

Disaster Itsuka

Spirit No. ?

Astral Dress — Raizen High School Type

12

*Koushi
Tachibana*

Illustrated by
Tsunako

Date A Live

■ Disaster Itsuka



Date A Live

Diaster Itsuka





“Wh-what are
you doing?”

Ellen M. Mathers
The world's most
powerful Wizard

“Bad girls have
to be punished.”

Shido Itsuka
A high school student



“Th-this
sensation...”

Kotori Itsuka
Ratatoskr Commander

“Eek?!”

Shiori Itsuka
A high school student



"Assent. It seems that you wish to be unmanned by Yuzuru and Kaguya's charms."

Yuzuru Yamai
ASpirit

"P..Please. Let...me..."

Yoshino
ASpirit

"Kah kah! Shido. How brave of you to come. Well done!"

Kaguya Yamai
ASpirit



“Thank you
so much for
choosing me,
daaaarling.
Your Miku
is here!”

Miku
ASpirit

“Isn’t it kinda
embarrassing?”

Tohko
ASpirit

“Since we’re here,
how about a toast?”

Origami Tobitachi
ASpirit

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**“Just go be
with one of the
others already.”**

***Natsumi*
A Spirit**



Date A Live

Disaster Itsuka

12

Koushi Tachibana

Illustrated by
Tsunako

YEN
ON
New York

Copyright

Date A Live 12

Disaster Itsuka

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 his surroundings whenever he 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 him and make him all weak in the knees.

Disaster Itsuka

Spirit No. ?
Uniform—Raizen High School Type

Prologue

Beast of Demise

A roar thundered in the inky black sky.

Surely it was the cry of a beast. How could it be anything but a monster, even if it took human form? No thoughts, no sense of self. Only atrocity made manifest and wreaking havoc. The embodiment of unstoppable power. Wrapped in light, it called to mind an apparition from the age of gods, instilling a deep, primordial terror in all who saw it.

Spirit power churned around this creature, radiating outward and flattening trees in an expanding circle of destruction. The light *it* emitted was blinding on this moonless night.

“It...can’t be...” Kotori clenched her hands into fists like she was hoping that would keep them from trembling as she listened to the howl that shook heaven and earth. Her hands must have been shaking because of the fear that welled up inside her. She wasn’t afraid of the howling monster. What truly terrified her was what she planned to do.

For years now, a secret resolve had weighed heavy in her heart. It was her mission to kill the monster if it ever appeared. Now that she had come face-to-face with the creature, what she felt wasn’t a sense of duty or a desire to kill. There was only extraordinary grief and regret.

How had it come to this? Was there something she could have done to stop this from happening? Those thoughts filled her mind until it seemed like it would burst. She could barely breathe.

It was too late. Everything had already been decided. All she could do now was end it.

Kotori called to the monster in a pained voice.

“Why... How, Shido...?!”

Chapter 1

Encroaching Abnormality

People often say that when winter comes, spring won't be far behind. But given that it was only the first of December, winter was just beginning, and warmer days still seemed a long way off.

If anyone needed proof, the most powerful chill of the season had come out in full force this morning, and the dull sky was a perfect match. Each time a gust of wind whistled through the sadly bare branches of the trees, Shido Itsuka pulled on his coat to close the gap between the collar and his neck.

His breath came out as white as the thick layers of clouds above. Did the air feel crisper when it was cold out because the weather reminded people of clear ice? Or was it because the low temperature made even germs want to move slower? The possibility that the cold simply dulled everyone's senses was probably a better guess.

Shido blew on his numb hands to warm them. It felt better for just a moment until the chilly air got to the moisture in his breath and his fingers ended up even colder than they started.

"Haah." Shido rubbed his hands together and exhaled once more. He knew by now there was no point in blowing on his hands. This was just a sigh. "It got so cold all of a sudden. I should've worn a scarf and gloves."

He was currently dressed in his usual heavy school uniform coat. He had underestimated the December weather and assumed he would be fine. Clearly, he had been a little optimistic.

Not to mention that he'd been feeling a bit off ever since he woke up. Maybe the overnight drop in temperature had done a number on him. He considered turning back and kitting himself properly at home.

"Mm..."

He was more or less halfway to school already. If he went back now, he'd probably end up being late to class. But he still had a ways to go before he made it to school. He was in a sort of limbo.

"Mm. You cold, Shido?" Tohka Yatogami asked as she walked alongside him. She looked over at him with those dazzling eyes as the wind caught her hair that was the color of night. She wore a warm duffle coat over her school uniform and a checkered scarf wrapped around her neck. She even had mittens on, and the socks she wore seemed thick. This was undoubtedly a full loadout for winter.

Now that he was thinking about it, she'd gone shopping for winter clothes recently with the other Spirits and Reine. That was probably where she picked up all this stuff. The black coat and red scarf looked great on her.

"Aaah," he said. "I sort of underestimated December. Starting tomorrow, I gotta dress a little warmer."

"Hmm." Tohka put a hand to her chin as she stared at him. And then she indicated to the scarf wound around her own neck. "I know, Shido! You can use this! It's super cozy and warm!"

"Huh?" He stared at her blankly. "No, no, then you'll be cold, Tohka."

"Mm. I'm okay. I've got mittens!" She waved her mittened hands around adorably.

He gave her a concerned smile. "I don't think you can keep your neck warm with mittens, though."

"Mm." Tohka fell into thought for a moment and then clapped her hands. "Okay! I just had a great idea!"

With that cheerful remark, she unwound part of her scarf and handed the one end to Shido while keeping the other half wrapped around her neck. "Okay. You can wear this part. That way, we'll both be warm," she said, a grin spreading across her face.

"O-oh, uh. No..." Shido declined the offer with an awkward smile.

Of course he did. While her idea would probably work, just imagining the two

of them waltzing into school wearing the same scarf like something out of a manga... Shido could already see the looks their classmates would give them. Their eyes would be filled with jealousy and murder.

But Tohka wouldn't give up. She made him hold one end of the scarf and urged him to put it around his neck. "What are you waiting for? You'll catch a cold."

"Oh, uh, I mean, yeah, maybe, but no..." He refused again, a troubled look on his face. Then he heard thumping footsteps racing up from behind.

"Kah-kah! What foolishness! What are you two doing here?!"

"Departure. Yuzuru and Kaguya cannot stop."

Two shadows raced past Shido and Tohka.

The near-identical Yamai twins lived in the same apartment building as Tohka and the other Spirits. Today, they both wore camel duffle coats over their uniforms and toasty earmuffs. They were fully prepared for the cold. Yuzuru had regular mittens on her hands, while Kaguya wore leather gloves.

"Kaguya! Yuzuru!" Shido called.

"Heh! Warriors must make do. You will have to allow us—what *are* you doing?"

"Puzzlement. Are you pretending to be a dog and its walker? Or is this some kind of kink play? This early in the morning?"

The Yamai sisters were now standing right in front of Shido and Tohka, examining them with furrowed brows.

Shido made a strange sound in his throat. Tohka had put the end of her scarf in his hands, so it almost looked like he was holding on to a leash.



“Mm?” Tohka frowned, too. “What do you mean?”

“Hey, whoa,” Shido protested. “That makes it sound like there’s something weird going on here. But it’s just—”

Before he could finish, Kaguya and Yuzuru whirled on their heels.

“I will not condemn any person for their private interests, but I would suggest that you refrain in places where passersby can see.”

“Assent. Please think of Tohka, who’s forced to go along with your perverted wishes, Shido.”

“I’m telling you, that’s not—”

“Farewell! May we meet again in the promised land!”

“Parting. The Yamais are the healthy children of the wind.”

With those words hanging in the air, the Yamai sisters raced down the road to school.

“Ah! Hey! You still have the wrong idea...”

He knew they wouldn’t deliberately say anything to hurt Shido, but he was worried that they were liable to innocently spread word of this little misunderstanding. It would be best for him to clear things up as soon as possible.

He followed the two girls with his eyes as he said to Tohka, “Hey, I thought of a way to warm me up without you giving me your scarf.”

“Mm?” Tohka raised an eyebrow. “There’s another way?”

“Yeah. We can run!” Shido kicked at the ground.

“Ah!” Tohka cried out, and raced after him.

After a few minutes of running, snapping at the heels of the Yamai sisters, who gradually pulled away from them, they arrived at school quite a bit earlier than expected.

“Haah! Haah!” Shido panted heavily at the entrance and leaned forward, hands on his knees.

“You okay, Shido?” Tohka didn’t sound the least bit winded.

“Y-yeah...” He nodded as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. The obvious difference in physical strength was only natural given that Tohka was a Spirit. Still, he felt more exhausted than normal. Maybe he really did catch a cold after all?

“Kah-kah! You manage yourselves quite well!”

“Praise. But when it comes to speed, Yuzuru and Kaguya are indeed the champions.”

The Yamai sisters had reached the school first and struck silly poses to greet Shido and Tohka. He knew from the beginning he wouldn’t be able to catch up to them, but it was a bit of good luck that they were waiting at the front door like this.

Shido got his breathing back under control before standing up straight again and calling out to them. “Guys, I think you got the wrong idea, so let me just tell you now, that back there—”

“Hmm? Tohka was trying to lend you her scarf, wasn’t she?”

“Obvious. We could tell that much just from looking,” the pair said nonchalantly, and Shido’s eyes flew open.

“So then you got it!”

“Kah-kah, naturally. Dared you presume that there exists any issue my beastly eyes could not penetrate?”

“Assent. Jealous Kaguya was simply teasing Shido before.”

“Hey—! Don’t just go saying stuff! And I was *not* jealous!”

“Escape. She who fights and runs away lives to fight another day,” Yuzuru said with a straight face, and ran off.

“Hey! Get back here! Yuzuruuuu!” Kaguya stomped into the school after her.

After watching them leave, Shido let out a long sigh. “Honestly. Those two are absurd. They never run out of energy.”

“Shido, we should go inside, too,” Tohka said. “Especially after you finally

managed to warm up.”

“Oh yeah. Good point.” Shido nodded, took off his shoes, and opened his shoe locker. Then he furrowed his brow in puzzlement. “Hmm?”

“Mm, what’s wrong, Shido?” Tohka looked over at him.

“Oh... I can’t find my inside shoes.” When he reached inside the shoe locker, his hand grabbed nothing but empty air.

“What?” Tohka’s eyes were wide and round. “Did someone else accidentally put yours on?”

“Mmmm. Maybe.” Shido responded vaguely. Inside shoes going missing was a pretty common bullying tactic. But telling Tohka that would only make her anxious. Plus, he also had no idea who would try and harass him like that. It was true that he wasn’t the most popular guy at school recently, so he couldn’t reject the possibility entirely, which was a sad realization.

“Guess I’ll just have to make do with slippers, then,” he said, and went to borrow some slippers for guests from the office before heading toward Grade 11, Class 4 with Tohka. He opened the classroom door, walked to his desk, and then stopped short.

The reason was simple. Someone else was already at his desk—a girl with hair tickling her shoulders and a perfectly proportioned, doll-like face.

But that in and of itself wasn’t particularly strange. The girls in class would often borrow other people’s desks to chat with friends.

It was a totally different story when the girl was on her knees underneath the desk and pressing her cheek against the chair until Shido showed up. It was painfully obvious that his classmates were watching the scene unfold while pretending not to look.

“What are you doing, Origami?” Shido asked, rolling his eyes.

Yes. It was Origami Tobiichi, Shido’s classmate and a new Spirit whose powers he had successfully sealed the month before.

Normally, new Spirits moved into the apartment building next to the Itsuka home, but Origami couldn’t bring herself to abandon the home filled with

memories of her parents, so she stayed there even now. Because of that, she usually came to school at a slightly different time from Shido and the others.

In response to Shido's question, Origami crawled out from under the desk with a rustle. "I warmed it up," she explained.

"My chair?!" He stared in blank amazement.

"Not only that." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a shoe. It was his, all right. Now it was nice and warm. "Here."

"So *you're* the thief!" he cried.

"Origami!" Tohka was quick to join Shido in outrage. "You can't just take Shido's shoes! He had to wear slippers because of you!"

"...!" Stunned, Origami looked down at Shido's feet and then bowed deeply. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think things through."

"I-it's okay," he said. "I'd just appreciate it if you could be a little more thoughtful next time."

"My head was so full securing a patent and copyright for the system I came up with this morning that allows me to warm both your chair and shoes at the same time."

"This method might as well be from the Stone Age!" Shido shrieked before sighing as if exhausted by the whole exchange. He switched slippers for shoes and hung his bag on the hook on the side of his desk before lifting his hands to take off his coat.

"Wait." Origami stopped him.

"Hmm?" He glanced over at her. "What?"

"Shido Warming System Type Zero," she said in a monotone right before slipping her hands into his coat and wrapping her arms tight around his torso. It almost looked like they were two people wearing one coat.

"Wha—?!" Shido gasped.

"H-hey, Origami! What are you doing to Shido?!" Tohka cried indignantly as she tried to peel Origami off him. But Origami held on to Shido like a vise and

would not budge.

A few seconds later, however, Origami noticed something, and she lifted her face from where it was buried in Shido's chest. "You are already very warm, Shido. Do you have a fever?"

"Huh? Oh." He scratched his head. "Uh, I actually ran here, so I'm probably a little warm right now."

"Oh. That's fine, then," she said as she pulled away from him. Then she whirled around.

"Origami?" He raised his eyebrows. "Where are you going?"

"Back in a sec," she replied before slipping out of the classroom.

"Hmph." Tohka crossed her arms as she watched her go. "Honestly! Can't let my guard down for a second with her!"

"Ha-ha..." Shido laughed lifelessly as he took his seat. "Well, you know, Origami's gonna Origami."

The truth was, this Origami was slightly different from the one Shido and Tohka used to know. She was a fusion of the original and a good-girl version who had been a product of Shido rewriting history. But judging from her actions this morning, the original Origami came through stronger.

"Mm?" Tohka cocked her head in confusion. "What are you talking about? True, her behavior's still way over the top, but something's also a little different."

"You think?" He frowned. "It feels like more of the same, just more intense."

"The old Origami would have held on until I physically yanked her off you," Tohka told him. "And the look on her face just now when she left..."

"Huh..." Shido unconsciously widened his eyes in surprise.

"....."

After leaving the classroom, Origami trotted down the hallway until she reached a quiet place with no one around. She pressed her back against the wall and slid down to the floor.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaah...” She covered her face with her hands. The warmth reached her palms. She hadn’t checked in a mirror, but she could tell her face must’ve been bright red.

“Why did I do that?” she murmured in a shaking voice, running her hands frantically through her hair.

She was supposed to have just come to school like a normal person. But the instant she laid eyes on Shido’s shoe locker, Origami’s inner Kinoshita Tobiichi Ichiro Hideyoshi started shouting that she had to warm up her lord’s shoes. And before she knew it, her head was resting on his chair like a criminal waiting for the guillotine to drop as she clutched his shoes to her breast. Remembering it all now, she had no idea what that was supposed to be.

On the other hand, part of her thought that what she did was not only extremely natural, but it would have actually been an error to *not* put on Shido’s gym clothes under her uniform to warm them up.

If Shido’s warm, I’m happy.

It was the impossibly rare win-win situation. Origami renewed her determination to patent this before someone got the jump on her. She would name it the Origami Steamer. A moniker full of subtle wit, with a nod to the hot water device and a wink at the idea that flushed cheeks also ran hot.

Two totally different lines of thought existed simultaneously in her mind. The confusion arose from mixing the minds of this world’s original Origami and the Origami of the revised world. And while both of them were equally Origami, when it came to Shido, one side seemed to always take over for some reason.

This body originally belonged to post-world-revision Origami. If it was reaching some kind of equilibrium with the two minds, the pre-revision Origami shouldn’t have taken precedence. The problem was that post-revision Origami already thought about Shido 30 to 70 percent of the time. Add in the other Origami who thought about Shido 120 percent of the time, and any semblance of internal balance would just completely collapse.

“I wonder if he thinks I’m weird,” she murmured with a sigh just as the first bell rang. “Ah. I have to go.”

She couldn't sit there forever. She fixed her mussed-up hair, put her hands on her knees, and stood up. She turned the corner in the hallway and immediately slammed into someone.

"Eek!" she cried.

"Oh, sorr—Wait, Origami?" Standing there was the very Shido she'd left in the classroom earlier. "So *this* is where you are. Also, you shouted kind of funny just now."

"No, I didn't. Anyway, what are you doing here?" she asked.

He ran a finger along his chin as he replied, "You seemed a little off somehow, so I came to check on you."

"...!" Origami felt her heart pound in her chest. Shido was watching out for her. The thought alone made her feel warm and fuzzy. But her body was already in motion. She grabbed hold of his hand. "That makes me happy. I'm actually not well, so I want you to do a palpation exam on me. My chest and abdomen in particular."

Shido cried out with an "Eep!"

Huh? What? What am I doing?! Despite her confusion, her body continued to move decisively.

"Please, Doctor," she said. "Be kind, but bold."

"Tohka! Tohkaaaaa! She really hasn't chaaaaaaanged!" Shido's cries echoed through the early morning school.



"....."

Commander Kotori Itsuka was sitting alone in the underground facility Ratatoskr owned in the city of Tengu. Long hair tied up into two bundles with black ribbons, crimson jacket hanging over her shoulders, and Chupa Chups stuck in her mouth were her identifying features. Her face was an age-appropriate cute, but the expression she currently wore was the complex face of a hardened military veteran.

This was no surprise. Kotori was holding a file on the Spirit they had

succeeded in sealing the previous month.

Devil. An inverted Spirit who ranked alongside the evil Spirit Nightmare, an alarming target in every sense. Her true identity was former AST member Origami Tobiichi. The documents Kotori was reviewing contained detailed information on Devil and the transcriptions of interviews with her.

“Hmm.” She hummed quietly to herself when she came across a particular item on the page.

The discussions of the world revision and the personality fusion were also extremely fascinating, but what really grabbed Kotori’s attention was the fact that Origami had gone five years into the past using the power of Kurumi’s Zafkiel.

In order to save her parents, Origami had traveled back in time and faced off against a very special being. Phantom. The mysterious Spirit who had given Kotori, Miku, and Origami their powers.

“Got you by the tail,” Kotori muttered to the empty room. “Okay, maybe we’re not quite there yet, but still.”

She, too, had once met Phantom directly. But the Spirit’s body had been covered by what appeared to be static, and their voice sounded like it had been passed through a voice changer, so Kotori hadn’t managed to glean any information at all. And the story she’d heard from Miku was the same.

But Origami had fought Phantom, cleared away the wall of static with the power of her Angel, and heard her voice, seen her figure from behind, albeit for only an instant. According to Origami, Phantom was a young girl. And she’d mentioned having an objective.

Almost glaring at the sketch of Phantom that had been drawn based on Origami’s description, Kotori moved her lips. “Phantom... Who are you? What exactly is this objective of yours?”

There came a very timely knock on the door.

“Who is it?” she called, eyes still on the document before her.

“It’s me.”

“Oh. Come in.”

The door opened for a woman in a Ratatoskr uniform. Hair tied back simply, eyes underscored with dark circles. This was Ratatoskr analyst, and Kotori’s close friend, Reine Murasame.

“What’s up, Reine?” Kotori asked.

“...Well, I was going to ping your terminal,” Reine said. “But then I heard you were here today, so.”

“Ah.” Kotori nodded slightly. Today being a weekday, she should have been at school like Shido, Tohka, and all the others. “I just had something I wanted to look into. Oh! I did do a quick count of my absences this year, though. The school’s not going to kick up a fuss yet. So? What’d you need?”

“...Right.” Reine moved toward her. “Something’s bothering me.”

“What is it?” Kotori cocked her head, and Reine showed her the tablet terminal in her hands. Both sides displayed all kinds of numbers and a graph with several lines on it. “What am I looking at?”

“...A graph of everyone’s recent Spirit wave values. Look at this here,” Reine said pointing to one line. The only one that showed an extreme increase.

“Hmm? Everyone’s mental state has been stable the last few days, right? Who on earth—” Kotori started and then gasped. “It can’t be. Origami Tobiichi?”

Her power had only just been sealed, and as an inverted Spirit, that power had been immense. It wouldn’t have been strange for her to have a certain number of irregularities.

But Reine slowly shook her head. “...No.”

“Then who?” Kotori frowned. “Tohka? Yoshino? You can’t actually be trying to say it’s me?”

“...No, it’s none of you. This is...” Reine quietly told her the name.



Math and Japanese were over. Time for third period. Class 4 had gym with Class 3.

“Heeey, Itsuka! Let’s take our time, man.” A boy with short hair spiked with a lot of wax called out as he approached. It was Shido’s partner in crime, Hiroto Tonomachi.

“Yeah...” Shido slowly lifted his face. “Gym, right?”

“Uh?” Tonomachi looked at him dubiously. “What’s up, my dude? You look kinda pale? You sick?”

“Mm. Dunno. I *have* been feeling a little sluggish all day, though.”

“Mm. You okay, Shido?” Tohka peered at him with a worried look from the desk to his right, while Origami did the same from the one to his left.

“If you’re not feeling well, you should sit on the sidelines,” she said.

“Nah, I’m fine.” Shido waved a dismissive hand and laughed. “It’s not that bad. Tonomachi, what’re we doing in gym again today?”

Tonomachi shrugged, slightly exasperated at Shido’s forgetfulness. “Today’s the physical fitness test, man. Plus, the girls’re gonna be doing it at the same time, so we gotta really show off how tough and manly we are! I mean, I’ve been hovering above my seat during classes just for today!”

“For the whole class?!” Shido yelped.

“Nah, maybe like five seconds per class?” his friend responded.

“That’s nothing!” Shido retorted, but Tonomachi ignored him. Instead, he turned toward Tohka and Origami and gave them a solid thumbs-up.

“So, ladies.” He winked obviously at them. “If you’re gonna fall for me all over again, better do it now. The ladies’ll be aaaaall over me after today.”

“Are you sure you’re okay, Shido?” Tohka asked. “You want to go to the nurse’s office?”

“Don’t push yourself, Shido,” Origami insisted. “I’ll be waiting for you in the nurse’s office.”

“So *that’s* how it is, huh? You could at least pretend to listen to me. I’ll start sulking, you know? You don’t want Hiropon to do that, do you?” Tonomachi said while pouting dramatically.

Shido gave them all a pained smile before slowly standing up. “If it’s just the fitness test, well, I’m sure I’ll be fine. I don’t want to have to defer it and get stuck doing it later. I’ll be there in a minute, you go on ahead.”

“Woh-kay.” Tonomachi shrugged. “Don’t go too hard, though. You got a real bad habit of not looking after yourself. We worry, y’know?”

“Ha-ha! I’ll be careful. Kotori says the same thing.”

“Huh? For real? I *knew* Kotori and me were on the same wavelength. Right, Big Bro?”

“Whatever. Just go.” Shido shooed his friend away like he was a dog, so Tonomachi left the classroom, chuckling to himself.

“Okay... Physical fitness test, huh?” He turned his gaze on Tohka and Origami. “I’m going to say this just in case. Don’t get too serious out there. Even if your powers are sealed, you still have physical abilities way out of line with anything a regular person’s got.”

“Mm. I know that.” Tohka sniffed. “I’m gonna hold back.”

“I will keep it within the realm of normal,” Origami reassured him.

“Great,” Shido said. “I’m more worried about Kaguya and Yuzuru, though. Warn them not to start competing with each other. Don’t let them try to set some new record or anything.”

Tohka and Origami both nodded, slowly, and Shido gathered up his gym clothes. They left the classroom together but parted at the locker rooms. (For some reason, Origami started to trail after him into the boys’ area, but Tohka dragged her into the girls’ locker room.) He changed his clothes and went out into the schoolyard.

The bell for the start of class was already ringing, and their teacher Suganuma had appeared in a track suit to divide the students into rows.

“Ah. Crap.” Here, Shido furrowed his brow the tiniest bit. Another wave of dizziness just hit him, though not as intense as the last one. His whole body felt hot like the start of a fever, and his mind grew hazier and hazier. Suganuma was standing in front of the students, explaining something about the physical

fitness test items and how to use the hand dynamometer, but Shido couldn't focus on a single word he said.

"Unh..." He rubbed blurry eyes. He hadn't imagined he was already this sick. Maybe he should have listened to the others and gone to the nurse's office.

Abruptly, he felt someone tapping on his back.

"Mm... Wh...at...?" He turned his head, and the student standing behind him pointed toward the front.

"Not 'what,'" he said. "It's your turn, Itsuka. With the dynamometer."

"Huh? Ohhh..." Shido realized that while he'd been spaced out, the students ahead of him in line had already finished the grip strength test. He stepped forward on unsteady feet and picked up the analog dynamometer.

"So you're next, Itsuka? Okay, start with the right. Squeeze as hard as you can," Sukanuma said, holding a clipboard to record the results. He made a gesture like he was clenching his hand tightly. "The average for a high school boy is forty-three kilos. And at the moment, the record is Yoshikawa's seventy-five kilos. Can you beat that?" he asked jokingly, and Yoshikawa, a large student on the judo team, smiled.

"Quit that, Mr. Sukanuma," the big boy said. "I can't lose to Itsuka of all people. Like, if I can't even beat King Lear in gripping strength, I'm gonna have a serious identity crisis."

"Fair enough!"

The other boys laughed. It went without saying that *King Lear* was one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, but why would Yoshikawa bring that up? Shido couldn't help but feel that it was being used in a different sense from its original meaning.

Unfortunately, Shido was in no state to complain with his current brain fog.

In this condition, he'd have trouble even meeting the average, much less the record. He had to grit his teeth and just get through this. He clenched his right hand and squeezed the dynamometer.

Bang! Something hard grazed his cheek.

“...?”

“Wh-whoa, Itsuka.”

Shido cocked his head in confusion and realized that all the other students were staring at his right hand.

“What...?” Following their gazes, he looked down at the dynamometer clutched in his hand. Or at least what was left of it. The springs had been ripped in half, the grip was stuck in place, and the needle that should have been above the scale had popped off.

The other boys began to clamor immediately.

“Wh-what was *that*?”

“How many kilos did you just hit on the dyno, Itsuka...?”

“L-let me see that thing.” Suganuma took the dynamometer from Shido and examined it carefully from a number of angles. And then he sighed. “Aah. Probably metal fatigue in the springs. It’s just worn out. We’ve been using this one for a long time now. You okay, Itsuka?”

“Huh? Yeah...,” Shido replied, and the tension drained out of the air.

“Aah, geez, man. Way to go scaring us.”

“Well, that makes sense. I mean, the needle swinging up’s one thing, but breaking the springs?”

Students nodded at one another, as if everything was right in the world again.

“.....” Shido silently opened and closed his hand several times.

He could get on board with the idea that the springs had been worn out. He hadn’t done any special weight training or anything, there was no way he could break a dynamometer. Not to mention he was also in the worst possible condition at the moment. And he’d barely squeezed it.

As his thoughts raced off on their own, he heard Suganuma call out once more.

“Okay! Next up’s the ball toss. We’ll go in order and throw the ball from here. High school average is about twenty-six meters. Handball, baseball people—you

guys are gonna smash that average, yeah?”

Several boys in the class grinned. And then following their teacher’s instructions, in a haphazard sort of order, the students stood at the designated position and took their throws.

“Hah!”

“Asai, twenty-four meters!”

“Hi-yaaaah!”

Yoshikawa, thirty meters!”

“Hnngaaaaah!”

“Tonomachi, you stepped over the line.”

Ten, then twenty minutes of the alternating student and record-keeper calling out quickly passed. And then it was Shido’s turn.

“Okay, next up, Itsuka!” Suganuma shouted. “You can’t break a ball, so relax and throw that thing!”

“...Okay,” Shido responded lifelessly before picking one at random from the basket and taking his place in the chalk circle. When he saw the record-keeper raise a blurry hand and give the signal, he slowly pulled his right hand back.

“Fwaaah!” Tohka shouted as she kicked at the ground, landing in the sandpit.

Ai, the student in charge of the meter stick, walked up and measured the distance from the start line to the spot where Tohka’s feet landed. “Tohka, two meters, ninety centimeters!” she called.

“Oooh! The best so far!”

“That’s our Tohka for you.”

Ai’s good friends Mai and Mii also joined in with praise and applause. Judging from their reactions, Tohka had successfully kept her jump within human expectations. She nodded, satisfied. After going through the grip measurement and the ball toss, Tohka had just finished up at the standing long jump station. When she stepped out of the sandpit, she was accosted by the Yamai sisters, who had already done their jumps.

“Kah-kah! You have done it, Tohka.”

“Assent. That is an exquisite number.”

“Oh, Kaguya, Yuzuru. How far’d you go?” Tohka asked, and Kaguya and Yuzuru threw their chests out smugly and crossed their arms.

“Two meters, fifty centimeters. Keh-keh, there would be an outcry if we, the children of the hurricane, used our full strength. For this day alone, we have changed the nature of our contest.”

“Unity. Rather than compete for the record, we are making a contest of who can most closely approach the initially determined value. The grip strength itself was easy, but the ball toss and the standing long jump have been quite challenging.”

“Oh, I get it!” Tohka opened her eyes wide and thumped a fist into her palm. It was true that this way, they could compete against each other without arousing suspicion.

While Tohka and the Yamai sisters were talking, the student in line after Tohka finished her long jump.

“Tobiichi, two meters ninety-one centimeters!”

“Whoaaaaaaaaa?!”

“Tohka’s attacked from behind?!”

Ai-Mai-Mii’s surprised cries caught Tohka’s attention.

When she saw Origami walk over with a perfectly composed face, Tohka immediately started pouting.

“...Origami, you didn’t do that on purpose, did you?” she demanded.

“Do what?” Origami stared at her blankly.

“Your score. Why exactly one centimeter more than me?”

“Pure chance.”

“...Really? I think you were zero point one kilos more than me on the dynamometer, too.”

“Also chance.”

“And one centimeter farther than me on the ball toss.”

“Chance.”

“Mm...” When Origami declared it so firmly, Tohka started to feel like maybe it really was chance. But that didn’t feel right. She continued, her eyes still on Origami. “Okay, then. Next one you go first, Origami. Then I’ll agree it’s just chance.”

“I can’t.” Origami shook her head, ever so slightly.

“So you *are* doing it on purpose!” Tohka shouted. But Origami was already not looking at her. Instead, she was glancing across the yard, toward where the boys were doing their physicals.

It looked like they were still doing the ball toss. Now that she was thinking about it, she felt like there’d been some kind of commotion earlier when the boys did the grip strength test. Maybe there’d been a major problem that made the test take longer.

“Mm?” She noticed then that Shido was up at the front doing the ball toss. She frowned. As Shido moved toward the starting position, he staggered and wobbled like a sick person. “Mm. Is Shido okay?”

“He really does look ill,” Origami agreed. “I’ll have to take him to the nurse’s office. In a princess carry.”

“Hold it! Why does it have to be a princess carry?!” Tohka grabbed onto Origami’s hand just as she heard a strange loud whistling sound and watched something shoot up from Shido’s hand toward the sky.

“Huh...?”

She could clearly make out someone’s stunned voice. It was completely understandable. This ball didn’t travel along an arc; it carved out a line so straight it, could have been drawn with a ruler as it ripped through the clouds and vanished in the distance. It was less ball and more ballistic missile. A line of smoke appeared like a vapor trail, until it finally melted away into the air—perhaps the friction with the atmosphere burned away the surface of the ball?

“.....”

Silence enveloped the schoolyard.

The only one who said anything was Miku, who murmured, “Bye-bye, baby.” No one had a comeback for that.

In the end, Shido’s abnormally wild throw was explained away as the sudden appearance of a powerful upstream air current. Or it might have been more accurate to say that no one could process what had happened without this level of rationalization. Either way, the fitness tests proceeded, and a half an hour or so after the commotion, they were at last recording times for the 50-meter dash.

“Okay. Next up, we’ve got Yatogami, Tobiichi, and Yamabuki for the girls. Tonomachi, Asai, and Itsuka for the boys. Take your marks,” the student in charge instructed.

Tohka nodded and took her place before the white line. Origami and Ai followed suit. The boy students stepped up behind them, and Shido staggered to the line.

“Mm.” She frowned. “Shido, you’re all wobbly. If you feel sick, maybe you shouldn’t push yourself?”

“Mm. Yeah... I’m okay,” he said, waving a dismissive hand at her.

Tohka pursed her lips. She was anxious, but if he said he was okay, then maybe it wasn’t her place to push it further.

“Okay, let’s get started. The average for boys is seven point three eight seconds, and for girls, it’s nine point zero two. Good luck, gang.” The student in charge raised their hand to give the signal.

Tohka and the others crouched down and took up starting positions.

“Ready...set, go!” The appointed student swung their hand down.

Tohka poured everything into her legs and launched her body forward. She left the boys behind and raced across the field. But right when it seemed like she raced far ahead, a shadow appeared beside her—Origami.

“Ngh!” She looked at Origami out of the corner of her eye. One glance at

Origami told Tohka the other girl was keeping some strength in reserve. Most likely, she was planning to pull past Tohka right before the finish line and win by 0.1 seconds, just like with the other events.

“As if...!” She clenched her fists and picked up her pace. But Origami adjusted her own speed to match and stayed right by Tohka’s side. They continued to get faster as their competition heated up.

But then she realized with a gasp that in her intense desire to beat Origami, she surpassed anything an ordinary high school girl could achieve.

“Oh no...”

It would draw unwanted attention if she accidentally set some kind of record. And that might cause problems for Ratatoskr, who’d been so kind in securing a place for Tohka and the other Spirits to live. So what exactly could she—

A shadow whizzed by her at incredible speed.

“Mm?”

After a heartbeat, she realized it was Shido racing across the field like a firework shooting up into the night sky.

“?! I-Itsuka... Your time’s four point three eight seconds!”

“What?!”

“Hold up. Isn’t the world record like five point five six seconds?!”

“And Itsuka was just sort of standing there for a bit after the start, right?!”

“Huh? So then how many seconds was he actually—?!”

The students at the finish line erupted.

“Hmm... What’s everyone so surprised about...” But Shido himself seemed to be entirely unconcerned about his time or any of the commotion. He shook his head like he was having trouble focusing and then collapsed on the ground.

“Shido!”

“Shido!”

Tohka and Origami ran even faster, crossing the finish line to race over to

Shido's side.



Something was strange.

Shido's mind was clouded, desperately trying to make sense of things.

He was on a bed in the nurse's office. He'd decided to lie down for a bit because he felt so lethargic, but it wasn't helping. He just kept getting worse. His eyes were blurry, his brain was foggy, his body was hot with fever, and an incredible fatigue lay on top of everything else. If he didn't know any better, he'd swear he caught a bad case of the flu.

That wasn't the main issue.

"...What is happening to me?" He lifted his faintly shaking hand to stare at it.

A few hours earlier, this right hand of his destroyed a dynamometer and turned a ball into a star. Everyone in class, including the gym teacher, had been surprised, but no one found this more shocking than Shido himself. He'd barely put any effort into that throw. And even if he had, it should've been impossible for him to send a ball into orbit. It was almost like—

"...A Spirit..." he muttered. His voice was barely more than a low, hoarse sound.

That's exactly what it was like. That level of strength was on par with Tohka and the other Spirits.

It was true that with a kiss, he could seal away the powers of Spirits who opened their hearts to him. And, while in a limited form, he had also manifested the Angels that were the power of the Spirits and fought with that borrowed strength. But today was the first time this power had appeared without him being aware of it at all, in a situation where there were no enemies to fight, and no one was in any kind of danger.

"What on earth..."

"Shido!" The curtain drawn around the bed was yanked open.

He thought the nurse had returned from wherever she went, but no. It was his little sister Kotori in her junior high uniform.

“Huh? Kotori? What are you doing here?”

“Tohka messaged me,” she explained. “They said you got a fever and collapsed. And that you were strong as a Spirit somehow. Goes without saying that something’s seriously up with you.” Kotori studied him closely.

“Do you...know what this is?” he asked. “I’ve felt weird for a few hours now. I don’t know what’s what...”

“...At any rate, we’ll get you checked out in the Ratatoskr facility. I’ve got a car around back of the school. Can you walk?”

“Yeah... I’m okay to do that much at least.” Shido slowly got out of bed and put on his shoes. He took Kotori’s offered hand and left the nurse’s office with her. “Ungh...”

He staggered down the hallway on unsteady feet. At some point, the lunch break had apparently started. He could see students with their lunches here and there. Some of them noticed Kotori in her junior high uniform and curiously watched Shido walking with her support, but he didn’t have the brainpower to deal with them now. He actually wanted to go back to the classroom for his bag and books, but climbing the stairs would’ve been a struggle. He could ask Tohka to grab his stuff for him later.

“Shido! Kotori!” Tohka’s voice rang out up ahead.

He slowly lifted his face and saw that in addition to Tohka, Origami and the Yamai sisters were coming toward him at a trot.

“Gang... What’s up? What are you doing here?” he asked, and the Yamais struck poses.

“Know you not? The lunch break is upon us, and thus we were making our way to the infirmary to confirm your condition.”

“Question. What is wrong, Shido? Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“Oh,” he said. “Today’s kinda... I’m going home early. Kotori got a car, so we were just about to head out.”

The four girls nodded in understanding, and Origami stepped forward.

“Then I will lend you my shoulder,” she declared. “I will also lend you my

bottom. Grab hold, Shido.”

“Mm...” Tohka started to say something in response but then stopped. She might have been frustrated that Origami got the jump on her, but seeing the poor state Shido was in, she had no doubt decided that this was not the time for arguing.

“Mm... Thanks. But it’s just outside, I should be o—Ah!” Shido staggered and had to throw a hand up against the window on his left to catch himself.

A dry cracking sound rang out as a web of lines raced out from the spot where his hand had landed, sending shards of glass flying.

“Huh...?!” he shouted. Shido could only gape at the window. It offered much better ventilation now.

Students in the area turned and stared, eyes wide. Ai-Mai-Mii, who just happened to be in the hallway, cried out.

“Huh? That sound just now...”

“Whoa, wait. The window’s broken!”

“What? Is Itsuka going around and breaking all the school’s windows? What is this? Graduation?”

“N-no, I wasn’t...” In his bafflement, Shido pulled away from the window and ended up pressing a little too hard on the nearby wall. Even though he’d barely touched it, his hand sank in like it was sponge cake.

The unbelievable sight stunned Ai-Mai-Mii once more.

“Whoa! Uh! What the—?!”

“He destroys everything he touches?!”

“That’s just like the song ‘Jagged Heart’!”

“Sh-Shido!” Tohka said, worried. “What’s going on with you? This is...”

“I haven’t the slightest...” He narrowed his eyes. The crumbling wall sent fine particles of building material into the air and straight up his nose.

“Ah-ah-choooo!” he sneezed.

Gale force winds whipped through the corridor like a typhoon passing through. Windows creaked, loose papers danced into the air, and girls' skirts were blown wide open.

"Whoa?!"

"....."

"Eeeeeeeaaaah!"

"Disturbance. What are you doing?"

"I—I don't... Hngh..." Shido staggered, his head spinning, and then he keeled over onto the hallway floor.



"I never dreamed Devil would fall into Ratatoskr's hands." Managing Director Isaac Westcott sighed quietly in a room at the Japanese branch office of DEM Industries. The man in his midthirties wore a suit so black it looked like he was cloaked in the deepest shadows. He had distinctive dark ash-blond hair and eyes like blades, the latter of which were currently focused on the documents spread across his desk.

"Apologies," the Nordic blond girl standing to one side said. This was Ellen Mathers. Leader of the second enforcement division and one of the true shot callers at DEM, she wore the crown of most powerful Wizard in the world.

Westcott shrugged theatrically and shook his head. "No need for you to apologize. I also failed to anticipate the Devil situation. However..." He sighed. "It truly is regrettable that we let such a valuable sample slip through our grasp. A naturally inverted Spirit... Outside of Princess, I've never set eyes on a more perfect inversion."

He turned his chair around and looked out the window.

Three months earlier, he and Ellen had succeeded in capturing the Spirit known as Princess and inverted her. It had cost them the Japanese branch office and the surrounding facilities, plus a large number of weapons and Wizards, but that was a small price to pay.

The half-destroyed office building and facilities had already been completely

restored with Realizers, and they could simply make more Bandersnatches. He did rue the loss of talented Wizards, but if he thought of them as the keystone to securing his true ambition, then they were simply unavoidable sacrifices.

“Of course, a Spirit has never appeared already inverted. What could have possibly pushed Devil to the edge of despair in such a glorious fashion? My curiosity only grows. I’d gladly ask her myself, were that possible.” Westcott stood up. “At any rate... Ellen, there was a call earlier from the facility on Neryl Island.”

Ellen arched an eyebrow at the mention of that place. Neryl Island was a small island in the Pacific owned by DEM with an experimental underground facility. There was a good reason Ellen recognized the name. Deep inside that facility lived DEM’s greatest secret—the uniquely catastrophic creature Ellen had captured was confined there.

“It seems the *processing* of Material A is complete. Princess’s inversion was a great step forward for us. Projected success rate is seventy-five percent. Not too shabby, if I dare say so.”

“You mean...?” Ellen asked, and Westcott’s mouth curled into a smile.

“Mm-hmm. It’s about time we created our own perfect inversion.”

Chapter 2

The King's Procession

Kotori faced the stuffed toys seated at the round table in an underground Ratatoskr conference room. Naturally, however, she wasn't actually talking to plushies. Each had a speaker beneath it, connected with a member of the Ratatoskr's top executives scattered around the world.

"Commander Itsuka. What is the meaning of this?" The voice that came from the speaker by the mouse with the crying face was exactly as pathetic as the face of the toy. *"I thought the possibility of Shido Itsuka rampaging was extremely low?"*

"...There's no mistake in the data," Kotori said solemnly. "This should never have happened. I take full responsibility."

"Do you think you taking responsibility changes anything?" The stuffed bulldog with an exaggerated string of drool hanging from its mouth raised a voice in anger. *"He's accumulated the powers of eight Spirits. If he loses control... Do you have any idea of what kind of damage he could cause?!"*

"Calm yourself," the ugly cat toy said as if to check this sudden outburst. *"This is exactly the kind of contingency Dáinsleif was constructed for, yes?"*

"...!" Kotori frowned in disgust. Now that she was thinking about it, it had been this ugly cat that insisted they agree to a certain condition before approving the strategy of sealing the Spirits using Shido's ability.

"...Shido Itsuka is a special existence to the Spirits. If we kill him now, is it possible that all the Spirits could lose control and in the worst case, invert?"

"Yes, normally, that would be the case. But I wonder if things aren't a bit different now?"

"You mean... Well, either way, you're aware that if we moved forward with

this, all the Spirit power we've collected thus far would be lost, yes?"

"I know that. But isn't that better than risking the worst-case scenario?"

The idiot dog fell silent; it had no good response. In this situation, that couldn't be interpreted as anything other than agreement.

"....."

Kotori gritted her teeth. They were all getting on her last nerve.

They couldn't have seen her annoyance, however. The ugly cat continued speaking, this time addressing Kotori.

"All of which is to say, Commander Itsuka. Please handle him if it comes to that. This is your duty."

"....."

Squelching the urge to dive into the speaker connection and punch the arrogant ugly cat right in the face, Kotori opened her mouth to respond. But before she could speak, the stuffed squirrel sitting at the far end of the round table—Elliot Woodman, Rounds Chairperson, raised his own voice.

"You must not misunderstand, Commander Itsuka."

"What...?"

"Your most important task is not to bring down the hammer in case of the worst. It is to ensure that the worst does not happen."

"...!"

"We're counting on you, Commander Itsuka."

"Yes, sir!" Kotori snapped to attention and bowed.



Several hours after Shido collapsed, Tohka and the others were in a large rest area, still in their school uniforms. They had all come to Ratatoskr's underground facility. Along the wall were several vending machines, monitors, and decorative plants, with tables and chairs set out in the space randomly. Normally, crew members would chat here during breaks, but the mood at the moment was the oppressive air of a hospital waiting room during surgery.

After Shido collapsed, the group took him outside, rendezvoused with the Ratatoskr contact, and rode along to this facility with Shido. They'd been told they might as well go home for the time being since the treatment and analysis would take time, but Tohka, Origami, and the Yamai sisters weren't going anywhere. If something happened to Shido while they were away... When they thought about that, they found it impossible to go home.

"I hope Shido's all right," Tohka murmured for the nth time in the quiet room.

No one reproached her for it. Of course not. They all carried the same anxiety in their hearts.

"I'm sure...he's fine."

"Yeah, totally. If everyone's taking care of him, he'll be back to full speed in no time. Aah, or would that make his temperature go up?"

Responding to Tohka were the small girl sitting across from her and the rabbit puppet she wore on her left hand. Yoshino and her friend Yoshinon. She was a Spirit like Tohka and the others who lived in the apartment building next door to the Itsuka house. The moment she heard the news about Shido, she came running.

"R-right. And Kotori and Reine are with him. I'm sure he's..." But just as Tohka was about to agree, the girl sitting next to Yoshino with a grim look on her face opened her mouth.

"...Nah, I dunno. Sometimes, the worst does happen. Just in case, we better brace ourselves," she said as if she wanted to make them feel even gloomier than they already did.

A terrified look crossed Tohka's face. "Y-you can't be—"

"Silence! Do not give voice to such inauspicious words!"

"Rebuke. That's right, Natsumi. Tohka will take you seriously."

Natsumi flinched when the Yamai sisters raised their voices. Her hunched back became even more hunched as she shrank into herself.

"But in my experience...", she said in protest, "...if I have to choose between getting knocked down from a place of hope and getting knocked down when

you've braced yourself for the worst, I'll take the latter every time."

"That makes it sound like getting knocked down is inevitable!" Kaguya half shrieked.

"...S-sorry." Natsumi averted her eyes apologetically.

After that, silence descended once more. The ticking of the clock on the wall seemed excessively loud.

"Still," Origami said, breaking the silence. "He may not have been feeling well, but Shido's condition today was abnormal. He was almost like...a Spirit who can't control her powers."

"....."

Tohka and the Yamai sisters groaned. They had also seen Shido in action that day.

Shido had actually fallen ill a number of times before. When he'd been laid up with the mumps or something, she felt like he'd had a really hard time of it. But just as Origami said, his condition that day had been very clearly different from those other times.

"You mean...," she said hesitantly, "Shido's a Spirit, too?"

"I don't know." Origami shook her head, her expression unchanging. "But. I definitely don't believe Shido's a normal human being. To start with, no one's even explained to us why he is able to seal away Spirit powers."

"...So you're saying Shido and Ratatoskr are hiding something from us?" This came from Natsumi, who was hiding behind Yoshino.

"I wouldn't go that far. It's possible that Shido himself and Ratatoskr don't fully grasp the true nature of his ability or the reasons for it. But even setting that aside, there are just too many mysteries surrounding this organization." Origami continued, coolly. "I'm grateful they saved me. So much that I can't put it into words. But why is Ratatoskr trying to safeguard Spirits in the first place? I highly doubt they're pouring vast sums into such risky work for no return."

"That's..." Tohka pursed her lips in a frown.

Actually, it wasn't only Tohka. Kaguya, Yuzuru, Yoshino, and Natsumi all fell

silent, their eyes focused on Origami.

Everyone thought Origami was probably right. Not knowing anything of this world, Tohka hadn't considered this question at first, but after living as a human being, she came to more or less understand the incredible power of Ratatoskr.

And this organization was going to great lengths for Tohka and the other Spirits. She'd accepted these kindnesses as if they were only natural, so she hadn't really given it too much thought. But without their help, she and the others wouldn't have even been able to go to school.

Why did Ratatoskr show them such hospitality? She had no answer for this.

"Mm..." She groaned just as the door opened and Kotori and Reine came inside.

"Kotori!" Tohka cried out.

Kotori shrugged as she looked around the room. "Yes, Tohka. Sorry Shido caused you some trouble back there." She cocked her head, as if picking up on the strange mood in the room. "...? What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." Origami shook her head as if to change the subject. "More importantly, how is Shido?"

"...?" Kotori looked at them all again curiously but then quickly nodded. "All right, I'll explain, but... Looks like Miku's still on her way, yeah?"

Reine spoke quietly. "...I've already contacted her, but it seems that she's in Kansai for work at the moment."

"Hmm. Well, can't do anything about that. As long as she gets here sometime today, it should be fine. In that case—" Just as Kotori started to explain, she was interrupted by an intense pounding that was coming from the hallway.

"Daaaaaaaarllllllling!!"

"Eh?" Kotori's eyes grew wide as saucers when someone kicked the door open before throwing her arms around Kotori.

It was a tall girl with bluish-purple hair, impeccably made up and dressed in a dazzling outfit that appeared to be a stage costume with a coat thrown over top.

“M-Miku?!” Kotori cried out.

Miku appeared to pay this no mind and squeezed Kotori ever more tightly as she pressed her cheek to the smaller girl’s. “Are you all right, darling?! When I heard you’d collapsed, I nearly lost my mind! I chartered a helicopter and came flying back! It’s me, your Mikuuuu!”

“Hey.” Kotori tried to push her away. “Calm down—”

“Aaah, my poor darliiing!” Miku cooed. “You’ve gotten so tiny! And your arms and legs are all flabby and squishy! And actually, your skin’s so smooth and soft! Almost like you’re Kotoriiii!”

“Not almost like. I *am* Kotori!” Kotori shouted, and Miku finally opened her eyes with a gasp.

“Goodness, Kotori! What are you doing heeeere? Slipping into my arms without me even noticing! Hee-hee-hee! You loved to be spoiled, too, hmmm?”

“You did this on purpose, didn’t you?! And would you keep your hands to yourself?!” Kotori shoved Miku away to escape her embrace.

“Aww, boo.” Miku pursed her lips into a regretful pout.

“Honestly.” Kotori rolled her eyes. “Go. Take a seat. We were just about to explain what happened to Shido.”

“Ooookay!”

Miku obediently raised her hand and sat down in the nearest chair. Natsumi jumped and shifted to a position where Miku couldn’t see her.

Watching all this with a sigh, Kotori turned her gaze toward Reine. “Okay, Reine, if you would.”

“...Sure.” Reine set the terminal in her hand on the table and began tapping at it. Her screen was soon mirrored on the large monitor embedded in one wall of the room.

“What...?” Tohka said as she looked up at the monitor. It showed a full-body image of Shido, complicated numbers, and what appeared to be graphs.



“This is a visualization of our analysis of Shido. It would have gone a lot faster if we still had *Fraxinus*, but a certain someone went and smashed that ship pretty spectacularly,” Kotori said pointedly.

“Some people will do the most terrible things,” Origami replied nonchalantly, not even a heartbeat later.

Smiling wryly, Kotori shrugged. “Anyway, this is Shido’s current state. See the red line on this graph? That’s Shido’s Spirit wave signal. To be blunt, these values are extreme. But detecting Spirit waves in a human being at all is already out of the ordinary.”

“Mm. I don’t really get it. Why would something like that happen?” Tohka asked.

“Reine,” Kotori signaled. Reine responded by displaying a new image on the monitor.

This one featured Shido in the center with Tohka, Origami, and the other Spirits in a circle around him. Hazy lines linked Shido and each of the Spirits, brightening and darkening in a regular pattern.

“...Think of this as the normal state of affairs. While Shin does have the ability to lock away Spirit power, he doesn’t take all the power from the Spirit and completely isolate it inside of himself. I want you to think of it more like an invisible path that connects him with the Spirit. While he does hold the majority of the Spirit power, it still cycles a little bit.”

As she spoke, Reine tapped at her keyboard. The light that had been in Shido followed along the paths and was distributed among the Spirits.

“...This is an illustration of when your mental state as Spirits becomes unstable. The ratio of Spirit power in you and Shin changes, and you become able to manifest a limited Astral Dress and Angel.”

“Hmm. Comprehensible.”

“Point. Kaguya is pretending to understand.”

“I-I’m not pretending! I *do* get it!”

Kaguya and Yuzuru began squabbling. Reine quietly cleared her throat.

“...Can I continue?”

“Y-yes...”

“Apology. Please go ahead.”

When both of them quietly shrank back, Reine tapped at her terminal once more and brought the screen back to the previous image. “...And this is what’s happening in Shin’s body now.”

As she spoke, the paths between Shido and the Spirits grew thinner, and the movement of light through them slowed.

“Wh-what...?” Tohka stared.

“...Based on our analysis, we found that the paths connecting you all and Shin have narrowed, hindering the cycling of Spirit power.”

“So, then...what will happen to him?” Yoshino asked, her eyebrows pulled together into a worried upside-down V.

Reine nodded slowly. “...The Spirit power that should be cycling has been building up inside Shin, bringing about something akin to an overheated state. This is the cause of his symptoms. Additionally, as the Spirit power has nowhere else to go, it’s now passing through his body and manifesting as abnormal physical ability.”

Reine hit a key, and the image of Shido turned red.

“That’s... That’s real bad, then?!” Tohka slammed the table and leaped to her feet.

“Yes.” Kotori rolled the Chupa Chups around in her mouth as she crossed her arms. “It’s not ideal. If he continues in this state, it’s possible that the Spirit power building up inside of him will go out of control. An explosion of the Spirit power of eight Spirits. Just thinking about it makes me shudder.”

“I-isn’t there any way to help Shido?!” Tohka pressed Kotori for an answer.

“Of course there is.” Kotori patted the girl’s head reassuringly. “That’s exactly why I called you all here.”

“Mm...?” Tohka stared at her blankly, and Kotori stood up before continuing.

“Basically, all we have to do is bring the paths between us and Shido back to their normal state. So long as we do that, the Spirit power will cycle and Shido’s condition will improve.”

“Y-yeah?!” Tohka nearly jumped for joy.

“But hooooow on earth are we supposed to open the paths?” Miku cocked her head, a finger pressed to her chin.

For some reason, Kotori began to stammer, awkwardly. “Umm, well, that, okay...”

“...Huh? You can’t actually be telling us to do it without knowing how?” Natsumi said rolling her eyes.

“N-no. I know how.”

“...Umm. So...is it super hard to do...or something?” Yoshino asked.

“No,” Kotori said slowly. “It’s not that.”

“Teeeeell us,” Miku entreated her. “What do we have to do to save my precious daaarlign?”

“W-well...” When Kotori was pressed for a reply, her cheeks reddening deeply, Reine stepped in, as if she couldn’t stand to watch this anymore.

“...Kiss him,” she said.

“Huh?”

“What did you...?”

They stared in surprise, and Reine nodded.

“...Shin kisses to lock away the power of Spirits. In other words, this act is what creates the path between you. In order to open up the constricted paths, you’ll all have to kiss Shin again.”

“I—I get that...” Tohka nodded slowly and then touched a finger to her lips. She had indeed kissed Shido that time when her powers were sealed. If that was what built the path between them, then it made sense that it could be opened back up by doing the same thing again. But.

“Mm?” Having thought this far, Tohka craned her neck, confused. “Wait a

minute, Reine. Does that mean that Shido has kissed all of us?”

“...? Ohhh, yes. That’s right,” Reine agreed, slightly confused herself.

Tohka’s eyes flew open wide. “Wha—I-is that true?!”

“Huh?” Miku frowned. “Did you not knooooow, Tohka?”

“Umm. So then how did you think he sealed our powers?” Kaguya asked.

“Mm...? I just sort of...” Tohka put a hand to her chin, deep in thought. The basic problem here was that kissing and sealing were not the same thing for her.

“I guess. So that’s how it works?”

Tohka had told Shido that she wanted him to help the Spirits. But at the same time, she’d also told him not to kiss anyone else.

“Mm.” She finally knew why Shido had looked so troubled at the time. Whatever else it meant, the kiss was an essential element in sealing away a Spirit’s powers. Completely unknowingly, she had forced him to promise the impossible.

“Umm, Tohkaaaa?” Miku said, peering at the face of Tohka deep in thought.

Tohka lifted her face with a gasp. “Okay. I’ll do it! I can do this! Shido saved me. Now it’s my turn to save Shido!”

The other Spirits chimed in, as well.

“I’ll...do what I can...too!”

“Hmph. This guy’s a lotta work.”

“Kah-kah! Awakening with a caress of the lips is like a fairy tale!”

“Assent. It’s Sleeping Shido.”

“Hmm? What’s that? Could you maybe tell me a liiiiittle more about this story?”

“...And *that’s* what you dig your teeth into.”

“That’s fine. Saving Shido *and* getting to kiss him is double the pleasure, double the fun. No objections.”

Reine nodded slowly at this response from the Spirits. "...Thanks. Then we'll get straight to business and show you to Shin's hospital room. It'll be painful for him if we let this go on too long."

"Mm, I'm ready!" Tohka clapped her hand to her chest and stood up. The others followed suit, nodding with determination.

But when Reine was able to lead them all out of the room, she abruptly stopped and looked back. "...Oh, right. You can go into his room one at a time in case you're embarrassed to kiss him in front of everyone else. What do you think?"

The Spirits looked contemplative, as if imagining themselves kissing Shido. Color immediately appeared on their cheeks.

"Mm. I'd appreciate it if we could do that."

"R-right..."

"Heh! The eyes of all who witness my kiss will suffer an inescapable curse."

"Translation. Kaguya is saying that she is embarrassed."

"I—I didn't say that!"

It seemed that everyone was fairly self-conscious about being seen doing the deed. There was one lone girl who said "Whaaat? I'm perfectly fiiine with that. In fact, I'd almost prefer to have everyone line up alongside my daaaarling and have them kiss him in his sleep." Of course, she was an outlier.

"...Hmm. Then how about we decide on the order to go in?"

"Yes, we'll do just that," Kotori said, and the Spirits nodded.

However...

"I don't mind being last. And I want you to tell me if there's a lock on the door. It would be even better if it was soundproofed." The instant Origami said this, everyone's eyebrows shot up.

"...On second thought, I think it would be better if you all went in together," Reine said.

"Right," Kotori agreed. "That does seem better."

“Why?” Origami cocked her head, but the others ignored her and followed Reine out of the room and down the hallway.

After a few minutes, Reine stopped in front of a door. “...This is it. He’s probably still sleeping, so be quiet going in.”

“Mm, got it.” Tohka bobbed her head in agreement and slowly opened the door.

The room inside was just like a real hospital room. A large bed sat in the middle of the 18-m² white space. And on top of this, the figure of Shido groaning in his sleep...

...was not there.

“Mm...?”

“What the...? Shido’s...”

The group opened their eyes wide in surprise. It was easy to tell why. The bed where Shido was supposed to be sleeping held only an indentation of the body that had been lying there recently. The only other things there were an IV that had been casually yanked out and a scattering of electrodes that had been attached to the missing body.



There was an unusual amount of activity that day on the small strip of land floating in the Pacific Ocean known as Neryl Island. Ever since it had been purchased by the British company DEM Industries twenty years earlier, the island itself had been deserted—apart from the massive underground research facility, of course.

That said, its existence was certainly not public, and the location of the island was not noted on any maps. Essentially, this facility was for the kind of experiments that would inevitably be a black mark on DEM if they ever came to light.

Thus, the only staff normally stationed here were fifty or so researchers, thirty administrative personnel, and a handful of Wizards for security. If the subjects held in the facility were counted as people, then that number would more than double.

Either way, seen from aboveground, Neryl Island was normally an extremely quiet island, visited only by supply shipments once a week or so and bigwigs from the head office when the whim struck them.

Things were slightly different today. Nearly one hundred Wizards had gathered on the small island. All of them were equipped with wiring suits and CR units, fully prepared for battle. Additionally, over three hundred of the remotely operated Bandersnatches were deployed around the island. If anyone familiar with the island's usual sleepy state saw this, they would be perfectly justified in assuming a war had started.

"...Quite the commotion, hmm?" Knox sighed as he stared from the cockpit of the transport plane sitting on the runway that was jam-packed with Wizards.

His copilot sitting next to him, Burton, nodded in agreement. "I suppose that's just how important *Material A* is." He jerked a thumb toward the rear of the cockpit.

Yes. They were entrusted with the transport of very important cargo that had been enshrined in the depths of Neryl Island codenamed Material A.

"Well, I guess that makes sense. Still, this is a lot. Look at all those Wizards. They expecting the Seventh Fleet to attack or something?" Knox joked, and Barton responded with a wry smile.

Then Knox forced himself to blink.

A small human figure had appeared in the middle of the runway, directly ahead of the plane.

"Mm?" At first, he thought it was a Wizard or one of the island's research staff, but no. It was a young girl. In a dress that seemed like a cloak of shadow and blood, her black hair pulled up to either side, asymmetrically. And in her left eye, he could see something that looked like the face of a clock.

"What the...? But Halloween was a couple months ago already," Knox said dubiously. At the same time, the Wizards on the runway noticed the presence of the girl a heartbeat later than he had. They turned their guns on her and cried out in tense voices.

"*Who are you?! How did you get in here?!*" He heard the Wizard's voice over

the radio.

“Kee-hee-hee! I finally found you, Little Spirit Number Two.”

As soon as the girl’s voice crackled over the radio, a shadow stretched out from her feet toward the Wizards with their guns at the ready. A swarm of pale hands sprang out and pulled Wizards into the shadow.

“Wh-what the—What’s happening?!”

“Sh-shadows?!”

“Fools! Don’t get too close! That’s...Nightmare!” one of the Wizards said.

Nightmare’s lips curled up into a hungry grin as the shadow spread out like a carpet across the runway. A group of girls who looked exactly like Nightmare started to crawl out of the inky darkness.

“Aaaaaaah!”

“Stay calm! We have to protect Material A!”

The Wizards readied their CR units, and the Nightmares pulled ancient rifles and pistols out of the shadow, instantly transforming the quiet island into a cruel battlefield.

Defenses that had seemed rock solid fell alarmingly quickly one after another. No matter how many Nightmares the Wizards slaughtered, more girls emerged from the shadows to replace them. There was no end to them. It was only a matter of time before this monster got her hands on the transport plane.

“Captain Knox! We can’t hold! You have to take off!”

“You can’t be serious!” he shouted in disbelief. “The Wizard guards haven’t even boarded yet! And you’re telling me to go down the runaway now?!”

“There’s no other way! Go!” the Wizard commanded.

“Hngh!” Scowling, Knox tightened his grip on the control column.

The low rumble of the transport plane’s engines steadily grew louder. Nightmare’s keen ears couldn’t miss it. Kurumi Tokisaki grinned broadly. She brandished the rifle in her hand and issued orders to the other Kurumis. “We simply can’t let them escape. Right, me’s?”

Several of her avatars flew at the transport plane.

However...

“...!”

She heard something like a gasp as the heads of five charging avatars flew into the air as one. A few seconds later, their bodies dropped to the ground, spasming and spraying blood.

“...Oh dear. Oh my?” Narrowing her eyes, Kurumi looked over the Wizard that had appeared.

The wiring suit of the girl with the blond hair there was different from those of the other Wizards, with a design that strongly resembled that of Ellen Mathers’s suit. Her face was gentle, with traces of baby fat still visible, even though it currently wore a harsh expression.

Kurumi hummed to herself. At first glance, she could tell that *something* about this girl was different from the other Wizards. Her skill with a Territory. The level of mastery required to remove the head of an avatar in an instant. This was clearly no ordinary person.

“You’re going to be no small bit of trouble, hmm? But did you think I would give up over something so trivial?” Her smile was a challenge.

But rather than responding to this in words, the girl readied the unique laser blade in her hands. “Arondight.”

The avatars nearby flew at the girl as one. But she manipulated her Territory to momentarily slow their movement. In the resulting opening, she charged at Kurumi. After practically bouncing forward, she slammed into Kurumi and ran her through with the laser sword.

“Aaaah—Gah...!” Kurumi stared at the blood gushing from her chest and then at the cloudless blue sky as she fell back onto the runway. A few seconds later, she saw out of the corner of her eye the transport plane roaring as it took to the air.

“Oh dear. Oh my... I—! Was...done in...then...” Kurumi’s bold smile never faltered even as she coughed blood. “But...this isn’t...the end of this, you know?”

/...will have...Miss Number...Two..."

"....."

The girl brandished Arondight again, and Kurumi's consciousness was cut off.



His mind clouded by fever, Shido wandered through town on slow feet. He had the vague sensation his own body was melting, and he wasn't certain he'd be able to maintain his human form. The fact that he was able to stay on his feet seemed miraculous in a way. And yet for some reason, his gait was steadier than it had been earlier. A casual observer probably wouldn't think that he was feeling gravely ill.

"Uh... Umm, what was I doing...?" Shido stopped on the road and cocked his head. He couldn't remember why he was even in this place to start with or where he was going.

He'd been in a strange room when he woke up, with an IV and electrodes connected to his body, like a sick person. When he noticed them, he'd gotten a strange feeling that he couldn't stay there, so he promptly slipped out of the room and went outside. And then after walking for a while, he'd arrived in a familiar town. Wide road with several shops lining it. This was Tengu's main street, where Shido often came to do shopping.

He wasn't sure what time it was, but he spotted students here and there who appeared to be on their way home from school. They were all wearing warm coats, breathing puffs of white as they walked.

"...Huh?"

Here he realized something else that was strange. He looked down and peered at his own clothing. It was the Raizen High School uniform he was used to seeing and wearing. Although he had on the blazer that had been hanging by the side of the bed, he wasn't wearing a coat or anything else to protect against the cold. And yet he hadn't so much as shivered once this whole time. The only reason he even noticed he was missing a coat was because he saw what everyone else was wearing.

It couldn't have been because of his high fever. No, definitely not. It felt

almost like there was a bubble or something around him that he couldn't see, keeping his body at an appropriate temperature.

“Waaaiit? Itsuka?” he heard someone from behind say suddenly, as he stared hazily at his surroundings. “Didn't he go home sick today?”

“Oh, you're right. But he looks like the picture of health now. He's not even wearing a coat, even though it's freezing.”

“So then he was faking. Guilty!”

He looked behind him and found the tight-knit trio from his class, each wearing a different color coat—Ai Yamabuki, Mai Hazakura, and Mii Fujibakama.

“And like, okay, Itsuka. What was that little show at the fitness test today?”

“Riiight? How'd you do that little trick? Were you number one in the draft?”

“Yeah, seriously. Well, I guess we already know that the sneeze typhoon seemed like a manifestation of Itsuka's desire to peep at girls' panties.”

As they spoke, the three girls marched toward Shido. Silently, he turned toward them.

Staring at each of their faces in turn, he set his heat-buoyed brain to work. What on earth did these girls want with him? They'd said all kinds of things *at* him, but none of them were relevant somehow. He felt like he was half registering their voices as nothing but sound. He contemplated exactly what he should say in response, how he should act, and—

“Ohhh... Right...” He landed upon a single answer.

Before him now were girls. In which case, there was just one thing he should do.

“Yamabuki, Hazakura, Fujibakama,” he said in a quiet voice. “Now that I'm really looking at you, you're cuter than I realized.” He regarded them with serious eyes.

Yes. The thing that Shido should do when faced with a girl. The act he'd carried out any number of times to save the world. When he met a girl, he had to make her weak in the knees.

The chatting girls froze as though he had hit the pause button. And then after a few seconds, they furrowed their brows dubiously.

“Uh?”

“So suddenly it’s jokes?”

“Heat is one thing, but apparently this is the rare case when the cold does someone’s head in.”

Ai-Mai-Mii spoke, one after the other. But Shido didn’t smile or laugh it off; he was very serious.

“It’s not a joke. All three of you are super cute. Why didn’t I notice that before now? Yamabuki—no, Ai.” As he said her first name, he took her hand.

Ai’s eyes flew open in surprise. “Huh?!” She gasped like she’d remembered something and covered her lips with her free hand.

Regardless, Shido continued, a gentle smile filling his face. “I know what a kind person you are. I appreciate how you’re always watching out for Tohka. But at some point, I realized a part of me kept looking over Tohka’s shoulder trying to find you.”

“Uh. Um,” Ai stammered. “Itsuka? I. Uh…”

“Yeah, I know. You like Kishiwada in the class next door. It really is true that a young lady in love is beautiful,” he told her, his eyes intent on hers. “Makes me a little jealous.”

“Heeyaff!” Ai turned beet red and took a step back.

Shido grinned and next took the hand of Mai beside her. “Mai.”

“E-eeeah!” Mai let out a nervous cry. She had witnessed what just happened with Ai.

“You always call yourself average, but I don’t think that’s true. I mean, you don’t have to go out of your way to dress up or play a character. Just you being you, Mai, that alone makes you special to me.”

“Hapah!” These words likely tugged on Mai’s heartstrings. Like Ai, she flushed and turned away.

Shido next touched the hand of the third girl. “Mii.”

“Wh-what?” Mii had a complicated look on her face, on guard but also somehow expectant.

“Now that I’m thinking about it, out of the three of you, you’re the one with the most secrets. At first, it was simple curiosity. But as I talked with you more, I started wanting to see the other side of this mysterious mask. I want you to show me everything.”

“Bahowah!” When he brought his face in close with that last line, smoke shot out of Mii’s ears.

Shido chuckled, took a step back, and snapped his fingers. For some reason, his brain understood intuitively that doing so would make something happen.

The already low temperature dropped even further, and the moisture in the air froze, creating glittering crystals around him. He moved his hand from down low to up high, and the ice crystals followed this path, coming together in the shape of a rose. He did this three times and then handed a transparent flower to each member of Ai-Mai-Mii.

“Please, my princesses,” he said with a theatrical flourish.

“Wh-what the—?!”

“Wow... Magic?”

“It’s cold! This is real?!”

Ai-Mai-Mii’s faces were filled with shock. Shido smiled and kept talking.

“That flower is me—an ephemeral being that melts when the seasons change, or even in the palm of your hand. But if its form will linger in your eyes and hearts for even the briefest of moments, then I will have no regrets.”

He held up a finger and blew on it. Icy flower petals danced up into the air from the tip.

“I know well enough that you don’t feel anything for me. And I would never force you to be mine. But would you permit me to at least continue to feel for you, Ai, Mai, Mii, in the depths of my heart?” Shido held out a hand, and Ai-Mai-Mii’s faces grew even redder as they cried out loudly in turmoil.

“Wh-whoaaaaaaa!”

“I—I won’t forget this, god damn!”

“I don’t really understand what you’re saying, but you’re definitely pulling something!”

And then they ran off, clutching the flowers of ice.

Shido didn’t chase after them. Instead, his face relaxed into a gentle smile. “Heh-heh... You naive princesses are cute, too.”

Then he gasped.

“Wait. What the hell am I saying...?” He unconsciously pressed a hand to his forehead. The instant he’d had Ai-Mai-Mii before him, he’d been overcome with the compulsion that he had to seduce them. On top of that, he’d used Spirit power completely effortlessly just now. The ability to manipulate water and cold air with a single finger. That was without a doubt the Spirit power of Hermit aka Yoshino.

“What is going on? Did I just...” His expression turned into a scowl just as another voice called to him from up ahead.

“Oh my. Shido? What are you doing here?”

He turned in that direction and found a small woman in glasses standing there. It was his homeroom teacher, Tamae Okamine, aka Tama. The moment he spotted her, he went down on bended knee with a sorrowful look on his face.

“Please forgive me, Ms. Okamine!”

“What?! Wh-why on earth would you...?” Tama was clearly surprised at the suddenness of it all.

Shido lifted his face, still in the posture of a knight serving his queen, and looked straight into her eyes as he continued. “I... I was afraid. Even as I told you that I wanted to marry you, I worried whether or not someone like me would really be able to support you when it came right down to it.”

“I-Itsuka...”

“But I’ve finally made up my mind,” Shido said passionately. “I want to put you in a wedding dress while you’re still in your twenties!”

“Haawah!” Tama did a little dance on the spot and pressed a hand to her chest like her heart might break through. “R-really, Itsuka?! I—I mean...I’ve only got three months left in my twenties, though?!”

“Even if we can’t make it official, we should be able to have the wedding ceremony at least!” he insisted. “We’ll have the ceremony in a chapel now, and once we sign the papers, we’ll do it before God!”

“What?! That’s wonderful?!” Tama cried out, hands on her cheeks.

Not slowing down for even a second, Shido took a fairly large rock from the nearby flower bed and held it up toward her. “Ms. Okamine—I mean, Tamae, please accept this.”

“Huh? Accept that?” Tama got a dubious look on her face and peered at the stone in his hand. “It’s just a rock, though, isn’t it?”

A small smile appeared on Shido’s face as he covered that hand with the other and blew into them. When he opened them up again, what had been nothing more than a rock he found by the road was now a beautiful ring box.

“Eeek! Is this...” Tama’s eyes grew round as saucers. Shido slowly opened the box to reveal the silver engagement ring inside.

At the same time, a loud voice called out, as if to draw the attention of the passersby, “C’mon, let’s all congratulate Tamae!”

“...!”

The strangers who had been walking through the area jumped in unison before they turned toward Shido and Tama, clapping.

“Congratulations!”

“You look so good together!”

“Whoaaaaa! Felicitations!”

“Huh? Uh?” A baffled expression sprang onto Tama’s face, and she whirled her head around, staring.

Shido raised a hand up high and snapped his fingers. A glittering mirror appeared above his head and scattered light over the area. In the next moment, the bags and umbrellas in the hands of the passersby were transformed into musical instruments like trumpets and violins, and a magnificent performance began.

Felix Mendelssohn's iconic "Wedding March" was playing. Everyone had heard this song at least once. The melody of many a girl's dreams.

Astonished at first, Tama quickly concluded that Shido must have hired a flash mob. Gradually, the look on her face changed to one of ecstasy.

"Tamae." Shido looked up at her solemnly. "Will you marry me?"

"...Yes!" Tama squealed, cheeks flushed, and she began digging in her bag. "Ah! I can't believe I'd forget the marriage registration form! Pl-please wait just a minute, Itsuka—I mean, honeybunches!"

She raced off, forgetting to take the ring with her.



"Hngh. Who said winter in Japan is nothing? It's plenty cold!" leader of DEM Industries' second enforcement division, Ellen Mathers, shivered as she walked the streets of Tengu. Her most notable features were her Nordic blond hair and her milky skin, but now she also had a toasty coat wrapped around her, and a warm Russian hat sat atop her head.

When she'd been in her home country of England, one of her subordinates had said that winters in Japan were "basically nothing" so she'd let down her guard. Only now did she recall that particular subordinate was from Alaska. While it wasn't exactly that subordinate's fault, Ellen decided to put together a special training course for her when they met again.

Ellen was widely recognized as the world's strongest Wizard. She could operate a Realizer without a wiring suit, so it was an easy matter to deploy a Territory around her body and adjust the temperature. However, using a Realizer outside of a mission was not looked upon favorably, and more importantly, her own immense pride kept her from using a Realizer for something as trivial as being cold.

The fact was Tokyo was at fault here. If it were somewhere else in Japan like Hokkaido or the Tohoku region, her excuses would have had legs. But this was fairly south even for the Kanto region, and a city considered humid subtropical according to the Köppen climate classification system. Ellen M. Mathers, the world's most powerful Wizard, refused to bend to the cold in such a place.

"Ah... Ah-choo!" Just when she thought she felt a tickling in her nose, a shrill sneeze slipped out of her. "Ngh..."

Ellen pressed a hand to her mouth and looked around to check that no one had heard this odd physical phenomenon. Fortunately, none of the pedestrians seemed to have noticed. She let out a sigh of relief and started walking once again.

"...Maybe I should have actually done this at the coffee shop in the company building," she muttered to herself.

Since she had finished her afternoon duties early, Ellen was on her way to a café in the city to enjoy some afternoon tea and take a little break. It wasn't that she disliked the employee coffee shop. But the DEM café didn't offer her favorite—strawberry shortcake.

She lifted her face abruptly and peered up at the heavens. The thick clouds blanketing the sky looked like heaping piles of snow floating in the air.

"...From the look of it, snow is actually going to fall sometime this month." As she furrowed her brow ever so slightly, her thoughts raced.

If snow piled up, the road to the café from the branch office would become even harsher. Maybe she should put in a request for strawberry shortcake to be added to the menu at the coffee shop in the building before that happened.

While she walked along, lost in thought, she felt a sudden light impact, almost a tap. She'd bumped into someone coming from the other direction because she'd been looking elsewhere.

"Excuse me. I wasn't paying—" she started as she brought her gaze forward again and then abruptly stopped.

The reason was simple. It was because she had seen this person before.

“...! Shido Itsuka.” Ellen spoke the boy’s name, and her gaze focused to a razor-sharp point.

Standing there was the high school student who was a high priority target like the Spirits—Shido Itsuka. She didn’t know why, but he wasn’t even wearing a coat in this freezing cold, and he seemed a little out of it. Just looking at him made her feel even more chilly.

“Mm... You’re...” At the sound of her voice, Shido turned his eyes toward Ellen. She felt that the expression on his face shift slightly in that instant. Like a light coming alive in his eyes, or maybe it was more like a machine coming out of hibernation mode. Either way, the dazed attitude of a moment earlier was gone, and he stared directly at her.

“Wh-what?” Ellen said guardedly, and took a step back.

But Shido grabbed hold of her hand, as if to say there was no way he was letting her get away. His eyes grew misty, and he moved his lips, half whispering, “Ellen. I’ve wanted to see you all this time.”

“Uh...?” Ellen let out a baffled cry. This was the last thing she’d expected him to say.

“You’re a DEM Wizard,” he went on. “Someone in conflict with us. I know that. I mean, I’ve already had brushes with death more than a few times. But just because we’re enemies doesn’t mean we’re not allowed to feel for each other.”

“...What on earth are you babbling about?” Even when Ellen turned dubious eyes on him, Shido continued speaking, passionately.

“Your face hasn’t left my mind for a second since the day I last saw you, Ellen. Please. Come to Ratatoskr. With me.” He looked deep into her eyes.

Ellen was baffled for a moment, unable to process the situation, but she soon untangled this knot. He was probably staging this sad little bit of theater in order to win over Ellen, the strongest Wizard, stealing her from DEM and bringing her over to Ratatoskr.

“That’s not a very funny joke. Please let go of me,” Ellen spat, and tried to brush away Shido’s hand.

But he only tightened his grip as he pulled her hand toward him and wrapped his other arm around her waist. The other people on the street turned fascinated eyes on them.

“Wha—?” She definitely hadn’t thought he would go this far. Surprise bled onto her face.

“It’s not a joke,” he said with the utmost sincerity. “I... You’re the—”

“Aren’t you taking this prank too far?” Ellen said, cutting him off, and frowned slightly as she focused her mind. The Realizer she’d snuck into her pocket reacted to her mental command and formed a small Territory with a radius of about two meters around her.

Just as the name suggested, this space served the creator’s will and its nature could be freely changed according to her will. Ellen exhaled sharply and pictured Shido’s body being pinned down. Instantly, the gravitational force of her Territory increased, and Shido sank to the ground.

However.

“Wha...?” Her eyes flew open in amazement.

The reason was simple. Shido should have been completely under Ellen’s influence, and yet he was still embracing her and staring at her with entreating eyes.

“This is impossible.”

For a moment, she wondered if her Realizer was malfunctioning. It wasn’t. She could feel that her Territory had been deployed, and the way the sleeves and hems of Shido’s clothing were swaying subtly were signs that they were being pulled downward by a powerful force. The ground he stood on was buckling.

Somehow, despite the fact that her Territory was undoubtedly affecting Shido, he continued to cling to her without so much as a strained twitch of an eyebrow.

This was clearly an anomaly.

Of course, she was holding back. Ellen could produce the most precise

Territory in the world. If she used her full power against an unprotected human being, her target would instantly be reduced to a smear of blood.

That didn't mean the Territory that Ellen had deployed this time was so weak that an average high school boy could stay on his feet. In fact, the time she snuck into the Itsuka house, she'd used the same level of power and Shido hadn't been able to move a muscle. So how on earth...

While she wondered about all this, Shido took a few heavy steps with his arm still around her waist, pressing Ellen up against a wall before tugging her chin up with a finger.

"Ellen," he said. "Please understand. I love you."

"...!"

Ellen scowled, increased the strength of her Territory, enhanced her physical strength, and spun around to knock away Shido's hands.

"Whoopsy!" he said with a laugh.

"Hah—" Using the momentum of her spin, Ellen aimed at his head with her hand. This strike was enhanced by her Territory. Anyone relying on the reflexes of a normal human being would have trouble even perceiving it, much less dodging it.

But Shido easily evaded her strike and snaked his arms around Ellen's body once more.

"Don't underestimate me!" She knocked his hands away with the base of her palm and launched a kick at his solar plexus.

But once again, Shido whirled away in the nick of time, and she caught nothing but air.

Shido dodged, defended, and deftly responded to Ellen's attacks, while Ellen fended off his advances. The game of cat and mouse played out lightning fast. Passersby stopped to gape at the blur of moving limbs that looked like something out of an action movie.

"Ngh..."

Ellen wasn't wearing her wiring suit, but even so, she couldn't believe there

was a human being who could go toe to toe with her when she had her Territory deployed. She gritted her teeth in vexation, grabbed the Russian hat on her head, and threw it as hard as she could at Shido's face.

"Hup!" Naturally, Shido pulled back and evaded the fuzzy projectile without issue.

But she had expected that. She simply needed his field of view to be blocked for a moment.

"Hah!" She threw her leg out in a sharp roundhouse kick in his blind spot. Her timing was exquisite. She should be hearing Shido groaning in anguish any second now.

However...

"Huh...?" Her eyes shot open in surprise. The instant she was sure her kick had landed, Shido vanished like wisps of light. She lost her balance when her kick sliced through empty air, only for Shido to pop back into existence behind her.

"Wha—?"

"Don't make this so hard for me, Ellen," he pleaded sweetly. He took the Russian hat that he had managed to grab at some point and returned it to Ellen's head. Then he wrapped his arms around her legs and scooped her up into the air. It was the famous princess carry.

"Eeah?!" Ellen shrieked at the sudden upending.

Shido smiled gently as if even this reaction was far too lovable.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Ellen narrowed her eyes as she pulled herself back together and manipulated her Territory to try and fling Shido away. But just like earlier, only the hems of his uniform fluttered, while Shido himself didn't so much as flinch.

If she'd been wearing a wiring suit, she could have deployed a Territory so strong that it would make the one she was using now pale in comparison. But she really shouldn't use the emergency equip device under so many watchful civilian eyes. But if it meant breaking away from this guy...

While Ellen hesitated, Shido's lips relaxed into a grin. "Bad girls have to be punished," he said, and slowly brought his lips toward hers.

"Wha...?!" She gasped when she guessed at his intention. "Huh? Um. Hey... Whoa?!"

Eyes darting about in confusion, Ellen kicked and flailed to try and get away from Shido. But he was strong, and she couldn't throw him off. Even if she were to try and increase the strength of her Territory, her mind was in chaos, and she wasn't able to focus properly.

"Pl-please stop. I—"

"Ellen."

She jumped as she felt the warmth of his breath on her and squeezed her eyes shut. But the next moment only brought the soft sensation of a kiss on her forehead.

"...Huh?" At the same time as she very timidly opened her eyes, Ellen felt herself slowly lowered to the ground.

Shido waved a hand at her. "How about we call it a day there? It's not my thing, forcing a girl who doesn't want it. Okay, later. My adorable Ellen," he said, and walked away.

"....."

For a second, Ellen stayed slumped on the spot, stunned, but she soon gasped, and her face turned red. And then she rubbed her face furiously with the sleeve of her coat before clenching her fists and speaking in a venomous voice.

"Shido... Itsuka! I will remember...this humiliation!" Ellen hissed, her eyes red like she had spent the last week weeping. She returned to the office at a brisk pace like the only thing she wanted to do now was escape the eyes of the spectators on the sidewalk.



"Shido! Shido! Where are you?!" Tohka called loudly as she ran around the city with the other Spirits. The residents walking through the area turned

dubious eyes on her, but she paid them not one iota of attention and continued to cry Shido's name desperately.

It had already been nearly an hour since they started the search. At first, they'd turned Ratatoskr's underground facility upside down, but they quickly discovered traces of Shido escaping to the outside, and so Tohka and the Spirits also shifted their search to the world aboveground.

"Mm," Tohka murmured. "Where could Shido have gone as sick as he was?"

"What if... Do you think he collapsed somewhere or something?" Yoshino asked, her brow knitting anxiously.

Tohka couldn't definitively say that he hadn't, given the condition he was in. She looked at Kotori worriedly.

Kotori nodded in understanding. "At any rate, I've taken all possibilities into consideration and put all hospitals in the area under watch. If an emergency patient matching Shido's description is brought in, Reine'll call me."

The words had no sooner left her mouth than a call came in over their earpieces with exquisite timing.

"...*Can you all hear me?*" Reine's sleepy voice hit the drum of their right ears, and they each pressed a hand to them so as not to miss a word of what she said.

"What's up, Reine?" Kotori asked.

"...*Yeah, Shin's been found.*"

"Really?! Where is he?" Kotori asked. "Did he actually collapse somewhere and get taken to a hospital?!"

Reine responded with a slight groan. "...*No, it seems that he hasn't collapsed. In fact...*"

"What...?"

When Reine hesitated, Natsumi got a dubious look on her face.

"...*It'd be faster if you just took a look at him. Come to the location. Main Street, district three.*" She ended the transmission, and Natsumi pursed her lips

in dissatisfaction.

“A-aww, come on. I mean, leaving us hanging like that...”

“But the fact that we know where he is, is good news,” Kotori said. “Let’s hurry!”

They all nodded, and Tohka took off at a run.

“Woh-kay, here we go!” she cried. “To Shido!”

“Tohka, you’re going the wrong way?” Kotori called from behind her. “It’s this way!”

“Mm! Ohhh, it is?” Rather than decelerating, Tohka skillfully turned around with a stomp and a hard pivot. She caught up with Yoshino, who grinned in exasperation while Kotori shrugged and kept running until finally their path met the main road.

“So the main street of third district is basically here, but...”

“Where is my daaaarling, though?”

“...! Everyone, look there...!” Yoshino cried out while they were all whirling their heads around and pointed to a spot farther down the road.

The Spirits turned their eyes in the direction of her finger as one. And then they gasped as one.

But that was only natural. An early snow was falling in a single area, blanketing the surface of the ground in white.

That wasn’t all. Glittering beads of ice danced down out of nowhere to mix in with the snow and took shape as several beautiful candlestands on the side of the wide road. And then flames popped to life one after another on the candlesticks at regular intervals, marking out an aisle.

“I-is that...” Tohka was stunned at this mysterious sight when a boy came walking leisurely, almost swaggering down the center of this aisle.

Familiar Raizen High School uniform, neutral features. There was no mistake. This was the very Shido Itsuka that Tohka and the others had been looking for. He showed no sign of his earlier unsteadiness, and he wasn’t pale like he had

been, either.

“Sh-Shido...?” Tohka frowned, bewildered.

The people on the street gathered round began to applaud and cheer. It looked like they were welcoming Shido.

“Ngh, impudent. What is this entrance? It’s surprisingly a little bit impressive.”

“Point. Kaguya, I feel as though that is not the issue here,” Yuzuru said while Kaguya gritted her teeth in vexation.

While the Spirits did feel relieved that their search was over at last, Kotori’s hands visibly trembled.

“That can’t be...,” she muttered. “Yoshino’s power and my power. And is he influencing the audience using Miku’s power?”

Tohka didn’t understand what was going on with Shido. But seeing Kotori’s reaction, she got the idea that perhaps this wasn’t an ideal situation. She danced out in front of Shido and called out, loudly, “Shido!”

“Hm?” He lifted his face as if he’d only just noticed the presence of Tohka and the other Spirits, and then he slowly walked toward them. “Ohhh, Tohka. And everyone else. What’s going on? You all seem worked up,” he said in his usual gentle manner. No one would have believed that this same boy had been so ill earlier that day, he couldn’t even stand up.

But Tohka had already heard about his condition from Kotori and Reine and knew that he was currently far from normal. The ultimate proof of that was the scene that had just unfolded before her.

“Don’t ‘What’s going on’ me!” Kotori snapped, her voice full of frustration. “Sneaking out of your hospital room in your condition, what were you *thinking*?!”

“Ohhh. Sorry. Didn’t mean to worry you. But I’m okay now. Absolutely no issues. In fact, I’m so okay that I’m stronger than ever,” he said, and he raised a single finger and blew on the tip of it. A fire sprang to life and swirled around him before disappearing.

“Shido, you...” Kotori gaped.

“Ha-ha! Pretty cool, huh? I can do all kinds of stuff now. So I can fight alongside you. It doesn’t have to be only you in danger—”

“Shido!” Kotori half shrieked, and Shido stopped speaking. “Please. Calm down and listen to me. Right now, the paths between us and you are constricted. This is a very dangerous state. If we don’t deal with it immediately, there’ll be no coming back. So please... You have to listen to me.”

“Dangerous state?” He furrowed his brow. “And what exactly do you mean by ‘deal with it’?”

“Well...”

“We all have to give you a paaaassionate kiss!” When Kotori faltered for words, Miku jumped in, wriggling her bottom back and forth.

Shido’s eyes widened for a second, and then he chuckled, a daring grin spreading across his face. “Really? Are you sure this isn’t a story you made up just so you could kiss me, Kotori?” He tugged her chin up with a bewitching flick of his hand.

“Wha—?!” Kotori turned beet red. “You gotta be kidding me. This is not the time—”

“Ohhh,” Kaguya, Yuzuru, Miku, Natsumi, and Origami chorused, nodding as if it all made sense to them now.

“What do you mean, ‘Ohhh’?! ” Kotori shouted.

“I’m kidding.” Shido whirled around, still smiling pleasantly. “My adorable little sister would never tell a lie like that for her own selfish desires, now would she?”

“...! Why, you little...!” Kotori frowned, her face a deep red.

“But I’d hate to lose this power as soon as I get it. Plus, it’d be a real shame to turn kisses with you lovely ladies into some kind of assembly line situation. We’ll never have a chance like this again. Don’t you want to make some beautiful memories together?” Shido winked at them.

Tohka felt a trickle of sweat roll down her cheek at the unfamiliar sight. “...So you’re not feeling sick, Shido?”

“Never been better, actually,” he replied immediately. “My sweet Tohka.”

“M-mm.” Tohka scowled, perplexed. She could sense something was off.

But Shido continued regardless. “So how about this? I will kiss all of you tonight at exactly midnight.”

“Midnight...?” Kotori repeated.

“Midnight’s the time for undoing magic spells, right?” It was possibly the most embarrassing thing he could say, and yet his words seemed impossibly sincere.

“.....”

Kotori felt beads of sweat pop up on her forehead. But Shido paid this absolutely no mind.

“I have just one condition, however.” He snapped his fingers before he announced his request. “Up to now, I’ve made you all weak in the knees to lock away your Spirit power. So now *you* need to make *me* weak in the knees.”

The Spirits’ eyes grew wide in surprise.

“Wha...?”

“Mm...?”

“Weak...in the knees?”

“That’s right,” Shido confirmed. “Well, more precisely, since I already like all of you, that might not be the most accurate way of putting it, but...” He shrugged and grinned before continuing. “However you want to think about it, here’s what you have to do: Make my heart skip a beat or three. Make it so I want to kiss you so badly, I can’t stand it anymore.” He held up the index finger and thumb of his right hand and pantomimed shooting Tohka and the others through the heart. “Bang!”

The Spirits were taken aback by Shido’s proposal, but Kotori soon spoke up, her voice edged with anger.

“Did you not hear me?! This is a race against the clock, okay?! We do *not* have time to screw around!”

“Ha-ha!” Shido grinned at her. “Come on, why not? Just a little. Life is short.

Let's have fun with it."

"You...cannot be serious!!" Kotori shouted, and threw her arms out. "Kaguya! Yuzuru! Pin him down! We'll just have to do this by force!"

"Keh-keh! You are quite the plucky one, Kotori, to consider using us. But in this affair, I shall praise your discerning eye in so swiftly selecting Yamai!"

"Confinement. Shido, prepare."

Kaguya and Yuzuru hurled themselves forward and each grabbed hold of one of Shido's arms.

Stretched out crucifixion-style, Shido opened his eyes wide in surprise. "Hey, whoa. Doesn't this go against Ratatoskr's principles?"

"Shut up! This is because you won't listen to reason!" Kotori shouted with an air of desperation as she strode toward him. "Shido, you like me, right?! Then there's no problem!"

He stared blankly for a moment before his face slackened into a smile. "Ha-ha-ha! I get it. Well, that's true. I do love you, Kotori."

"...!" Her face flushed bright red once more, and Kaguya and Yuzuru smiled wryly.

"The source of those words were her own mouth, and yet she blushes."

"Blush. I feel secondhand embarrassment just watching."

"Sh-shut up, okay! Anyway, I'm going to take my turn at the head of the line!" Kotori said, then stopped moving forward and placed her hands on Shido's cheeks. And then with a nervous look on her face, she slowly brought her lips closer.

"Hmmm..." A playful smile crept onto Shido's face, and an instant later, his body shone with a faint light.

"Wha—?" Kotori gasped.

"You still want to keep going?" said a voice that was not Shido's once the light had faded away.

Actually, that wasn't quite right. Tohka and the others had heard this voice

before.

“Y-you’re...”

“Shiori,” Origami said, in a quiet voice, the name of the *girl* who had appeared before them.

Yes. There was a girl in the place where Shido had been standing until that very second. Although her features were unchanged from Shido’s, her hair was long, and she was wearing a girl’s uniform. Her name was Shiori Itsuka. Shido’s cross-dressing persona.

But it wasn’t only that. To Tohka’s eyes, the Shiori in front of her and the Shiori she’d seen before didn’t look exactly the same.

What was it? The air about her was different somehow from the time Shido had cross-dressed as Shiori. Maybe it was that the lines of her body hinted at an unfamiliar fullness, or maybe it was how the thighs peeking out from the skirt’s hem looked curiously soft.

As Tohka’s thoughts reached this point, a hint of fear came over Kotori’s face.

“Cross-dressing in the blink of an eye,” she said slowly. “You used Natsumi’s transformation ability?!”

“Ding, ding, ding!” Shiori grinned at her. “But that’s only half the answer.”

“...! Y-you didn’t—?!” Kotori gasped, and grabbed at Shiori’s chest with one hand.

“Eeek?!” Shiori cried out, in a strangely erotic way.

Kotori held her breath as she took a step back. “Th-this sensation...”

“Yup.” Shiori nodded, satisfied. “I went *all* the way.”

“Eeagh?!” Kotori shrieked, her whole body shaking.

“Heh-heh.” Shiori smiled broadly, as though Kotori in that moment was so cute she could hardly stand it. “This is on you, Kotori. It’s because you tried to force a kiss on me.”

“Th-that doesn’t mean you can just...!” she protested.

“Now. What’s it gonna be? The paths will open up if you kiss me like this,

right?” Shiori grinned, audaciously.

“Unh...” Although Kotori struggled for words for a second, she soon clenched her hands into fists and raised her voice. “D-don’t think you’ve got me beat—”

“Eeee!” A strange, shrill cry interrupted her. It was Miku. “What? Oh? Is this actual, reaaaal girl mode? Can this really be real? It’s good! I’m fine with you like this! I’ll kiss you riiiiight now!”

“Ah-ha-ha! Right, you’ve got Miku there. Maybe this was a bad move, then?” Shiori scratched her head with a rueful smile.

“Noooo!” Miku shook her head vigorously. “This was a very good move! Time for my kiiiiiiiiss!” she yelled, and flew at Shiori like she was diving into a swimming pool.

But Shiori snapped her fingers, and something like a shining mirror appeared in her hand, radiating a dazzling light.

“Whaaat?!”

“Ngh...!” Tohka automatically covered her eyes at the sudden brightness. “Wh-what? What is going on...?”

A few seconds later, she blinked several times before taking in her surroundings. And then her eyes flew open in surprise at the strange scene she beheld. “Wha—?!”

But her shock was only natural. Because the Spirits there all looked like Shiori now.

“Sh-Shioris everywhere?!”

“Shock. What is happening?”

“Huh? I-I’m...!”

The others had also noticed that things were not as they should be. One after the other, they voiced their confusion. Although just one cried out in excessive excitement, “Eeeeeeeee! Paaaaraaaadiiiiiiiise!”

Tohka looked down at herself and gasped. She couldn’t check her face, but her clothes and her hair had become the same as Shiori’s. And that wasn’t all.

From somewhere nearby, she heard a rumbling that made it seem like the earth itself was shaking. When she glanced in that direction, she spotted a herd of Shioris running toward them.

“Heeeey!”

“You guys!”

“Let us hang, too!”

“Wha—?!” Tohka shuddered at the entirely unexpected and impossible sight.

All the people in the area had apparently also been transformed into Shioris. And they were obeying her will thanks to the influence of her supernatural voice. They clumped together in one spot as if to hide the real Shiori.

“Ngh... O-out of the way!” Tohka pushed Shioris aside. She might have been using Natsumi’s power, but she was sure that she could identify the real Shiori if only she examined them all very carefully. But there were so many of them; she’d never get the chance to get a good look at any single one in the middle of this jostling crowd. She didn’t know who was who, and she had already lost sight of the one they were looking for.

“I-is everyone okay?!” Kotori shouted.

“Y-yes... More or less...”

“Reply. But which one is the real—” Yuzuru started, just as a whirlwind twisted into being and swept a single person up out of the multitude of Shioris and into the air.

“That’s...!”

“Shido!” Tohka cried out.

Yes. Dancing up into the sky, riding on the wind, was Shido, now back in his original form.

“Ha-ha! Sorry, gang. But I wasn’t lying when I said I’d kiss you if you could make my heart race.” He yanked the corners of his mouth up into a grin. “Now. Try making me weak in the knees.”

And then, leaving only these parting words, Shido disappeared into the sky.

Chapter 3

Vacation Time

“.....”

Ellen squared her shoulders angrily as she walked down the hallway of DEM Industries' temporary headquarters. Her mouth was set in a deep frown, creases had popped up between her eyebrows, and the sound of her footsteps was also somehow violent. This was quite strange for Ellen, who took pains as the strongest of all of them to always be graceful in her daily conduct.

But her irritation was only natural. Although she hadn't been wearing a wiring suit, she'd been toyed around with by Shido Itsuka, who was supposed to have been a mere human being. For the proud Ellen, there was no greater humiliation.

“...Ngh!” The more she tried not to think about it, the stronger the image of the boy's irritating face grew in her mind. She gritted her teeth and slammed a fist hard against the wall.

“Ow!” It hurt more than she expected it to. Eyes filling with tears, she crouched down and rubbed her hand.

But she did not have time for this now. Soon after she'd returned to the office, she'd gotten a notice that Westcott was asking for her. Ellen pulled herself together, got into an elevator, headed to Westcott's office, and knocked on the door.

“Ike. It's me.”

“Aah. Come in.”

“Thank you,” she said, and opened the door.

As usual, Westcott was sitting leisurely in his chair, waiting for her. “Sorry to call you up here out of the blue.”

“Not at all. Did something happen to Material A?” she said, still standing at attention. This was about the only reason that came to mind as to why he would need to speak with her.

“Well, yes, there was that, too.” Westcott shrugged exaggeratedly. “Apparently, the transport plane was attacked by Nightmare right before takeoff.”

“By Nightmare...?” Ellen furrowed her brow at the name.

Nightmare, aka Kurumi Tokisaki. Unlike the other Spirits, she was still operating behind the scenes and not under the care of Ratatoskr. DEM had a deep connection with her. In the battle at DEM’s Japan offices, this Spirit had severely damaged their assets.

“Why on earth...,” she started. “Does this mean that Nightmare knows the true nature of Material A?”

“Who can say?” Westcott chuckled as though deeply amused. “But if that is indeed the case...it might be that she wants to *know* something.”

It would be no laughing matter if anything happened to Material A, but the mirth on Westcott’s face didn’t seem to be coming from a show of courage or a simple bluff.

“And the transport plane?”

“It made it out safely, thanks to the Wizards guarding it.”

Ellen narrowed her eyes slightly. “Adeptus Two?”

“Mm-hmm.” Westcott nodded. “It was a magnificent performance, and so soon after taking up her new post. Material A should arrive here this evening.”

“Is that right? That’s excellent news,” Ellen said as a question popped up in the back of her mind. Material A has been stolen by Nightmare; go get it back—that she could understand. But if the plane had managed to take off and was safely on its way, then there was nothing for Ellen to do there. But then she remembered his earlier words.

“You said ‘There was that, *too*’?”

“Mm. I called you about a different matter at hand,” Westcott explained, and

then he continued. “While you were out earlier, a curious Spirit signal was observed in the city. We thought it was a new Spirit, but it was off somehow. The techs said it was almost like multiple Spirit signals forcibly compressed into one.”

“While I was out—Ah!” She recalled a certain incident, and her eyes flew open.

Yes. Ellen had encountered it. A boy with abnormal strength, strength that she could only assume was Spirit power!

“And so I’d ask you—”

“I will handle it,” Ellen declared, before Westcott could even finish speaking, practically champing at the bit.

“You’re raring to go, hmm?” He arched a curious eyebrow. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing. Everything is as usual. I *will* bring the target’s head to you.”

“Actually, if you could, I’d appreciate it if you simply captured it as a sample, mm?” Westcott said, opening his eyes wide in what seemed to be surprise for once.



After Shido ran out on them, Tohka and the others gathered in a briefing room in Ratatoskr’s underground facility. Sitting around the elliptical table, they all had troubled looks on their faces.

“Mm,” Tohka said, propping her elbows up on the table. “What exactly are we supposed to do now?”

The Yamai sisters nodded in agreement.

“First, was that truly Shido? His manner of speech and action were eccentric.”

“Assent. He was quite the gigolo.”

Indeed, the Shido they saw earlier had seemed different from usual. He was strangely brimming with confidence, and the usual Shido would have responded to their request without attaching any weird conditions. And above all else, Tohka felt like the usual Shido would never think to transform into a

complete girl even if he did have access to Natsumi's powers for some reason.

Reine began by confirming their doubts. "...Of course that's Shin. But because of the effects of the high fever and the Spirit power, he's lost quite a bit of self-restraint and is effectively high."

"What? Then does that maybe mean my daaarl意思ing wants to be a girl in his heart of hearts?" Miku squirmed in her seat, eyes glittering.

Reine scratched at her cheek, slowly. "...That I don't know. It could have simply been a means of escaping from you."

"Either way, it doesn't change the fact that we've got a real situation on our hands. Ngh." Kotori crunched her Chupa Chups to pieces in annoyance, pulled a second lollipop out of the candy holster at her waist, and popped it into her mouth. "That stupid brother of mine, getting all carried away. He has no idea the kind of danger he's in!"

"Whining won't get us anywhere," Origami said quietly. Still utterly dispassionate, she continued. "Shido said that so long as we can make his heart skip a beat, he would accept our kisses tonight at midnight. In which case, that's our only option. How much time do we have?"

"...Right," Reine said. "Looking at the numbers, we should make it with time to spare if you can kiss him at midnight. But the issue is whether or not all of you can make him weak in the knees before then."

They all glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was currently six PM. Which meant they had only six hours.

There were eight Spirits in total. Quick math gave them forty-five minutes per Spirit. But that also included prep time and the time until they made contact with Shido. So the actual minutes per Spirit would be less than that.

"...!"

Tohka swallowed hard. She'd thought she was taking the situation seriously, but when she was shown the time remaining like this, her heart started beating faster like it had a mind of its own.

"Anyway, we have to make Shido weak in the knees...right?" Yoshino nodded

where she sat next to Tohka, a slightly nervous look on her face.

Natsumi crossed her arms with a groan. "...But *how* exactly?"

"That's..."

"*Oh ho, I wonder what you're trying to make Yoshino say. Natsumi, you perv!*" Yoshino said, deftly covering its face with its hands.

"Wha—I—I didn't mean..." Natsumi hurriedly shot back, and Yoshino smiled, wryly.

"...I have a suggestion." Reine held up her index finger and tapped her right ear. As if indicating the earpieces they all wore.

Guessing at Reine's intention from this gesture, Kaguya and Yuzuru clapped their hands at the same time.

"It comes to me now! The card that we ourselves played on Arubi Island!"

"Understood. This is the most optimal card."

"Mm, what do you mean?" Tohka cocked her head, and Reine continued as if to fill in the blanks.

"...Basically, I mean that we offer support over the comms. *Fraxinus* is being repaired, but the AI still works, and it's possible for us to give instructions from here. We're talking about making him fall for you, but you've all always had an extremely high likability with Shin. Generally speaking, if you can make his heart skip a beat just once, you should earn the right to a kiss."

"Hmm." Tohka looked thoughtful. "So you mean you and everyone here would help us, Reine?"

"...Mm-hmm. We'll monitor Shin's pulse and mental state at the same time. As a standard, let's define his excitement index going above ninety as a 'heart-pounding' state. If you manage that, the all-clear will sound over your earpiece."

"Huh. So you can do that? That's veeery reassuring," Miku sang, and Reine confirmed with a nod before continuing.

"...There's one thing I want you all to take care with. About the limited

unlocking of Spirit power.”

“...?” Natsumi craned her neck curiously. “I thought the paths narrowing meant Spirit power couldn’t flow back to us from Shido, though?”

“...Essentially, yes,” Reine agreed. “But there has always been a minute amount of Spirit power remaining in your bodies. Most likely, if you felt like it, it wouldn’t be impossible for you to manifest it for brief periods.”

“Huh? So then—” Miku started, and Reine shook her head.

“...But don’t use Spirit power unless you absolutely have to. If you forcibly use those powers in a state where there is no replenishment, we don’t know what kind of effect it will have on you.”

“...!”

A hint of anxiety colored the Spirits’ faces. But Tohka shook her head vigorously.

“Even so, if it’ll save Shido,” she said.

“...In the worst-case scenario, you collapse, and it’ll be impossible to save Shin.”

“M-mm...,” Tohka stammered. She was getting her priorities backward. “Fine. I’ll try not to use my Spirit power unless I really have to.”

“I suppose soooo. Well, so long as we have our combined hotness, we’ll trounce my daaaarling even without using Spirit power!” Miku beamed, carefree. This was absurdly optimistic, but it wasn’t good to get too bogged down, either.

“...The other problem is obviously time,” Reine said. “I’d like to have the entire offensive take place in one location if we could.”

Origami hung her head, deep in thought. After a few seconds, she lifted her face. “I have an idea.”

“...Let’s hear it,” Reine replied quietly.



“...Mm?” Shido was walking along when the cell phone in his jacket pocket

began vibrating suddenly. He thought the delicate equipment had been taken from him during the examination, but it seemed that it had only been transferred to his jacket. Judging from the rhythm of the vibration and the ringing sound, it wasn't a phone call. Messages. He glanced at the screen and found that it had been sent from Kotori's cell phone.

"Hmm?" The corners of his mouth turned up in amusement.

She'd sent a map, and the body of the message contained only an address with what he assumed was the location on the map. The text itself was brief, but informative enough that he knew exactly what it was about. Essentially, the Spirits had made their preparations to meet his request.

"Now then, what on earth could they have up their sleeves, hmm?" Shido tucked the phone away in his pocket and kicked at the ground. His body floated up into the air as though it had been released from the bonds of gravity.

Watching his ascent, the people walking in the area opened their eyes wide in astonishment.

It wasn't advisable to reveal the power of Spirits to the general population, but Shido in that moment cared about none of that. Every time he used these powers, an exultation filled his head, already light from fever. Somehow or other, he felt like this was maybe what it felt like to take drugs.

"Okay, then. Why don't I let myself be lured into their trap?" He lifted his face, and the map he'd seen a moment ago popped up in his mind. The place wasn't too far from here. Traveling like this, he'd be there in no time.

He pulled a leg up and then kicked at the empty space. When he did, a wind sprang into being, and he danced up into the sky at super high speed. The sensation was almost like he had become a bullet. The scenery flowed past at a dizzying pace, and the wind beat at his skin almost painfully. If he had been the usual Shido, he would no doubt have lost consciousness in the middle of this flight and crashed headfirst into the ground. But the Shido now would do nothing so clumsy as that.

After a few minutes' flight, he spun around and executed a beautiful landing. And then he scanned the area as he quickly straightened his clothing and hair knocked out of place in the incredible wind pressure.

“So this is it...,” he said, and lifted his face.

A large building stood in the middle of the lonely woods outside of the city. It wasn't so tall as all that, but it was quite wide, at any rate. If you covered a domed stadium with a square box, you might get a shape like this.

When he looked around the building, he didn't see anything like a sign or something to indicate what kind of facility it was exactly. It was an extremely suspicious structure, like a secret factory producing dangerous drugs. That said, however, the current Shido's inner workings were no longer sensitive enough to experience any fear at this. With a sense of expectation and excitement, he walked toward the building and opened the door.

“Shido!”

“Shi...do!”

“Daaarlliiing!”

“...!”

His eyes automatically grew round. A dazzlingly bright light filled his field of view, and a scene like a beach in some tropical country unfolded before him. Spirits in multicolored swimsuits welcomed him inside.

Meanwhile, the crew of the airship *Fraxinus* had filled a room inside Ratatoskr's underground facility back in Tengu.

“Target has entered the dome!” Deep Love Minowa said, and tapped at her console. The figure of Shido was then shown in close-up on the enormous monitor built into the wall. On either side of him were values indicating his mental state, likability, and other metrics.

Yes. This was a temporary command center built in the underground facility. They did not have the complete array of the equipment they'd had aboard *Fraxinus*, but it would be enough to carry out their mission of supporting the Spirits.

As he stared at the video displayed on the monitor, the tall man standing next to the captain's chair—*Fraxinus*'s vice commander Kyouhei Kannazuki—called out, loudly, “Excellent. Well then, we shall begin the attack. Although this

mission is irregular, it is of the utmost importance. All hands, please focus.”

“Yes, sir!”

Following this, he heard a deliberately lowered voice over the speakers.

“...Kannazuki. I’m sure you know this, but don’t go making ridiculous choices, okay? The last time I was gone, I heard you were pretty out there, y’know?”

Commander Kotori Itsuka was shown on the edge of the monitor, wearing a white two-piece swimsuit. She was glaring at the autonomous camera with scary eyes.

But Kannazuki appeared not to notice this thorny mood and simply bowed slightly like a dog before its master. “Naturally! Leave everything to me! Unworthy Kyouhei Kannazuki will utterly defeat young Shido!”

“I don’t really like it when you put it like that, but... Well, fine. This is where we stop Shido.”

“Yes, sir!” the crew responded again.

“But you are as impressive as ever, Commander,” Dimension Breaker Nakatsugawa said, almost groaning. “With this ‘Chest-pounding Spirit-only swim meet,’ not only will you be able to easily approach Shido, but you also have the exquisite thrill factor of everyone in swimsuits.”

Just as Nakatsugawa said, all of the Spirits in the indoor pool were wearing either adorable or sexy swimsuits. This was a scene that might send boys of a certain age straight to heaven the moment they stumbled upon it.

“That’s true.” Bad Marriage Kawagoe nodded. “And the mismatch between the swimsuits and winter makes it all the more impactful. Shido is bound to go down like a lead ship.”

Kotori shrugged, sweat trickling down her cheeks. *“Oh, I wasn’t the one who proposed this strategy, it was—”*

“I object.” A quiet voice came over the speakers, cutting Kotori off. At the same time, a window opened on the monitor to display the figure of Origami in a black swimsuit. *“What I proposed was not this meager strategy. It’s still not too late to change direction.”*

"Listen, you," Kotori half groaned. "A nudist beach is obviously out of the question, okay?!"

The crew reflexively choked at this.

"...W-was that the initial idea...," Nailknocker Shiizaki said, breaking out into a sweat.

"That's...very Origami Tobiichi..." President Mikimoto paled as well.

But Origami continued, nonchalantly. *"Why."*

"Wh-why, I mean..."

"That would definitely catch Shido off guard. The priority right now is to kiss Shido and open up the paths."

"Okay... That might be true, but..." Kotori stammered.

"...Calm down, Origami," Reine interjected. *"At the end of the day, it's Shin who'll be handing down judgment. Too much exposure all at once might shock him."*

"I see. So we should gradually remove clothes."

"...No, that's not exactly it, either." Reine scratched her cheek slowly and then cleared her throat as if to pull herself together before turning her eyes toward the monitor.

The Shido displayed there had already changed into a swimsuit with Natsumi's ability and was walking toward the Spirits. He seemed surprised at first especially, but she couldn't see anything like excitement now in the numbers. So an active offense was indeed going to be necessary to kiss him.

"...At any rate, we'll shift to attack mode. Who's going to go first?" The moment Reine said this, she heard a new voice come over the speakers.

"Keh-keh! A warrior is one who charges first onto the battlefield. We shall take our leave to stand forth here."

"Conceit. Yuzuru and Kaguya will handle this."

A new window opened up on the monitor to show the Yamai sisters in swimsuits of the same design (although the patterns were mirrored).

“...Hmm, the Yamais? Anyone have any objections?”

“No, of course not. I’d like to seeeee what they’ve got.”

“I don’t mind. They can warm him up for me.”

“...Do what you want.”

The Spirits currently in a position farther from Shido responded.

Hearing these replies over their earpieces, Kaguya and Yuzuru grinned and nodded at the same time before striding over to Shido like models on a catwalk, which brought up the question of where they would have picked this skill up.

“Kah-kah! Shido. You arrived quite fearlessly. Well done!”

“Assent. It seems that you wish to be unmanned by Yuzuru and Kaguya’s charms.”

“Oh!” Shido turned toward the sisters, a carefree smile spreading across his face. *“So it’s Kaguya and Yuzuru, then? Ha-ha! I haven’t seen you two in swimsuits since the festival, I guess? Good taste really is reflected in the swimsuit you choose, huh? You both look great. Incredibly beautiful.”*

Perhaps they hadn’t expected to be complimented so straightforwardly—Kaguya and Yuzuru blushed beet red right after they’d walked toward him so full of confidence.

“Likability skyrocketing for both Kaguya and Yuzuru!” Shiizaki’s shrill voice rang out in the temporary command center.

“Aah, we can’t have them being made weak in the knees, though?!” another crew member shouted.

A new window popped up on the monitor. The three options noted there were:

(1) WEDGE SHIDO IN BETWEEN YOU AND HIT HIM WITH YOUR SPECIAL ATTACK.

(2) VANILLA-FLAVORED KISS THROUGH SOFT-SERVE ICE CREAM.

(3) MAKE SHIDO A HUMAN BANANA BOAT AND RIDE HIM TOGETHER. PLEASURE CRUISE AROUND THE POOL.

“Oh ho! There we have it! Choices, everyone!” Kannazuki cried out.

The crew tapped at the consoles to cast their votes. The results were soon shown on-screen. It was a close contest between one and two, while three had only a single vote.

“It really has to be one,” one crew member piped up.

“Yes, this method only works with the two of them, after all,” another agreed. “It’s hard to pass up on two, but... I feel like three wouldn’t make anyone happy unless they had very particular tastes.”

“Whaaat?!” Kannazuki stared in disbelief. “What’s wrong with three?! It’s wonderful! His heart will *absolutely* skip a beat! All the more so if we tie a rope around his neck! I’m certain that Shido understands this, as well. Can you hear me, girls? Three’s—”

“Kawagoe!”

“I’m on it!”

Just as Kannazuki was about to issue instructions to the Yamais, Kawagoe leaped at him. In the opening he created, Mikimoto pinned his hands down, while Nakatsugawa tied him to the chair with a rope.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Kannazuki cried. “Is this a coup d’état?!”

“Pardon us, Vice Commander,” one of the insurgents said.

“The commander told us to do this if it looked like you were getting out of control,” another told him slowly.

“I see! How very like our commander, to know my needs so exactly! But I’d ask you to tie the ropes tighter! The one around my left wrist’s so loose! Honestly! Do you even know what you’re doing?!”

Bound to his chair, Kannazuki flushed as his breathing grew ragged. Cold sweat beaded on the foreheads of the crew members.

“Analyst Murasame, please take over!”

Thus told, Reine nodded with a “...Yes” and brought the mic close to her mouth.

“...*Can you both hear me? Go with one.*” Reine’s instruction arrived over their

earpieces.

“Hmph. Very well. Keh-keh. If we behave this way, it be unendurable for naive Shido.”

“Attention. Kaguya, the key to a thing like this is to go all in. Please ensure that you do not get embarrassed and grow timid.”

“I—I will not! I’m fine! No need to worry about me!”

“Assent. In that case...shall we do it?”

The sisters nodded at each other before turning back to Shido. They stepped up neatly along either side of him and linked their arms through his.

“Hmm? What’s up, you two?” Blinking rapidly, Shido looked back and forth between them.

Kaguya and Yuzuru exchanged a glance before mouthing the words “One! Two!” and at exactly the same time, they pressed Shido’s arms up against their breasts.

“Uh?” Shido’s eyebrows jumped up at the new sensation.

Kaguya and Yuzuru grinned at him while their cheeks turned red.

“Keh... Keh-keh... So, Shido? Does our allure make your heart pound?”

“Unity. You don’t have to fight it. Go on, there, there.”

They snuggled in closer to him.

But Shido sighed and shook his head slightly. “Hey, whoa, you two. Personally, I’m utterly delighted. But an unmarried girl shouldn’t be acting so recklessly.”

“Wha...?!”

“Shock. Your composure is un-Shido-like.”

At Shido’s reaction, Kaguya and Yuzuru unconsciously broke into a sweat.

With their breasts pushed up against him, the usual Shido would no doubt have instantly turned beet red and cried out in total confusion. But there wasn’t even a hint of such a reaction in this Shido.

In the face of his calm, Kaguya and Yuzuru ended up feeling embarrassed.

They groaned and averted their eyes awkwardly.

“But thanks, you know?” Shido patted each of their heads reassuringly. “You’re both trying to get my heart pounding, right, Kaguya, Yuzuru? To save me? The fact that you really want to do that makes me super happy.”

“Hnnngh...”

“Blush. This isn’t fair somehow.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru had the feeling somehow that they’d been cornered in this argument.

“...Don’t get so down, Kaguya, Yuzuru.” Reine’s voice came into their ears. *“...Shin looks cool, but the moment you pushed your breasts up against him, his excitement level clearly rose. Just a little more and he’s yours.”*

“Keh... Keh-keh! Oh ho. So you *were* reacting, then?”

“Assent. You are always the pervert.”

“...Let’s try two next. Vanilla-flavored kiss through soft-serve ice cream. There’s an ice cream stand by the pool, right?” Reine said, and they glanced over to find that there was indeed a brightly colored stall set up there. The woman working the stall, presumably a Ratatoskr agent, smiled brightly.

Kaguya and Yuzuru nodded at each other and then leaped to their feet.

“Keh-keh! Shido! You would do well to wait an instant! I shall bring you a caress from the mouth of a snow goddess!”

“Translation. We are going to buy some soft serve, so please wait a moment.”

The pair raced off down the beach, ordered two ice cream cones, and returned to Shido.

“Huh?” He looked at the number of cones in their hands and cocked his head. “You only got some for you? That’s pretty mean.” He shrugged and gave them a pained smile.

But Kaguya and Yuzuru were quick to shake their heads.

“Heh! You are overhasty, Shido.”

“Transfer. One of them is for you, Shido. Here.” Yuzuru handed him a cone,

and Shido's eyes grew round.

"Mm. Thanks," he said. "But now you don't have a cone, Yuzuru. Did you not have enough money or something?"

"Refusal. That is not the case. But one is plenty for Yuzuru and Kaguya... Kaguya."

"...Mm."

At Yuzuru's urging, Kaguya hesitated shyly for a moment before holding out the cone in her hand. Yuzuru gently placed her own hand on it. And then the twins nodded at each other and opened their mouths. They let their tongues peek out and began to lick the cone in front of Shido. Both of them at the same time.

"Mm... Aah-hah."

"Sw...eet. This is..."

Their breath gently tickled the other's cheek. Shido could see their tongues squirming around, separated by the sweet white ice cream. Kaguya and Yuzuru felt this lewd act practically frying their brains. They were overcome with a pleasant feeling of corruption, sensuality, seduction. This made sense. This was the external stimulus. Shido, too, would no doubt...

"...Both of you. I apologize for interrupting when you're in the heat of battle, but shouldn't you maybe be doing this with Shido instead of each other?" Reine said, and they froze in place.

"...Ah!"

"Forgetting. Now that you mention it."

She was exactly right. When they'd read the text of the option before them, they'd simply assumed that they would be the ones doing the kissing. But that meant that Shido was simply stuck watching them play with each other. Their faces flushed a bright red with the shame double punch of their own actions and of misunderstanding the instructions.

But then they noticed a faint coloring in Shido's own cheeks.

"...? Huh?"

“Puzzlement. Did we not make a mistake?”

“Analyst Murasame, please wait a moment! Shido’s excitement levels are increasing!”

They heard the voice of President Mikimoto over their earpieces.

“It seems that the flirting of the Yamai sisters is bringing about visual excitement!”

“And it’s no wonder! That was really something. I almost want to record it and enjoy it in the evening by myself.”

They heard several people agreeing with Dimension Breaker Nakatsugawa.

“...Minowa, I’d suggest you pat down the male crew when they leave here,” came the exasperated voice of Nailknocker Shiizaki.

“Noted. I’ll do that.”

“I would never—! I was speaking for research purposes only!”

“That’s right! Pure intellectual curiosity!”

“Haah, yeah, yeah. Anyway, Analyst Murasame.”

“...Right. This is a real windfall. But the current excitement index is eighty-four. We need something for a final push.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru furrowed their brows.

“Something... That’s not much to go on...”

“Attention. The soft serve is—”

At the same time as Yuzuru started to offer a warning, the soft serve, warmed by their hands, fell from the cone onto Yuzuru’s chest.

“Chill. Eeeah!” Yuzuru jumped, and the melted ice cream slid down her breasts and dropped off onto Kaguya’s thighs.

“Ungaaaah! S-so cold...!” Kaguya squeezed her eyes shut and twisted her face up unhappily. “Whoa. This is sticky. Is there anything to wipe it off with?”



“Suggestion. If we get into the pool, it should—” Yuzuru began, and then the ends of her eyebrows twitched upward.

“Hmm?” Kaguya cocked her head curiously. “What’s wrong, Yuzuru?”

“Revelation. With this, we could...” Yuzuru reached around behind Kaguya abruptly, grabbed onto her shoulders, and pushed her at Shido.

“Petition. Shido, Yuzuru and Kaguya are sticky with ice cream. Please clean it off with your tongue.”

“Hmm?” Shido replied, his eyes growing rounder.

A heartbeat later, Kaguya grasped the meaning of what Yuzuru was saying and cried out, “Hey—?! Wh-what are you even saying, Yuzuru?! ”

“Restraint. Please calm down, Kaguya. Disaster is opportunity. This is simply one way to turn the tables. Kaguya’s chest size is mediocre, but your supple skin is first class.”

“Excuuuuse me for being mediocre?! And if that’s what we’re doing, then make him start with your chest, Yuzuru!”

“Refusal. If Yuzuru goes first, then when it’s Kaguya’s turn, there may not be sufficient stimulus, and he will not get excited.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?! Are you making fun of me?!” Kaguya shrieked.

“Huh...?” Shido grinned as he watched them argue. “You want me to clean you up, Kaguya?”

“...! I—I just...!”

“Advice. Kaguya?” Yuzuru whispered into Kaguya’s ear.

Kaguya flushed bright red as she nodded. “...I. I would...love that.”

“Mm-hmm?” Shido smiled, amused, and licked his lips. And then he crouched down and brought his face toward Kaguya’s thighs.

“...!”

Pa pa pa pam pam pa paaa!

Just as Shido's tongue was about to touch her skin, she heard a loud fanfare in her right ear suddenly, and both she and Yuzuru jumped at the same time.

"Uwahee?!"

"Shock. What was that sound just now?"

Two pairs of eyes darted about in confusion, and as if in response, Reine's voice came to them over their earpieces.

"...Congrats, both of you. Shido's excitement index exceeded ninety just now. For both of you."

"What?! So then that means..."

"Achievement. Does that mean that Shido's heart skipped a beat for Yuzuru and Kaguya?"

Shido shrugged with a sigh, as if guessing at the situation from this conversation. "Looks like you got me, then. I'd expect nothing less from the Yamai sisters."

"Huh? Ohhh. Keh. Keh-keh-keh! Indeed! Bow down before the charm of the Yamais, children of the hurricane!" Kaguya laughed loudly, pretending she was perfectly fine.

Shido smiled as if he was enjoying this while he pointed to her thighs wet with ice cream. "Should I keep going?"

"...! Ah. Unnnh..." Kaguya blushed deeply once more and hung her head.



"....."

Clad in an unsexy one-piece swimsuit (well, it wasn't only the fault of the suit), Natsumi hid behind a rock at the indoor pool facility and stared hard at Shido and the Yamais. Although she was a little ways off to not be discovered, she could listen in on their conversation if she tuned into their channel on her earpiece, so she knew what kind of exchange they'd had and what result that had led to.

So they'd managed to make Shido's heart skip a few beats. Exactly the kind of thing she'd expect from the ever-confident Kaguya and the low-key incredible

Yuzuru. They'd landed the first blow magnificently.

This didn't particularly surprise Natsumi, however. There wasn't a man alive who would give the cold shoulder to these two beautiful girls when they wooed him so obviously.

Similarly, Natsumi wasn't particularly worried about any of the other Spirits, either. Her personal goddess Yoshino was a shoo-in; Tohka's innocent, adorable style was top notch; and Kotori's nature as the adopted little sister, her fall from grace, and her strong bluffs would stir the heart of any man. Her behavior was a bit of an issue, but even Miku was a lethal weapon with that chest of hers. And Origami, well... She excelled at restraining her target. All of them would get their chance to kiss Shido.

The problem here was none other than Natsumi herself.

"Make him weak in the knees... I mean, how am I even supposed to do that?" she grumbled, and clenched her fists. Transparently obvious spite. This condition seemed to be expressly for the purpose of targeting the problem child who would inevitably yank down the average score in among all the beautiful Spirits—Natsumi.

She was anxious that she alone wouldn't be able to meet this condition that the rest of them would hit without even breaking a sweat. And terrified that she would be a burden on everyone else because of this. It might have been hard for anyone else to understand, but these feelings were unexpectedly huge.

In her mind, it was like they were holding a jump rope contest against another class, where they were all, "Woh-kay! The other class's record is totally nothing!" "Yeah, we get ten jumps in and we win!" "Victory's as good as ours!" "Okay, here we go! One! Two! Thr—ah!" "Hey, whoa! Who was that?!" "Whoa, I can't believe this..." *I told you, I'm no good at jumping rope! Why are the people who can actually do this back there turning the rope?! Is this a society where the haves torture the have-nots?!*

Natsumi wanted to scream somehow.

"...A-anyway, there's no way I'm going to be able to do this," she said gloomily, as she ran her hands through her hair desperately and thought hard.

Even if she couldn't make Shido's heart skip a beat, if everyone else kissed him at midnight and opened up the paths, that would almost certainly make Shido weaker than he was currently. And then she could get everyone to hold him down and force a kiss on him. It might not have been a particularly commendable way of doing things, but this was an emergency. The others would understand.

"Okay." She nodded to herself. "Let's go with that."

"What are we going with?"

"Like I said first, everyone—Eeeaaah?!" Natsumi let out a shriek and jumped back. "Sh—Shido?!"

At some point, the very person she had been watching until a moment ago had appeared behind her.

"Sup," he said in return. "What're you doing over here, Natsumi?"

"...! N-nothing. I'm not doing anything. Anyway, go and be with one of the other Spirits already. C'mon, Tohka and them are looking for you," Natsumi told him.

Shido tilted his head and hummed thoughtfully before breaking into a roguish smile. "And if I said I don't want to?"

"Huh...?" Natsumi stared at him blankly. "I—I don't understand what you..."

"I'm saying that I'm not going to the other Spirits until you make my heart race a little, Natsumi," he told her.

"...Whuaaa?!" Her eyes darted around the room at anything but him. "H-h-h-h-h-h-hang on just a minute. You can't be serious?! D-don't we get to pick what order we go in?! And why me anyway!"

He shrugged. "Feel like it."

"For reaaaaaaal?!" she shrieked.

"...*Calm down, Natsumi,*" came a sleepy voice over her earpiece.

A window of options was displayed above Natsumi and Shido on the monitor in the temporary command center.

(1) TAKE ADVANTAGE OF YOUR UNDEVELOPED BODY AND MAKE HIS HEART POUND WITH THE INNOCENT APPROACH.

(2) APPROACH HIM AS A WOMAN BRIMMING WITH CONFIDENCE AND WIN WITH THE CONTRAST WITH YOUR CHILDISH APPEARANCE.

(3) WIN BY PLAYING THE CUNNING OLD LADY IN A GIRL'S BODY.

“...All hands, choices,” Reine said, dazed, and the crew tapped at their consoles. The results were soon displayed on-screen.

The winner was two.

“...Mm-hmm. Two, then.”

“Yes. Shido seems like he likes small girls, so one would also be good, but it might be a little harsh to make Natsumi do that.”

“Mm. Well, if you wanted to say that two was harsh, you could make that case. But if we got him to remember her in her older woman mode, then...”

“What?! Is three out of the question? I thought that we might be able to go in a totally different direction than we have up to now.”

“Hmmm. You might not be as bad as the vice commander, Nakatsugawa, but your inclinations are still a bit niche.”

The crew commented one after the other as Reine brought her mouth to the mic.

“...Did you hear that, Natsumi? It's two.”

Receiving Reine's instructions over her earpiece, Natsumi swallowed hard. Act an older woman brimming with confidence, play up the difference. That's what they were telling her to do with Shido now.

“...!”

She was so nervous that her heart pounded wildly in her chest, and sweat sprang from every pore on her body. But that was only natural. At the moment, her path with Shido was constricted, and no matter how unstable her mental state became, almost no Spirit power would flow back to her. In other words, she wouldn't be able to properly use the transformation ability that kept her upright mentally.

She had indeed used an adult appeal to toy with Shido the first time she'd encountered him. But that approach had relied on the young woman mode Haniel enabled. Given that she was shy by nature and anthropophobic and that she would want to be reborn as a parthenogenetic creature in the next life, this was an impossibly high hurdle for her normally.

However, Natsumi knew only too well that doing nothing was also not an option. If she gave up now, Shido's powers would spiral out of control, and in the worst case, he might die. If that happened, Yoshino and the others would be sad. Above all else, Natsumi would never forgive herself.

Natsumi had come this far thanks to Shido. True, she was dizzy with nervousness, and she couldn't keep the shrill edge out of her voice. But she had to do this. She scraped every last bit of courage in her bones together into a lump in her heart and lifted her face with resolve.

And then with an awkward flirtatiousness, she called out to Shido, "H-heh-heh. Oh, Shido, you silly... Do you want me that much? What am I...even going to do...with you..." She ran a finger along his arm with all the eroticism she could muster.

However.

"...Pft!" Shido erupted, and hid his face in his hands.

Instantly, the shame Natsumi had barely suppressed, like water that was on the verge of spilling over if it wasn't held back by surface tension—that shame exploded.

"G-gaaaaaaaah! What, what, why are you laughiiiiing?! You're making fun of me, you're laughing at me! I know it's weird, a little shrimp like me to act like a sexy lady, it's obviously hilarious and ridiculous, okaaaaay! But I don't have a choice, do I! What else am I supposed to dooooo?!"

"Sorry, sorry," he apologized quickly. "I wasn't actually laughing *at* you or anything. I just thought it was really cute."

"Shut your pie hole! Now you're trying to placate me with that garbage?! You're pouring it on waaaay too thick, I'm drowning here!" she screamed, and tousled her own hair wildly.

Aah, this is not good. I knew it would be bad. I can't fight like this. I can't help Shido like this.

Natsumi made this determination and snapped a finger out at Shido.

"...Wait just a second!" she yelled.

"Huh?" His eyes grew wider in surprise, but Natsumi ignored this as she whirled around and raced toward the changing room alongside the indoor pool where she had earlier changed into her swimsuit.

Inside were swimsuits in a variety of sizes and designs. The Spirits had scrutinized these and chosen the one that best suited each of them before Shido arrived. Well, Natsumi had chosen hers based on which was the least fancy, though.

She turned the mountain of swimsuits upside down and quickly selected a new suit. Rather than a one-piece like the one she was currently wearing, this was a daring bikini in a size that had probably been intended for use by Miku or Yuzuru.

"Perfect..." She clenched her fists, as if to bolster her determination, and then took off the suit she was wearing, so that she was totally naked. She was very well aware of the fact that it was dangerous to manifest Spirit power in the current situation. But this was the only way she could help Shido.

She exhaled slowly and focused her mind.

Heeey, let's all play together! Yeah, sure... Oh! Natsumi, you don't have this video game, do you? Sooorrrrrrry. Forgot. Okay, well, maybe you could go play by yourself?

"...You knew when you suggested we play couch co-op that I don't have that gaaaaaaame!" She cried out at the cringe-worthy fantasy that played out in her head. Her body shone faintly, and its silhouette transformed from miserable shrimp to glamorous woman.

Yes. Mentally weaker in a way that stood out from the other Spirits, Natsumi could unlock a limited amount of Spirit power simply by imagining painful moments. And nothing could scare her when she was in adult lady mode.

“Hee-hee-hee! Maybe I should go and keep Shido company, then.” She struck a pose in the mirror, brimming with confidence, a stark contrast to the nervous girl who had entered the changing room. She put on the bikini she’d picked out and went back out to the pool.

Reine’s voice came to her through her earpiece. “...*Natsumi, that form—you used Spirit power, didn’t you? It’s dangerous. You have to go back to normal right now.*”

“Hee-hee! It’s fiiiine.” She waved a dismissive hand. “No need to worry. To save Spirit power, I didn’t make the swimsuit. I’m using a real one.”

“...You can’t. It’s too risky. You have to—”

“Yeah, yeah. I hear you.” Natsumi rolled her eyes and sighed. “If I get Shido all weak in the knees quick and easy, then everything’ll be peachy, yeah?”

Humming to herself, she walked over to Shido. “Sorry. For. The. Wait! ♪”

“Hey, Natsumi—Wait, you’re...” Shido stared in disbelief.

With a playful smile on her lips, Natsumi pressed up against him and ran a finger along his arm. “All grown-up? Mm-hmm. And Shido, you like my body, don’t you?” she said naughtily. “Which part of a girl do you prefer, Shido? Share your every little secret with me. If you do, just this once, I’ll let you touch your favorite part!”

Shido’s mouth turned up sharply at the corners as he listened to Natsumi’s challenge. The usual Shido would have been panicking and blushing deeply, but it seemed that he really was a little off with the fever and the Spirit power.

“Ha-ha! Are you sure about that, Natsumi? Aren’t you underestimating the fantasies of a high school boy?”

“Oh, of course,” she cooed, nudging his chin up with a finger. “Don’t hold back. Come on, let me baby you—Aunh?!”

Suddenly, she felt a sharp pain in her chest, and she began to shiver all over.

“H-hngh...,” she said through clenched teeth. She doubled over, a cold sweat beading on her forehead. “What is...”

“Hey, Natsumi? What’s wrong?” Shido said worriedly.

But the pain didn't subside. A wave of heat gradually swept through her body, and it grew harder and harder to even breathe.

And then just when she was on the verge of passing out, her body glowed faintly before her form returned to its original small stature. It seemed that she had already exhausted her supply of her Spirit power.



On top of that, she'd changed swimsuits to go along with lady mode, which left her in a major predicament. Her own chest couldn't support the bikini top that had covered a bust over twenty centimeters larger than her original bustline, so it now hung loosely, just barely hanging on by the string resting on one shoulder.

"Eeaaah?!" she shrieked, crouched down, and covered her chest and abdomen with her hands.

Shido stared for a moment, jaw dropped. "Pft!" Finally, like he could no longer hold it in, he began to laugh, clutching his stomach. "Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Sh... Sh-shut uuuuuuuup!" Natsumi yelled, still crouching on the floor. "Don't laaaaaaugh! This is all your fault because your heart wouldn't skip a beat with me like thiiiiiiiis!"

"Ha-ha! Ah, I'm sorry. I was just surprised..."

"I know, okay! I *know*! You're totally thinking 'No way am I kissing this little uggo,' aren't you?! You go and tack on this serious condition of making you weak in the knees or whatever! You can just come out and say it already!!" she yelled, all in one breath, and Shido shrugged.

"Hey, whoa. I didn't say any of that. The truth is—"

"I don't need anyone to tell me to know that muuuuuch! And then at the end, you'll be all, 'Okay, there's just one person here who couldn't make my heart go pitter-pat' and then expose me in front of everyone and publicly eeeeeeeexecute me! Dammit, dammit, dammit! How am I even supposed to make you—"

Here, the shrieking Natsumi noticed fanfare playing in her right ear. The sign that she'd cleared this hurdle. Her eyes widened. She gaped, unable to comprehend what had happened for an instant.

"...Congrats, Natsumi. You did it. Shin's heart was in fact moved by your charms."

"Huh... No way. Really...?" Unable to believe the words Reine spoke into her ear, Natsumi stared blankly.

Shido went over to a nearby beach chair, got a thin hoodie, and placed it gently over her shoulders. After he stared at her for a few seconds, his face softened into a smile.

“...Wh-what,” she demanded.

“Heh-heh.” He chuckled. “Ah, sorry. Natsumi, you really are cute, you know?”

“Wha—?!” A shiver of fear ran across her face. “What are you even saying out of nowhere...! Did your eyes fall out of your head?!”

“Nope, they’re right where they always are,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re cute, Natsumi. I guarantee it.”

“Unh... Hngh...”

“So cute. The cutest, Natsumi. Super cute.”

“Hey...”

“You really are cute. Seriously cute.”

“...Munnnh...”

“You’re cute, Natsumi.”

“...G-gaaaaaah!”

Natsumi turned red as a tomato and pushed Shido into the pool.



“Oh ho! Look at Natsumi go! Whoopsy. Maybe we’ll have to call her Cutie Pie from now on?”

“Yeah, Natsumi is...amazing.” Having watched her friend’s struggle, Yoshino agreed quite firmly with Yoshinon on her right hand.

Now, together with the Yamai sisters before Natsumi, three of them had succeeded in getting Shido’s heart pounding. Naturally, they still couldn’t relax just yet, but things could be said to have been going relatively smoothly.

“...Okay, who’s up next, then?” She heard Reine’s voice through her earpiece.

Yoshinon waved its hands around eagerly. *“Okay, right here! Let Yoshino go next!”*

“...! Y-Yoshinon...?” Yoshino’s eyes flew open.

“...Mm. Should we go with you then, Yoshino?”

“N-no, I’m not...”

“Yoshinoooo, this is a time to get in there and fight, y’know? After all the help Shido’s given you, you gotta pay him back here! That’s why we had the strategy meeting and everything!”

“...!”

Yoshino’s small shoulders shook. Yoshinon was right. The only ones who could help Shido now were the Spirits. She didn’t have the luxury of shrinking back. Firming up her resolve, she replied to Reine, “Pl-please let. Me go...!”

“...Mm, roger that. Good luck,” Reine said, her voice quiet.

Yoshino pressed a hand to her chest and took a deep breath to calm herself before slowly lifting her face. “Here we go, Yoshinon...!”

“Aye, aye! Okay, Yoshino, just like we planned!”

“R-right...” She nodded, as if to bolster her own resolve, and walked over to Shido.

“Oh!” Noticing her, Shido turned his gaze in her direction. “Yoshino, Yoshinon. Ha-ha! That’s a cute swimsuit.”

“Th-thank...you.”

“Well, you’re cuter, Yoshino,” he said to her straight off, and Yoshino automatically turned red.

“...!”

When she was unable to say anything for a few seconds, Yoshinon jabbed her in the side as if to urge her on.

“Oh... Shido. Um...” She pulled out the small bottle that she’d slipped inside of Yoshinon, and the puppet let out a strange cry. *“Nnnhooo!”*

“Hm?” Shido frowned. “What’s that?”

“It’s...sun. Screen...,” she told him haltingly. “I thought I could put some on for

you...”

“Sunscreen?” Shido turned his face upward. A blue sky was projected onto the ceiling of the tropical resort set, and an artificial sun shone in it, but...he didn’t know whether or not it could give him a sunburn.

But he smiled, warmly. “Yeah? Okay. Please and thank you. I’ve done it for Kaguya and Yuzuru before, but this is maybe the first time anyone’s ever lotioned me up.” He spread a towel on the artificial sand and lay down on his stomach.

“O-okay...!” Yoshino bobbed her head up and down, and after slipping a plastic cover over Yoshinon, she squeezed some sunscreen into her hand. “E-excuse. Me...” She steeled herself and straddled his back like she was riding a horse.

“Oh ho!” He chortled. “You’re pretty daring there, huh?”

“...! Uh. Um... I’m sorry...”

“Nothing to be sorry about. Keep going.”

“O-okay...” Together with Yoshinon, she began to apply sunscreen to Shido’s back in a massaging motion.

“.....”

When she touched him like this, the difference from her own body became very clear to her. Shido’s features were more or less androgynous, but his back was large, and she could feel sinewy muscles on his arms. Just having her hands on him somehow made her face a little hot.

“Aah,” he said with a blissful sigh. “This actually feels pretty good. I get why Kaguya and Yuzuru made such a fuss. You’re good at this, Yoshino.”

“Th-thank you...,” she said bashfully, as she painstakingly applied the lotion.

Once she finished his entire back, she took a deep breath to get her breathing back under control before opening her mouth. “Um...Shido. I finished your back.”

“Hmm?” he responded. “Oh, great. Thanks.”

“So, I... N-now I’ll do...your front...!” she said, squeezing her eyes tightly shut.

Shido’s eyes grew wide for a moment. “Uh-huh,” he said, amused. “Okay, then. I guess I could let you spoil me a little more.” He moved a hand to indicate that Yoshino should get off him for a second, and she hurried to obey.

He sat up in a strangely erotic motion and then lay down on his back. “Okay... Have at ’em, Yoshino.”

“R-right...,” she replied, in a small voice, and timidly straddled his stomach before slowly lowering herself down onto it. “O-okay... I’m starting.”

Just like she had with his back, she put some lotion on her hands and began to rub it onto Shido’s stomach. Every time her fingers touched him, his muscles twitched ever so slightly.

She heard Reine’s voice over the device in her right ear. “...*Shin’s excitement index is steadily climbing. Just a little bit further, Yoshino.*”

“A little...bit...”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“Uh... Um...,” Yoshino stammered as she averted her gaze, while Yoshinon on her left hand flapped its mouth as if to speak on her behalf.

“*Hey, so, Shidooo? Like, personally, okay, I think we should actually get this lotion on there a little farther south.*”

“Huh? Farther south... Meaning...” Shido’s gaze slowly slid downward.

But Yoshino was currently straddling his stomach. His gaze was necessarily obstructed by her lower half. From her feet to her shins, knees, and then to the thighs stretching out from her swimsuit.

“...!”

Yoshino gasped unconsciously at the sensation of his gaze licking her all over.

“What’ll we do, Yoshino?” Shido asked her finally. “You heard Yoshinon.”

“Oh... I...” She covered her face with her hands as she said weakly, “P... Please. Let...me...”

“I can’t believe you got the words out,” Shido said, impressed.

Yoshino's breathing grew ragged, and she flipped around on Shido's stomach so that she was facing his feet. But the moment her hands moved to touch his thighs, the facility around her shuddered violently.

"E-eeeah?!" she cried out, automatically. The shock was on par with a massive earthquake, and she could hear an explosion on the other side of the ceiling. Cracks snaked across the walls, while the objects that gave shape to the fake tropical country broke apart and crashed to the ground. The Spirits and Ratatoskr personnel inside the facility looked around fearfully.

"Yoshino!" Shido had no sooner called out than he was hugging her to him and forcing her into the pool.

She quickly understood why. A massive light fixture dropped from the ceiling and slammed into the spot where she had been standing only a second earlier.

"Th-thank you...," she said, her voice shaking.

"You bet. But what in the world is going on?" he said, scanning the area.

"This is..." She quickly realized that this was no natural disaster. She caught wind of a scent she'd come across any number of times before her power had been sealed by Shido. It was the smell of weapons produced by human malice and the desire to kill.

She looked up at the giant hole in the ceiling and found several twisted human silhouettes there.

"What? What was that?!" Kotori had been watching Yoshino's strenuous efforts from behind one of the tropical objects, and now she frowned as she stared up at the ceiling, which now offered quite the view of the sky. "Reine! What the hell is going on?!"

"...Emergency. We've confirmed several Bandersnatch signals in the sky above the facility. And a little ways off, a signal that appears to be Ellen Mathers."

"What did you say?!"

Bandersnatch. The DEM Industries remotely operated, humanoid weapon. Just as Reine said, Kotori could see several camera eyes flashing red in the breaks in the smoke rising up from the roof.

And Ellen Mathers. The world's strongest Wizard, and the greatest firepower DEM had at their disposal.

"Ngh." She groaned. "You mean, DEM caught wind of us?"

"...Mm-hmm. Their target is probably Shin," Reine said. "...Sorry. This was an oversight on my part. I can't believe I let them get so close so easily."

"No, it's not your fault. We're hobbled without *Fraxinus*. I'm well aware of that. Anyway, how do we get out of this situation? Ngh. And now of all times!" Kotori said, frustrated.

But that was only natural. She didn't have *Fraxinus*, and the Spirits couldn't use their Spirit powers. A Wizard of Ellen Mathers's caliber showing up in that moment was potentially the worst-possible-case scenario.

"...There's no time. Kotori," Reine insisted. "You and the others keep up the Shin offensive. We'll deal with Ellen Mathers somehow on our end."

"Deal with? That's not—"

"...I would have rather not used it, but I put together a countermeasure in case of something like this. Let me handle it," Reine said, sounding calm.

After a moment's hesitation, Kotori nodded. "Fine. If you say so, Reine. I'm sure you got this, then. I'll leave her to you. But the pool's totally out of commission now. Activate the second sequence and prep the backup set."

"...Right. Well, good lu—"

Interrupting Reine, a shadow stepped forward slowly in the corner of Kotori's eye. It was Shido.

"Hey, whoa," he called. "You really make one heck of an entrance, huh? Well, you started it, so I assume you're ready to throw down, right?" He glared at the countless Bandersnatches hanging in the sky as he spread out his feet to brace himself against the earth and put both hands on his hips.

"Shido...? What are you doing?" Kotori asked, a dubious look on her face.

He glanced at her and chuckled. "Just watch."

**SECRET TECHNIQUE!
INSTANT FLASH**

BOOOOOOOOOOMB!



The light of Spirit power began to concentrate in his hands.

He yelled the name of the attack.

Screaming ferociously, Shido thrust both of his hands upward.

Instantly, an intense wave of Spirit power shot from his palms. The torrent of power was so concentrated, it was on par with Tohka's Sandalphon or Origami's Metatron, and now it burst through the crumbling roof and lit up the evening sky like the midday sun for a few moments. The dozens of Bandersnatches gathering in the upper reaches were unable to escape from the sudden attack and scattered like fireworks.

"No way?!" Kotori shrieked, reflexively. Actually, when she thought about it, Shido *was* in possession of the Spirit power of eight Spirits now, so it wasn't a total surprise he'd be able to pull something like this off. But somehow, she couldn't help but feel she'd witnessed an incredibly abnormal sight.

"R-Reine, this wasn't your countermeasure, right...?" she asked, baffled.

"...*It was not*," came Reine's quiet voice in reply.

Shido ran a hand across his forehead, signaling the end of a job well done. "Do you see now the fruit of my long years of training? Ha-ha!"

"....."

That was pretty funny, but the power he displayed was terrifying. She really couldn't leave him in this state. She hadn't thought she was soft on the idea to begin with, but she resolved this to herself anew.

"Shido...!" Yoshino came running to Shido's side. Which reminded Kotori. Yoshino had been in the middle of her offensive.

"Aah, Yoshino." He smiled at her. "Don't worry. I took care of the little pests."

"Uh... Uh-huh...," Yoshino responded vaguely, sweat trickling down her cheek. Her reaction was understandable. After seeing an attack like that, it was only natural.

Kotori blinked rapidly for a moment. Yoshino's one-piece suit had been torn around her stomach, and her cute bellybutton was peeking out. "Yoshino,

look.”

“Yes, what is—Aah!” Yoshino looked down at her own stomach and cried out in surprise. She hadn’t noticed the damage to her suit until Kotori said something.

“Aah.” Kotori clucked her tongue. “You must’ve got it caught on something, hmm? Maybe you should go change?”

“Oh... I’m okay. In that case...,” Yoshino said as she set a deliberate hand on a shoulder strap and tugged.

“Wh-whoa, Yoshino?!” Kotori hurriedly tried to stop her, but it was too late.

With the help of Yoshino, Yoshino pulled the swimsuit down to her waist. The fair skin that had been covered up by the one-piece suit was exposed to the outside air.

“...Huh?” Kotori’s eyes snapped open. Underneath her swimsuit, Yoshino was wearing another tube-top-style bikini. “Yoshino, you...”

“Yes...” The smaller girl nodded. “Yoshino said I should wear it just in case...”

“‘Just in case’? That didn’t mean for when your suit was ripped, right?”

“Uh. Um... I... Yes.” Yoshino shrank into herself, embarrassed, as her face grew red. She suddenly heard over her earpiece the fanfare signaling her breaking an excitement index of ninety.

“...?!”

Surprised, she looked over at Shido to find that he was staring at her, deeply fascinated by how her swimsuit was partly hanging off her. He had a hand to his chin and was nodding to himself every so often with the air of an art critic.

“Uh. Um...” Yoshino’s face grew even redder.

“...Yoshino... She’s a fearsome girl,” Kotori murmured, a shiver of fear in her voice.



Chapter 4

Party Time

“Wha...?”

Ellen opened her eyes wide in surprise from a platform that afforded a view of the place where the curious Spirit signal had been measured, a mysterious facility in the woods a little outside of the city of Tengu.

But her surprise was only natural. Whatever else, the twenty Bandersnatches vanguard she'd sent to attack the facility had been blown to bits by a mysterious beam of light that shot out of that same facility.

“The Bandersnatch team has been eliminated!”

“Th-this Spirit power index is incredible!”

The operators' voices came over the radio built into her CR unit.

Ellen scowled in annoyance, but then she chuckled as though rethinking the situation. “...I see. So it seems that it isn't any ordinary facility, after all.” She crossed her arms, and her equipment creaked.

Wrapped around Ellen now was not the coat she'd worn earlier that day, but Pendragon, the platinum CR unit that bore a king's name, the most powerful armor and sword made to order for humanity's most powerful Wizard. Clad in this gear, Ellen had no equals. Someone like Shido Itsuka, who wasn't even a Wizard, had no chance of laying a single finger on her now. His only choice was to bow down before her.

“.....”

At the same time this thought crossed her mind, she was forced to recall the disgrace of that afternoon. She tapped her elbow with a finger in annoyance and issued instructions to the Bandersnatches.

“Ready second squad. I will join them. Please prepare the AA weapons.”

“Yes, *sir!*” the operator’s voice rang out in response, and the Bandersnatch squad on standby behind her flew up into the sky one after the other, weapons at the ready.

And then.

“...?!”

A beam of light appeared in her field of view, and the heads of three Bandersnatches that had gone ahead burst.

“What—” she murmured, and half-unconsciously placed a hand on the hilt of Caledfwlch, the high-output laser blade on her back. As she drew it and used her magic to make the light blade sizzle to life, she swung it at the shadow that had appeared before her in the blink of an eye.

A shower of magical light scattered as it made contact.

“Mana,” she said flatly.

“Impressive as ever, Ellen. You just won’t let me get a hit in on you.” The girl who had appeared before her curled her lips up into a grin and leaped back.

She was young, with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. But the jet-black and blue CR unit on her body indicated her unusual history. Mana Takamiya. Shido Itsuka’s biological sister and former DEM No. 2 Wizard.

“I never imagined you would be here,” Ellen remarked.

“Not like I could sit back and stay quiet when they tell me my big bro is in a pinch,” Mana said challengingly. “Apologies and all, but since I’m here, things won’t be going your way, Ellen.”

“...You siblings really are infuriating.” Ellen furrowed her brow unhappily. “It’s a bit late for this sentiment, but I should have killed you back then. Honestly, Ike’s whims really are a problem.”

Mana raised dubious eyebrows. “...‘Back then’? What are you talking about, exactly?”

“Mm. What indeed.”

“Hmph,” Mana said, and turned the sword in her right hand toward Ellen.

“Well, whatever. At any rate, I’m not letting you pass.”

Ellen snorted quietly before turning the tip of Caledfwlch on her.



The indoor pool facility was on the verge of collapsing due to the Bandersnatch attack and Shido’s Secret Technique Instant Flash Bomb, which he used after Yoshino made him weak in the knees. The Spirits held an emergency meeting in an area that seemed structurally sound.

“Woh-kay, we had a little disruption,” Kotori said. “But Yoshino’s offensive was a success. Four left!”

The other Spirits gave a lively cry of “Yeah!”

“Mm.” Tohka nodded. “This is going fairly well, hmm?”

“But the difficult part starts now,” Kotori replied. “If we look at it the other way, we’re only halfway through. On top of that, we got Ellen Mathers up in the sky. Reine and her team are dealing with her for us, so we can’t count on their support for the rest of this mission.”

“Mmm, that *is* an issue, buuut even before that—” Miku looked around, a finger on her chin. “Our little tropical paradise looks like a war zone... How are we supposed to make my darling’s heart beat faster in a place like this?”

She was right. The special facility that Ratatoskr had gone out of its way to procure had been ruined by the DEM surprise attack. With the walls about to come tumbling down around them at any moment, this was no place to woo anybody.

But Kotori shook her head as if to say not to worry. “Relax. I’ve got that covered. The second sequence was activated earlier, so everything should be all ready by now.”

“Second...? What’s that?” Tohka asked dubiously. Actually, it wasn’t only her. The other Spirits also looked like this wasn’t connecting for them.

“Check this out.” Kotori put a couple fingers to her mouth and whistled loudly.

The walls of the building began to shake with a rumbling noise in response.

For a second, the others thought the attack from the sky had started up again, but they quickly realized that something totally different was happening. They whirled their heads around with surprised looks on their faces.

And of course they did. The walls with the blue sky projection transformed, the palm trees and their indeterminate tropical country vibe shifted to expose metal roots, and the water drained from the pool with impressive speed, while the ground itself sank like an elevator.

“Wh-whoa?!”

Once the earth beneath their feet had moved several meters downward, a thick, sheltering lid grew up over it to form a ceiling, and the artificial beach split neatly apart, while from below, a deep red carpet appeared.

That wasn't all. Lighting was deployed, tables rose up from the floor with a loud mechanical rumble, and glittering decorations were constructed one after another. Next, extras decked out in tuxes and evening gowns scattered around the room, played instruments, served hors d'oeuvres, and began chatting animatedly about high-society topics.

Within the span of a few minutes, the transformation into chic banquet hall was complete.

“Wh-what is this?!”

“Oh ho! Such elegance! And the mechanisms behind it... This does thrill the spirit!”

“Assent. Change is romantic.”

“...Whoa, amazeballs. Don't need my abilities here...”

The Spirits voiced their surprise one after the other.

But that still wasn't enough. The swimsuited figures of Kotori and the other Spirits were very out of place in this luxurious space.

“Costume department!” Kotori called, and several female staff came running over to the Spirits.

“Yes! Right away, sir!” they shouted in reply.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Tohka protested.

“Now then, right this way.” The staff led the Spirits to a curtained area set up on the edge of the hall.

When the curtains opened again a few minutes later, Spirits clad in beautiful dresses stepped out into the banquet hall.

“Ooh! Look at this!”

“This is...amazing.”

“Eek! You all look wooonderful!” Miku wriggled and squirmed as she stared at the others.

Kotori threw her arms out and announced, loudly, “*This* is the second sequence of the Shido offensive—elegant style! Now, ladies, it’s time to make Shido weak in the knees with your sophisticated charm!”

“Yeah!” They all thrust a fist into the air. The gesture was somewhat unladylike, but the most important thing here was not strict adherence to etiquette. It was their desire to save Shido.

Kotori put her hands on her hips and threw her head back. “Excellent. Now then, allow me to demonstrate,” she said, making her skirt twirl, and the others nodded.

Origami snapped a thumb up to see Kotori off. “May fortune favor you.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Heels clacking against the floor, Kotori strode forward and came to stand in front of Shido.

“Oh! You finally make your appearance, Commander,” he said teasingly, a grin rising up onto his face. He too had changed like Kotori and the others from a swimsuit into a dashing tuxedo.

“Yup.” Kotori crossed her arms and snorted. “I figured you’d be all flustered in a banquet hall, not being used to ‘em and all.”

“Well, well.” He shrugged clownishly and said with clear amusement, “So what exactly are you planning on doing then, Kotori?”

She uncrossed her arms, raised her right hand high above her head, and

snapped her fingers briskly.

The musicians playing toward the rear of the hall switched to a graceful melody. The staff who had been chatting merrily around them naturally split up into pairs and began to glide across the dance floor to the rhythm of the song.

Shido's eyes widened in surprise at this sudden development, like something out of a movie. "Ooh, very impressive. It really does feel like a party," he said, his eyes shining innocently.

Kotori looked up at him and sighed in exasperation. "Shido."

"Hmm? What's up?" He glanced over at her.

"You're not actually going to make the girl say it, are you?" she said, rolling her eyes.

Shido quickly smiled to himself as he guessed what she was getting at. "Oh, right. I guess not." And then bowing to her, he held out his hand. "You there, lovely young lady. Would you care to dance with me?"

"Well done," Kotori responded, her face softening into a smile, as she took Shido's hand and bent at the knee in a curtsy.

After exchanging a look, the pair walked out onto the dance floor. But when they had come to stand in the center of the hall, Shido turned to her.

"Now then, Kotori," he said. "I know we've come this far, but there is just one problem."

"What?" she asked.

"Your big bro has never danced before."

"....."

Well, why would he have? Although Shido at the moment was acting like quite the playboy due to the fever and Spirit power, it wasn't as though he could suddenly do things he'd never learned to do.

"That's fine," she told him. "I anticipated that much at least. Just take my right hand lightly in your left."

He did as he was told. "Like this?"

“Yes. And now, slip your right hand around my waist.”

“Got it.” Shido nodded obediently, and reached his hand out to Kotori’s waist. His fingers slid up and caressed her back.

“Eek?!” she yelped.

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s quite the cute noise you made there, Kotori.”

“...Listen, you.” She glared at him as her cheeks flushed.

He chuckled. “Sorry, my bad. Don’t glare at me like that.”

“...Honestly.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll lead, so you just move in time with the music.”

“Okay, got it.” He started to move his feet, taking his cues from the music and Kotori’s movements.

“Just like that,” she told him. “Rhythmically. One, two, three. One, two, three.”

“Hey, whoa,” he protested. “Don’t push so much. I mean, I get that you want to be close to me, but still.”

“A-as if! Look. Come on. Let’s speed this up!” Kotori shouted, her face turning red. She did actually have to be pressed against him to dance, and it was also one way of making his heart skip a couple beats. But Shido himself taking note of it was excessively embarrassing to her.

However, getting cold feet now would be counterproductive and the opposite of what she wanted to happen. Kotori composed herself and brought her body in even closer. And then, feeling them breathe together as one, she danced, spinning around the hall in time with the elegant melody.

While he was awkward in the beginning, Shido’s steps steadily grew more daring after a few minutes, as he became comfortable with the movement.

“Yes, exactly.” Kotori smiled. “You’re a pretty quick study, huh?”

“Ha-ha!” He grinned back at her. “Maybe because I have a good teacher?”

“Yes, I suppose so. I can’t think of anything else.”

“Not a humble bone in your body, huh?” Shido said jokingly, as he stared into

her eyes. “But I’m a bit surprised. When did you learn to dance like this?”

“A lady’s education. There’s that old line about how a boy becomes a man in the blink of an eye, and well, you could say the same thing about girls, right?” she said almost challengingly, and looked up at him. “I mean, I’m not going to be a kid forever. If you’re not careful, I’ll leave you in the dust, you know, Big Bro?”

“.....”

Shido gulped, and his eyes widened. A second later, he snorted a little, laughter breaking free of him. “Ha-ha-ha! Well, darn. I never imagined you’d get my heart pounding with something like that, Kotori.”

“That’s a curious way of putting—Wait, Shido, what did you say?” Kotori unconsciously stopped on the dance floor. Shido had in that moment said something she couldn’t let slide.

A heartbeat later, fanfare rang out over her earpiece.

It wasn’t like he couldn’t hear it, but Shido smiled, calmly, and repeated himself, looking straight into her eyes without seeming the least bit embarrassed. “Yeah. My heart skipped a beat. You’re a natural, Kotori. You got me.”

“...!”

Kotori was the one who turned bright red. Averting her eyes slightly, she threw her chest out to put on a brave front. “H-heh. Of course I did. Making you weak in the knees is like taking candy from a baby for me.”

“Yeah, I never imagined you’d come at me with this kind of grown-up approach, Kotori. It was that gap that got me. When you urged me to dance, I just assumed that you’d fall over dramatically in the middle of the dance, your skirt would fly up, and you’d expose panties with some kind of cartoon character on them to get my heart to beat faster.”

“Okay, now you’re going too far!” she protested. “And just so you know, I don’t wear any with cartoon characters anymore, okay?!”

“Fine, yes. I get it.” He laughed. “I was kidding. It was a joke.”

“...Geez.” She sighed. “At any rate, the fact that I got your heart pounding means I cleared your little bar, yeah?”

“Yes, of course. Looking forward to midnight, my little Cinderella,” he said, and kissed the back of her hand.



“Wha... Wha...?!” Her eyes darted frantically around the room.

“Hmm? Your face is quite red, isn’t it?” he remarked. “I figured that the grown-up Kotori wouldn’t bat an eye at something like this, though?”

“...! O-obviously! Something like this. I mean, it’s a greeting! A way of saying hello!” Kotori spat, putting on a show of being cool with it, and the corners of Shido’s mouth stretched up in amusement.

“That it is. Now that I think about it, we’ve kissed a total of twice: once five years ago and once in June. You wouldn’t get all flustered over a little thing like this after all this time.”

“W-well, yeah. I mean, we’ve already...kissed twice now.” As she spoke, Kotori could feel her face growing hotter.

Twice. Yes. She and Shido had kissed two times. Naturally, she also remembered this quite well, but when she recalled the fact all over again, her heart began to race entirely separate from her own volition.

Shido smiled, almost as though he could see right through to her pounding heart, brought his lips close to her ear, and half whispered, “You’re not going to be a kid forever, after all, Kotori. How about we make the third time a grown-up kiss?”

“Huh?!” Kotori shrieked, as his breath tickled her ear with these words. “Gr-grown-up...kith...?”

In her great surprise, her tongue wouldn’t properly form the word. Kiss. A grown-up kiss. No, she understood what it meant. She was aware of what sort of thing those words indicated. But the kiss five years ago and, of course, the one six months ago had only been lips touching lips, and somewhere in Kotori’s heart, she’d thought that the kiss at midnight would be more of the same.

But. Huh. No way. What? Grown-up... Actually, it isn’t out of the question, but there’s the small matter of preparing my heart—

“Ahmu.” Her brain was about to short circuit when Shido abruptly nibbled at her earlobe with his lips.

“Hngaaah?!” She jumped at least a meter into the air.

Shido laughed out loud. “Actually, I guess it’s still a little too soon for you?”

“Ngh. Ngggh...” She glared at him vexed and yet somehow also relieved.



“Kotoriiii! You diiiid it!” Miku’s bright voice greeted her, and Kotori, the red not entirely gone from her cheeks, raised her hand slightly in response.

“...Yes, somehow.”

“Mm. You were amazing, Kotori!”

“That was a...beautiful dance.”

“Mm-hmm... Thanks.” Kotori nodded slightly in response to the Spirits.

However.

“It’s unfair that only Kotori gets the grown-up kiss,” Origami commented in a quiet voice, and Kotori’s face steamed as the exchange with Shido came rushing back to her.

“L-look!” she cried. “Shido just went and said that!”

“Now, now, please caaaalm yourself. Anyway, is it all right if I go neeeext?” Miku placed a hand on Kotori’s shoulder as if to calm her (blowing a puff of air on her neck and stroking her backside as she did so).

“Eek!” Kotori’s eyelids flew back as she let out a tiny shriek. “S-sure, of course. That’s not a problem.”

“Thank you sooooo much. I do have a little something I’d like to do, so could I get you to get some things ready for me?” Miku held up a hand to her mouth like she was spilling secrets, and Kotori was strangely on guard as she brought her ear closer. Miku lowered her voice and explained her plan.

“...is how I’d like it to go, you knooooow?”

“Makes sense.” Kotori nodded. “Got it. I’ll get it set up for you, so give me a signal when you’re ready.”

“Okay! Thank you!” Miku said excitedly, and her breath brushed against Kotori’s ear.

“Ahyaaah?!”

“Hee-hee-hee! Well then, ladies, off I goooo!”

“Y-you...!” Kotori cried out, holding a hand to her ear.

Miku pressed a hand to her lips and smiled gracefully before bowing theatrically and walking over to Shido, hips swinging.

“Hellooooo!” she cooed. “Thank you so much for choosing me, daaaarling. Your Miku is here!”

She whirled around in front of Shido to make her skirt twirl and struck a pose, throwing her chest out. Well, he hadn’t chosen her exactly, but this was more about setting the mood than anything else.

“Oh! You’re next, Miku?” He smiled at her. “Ha-ha! That dress looks great on you, too.”

“Thank youuuuu,” she purred. “Hee-hee-hee, you look wonderful, too, darling! But don’t you think an evening gown like the ones we’re wearing would suit you, too? You can still use Natsumi’s ability, can’t you? Why don’t you become Shiori, and we can be twiiiinsies!”

“Yeah, I guess I can probably use it still. But you sure you want me to transform? If I’m in an outfit like that, your nose might start seriously bleeding, Miku?” Shido said theatrically.

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted!” Miku unconsciously began to squirm, and she argued passionately, eyes shining, “Even if I died from the blood loss, I would have no regrets if the laaaast thing I saw was Shiori so daring in evening wear! With a lot of back exposed!”

“Ha-ha!” Shido stroked her hair as if to calm her. “That’s quite the honor. But your fans would kill me if something like that stole away the world’s greatest idol from them. Actually, if you really did die because of that, Miku, I’d have no choice but to follow you, crying the whole while, now wouldn’t I?”

“Daaaarling...! You would go to such lengths for me?!” She clapped her hands to her mouth, and her eyes grew watery.

“...I know I ask this every time, but what are you doing, Miku?”

She heard some kind of voice over the device in her right ear. She turned

away from Shido and replied, quietly, “I don’t know what I should do, Kotori. Personally, I am one hundred percent okay with going to the graaaave with my darling. But I also want him to have a long and happy life. I’m not sure my delicate blood capillaries will be able to withstand the impact of Shiori, though.”

“Seriously, what are you even talking about?!” Kotori cried, shrilly. *“I’m telling you we don’t have time for this!”*

“Oh!” Miku scratched her cheek. “That’s right. I’m so sorry, Kotori. I just sort of got carried away talking about the aesthetics of my daaarling.”

“Honestly.” She could almost hear Kotori rolling her eyes. *“Get it together. You sure you’re okay?”*

“Yes, please leave everything to me. All right then, I will go ahead and dig in, then!” Miku said in a quiet voice, and turned back to Shido with a bright smile. “All of which is to say, daaarling. Since we’re here and all, and we are indeed pressed for tiiiime, I’ll get right to making you weak in the knees.”

“Oh? You sure are confident,” Shido said, a hint of amusement in his voice. “What exactly are you going to do?”

She looked over her shoulder and declared loudly, “All right, everyone! It’s go time!”

At her command, musicians with instruments and women clad in dazzling dresses stepped out onto the stage at the back of the hall, a shining silver mic stand in the center of them all.

Miku watched as they took their places, and then she stepped up onto the stage herself, heels clacking against the floor, and took her place before the mic.

Instantly, the lights in the hall dimmed, and a spotlight snapped on, bathing Miku in light. The people in the hall started to murmur excitedly, and applause filled the air.

Miku waited for this to die down before she glanced back and gave the musicians a signal with her eyes. They nodded and began to play a jazz number.

She moved to the rhythm of the beat, set a hand on the mic, and began to

sing in a sweet voice.

“_____”

It was a quirky song with English lyrics. Everything about this song was different from the usual fare of the idol Miku. But the feeling she put into it was exactly the same. A sweet, sweet love song.

Yes. At the moment Miku had been told to make Shido weak in the knees, she'd known there was only one way for her to do that.

She pulled the mic from the stand and strutted bewitchingly across the stage like it was a catwalk. She pressed up against a woman dancing to the song, and as she lifted her chin with a finger, she turned daring eyes toward Shido.

When she did, a spotlight popped to life on Shido. His eyes grew wide, like he hadn't seen this coming.

“Hee-hee!” Miku smiled charmingly, stepped down from the stage in time to the music, and began to walk toward him. The spotlight followed her, while the backup dancers trailed after her through the hall.

And then once she was standing in front of him, she took his hand and led him away. He looked a little surprised, but he followed, entrusting himself to her.

She led him to an exaggerated sofa that had been brought out at some point. This corner of the hall had the air of a cozy bar. She sat him down there and settled in on his lap, taking a pose like he was princess-carrying her, before she began to sing the rest of the song.

“_____, _____”

And then in line with the song, mixing in sweet sighs, she traced a finger along his cheek and tapped the end of his nose with a fingertip. Shido smiled crookedly.

Additionally, for good measure, beautifully dressed female backup dancers appeared behind and on either side of Shido. Seen from the outside, he looked like some profligate prince indulging in lavish fun.

That said, however, the person who was most intoxicated at that moment

was without a doubt Miku herself. She was singing on the lap of her beloved Shido, surrounded by beautiful women. It was a dream come true, so much so that she wouldn't have been surprised to wake up in her bed a moment later.

“_____”

Miku sang, her voice taking on an even sexier timbre. Finally, she pointed a pair of fingers at Shido and made a gesture like she was shooting him in the heart.

“Darling, I love you,” she said, and winked smartly at him.

“...!”

Shido's eyes flew open, and the sound of fanfare filled Miku's right ear.

“Hee-hee-hee! Looks like your heart poooounded a little faster for me, hmm, darling?”

“Yeah,” he said with a wry smile. “It does seem that way. I feel sort of bad that you got me from head-on like this.”

With a bright smile of her own, Miku brought her fingers to his lips. “That's not what happened at aaall. Did you forget? I'm a whole year older than you, darling? Isn't it all right to let me play with you from time to time?”

Shido chuckled as he raised his hands in defeat.



“...Ah!”

The Spirits watching what transpired between Shido and Miku from a short distance away came back to their senses a heartbeat later.

“That was kind of...amazing.”

“Uh. Mm.”

“...Okay, so. Miku's a singer then? I assumed she was some kind of yokai that abducted girls who stayed up too late.”

“Natsumi...” Yoshino gave her a pained smile, and Kotori cleared her throat as if to change the subject.

“Well, at any rate, that's six of us in the clear. Just two left. Next is—”

“I’ll go.” Origami threw her hand into the air before Kotori could finish speaking.

“Origami...” For some reason, Kotori had an anxious look on her face. “Mm-hmm. I don’t have any real objections, but could you just be extra careful? The heart-pounding Shido was talking about, it’s like, he meant cute girls doing cute things. So like, it’s different from suddenly taking off all your clothes or assaulting him or whatever, you know?”

“I know,” Origami said flatly.

“And the kissing him thing, that’s at most today at midnight, right?” Kotori continued. “We’d be in a real pinch if you chase him off, so don’t go trying to force that kiss from him or anything, okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“So I’m basically saying that it’s not just a kiss, it’s bad if you try to do anything more than that, too?”

“.....”

“Why was that the one time you didn’t answer?!” Kotori cried.

“A little joke.”

“...Uh-huh.”

Origami flipped up the hem of her dress as she left Kotori, who still had a troubled look on her face, and walked toward Shido. Halfway there, she passed by Miku leaving Shido’s side, regretfully.

“Oh myyy?” Miku turned her gaze on Origami and then winked and waved as if to say *good luck*.

“.....”

The moment they passed each other, Origami slapped Miku’s hand like she was accepting the baton. Perhaps delighted by this, Miku squealed and squirmed on the spot.

Origami kept walking forward and stopped in front of Shido, who was sitting leisurely on the sofa.

“Shido,” she said.

“Oh, Origami? Huh. I’ve never seen you in an outfit like this before,” Shido replied, looking rather handsome himself in his tuxedo. It was a little too cool. He came across as very androgynous, but dressed in formal wear like this, he looked a little more grown-up than usual. Elegant, gentle. He was a fetching wolf who naturally seduced ladies.

Half-unconsciously, Origami sent her right hand crawling down her own leg. When she’d changed clothes, she’d slipped a small digital camera into a holster there. Naturally, the power was already on. With her skills, she’d be able to capture Shido’s look for the ages.

However...

“...?”

Origami frowned. Her right hand had been abruptly stopped.

For a moment, she thought it was the work of Ratatoskr personnel or Kotori chasing after her, but no. What had caught Origami’s right hand was none other than Origami’s own left hand.

Yes. It was like she was stopping herself.

“What...”

A look of sheer confusion crossed her face as she considered this strange phenomenon. But she soon understood the reason for it. Inside of her was a line of thought that did not approve of this action, and that was what had stopped her.

How could she put it? It felt like an angel and a devil were arguing inside her head. Naturally, they weren’t visible to the eye, but in her mind, she saw a vision of a little angel with her face appearing before her.

Tuxedo Shido is precious. It should be captured in a photograph no matter what.

And on the opposite side, a devil with her face appeared. (For some reason, the devil’s hair was longer.)

Y-you can’t. If he pulls away from you now, everyone’s efforts will have been

for nothing!

It's okay. Shido's nice. He's not going to freak out over something like this.

Maybe so, but that's not the point!

She did feel a bit like the roles of angel and devil were reversed for some reason, but at any rate, the two Origamis were arguing fiercely inside her head.

Perhaps realizing something was going on with her, Shido cocked his head curiously. "Origami? What are you doing?"

"...Nothing." She'd lost her chance. She relaxed her hand and let out a short sigh.

When the tension drained out of her left hand, her right hand reached for the camera once more. And was stopped again. Given that her opponent was her own self, it seemed that catching her off guard was impossible.

"Origami...?" Shido asked again.

"I'm fine. No problems," she replied, before moving to his side. "Can I sit?"

"Oh, sure." He gestured to the spot beside him.

Origami sat down in an extremely ladylike manner. Then she turned her gaze on Shido, making a gesture like she was holding a glass. "Since we're here, how about a toast?"

"Oh, good idea." Shido nodded at her suggestion and raised his own hand.

A Ratatoskr member assigned to the waitstaff walked over to them on quick feet and bowed respectfully. "How may I be of service?"

"We'd like to make a toast, so could we get something to drink?" He turned to Origami. "Any requests?"

"Dom Pérignon," she said, the look on her face not changing, and Kotori's voice rang out through her earpiece.

"...! Hey, that's alcohol! Be reasonable. Make it Chanmery."

Chanmery was a nonalcoholic carbonated drink that tasted a little like champagne. Kotori's words seemed to have reached the server, too. When Kotori gave the exasperated instruction, they said "Right away" and hurried off.

It wasn't long before they returned with a silver tray bearing Chanmery and wine glasses. "Here you are." The server set the glasses down on the table and poured their drinks. Fizzing and bubbling in the glass, the liquid seemed to sparkle in the light of the chandelier.

"Well then, Origami." Shido reached a hand out to pick up his glass.

"Wait, Shido. What's that?" Origami pointed forward, as if to stop him.

"Hmm?" He arched an eyebrow as he followed her finger with his eyes. "What's what?"

"There. Higher." As she spoke, Origami slipped her right hand into her pocket and pulled out a small packet of medication she had snuck in. She raised it above Shido's glass, ready to pour the powder in before anyone had the chance to notice.

But here, just like earlier, the angel and the devil appeared inside of her head. Her left hand grabbed onto the edge of the packet and stopped the movement of her right hand.

Let go. This is the perfect chance. If we just get him to drink this, we can get that grown-up kiss.

You have to calm down! Kotori told us we can't force it, okay?!

Of course, I remember that. I have no intention of going against her.

So then—

It should be fine as long as Shido wants it.

What is this drug anywaaaaaay?!

Together with the devil's shriek, the resistance in her left hand grew stronger. The thin paper package holding the medication ripped due to the force being applied from either side, and white powder went flying.

"Ngh—" she groaned.

"Hey, are you okay, Origami?" Shido asked. "There's nothing to see here?"

"...I was mistaken," she said, gritting her teeth.

Shido turned back to her with a curious look on his face. "That's kinda

unusual... Well, whatever. Anyway, let's toast."

"....." Origami nodded, firmly, and picked up her glass as Shido took his in hand.

"Cheers."

"Cheers."

They made their glasses kiss with a lovely *clink*.

Origami put her mouth to the rim and took a sip of Chanmery. The pleasant sting of the fizz passed down her throat. Toasting with Shido. This act alone quickly transformed a beverage for children into the sweetest nectar.

That said, however, she couldn't deny that the schedule had been significantly disrupted. If she'd had her way, once Shido drank this, he would turn into the wolf on the night of a full moon in mere minutes. It would've been only a matter of time before he came for Origami's body to satisfy his carnal desires...

But it wasn't my fault I failed. Anywaaaay, the kish...

"....."

Origami was suddenly struck by a bizarre sensation, like the world was wobbling. She slumped against Shido.

"Hmm?" He looked down at her. "What's wrong, Origami?"

"...I'm...jus a li'l...drunk...I shink...," she said, slurring her words.

"Hey, whoa. This is Chanmery, though?" He gave her a weary smile.

Origami was undoubtedly drinking a nonalcoholic beverage. There was no way she could get drunk from it. So long as nothing weird had gotten mixed into it...

"....."

That was when she realized. Right before their toast, her secret drug had gone flying. A minuscule amount of it might have made it into her glass then.

Not good. In fact, this was extremely bad. She had to make Shido weak in the knees, but in this state...

“...Itsuka...”

Her mind hazy, Origami heard his name slip out of her own mouth.

“Hmm? What’s with you all of a sudden, Origami?”

“Bashically... You’re you, Itsuka... Why’re you sho handsome? I jes... I wanna stop being me and take a picture...”

“Origami? What are you talking about...?” Shido asked dubiously, but there was no stopping her now. Like a dam breaking, the words spilled out of her.

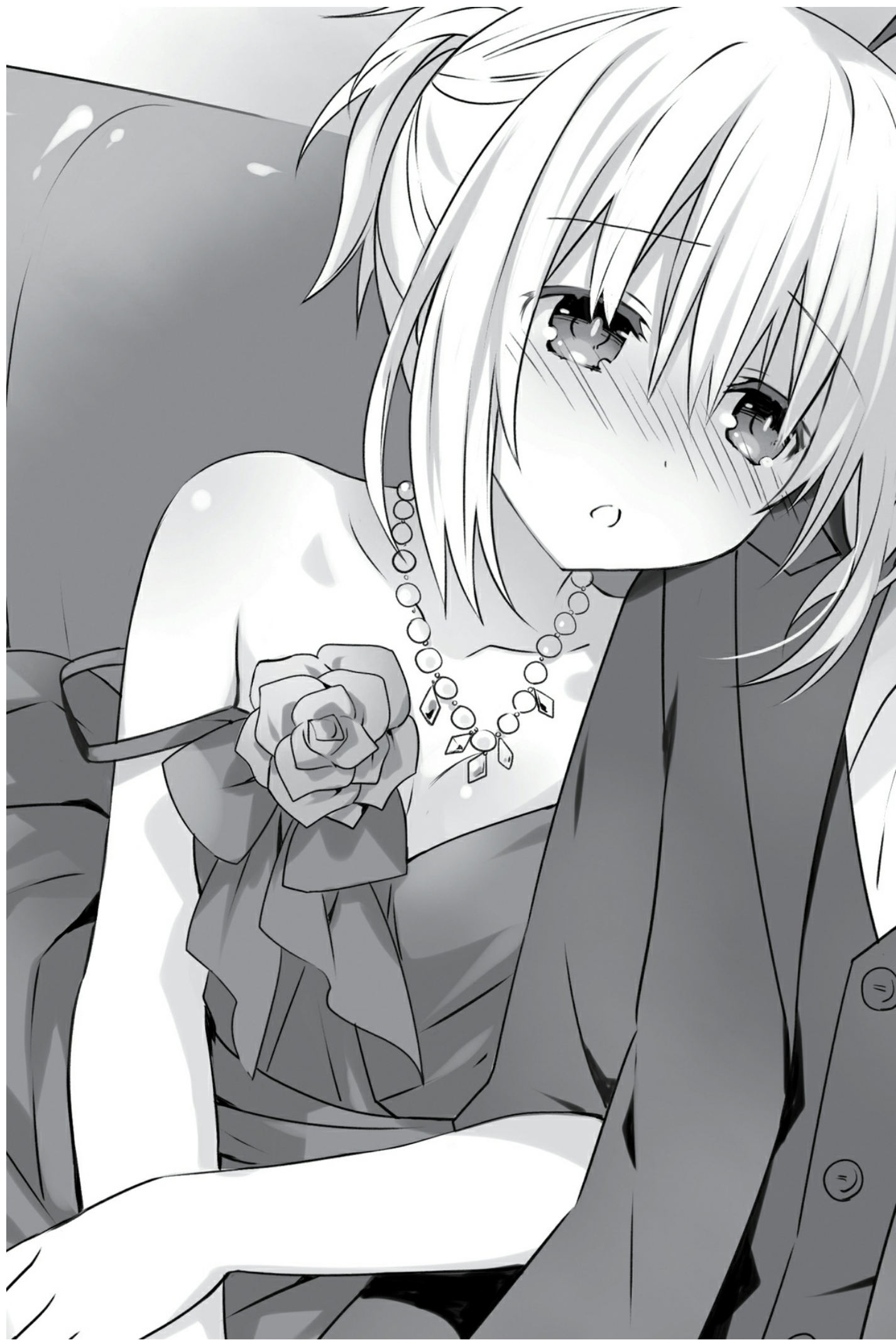
“...When I think about you, Itsuka, I feel all kinda fuzzy inside... But like it hurts a little, too... I dunno...”

Origami continued, as she snuggled into Shido.

“Itsuka... I like you... I love you. So much that I don’t even know what to do with myself... I love you.”

“...Origami—” Shido said her name in a hushed voice.

At the same time, she felt like she heard fanfare blaring in her right ear, but in her current state, she didn’t really understand the meaning of it.





After a harrowing takeoff from Neryl Island, the DEM Industries transport plane was cruising through the air, maintaining altitude.

Although the Spirit had attacked when they were leaving the island and things had seemed touch and go for a moment, they'd run into absolutely no problems since. If this kept up, they'd reach their destination right on schedule.

Just as the pilot Knox had this thought, an abrupt call came over the radio.

"DF0806, this is Control. Please respond."

"You bet, Control. This is DF0806."

"You are requested to change your flight path. Please divert around base E139."

"Change our flight path?" Knox asked as he met the eyes of his copilot. "Something going on?"

"There is an ongoing battle on the scheduled flight path between an enemy thought to be a Ratatoskr Wizard and Executive Leader Mathers. This is merely a precaution, but the worst-case scenario cannot be allowed to happen."

Knox frowned, confused. "A battle? Out here?"

"Yes. Read back, please."

Knox had meant his question as a request for an explanation why a battle was happening all the way out there, but Control urged him to obey orders without responding.

Inflexible bastard...

"Roger. DF0806 will change the scheduled flight path to avoid base E139 and progress to destination," Knox replied.

Control cut off the communication with a curt *"Over and out."*

"...Welp. You heard 'em," Knox said. "We're changing course."

"Roger. Still, they're being pretty cautious there. After all, it might be two Wizards fighting, but it's not like they'd find their way to this altitude, fight or no fight," Burton said with a shrug. "I guess our cargo really is that special,

hmm?”

Knox understood what his copilot was getting at, but he nevertheless shook his head. “Well, I suppose that’s reason number one. But it’s not just that. You heard ’em. It’s Mathers out there. Shootout with a normal Wizard’s one thing, but if that girl’s at work, then it’s a whole other story. We fly through that sky, and we risk getting skewered with a lance from below.”

“Y-you can’t be—” Burton said, sweat beading on his forehead.

Suddenly, an alarm began to sound, and the numbers on cockpit gauges jumped out of the realm of normal. The transport shuddered violently, like something had crashed into it.

“What the hell—?!” Knox cried.

“I-it can’t be Executive Leader Mathers’s stray bullet?!” Burton gasped.

“Idiot. Even her attacks can’t reach this far! And anyway, it’s not a Wizard. We got a Spirit signal!”

“Wha—?!” Burton paled at Knox’s words.

That was no wonder. The transport plane had only just been attacked by a Spirit a few hours earlier.

“You can’t mean that Nightmare came after us...?!” he asked.

“No. The signal’s different from before. And it’s—?!” Knox gasped and looked back.

Naturally, there was only the seat Knox had his back against and the wall of the cockpit there. But beyond that wall was the cargo hold, and inside of that, Material A was locked up under several layers of container.

Burton also realized in that moment that the earlier shock hadn’t been a collision from outside. It had been coming from inside the aircraft. “That’s not possible?!” he shouted. “I-It can’t be, right?! Material A is supposed to be completely dormant!”

“*Supposed* to be. But this is—” Knox started, and then noticed the anomaly in the numbers displayed on the gauges.

There were *two* Spirit signals. One was inside the transport plane, the other at the point Control had directed them to divert around. And these two signals were happening almost as if they were resonating with each other.



“...Yes!” Kotori watched Shido and Origami’s interaction to its conclusion and clenched a fist in triumph. “For a minute there, I wondered how it was going to go, but that’s what you call a lucky mistake. I guess it’s unlike her usual approach of throwing herself at him. Telling him straight up how she feels creates a nice change from the usual,” she said as if to explain the whole thing, and crossed her arms, nodding in agreement with herself.

Origami, meanwhile, regained consciousness not too long after and continued to play up to Shido like nothing had happened, so Kotori ordered a staff member to remove her.

“That’s seven now. But we can’t let our guard down. We have to hurry—” She stopped there. Beside her, Tohka watching Shido, just like she was, had gotten a somehow complicated look on her face. “Tohka? What’s wrong?”

“...!” Tohka jumped. “Mm... Oh, I’m not sure. When I heard Origami tell Shido how much she likes him, this part of me started feeling tight.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “I know that helping Shido’s the number one thing. There’s no time for worrying about stuff like this. But...”

Tohka ran her hands through her hair awkwardly.

“I know so...I don’t know. Why do I feel like this? Even though we don’t have a moment to spare to save Shido, I can’t get these random thoughts out of my head.”

“Tohka...” Kotori sighed and patted Tohka’s head. “Sorry. Push through it for now. But those feelings aren’t ‘random thoughts.’ They’re the ultimate honesty, something precious and worthy of respect.”

“They are?” Tohka stared at her.

“Yep.” Kotori nodded. “And we probably all have those feelings, more or less. That’s why we want to help Shido.”

“Mm... Is that it?” Tohka felt like she both did and didn’t understand. But she

noded anyway. Just the fact that this “something” was connected to her desire to help Shido clicked for her in a weird way.

“Great!” Kotori slapped her on the back, relieved. “Now, last up is you, Tohka. You ready?”

“Mm! I got this!” she replied brightly, and began to walk on brisk feet toward the sofa where Shido was sitting.

But because she was wearing a dress she wasn’t used to and shoes she normally never wore, her feet tangled beneath her, and she fell spectacularly.

“Hngh!”

“Tohka?!” Kotori yelped. “You okay?!”

“Mm. All good!” Tohka responded with a wave of her hand. She rubbed her face, which she’d slammed into the floor as she stood up, and this time began to walk with a little more composure.

Laid out on the long table set against the wall was a feast for the eyes—and the stomach.

“Oooh,” she sighed. “This is amazing, huh!”

And somehow, it was apparently okay to take whatever you wanted from this table. Eyes shining, Tohka grabbed two of the biggest plates and began piling all the delicious food onto them, which was pretty much everything.

She heard Kotori’s voice over her earpiece. *“Tohka, what are you doing? Food’s all fine and good, but right now, Shido—”*

“Mm. I know. Don’t worry,” Tohka replied, and walked over to Shido with two heaping plates.

And *bam!* She built two mountains on the table in front of the sofa.

“Oh, Tohka—Whoa, this is amazing.” Shido’s eyes grew wide when he saw the feast.

“Mm!” She puffed her chest out. “You haven’t had anything to eat since this morning, right, Shido? I figured you must be hungry. So I—”

The loud growling of her own stomach interrupted her.

“Mm!” Her face automatically flushed at her empty stomach chiming in with such unplanned yet exquisite timing.

Shido looked surprised for a moment before he burst out laughing. “Heh... Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“M-mm.” She furrowed her brow. “That’s not it. I mean, yeah, I’m hungry, too, but that’s not the only reason...”

“Heh! Heh-heh-heh! No, I get it. Thanks, Tohka,” Shido said, wiping away tears. And then he patted the spot next to him. “I’m about as starved as you are. Let’s eat. I mean, we can’t let this food go to waste.”

“...Mm!” She nodded firmly and settled in beside him.

“Okay, then.” He smiled at her. “Shall we dig in?”

“Mm. Let’s—Oh!” Tohka cried out suddenly. “Hang on a second, Shido!”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?” He looked at her curiously.

She picked up her fork, stabbed some roast beef, and held it out toward him. “Come on, Shido. Say ‘aaah.’”

“Oh ho! Full service, huh? Okay, if you insist.” Shido opened his mouth wide and accepted the roast beef Tohka offered him.

“So?!” She looked at him, eagerly. “Is it yummy?!”

“Mmm.” He nodded. “Yeah, it’s great. Obviously, the food itself is good, but it’s twice as delicious when you feed it to me, Tohka.”

“Mm. Y-yeah? Is it kinda embarrassing?” Tohka smiled bashfully as she brought her fork down on the plate again. But here, Shido stopped her.

“Hang on there,” he said. “Now it’s my turn. Say ‘aaah.’” Just like Tohka had, he held a fork of roast beef toward her.

“Ooh! Okay, I’ll have some, then. Aaah...” Tohka closed her eyes and waited for his fork with her mouth open wide.

However...

“Mm...?” She furrowed her brow questioningly. Even after she waited a few seconds, no food made its way into her mouth. Instead, she heard a clattering

sound, like something had dropped onto the table. Next, she heard Kotori's panicked voice over the earpiece in her right ear.

"Tohka! Open your eyes!"

"Mm...?" She lifted her lids as told. And gasped.

The Shido who had been before her eyes only a few seconds ago was now nowhere to be found. But she quickly realized he hadn't disappeared; he was doubled over, clutching his chest at her feet.

"Sh-Shido!" she cried, in a panic. "Are you okay?! What's happening?!"

"Hngh. Ah. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" He raised his voice in anguish as his whole body radiated light, and an incredible shock wave tore through the area.

"Ngh...?!" The whole thing was too sudden for her to brace herself properly, and she was easily sent flying. After tumbling back several meters, Tohka hit a table and finally came to a stop.

"Tohka!" a voice shouted. "You okay?!"

"Mm." She lifted her face, rubbing her aching head. "Oh, it's you, Kotori? I'm okay. But Shido!"

She looked over and saw him floating in the air, cloaked in concentrated Spirit power. He was back in his usual school uniform instead of the tuxedo of a moment ago. The transformation had most likely been undone.

"Shido!" she shouted, but got no response.

He didn't appear to be sleeping, but there was no expression on his face, and his gaze was vacant, locked onto empty space.

"Kotori, what is happening to Shido?!" she half shrieked.

"I don't know...!" Kotori shrieked in response. "We should still have time left before the counter runs out!"

Suddenly, the mass of Spirit power coiled around Shido grew even brighter, and the light spread out to envelop the entire facility.

"Shido—"

Before his name was fully out of her mouth, a beam of light shot out of him

and ripped through the ceiling of the banquet hall.

Chapter 5

Spirit Dance

Two swords flashed in the sky. One was the high-output laser blade Caledfwlch, wielded by Ellen. The other was Mana's Wolftail, which deployed with her Vanargand equipment.

Overhead, underhand, straight across. Ellen neatly caught every attack Mana came at her with, tracing out a trajectory of light as if to stitch them all together. Mana evaded the nth blow by a hair's breadth, and before Ellen could follow up, Mana swung her blade in a counterattack.

"Haah!"

Unlike the laser blade of Caledfwlch woven from magic, Mana's Wolftail was a physical sword coated with magic. Structurally, its maximum output value—essentially, the power of a single blow—was lower. But to compensate, it had the advantage of being able to endure long periods of use since it consumed little magic, and it was excellent for traditional sword techniques.

There wasn't a person on the planet who could beat Ellen in terms of sheer magic output. In which case, rather than a simple contest of strength, the optimal strategy against her was to harass her with massed attacks and careful technique. Mana was relentless on the offensive, delivering one lightning-fast attack after another that left Ellen no chance to recover.

But her opponent was considered the most powerful Wizard in the world. She wouldn't go down that easily. She dealt with Mana's attacks in a precise manner, deflecting them or stopping them completely. She even pushed back attacks that slipped through her defenses somehow by hardening her Territory into a solid. The truth of the matter was that Mana still hadn't managed to so much as scratch Ellen.

But her goal wasn't to defeat Ellen; it was merely to buy time for Kotori and

the others to save Shido. Launching some kind of suicide attack to inflict damage on Ellen was the worst of all possible moves. She walked a very fine tightrope to draw the battle out.

If things kept going like this, she should be able to buy the time she needed. And then if Kotori and the Spirits could somehow help Shido—

A sudden burst of light flashed at the Ratatoskr facility directly below her, and before she knew it, a beam shot up into the sky. The intense shock wave slammed into her back.

“...Wha—?!”

Her eyes flew open automatically. Although she hadn’t been knocked flying because she had her Territory deployed, the sudden event had stolen her attention, and this left her open for the merest hint of a second.

But for her opponent, a single instant was plenty of time to land a fatal blow.

“You’re wide open,” Ellen said flatly.

“Ngh—”

Impact.

While she managed to defend somehow, she wasn’t able to completely kill the power of the blow. Like a volleyball hit by a decisive smash, Mana plummeted toward the earth.

“Hnnngh...!”

She mitigated the impact with her Territory as she struck the ground. The surface of the earth distorted, pressed down by an invisible sphere.

“Ngh! You got me good just now... Still, what *was* that?” Warily, Mana kept an eye on the sky above as she did a quick survey of the area. And then she gasped.

And rightly so. Very close to the spot where she had been beaten into the ground was a floating Shido, brimming with the light of Spirit power.

“Brother?!”

She shuddered, and Shido slowly turned his gaze on her. His eyes were almost

unfocused somehow, like he'd been given some kind of drug, and his grip on consciousness seemed tenuous.

"Aaah, Mana," he said, his voice gentle. "Thank goodness, *you're okay.*"

"Bro...ther?" Mana frowned. Something about his words was strangely off. If she took them at face value, then it sounded like he had been worried about her. And in fact, she had just taken a painful hit in her fight with Ellen.

However. She wasn't sure why, but she couldn't help but feel that he meant something totally different.

Still looking as though he was in a trance, Shido continued, the words trickling from his lips. "I was...worried. You were taken by those DEM guys... I'm so relieved. Really..."

"...Taken?" She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Where's...Mio? Didn't she rescue you?"

"Seriously. What are you trying to say—" she started to say before a sharp pain in her head stopped her. Reflexively, she pressed a hand to her forehead and scowled. "Unh... Ngh!"

It was clear that this was no ordinary headache. Mio. The moment Shido uttered that name, several scenes she'd never witnessed before popped up in her mind.

"Wh...at...is...?"

Snap. Snap. Like a camera shutter closing, the pictures inside of her head changed in quick succession. Playing with a friend in the park. A teacher conducting a lesson in a classroom. Her birthday being celebrated by her big brother Shido. And the back of a girl with long hair.

"Ah..." Mana felt like her field of view flickered at the last one. For some reason, she could not recall the girl's face. She knew it. She was sure that she knew this girl, and yet...

But there, her thoughts were interrupted.

"Lost in thought when I'm right here?" The high-handed voice of Ellen rang out above her head. "You don't think much of me."

“...! Damn—” By the time Mana noticed her, Ellen had already descended and was brandishing Caledfwlch. She quickly refocused, but she was too late.

“...!”

However, she wasn’t seared by the laser blade.

Just as Caledfwlch was on the verge of touching her, the Spirit power cloaking Shido swelled up and stopped the blade of magic.

“Oh...?” Ellen arched her eyebrow and turned an annoyed glare on Shido. “Shido Itsuka. You are indeed looking most magnificent, aren’t you? Now it makes sense. I don’t know what happened, but I can understand why Ike would want you.” Her lips were curling up into a bold smile.

But Shido’s face grew severe. “D...E. M...!”

His breathing grew ragged, and he howled like a wild animal.

“Urngh. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The vortex of Spirit power swirling around him grew even more violent and knocked both Mana and Ellen flying.

“...!”

“Wha—?!” Mana cried out as she manipulated her Territory to neutralize the blow, and then she stopped in place in the sky. “Brother! What is all this! And Mio—who is that?!”

But Shido did not respond. The words that had spilled from his lips before were gone now. He was simply growling like a ferocious beast as he radiated vast quantities of Spirit power.

“Ngh...”

It was clear as day that Shido was not his normal self, and she wanted to try and get through to him, if she could have. But it was no exaggeration to say Mana was up against humanity’s most powerful Wizard. She couldn’t let her guard down even for a split second.



Gritting her teeth, she looked away from Shido.

“Cough... Cough... I-is everyone okay?!”

In the party hall destroyed by the incredible beam of Spirit power, Kotori call out to the others, as she coughed at the dust and smoke rising up into the air.

“Mm.” A familiar voice came from one side right away. “No serious damage. But what happened...?”

Tohka sat up from where she’d been knocked flat on her back and swiveled her head around to take stock. Kotori lifted her own face and followed her gaze.

Shido’s sudden bombardment had left gaping holes in the wall and ceiling, but as far as she could tell, the Spirits and the Ratatoskr personnel were unharmed. Voices rang out around her.

“Are you okaaaay?!”

“...G-geez. What was that?”

“Kotori!”

She heard an unexpected voice mixed in among them, and her eyes widened automatically in surprise.

“That voice... Mana?!”

Yes. Standing there was the girl who claimed to be Shido’s biological sister, Mana Takamiya. And she wasn’t alone. DEM Wizard Ellen stood there with her, clad in a CR unit and pointing a sword toward Mana.

“What on earth are you...!” Kotori cried.

Without taking her eyes off Ellen, Mana waved a hand in response and readied Wolftail in her right hand.

“I’ll tell you the whole story later!” she shouted. *“Right now, though... Take care of my brother!”* And then she kicked at the air and swung for Ellen.

The pair shot up into the evening sky, in a shower of magical sparks.

Now Kotori got it. The trump card Reine had prepared in case of emergency was Mana. She scratched her head.

“Honestly, that girl...” She sighed. “Even though she went and disappeared without even telling me how to contact her...!”

But it was a fact that Mana had saved them by holding Ellen in check. Which meant Kotori needed to keep up her end of the bargain. She looked once more toward Shido.

“Ah...” Her voice trembled when she saw him.

This was not the usual nice Shido nor the daring Shido they’d been dealing with all day. Emitting multicolored light, this *thing* had become an object. Shido could no longer be called human.

The concentrated Spirit energy swirling around him pulsed, and Kotori could feel faint tremors that matched that rhythm. It was almost like the air, the earth, and space itself were throbbing in time with Shido’s power.

No. It wasn’t just that. Part of the Spirit power had taken shape as something like a shining curtain of light or a fragment of metal. Almost like the Astral Dress that cloaked a Spirit.

The instant after Kotori caught sight of this figure, she heard an ominous alarm coming through her earpiece.

“Ah!”

It was different from the usual alarms used when a spacequake was detected or when they spotted an anomaly in a Spirit’s mental state. Kotori had heard it only once before.

She’d been told this was one kind of warning she might be subjected to, so she should remember it. And then she’d been made to listen to it in a test, followed by the words that it would be best if she never, ever heard it again.

“No...way...” She felt her fingers trembling, like she was cracking and coming apart at the seams. Her heart rate was sky-high, her breathing came hard and fast, her field of view warped, and she was finding it increasingly difficult to stay on her feet.

When she heard the trumpets the angels sounded to signal the end of days, her consciousness lapsed for several seconds.

“—————!”

Shido let out a howl that was wholly inhuman. Spirit power crackled like sparks of electrical discharge, brightly illuminating the area.

“...!”

He crouched down and launched himself up into the air. The shattered remnants of the ballroom were located in the basement of the original facility, but this depth did not hinder Shido even slightly. He easily reached the surface and kept going, leaving only the sound of falling trees in his wake.

“Kotori! What’s haaaappening?!” Miku cried. “We have to go after my daaarling!”

“.....”

Kotori lifted her face and parted her small lips. For a moment, no words came out. But this too was only natural. The words she was about to say were the equivalent of the worst, most terrible judgment.

But she had to say them. For the sake of the country. For the sake of the world. For the sake of humanity. And above all else, for the sake of Shido.

As the commander of Ratatoskr, as someone who Shido had saved five years earlier, she knew the responsibility fell on her shoulders.

She opened her mouth and willed her voice not to shake. “All of you are on standby here. I’ll take care of it.”

The Spirits turned surprised eyes her way.

“Standby, you say? You would do well to enlist our assistance.”

“Assent. This isn’t like you, Kotori.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru spoke up, followed by the other Spirits. And of course they protested. If Kotori hadn’t known what was happening and someone had told her to wait around, she would no doubt have reacted the same way.

But she couldn’t bring them with her. She took a deep breath and continued, working hard to keep her voice cheery. “Look. I’m going to help Shido. Leave it to me. Ratatoskr’s got measures set up for exactly this kind of thing.”

The Spirits looked like they were still anxious, but eventually, they nodded.

“Okay, then! Please and thaaaank you!”

“Please...help him...!”

“Will do,” Kotori responded, briefly, and left the Spirits and the Ratatoskr personnel behind to climb the stairs to the surface.

Shido was mowing down trees like a wild animal, Spirit power radiating from his entire body. If he kept going, he would eventually reach the city.

Kotori exhaled at length while she stared at him. And then she pulled a small terminal out of the pocket of her dress. The key of destruction she swore she would never use.

“.....”

Tapping at this terminal with trembling fingers, she finished fingerprint, retina, and password authentication. She raised her hand, placing her finger on the button.

This would activate the weapon mounted on a satellite in orbit that was aiming at Shido, Dáinsleif.

“...I’m so sorry, Big Bro,” she murmured. “This is the only thing I can do. Forgive me.”

But in that moment, she picked up on a murderous rage almost stabbing at her from the left, and for an instant, her mind was in chaos.

Then she heard a *clack* and felt something hard and cold press against her temple. She quickly understood that the barrel of a gun was pressed to her head.

“...!”

Moving just her eyes, she looked in the direction of the cold metal to find Origami, who she had left underground with the other Spirits.

With harsh eyes and the barrel of a 9mm pistol turned on Kotori, Origami spoke quietly and yet in a thoroughly icy voice, “What’s that in your hand? What exactly are you planning to do to Shido? Kotori Itsuka, wha—?”

But she stopped in the middle of her question. Uncharacteristically, her eyebrows shot up.

The reason for this was more or less clear. Origami had seen Kotori's face when she turned toward her. It was a mess of tears and snot, an expression of suffering that was hard to look at directly.

"...Explain. What exactly is this?" Origami continued, furrowing her brow.

Origami was clever. Kotori wouldn't be able to throw her off the scent with half-baked lies. But if she tried to power forward, it was clear as day that Origami would interfere.

Kotori opened her mouth, resigned. "...It's to kill Shido."

"Meaning?" Origami's already stony face grew even harder. "Is this an order from Ratatoskr?"

"...Half-right, half-wrong," Kotori said self-deprecatingly. "If I had to say, Shido's a time bomb right now. The Spirit power keeps welling up. If we leave him like this, he'll cause an explosion that surpasses the Great Southern Kanto Spacequake."

"...!" Origami gritted her teeth. "So you're going to kill him?"

"...Yes." Kotori nodded sadly. "My final mission if I failed. If I can kill Shido while he's subcritical, then the scale of the explosion will be smaller. And if you ask me whether I'm going to watch Shido die and take millions with him or have Shido alone die, then I choose the latter. I mean, *he* would definitely be sad if so many people died because of him."

"....." Origami's finger trembled, slightly.

Kotori turned her gaze back on Shido. "If I press this switch, Dáinsleif up in orbit will fire a beam of magic."

"Dáinsleif...?" Origami echoed.

"A cursed sword created to kill Shido alone after a thorough investigation of Shido's physical nature."

Yes. That was Dáinsleif. Kotori didn't know anything else about how to use this most awful Realizer. Shido might have had her power, but his physical form

would be completely obliterated and there would be no way to regenerate.

“...Absurd. This is how Ratatoskr does things?” Eyes shooting daggers, Origami continued. “You kill him if he stops being able to balance all the sealed Spirit powers? Ratatoskr are the ones who sealed the powers of those Spirits in him in the first place. You’re saying you used Shido for your own objectives, and then you dispose of him when he becomes inconvenient? You care for Shido so much, so why would you follow an order like—”

“You’re wrong!” Kotori cried, cutting Origami off. “It’s true that Ratatoskr’s objectives and Shido’s abilities align almost miraculously. But Chairperson Woodman cares about Shido. I mean, sealing away the powers of Spirits in a human body, there’s no way there wouldn’t be any consequences. He said if it looks like there are risks, then we should find another way.

“But...it was too late. By the time Ratatoskr discovered Shido, his body already had locked within it one Spirit’s worth of power.”

“...You can’t mean...” Origami trailed off.

“Yes. Mine,” Kotori announced in a trembling voice.

This was the unavoidable contradiction. Whatever else, Ratatoskr had learned of Shido’s existence because he had sealed *her* Spirit power.

“Ever since that day five years ago, there’s been the possibility that Shido would fall into this critical state. Even if he returned the sealed Spirit power to me, the path that formed would never completely disappear. Unknowingly, five years ago, I forced Shido to become a living bomb.”

Origami frowned. “Even so, didn’t him sealing even more Spirit power away on top of that increase the risk of criticality?”

“...We had no choice. There was only one way to make Shido completely stable.”

“And that was?” Origami demanded.

“Shido himself expelling the Spirit power in his body as Sefirahs,” Kotori said without taking her eyes off him.

“...! You mean—!”

Sefirah. The crystallization of Spirit power in the form of a gem that the mysterious Spirit Phantom possessed. Origami herself had been turned from a human being into a Spirit with that power.

“Then in that case,” Origami whispered. “But that’s...”

“...Yes.” Kotori nodded firmly. “Even if we’re in a state where we can completely wield our power, it’s impossible. I’ve undergone testing at Ratatoskr any number of times, but it requires an unfathomable amount of Spirit power to expel a Sefirah fused on the cellular level. This is exactly why the power of all the Spirits we’ve found thus far had to be sealed inside of Shido.”

“...!” Origami’s eyes widened in shock.

Seeing this reaction, Kotori realized the other girl had been harboring some serious doubts about Ratatoskr.

She could understand why. In fact, it would have been a lie if Kotori herself said that she trusted Ratatoskr without reservation.

“But...It’s all too late now,” she said. They didn’t have any more time for chatting. She took a deep breath and was about to press the button.

“Kotori! Origami!” Tohka’s voice rang out from behind them.

When she looked back, she saw that all the Spirits were in force there. They had come after Kotori, just like Origami.

“Guys—” she started.

“How dare you, Kotori!” Tohka said, her eyes brave. “Why didn’t you talk to us if that’s what was going on?!”

Kotori’s eyes widened in surprise. How did Tohka know? But then she remembered that all of their comms were connected by the same devices. Just like she herself had done earlier, it was possible to listen in with their earpieces so long as they were on the same channel. The others had apparently heard her entire conversation with Origami.

Naturally, Kotori had known about this function, but her brain had skipped over it in the face of the current danger.

“...I’m sorry, everyone,” she said. “But it’s over now. Everything—”

“Nothing’s over!” Tohka cried, as if to stomp out Kotori’s weakness. “I don’t know the whole story. But even if there’s totally no hope, that’s only just you by yourself, Kotori!”

“...!” Kotori felt her heart being squeezed tightly. “You...guys...”

The Spirits looked into Kotori’s eyes and nodded. Almost like they were reprimanding her.

“It’s not like you to giiiive up, Kotori!”

“That’s right... Let’s all save Shido...!”

“.....” The finger touching the button shook. The moment she’d been handed this terminal flashed through the back of her mind.

She’d been so, so scared, she could hardly stand it. Although it was preparation for the worst-case scenario, the mere fact that she held in her hand the means to kill Shido had given her more than a few nights of sleeplessness.

Aah, but now...

The Kotori from back then and the Kotori now were different. She had friends now who had the same readiness, experience, and above all else, cared as much as she did.

There’s no way we come to the same conclusion as back then.

The trigger slid from Kotori’s hand and fell to the ground.



“Why?! Why isn’t Commander Itsuka firing?!”

A frustrated cry rang out in the gloomy meeting room. That didn’t mean, however, that the owner of that voice was currently present there at the round table in the center of the room. It was rather a 3D image, projected into one of the seats at the table, that was raising its voice in anger and frustration.

Of the five in that room, only two were actual people. One was a man with white hair seated at the round table, Elliot Woodman. The other was a woman in glasses on standby behind him, Karen Mathers. The man shouting and the other two at his side were joining the meeting from Ratatoskr branches around the world.

“Fire! You have to fire, Commander Itsuka!”

“.....”

Roland Creighton. A middle-aged man reminiscent of a bulldog with a tendency to bark. His behavior wouldn't normally be considered appropriate for the Rounds, but...Woodman could understand his anger. Whatever else, the monitor placed in the middle of the round table showed what was for Ratatoskr the worst possible situation.

On it, a boy could be seen in the woods radiating incredible Spirit power. His power levels continued to climb, and if it kept going, they risked another tragedy like the one that struck thirty years ago. In fact, while the other two men at the meeting were not shouting angrily, they wore similar looks on their faces.

“Lord Woodman.” Fraser Douglas spoke up, a drop of sweat trickling down his cheek. He was a slim man with a monocle, reminiscent of a mouse somehow. *“This really will end in a large-scale spacequake if we don't put a stop to it. Why was the authority to activate Dáinsleif given only to Commander Itsuka?”*

A man who had the same air as a malicious cat out of a cartoon nodded. This was the final member of Rounds, Gillian Olmsted. *“Exactly. However talented she might be, she is still a junior high school student. Do you really believe she will make the correct decision when her older brother has fallen into such a state?”*

“.....”

If you lot had been given the authority to activate, I've no doubt you would have fired without hesitation, Woodman murmured in his heart, outwardly silent.

Ratatoskr, an organization to save Spirits. But it was only a faction centered on Woodman who acted in line with that philosophy from the heart. The other members were no doubt a part of the group because they found it rewarding for other reasons.

These people prioritized their own profits. Woodman wasn't particularly interested in denying them that. As human beings, it was natural to look after

their own interests. But at the same time, if the risks grew higher than the returns, it was very likely they would cut the Spirits loose.

Thus, the only one Woodman had thought worthy of entrusting with the key to Dáinsleif was Kotori. Even though that meant pressing her into the role of firing on her beloved older brother.

“Calm yourselves, gentlemen,” Woodman said quietly, as he lorded over the round table. “It’s true that what’s happening now might well be the worst thinkable situation. But it’s not necessarily true that everything is lost.”

Douglas and Olmsted looked dubious, while Creighton had an expression of what seemed to be anger on his face.

“At this late stage, what are you saying, sir?!” he demanded. *“What on earth could possibly fix this situation?!”*

“I’m not sure. But as Commander Itsuka has not given up, I can’t give up, either,” Woodman said, his gaze growing sharper. There was obvious dissatisfaction on the faces of the other three men.

Well, it wasn’t that he couldn’t understand how they felt. On the outside, what Woodman was saying was not much different from a tantrum. But he was certain there was still a possibility that Shido Itsuka would come to his senses. If there was a problem, it was that the three people before him didn’t seem to be worthy of hearing the reason for that possibility.

In which case, all he could do was buy even a little more time for Kotori. He continued speaking, bringing the conversation to a negotiation.

“I see what you’re saying. I know that I’m asking you for the moon here. So how about we do this? For every minute we wait, I will yield one percent of my shares in Asgard Electronics to each of you.”

“Wha...!?”

The men looked shocked.

And of course they did. As the only company in the world capable of producing Realizers outside of DEM, Asgard Electronics was the keystone for Ratatoskr technology and a lifeline for Woodman himself. Their mouths must

have been watering.

Still, they didn't immediately respond. They were likely suspicious of a deal that seemed too good to be true.

Woodman laughed to himself. That was fine. The longer they wrestled with the idea, the more time he could give to Kotori.

However, as if to interrupt, the Spirit power values displayed on the screen rose once again, and a shrill alarm began blaring.

"...!" The hologram Creighton gasped. *"I knew it was too late! It's impossible to expand the paths! We can't stop the Spirit power rampage! All we can do now is to strike the finishing blow as soon as possible!"* He pulled a small terminal out of his pocket.

"...! Creighton, is that—?!" Woodman gasped himself when he saw it. The item in Creighton's hand was something only Kotori and Woodman were supposed to be in possession of, an activation key for Dáinsleif. "How do you—"

"If you're prepared, you never need worry... It's a Japanese saying, I believe. The idea is that there's always a loophole somewhere."

"Stop! Don't be fooli—"

Creighton ignored Woodman and pressed the button without hesitating.



"....."

Kotori wiped her tears away with the palm of her hand and sniffled. "Go ahead, laugh. I talk like I'm so high and mighty, and then I fall apart when push comes to shove. Like, what kind of leader am I?" she said self-deprecatingly.

But Origami shook her head quietly. "That's not true. I'm really glad that Shido has you for a sister."

"Origami..."

"There has to still be some way. Don't give up," Origami said, and the other Spirits also nodded, chiming in to give Kotori courage.

"Indeed. The impossible exists not for us."

“Harmony. Yuzuru and all of us will help.”

“...Well, I guess something’ll work out maybe. I don’t know how, though.”

But interrupting their moment, an alarm on the terminal Kotori dropped began to blare.

“Dáinsleif activation code confirmed. Commencing attack on designated target.”

“...?!” Kotori gasped and scooped up the terminal. She wanted to believe that she’d simply misheard, but the screen confirmed that Dáinsleif had been activated.

Origami peered at it, a sliver of fear clouding her expression. “What does this mean? It can’t have been the impact of dropping it?”

“It’s not so cheaply made that it would malfunction over something like that! Why on earth—?!” She didn’t know the reason, but now they knew that Dáinsleif had been activated. Panicked, she tapped at the terminal in an attempt to delete the code.

But it was too late.

A falling star streaked across the night sky, and her field of vision filled with light.

“Shido?!” Kotori shrieked so hard she thought her throat would bleed as she reached out a hand toward him.

But this act couldn’t change his fate. His body disappeared into the light, the blowback dug into the earth, and Kotori and the others were knocked back by the incredible shock wave.

Except they weren’t.

“Huh?” Having braced herself, Kotori blinked repeatedly before slowly lifting her face. The other Spirits had similar expressions on their faces as they looked to the sky.

A defensive wall woven out of Spirit power had been deployed directly above them—or more precisely, above Shido, to protect him from Dáinsleif.

“Wha—?” Kotori stared in amazement. For a second, she thought that Shido had summoned this wall with his excessive Spirit power, but no.

“Goodness gracious, that was a close call.”

Another Spirit had appeared above Shido’s head at some point.

Although Kotori herself didn’t know whether or not it was actually a Spirit in the end. What was there was a human silhouette hidden behind static so that it was impossible to tell if they were man or woman.

“You...!” Kotori said, her fingers trembling slightly. The others there had more or less the same stunned look on their faces as she did.

Miku and Origami had particularly striking reactions because they had met the new arrival before. Miku seemed upset, while Origami was alarmed as they both stared at the mysterious mass of static.

Yes. This was the Spirit who created Spirits. The being who had given Kotori, Miku, and Origami Sefirahs and turned them into Spirits. The one known as Phantom was there in the sky.

“Phantom?!” Kotori half shouted.

Despite the fact that she was looking right at the Spirit, she couldn’t tell what kind of shape that static was supposed to be. The abnormal presence was something that she couldn’t have forgotten if she’d tried. It was the same as the “something” that had appeared before a young Kotori five years earlier.

A being for which everything was shrouded in darkness. A Spirit of mystery. No matter how she investigated, Kotori had never managed to find even a scrap of a clue. And although she had a million things she wanted to know and ask, Kotori was at a loss for words for a few seconds, like her brain had short-circuited.

The being wrapped in static began to speak in a voice that was hard to process, almost like it was being passed through a voice changer first.

“...Humans do such violent things, hmm?” Phantom said in a joking tone before whirling around dramatically. The defensive wall that covered Shido like an umbrella melted into the air.

“...! You’re one to talk!” Kotori scowled.

The reason that Shido was in this mess in the first place was because of Phantom’s actions in the past. Turning Kotori into a Spirit led directly to Shido sealing her Spirit powers and had saddled him with the risk of losing control ever since.

But then a question popped up in her mind: Why did Phantom appear now of all times? And why save Shido from Dáinsleif?

“Phantom...What exactly are you...?” Kotori demanded.

But rather than responding, Phantom turned toward Shido and continued speaking. *“...Now I understand. He is in a dangerous state right now. I understand your tragic decision a bit better now. But I need him to stay alive for the time being.”*

“Wh-what do you...?” Kotori could only watch in pure confusion as Phantom came to stand in front of Shido, ignoring the currents of Spirit power swirling around him.

“...Good boy,” she said gently, and touched his forehead.

And then...

“——!” Shido shrieked loudly enough to shake the heavens and writhed in agony. “Ngh. Gah. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

He shot forward, digging into the earth, and the forward movement that had stopped momentarily was restarted. He moved in a straight line toward some unknown destination.

“Sh-Shido?!”

“Daaarling!”

“Knave! What have you done to Shido?!”

“Conformity. I feel that the situation has worsened.”

When the Spirits protested, Phantom moved like heaving a heavy sigh.

“...Greetings, then. And after I gave you all this precious chance.”

“What did you say?!” Kotori frowned

“Kotori! Look!” Tohka cried out in a surprised voice.

Kotori realized that the Spirit power enveloping Shido was weakening ever so slightly. “This is...”

“...You’ll have to take over from here. I wish you good luck. Goodbye, my precious children.”

“...?! What—” Kotori cried out. “St-stop!” Phantom simply whirled around and melted into the air without answering.

“Kotori... What’s most important...now is Shido...!” Yoshino said pleadingly.

Kotori froze in place and then slowly nodded. “Right... I don’t know what Phantom did or how, but the Spirit power around Shido’s coming undone. We might still make it in time.”

“Really, Kotori?!” Tohka’s eyes flew open in excitement.

“Yes...” Kotori nodded as she continued. “At best, we’re back to being one step away from total disaster. We’re still standing on the brink. We have to break through that Spirit power and kiss Shido. And right now, we—”

“Kah-kah!” Kaguya laughed loudly. “Is that all?! Such a simple task!”

“Unity. In that case, there is no problem.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru took each other’s hands and struck a somehow odd pose.

““No problem’...? Do you understand how close we’re cutting it...?” Kotori asked, a deep crease forming on her brow.

But Kaguya and Yuzuru exchanged a glance, their faces softened into smiles, and they closed their eyes as if concentrating.

“Kaaah! Manifest, power of the hurricane!”

“Manifestation. Hiyah!”

At the same time as they shouted, something like bondage gear appeared over the dresses they were wearing. Limited Astral Dresses, the armor and castle of a Spirit.

“Wha...!?” Kotori gasped. And of course she did. The Yamai sisters had not widened the still constricted paths. Which meant that they were forcibly

manifesting these Astral Dresses with the dregs of Spirit power that remained in their bodies.

“Kaguya! Yuzuru! What—” Kotori started and then stopped.

It was true that it was extremely dangerous to manifest a limited Astral Dress when the paths were constricted. In the worst case, the two of them might even die. But it was a fact that this was the only way to reach Shido in his current state.

“Based on Natsumi’s performance earlier, you’ve got five minutes at most,” Kotori told them with a stern look on her face. The twins smiled cheerfully.

“Kah-kah! Then we have an unexpected amount of leeway.”

“Assent. That is plenty of time for the ultra-speedy Yamai sisters.”

With those parting words, the twins nodded slightly at each other, and cloaked themselves in wind before leaping into the air. Off they went to find Shido charging through the woods.



Wolftail and Caledfwlch sent a shower of sparks into the night.

“Hah!”

“You’re too soft.” Ellen easily stopped Mana’s attack yet again, twisted around, and delivered a kick into Mana’s stomach.

Mana immediately signaled to her Territory and pulled back toward the rear. But because her reaction was a heartbeat too late, she was unable to completely absorb the force. A sharp pain bloomed in her solar plexus, and she coughed.

“For all your impressive declarations, your attacks are quite half-hearted,” Ellen said. “Do you believe you can take me with such weak efforts?”

“Hmph.” Mana snorted. “Take, kill—those the only ways of winning you can think of? Your magic is the strongest, but your brain seems to be a bit lacking.”

“What obvious provocation. You expected me to fall for that?” Ellen returned, a cool look on her face. But that was only natural. It was a Wizard’s brain that controlled the Realizer. Stress and confusion would be reflected in the precision

of their Territory. A woman who called herself the strongest would not have reacted to something on this level.

“Ha!” Mana laughed. “No, not really. It was my opinion. Ever since I was at DEM, I’ve thought you had a screw loose somewhere is all.”

“A joke. I believe I do have openings.”

“Nah.” Mana shook her head. “‘Though I’ve seen you flopping more than a few times over something that was nothing. Also, when you carried files from the second to the fourth floor, you had to take two whole breaks.’”

“Ah?!” Ellen gasped. “How did you—”

“Well, I guess I can tell you now. The Wizards of the second enforcement division, instead of ‘executive leader,’ they called you ‘Captain Gangly,’ y’know?”

“.....”

A vein started throbbing on Ellen’s forehead. Without a word, she closed in on Mana, swinging Caledfwlch downward.

At the very last second, Mana dodged her and laughed teasingly. “Oh ho? I thought you weren’t gonna rise to my obvious provocations?”

“Quiet! How could they give me such an unpleasant nickname!” Ellen cried, thoroughly annoyed. Once she returned to the DEM head office in England, Mana’s former colleagues would no doubt get stuck with harsh “special training.”

The nickname Mana had just thrown out there was something she’d made up on the spot. For one thing, British Wizards comprised the majority of the second enforcement division, and a Japanese play on words would’ve made no sense to them. Mana figured that Ellen would have known that if she’d taken a second to think about it, but this appeared to have been a sore spot for Ellen. It seemed she hadn’t been able to reason it through when she was seized by a great white rage.

Suddenly, it seemed Ellen got a call from somewhere. Her eyebrows jumped up.

“Yes... What did you say? Material A?” She scowled and clicked her tongue before lowering Caledfwlch.

She gave Mana a hard look. “You are a lucky person. However, there won’t be a next time.” She manipulated her Territory and flew off into the dark night.

“...Hmph. A woman of few words as always.”

But Mana didn’t attempt to chase after her. Her objective was at best to buy time, and there was no guarantee she could beat Ellen Mathers if she followed up with an attack now.

But she had an even bigger reason for not pursuing the fight.

The name Shido had spoken when she’d dropped to the ground earlier was still swirling around inside of her head.

“...Mio. Who the heck is that...,” Mana muttered, quietly, under the night sky.



A beast clad in dazzling light raced in a straight line through the forest spreading out below them. Staring down at the scene that could only be described thusly, Kaguya and Yuzuru rode the wind through the sky.

“Yuzuru! Have you prepared?!”

“Response. Of course. Please make sure that you do not shrink in fear and miss this chance, Kaguya.”

“Hmph! Who do you think you’re talking to? Would a Yamai, a child of the hurricane, show fear in the face of such a thing!”

“Negation. I do not worry about that. But it would be a problem if you were to shrink back when it came time for the kiss.”

“Wha—?!Never! In fact, I’m the coolest you’ve ever seen me!” Kaguya cried, apparently forgetting her exaggerated persona. Yuzuru turned dubious eyes on her.

“Skepticism. Is that really true? In front of Shido, Kaguya is as meek and gentle as a cat getting chin scratches.”

“I am not! Could you not just say stuff?!”

“Mimicry. Hanyaah... When you pet Kaguya like that, Shido, Kaguya almost loses her mind, myaah...”

“Hang on a second! Is that supposed to be me?! I’ve literally never said those words before in my life!” Kaguya raised her voice, but Yuzuru paid no mind.

The pair climbed in altitude at the same time and flew through the trees so as to pin Shido between them.

“...Honestly. Here we go, Yuzuru!”

“Response. I understand.”

They nodded at each other and then sent gales shooting toward Shido. Pushed back by this wind, his movement became just a little sluggish.

Neither of them thought that this alone would stop Shido. However, the real show was about to start.

“Raphael. El Re’em!” Kaguya shouted, throwing a hand up into the air, and armor appeared on her hand and wrist, together with one wing and a massive attack lance. “Haah!”

With a fierce battle cry, she put everything she had into a blow aimed at Shido—or more precisely, the defensive wall of Spirit power enveloping him. A violent gale swept through the area as, for a brief instant, the wall around Shido split.

While this was a good chance, it was the most fleeting and unreliable of openings. But for the fleet-footed Yamais, it was enough.

“Concord. Raphael. El Na’ash!” Yuzuru cried, and fired the pendulum-shaped Angel at Shido.

However, her aim in this was not to attack. The chain of El Na’ash twisted around his limbs to check his movement.

“Chance. Kaguya!”

“Aye!”

They closed in on him in an instant. Although the trussed Shido seemed to have lost consciousness, he was groaning quietly.

“Shido. We’re here to save you.”

“Recognition. Just like you did for us.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru brought their faces closer to Shido’s. And kissed his lips.

““...!””

In that moment, the twins felt a sudden surge of heat. Power welled up inside of them almost as though a stopped blood flow had returned to normal.

“This... Does this mean the path’s open?”

“Assent. Most likely. While I am holding Shido down, everyone else should—”
Yuzuru started to say.

“Nnngaaaaah!” Shido had no sooner howled than he was shaking off Yuzuru’s El Na’ash restraint. At the same time, a violent shock wave sent Kaguya and Yuzuru flying.

“Aah!”

“Inattention. He has escaped from us.”

Now freed of his chains, Shido charged forward again, like a crazed beast.

The twins roused themselves to chase after him when an enormous silvery rabbit cut in front of them.

“Yoshino?!” Kaguya called, and the younger girl gave her a sharp nod as she straddled the back of the rabbit in her limited Astral Dress.

“Zadkiel!” Yoshino cried, and the Angel in the shape of an enormous rabbit opened its mouth and filled the area with an icy chill. The moisture in the air crystallized, and the surface of the earth crackled and froze. The same happened to the trees, the rocks, and even Shido’s legs.

Blocked by ice, Shido’s relentless march finally stopped. Yoshino raced Zadkiel over and circled around in front of him. And then she made Zadkiel crouch and leaned off its back, in toward Shido’s face.

“Shido... Please return to normal,” she said, and brought her lips to his. Her body grew hot, and her Astral Dress shone with a faint light.

“Okay, Natsumi, you too...!” Yoshino called to the shadow clinging to her

back.

“R-right...” Urged on by Yoshino, Natsumi, riding double on Zadkiel, popped her face out.

Of all the Spirits, she was the only one who had not manifested a limited Astral Dress. It wasn't that she didn't want to save Shido, but rather that she had used up her Spirit power already during the first Shido offensive.

“...I'm sorry for getting in your way by being so thoughtless, Yoshino. I'll go ahead and die,” she said.

“What?” Yoshino stared at her.

“Oh. Uh... Nothing. Gotta get helping Shido...,” Natsumi said awkwardly, and leaned over on Zadkiel. But her hands slipped, and she fell face-first onto the ground.

“Pleh!”

“N-Natsumi!”

“I-I'm okay. All good...” She waved one hand reassuringly while she pressed the other to her nose. She said she was fine, but there were tears in her eyes, and blood was trickling from her nostril.

“O-okay then, Shido. Sorry you're stuck with me here... But if we're talking blame, I'm in this form 'cause you wouldn't let me have any Spirit power, so... And don't come and sue me for kissing you while you're unconscious... I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna kiss you. That's cool, right? If not, you have to say so, okay?”

“Um. Natsumi. We don't have much time—”

“Aaaah!” Shido gritted his teeth like he was mustering his strength. The ice holding his feet shattered, and he lunged at Natsumi.

“Hngaah...?!” She let out an odd cry as she reeled backward.

But his hands didn't reach her.

At the last second, silver cylinders appeared around him. They emitted a sound with strange power, trapping him in place.

“Hee-hee-hee! That was a cloooooose call, hmm?” Miku strode forward from among the trees in a limited Astral Dress. It was the power of her Angel Gabriel that had stopped Shido.

“Miku...” Natsumi groaned.

“Are you all right, Natsumi? To thank me, one kiss would be peeeerfect.”

“A-as if!”

“Um. Shido looks like he’s going to start moving again, so...,” Yoshino said, and Natsumi jumped.

After a moment’s hesitation, she touched her lips lightly to his. “And there we go! All good, right?! A kiss is a kiss, right?!”

“Aaah, what a waaaaaste, Natsumi.” Miku brought her own face toward Shido’s. And then after kissing him, as she was pulling her lips away, she slipped her tongue out and licked his lips. The obscene act made both Yoshino and Natsumi turn beet red.

“Hee-hee-hee! That kiss with my daaarling was an indirect kiss with you, too, Natsumi.” Miku giggled. “Aaah, I feel like I got such a good deal somehow!”

“Huh...?! Indirect—I didn’t—” Natsumi started to say, and then her shoulders shuddered. “Wait. Huh? But then...that means I indirectly kissed Yoshino...?” Her face caught fire, turning an even deeper red if that was possible.

And seeing her reaction, Yoshino ended up feeling embarrassed as well. “Huh? Uh. Um...”

But they couldn’t stay there and chat forever. Before long, Shido broke free and shoved Zadkiel aside to continue his march.

“Eek...!” Yuzuru hurried to right Zadkiel, while Miku leaped backward, and Natsumi fell flat on her face.

“All right! The other girls succeeded with their kisses. It’s our turn now!”

“I know.”

Kotori, clad in flames, and Origami, wrapped in light, soared through the sky as they followed the path Shido carved out below.

Now bereft of his senses and totally out of control, Shido was truly a monster. He was a catastrophe in human form. This was exactly what the AST considered all Spirits to be.

But there was no despair in Kotori's heart. In fact, she was filled with a curious elation.

The severity of the situation hadn't changed. But being able to find some small measure of hope in choosing to do something other than kill Shido could only be described as a miracle for her. Of course, that didn't mean she felt any inclination to thank Phantom or anything.

Kotori snorted at the thought and then called out to the girl beside her. "Origami! Can you do it?!"

"Of course," Origami replied briefly as she glided through the air toward Shido. "Metatron."

Answering her call, an Angel that looked like a crown of large feathers manifested on her head. She held up a hand, and Metatron broke apart. Beams of light rained down on the ground from the tips of each feather.

Origami had no intention of injuring Shido. The beams accurately ripped up the ground ahead of him to block his progress.

"...!" In response, Shido jerked his face up and leaped into the sky. "Graaaaaaar!"

The sword-shaped Angel Sandalphon appeared in his hand, and he sliced at Origami.

"Origami!" Kotori cried out. Even Origami couldn't use any real Spirit power at the moment. If she took a blow from an Angel, it could very well have been fatal.

But just as Sandalphon was about to make contact, Origami vanished like light winking out, only to reappear pressed up against Shido's chest.

"....."

She placed her hands on his cheeks and her lips onto his.

Shido jolted, then swung Sandalphon again with another howl.

Origami vanished once more and reappeared several meters away. Kotori had been waiting for this moment and started her own approach.

“Ah. Aaaaaaah!” Shido swung Sandalphon and shot out a wave of Spirit power from the sword.

Kotori dodged this and swallowed hard. Shido’s reactions were indeed gradually changing. With the Yamai sisters, he had been simply a raging catastrophe, but he’d shown clear intent to attack Natsumi, and now, it was plain to see he was deliberately using an Angel and swinging the sword at his “enemy”—Kotori and Origami.

The greater his resistance, the harder it became to approach him. At the same time, this also meant that he was slowly regaining his senses and thoughts.

“...Shido.” Kotori held out her arms and charged at him like she was going to envelop him in a hug

“—!” He swung Sandalphon at her. But she didn’t dodge. The blade sliced into her diagonally from the shoulder, and blood gushed everywhere.

“Kotori!” Origami cried, but Kotori only held up a hand, as if to say not to worry. Flames quickly rose up from the deep wound and healed her.

While her ability did heal the wound, she still felt the pain. But that was all right. This pain was her atonement for coming so close to killing him.

“Big Bro.” She wrapped her arms around him and gently kissed his lips. “I’ll wait a little longer for that adult kiss.” She smiled slightly.

“_____!”

Shido gave a soundless scream and twisted out of her embrace before resuming his charge.

“Just one more,” Kotori groaned in anguish, as she pressed a hand to her still healing wound. Pain and heat eased by excitement and elation overcame her a heartbeat later.

At any rate, they were almost done. If they could get that last kiss, all of the paths between Shido and the Spirits would return to normal, and Shido would be himself again.

She looked in Shido's direction through blurry eyes.

Ahead of him stood a beautiful princess with a bluish-purple Astral Dress and the tip of a golden sword thrust into the ground.

The sound of leafy trees being mowed down. The crackle of Spirit power. A roar that ripped through the darkness and shook earth, ear, and skin alike.

Tohka quietly opened her eyes and grabbed the hilt of Sandalphon before assuming a stance. "Here you are, Shido!"

Shido appeared with a surge of Spirit power and Sandalphon in hand, just like Tohka. Clouds of white streamed from his mouth. He saw that Tohka barred his way, so he visibly readied himself for battle and swung hard.

"Heh!" Tohka pumped her legs and charged forward to intercept the blow.

The two Sandalphons clashed, sending sparks of Spirit power in every direction.

Above, below, left, right. Swings came from all directions, each blade catching the other as if weaving the intervals together. Every time their swords clashed, a shock wave rippled through the area, and the shape of feet was etched into the ground.

It was strangely emotional. Tohka never dreamed that Shido would be able to go toe to toe with her in a sword fight like this. But Shido in that moment both was and was not Shido. She sharpened her gaze and swung Sandalphon with all her might.

"Heeeyaaah!"

Clang! The Sandalphon that Shido held bounced back into the night sky, melting into particles of light that were carried away by the wind.

Although she couldn't match Shido in terms of pure Spirit power, when it came to swordplay, there was still a world of difference between them. The moment he challenged her to a fight with Sandalphon, she knew exactly how it would end.

"Shido. I'm gonna save you now." Tohka nodded as she firmed up her resolve, slipped in close to Shido's breast, placed a hand on his chin, and brought her

lips in.

However...

“...! Nngaaah...?!” Tohka felt a sudden stabbing pain in her chest and cried out in anguish, pressing a hand to her breast. “What...”

Sandalphon and the limited Astral Dress adorning her body melted away. Apparently, she’d completely run out of what little Spirit power remained in her body.

Instantly, an intense pressure and stress overwhelmed her. Because her limited Astral Dress had come undone, her body was now fully exposed to the force of Shido’s Spirit power.

“Hngh—”

“——”

Shido shook her hand off, easily. With that minor movement, Tohka was helplessly sent flying.

“Aah...!” She slammed into a massive tree and the world grew dim around her. Every bone and muscle in her body shrieked in pain.

“Tohka!”

“Tohka...!”

She heard the voices of Kotori and the others ring out from the sky and up ahead. But just as they were about to summon their Angels to seal Shido’s power, Tohka shouted to them, “Don’t!”

“...?! What is it, Tohka?!” Kotori called back in surprise.

In contrast, Tohka was the picture of calm as she continued. “Don’t...do anything. I feel like this is something I have to do.”

“Tohka...,” Kotori said. She could guess what Tohka was probably thinking, so she held out a hand to keep the others back.

Tohka glanced that way to show her appreciation before she turned back toward Shido.

“——!”

Shido howled and twisted his body around.

However much the paths had been opened and the supply of Spirit power had stabilized, the amount sealed away inside of Shido was still overwhelming. In a simple contest of strength, he would eventually push them back and defeat them.

“Ngh...” Dragging her aching body, Tohka pulled herself closer to him. Her field of view was blurry, and her thoughts were hazy. There wasn’t a part of her body that didn’t hurt. Even so, she refused to let this chance the others had created slip through her fingers.

“Gah... Ah...!”

The vortex of Spirit power swirling around Shido raged like it rejected Tohka. It almost felt as if she had leaped naked into a sea of sulfuric acid. An invisible force lapped at the surface of her body, inflicting such agony that she nearly fainted.

But she didn’t stop moving. If she gave up here, they wouldn’t be able to save Shido. All of their hard work would go up in smoke. She couldn’t let that happen, no matter the cost.

“Shido... Are you fighting...even when you’re in this much pain...?” Tohka practically wrenched the words out of herself.

He may have had Kotori’s ability to regenerate, but he was still a human being with the capacity for pain. How terrifying it must have been for him to go up against Spirits and Wizards without even an Astral Dress. Tohka now knew that very pain.

But Shido never gave up. No matter how many times he was hurt, how many times he was knocked down, he never stayed down. All to save none other than Tohka and the other Spirits.

She didn’t know the reason why he would go to such lengths to try and save them. But it was too absurd that he would meet his end like this without being saved.

No.

“...I,” Tohka said, as if talking to herself.

It was true, she owed Shido a huge debt, a debt so large that she could never repay him, even if she tried for the rest of her life. Plus, she thought it was a mistake to not save a boy as kind as Shido.

But that wasn't the only reason her feet kept moving forward. If she had simply been leaning on gratitude and justice, her legs would have failed her already. There was a different feeling inside of her that would not allow her to stop no matter what kind of suffering she was forced to endure.

“Ohhh, is that it?”

As she reached the limits of pain, Tohka felt like she understood for the first time. The word she'd heard so many times and the fathomless sensation inside of herself came together for the first time.

This had to be...love.

A love that was just a little different from the love she had for Kotori and the others. Tohka loved Shido. She loved him so much, she could hardly stand it. That was why she wanted to save him.

“Shido!” She called his name. She reached out and grabbed onto the tie around his neck. And then she yanked his head toward her. Their lips met.

“—”

At the same time she felt her body grow hotter, the Spirit power cloaking Shido faded away, dissipating into the air around them.

A few seconds later, his wild panting gradually calmed, and the tension drained out of Shido's body. As consciousness flickered to life in the eyes that before contained nothing but ferocity, his shoulders jolted up as he seemed to finally notice that he was kissing Tohka.

“...?! T-Tohka?! What on earth are you doing?!”

His usual voice. His usual reaction.

Tohka had found her beloved Shido.

Her cheeks relaxed into a relieved smile, and she said softly, “I'm not telling.

Stupid...”

Then all the strength left her body, and all she could do was lean against Shido.



Epilogue

The Second One Freed

The light of flames illuminated the night forest sunk into darkness. It was a quiet spot away from the city. Naturally, there was never a soul around normally, and as long as no lightning hit a tree, there was no way for a fire to start.

But the look of the forest was a little different at the moment. What was burning was not dead trees or a bonfire left behind by campers, but rather the fuel spilling out of the massive transport plane that had crashed.

“Oh dear. Oh my.”

Walking through the flames that stank of aviation fuel, a girl who looked like she'd been cut from the darkness crawled out of a shadow on the ground.

“Here I was, lying in wait at the DEM facility, while you went and came down in a place like this.”

The girl—Kurumi—picked up one of the fragments of the plane's exterior scattered across the area and held her other hand out ahead of her.

The shadow at her feet squirmed and launched a pistol into her hand.

“Zafkiel. Yodh.”

When she chanted this name, shadow was sucked into the barrel, and a bullet was loaded into the gun.

Yodh. The tenth bullet. A bullet that communicated to Kurumi the memories of the target she used it on.

The barrel was aimed toward herself, and the piece of plane was positioned between her head and the gun. She pulled the trigger without hesitation. The concentrated shadow shot through the fragment and plunged into her head.

This didn't leave so much as a scratch on either the fragment or her head. Instead, a scene of the transport plane flying was projected inside of her mind.

The blaring alarm. Material A shaking the plane, quickening like a baby in the womb. And in resonance with this, a mysterious Spirit signal that kept growing more intense.

An instant later, a beam of light emitted from a mysterious underground facility in the distance ahead shot through the transport plane.

"...I see. Shido was the cause." Kurumi giggled. She'd received reports from her avatars that something about Shido was strange, but she never imagined that *that* would affect *this*.

"I suppose Spirit Number Two sensed Shido's Spirit energy from inside the transport plane and reached out for help? That said, if this was what set off Shido's rampage, she caused *quite* the problem for Kotori and the other ladies."

It was no wonder that the Spirit locked up inside the container would say something. Kurumi couldn't and wouldn't blame her for reaching out for something, anything that might save her, no matter what the consequences would be.

"Or...was she was unexpectedly assisted by Shido, perhaps?"

Kurumi dropped the pistol back into the shadow and circled around to the rear of the aircraft, skipping the whole way.

Because she'd placed all of her avatars at the main DEM facility where she suspected the transport plane would show up, she would have undoubtedly secured Spirit No. 2 if this accident never happened. She would have had to use up a fair number of avatars, though.

It was extremely significant that she wouldn't have to make that sacrifice.

Kurumi's objective was not only to get a hold of Material A. Once she did that, she would acquire the information that Spirit No. 2 likely knew about the original Spirit and use that to defeat the mysterious being.

"Now then, Little Miss Spirit. Please do let me see your face," Kurumi said, peering into the shipping container that had spilled out of the half-destroyed

plane.

However.

“Oh dear?” Her eyes widened.

All she found was an empty container that had been torn open from the inside.



Ratatoskr's Rounds was currently in an uproar.

It wasn't hard to imagine why. After one of the board, Creighton, activated Dáinsleif, which he had no authority to do, the mysterious Spirit Phantom appeared to stop it.

“Phantom?! What is the meaning of this?! Why would that Spirit show up?!”

“No, this is a godsend. Whatever the reason, we made it through this without losing the power of the Spirits. Creighton, have you no nerve?!”

“What are you talking about? If I hadn't fired, the situation wouldn't have improved!”

“But you didn't have that authority. This is a serious abuse of power.”

“What's more important right now is Phantom. Can't we pick up some trace of it somehow? We're talking about a Spirit that turns people into Spirits. If we had that power...”

The members of the board all spoke at once, making for a tumultuous scene.

Woodman banged on the table, annoyed. “Quiet yourselves, you children.”

“...!”

The three members of the board gasped at the icy edge in Woodman's voice.

“I won't say that you have to act exactly in line with my wishes. But will you at least keep your promises? If you would like to revoke them, then I also have thoughts of my own.”

“.....”

Nervous tension colored the faces of the executives.

Woodman glared at them as he continued. “I will notify you later of Creighton’s punishment.”

“P-punishment...? Punishment?! I acted for the sake of Ratatoskr...!”

“That’s right, Lord Woodman. He may well have been imprudent, but he—”

“I said quiet, Olmstead. Did you honestly think I hadn’t realized? Do I truly seem that idiotic to you all?”

“.....”

Olmstead fell silent.

Yes. It was hard to imagine that the simplistic Creighton could have done all this on his own. Most likely, the Dáinsleif activation terminal had come about because of Olmstead who placed it in Creighton’s hands. It was very much Olmstead’s style, given how he hated to get his own hands dirty. Creighton likely had no idea of his involvement.

“That’s all for today. Each of you should rethink your positions,” Woodman said, and left the conference room with Karen pushing his wheelchair.



“Nnn...” Shido opened his eyes with a groan.

He found himself in what looked like a doctor’s office. Definitely not his bedroom. After a few seconds, he guessed that he was in the Ratatoskr facility.

“Oh, you’re awake?” he heard someone say. When he looked over, he saw Kotori standing there. And seeing her, he remembered everything.

“Right. After that, I...”

Once Tohka passed out, Shido had been brought to Ratatoskr’s underground facility and forced to undergo a very thorough examination.

“Hngh...”

But his memories of anything before that were vague at best. Saying he couldn’t recall anything would be a bit misleading. He had memories of what he had done, but the more he tried to understand the big picture, the more the details failed to come into focus. It was almost like trying to remember a dream.

“Don’t push yourself,” Kotori told him. “The paths are stable now, but you’re definitely still on the mend.”

“Yeah... No, I’m okay. How’s everyone else?” Shido asked, and Kotori sighed before replying.

“They’re on standby in another room. I told them to get some rest, but they insisted on waiting until you woke up. And...” She pointed farther into the room, to the bed on the right side of Shido’s.

He shifted his gaze and found Tohka sleeping soundly there, her whole body wrapped in bandages, compresses all over. It was painful to look at.

“Tohka...”

“She said she’d be too worried to sleep if she couldn’t keep an eye on you, so I had to put the both of you in the same room. When she wakes up, you better thank her. The reason you returned to your usual self was because Tohka was courageous right up to the very end. I mean, charging into a vortex of Spirit power with nothing but the clothes on her back...that’s not something just anyone could do. Though I guess I have one idiot sibling who’s done something similar,” she added. A wry smile crossed Shido’s face.

At the same time, one of his memories became clearer, like the fog had lifted.

Right. He remembered now. Tohka had reached out to him heedless of the danger.

“Thanks, Tohka.” He leaned out of his bed and stroked her hair. She squirmed like it tickled and kept snoring away. He smiled at this before turning his gaze back on Kotori. “You too. Thanks, Kotori. You worked hard for my sake.”

“...! I—I mean,” Kotori stammered until finally she clutched the hem of her skirt tightly, and began to shed plump tears.

“K-Kotori?” he said, worry clouding his face. “What’s up? Come on.”

“...I’m. Sorry... I—” She continued in a halting apology.

For keeping quiet about the danger of Shido losing control. For Ratatoskr preparing a means of killing him if things went awry. And for the fact that it was Kotori herself who held the key.

“I’m sorry...for not telling you. All you did was seal my Spirit power, and you ended up like this... I’m so sorry.”

“.....”

Shido silently listened to her and let out a sigh. “Don’t cry, Kotori.”

“But what I did to you—” she protested.

“I mean, sure, it doesn’t feel great to have a gun pointed at me twenty-four-seven, but...” He shrugged. “I guess that’s just how it has to be, right? If there’s even a one in a million chance that I’ll lose control, then there should be some sort of countermeasure. If a whole bunch of people ended up dying or something because of me, I’d never be able to live with myself.”

“Big Bro...,” Kotori murmured.

“Also,” Shido continued. “Even if I got to go back in time five years, I would absolutely still seal your Spirit powers. You might tell me I’m not valuing my own life or whatever, but... This is who I am. I can’t do anything about it. It hits me way harder when you cry. That’s just how it is.”

“...!”

“So quit crying, Kotori. I almost died there, and I managed to finally wake up somehow. No one wants to wake up to your tears,” he said. “That’s too much, okay?”

“.....” Kotori wiped her eyes with her sleeve and smiled brightly, eyes and nose still red.

“See?” Shido also put a smile on his face. “You really are much cuter like this. My little sis is the cutest in the whole world.”

“...Jerk.” She turned around, opening the door to the room. “I’m going to go get the others. I know they’re worried.”

“Yeah, please do,” Shido said. Kotori nodded.

“Thanks, Big Bro,” she said as she left and closed the door.

After Shido saw her off, he stretched to loosen his tense muscles. But the muscle pain wouldn’t allow him to properly raise his arms. “Ah! Ow-ow-ow-

ow...”

Tohka sleeping in the bed beside him moaned quietly and then rubbed her eyes. “Mm... Unh...”

“Hey, Tohka. Morning.”

“.....! Shido!” She stared sleepily for a moment, but her eyes quickly snapped all the way open, and she sat up in bed. “Hngh...!”

She was still in terrible pain. When she lifted her torso off the bed, she groaned in anguish.

“Hey, whoa,” he cautioned. “Take it easy.”

“No...” She shook her head. “I’m okay. But how are *you*, Shido?”

“Good, because of you,” he said. “Thanks, Tohka. I heard you really saved my bacon.”

Tohka shook her head vigorously. “Don’t worry about it. You saved me first, Shido. It would be plain weird if you didn’t get saved after you’ve done so much for us. Plus...”

“Plus?” he returned, head cocked curiously.

Her cheeks turned red. Then she giggled, and her face relaxed into a smile. “... The last part is a secret.”

“Come on,” he urged. “Now I’m curious. Tell me.”

“Nope. A secret’s a secret. Anyway, Shido.” Tohka whirled her head around and discovered a basket of apples on the table. She grabbed one and deftly peeled it. And then she took part of it in one hand and turned to him. “C’mon, Shido. Say ‘aah.’”

“Huh? What’s with this all of a sudden?” he asked.

“You told us to make you weak in the knees,” she said, her eyes serious. “But I’m the only one who didn’t get to.”

“Huh?” He cocked his head. “That happened?”

“Yep. So come on. Aaah.”

“A-aaah...” Shido let her push the apple into his mouth.

“So?” She looked at him, expectantly. “Is it yummy?!”

“Mm.” He nodded. “Yeah, it’s good.”

“Did your heart skip a beat?!”

“Yeah. It sure did.”

“It did!” Tohka grinned happily. Shido really did feel his heart beat faster as he admired her carefree smile.

She couldn’t have actually noticed this, but nonetheless, she looked into his eyes with a meek air. “Now that we’re talking about it, Shido. There’s something I wanted to check with you.”

“Mm?” He looked at her with raised eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“...Kotori told me that a kiss is required to seal Spirit power,” Tohka said hesitantly. “So I guess that means you’ve kissed everyone up to now?”

“Pffft...!” Shido choked. He was pretty sure Tohka had said something that he wasn’t allowed to kiss anyone other than her after he’d locked away Yoshino’s Spirit power.

Because he was worried about destabilizing her mental state, he’d done his best to keep the kisses with the other Spirits a secret from Tohka. But it seemed that the whole thing had been blown wide open with this incident.

“...Listen, Tohka,” he said. “The thing is...okay, look—”

“No, it’s fine.” She stopped him. “I’m actually sorry for asking the impossible. I was telling you to save the Spirits at the same time I was forbidding you from doing it. And that’s just contradictory. But...,” she continued. “Don’t you think you could’ve just told me that? This whole time, I’ve thought there was some other way besides kissing to seal away Spirit power.”

“That’s... I’m sorry. You’re totally right.” Shido bowed at her, and Tohka shook her head once more.

“It’s okay. I forgive you. In exchange, though...”

“Huh?” Shido’s eyes grew round in surprise. Because Tohka slowly got out of

the bed, wincing in pain the whole time, and came to climb up on his bed. “Umm, Tohka?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” she said. “But you did actually break your promise. So...”

“Yoshino. Kotori. Kaguya. Yuzuru. Miku. Natsumi. Origami.” She counted the Spirits off on her fingers as she said their names.

And then, her cheeks coloring bashfully, she said in a voice that was more like a whisper, “Seven. Just this once, I’ll forgive you with seven kisses. One for all the people you didn’t tell me about.”

“Huh...?” He stared at her. “Wh-whoa. Uh, Tohka?!”

“No use in arguing.” She pouted. “Or...do you hate the idea of kissing me that much?”

“No, it’s not that at all. It’s just—”

“Great. Then there’s no problem! Okay, sit still. It’ll be over soon!”

“Hey! St—” Shido started, but Tohka lay down on top of him whether he liked it or not and pressed her lips firmly to his. A pleasant feeling overcame him, like his brain being fried by the soft sensation and the faint scent of sweat.

“Mm... Kiss...!”

“...! ...?!”

But in that moment, the door to the room opened abruptly.

“Sorry for the wait, Shido. I brought the gan—” Kotori froze on the spot.

Tohka’s eyes flew open, and she pulled her lips away from Shido’s. His own lips were pulled slightly upward, and after they returned to their original position with a slight *pop*, a string of glittering saliva stretched out between his and hers.

Kotori, the other Spirits, and Mana surged into the room.

“Hey! I leave you alone for two seconds, Shido!”

“Uh. Um... You’re both still recovering. You shouldn’t...”

“Kah. Kah-kah... You are indeed a wily one, Tohka.”

“Point. You seem bothered, Kaguya.”

“Eek! Uh! I didn’t get a good look. One more time! Please, just one more time!”

“Whoa... *That’s* the first thing you do when you wake up. Pretty cringe...”

“...Really can’t let our guards down.”

“Brother! What on earth?!”

They surrounded Shido’s bed, clamoring.

“H-hey, gang. Calm down. This is just, uh...” Shido’s mind raced as he tried to figure out how to explain this away.

But there was no way a simple excuse was going to pop up in his mind that could deceive them in this situation.

“Mm...” Perhaps thinking the same thing, Tohka apparently decided to lean into it and squeezed him tightly.

“Ah!” the Spirits cried out as one.

“Ha-ha...” Shido patted Tohka’s head and gave a tired smile as the commotion went on. A part of him had missed this.

Afterword

This is Koshi Tachibana. It's been a while. I'm here with *Date A Live 12: Disaster Itsuka*. What did you think? I hope you had fun with it.

And well, as you see, this is the twelfth volume. And with an unexpected Shido cover. I thought it would be nice if I could do that at some point, and the chance finally came along. Or rather, if we count from my debut work, I've put out over twenty books, and I feel like this is the first time there's been a boy on the cover.

Designs with the protagonist adorning the cover have increased in number recently, but perhaps seeing the protagonist in a pinup style is still a bit unusual. Shido also seems to be looking cool somehow, too. There's the whole bit with the *disaster*, and I can't help but feel that complicates it the perfect amount. I'm sure a few years from now, I'll remember this and start groaning in my bed.

And then there's the illustration on the insert pages that we get in every volume. Those of you who have yet to read the book, please do hurry to the main text. If it's still not quite clicking for you, you might want to refer to page 131 of volume one. That's some serious foreshadowing. Or is it?

Now, then. In the book, it is a chilly December, but it goes on sale in June, the polar opposite. It seems like it will be quite the hot summer this year, so allow me to report on some things.

First of all, next month, on July 1, my new work *Qualidea Code* is coming out! And the illustrations will be done by Kiyotaka Haimura! Please check it out!

A world threatened by the invasion of a grotesque enemy. To protect their land, the children of the cities spend day and night in grueling battle... But the

children themselves aren't too concerned with the life or death of the world. They would rather pour their hearts and souls into thoroughly, carefully loving one girl. Basically, everyone's a pervert. You could think of it like Origami split into several people. I know I'm the one who wrote it, but even I think that's scary.

Additionally, the September edition of *Dragon Magazine* that goes on sale the same day will have a special extra, *Date A Live Collection Book*, gathering all of the articles about *Date* that have appeared in *Dragon Magazine*! I believe the illustrations by Tsunako that haven't been collected anywhere else thus far will be in this book, so you'll simply have to get the magazine. I was sent a sample copy myself, but I want one for collecting, so I'll probably buy another at my own expense.

And then on July 30, the PSVita game *Date A Live Twin Edition: Rio Reincarnation* goes on sale! This is a deluxe edition that collects *Rinne Utopia* and *Arusu Install*, previously available for the PS3, and includes bonus episodes as well!

Also, on July 31 the first anime arc Blu-ray box set is scheduled to come out! This is the director's cut, which includes additional scenes not in the TV broadcast, so I hope you'll be able to enjoy them as a different kind of fun from the broadcast.

After all of that, August 22! *Date A Live: Mayuri Judgement* will open in theaters nationwide!

I actually went to the postrecording the other day. I've had the recordings for the games, but it's been about a year since I went to one for an anime, so I was all the more impressed. The staff and the cast were all working so hard, so please do look forward to it!

Now, once again, I was able to put out this book only with the support of so many people.

Illustrator Tsunako, my editor, the book designer, everyone in the editorial department, bookshop employees, and all the readers who picked up this book—I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I hope we next meet in *Date A Live 13* or my new book *Qualidea Code*.

Oh! I do have the new series coming out, but I have every intention of continuing *Date A Live*, so please do rest assured.

I look forward to meeting again.

Koshi Tachibana

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