dark aura radiating from his entire body.

“Oh! Ohhh...”

The reason was extremely simple.

Shido slowly lifted his face and looked around. There were all kinds of booths in the area with a wide variety of offerings. Takoyaki, crepes, and the pleasingly crunchy fried meat patties called *menchikatsu*. But Shido and the rest of Raizen High School were following a much less straightforward strategy in their bid for ultimate victory.

He turned his head and looked to the towering sign behind him.

MAID CAFÉ RAIZEN

After digesting the foreboding name, he slowly lowered his gaze once more.

“Ooh! It’s all fluttery!” Tohka giggled as she pulled at the hem of her frilly apron to make it flap.

“Pfft! Keh-heh... Sh-Shido, the maiden look suits you surprisingly well.”

“Failure. I cannot suppress my laughter.”

He could see Kaguya and Yuzuru dressed in the same outfit as Tohka, snickers spilling out of them as they stared at him.

He lowered his gaze even further and looked down at his own costume. An outfit of the exact same design as Tohka and the Yamai sisters: an excessively frilly white apron worn over a long dress that was somewhere between navy and black. Crowning the ensemble was a headpiece that was also decorated with cute ruffles. It was the quintessential French maid outfit.

“How...did this...?”

The girl’s uniform had been one thing, but Shido never dreamed the day would come when he would be forced to cosplay a maid. He felt like a significant part of his boy’s heart had been sullied, and he slumped forward once more.

A gentle hand landed on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong, pretty girl?” It was Ai (maid version). Behind her, he could see Mai and Mii in the same costume. She gave him a thumbs-up. “Come on. The customers’ll be here soon. You gotta get it together.”

Shido staggered to his feet. “Um, so... About this maid café...”

“Yeah, I know. Pretty great, huh?” Ai smirked with self-satisfaction. “We decided this was the only way to beat Rindoji.”

“No, I mean... I can’t believe you got permission for this.”

Although the Tenou Festival was large in scale, it was still a school festival. It might have looked like “anything goes” to the casual observer, but there were actually tons of restrictions. If something was deemed “inappropriate for students,” then permission wouldn’t be given to set up the booth in the first place. On that point, approval for a café like this, which centered around customer service, would have been a very tall order.

Perhaps only too aware of this, Ai shrugged with a slight frown. “That’s why we worked to tweak the perception of it. Our original application was for a cabaret club.”

“Pfft?!” Shido did a spit take, and Ai-Mai-Mii burst out laughing.

“We got yelled at so hard!”

“Yeah, totally! But after that, getting the maid café was easy peasy. Which was what we really wanted.”

“Though we did want the skirts to be a little shorter, you know?” Mii said, drawing a line across Shido’s thigh over his skirt. He paled and automatically pressed it down. Seeing this, Ai-Mai-Mii began to laugh once more.

“Anyway, Shiori, I want you and the rest of the band to go stand by the entrance and lure in the customers. We’ve whipped the other girls in here into perfect customer-service shape, so you can rest assured that you’re selling those would-be customers nothing but the best.”

“Mm-hmm! Be as alluring as possible, okay? Get a line forming in front of our booth!”

“Yes, yes. With an adorably naive girl, two-flavor twins, and a tall, timid drink of water, the only men we’re *not* going to attract are the ones who prefer older women, and gay guys.”

“...”

At some point, Shido had been labeled “timid.” He flashed a smirk dripping with a complicated mix of emotions before cocking his head to one side. “That reminds me. What happened to Origami?”

Yes. Everyone from the band was there, dressed as a maid, except Origami.

“Hmm? Tobiichi? Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen her.”

“She *is* supposed to be working at the maid café...”

“Maybe it’s *that* day?” Mii said, and the three of them laughed out loud.

Not knowing how he should react, Shido could only smile awkwardly.

“Well, she’ll probably be here soon. As long as she’s in time for the show, I

won't complain."

"I—I guess so," Shido replied hesitantly and stopped as he heard an army of people marching in. It appeared that the customers—or rather, "masters" and "mistresses"—had arrived.

"Okay. Good luck!"

"We'll call you when it's time!"

"Oh! Everyone, Shiori's in charge out here. Make sure you follow her instructions!" said Ai-Mai-Mii as they entered the booth.

"Huh?! Hey—"

Left in front of the shop were Shido, Tohka, the Yamai sisters, and ten or so maids selected from each class to attract customers. And all of them had their eyes turned on Shido, who had been put in charge.

"Uh. Umm." Sweat beading on his forehead, Shido cleared his throat. "Well, at any rate, good luck. You got this."

""""Of course!""""

The maids bowed as one in response, a charming gesture with their hands neatly folded together in front of their waists. It seemed that they had indeed been trained properly, whatever else. Then again, Tohka and the Yamai sisters were waving their hands and crying out, """"Yeah!""""

The battle had begun.

Customers poured into the venue, pamphlets in hand. There were all kinds. He could see people who looked to be family of students, students without pressing responsibilities, students from nearby universities clearly looking to pick up girls, junior high students who had decided to attend one of the participating high schools, and so on. There were also fans wearing *happi* coats with *Miku Izayoi Army* embroidered on the back. Apparently, word had spread that the elusive idol would be taking the stage.

The cutthroat competition to attract customers began at the same time. Powerful voices rang out from all over, filling the venue with a vibrant energy.

"Come on in! It's fun! It's yummy!"

“Keh-heh... Temptations of truly hellish proportions await. How could any mere mortal resist?”

“Notice. This is our menu and system.”

On the right side of the entrance to the maid café, Tohka called out energetically (although not very maid-like), while to the left, Kaguya said something that was either attracting customers or excluding them, and beside her, Yuzuru held up a signboard with the menu written on it. It was hard to tell if their efforts were working, but it was undeniable that people were stepping into the maid café one after another.

“Ooh! Is this what success looks like?”

Compared with the booths around them, they were off to a fairly impressive start. At the very least, from what Shido could see of the inside of the other shops, no other installment had as many customers as their maid café.

“...Looks like things are going pretty well, Shin.”

He didn’t know how long it had been since the doors opened when he heard a sleepy voice.

It was a familiar voice belonging to Reine Murasame, Ratatoskr analyst and Shido’s assistant homeroom teacher.

“Ohhh, Reine, you came, too—” Shido looked back and then froze.

Reine was standing there just as he’d expected. So far, so good. But Reine had brought a girl wearing a straw hat, which changed things somewhat.

“Oh. Um...” Yoshino’s cheeks reddened, and she averted her gaze as if she was seeing something not meant for her eyes.

And then the rabbit puppet on her left hand, Yoshinon, began to laugh uproariously, head shaking from side to side.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! Is that you, Shido? It suits you! Why not take the bottom off, and wear it up top. There’s a demand for that, you know?”

“Y-Yoshino,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“...I—I came as you asked,” Yoshino responded.

Indeed, Shido himself had invited her the other day. There was nothing weird about her being here. But she apparently hadn't heard that he would be dressed as a girl.

"Um." Yoshino raised her eyes and smiled awkwardly as she looked Shido over from top to bottom. "I-it's... You look cute."

Shido turned around, crouched down, and covered his head with the menu in his hands. "Ahhh! Stahhhp! Don't be nice to me! Don't look at me! I'm dirtyyyyy!" he half shrieked, Shiori-mode style. He couldn't exactly stop talking like a girl in front of everyone.

For some reason, it wasn't so bad when Tohka, Origami, and the Yamai sisters saw him dressed as a girl. But when Yoshino looked at him with her clear eyes, he was overcome with the feeling that he was doing something that he really shouldn't.

He trembled like a vampire exposed to sunlight. No, maybe it would have been better if he had been. Because a vampire bathed in the light of day could at least turn to ash and disappear.

"Uh! Um! I didn't..."

"...It's okay, Yoshino. You can't get the wrong idea." Reine came through for him immediately. "Shin is doing very noble and proud work. This definitely isn't just his personal hobby."

Yoshino opened her eyes wide in surprise. "H-he is...?"

"...Mm-hmm. He's gotten used to dressing as a girl lately, and the way he applies lip gloss now looks perfect, but he *definitely* isn't doing this because he wants to."

"What exactly are you trying to say, Reine?!" he shouted, jumping to his feet.

Reine cocked her head to one side curiously. "...I was only trying to support you."

Shido's shoulders fell. No doubt, she really did intend to be taking his side there. He felt like the mean one now.

But when exactly had he become so at home in this girl style? He made up his

mind to be careful that he didn't fall off the edge into the darkness.

He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart and turned back to Yoshino. "You're coming inside, right? It's a bit crowded, but I think you can still get in without lining up?"

"Oh... O-okay."

"...Well, how about we go on in, then?" Reine said, ready to lead Yoshino into the maid café.

Yoshino whirled around. "Um... I'm. Looking forward to. Your performance. Too," she said, clenching her hand into a fist and holding it up in an encouraging gesture.



“Yeah, come watch. I’ll play my heart out.” He patted her head through her straw hat. She squirmed like it tickled or she was embarrassed, but because of the wide brim, he couldn’t catch a glimpse of the look on her face.

She bowed neatly and headed into the maid café.

Shido watched her go with a slight smile. He’d gotten courage from an unexpected source. Now he had to win, no matter what.

A few minutes after Reine and Yoshino went inside, just as the shop reached its maximum occupancy and a line was forming out front, there was a sudden commotion in the area.

“Hmm? What’s going on?” he asked a maid nearby.

“Over there,” she said, her face full of tension as she pointed toward the corridor leading to Hall No. 1.

At some point, a large group of people had gathered there. Naturally, the entire venue itself was crowded, but the density in that area was clearly on another level.

A second later, Shido realized the reason for the sea of people.

The crowd parted in two, and down the center strolled a single girl in uniform. He could see a group of high school girls, clad in the same navy sailor uniform, surrounding this central figure like a halo. When he looked closely, there was even a TV crew with cameras following her. There was no mistaking who it was.

“Miku...Izayoi.” He said the name in a quiet voice.

She couldn’t possibly have heard him, but Miku arched an eyebrow as if she had noticed him at the exact same moment. And then she languidly approached the maid café to stand in front of Shido, the corners of her mouth turning up.

“Good morning, Shiori. It seeeeems you’re doing brisk business here.”

“...Thanks. To be honest, it’s not anything too impressive,” Shido replied, trying to calm his pounding heart when he was suddenly surrounded by a crowd.

“Hee-hee! That outfit looks goood on you. How nice. Once you’re mine,

Shiori, it might be fun to have you wear these clothes aaaaall the time.”

Unable to gauge the true intent behind Miku’s declaration, the group around them began to clamor. The TV camera moved from Miku to Shido and back to Miku. He just couldn’t relax in the middle of this commotion.

Miku turned in irritation and spoke toward the TV crew.

“You’re bothering us. Please go somewhere else.”

“...!”

The crowd dispersed immediately. And not just the TV crew. Her personal entourage left, too. Miku was suddenly alone.

He furrowed his brow slightly. There was no mistake. This sensation... That was the same *voice* he’d heard at Miku’s house.

“Aah, finally,” she replied, sighing. “This is sooo much better. I should have done that sooner.”

“That was...something,” he said, a trail of sweat running down his cheek. He couldn’t exactly say anything about Spirit power here. “So? What do you want? If you’re here to spy on your enemy, don’t you think you’re being a bit obvious about it?”

“That’s not it at aaaall. I just came with a little invitation.”

“Invitation?” Shido arched a suspicious eyebrow.

“Yes,” Miku replied, unperturbed. “I thought maybe you and I could go on a daaaate.”

“...Huh?” He opened his eyes wide, unable to understand what she was talking about. “A...date?”

And then he let out a gasp. It just occurred to him that this would get very messy if Tohka or the Yamai sisters overheard them.

Fortunately, however, all three girls were out in front of Shido, trying to attract potential customers. None of them appeared to have noticed him talking with Miku. He let out a sigh of relief before turning back to the idol.

“Yes, a date. How abooooout it?”

“Oh, um...” After a moment’s hesitation, Shido opened his mouth.



An eerie silence reigned over SDF Tengu Garrison Hangar Two. It was not the middle of the night or anything, and yet there was absolutely no sign of any mechanics or AST combat personnel. Almost as if someone, for some reason, had ordered everyone to clear the room.

Slipping in through the unlocked back door, Origami silently turned her eyes toward her target.

“...”

Her footsteps echoed in a loud, jarring way, and she felt her pulse quicken at the noise. She forced herself to quietly take a deep breath.

She was wearing not her Raizen uniform, nor the outfit she was supposed to perform in that day, but the black wiring suit that was basic AST equipment. The wizard’s armor that a human being donned to resist the Spirits, the battle costume that sharpened Origami’s mind to the maximum.

That said, however, there was currently no spacequake alarm ringing, nor was she about to do any training exercises. She had another reason for wearing this suit now.

“...”

She stopped in front of a particular section of the hangar. Just by looking, she could tell that all the security protections were unlocked. No one would notice if someone snuck into the hangar and grabbed a CR unit. The situation was too perfect. Origami looked up at the unit before her.

“...Shido,” she said, swallowing to wet her dry throat.

Right after hearing Ryouko’s magnificent “rant,” Origami had begun to take a closer look at the movements of Jessica and her crew. That being said, she hadn’t done much of anything, truth be told. There was no need.

Whenever Origami asked a member of the team anything, they quickly started to mutter “rants,” ostensibly to themselves. Even Milly, who had stammered and held back before, spilled every last bean when Origami called

her later, adding in her own complaints about the situation.

As she learned the elements of this mission, she shivered in fear.

The Spirit Tohka was one thing, but why were they also targeting Shido?

The question lingered in her head for a mere instant. This was because she had an inkling that she already knew the answer.

In June, Shido had manifested Efreet's healing ability in front of her. A human being who used Spirit power. Actually, to be more precise, a human being who could *take* Spirit power.

She had absolutely no idea why Shido would possess such an ability, but if DEM Industries found out about it, then it made sense that they would also want to capture him. And if he were taken by DEM Industries, it wasn't hard to imagine what they would do to him.

"...I won't let that happen," Origami said in a quiet voice and took a step forward. Toward the crystallization of human wisdom sitting before her, the Combat Realizer unit.

If she took a CR unit without permission again, she probably wouldn't be able to avoid disciplinary action. She would have her memory processed before being dismissed from the squad, and she would never touch a Realizer again. In other words, this was the same thing as losing the means to exact revenge on the Spirit who killed her parents.

"...!"

She froze in place when this realization struck her. But she clenched her teeth and pressed on.

She remembered all too well the feeling of helplessness when they were on their school trip and Shido was in danger, but she had been unable to do anything.

Not having a Realizer then, a CR unit, Origami hadn't been able to do anything. But this time was different.

"This time...I *will* save you."

Even if that act meant that she would be chased out of the AST, she couldn't

let Shido come to harm. She couldn't lose the final emotional refuge she had after losing her parents.

She touched the palm of her hand to the unit's terminal and began authorization. With a low *whirrr*, the lump of metal transformed into the ultimate weapon.



"Okay, Shiori. Strawberry cream, right?"

"Y-yeah..." Shido said, bewildered, and took the beautifully decorated crepe cone from Miku.

She smiled with satisfaction before biting into the chocolate banana crepe she held in her other hand, and a look of bliss lit up her face.

"Mmm! I adooore this. I could start my own crepe shoop."

She squirmed in delight, and the hems of her skirt swayed back and forth.

Shido felt a bead of sweat slide down his cheek. "What am I doing here?"

"Don't grumble. It's actually great for us that she invited you out." He heard Kotori's voice through the earpiece in his right ear. *"We might be duking it out on the stage, but there's no harm in raising your likability. Even if we do beat Rindoji, you won't be able to seal her Spirit power if your likability drops."*

"Well, I guess that's true," he said, scratching his cheek. *But duking it out? More like duchessing...* He ultimately kept those thoughts to himself since Kotori would no doubt give him a real tongue-lashing.

Yes. Shido had left the maid café to Tohka and the others so that he could go on a school-festival date at Miku's invitation. He felt kind of weird about hanging out with the person he would soon be competing against onstage, but Kotori was exactly right. It was best if he just went along with Miku's wishes for now.

"And this time, don't go telling Miku you hate her, even by accident."

"...I know."

"Oh deaaar?" Miku said curiously. "You're not going to eat it?"

“Oh... No, I am.” He hurriedly raised the crepe in his hand to his mouth. The sweetness of the whipped cream and the tang of the strawberries wrapped in the thin layer of fried dough filled his mouth. Although it was a simple dessert, it looked as good as any you might find at an actual crepe shop, maybe because the crepe itself was perfectly cooked.

“Mm,” he said. “It’s tasty.”

“Hee-hee-hee! I’m glad,” Miku said and, in the next moment, took a big bite of Shido’s crepe.

“Ah?!” he cried.

“Mm, yours is also deliciouuuus. Exquisite work.” She looked satisfied as she patted her cheek. And then she noticed the surprised look on Shido’s face. Laughing, she held out the chocolate banana crepe in her hand. “Here. This way, we’ll be even.”

“Uh. Ummm...”

“What are you waiting for? Chomp down on it. Chomp, chomp,” Kotori urged.

He took a bite of the crepe as instructed. It wasn’t *not* good, but to be honest, he couldn’t really tell what flavor it was supposed to be.

“Is it goooood?” Miku asked.

“Uh. Uh-huh.” He nodded. “It’s great.”

“Hee-hee! We just had an indirect kiiiiss.”

“Pwah!” Shido choked slightly, the crepe still in his mouth, when she uttered the words he couldn’t bring himself to say even though they had been very much on his mind.

“I’m sorry.” Miku patted his back, smiling. “You’re so puuuure, Shiori.”

“N-no... I’m okay. I was just a little surprised, is all.” Shido somehow managed to breathe properly again.

Miku smiled gently at him once more before scarfing down the crepe in her hand. And then she pointed down the aisle ahead of them.

“We don’t have a lot of time before the perfooormances. Let’s go and see

moore things!” She tugged on his hand.

“Oh... Hey.” He hurriedly stuffed the rest of his crepe into his mouth and tucked the leftover paper holder into the pocket of his apron before starting after Miku.

She led him past the food booths toward the area with things like shooting ranges and simple haunted houses.

“Hey, Miku?” Shido called to Miku ahead of him.

“Yees? What is it, Shiori?”

“Why did you ask me out again at a time like this?”

Miku looked back at him. “It’s just, once today’s results come out, you’ll belong to me, won’t yooooou? I simply wanted to have a taste of the rare Shiori—who doesn’t belong to meee yet—before that changes forever.”

“...”

In Miku’s mind, her victory was already a done deal. Shido clenched his teeth and looked at her with determination clear in his expression.

“I’m just going to say that we seriously intend to beat Rindoji today. I hope you’re ready for that possibility.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Will you be able to, thouuugh?”

“You’ll keep your promise to me.”

“I knooooow. Don’t you forget, either, Shiori.” Miku smiled, looking as though she didn’t feel the slightest pressure at Shido’s declaration.

He couldn’t believe how relaxed she was, even though they had this contest before them. He felt himself getting thrown off his own game and ran his hands through his hair.

“Shiori! Shiori!” Miku said after a while. “Look there. It’s a riiiiing toss. Let’s give it a try.” She pointed toward what looked like a festival street stall. Prizes were laid out in a grid on top of a red mat.

“Ring toss?” he parroted.

“Yees. Which one do you waaant? I’ll win it for you.”

“Huh? Um... Okay, that one.” After a moment of indecision, Shido pointed at a stuffed cat relatively close to the front.

“Ooookay. It’s as good as yours.” Miku made a gesture like she was rolling up her sleeves, paid the student standing to one side, and took three plastic rings from her.

“Hiyaaa!”

She tossed the first ring with a strange cry. It flew off in the completely wrong direction.

“Hyah! Hyooo!”

Not giving up, she threw the other two rings, and these, too, fell with a *clatter* to the ground, not so much as grazing any of the prizes. She had a truly spectacular lack of control.

“Oh dear, it’s haaard, isn’t it?” She frowned.

“Ha-ha...”

“Shido, what are you laughing for? If Miku can’t do it, then you go win it for her.” Kotori’s voice rattled his right ear.

“Right,” he said. “Hey, Miku, if you want—”

But Miku was already speaking to the girl attending the booth. He thought she was going to try again, but...no.

“Give me that stuffed cat.”

Miku *pleaded* with the girl.

“Of course. Please wait a moment.” The girl nodded with a blank look on her face, picked the stuffed cat up, and handed it to Miku.

Miku took it, a grin spreading from ear to ear, and she held the cat out to Shido. “Here, Shiori.”

“Wait,” he said. “What are you doing?”

Miku cocked her head to one side as though she didn’t understand the question. “Was this not the one you wanted? I’ll get her to exchange—”

“That’s not what I mean,” he interrupted. “It’s not the same. Getting it like that.”

“Ummm. Then what should I dooooo?” she asked, and he couldn’t see anything like malice or pangs of conscience on her face.

He felt the same unbearable revulsion he had at her house the other day. “You have to actually get the ring on the prize to win it.”

“Whaaat? But what if I can’t get it oooon?”

“Then...you just have to give up.”

“What? Whyyy?”

“Why?” he repeated. “Because that’s the rule. If you ignore the rules, it’s rude to the people running the game, you know?”

“Rude?” Miku’s eyes widened like saucers. “But they get to give me a prize. Wouldn’t that make them happy, too?”

“Listen, you...”

“And most importantly, I wouldn’t be able to give you a preeeesent, Shiori.”

“And I’m telling you I can’t accept a present you didn’t win fair and square.”

“Whaaat...?” Miku pouted unhappily.

Shido frowned and scratched his head.

This girl genuinely didn’t think she was doing anything wrong. She was simply following her desire to give Shido the stuffed cat and using any means at her disposal to achieve her goal. Maybe because he’d had a bit of time since then to think about it, the impression he’d gotten of Miku at her house had changed a little.

Now that he thought about it, Tohka had been like this, too. Since she never had a chance to encounter people other than the AST before he sealed her Spirit powers, she’d attacked him and gone on the offensive with groups of people. But now she got along quite well with pretty much everyone, albeit with some fumbling from time to time.

In Miku’s case, the issue was that she could control people using this “voice.”

“It’s all riiight. I mean, human beings are my pawns and toys,” Miku told him, her voice carefree. “There’s nooothing for you to be concerned about, Shiori. I mean, you’re special, personally recognized by me, you knooow? We can do whatever we want with the common riffraff.”

“...Listen,” he said in a pained voice.

“...”

He clenched his hands into fists. This girl, Miku Izayoi, was definitely not a bad person. It was just that her values had gotten twisted because of her ability. It would take time. It would take work, too. But still...it was plenty possible that she would be able to coexist with people the way Tohka did.

To that end, he had to lock away her Spirit power, whatever it took.

Until she was standing in the same position as regular human beings, she would never see people as anything other than pawns and toys. And that...was unbearably sad.

“I’m sure now... I’m going to defeat you onstage... And I’ll make you truly connect with people.”

“Connect with people?” She arched an eyebrow. “I do all the tiime, though! Honestly, you say the strangest things.”

“You don’t have to understand right now. But just remember this. Humans aren’t such trivial creatures that you can casually treat them like pawns or playthings.”

“What are you talking about?” A sneer rose up on her face. “Humans aaare simple things. They can all be controlled one way or another. You shouldn’t pay them too much mind either, you know, Shioriiii? Their only real value is as pets.”

“Don’t underestimate humans! You might think everything will go the way you want, but if you’re not careful, they’ll pull the rug out from under you.”

“Oooh.” Miku narrowed her eyes, fascinated. “Well then, how about we put that to the teeest?”

“...? Meaning?” he asked, frowning suspiciously, but Miku didn’t respond.

“Hee-hee-hee! Well, though I am reluctant to part with you, how about we end our date here? The stage awaiiiiits. That is, if you can reach it, Shiori.” She pressed her fingers to her lips and then held them out toward Shido before turning and walking away.

“What was that about?” he said dubiously as he watched her go.

But a few hours later, he came to learn the true meaning of Miku’s words.

The time was twelve o’clock. Representatives from the various schools were beginning to gather in the greenroom backstage.

Although it was called a “room,” it was so large that there was still plenty of empty space even with all the performers inside. That was to be expected since the area that was normally a small hall behind the central stage had been opened up. The purpose couldn’t have been clearer as a drum set, keyboard, and other musical instruments had been set up inside.

Shido had gotten someone to take over for him at the café and headed for the greenroom himself. But only he and Tohka were there in the small hall. No matter how much time passed, Ai-Mai-Mii did not appear.

“Honestly. What are they doing?” he groaned as he crossed his arms and looked at the clock. It was already twenty minutes past the time they were supposed to meet. The first act would be starting soon.

And that wasn’t the only issue. Origami was also missing. He tried calling her any number of times but couldn’t connect. It was like her phone was turned off.

“Mm.” Tohka cocked her head to one side. “What happened to everyone?”

Shido shook his head to indicate that he didn’t know, either, before picking up the bedazzled phone Kotori had arranged for Shiori’s use and dialing Ai.

It rang a few times and then he heard Ai’s voice.

“Yeeeello? Shiori?”

“Yamabuki, where are you? Please hurry and come to the greenroom! Hazakura and Fujibakama also haven’t shown up yet. Do you know where they are?”

“Oh, Mai and Mii? They’re...”

“Right.”

“Here.”

He heard Mai and Mii’s voices on the other end of the line.

“What are you doing?! The performances are about to start!” Shido shouted.

“Hmm.” They sounded indifferent. *“Sorry, but, like, we decided not to play.”*

He gasped at the unexpected words. “Wh-why? We practiced so hard for this!”

“Huh? It’s just...Miss Miku told us not to.”

“...!”

Ai hung up, and he heard the empty dial tone in his ear.

“Shido, what did Ai say?” Tohka asked curiously.

“She said...” He managed to squeeze out a trembling voice. “They’re not... coming...”

“Mm! Wh-why not?!”

“That’s...” Shido pursed his lips together tightly.

Miku had most likely “asked” Ai-Mai-Mii.

Her “voice” was so powerful that even Shido had been confused and upset by it, and he had the protection of Spirits. If Miku whispered to them from up close, it would have been impossible for those three normal human girls to resist.

For a moment, he worried that Miku had sunk her fangs into Origami, too, but if that were the case, she could have easily picked up the phone and told him. Plus, that didn’t explain why she had been missing all day.

Either way, he was in a serious bind. Out of six band members, four—bass, keyboard, drums, and most importantly, vocals—were missing. All that was left was guitar and tambourine. There was no way they could put on a show like this.

“Ngh. What are we supposed to...?” Shido moaned and grabbed his head,

pushing his hair back and forth.

“Hee-hee-hee!”

He heard peals of laughter in front of him and looked up.

Miku was standing there, a cheerful smile on her face, having changed into her stage costume at some point. Perhaps she was going for a mermaid-princess sort of ensemble; the color of her dress was reminiscent of the ocean, with adorable accessories patterned after shells.

“What’s the maaaatter? You’re spoiling your pretty faaace, you know?”

“Miku! You...!” he shouted but somehow kept his anger in check.

Yelling at Miku wouldn’t change anything. Even if he complained to the powers that be that she was being underhanded, there was no way he could explain the “voice” imbued with Spirit power.

Miku likely knew that, too. Smiling happily, she flipped the hem of her skirt up. “I’m on soon. Please watch veeery carefully,” she said and walked away.

“Ngh! That girl...” He glared after her, teeth clenched in frustration. But he knew that it would take more than an angry look to turn this situation around.

“Wh-what’s going on?” Tohka asked nervously.

Shido pushed his hair back. “Let me think a second.” He put a hand to his chin as though deep in thought and walked over to the wall. He then whispered to the earpiece in his right ear. “Kotori. Kotori.”

“What’s up? You maybe want me to talk you down from nerves before you go out onstage?”

He heard Kotori’s lighthearted voice soon enough.

“No... It’s not that.” He briefly explained that Ai-Mai-Mii had fallen under Miku’s spell and that even Origami had dropped out right before the big show.

“Mm-hmm. That Miku... She definitely doesn’t play fair, huh?” Kotori replied with a sigh. He couldn’t see her from here, but he could easily imagine her shrugging in exasperation.

“There’s less than two hours until we go on. What are we going to do?”

"We're stuck here. We'll switch to the original lip-sync plan."

"Is that going to work?"

"I think it'll be marginally better than revealing your lovely singing voice onstage, at least."

"Well," he said. "There is that. But I didn't bring the CD."

"Don't worry. I've already got several people down there working as employees of the venue. They'll play the song when your time comes up, so you can rest easy."

"...Of course you do," Shido murmured with admiration. His little sister thought of everything. "But even still, we don't have enough people. I doubt Tohka can play anything else, either."

"Right. Hmm, it might not be possible to fill all those spots, but I should be able to make two happen. I'm sending in replacements. Meet up with them."

"Replacements? Hang on a second. No matter how good they might be, the moment people find out they're not from Raizen High School, we lose, you know?"

"I told you I'd take care of it, and yet you worry. You're getting a bit big for your britches there, Shido," she sneered, sniffing with annoyance.

Shido was at a total loss for words, although he had some choice gestures, but he decided to keep them to himself for now.

"She really doesn't think much of us, hmm? Well, if that's her game, I've got some ideas," Kotori said ominously.

"H-hey." Sweat beaded on Shido's forehead. "I thought we were going to steer clear of any sabotage?"

"I wasn't going to, but to be honest, I can't say for sure that we'll win now. She was the one who came at us first, so we'll just have to go ahead and do whatever we can, no-holds-barred."

"Hey, don't get too rough—," he started to tell Kotori when some hands reached out from behind and turned him around. He quickly realized that this was Tohka's doing. "Uh? Wh-what?"

“Mm. Miku’s performance is starting.”

“Miku’s...”

Now that she mentioned it, although the greenroom had been full of performers earlier, they were the only ones there now. Apparently, everyone else had gone to watch the show.

“Well, you’re there. Go see what the enemy’s got going on. It’ll be a little while still before the backup arrives. And you’re not going to come up with any good ideas just sitting there moaning,” Kotori told him through the earpiece.

“I guess not,” Shido agreed quietly and left the greenroom with Tohka.

They climbed the long, dark stairs and came out on a catwalk along the wall near the ceiling of the central stage. He saw the performers from the greenroom there, mixed in with the venue staff.

“Maybe around here?” he suggested.

“Mm. Special seats!” Tohka’s eyes shone innocently.

They needed to put on a show better than the one they were about to watch, but...did she really understand that?

Pop! Pop! Blue spotlights highlighted the center of the dimmed stage from several angles.

In the overlapping pools of light, Miku brought the microphone to her mouth and began to sing along with the quiet music.

He shuddered. He felt something like gooseflesh all over his body.

Then as the song gradually grew more upbeat, the spotlights increased in intensity, revealing the backup dancers waiting behind her. Miku’s dancing also became wilder, more intense. The tension in the venue increased in step with the changes in tempo and light.

“Wow,” he murmured, half-stunned.

Shido didn’t have any real interest in idols or any of that stuff, but this performance from Miku was so overwhelming that it very nearly stole his consciousness for a brief instant. The costumes, the dancing, the backup

dancers, the performance, even the audience cheering and waving glow sticks—all of it was creating the perfect space, as if everything was coming together in the exact right way.

He was starting to understand those fans who passed out at concerts. The passion of it. The sea of spectators before his eyes was literally being entranced by Miku's song.

But.

"...?!" Shido frowned just as this passion was reaching its zenith.

Most likely, Tohka and everyone else watching the central stage at that moment had the same look on their faces.

Just when Miku was about to begin the second verse, the lights went out, and the stage was blanketed by darkness.

And it wasn't just that. The music playing through the large speakers also shut off with the disappearance of the lights.

Confused whispers began to sprout from the audience.

Shido was the only one whose eyes shot open. A certain possibility had crossed his mind.

"Did they...?"

"Correct," Kotori replied before he could call out to her. *"I had my people fiddle with the venue equipment. Once the excitement dies down, I'll let the show continue. But if the crowd gets worked into a frenzy again, we'll do what we have to do."*

"..."

Shido scratched his cheek. She might have been his little sister, but she certainly had a devious edge to her. And indeed, this could very effectively cool the rising passion of the spectators. No matter how great the performance, it was pointless if no one could see it.

However.

"Huh?" Shido looked down again.

A hazy light had appeared at the center of the pitch-black stage.

And then as if to curb the audience's chatter, he heard a clear voice shouting.

"Shaddai El Chai!"

A hazy gleam shrouded Miku's body and formed a dress of light. The bodice traced the lines of her figure. The sleeves puffed out. A band of luminescence settled over her shoulders like a bolero. Ruffled layers of light shimmered along the hem of her skirt. Finally, a comb in the shape of a crescent moon nested in her hair.

This was the appearance that Shido had seen in the deserted arena.

"She can't be... Is she manifesting her Astral Dress here?!" Kotori was painfully loud in his ear.

But the shock in her voice was only natural. An Astral Dress. The absolute shield and sanctuary—the pinnacle of a Spirit's defense. Powerful armor woven with rich threads of Spirit power. Manifesting this meant nothing other than a declaration of war. He had only ever seen Spirits clad in their Astral Dress when an enemy appeared before them to do them harm.

But there was no reason the audience would understand what this outfit meant. They simply assumed the mystery unfolding before them was some kind of grand performance making use of cutting-edge technology. Their cheering grew that much louder.

"Here we goooo. The real show starts now!" Miku's voice reached every person there, even without a mic.

The audience went wild.

After that, it was Miku's world.

The speakers were dead. The lights were out. There was no mic, there were no amps. And yet her performance, her voice, her visage reached every corner of the venue.

There was no longer anyone in the room who thought the blackout before had been an accident. All of it had been part of the show. To make Miku stand out even more. To make her voice even louder.

Everything was swallowed up by Miku's presence.

She was perfectly, overwhelmingly an idol.

Miku threw her arms wide, and the song ended.

The audience erupted into their loudest cheer yet.

"Hee-hee! Thank you so much." Miku bowed neatly as she wiped away the sweat that had popped up on her forehead.

A deafening applause celebrated her as she left the stage.

"..."

Shido wordlessly put a hand to his forehead.

"Mm! That was amazing!" Tohka squealed happily.

The applause didn't stop even after Miku was gone from the stage. Shido and Tohka descended the stairs to return to the greenroom, accompanied by this thunderous clapping.

No one else was there. The other performers were probably planning to watch the rest of the acts. Or maybe they were just dazed from watching Miku's unbelievable performance.

"What's the matter, Shido? If you don't cheer up, we won't be able to win, you know?" Tohka cocked her head to one side.

"I guess not." He plastered a wan smile on his face.

But she was exactly right. However amazing their rival's performance, being overwhelmed by that wouldn't lead them to victory.

But he couldn't seem to shake this bad feeling, no matter how hard he tried to brush it away. They might have had an alternate plan for the song, but he didn't even know who these backup players coming to fill the hole left by Ai, Mai, and Mii were. He couldn't exactly—

The door to the greenroom slowly creaked open, and head still hanging, Shido heard familiar voices call to him.

"Keh-heh. You have quite the long face there, hmm? As if the dead cling to your feet."

“Disappointment. You lack spirit. You’ve lost the battle before it’s begun.”

“...?!” Shido jerked his head up and found two girls dressed in maid uniforms before him.

“Kaguya! Yuzuru!” Tohka shouted, her eyes wide in surprise.

“What are you doing here?” Shido asked, and they both crossed their arms smugly.

“Keh-heh. We heard from Kotori. It seems you’ve encountered some misfortune and run short of instrumentalists?”

“Assistance. If you have no objections, perhaps you could leave those roles to us?”

“Huh?” Shido said. “S-so the backup Kotori was talking about was...”

The sisters nodded in perfect sync.

“Aye. It is us. Keh-heh... We, the Yamai sisters, will lend you our strength. You should be honored.”

“Affirmation. Please leave this to us.”

Brimming with confidence, they struck incomprehensible poses.

“H-hang on a sec. I really appreciate the thought. But I mean, it’s easy to say you’re going to get up onstage, but there’s basically no time before we have to perform? We haven’t even practiced—”

Kaguya and Yuzuru looked at each other and then casually walked over to the instruments set up farther back in the room. Kaguya sat down in front of the drums, while Yuzuru picked up the bass.

In the next instant, they began to play without communicating with each other in any obvious way.

“Huh?!” he cried.

In a word, they were amazing. Emotional and powerful, staying perfectly in sync, with the drums carving out a steady rhythm to lead them and a melodic bass line plucked out with an incredible fluidity. Even a layperson’s ear could easily recognize the sheer power of their performance. They were so good that

he wouldn't have been surprised if someone from a record label were to step forward with a business card, had such a person been anywhere in the vicinity.

"Well... That's basically it."

"Breathing. Phew."

Having finished playing, the sisters exchanged a high five.

"H-how did the two of you get so good?" Shido asked, and Kaguya and Yuzuru looked at each other, the corners of their mouths turning up.

"Keh-heh... Do not underestimate us, human. We have already warred against each other with these instruments."

"Confirmation. Our seventy-second contest was in fact 'Drumming Up a Storm,' and our eighty-fourth contest was 'Best Bassist Battle.' The former was won by Kaguya, the latter by Yuzuru."

Shido suddenly remembered that the two sisters had been involved in contest after contest long, long before he met them. He'd heard that they grew tired of simply throwing punches at each other, but he never dreamed it had gone this far.

"Now. Shido. Because of your intervention, we are able to be together now."

"Oath. Please let Kaguya and Yuzuru help you now."

Miku was obviously a difficult opponent. And the audience was packed with her fans. Even with a perfect performance, they wouldn't be able to snatch victory from the idol so easily.

But.

Shido gulped as he took their hands and yanked his face up.

"...Yeah...!"



Giving orders in her head, she turned her gaze to the left, and small digits were projected onto her retinas. 14:55. Five minutes until mission start.

"Okay." Floating in the sky above Tengu Square, Jessica Bailey licked her lips. "It's about time. Everybody ready?"

““““Yes, *ma’am!*”””” she heard her team shout as one through her headset.

Jessica nodded, satisfied.

Deployed above Tengu Square were the ten members of Combat Squad Three, including herself, and twenty remote-operation combat dummy Bandersnatches, an extremely packed lineup.

Not to mention that Jessica herself wore the latest equipment from DEM Industries, technology not yet available to any country, including the 10.5 cm laser cannon Merry Lamb, the micro-missile pod Twinkle Star, and the molecular knife equipped with a laser edge, King Cole.

Her opponent might have been the AAA-rank Spirit Princess, but that Spirit would drop like a fly showered in this kind of concentrated firepower.

Jessica grinned and turned her gaze to the east block of Tengu Square spreading out below her.

In a few minutes, the target Tohka Yatogami would be standing on the central stage.

First, they would smash through the roof of that stage from this position, then the Bandersnatch vanguard would charge in and subdue the target. After that, they would begin firing on the captive Princess and capture her once she had sustained sufficient damage.

Naturally, Jessica did not enjoy the act of murder. It wasn’t that she felt absolutely no pangs of conscience at the fact that at least a few people would die in their assault.

But this slight pain was completely wiped out by the just cause of capturing a Spirit and the sweet sound of Westcott’s orders. For Jessica at that moment, the audience before the stage registered only as a group of potatoes or pumpkins.

A buzzer sounded in her headset. 15:00 hours. Mission start.

“Okay, it’s time. Adeptus Four through Twelve, get in position. Prepare to fire. Get the Bandersnatches ready, too. Outer One, twenty units, prepare to charge.”

““““Yes, ma’am.””””

The same response as before echoed in her ear, and the fully equipped wizards and Bandersnatches deployed as per Jessica’s orders.

“Now...let’s get this party started,” she said and turned her laser cannon toward Tengu Square’s central stage.



At the same time, fifteen thousand meters above Tengu Square, a shrill alarm was ringing on the bridge of the Ratatoskr airship *Fraxinus*.

“What is it?!” Seated in the captain’s chair, Kotori frowned at the unexpected blaring and turned her eyes to the monitor in front of her. But there didn’t appear to be anything unusual going on inside the venue. And she couldn’t see any significant changes in Miku’s mental parameters displayed on the side monitor.

“A-a radar signal! In the sky above Tengu Square, what look to be AST... twenty...thirty of them!”

“What did you say?” Kotori’s frown deepened at this report from her crew.

At the same time, the main monitor showing Shido and the others switched to a view of the sky. Ten wizards clad head to toe in extravagant equipment and twenty strange mechanical dolls were hovering in the air, looking down on Tengu Square’s central stage.

“These guys...” Kotori bit into the Chupa Chups she had been sucking on.

From the clearly non-Japanese personnel to the drone Bandersnatches—the same ones that had shown up on Shido’s school trip two months earlier—no matter which way she looked at it, this was no regular AST squad.

Even more notably, there was no spacequake alarm. It was a normal, peaceful day. So naturally, the nearby residents had not evacuated to a shelter. And practically everyone was at the Tenou Festival. In terms of common sense, the very appearance itself of this squad was unthinkable, given that they were all equipped with top secret CR units.

“DEM agents? But then why now of all the times...?” Kotori gasped as the

worst possible case flitted through her mind. “They can’t be...”

She checked the location once more. Tengu Square. The large convention center and current site of the Tenou Festival. They were directly above it. The space that held Tohka, Yoshino, the Yamai sisters, and Miku. Five Spirits all together in a single place. If DEM had somehow gotten hold of that information...

“Ngh...”

The idea would have normally been ridiculous. If DEM went into battle in a place there, it wasn’t hard to see that there would be an enormous number of deaths. She couldn’t imagine that the Japanese SDF would allow this, no matter how deep in DEM’s pocket they were.

But it was still a fact that she couldn’t come up with any other possible reason for the team to be there.

“Commander, what shall we do?”

“Well, we can’t exactly let them go about their business.”

That said, the measures they could take in this situation were limited. As long as Tengu Square was below them, they couldn’t attack with the big guns. And it would be difficult to make a clean sweep of that many of enemies with just Yggdrafolium.

“If you don’t mind, perhaps I could go?” Kannazuki said quietly, perhaps picking up on Kotori’s thinking.

“Doesn’t look like I’ve got a choice. I’m count—,” she started but was cut off by a new alarm on the bridge. “Now what?!”

“Another enormous signal has appeared above Tengu Square! Th-this is—,” a crew member cried out, baffled, as the monitor switched to display the new signal.

“Wha...? That can’t actually be...” Kotori swallowed hard.



“Wha—?! ”

Just as she was about to pull the trigger, a blinding light flashed ahead of her

in the sky while an alarm indicating contact with a heat source rang in her headset. In response, Jessica took urgent evasive action.

A powerful current of magic shot through the place where she had been only a second earlier. One of the Bandersnatches was caught up in it, and its upper body went flying.

Her face paled at this absurd power.

She'd had the Bandersnatches deploy their Territories around their entire bodies, although they were less precise than a wizard's. She may not have had enough time to shift them into defensive mode, but even still, it was normally impossible to shoot through that invisible wall.

"Wh-what was that?!"

"H-high-energy signal ahead!"

"A Spirit... No, it's not. It's a generative magic signal! Th-this... It can't be..."

And then *it* appeared from a gap in the clouds rolling out in front of them.

A strangely shaped weapon that would have been better described as a tank or even a fortress. The impossibly massive hunk of metal was equipped with two guns the size of trees. Inside was a laser blade of such high output, it threatened to evaporate anything it touched before it even got to slicing into it, and the rear was occupied by a rough weapons container that held countless arms.

And in the center, she could see a single wizard, almost like an emblem.

SDF AST Wizard, Master Sergeant Origami Tobiichi.

"Ah..." Jessica didn't stop shaking even after she confirmed it was a face she knew. "Absurd. Th-that can't be... White Licorice...?"

Jessica had seen this "monster" exactly once before in her home country.

How much battle power would be necessary for a single person to annihilate a Spirit?

White Licorice was the most powerful defective product ever conceived by the single-minded development division. Its design is based on abstract

numbers calculated by the overly theoretical intelligence division. After it left test users permanently disabled after a mere thirty minutes of operation, it became something like a work of art, with no other purpose except as a display of DEM power, technology, and humor.

But she had received the report about an extremely foolish wizard who had taken White Licorice out on her own when it was shipped to the SDF. As a result, not only had she not been able to take down the Spirit, but she also ended up getting arrested.

Jessica had laughed, naturally. Even the DEM wizards couldn't operate this piece of machinery properly. It was all fine and good for the little AST joker to have gotten carried away and moved it. But Jessica had assumed that was about all she would have been able to do before she reached her limit with the technology and passed out.

But if that was the case, then this entity floating before her eyes now...

"How...can you make White Licorice move?!" she shouted.

"..." Origami said nothing in reply but merely jerked her chin up.

The massive guns equipped on either side of the unit turned to aim squarely at Jessica and her squad.

"Ngh! New target! Prepare to attack!" Jessica called out in a shrill voice and turned the barrel of her gun on White Licorice.

But in the next instant, Origami swung the blade units in both hands, and daggers of light shot out to collide with the laser cannon Jessica had readied.

"Wha...?"

There was no impact. No sparks. She frowned. Something was very wrong.

She couldn't move her right hand. She looked down and saw a band of light tied around it, hindering her movement.

"This... What is this?!"

She issued orders in her mind to strengthen her Territory locally and try to clear away the band of light.

But Origami was already turning her magic guns on Jessica again. She hurried to fire her thrusters and escape. A heartbeat later, beams of light grazed Jessica's Territory.

"Wh-what are you doing?! Take her down! *Now!*" Jessica shouted, and the frozen squad members around her finally snapped out of their shocked state.

They deployed to surround Origami and shower her with a barrage of missile and laser cannons.

One of the small missiles slipped off on a downward trajectory, and there was a small explosion in the direction of Tengu Square. But they had been planning to rip a hole in the structure anyway, so no one paid it any mind. They simply fired with everything they had to try and take down the monster before them.

The many explosions blanketed White Licorice and Origami at its center in white smoke.

"Hold your fire!" Jessica called out after a full two minutes of concentrated attacks. Her squad and the Bandersnatches all stopped firing.

Their opponent might have been White Licorice, but there was no way even this monster would be unscathed after a coordinated attack from every direction with the very latest in anti-Spirit weaponry.

However.

"Wha...?!"

"Th-this is..."

Jessica frowned at the baffled cries from her squad and put a hand to her headset. "What's going on?!"

"A Territory that's not mine's been formed around me... I can't move!"

"What...?"

The cloud of smoke wafting through the sky in front of her swirled around and dispersed. And Origami appeared from inside, rear weapons container fully deployed, some hundreds of anti-Spirit warheads peeking out.

"...! Retreat!" Jessica shouted, but it was too late.

The countless missiles in the weapons container launched simultaneously and shot toward the immobile wizards and the Bandersnatches.

With the white vapor trailing out from her warheads, their attacker almost resembled licorice flowers blooming.

“Nghah?!”

“C-Captain!!”

The screams of her subordinates came to her through the transmitters in their headsets. Shot down, several members of her squad and a number of Bandersnatches plummeted to the ground, smoke streaming from their equipment.

She glanced at the sensor displayed on her retinas. Their life signs hadn't disappeared, but they wouldn't be returning to the fight.

The attack had dropped nearly half of her squad. Jessica clicked her tongue loudly and gave an order in her mind to open a new line of communication.

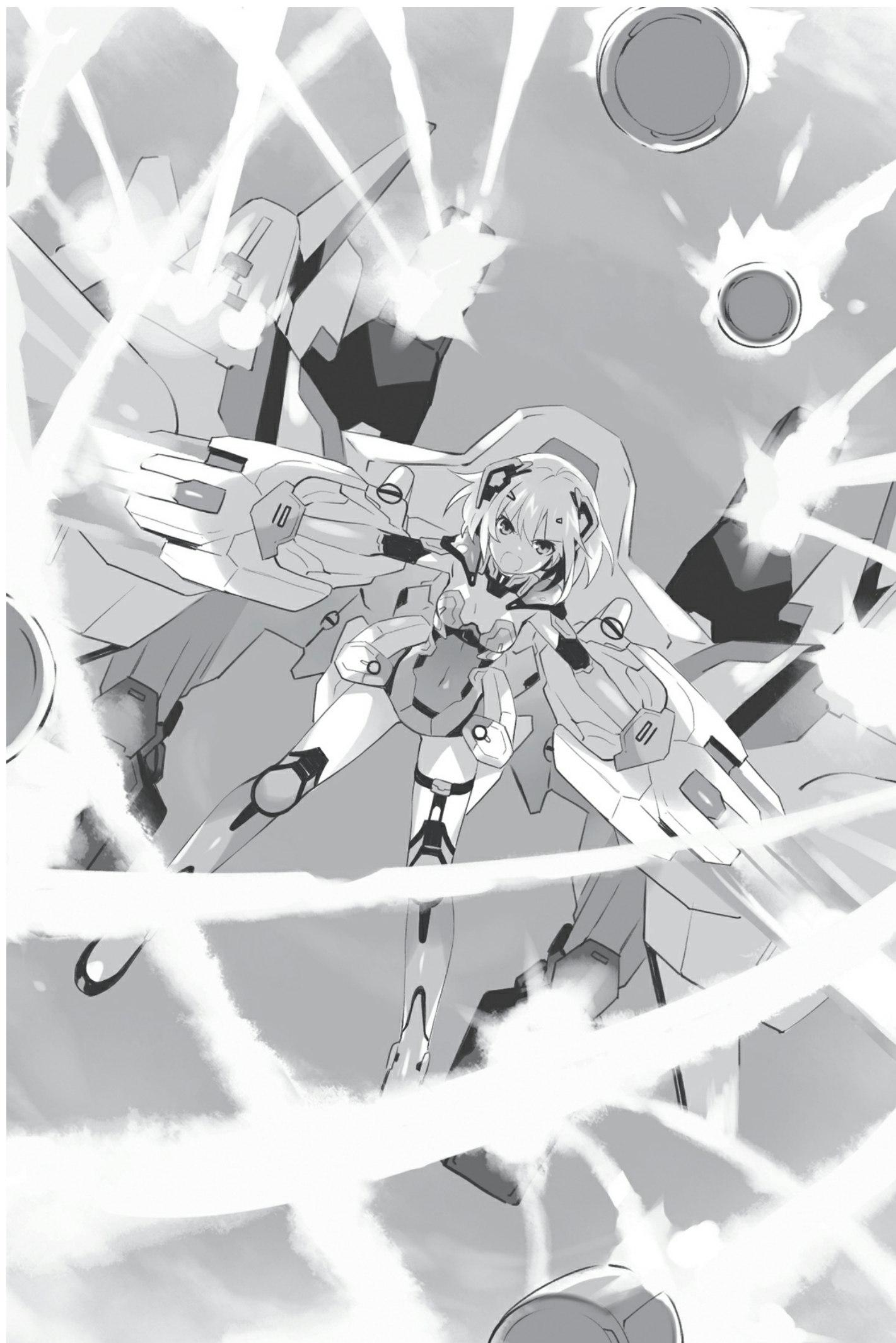
“We've got an emergency! Requesting backup!”

The delayed response she received made her gape in disbelief.

“Oh, this line is not currently in use. Following orders from a superior officer, Ryouko Kusakabe is not at the scene of the battle. Please try your transmission again later.”

What? It was clearly Ryouko speaking.

“Why are you fooling around at a time like this?! Your subordinate's out of control up here!”



But Ryouko did not engage with Jessica. She simply repeated the message.

“So this is your doing. Well, just remember this. I *will* be bringing this up with the brass,” Jessica said bitterly before closing the line with Ryouko and opening yet another channel.

It was a card she didn’t really want to play, but she had no choice. It was preferable to the mission ending in failure.

“This is Adeptus Three! We have an emergency! I’m requesting urgent backup!” Jessica shouted in a shrill voice, dodging an incoming missile.

The Japanese headquarters of DEM Industries. The place where Isaac Westcott was at that very moment.



A cheer rose up from the audience, and his heart started pounding like a drum.

“Mmngh.”

He gulped, attempting to calm the nerves in his dry throat. And then he took a deep breath. But his heart showed no signs of quieting. That was only to be expected, however. Because Shido was at the moment waiting in the wings for his turn onstage.

All the band members were wearing the same maid uniforms as before. They had actually gotten special costumes for their performance, but because Ai-Mai-Mii had gone AWOL with theirs, they didn’t have outfits for Kaguya and Yuzuru. But then he realized they all had the same thing on anyway.

“Well, as far as costumes go...it’s a costume,” he said. “I guess?”

The school ahead of them finished their jazz performance and bowed. He heard clapping from the audience once more.

He glanced behind him. Tohka, Kaguya, and Yuzuru didn’t look the least bit nervous.

“Look, Kaguya, Yuzuru. I was entrusted with *this*!”

“Ho-ho! So your instrument is a ring that sings with the clarity of true

integrity, Tohka?”

“Understood. I think it suits you very well. That is not sarcasm.”

The performers walked past them toward the backstage area, and the stage crew were right there, ready to start setting up the drum kit. Shido was slightly envious of the Spirits’ nerves of steel.

And then he heard something like an alarm through the earpiece.

“Kotori? Did something happen?” Shido asked.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Kotori replied, *“It’s nothing. Focus on your performance.”*

“I—I know. I will.”

While he had the Ratatoskr earpiece in his right ear, his left held an ear monitor to hear the music. This was an essential bit of equipment to avoid losing the sound in the cheers of the audience, but he felt a little deaf because both of his ears were plugged.

“I wonder about that. You seem pretty nervous.”

“Well...yeah, of course. I mean, I’m not doing this because I love performing.”

“Shall I tell you a way to ease those nerves?”

“What is it?”

“Write the character for girl on your palm three times and then eat it up.”

“You mean the character for *person*, right?!”

“Nope. This way’s better for you, isn’t it?”

“Don’t say things that’ll give people the wrong idea.”

“Oh dear, you’re unhappy? Well then, the character for little sister should also work.”

“Huh? Why?”

“...Hmph. Just forget it.” For some reason, Kotori snorted with dissatisfaction.

The crew in the wings signaled Shido and the girls. It appeared that they were finished getting everything ready onstage.

"Next up! A band performance from Raizen Municipal High School," came an announcement over the speakers out front.

He could hear people clapping in response.

"O-okay. Here we go," he said and took a step forward. Tohka, Kaguya, and Yuzuru followed him.

Just as they were about to step out from the dim wings and into the spotlight onstage, Shido gasped.

"...!"

He was overcome by a feeling that was different from when he'd watched Miku's performance. And when he'd been looking out at the audience from the wings.

The stage was the only source of light in the dark venue. The seats were packed. All eyes were on him. Every detail melted together and settled on Shido's limbs like a new form of gravity.

"I get it now. This is...incredible." He licked his lips. They tasted a little salty.

They had rehearsed a million times. He'd also been made to sing in front of a group from Ratatoskr in the name of getting him used to performing for people.

But this was different. This was obviously very different.

The atmosphere of the real thing. The tension of the real thing. This intimidating air stabbed at him mercilessly.

However.

"Ha-ha!" He laughed a little.

It was true that he had never stood on such a large stage in his life. But Shido already knew this feeling, even though he shouldn't have.

Tohka. Yoshino. Kurumi. Kotori. The Yamai sisters.

The feeling when he faced a Spirit.

The ultimate date where just one bad choice could cost him his life. Apparently, the many iterations of this harrowing experience had toughened him up.

Shido walked out to the microphone stand in the center of the stage, his guitar hanging across him, and then glanced around. At Tohka, on his right. Yuzuru, on his left. Kaguya, behind him. They were all in position, and they nodded back at his questioning gaze.

Microphones also stood before Tohka and Yuzuru. There were parts of the song like the chorus where they sang together, so they were basically there to make their deception look convincing.

They did a quick sound check before exchanging glances again and nodding at one another.

“Keh-heh... Well then, shall we play? A melody of death, an invitation to the underworld itself!” Kaguya said ominously as she clacked her sticks together.

Shido began to strum his guitar. At the same time, he heard Yuzuru’s masterful bass and the shaking of Tohka’s tambourine.

A cheerful performance. The singing would be done by a pro, but the accompaniment belonged to Shido and the Spirits.

Once he started playing, the rest was just like he’d practiced. His pick ran nimbly across the strings, practically dancing, and the song came out just the way he wanted it to. The tension filling his body gradually changed to exultation.

But then he frowned.

“Huh?”

They’d finished the opening bars, but there was no singing cutting in.

He suddenly heard Kotori’s panicked voice through his earpiece.

“Shido! Emergency! The transmission lines at Tengu Square were partially destroyed in an attack. We can’t use the soundtrack we had ready!”

“Wha—? So, so then what—?”

“You’ll just have to sing live! I’ll turn the mics on now!”

“Huh...? I—I can’t just—”

Feedback screeched from the microphone, and Shido clamped his mouth

shut. If he kept talking to Kotori, the mic would pick up his voice and broadcast it throughout the venue.

Meanwhile, the band kept on playing.

Fortunately, after so much practice, Shido's fingers kept moving even while his head was in chaos, but that chaos kept him from being able to remember a single lyric.

The audience had been bobbing along to the rhythm of the song, but now some of them stopped, clearly noticing that something was off. People near the front were cocking their heads to one side in apparent confusion.

"Ah..."

Nerves unlike anything he'd felt before strangled him. His teeth chattered. His legs shook. His vision gradually blurred.

What if he flamed out spectacularly? He himself was aware that this was a dangerous thought. A sudden accident, no getting the song back on track, but a total disaster of some kind to turn eyes away from this performance. Negative images ate into his mind.

It was no different from a little kid who hadn't finished their homework praying for a meteor to fall on the school. A destructive thought with no productivity, no future, a desperate desire for a chance to turn it around.

This isn't good. No good at all, he told himself. If he stopped playing now, he wouldn't be able to defeat Miku.

But that thought made him panic even more, further clouding his memory. The song wouldn't come out. His voice wouldn't come out. His breathing steadily grew more and more shallow.

"Unh. Ah..."

And then.

"_____!"

From somewhere.

He could hear singing.

“Huh?”

For a second, he thought that the lines had been restored and the recording had started to play. But that wasn't it. This voice was totally different from what he remembered being on the CD. In fact, this voice was...

Without moving his head at all, he looked around frantically.

“Toh...ka?” he said, too quietly for the mic to pick up.

Yes. Standing to his right, Tohka was rhythmically shaking her tambourine and singing away.

And the surprising part was her voice...

“Holy...smokes.”

It was so good that he got lost in it for a moment.

Actually, *good* might not have been the most fitting word. Was it faithful to the melody...? Not one bit. She was singing with her own arrangement. And sometimes, she got the lyrics wrong.

He didn't know how to describe it. Her voice strangely lifted the hearts of those hearing it.

“ _____ ”

Paying careful attention to the look on her face, Shido opened his eyes wide in surprise. He didn't see any excitement about the big performance, or hostility toward Miku, or an obligation to take over an important job.

She just looked like she was having a blast. She was having fun with the music. She looked like she was so happy, she could burst at the fact that she got to play together with Shido, Kaguya, and Yuzuru.

No. Shido's shook his head slightly.

During their practices, he'd been completely focused on the pressure weighing him down, hyperaware that he needed to beat Miku, and he hadn't paid much attention to anything else. But now that he had a chance to think about it, Tohka had looked exactly like this when they practiced, too.

Most likely, she hadn't even learned the lyrics on purpose. She'd just sort of

memorized them for fun when Shido or Origami was singing.

“Ha-ha-ha!” He started to laugh.

The pressure that had been weighing his limbs down disappeared as if it had never been there at all. His fingers moved so lightly, it surprised him.

Shido began to pick at the strings more confidently. It wasn’t that he wanted to show off the “cool-looking technique” he’d figured out in his junior high days and he hadn’t suddenly awakened to his inner rock and roll.

He simply felt that Tohka’s singing deserved more than some by-the-book guitar.

His playing was all over the place. Which only stood to reason. If he could have churned out a perfect arrangement of a song on the fly, he would have dropped out of school immediately to make it big in the music industry.

But right now...

...things were different.

Because right now, he wasn’t alone!

Immediately picking up on Shido’s sudden surge of determination, Kaguya and Yuzuru perfectly matched his wild performance. And perhaps sensing this change in the tune, Tohka glanced over at them, beaming.

“...!”

Instantly, his heart leaped up in his throat. It wasn’t the unpleasant nerves of earlier. This was different. But now was not the time to be wasting brain capacity on that.

The first verse ended, and they were back to the instrumental bit.

A secret desire popped into Shido’s head.

It was simple, really.

I want to sing with Tohka.

I want to sing together with Tohka on this stage!

Although Shido wasn’t fatally tone-deaf, he was still far from a master

musician. At the very least, Kotori had quickly rejected the idea of him as the lead singer because it was unlikely to lead them to victory over Miku.

But even so, there was no fighting this abrupt new desire in his heart.

He opened his mouth at the start of the second verse to add his voice to Tohka's.

“...!”

She looked over at Shido in surprise, still singing.

But her shock only lasted a moment. Then she began to sing even louder, looking much, much happier than she had before.

He sang his heart out so as not to be left in the dust by Tohka. The lyrics that previously wouldn't come out now spilled from his lips without a second thought.

Shido completely forgot about the contest with Miku. One simple feeling filled his heart.

This is fun!

This is fun!

This is fun!!

Before he knew it, the song was over.

He gasped and looked up. He was drenched in sweat, like he'd jumped into a pool or something.

“Shido!” Tohka ran over to him with a dizzying smile. “High five!”

“R-right!” He raised his hand as instructed, and Tohka slapped her own against it.

Instantly.

He heard applause and cheers so thunderously loud that his two earpieces didn't muffle the sound in the slightest.

Final Chapter

A Blue Flash

“Six wizards...five dolls,” Origami said quietly, counting the signals displayed on the sensor projected onto her retinas.

Eleven targets left. Which meant that she had dropped two-thirds of the original number that were here.

“...”

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the corpses of the mechanical dolls she had just attacked plunging to the ground. She exhaled.

Massive arms on slender frames. Legs that bent backward, as opposed to forward-facing human knees. A smooth head that resembled a full-face helmet. And the CR units affixed to those bodies in key locations.

She had seen these machines modeled after people before.

Two months ago, when they went to Arubi Island for their school trip, Origami had tried to go after Shido when he went out in the middle of a storm, and the same model of robot had blocked her way forward.

She was surprised when these dolls—Bandersnatches or whatever they were called—had shown up with the DEM wizards, but now they were a piece in a puzzle that was starting to make sense to Origami.

Mechanical dolls that used Realizers. Equipment that supposedly couldn't be activated unless connected to a human brain. Back on the school trip, she'd wondered if they belonged to DEM Industries, given how far beyond the normal technological standards this was, and now she was certain of it.

She had learned the reason why these dolls appeared on her school trip and also why there had been zero investigation into countermeasures when she reported their existence to her superiors.

“I won’t let you lay a finger on Shido.” She clenched her teeth and issued orders in her mind.

She set her sights on the wizards and dolls in her field of view and deployed limited point Territories. The precision was low because she had deployed a line of more than ten of them, but even so, they would stop her enemies for a moment or two. She opened up numbers five through eight in the container and launched missiles at her targets.

The wizards all escaped their restraints and just narrowly dodged these, but one Bandersnatch took a hit in the head and another was struck in the torso, and both dropped out of the sky.

“Dammit! Dammit! What the hell are you?!”

Naturally, Jessica and the other DEM wizards still in the air were opening up with whatever weapons they had at Origami.

But Origami wasn’t the sort to simply sit there and let it happen. She fired the high-output thrusters equipped below the weapon container and moved the enormous bulk of White Licorice through the air at a seemingly impossible speed.

Attacks she couldn’t evade, she defended against by either deploying a point Territory on the anticipated trajectory or bestowing defensive capability for just a moment to the Territory in the location where the missile hit.

As flesh and blood, Origami hadn’t been able to do anything up against the Bandersnatches. But with White Licorice, it was a different story.

Drones that used Realizers. This was indeed amazing and menacing, but in her assessment, they didn’t begin to compare to the human wizards in terms of simple battle power. They were an order of magnitude worse than the wizards at fine operation and Realizer control. And now that Origami boasted the firepower of an entire squad all on her own, they were great targets.

“Shoot! Go!”

The wizards pressed the attack. Enough warheads to fill her field of view closed in on her.

Even Origami in her current state wouldn't be able to completely evade this many missiles. She shifted the Territory enveloping her body to defensive mode. It wasn't a huge amount of force. She could take several hits and still—

“...?!”

The world shuddered abruptly.

Her Territory was momentarily disturbed, and several of the warheads ripped into White Licorice's armor. The incredible impact rocked Origami, and a slight nausea came over her.

“Ngh!”

She scowled slightly, fired her thrusters, and moved away from the spot for the moment. She stopped when she had a view of all the remaining wizards and got her breathing under control.

“Hmm?” Watching Origami suspiciously, Jessica raised her eyebrows. “Oh. Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha! I get it. Is that it?”

Even though her face had been drained of color until that very moment, Jessica suddenly began to laugh cheerfully and pointed at Origami.

“Looks like your time's just about up. Little miss master wizard!”

Origami narrowed her eyes. And then she felt something wet by her mouth. Without taking her eyes off the enemy, she wiped it with a hand. And discovered blood. Apparently, her nose was bleeding.

For an instant, she thought it was because of the previous impact. But that wasn't it.

“This is...,” Origami groaned as excruciating pain exploded in her head and she was assaulted by dizziness.

This was not the first time she'd experienced this. It was the activation limit.

“Pfft... Ha-ha-ha! And you were so close. You really were. But now that you're at your limit, this is the end for you.”

Several silhouettes appeared in the sky behind Jessica. Bandersnatches.

There wasn't a single mark on them. These were apparently not the machines

Origami had dispatched earlier, but reinforcements sent from somewhere.

Perhaps having confirmed the arrival of backup, Jessica smiled victoriously.

“Heh-heh. The tables have turned. You really did a number on me, so don’t think you’re getting off scot-free.”

“Ngh.” Origami gritted her teeth, her head splitting with incredible pain and her vision steadily growing hazier.



The first day’s performers were lined up on Tengu Square’s central stage. They were all holding their breath, looking nervous as they waited for the MC to speak.

And this only made sense. The performances were done, the votes had been cast, and they were about to announce the top schools.

“Third place in the performance division—Senjo University High School!”

The room erupted in cheers and applause, and the Senjo performers onstage cried out with joy.

They were the jazz group that had been on before Shido and the Spirits. Shido clapped his hands together politely.

They had to have played pretty well to be voted into third place. Shido’s own recollection of their performance, however, was pretty hazy. Although he’d been listening to them extremely close-up, he’d been so nervous for his own performance that hardly any of their playing actually made it into his ears.

“Second place!” the announcer shouted as if to curb the cheering.

The audience was eager to hear this result. All their yelling and clapping and whistling quickly gave way to silence.

There was no doubt that there were only two names in everyone’s heads at the moment: Rindoji, eternal champion, with an overwhelming performance from the actual idol Miku Izayoi. And Raizen High School, with their last-second miracle.

These two performances had obviously been special. That was clear for all to see. Maybe it was because of some aura the Spirits had.

The MC paused, seeming slightly nervous, and then took a breath before continuing:

“Falling just short of the win! Raizen High School!”

“...!”

The moment he heard this name over the loudspeaker and saw the results on the large monitor onstage, he felt time stop.

A beat later, deafened by cheering and applause, he opened his eyes and caught sight of Miku’s face twisted up in a grin.

And of course she was grinning. Because the fact that Shido and his band had come in second meant...

“And taking the crown of first place in the performance division!” the MC called, and a spotlight flickered to life, centered directly on Miku. *“They really are powerful! The queens, Rindoji Girls’ Academy!”*

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” The earsplitting cheer shook the venue itself.

“Sh-Shido...,” Tohka said, eyes on the ranking displayed on the monitor. Her face was colored with anxiety, and her fingers shook slightly. “W-we lost...? I-it’s because I sang...”

“N-no! It’s not your fault, Tohka!” Shido protested, but Tohka still looked like she was about to burst into tears. It was almost like she couldn’t even hear what he was saying.

“Hee-hee! Hee-hee-he-hee...”

He heard Miku chuckling behind them.

“Miku,” he said.

“Seeee? It went just like I said, didn’t it? This is what haaaappens when you count too much on those friends of yours.”

Treating the still-speaking MC like background noise, Miku walked over to them, smirking. She stopped in front of Shido and nudged his chin up.

“Either way, a promise is a proooomise. You and the five Spirits whose power you sealed are all mine as of todaaay, Shiori.”

“Ngh.”

“Hee-hee-hee. Please don’t look so scared. I’ll spoil you lottts—”

“And so!” the MC called out in an even louder voice, drowning Miku out. “First place overall on this first day of the Tenou Festival goes toooooo...Raizen High School!”

“...What?” Miku widened her eyes in blank amazement.

Shido and Tohka did the same. He honestly had barely been listening to the MC.

“This is a surprise. In the performance division, Rindoji did take top place with an unbeatable and overwhelming performance. But it seems they just weren’t up to snuff this year in the exhibit and booth divisions.”

“What...? What...?” Miku shook her head from side to side, as if she couldn’t understand what was happening.

“And it looks like Raizen scrambled past to take the top seat after getting second place in the performance division. They received an amazing number of votes for their maid café! There was some criticism during the judging, but the passionate push of the staff there gave them the edge they needed!”

“Ha-ha...” Shido laughed helplessly. He never dreamed that Ai-Mai-Mii would end up saving the day.

“Shido!” Tohka flew toward him, an entirely different expression on her face.

Half a second later, Kaguya and Yuzuru also threw their arms around his neck from either side, and it turned into a whole thing.

“Kah-kah-kah! Naturally! Once we step in, victory is assured!”

“Conformity. That is correct. No one can beat Yuzuru and Kaguya.”

Being mobbed like this, Shido finally felt the reality of it spread out in his heart.

We won.

We won.

Against Miku. Against Rindoji.

"All right. We'll now proceed with the award ceremony. Representatives, please step forward," the MC urged the three groups of performers.

But.

"...Please be serious. What is this—?"

He heard Miku's trembling voice from behind.

"This is strange...? There's no waaay I can lose..."

"Uhhh, Izayoi?"

Miku ignored the MC and staggered forward. "I'm...Miku Izayoi, you know? I'm... I'm..."

"...Miku," Shido called softly. He put a hand to his chest to calm his pounding heart and walked toward her.

But Miku jumped away.

"Stop... I—I won... I clearly won! They... Those girls didn't do anything right!"

"You can't say that," he told her. "The students at Rindoji, they did their best."

"I—I don't care! I don't care about that! I... I won..."

"Oh..." Shido scratched his cheek a little awkwardly.

And then well aware that he would sound like a total cornball, he said, "It's... that whole...counting on your friends thing, y'know?"

"...Fr-friends...", Miku murmured with disgust and scowled.

"Yeah." Shido nodded exaggeratedly. "It's true that we couldn't compare to you when it came to singing. But the students who worked on the maid café and our other exhibits made up for the areas we lacked in."

"Wh-what...is that? Please be serious... Friends...? Ha-ha! Mere humans couldn't possibly be..."

"But mere humans built the bonds that were able to beat you."

Miku was speechless.

"Hey," he said. "Humans are...pretty interesting. So, Miku, you—"

“...lesson.”

“Huh?” he asked, unable to catch what she said.

“Friends? Bonds...? I will teach you a lesson. All that is meaningless before me!”

Miku’s hanging head shot upright, and she spread out her hands.

“Gabriel!”

No sooner had she shrieked the name so loudly that her voice echoed through the entire venue than waves were radiating outward from the space at her feet.

A massive block of metal rose up from the rippling concentric waves onstage. It had a curious form, with several long, slender silver cylinders extending from the thick torso. It reminded him of an enormous church pipe organ.

The audience seemed to realize that this was not some kind of performance, and the crowd was soon awash with worried whispers.

But Miku ignored them and swept her right hand out from left to right. A belt of light appeared there, a hazy glow following the trajectory of her hand.

No. Maybe it was a mistake to call it a belt. The light curved to wrap itself around her body, and several faint lines ran across it, turning it into something like a piano or organ keyboard.

He didn’t know her purpose in calling this Angel. But he could easily imagine that it would be a destructive situation for the human beings in the venue.

“Miku! Stop! Listen to me! I—”

“Croon, chant, sing! Gabrieeeeeel!”

But Miku wasn’t interested in listening to him. She spread out her hands and hit the keyboard of light surrounding her.

Vwwwwwwwmmmmm!!

The massive Angel in front of Miku began to emit a terrifying sound. It reverberated within the silver cylinders that were arranged at regular intervals before emitting in every direction. The air in the room snapped and shuddered,

and he felt the vibration from the noise in his entire body.

“Unh...! Gah...?!” Unconsciously, he covered his ears.

But this wasn't enough to stop the tremendously loud sound. It traveled through the air and rattled Shido's eardrums as it sank into him, eating into the core of his mind. Yes. It felt like Miku's "please" made a thousand times stronger.

A minute or so later, after ripping through the venue like a storm, Gabriel's sound gradually softened before disappearing completely.

“...! ...!”

He nervously pulled his hands away from his ears. They were still ringing a little, but he couldn't see any other change in his body.

But he quickly noticed something weird.

Even after the ringing stopped, he couldn't hear any sound. This many people were crammed into the venue, and yet there wasn't a single whisper or footfall.

Maybe this attack had stolen his hearing? This worry passed through Shido's brain. Given that the Angel a Spirit possessed was a “miracle made manifest,” it wouldn't be a surprise if it could do at least that much.

“Wha...?”

But that wasn't the case. Shido could very clearly hear his own cry of confusion as he looked around. And gasped.

There were still thousands of spectators in the venue. And they were, without exception, standing perfectly straight and looking up at the stage, not moving a muscle.

“Wh-what is this...?”

A well-trained army unit wasn't this precise. He felt like he had stumbled into a mannequin factory.

“Miku, you didn't actually...!” he shouted in disbelief as he turned his gaze on Miku.

“Hee... Hee-hee... Hee... Friends...was it? How beautifuuuul. How

woooonderful.” Miku laughed loudly, like a broken doll. “To think they were so fragile.”

She began to play her keyboard of light once more. Like a call and response, the spectators all dropped into an at-ease stance.

“Hee-hee! Whee-hee-hee! Now aaaaall your friends belong to me, you know? Say, Shiori, those booonds you were talking about turn into nothing with just a tap of my fingers, hmm?”

“Ngh...”

A tortured look appeared on Shido’s face, and Miku laughed happily and pressed her fingers to the keyboard.

The performers on the stage swept behind Shido to grab both of his arms and hold him firmly in place.

“Wha...? Hey! Let go!” He struggled, but his captors didn’t so much as flinch.

Watching this with satisfaction, Miku parted the keyboard of light and strolled over to him.

“Our contest doesn’t matter anymore. Our promise doesn’t matter. Because anything in this world that does not happen in accordance with my wishes cannot be allowed to exiiiiist.” With a bewitching smile, Miku ran a finger along his body.



“Eee...?!” he shrieked.

“Hee-hee! Shiori, you, your Spirits, everyone, you all are mine—”

And then.

Miku froze when she reached his lower body.

“...Hmm? HmMMM?” She cocked her head to one side, took a step back, and clenched the hand she’d been touching him with. “That sensation... N-no, it can’t be...”

Miku furrowed her brow doubtfully and snapped her fingers again. “P-please check!”

Two of the students onstage appeared on either side of Shido and, with no expression on their faces, yanked up the skirt of his maid costume to reveal the unflattering shorts he was wearing underneath.

“Whoa?! Wh-what are you...?!” Shido shouted, his face turning red, but that was not the end of it. Another girl stepped forward and yanked the shorts down along with his underpants.

“Aaaaaaah!” He screamed and kicked and flailed and finally freed himself from the students holding him back. He hurriedly pulled up his underpants and shorts and returned his skirt to its proper position.

But it didn’t stop there.

Miku had run away from him at some point, and now she looked as though she were seeing the end of the world as she turned a shaking finger and shocked eyes on Shido.

“Shi—! Sh-Sh-Sh-Shiori... You... You’re...a-a-a-a-a-a...man...!”

Her eyes wavered, and her face lost all color.

“M-Miku! Calm down! I—,” he called, trying to bring her down somehow, but it was in vain.

“Eeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!” she shrieked, and the floating keyboard of light danced back over to her.

Miku began to play once more.

But Shido didn't have the luxury of being lost in this melody.

The moment she began to play, the other performers onstage, the MC, and the audience members all began to run toward him as one.

"Gaaaaaaaaah?!"

"Now, repent! How dare you deceive me!" Miku's voice rang out above the roar of footfalls.

"Ngh...!" Shido frowned and clenched his hands into fists. He had nowhere to run. He would without a doubt be swallowed up by this wave of spectators in a few seconds.

Now that it had come to this, there was only one path left open to him.

"Dammit!" He braced himself and ran straight ahead—toward Miku.

He would hit Miku, the person controlling everyone. The odds of this working were extremely slim, but there was no other option left.

However.

"Wha...?!" he cried out in confusion. Right before he could close in on Miku, the temperature around him dropped abruptly, and a wall of ice appeared between him and Miku, blocking his way forward.

"What...? No way!" His eyes flew open in shock, and then he heard familiar voices from behind.

"Mmm. Heh-heh. Pretty dangerous. You can't go doing that, hmm?"

"I... I will protect...Miss Miku."

He turned back and found a large rabbit puppet with a throaty voice and Yoshino plastered to its back in a partially unlocked Astral Dress.

"Yoshino?! Why would you—?" he started and then clamped his mouth shut. Yoshino had just said "Miss Miku." That was what Miku's fans and the Rindoji students called her. And Ai, who had been "asked" by Miku.

"No way. Not you..." A terrible realization dawned on him.

In the next moment, an explosive gust of wind blew through the venue.

“Ngh...!” The powerful wind knocked him onto his backside, and he heard a bold laugh from above.

“Keh-heh... Fool. The fact that you would attempt to deny Miss Miku shows that you lack wisdom.”

“Affirmation. A thoughtless and reckless act. I will not allow you to lay a finger on Miss Miku.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru danced down lightly and stopped in the air above Miku. Both were adorned in the bondage gear that was the limited manifestation of their Astral Dress, and Kaguya held her enormous lance, while Yuzuru had her pendulum weapon.

“E-even you...?!” Shido groaned in despair. It seemed that the sound that Miku’s Angel produced had also placed the sealed Spirits under her control.

“Hee... Hee-hee. Ha-ha-ha-ha...! Whaaat is this?”

He heard Miku laughing.

“You’re just awful, aren’t yooooou, Shiori? To think there were this many Spirits here! And each of them is just my type! Aaah... This is good. This is amaaaazing!”

She squirmed around as if she could hardly stand it.

“Now... I at laaast have no use for you anymore. I’m going to get rid of you and spend my time playing with the Spirits. Please do it!”

Miku pounded on her keyboard of light, and Yoshino and the Yamai sisters turned eyes full of animosity on Shido.

And then the situation got even worse.

Tohka stepped forward from the group of performers, dressed in the same limited Astral Dress as Yoshino and the sisters.

“N-no way, not you, too, Tohka... You’re kidding me, right? Stop—”

But no one was listening to him. Yoshino released a torrent of cold air, and the Yamai sisters unleashed a mass of wind pressure at Shido.

“Unh! Gaaaaaaah?!” He curled inward, bracing for impact.

But what came over him next was not a painfully icy chill or a crushing wind but a soft and curious floating sensation.

“Huh?” he yelped idiotically and discovered that his view had shifted from the stage to the catwalk that ran along the ceiling.

“Shido, what is even happening...?”

He heard a familiar voice. He looked over and saw Tohka in her limited Astral Dress. Apparently, just before he’d been swallowed up by the wave of spectators, she had leaped up to the rafters with him in her arms.

Which meant that Shido was currently being held lightly in Tohka’s arms. In layman’s parlance, he was being carried “bridal style.”

“...”

The fact was she had saved him, but his face stiffened with a complicated mix of emotion.

But this was no time to worry about that. Shido got to his feet on the catwalk and said, “Thanks, you saved me. But, Tohka... Why are you totally fine? Yoshino and them are all being controlled by Miku, but you’re...”

“...Mm?” Tohka cocked her head curiously to one side before clapping her hands together like she’d just remembered something. “Oh!”

She put her hands up to her ears and popped out her ear monitors. She’d apparently had them in ever since their performance.

“You...Those are...”

“Mm-hmm.” She nodded. “I felt off-balance with just one, like I wouldn’t get a feel for the rhythm.”

“...”

For a brief instant, he wondered if the tambourine really required that much focus, but he left that unsaid.

“So what’s happening, Shido?”

“Miku’s probably controlling everyone.”

Tohka looked down at Miku on the stage.

Miku glared up at Shido after his escape to the catwalk and changed the movement of her fingers on the keyboard, shifting the nature of the sound coming from Gabriel.

The spectators all changed direction and marched into the wings. Most likely, they were going to come up the stairs in the back to the catwalk. Some of them, for whatever reason, were trying to climb the walls to get to Shido.

But the real issue was Yoshino and the Yamai sisters. They still had sharp eyes turned on Shido and Tohka as they guarded Miku. As long as they were here, he wouldn't be able to get close to the idol.

"Ngh..." Shido scowled and tapped his earpiece.

He realized this wouldn't fundamentally solve anything. He knew that he couldn't just leave things as they were. But his only choice now was a temporary retreat. He was up against four clearly hostile Spirits. He might have had Tohka on his side, but there was no way he could win here.

He would get Tohka to rip open the venue wall, then escape into the sky and have *Fraxinus* pick them up there. That was the only way he could think of to get out of there now.

Before long, he heard a familiar voice in his earpiece.

"Hey, what's going on?"

With her autonomous cameras, Kotori would have known how much danger he was in, and yet she sounded cheerfully carefree.

"Kotori...?" He frowned. "Things are really bad here. We're going to get outside, so pick us up with *Fraxinus*!"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

His concern turned to despair.

"The idiot who disobeyed Miss Miku better go get made into mincemeat right now."

"Ko...tori...?" Shido could only stammer his sister's name, dumbfounded.



“...What...on earth...?”

After returning to *Fraxinus*, Reine frowned the moment she set foot on the bridge. Something was strange.

She'd gotten a message that Kotori wanted a detailed analysis of Miku's mental state after seeing Shido and the band perform, so she'd left Yoshino with another Ratatoskr member and returned to the airship. Which was all well and good. But it appeared that something had happened in the time it took her to walk from the transporter to the bridge.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You iiiiiidiot! It's only natural you'd have to die after tricking Miss Miku like that, you know? Die! Hurry up and die already!”

Shido was clearly facing real danger on the main monitor, and in front of that, Kotori was laughing and yelling while seated in the captain's chair—no, on the back of Kannazuki, who was down on all fours.

The rest of the crew were in similar states, swearing at Shido as they raised middle fingers or turned-down thumbs.

“A-Analyst Murasame!”

In the midst of all this, the only one who appeared to be panicking was Nailknocker Shiizaki. Her face brightened when she saw Reine, and she came running over to her.

“You have to help! Everyone's acting really weird!”

“...What happened?”

“I—I don't know! I was checking the sound from the stage when everyone suddenly...!”

“...Mm-hmm.” Reine turned her eyes toward the main monitor.

She could see Shido and Tohka cornered at one end of the venue; Miku onstage, having manifested what appeared to be an Angel; and the spectators, Yoshino, and the Yamai sisters, who were apparently obeying her orders.

There was no doubt that Miku had done something. They had to help Shido and Tohka right away, or else things would get very, very bad.

“...!”

“Huh?”

Reine and Shiizaki both furrowed their brows at the same time. A shrill alarm had begun to ring on the bridge. And it was not to signal the bad humor of a Spirit or to let them know of the approach of an external enemy. It was—

“Basic Realizer parallel operation. Commencing magic charging. Readying convergent magic cannon Mistilteinn. Target: Tengu Square’s central stage,” a mechanical announcement played over the speakers.

Reine and Shiizaki both turned their eyes toward Kotori, who was cackling as she bent over a console, and Kannazuki receiving her kicks with a look of pure ecstasy on his face.

“C-Commander! What are you doing?!” Shiizaki cried out, stunned.

But Kotori simply waved a hand, so carefree that it seemed impossible that she had just activated a destructive program.

“Ha-ha-ha! What are you talking about, Shiizaki? That place is full of fools who disobeyed Miss Miku, you know? The best thing here is to turn them all to ash in one fell swoop.”

“What?! V-Vice Commander, this is no time to happily be a chair! Please stop her!” Shiizaki shouted.

Kannazuki’s face snapped into serious mode. “What on earth are you prattling on about? I’ve finally found it. This is my utopia.”

“You’re actually in your right mind, aren’t you?!”

But perhaps realizing that this was not the time for that argument, Shiizaki made a dash for the console at the captain’s chair.

However, Kawagoe came flying out from the left to tackle her and bring her to the ground.

“Ow! K-Kawagoe?! What are you doing? Let go of me!”

“I could ask you the same thing, Shiizaki. So you’re another one of the people who deceived Lady Miku, hmm? Perhaps you should reflect on your crimes with

them?”

“Wh-what...?” Shiizaki looked at Kawagoe like she was seeing some impossible creature. But he simply smiled beatifically.

“...”

Reine really couldn't let this happen. She also took a step forward to try and stop Kotori. But Minowa grabbed hold of her arms, having come up around behind her at some point, and pinned them behind her back.

“Where are you going, Analyst Murasameeeee? That's a no-no. You can't interfere.”

“...Ngh. I don't know what happened to you, but you have to wake up.”

“Wake up? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, I'm awaaaake. I'm wide-awake,” Minowa said with clearly unfocused eyes while a maniacal grin spread across her face.

Kotori glanced at the captured Reine and Shiizaki before turning back to the console. A corner of her mouth slid up, and she held out a finger.

“Setting complete. Now I just have to push this button, and...boom!” she shouted and threw her arms out as if mimicking the explosion.

Shiizaki's face drained of color. “Y-you're kidding...right?”

“Ha-ha-ha! You say the funniest things, Shiizaki. Of course I'm serious here,” Kotori said, laughter in her voice, and threw her arm up into the air.

“...Ngh.” Reine glanced at Minowa behind her before turning her eyes on the pinned-down Shiizaki.

If they didn't do something, Kotori really would fire *Fraxinus's* main gun at Tengu Square.

And then she heard a certain sound. The sound of the bridge door opening. The sound of feet dashing across the floor. And then...

“Hnngah?!”

...came the sound of Kotori passing out after being punched in the solar plexus by the person who suddenly appeared.

After thrusting a fist into Kotori's stomach, this person held Kotori up as she

slumped over, stomped on the back of Kannazuki's head to knock him out, and then scratched her head in annoyance as she spoke.

"...Honestly, what is with this alarm? I was finally almost getting to sleep. Could you maybe be a little quieter?" a very particular and unique voice said.

Standing there was a girl about the same age as Kotori. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, and there was a notable beauty mark under her left eye. She looked somewhat like the cross-dressing Shido.

Mana Takamiya. AST Second Lieutenant and DEM dispatch personnel. And the girl who called herself Shido's biological little sister.

"...Also. When I was listening from outside the door, Kotori sounded like she had lost all her marbles, so I visited her with an attack. Was that okay?" Mana cocked her head to one side in a comical gesture.

"...Yeah." Reine nodded. "...That was a nice play. I'd be grateful if you could knock out the rest of the crew as well. Besides us, of course."

"Well, yeah, I got no probs with that," Mana said and set Kotori down on the floor. In the blink of an eye, she had rendered the rest of the crew on the bridge unconscious.

"Phew... Guess that about does it." She brushed her hands together and turned her gaze on Reine. "So...what happened, exactly?"

"...Not confirmed yet, but most likely a Spirit attack. Some kind of 'sound' with Spirit power to control anyone who hears it."

"Uh-huh... That'll be a bit of trouble," Mana said, nonplussed, as she turned her eyes to the monitor and then gasped. "B-Big Brother?!"

Her attention had been so totally focused on the bridge that she hadn't noticed what was happening on the monitor. She ran over to it and stomped her feet.

"Wh-what the heck is this?! This! Why is my brother in such danger?!"

"...The enemy he's facing now is the Spirit who uses that sound. The situation looks bleak. We have to hurry and help Shin and Tohka..."

After Reine gave her a quick overview of the situation, Mana said quietly,

“You got CR units on this here boat?”



Missiles rained down in the sky.

Given regenerative magic power through the Realizers, 30 mm bullets and micro-missiles closed in on Origami from all sides, filling her field of view.

“Ngh...!”

Gritting her teeth at the intense pain in her head, she gave commands in her mind and deployed the weapons container. She laid down a barrage of fire in a counterattack.

But she wasn’t able to defend against all the projectiles. Several slipped through the smoke and headed straight for her.

She sharpened her gaze and was about to shift her Territory’s attribute to defensive when fierce anguish shot through her brain and clouded her mind.

“—!”

In the next instant, several missiles hit the poorly defended White Licorice, and Origami was assaulted by powerful explosions and an intense shock.

“Nghah!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You came storming out here, and now look at you!”

Jessica’s shrill laughter clanged in Origami’s tortured head.

Still scowling, she turned her gaze to the left. As if in response to that, White Licorice’s damage status was displayed on her retinas. The laser blade on her left, Cleave Leaf, was out of commission; the magic gun on her right, Blastalk, was similarly half destroyed; and five of the eight motors of the weapons container, Loot Box, were damaged.

She shifted her gaze to the enemy. Five wizards. At least twenty Bandersnatches.

Overwhelming difference in numbers, massive mechanical damage. And the most serious part of all was the damage to Origami’s brain from continuous use of the destructive weapon. It was blindingly obvious that she soon wouldn’t be

able to fight in any meaningful way.

Not only that, but just continuing to maintain White Licorice's active state threatened to critically injure Origami's brain. Normally, she would have to cease battle immediately and deactivate the device.

But withdrawing here meant that Shido would be abducted by DEM. And she very much doubted that Jessica would simply let her leave after the damage Origami had done. As if showing proof of this, the wizards and Bandersnatches began to deploy to surround her on Jessica's orders.

"Heh-heh. You had your little fight, but it's over now. Truth is, I'd love to play around with here, but we got work that needs to be done. So I'll just go ahead and drop you—"

And then Jessica stopped.

Actually, that wasn't quite right. A sudden blast of intense sound from below drowned her out.

"What was that?!" she shouted, frowning.

Origami also glanced down toward Tengu Square while keeping her guard up against the enemies surrounding her.

Although her vision was enhanced by the Territory, she worried that in her current condition, it would be difficult for her to make out the details of a structure so far away. But she noticed the anomaly right away.

A large hole had opened up in the roof of Tengu Square's central stage, and an intense wind was blowing up from out of it.

In the next instant, new information was displayed on her retinal sensor with a *beep*. A powerful Spirit signal from Tengu Square.

Origami gasped, "Shido..."

She had no idea what was happening on the central stage. But there was no doubt that Shido was likely being exposed to some kind of danger. She hurriedly changed course and was about to fire her thrusters to head down.

But there was no way Jessica would allow that. Several Bandersnatches blocked Origami's path.

“Looks like something happened down there. We might want to hurry. Let’s take care of her already and get going,” Jessica said and pointed a finger at Origami.

The Bandersnatches around her moved as one and turned the laser cannons in their right arms toward Origami.

“...Ngh.”

Even if she hurried to take evasive action, her brain was at its limit. Her field of view was dyed red, and her grasp on her consciousness was tenuous.

In the end, this was no different than two months earlier. Origami’s heart was filled with a sense of helplessness.

Even using the Realizer, even with White Licorice, the most powerful equipment at the garrison, Origami couldn’t protect Shido.

Power. If only I had more power.

Enough power so that no one could beat me.

“Shi...do...”

“Wohkay. Go get her,” Jessica said, and the Bandersnatches got ready to pull the triggers.

And then something shot through Origami’s hazy field of view, and the barrels of the laser cannons pointed at her were neatly sliced off.

Charged to fire, the generative magic was left with nowhere to go, and the cannons exploded, sending chunks of metal flying every which way. The Bandersnatches were not surprised, nor did they have eyes that could be burned, but perhaps sensing something abnormal, they swiveled their heads around.

“Wha...? The hell was that?!”

“I—I don’t know! The Bandersnatches’ guns were suddenly—”

A heartbeat later, Jessica and her subordinates realized something was amiss and cried out in a panic.

But that was not the end of it. A blue silhouette cut in front of Origami once

more, and in the next instant, Bandersnatch heads were dancing up into the air.

“Wha—?!” Jessica cried out, baffled, while the Bandersnatches around Origami ceased functioning and fell toward the earth.

“What...exactly...?” Origami said, pressing a hand to the side of her head as if to hold back the pain.

A person clad in blue mechanical armor appeared in front of her.

She’d never seen this CR unit before. Fluid armor lines covering the limbs and body, enormous thrusters mounted on the back. And the weapons were particularly distinctive—a sword in the right hand and what looked like a wolf’s maw equipped on the left.

She looked at the face of the person wearing the armor. And gasped.

“Mana?”

“It’s been a while, Master Sergeant Tobiichi.” The girl in the blue CR unit looked back at Origami.

There was no mistake. This was the AST member who had fought Spirits alongside Origami—Shido’s little sister, Mana Takamiya. After sustaining serious injuries in the fight against Kurumi Tokisaki, she had disappeared from the hospital and been missing ever since.

“Why...? What are you doing here? And that equipment...,” Origami asked.

Mana waved a hand to dismiss the questions. “We can talk details later. Right now, saving my big brother is the first priority, right?”

“...!”

Origami opened her bloodshot eyes wide before nodding firmly.

Mana smiled, satisfied, and shifted her focus to the stunned Jessica. “Oh dear me, I was *wondering* who was up here! If it isn’t Jessica! What are you doing up out in Japan?”

“Mana Takamiya?!” Jessica said, her voice colored with surprise. “Why are you—? No, more importantly, do you realize what you’re doing right now?!”

“I’d be wanting to ask you the same question. This huge group against one

person? I mean, I don't see you for a while, and your plays get pretty mean, huh?"

"That is not the issue here! Why are you attacking us?! Answer me, Adeptus Two!" Jessica shrieked.

Mana shrugged in exasperation. "Could you not call me by my old call sign?"

"Your old... Wait. You're not actually..."

"Yup. Since you're here and all, please tell the boss. Sorry, but I'm quitting DEM. Tell him I'll take my severance pay out of his hide."

"Wha—?"

Jessica and the other wizards gasped.

"What are you even talking about? You're betraying Mr. Westcott?! You! Second only after Executive Leader Mathers in the glorious Adeptus numbers!"

"Well, to put it bluntly, that's what it is, uh-huh." Mana turned the strange weapon in her left hand toward Jessica. "The real ideal sitch here would be for you all to ignore me and retreat. How about it?"

"...! You've got to be kidding me! You know as well as I do that disobeying an order from Mr. Westcott—"

"Well, yeah. Guess so. But," Mana said, and then she flickered and faded like a mirage.

"...?!" When Jessica stared in disbelief, Mana appeared behind her, and the sword in her right hand flashed.

"You...!" Jessica twisted away. But not in time. Mana's blade sliced through her unit and thrusters like butter.

The fine laser edge on the surface of the blade vibrated with generative magic. Although the weapon resembled a sword, the structure was more like a chain saw.

Even as she lost her balance, Jessica did not lose her will to fight. She pulled her laser blade from her hip and swung it at Mana.

But sadly, the gap between fighting technique and unit function was too

great. Mana caught Jessica's blow with her sword and fired a lump of magic at Jessica's stomach from the weapon in her left hand.

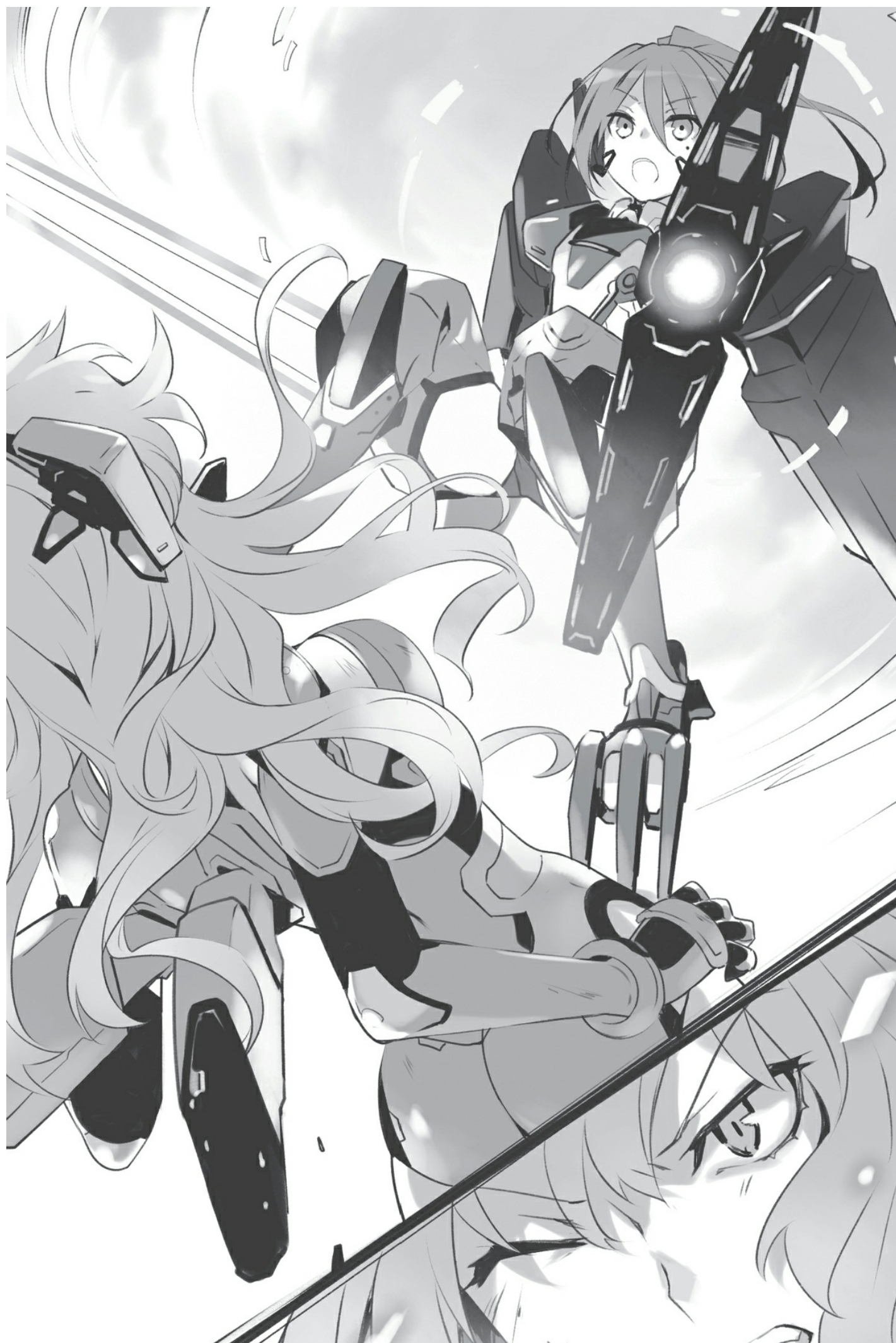
"Kaaah...!" With a short cry, Jessica lost consciousness. At the same time, her Territory was released, so the connection with the unit she was wearing was also released, and she dropped forward.

"If you'd ever actually beaten me in a practice fight, then maybe you could go talking all hot like that." Holding up Jessica's limp body with one arm, Mana let out a sigh. "Phew. Vanargand. Not bad for your first time out."

Then she turned her eyes on the remaining four wizards.

"Now then. You can see the state your boss is in. If you're DEM wizards, then you basically know whether or not you can beat me in this fight, hmm?"

The wizards got nervous looks on their faces.



Mana moved instantaneously once more behind them and tossed over Jessica's unconscious body.

"A-ah...!" A wizard hurried to manipulate her Territory and catch her captain.

"I'm saying that I'll let you walk away," Mana continued. "This is your final warning. Take her with you and scram."

But apparently, the wizards were not wise enough to lay down their arms at this warning. They moved to surround Mana, eyes glinting sharply.

"Oh boy... That's just the reaction I was expecting, huh?" Mana sighed and then held out her arms, ready to take on all comers.



"St-stop! Yoshino! Kaguya! Yuzuru! Wake up!" Shido shouted, but none of the Spirits paused their attack on Tohka.

"What. Are you talking about? Shido... You. And Tohka are the ones being mean to. Miss Miku?"

"Damn straight. You're the bad kids here. You need a good scolding for sure."

"Keh-heh... Shido speaks such capricious words, hmm, Yuzuru?"

"Shock. Does he not have a conscience?"

Yoshino and Yoshinon—now transformed into Zadkiel—spoke up first, followed by interjections from the Yamai sisters.

From their words, it was clear that they hadn't forgotten who Shido and Tohka were, nor had their personalities been overwritten or something. Miku Izayoi had simply been imprinted on them as the top priority in their worldview.

"What...are we going to do...?" Shido's face sank in despair.

This was the worst possible situation.

Miku, manifesting her Angel on the central stage, Yoshino and the Yamai sisters controlled by her, and the thousands of spectators. All of them were attacking Shido and Tohka.

Not to mention that even Kotori up on *Fraxinus* had been hit with Gabriel's "sound" and lost her mind. Which meant that he couldn't even retreat and

regroup. This was what it meant to be cornered.

Tohka was doing what she could to try and stop Miku, but Yoshino and the Yamai sisters were blocking her way, so she couldn't even get close to the idol.

But not giving up, Tohka gripped the sword she had manifested—Sandalphon—kicked at the catwalk, and charged Miku.

“Aaaaah!”

Loosing a battle cry, Tohka launched a slicing attack from midair toward Miku.

But just as it was about to make contact with her, Yoshino threw up a wall of ice. And then two powerful gusts of wind flew toward Tohka from two different directions.

“Ngh!” She immediately defended with her sword, but she couldn't manage to kill the wind pressure itself. She was knocked helplessly into the air, crashed through the ceiling of the stage, and flew off outside.

“Unh! Waaaaaah?!”

“Tohka!” he shouted, but there was nothing he could do. Tohka disappeared outside the building, and soon, he could no longer hear her screaming.

However.

“Hmm...?” This was not a groan of confusion or despair from Shido, but rather an expression of doubt.

The reason was simple enough. Although it was extremely quiet, he could hear a sort of banging from above the venue.

And in the next instant.

“There!”

The ceiling of the stage was ripped away above where Miku was standing, and Tohka plummeted down at incredible speed, the tip of Sandalphon turned downward.

After being knocked out of the building, she'd come around to the stage ceiling from the outside.

“Wha...?!” Miku's baffled cry echoed through the venue.

Yoshino, Kaguya, and Yuzuru all whirled their heads around, but they were already too late. Tohka was charging Miku and her Angel with Sandalphon, ripping through the air itself.

But the moment the tip of Sandalphon touched the metallic pipes of the Angel...

“Aaaaaah!!”

...Miku let out an incredible shout.

The deafening noise boomed through the closed space and made his first brush with the compelling voice seem like a whisper in comparison.

And Tohka was practically on top of the source of this dreadful sound. She might have been a Spirit, but with the limited manifestation of her Astral Dress, she was helpless before it.

“Ngh!” She let out a groan of anguish, as the actual physicality of the noise sent her slamming into the wall next to Shido.

“Tohka!” he shouted and ran over to her.

“Koff-koff!” Tohka was coughing painfully and managed to stand up somehow, using Sandalphon as a cane.

“That was a little bit close. But it’s hooopeless, you know,” Miku said, glaring at Shido with angry eyes from the stage.

Spectators poured in through the doorway to the stairs that connected the backstage with the catwalk. They marched toward Shido and Tohka like zombies.

“Hngh!”

This was the end. Shido froze.

And then.

“Huh...?” He frowned and looked up at the sky. A cross had been cut out of the stage roof, and a girl in mechanical armor was coming through it into the venue.

“Th-that’s—”

For a second, he thought help from Ratatoskr had arrived.

But it wasn't Ratatoskr.

He'd seen this girl before. A platinum CR unit was wrapped around her slender body. Silken pale-blond hair swung as if toyed with by the wind inside her Territory.

"So Bailey and her squad failed," the girl—Ellen Mathers—said in a quiet voice, narrowing her deep aquamarine eyes. "Well, that's fine, really. This was expected."

Shido held his breath. He knew this girl. She was the leader of the Bandersnatches that had come after Tohka on their school trip. Although they'd managed to get away then with one lucky break after another, her power far surpassed that of Tohka in her limited state.

"Hey... What's she doing here...?" Tohka had also noticed Ellen. She scowled fiercely and readied Sandalphon.

"Targets, Tohka Yatogami and Shido Itsuka... A girl with Itsuka's signal acquired. Proceeding to capture."

Without so much as a glance at Miku and the others, she headed straight for Shido and Tohka. Tohka gasped and grabbed his arms.

"We have to get out of here, Shido!"

"S-sure, but how exactly...?" Shido replied, panicked.

"Ngh!"

Ellen drew ever nearer.

Tohka's grip around Shido's arm grew even tighter as she wound up and flung him toward the hole she'd ripped out of the ceiling.

"Waaaaaah?!"

She might have been limited, but the power of a Spirit was much, much greater than that of any human being.

Shido was launched lightly out of the building.



At the same time as Mana vanished, one of the wizards remaining in the sky screamed.

When Origami turned her eyes in her direction, holding her aching head, she found a wizard whose CR unit had been destroyed before she'd even had time to blink.

Mana twisted around and had no sooner approached the Bandersnatch floating nearby than she was clamping its head between the "jaws" of her left hand. *Krrrk!* The doll's head was twisted off.

This was overwhelming from anyone's perspective. The enemy had the advantage in terms of numbers, but they had absolutely no hope of winning.

Origami had experienced Mana's strength firsthand. But...this was on another level. It wasn't just her own abilities; the performance of the unfamiliar blue CR unit wrapped around her was also of a standard that the AST's CR units couldn't begin to compare to.

In less than five minutes, the battle was over.

"...Honestly. Wasting my time like that." Mana brushed her hands briskly and let out a sigh.

There was no longer any sign of wizard or Bandersnatch in the sky. They had all been butchered with one or two blows by Mana and fallen to the ground.

That said, however, the wiring suits the wizards wore were equipped with emergency impact and safety features. They wouldn't die even falling from this height, unless their luck was extremely bad.

"Are you doing all right there, Master Sergeant Tobiichi?" Mana turned her eyes on Origami.

Origami gritted her teeth against the pain. "What. Are you...doing. Here...?"

Blood poured from her nose and eyes, and the world shuddered in her red field of view.

"Whoopsy..." Mana quickly flew over to Origami to hold her up.

Origami could no longer maintain her Territory. Held prisoner by the weight of White Licorice, she dropped toward the earth.

“You really went all out there, Master Sergeant Tobiichi... Hmm, this is a pickle. I need to go and save my big brother, but I can’t leave you like this...”

And then.

“Hmm...?” Mana abruptly frowned.

“What’s...wrong...”

“No, it’s nothing. I just had a bad feeling,” she said, but the expression on her face...

Origami felt it looked a lot like when she detected the aura of her mortal enemy and worst Spirit.



“...! Oh-ho.”

Unconsciously, Ellen stopped moving at this unexpected act from Princess—Tohka Yatogami.

An instant before Ellen could reach them, Tohka had gotten Shido Itsuka (...at least, she assumed it was him from the verification results...probably) out of the venue. Perhaps she had guessed Ellen’s target from her gaze and direction of movement, but to make that judgment in an instant was wonderfully clever.

However, for Ellen, whose objective was the capture of both Tohka Yatogami and Shido Itsuka, this was extremely annoying.

“A levelheaded judgment. Worthy of praise.”

“Hmph!” Tohka sniffed. “I don’t need compliments from *you*!”

“I see,” Ellen said briefly and then looked over to check on the situation on the stage again.

Princess Tohka Yatogami backed into a corner on the catwalk. Several thousand spectators coming after her. And onstage, the Spirit Diva, who had manifested her Angel, with Hermit and Berserk following her. What a curious situation.

It was extremely unusual to have this many Spirits together. Perhaps to make up for being unable to capture Shido Itsuka, she could... The thought passed

through her mind, but Ellen quickly shook her head.

“No, I’ll leave that for now. Pride is the enemy.”

In the back of her mind, the nightmarish failure of two months ago came back to life. Yes, if she was going to be greedy only to fail, it was many times better to achieve a certain target.

“I only have business here with you today, Tohka Yatogami.” Ellen narrowed her eyes and turned her gaze on Tohka.

She didn’t have the extra time to chase after Shido Itsuka now that he’d fled the venue. In which case, it was obvious what she had to do.

Fortunately, perhaps guessing at Ellen’s intentions or maybe simply unable to respond immediately to the sudden development, the other Spirits were only looking at her. It would be best to finish this job before they took some kind of action.

“Today, you *will* come with me, Princess.”

“N-not a chance!” Tohka Yatogami swung the Angel in her hands. An intense slicing attack flew toward Ellen.

“Caledfwlch.”

But she casually unsheathed the large laser blade on her back and easily stopped this attack, dispelling it.

“Augh.” She jerked her chin up and turned her sword toward Tohka. “Curious, your attack is not as powerful as it was on Arubi Island?”

“Wha...?” Tohka gaped.

“Excellent. I mustn’t take too much time. I will dispense with this situation in an instant,” Ellen said, readjusted her grip, and kicked at the sky.

“Unh... Aah... *Koff-koff!*”

Thrown out of the venue, Shido crashed through several trees in the area before hitting the ground. He coughed repeatedly at the impact and the pain that tortured his body.

Apparently, he’d lost consciousness for a few minutes. He whirled his head

around to get a look at his surroundings.

He'd been sent flying into a corner of the park near Tengu Square. Thanks to the trees and the soft shrubs, he'd somehow managed to escape with minor injuries. He glanced at the concrete parking lot spreading out immediately behind him and paled.

Shido had the power to regenerate, thanks to Kotori's protection. He wouldn't have died even if he had landed on that concrete (and he supposed Tohka had done what she did precisely because she knew that), but the pain of such an impact was something he couldn't mitigate at all. He gave thanks to his own good luck and to Tohka's control.

"Right. Tohka!"

His clouded mind finally cleared, and he remembered the situation he was in.

Yes. Tohka had been left alone in the venue.

"Ngh!" Racked with pain, he sat up and turned his eyes toward the stage. Tohka might have had some of her Spirit power unlocked, but there was no way she was going to be all right alone there.

And just as he did so, he saw something fly out from the roof of Tengu Square's central stage, which rose up ahead of him.

"That's...!"

His eyes flew open in surprise.

A blond girl in a platinum CRunit was carrying Tohka, her Astral Dress gone now, and flying off into the sky.

"Tohka?!"

Perhaps she was unconscious. Tohka was slumped over, motionless.

Ellen looked around as if to confirm her surroundings before disappearing somewhere with Tohka.

Left behind, Shido gaped for an instant and stared into the sky where Ellen had been.

"Toh...ka...?"

The whole thing had happened in the blink of an eye, and it felt unreal to him. But as the facts of the situation gradually sank into his brain, Shido reeled.

“Tohka... Tohkaaaaaaa!” he shouted, but his voice only echoed emptyly.

Tohka had been abducted. Just like that.

And he hadn’t been able to do anything. This fact made his sense of powerlessness even stronger.

But he wasn’t even given the time to fall to his knees in anguish.

For a simple reason. He heard the gates at the front of Tengu Square open, and a sea of people plodded out. Almost as if they were looking for someone.

“Ngh...”

Most likely, Miku had ordered them to come search for him.

If he was caught now, all of Tohka’s efforts would have been for nothing. Shido urged his aching body on and somehow managed to stand up and flee slowly, painfully.



How many hours passed after that?

Around the time that twilight colored the sky and the area began to grow dark, Shido was hiding in a room of an abandoned building on the outskirts of Tengu City after escaping the stage, thanks to Tohka.

It was hard to move in the maid outfit, not to mention that it made him stick out like a sore thumb, so he’d bought some more masculine clothing at a flea market in a plaza along the way and changed. Naturally, he’d also removed the voice modulator on his throat, so he had completely exited Shiori mode.

“...”

He looked at the cell phone on the table.

A news program was playing on the screen, broadcasting live the mysterious riot in Tengu. Tens of thousands of people wandering around the city were caught on video from a camera in a helicopter in the sky above.

The announcer offered up his personal theory and tried to clarify the cause of

the riot, but it was useless. No one could have imagined that these thousands of people were simply going around looking for Shido on Miku's orders.

“...”

Shido clenched his jaw and glared at the screen. There were clearly more people than there had been.

It seemed that Miku had decided the audience from the festival was not enough and was steadily increasing the number of conscripts. He didn't know how powerful Gabriel was, but if this kept up, they'd find him sooner or later.

And apparently, Gabriel was effective even through speakers. It was a moment of true despair for Shido when the police came to quash the riot and ended up joining the ranks of the rioters the instant they heard Miku's performance playing from a sound truck.

“Dammit!” he cried in frustration and slammed his fist against the floor. “I shouldn't be just sitting here right now... I—”

Yes. It wasn't just the Miku problem he needed to resolve. He also needed to get Tohka back as soon as possible now that she'd been abducted by a DEM wizard.

It wasn't like Shido was particularly knowledgeable about the company. But he very much doubted that an organization providing armies and police units around the world with Realizers explicitly for killing Spirits would give Tohka a warm welcome.

He tapped his earpiece in frustration. But all he heard was static. No voice came through.

“What...am I going to do...?”

Anguish filled his face, and he slammed his fist into the floor again.

He was facing a mountain of problems.

Miku was after him.

Yoshino, Kaguya, and Yuzuru were being controlled by her.

Swarms of her minions were filling the streets of Tengu.

He still couldn't contact Ratatoskr.

And DEM Industries had abducted Tohka.

He didn't have enough of anything to deal with all these.

He didn't have enough time.

He didn't have enough resources.

He didn't have enough combat skills.

And more than anything else, Shido didn't have enough power.

"I..." He gritted his teeth. "I...!"

The moment Shido gave voice to this overwhelming sense of powerlessness...

"Hee-hee."

...someone laughed.

"...?!" His shoulders jumped up, and he lifted his face with a gasp.

For a moment, he thought his hiding place had been discovered by a Miku-controlled resident. But he couldn't see any sign of a person.

The owner of that voice soon revealed herself, however.

A shadow.

Just when he thought the shadows filling the dark room were squirming, a girl crawled forward from within them.

A dress of bloody crimson and shadowy black. Dark hair tied up asymmetrically to either side. The face of a clock in her left eye, the hands regularly carving out each second. And her countenance, so exquisite that it seemed almost manufactured, was colored with a cheeky smile that could have been read as joy or contempt.

"Hee-hee-hee, your face is quite gloomy indeed."

"Kurumi...?!" Shido's eyes flew open in surprise.

Yes. This was the worst Spirit. Shido had encountered her before. Kurumi Tokisaki. There was no mistake.

He unconsciously leaned forward and glared at Kurumi carefully. But it was painfully obvious that this was a mere bluff. Not only was Shido incapable of doing anything to her, but merely escaping her would also have been a feat unto itself.

Well aware of this, Kurumi maintained a bewitching smile. And then she quietly parted her lips.

“You seem to be in a terrible situation, don’t you, Shido? Why don’t we have a little chat?”

To be continued.

Afterword

It's been some time. Koushi Tachibana here.

This is Koushi Tachibana feeling like he has been starting these afterwords with "It's been some time. Koushi Tachibana here" quite a lot recently. I present to you *Date A Live, Vol. 6: Lily Miku*. The Spirit this time is Miku Izayoi. Just as the subtitle has it, she is a lily Spirit. How did you like her? I do hope you enjoyed the book.

This is a series that'll have new characters and new designs appear in every volume, but there were a lot of fresh faces this volume, albeit not as many as in the last. Miku, that character, that character who's not a new character but is a sort of new character (contradiction)...

I'll say this since the front color pages are a spoiler, but this character returns in this volume after an absence. Well, strictly speaking, she reappeared in the last volume, but it's the first time she's back in battle after three volumes, so it's all the more moving. And she makes her appearance with new equipment on top of that. Ma'am, your new equipment's arrived. It's something along the lines of Shining to God, Arbalest to Laevatein, Pretty Cure to Princess Form. There's no way anyone could sit still in the same situation. The unparalleled begins!

Now then, this work, *Date A Live*, is going to be serialized as a collection of short stories in *Dragon Magazine*. The nature of the series is that there will be a new heroine each time, and there will be fewer and fewer appearances of characters already appearing in the books.

With the short stories, I'd like to supplement the activities of the characters with new sides of the heroines not depicted in the main story and events that unfolded behind the scenes. I do hope you will also enjoy these stories.

One more thing. *Date A Live* is going to be made into a video game! It will be released by Compile Heart, who were also responsible for the *Neptunia* series. Please look forward to more announcements on this!

And the airing of the anime has been decided at last! The TV anime will begin airing in April 2013! The staff have all been working very hard on it, so please do look forward to it!

Here we come to the customary special thanks. I was able to create this work with the kind help of so many people. Tsunako, my editor; the designer Kusano; and everyone involved in the publication, including the booksellers—I am in your debt every volume. Thank you so much!

Also, ringo serializing the manga version of *Date A Live* in *Shonen Ace*, Kakashi Oniyazu serializing the spin-off manga *Date A Strike* in *Dragon Age*, and Maya Mizuki serializing the four-panel serial *Date A Origami* in *Dragon Magazine's Age Premium*, thank you so much for the wonderful manga every issue!

I believe those of you who read the story know this, but things this time around have gotten to a place. I'd love it if you would look for the continuation of this story in *Date A Live*, Vol. 7. The next volume is scheduled for release in the spring.

All right, then. I pray we will meet again.

Koushi Tachibana

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