

Killer Kurumi

Spirit No. 3

Astral Dress—Nightmare

Weapon—Clock Type [Zafkiel]

03

*Koushi
Tachibana*

Illustrated by
Tsunako

Date A Live

Killer Kurumi



Date A Live

Killer Kurumi





“If it’s you, Shido...
I don’t mind.”

Kurumi Tokisaki
A transfer student



“I’m his
sister
now!”

*Kotori
Itsuka*
Shido’s
adoptive
sister

“It’s
obvious
his real
sister
is more
powerful!”

*Mana
Takamiya*
Shido’s
biological
sister (?)

“...”

*Shido
Itsuka*
A high
school
student



"I'm honestly delighted.
Now, where are we heading first?"



"Shido!"

Tohka
A Spirit

"No
problem.
I just got
here."

*Origami
Tobiichi*
Shido's
classmate

“Kee-hee! Hee-hee!
Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-
hee-hee-hee! You stiiiiiiiiill
don’t understand? You can
neeeeeeeeever completely
kill me!”

Kurumi
A third Spirit

“It’s my
mission
and my
reason
for living
to keep
murdering
you. If you
do not fall,
I’ll kill you
until you
fall, and if
you do not
die, I’ll kill
you until
you die.”



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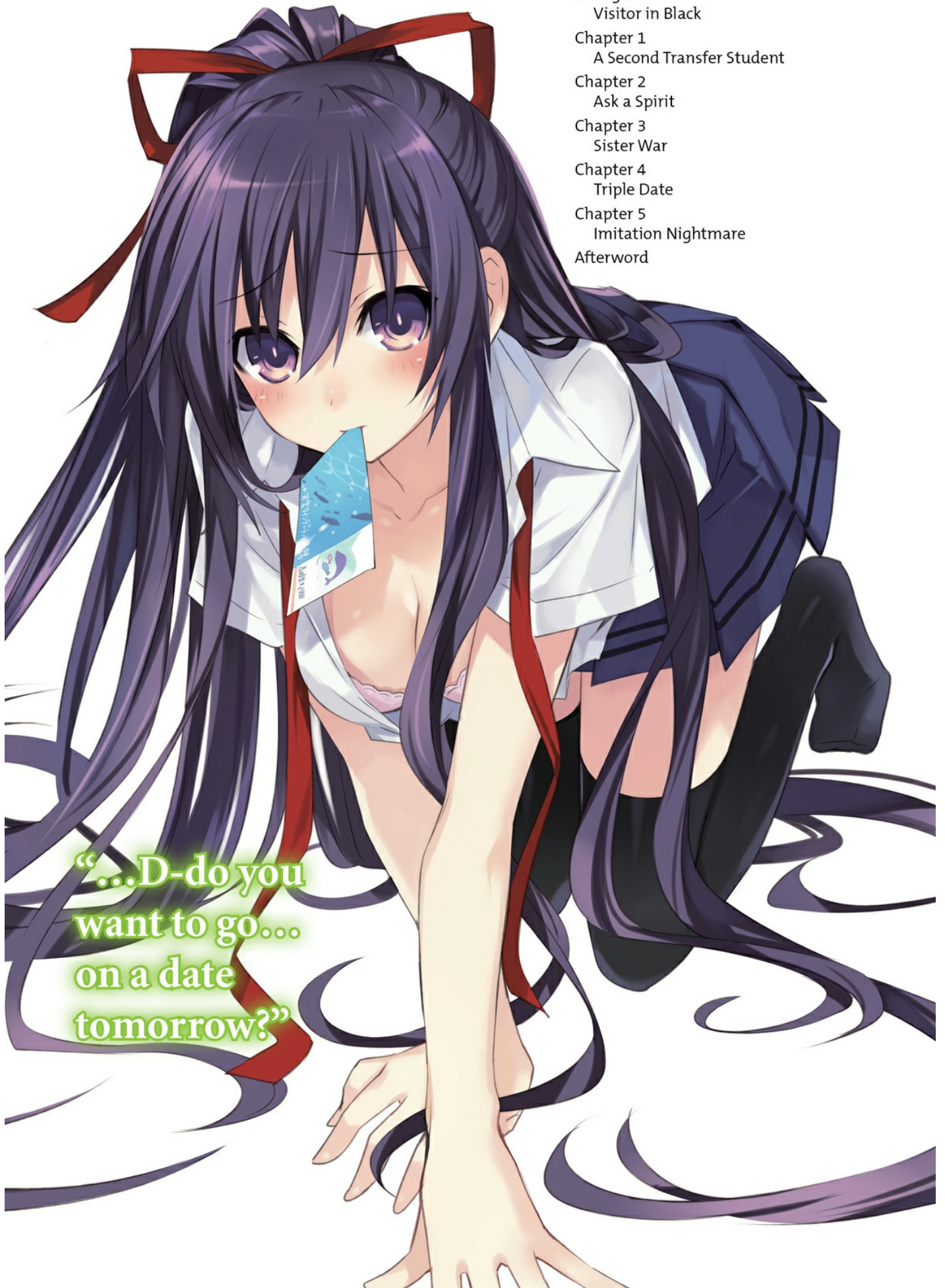
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“...D-do you
want to go...
on a date
tomorrow?”

Date A Live

Killer Kurumi

03

Koushi Tachibana

Illustrated by
Tsunako

 YEN
ON
New York

Copyright

Date A Live 03

Killer Kurumi

Koushi Tachibana

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Spirit

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

Strategy No. 1

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

Strategy No. 2

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

Killer Kurumi

Spirit No. 3
Astral Dress—Nightmare
Weapon—Clock Type [Zafkiel]

Prologue

Visitor in Black

“I am a Spirit.”

Monday, June 5.

Year 2 Class 4 at Raizen High School fell silent when the transfer student introduced herself in front of the blackboard. Not all students wore the same expression on their faces, however, as they stared at her soundlessly.

The majority had no idea what she was even talking about, and their stares were doubtful, as if to say, “What’s with her? Is she a daydreamer? Or just a weirdo?” Next in number were the boys who were so captivated by her startling beauty, they hadn’t been listening to a word coming out of her mouth.

Shido Itsuka belonged to neither of these groups.

“Wha—?!” A deep crease appeared between his eyebrows, and a trickle of sweat ran down his cheek as he focused on the transfer student standing calmly next to the teacher’s podium.

Her black hair was tied back in low pigtails, her skin was smooth and pearly white, and the neck peeking out from her collar was so slender, it seemed like it might snap under the tiniest bit of force. The most distinctive thing about her was her bangs. Her face was terribly lovely, but her bangs were absurdly long, covering the left half of it.

But Shido could only be thankful for that. The instant he’d been exposed to the right eye—the one not hidden by hair—he’d felt intoxicated, like he’d been possessed by a demon. If she looked at him with both eyes, he might have joined the ranks of the boys above.

He swallowed hard and glanced toward the blackboard, where the girl’s name was printed in white chalk.

“Kurumi...Tokisaki,” he murmured, quiet enough for no one to hear him.

A Spirit. That was what she—what Kurumi—had said just now.

Only three people in the classroom knew the real meaning of that word.

“...” Shido looked over at the desks on either side of his own.

The girl seated to his right—Tohka Yatogami—gaped, eyes wide. Even from the side, he could tell immediately that her expression was one of surprise.

Opposite her, on Shido’s left, the look on Origami Tobiichi’s face was exactly the same as ever, but the eyes she turned on Kurumi were cold enough to kill.

“...!” He looked forward again and gasped, trembling.

And for good reason. Kurumi Tokisaki was staring directly at him with that right eye circled in long lashes.

“...! Wha—?” He was frozen in his seat.

Kurumi broke into a tiny smile. “I do look forward to getting closer to you all,” she said and dipped her head in a bow.

Shido was the only one who didn’t join in the clapping that filled the classroom, a shiver of fear running up his spine.



Chapter 1

A Second Transfer Student

She licked her lips and tasted sweat.

The Territory deployed around her body allowed her to control everything—from gravity to temperature and humidity. Thus, the fact that she could detect sweat, no matter how little, indicated that the cause came from somewhere other than external conditions. Most likely on the list were excessive exercise, serious illness, and abnormal tension.

“...” Origami Tobiichi swallowed hard to try to regulate her breathing before adjusting her grip on the high-output No Pain laser blade in her hand.

Her slender body was not wrapped in her familiar high school uniform but rather the wiring suit and CR unit, the mechanical armor that modern wizards donned to perform their feats of wizardry. A wizard in this getup with her Territory deployed was basically superhuman.

However, the supposedly superhuman Origami was currently backed into a tight corner.

“Aaaaaaaah?!”

“...!” She gasped at the cry she heard over the radio in her headset. It was a voice she knew. A member of Origami’s Anti-Spirit Team—AST, for short.

This was the ninth person to fall. Which meant that all her allies had been taken down.

“...Ngh.” Hiding behind an obstacle, Origami issued commands in her mind.

Instantly, the light inside her Territory bent, and a scene she couldn’t have seen from her current position came into view: the special maneuvers area adjacent to the Ground Self-Defense Forces, Tengu Garrison, a special field Origami and the rest of the AST used to enact their magic when practicing with

their Realizers.

In the center of this space, cluttered with ruined objects, stood a girl with her hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Mana Takamiya.

Origami spoke her name silently while she looked her over.

She was probably around fourteen or fifteen. There was still an innocence left on her intelligent face, which was adorned with a beauty mark under her left eye. Her petite physique was wrapped in mechanical armor that was ill-suited to her looks—the CR unit.

Her wiring suit was a little different from that of Origami and her comrades, with what looked like shields equipped on her shoulders. This was supposedly the prototype for the next generation of equipment.

“—All right. Only one person left. Come at me from wherever you’d like,” Mana said, without so much as a glance at the AST member fallen at her feet.

Origami couldn’t see them from her position, but she knew that the eight other AST members who had been taken out of the game were on the ground behind the obstacles that covered the area. Mana was crushing them. Origami felt almost like she was fighting a Spirit.

Mana had been assigned to the Tengu Garrison at the end of last month. Apparently, she was the Self-Defense Forces’ ace. Rumor had it she was one of the leading five Realizer users in the world. Apparently, she had *killed* a Spirit by herself.

From the stories alone, she was an exceptional monster. But when she had asked if any of them could best her the day she was introduced to their team, there was no way the self-professed elites of the AST could let a challenge go unaccepted.

Thus, under the pretext of testing Mana’s strength, they had agreed to a special training session of one against ten. To be honest, Origami herself hadn’t been particularly interested. But...

“...” She recalled the conversation she’d had with Mana that day.

When Mana was assigned to the Tengu Garrison, Origami and her teammates were in the middle of watching the playback of an earlier battle.

Mana had looked at the boy on-screen—Shido Itsuka—and said, *“Brother.”*

Origami didn’t know anything about Shido having another sister. So she asked about it later, and Mana looked surprised.

“! Master Sergeant Tobiichi, are you acquainted with my brother?! Hmm... Yes, I suppose I could discuss this with you—if you take part in this exercise. That is my one condition.”

This left Origami little room for choice, and so in the end, she had joined the exercise.

This was the result. Nine of her team members had already been neutralized, and Origami had lost all her equipment other than her close-range laser blade. In contrast, Mana didn’t have a scratch on her.

“...If we continue in this manner, the time will run out on us, you know?” Mana sighed, her phrasing slightly unnatural.

There was no point in her hiding there. Origami stood up.

“—Oh!” Mana exclaimed. “Have you finally resolved yourself to your fate?”

“...” Origami issued commands in her mind and activated the thrusters on her back.

The only weapon left to her was No Pain. Her final choice was to bring this to close combat. She leaned forward and raced through the air at incredible speed.

“You’re brave. I do not dislike you for this.” The corners of her mouth curled up as Mana converted the unit on her shoulders and equipped it in her hands. “Murakumo—Sword style.”

In the next instant, an enormous blade of light appeared from the tip of the shield.

But Origami didn’t stop. Brandishing No Pain, she moved even faster. She knew very well, however, she would face a counterattack rushing her enemy like this.

“—Now.”

Thus, the moment that her Territory touched Mana's, Origami rapidly contracted hers. The field was normally deployed outward three meters in all directions, and now she dropped this circle to a tenth that size in a single breath.

The thrusters behind her protruded from her Territory and regained their normal mass instantly. At the same time, Origami released the link between the thrusters and her wiring suit, curled her body up as if to cradle her sword's sheath, empty of its blade of light, and slipped past Mana.

“Wha...?” Mana's eyes grew wide. This movement had clearly been unexpected.

Having lost their master, the thrusters obeyed the law of inertia and closed in on Mana like an enormous bullet.

“Ngh! Oh no...!” She quickly regained her composure and sliced the thrusters in two with her blade of light.

Fireworks crackled and sparked, and the severed corpse of the thrusters dropped to the ground, jetting smoke.

But that had been precisely Origami's objective.

“—!” She rematerialized No Pain's blade and turned the tip toward Mana's back—a single blow to pierce through the momentary lapse of guard while Mana's attention was taken up with repelling the thruster.

Just as Origami intended, the blade scratched Mana's CR unit.

“Wha—?!” she cried out.

The moment the tip of her laser blade reached Mana's equipment, she felt a sensation like a hand running over the entire surface of her body, and then her movement stopped.

“Phew! That was dangerous.” Mana turned her head and looked at her.

Origami gasped. There was no doubt: Mana had stopped Origami's movements with her Territory.

This wasn't entirely unexpected, however. Given Mana's reaction speed, Origami had thought she might respond to Origami's attack in the instant after dealing with the thrusters. After all, she was very close to Mana's body. Inside her domain, her Territory.

But she'd also calculated that Mana's Territory would be unable to affect hers when she had shrunk it down to thirty centimeters. It seemed, however, she'd been too optimistic in her calculations.

"I regret to tell you, that's check." Mana turned slowly and touched her blade of light to Origami's shoulder.

A buzzer sounded above their heads, and then Origami heard a voice over her headset.

"Game set. Win goes to Mana Takamiya."

Having returned to the garrison hangar after the exercise, Origami sank down and stared at the floor. As if remembering the sensation from less than an hour earlier, she clenched her right hand.

"..."

Her body was terribly heavy because she had just released her Territory. The mere act of lifting her arm and closing her hand felt unnatural, like she was swimming in viscous mud. Even this totally natural phenomenon seemed to her to be a sign of her own powerlessness, and she unconsciously tightened her fist.

"Mana Takamiya."

She handled her absurdly precise Territory with such dexterity that the special equipment seemed to be extensions of her own limbs. The rumors made sense now. She really was a genius.

Origami should have welcomed this development. Mana was a human being and a member of the AST. Which meant that, like Origami, her goal was to defeat Spirits. With a wizard of her class, the rate of success for their missions would increase drastically.

Even though she understood this in her mind, the incomprehensible frustration and annoyance only grew worse in her heart.

“...So strong.” Origami glared at her clenched fist.

“You’re something else, too, Master Sergeant Tobiichi.”

She heard a voice from above and jerked her face up. Mana was there, in nothing but her wiring suit, holding a sports drink in each hand.

“Have some if you would like.” She held out the bottle in her left hand.

“...”

Even though she, too, had just released her Territory, Mana moved normally, with no sign of sluggishness.

Origami looked up at her with complicated feelings as she raised a heavy arm to take the bottle.

Mana nodded, satisfied, and continued speaking after taking a drink. “To be honest, I was surprised. It might have been a mere few millimeters of a sword tip, but it has been quite some time since anyone caught me with an attack.” She said this with no aggression, sounding as though she was simply assessing Origami’s skill.

Origami gritted her teeth. “How can I get as strong as you are?”

Mana’s eyebrows shot up. “I don’t know how to respond to that...”

“I heard you killed a Spirit,” Origami said. “I want details.”

“You heard I...killed a Spirit?” Mana shrugged. “Well, the words themselves are not incorrect.”

Origami cocked her head slightly to one side. “Meaning?”

“Mm.” Mana paused. “It’s best not to treat *that thing* as in line with the other Spirits.”

“Any detail is fine. No matter how trivial. Tell me.”

“Well, I suppose, but... Even if I don’t tell you now, you will likely have the opportunity to see her soon enough. It is for that reason I was assigned here.”

“...?” Origami raised an eyebrow. “I was told you were assigned here to strengthen our fighting capacity.”

“That is not incorrect,” Mana agreed. “But to be more precise, the signal of a certain Spirit has been confirmed in this area.”

“A certain Spirit?”

“Yes. The worst Spirit. I’ve been chasing her for some time. Her identifier is—”

Whap! Whap! They both took a hit to the head.

“...!”

“Ow!”

Origami and Mana pressed hands to their heads and then simultaneously turned their faces to the right.

AST Captain Ryouko Kusakabe was standing there in her SDF—Self-Defense Forces—uniform, holding what looked to be a rolled-up pamphlet in one hand.

“The. Two. Of. You...”

A vein popped up on her forehead as she snapped a finger out at the metallic lumps recovered from the exercise grounds—the thruster unit split perfectly in half.

“I said this was a *mock* battle, didn’t I?! So why would you destroy our precious equipment?!”

The two girls stared at the clumps of metal for a moment before opening their mouths.

“I couldn’t create an opening with Second Lieutenant Takamiya by holding—”

“It may have been a mock battle, but I judged that we would not get correct data unless I—”

Whap! Whap!

“Save the noble speeches for after you look up the price of a Realizer unit,” Ryouko told them. “Our budget isn’t infinite.”

“Understood.”

“I will use discretion.”

“Honestly...” Ryouko sighed. “Be more careful from now on.” Their

commanding officer squared her shoulders and walked off.

Once they could no longer see her, Mana pursed her lips, displeased. “That captain is a real problem. It’s stinginess that allows the Spirits to have their way with you.”

“Agreed.” Origami nodded.

“It looks like you and I will get along, Master Sergeant Tobiichi.” Mana brought the corners of her lips up. “After all, we are taking on a creature known as a Spirit. If we fixate on money, we will never achieve victory over the ones we could win against.” She gave a dramatic shrug.

Wordlessly, Origami looked again at her face. She really did have a similar air as Shido. But Shido only had one little sister. Supposedly.

Origami had never spoken with her, but she’d seen her any number of times. Kotori Itsuka. It went without saying that she was not the same person as Mana. But according to the Origami database, Shido was adopted, so she couldn’t entirely exclude the possibility that Mana was his biological sister.

“Second Lieutenant Takamiya,” Origami started, “you promised. Tell me how you and Shido are related.”

“Shido? Who is that?” Mana appeared confused.

Strange. Origami continued doubtfully, “The boy in the video from the Hermit battle we were watching the other day. The person you called ‘brother.’ You promised you’d tell me if I took part in the exercise.”

“Bro...ther...” Mana frowned.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh. Just a slight headache.” She pressed a hand to the side of her head.

Origami had seen Mana like this before. She’d had the same reaction when she saw Shido in the video.

“...! Apologies, apologies. I’m all right now. Er, we were talking about my brother, yes?” As if to dispel the pain, Mana shook her head lightly before touching the chest of her wiring suit and pulling out a small silver locket. Inside was a picture of a small boy and girl.

“Shido,” Origami murmured. Yes, there was no mistake—this was young Shido Itsuka. And the girl with the distinctive beauty mark beside him was definitely Mana. “What’s this?”

“A photo from a long time ago. It’s the only clue I have to my brother after we were separated.”

“Tell me the details,” Origami urged.

“I’m sorry, but...” Mana tousled her hair, troubled. “I’m afraid I don’t remember so much.”

“...? Meaning?”

“Oh. You see, I have no memories of the past.”

“...Amnesia?”

“To put it simply, yes, I suppose that would be it. But the moment I saw that video, I remembered. I used to call that person my brother.”

“So then why set that condition of fighting you?” Origami asked, suspicious.

“Oh.” Mana lowered her head in apology. “I wanted to see your actual abilities. You seemed like the most capable in this squad. In fact, you were better than I anticipated.”

“...” Origami stared back at her without saying anything. She didn’t know how to feel at being told she was “better than anticipated” after she’d been so thoroughly schooled by the overwhelming difference between their powers.

“Master Sergeant Tobiichi?” Mana looked up at Origami. “Together with my apology, I have one other favor to ask.”

“What?”

“I realize this is perhaps asking too much, but...you do know my brother, yes? Would you tell me whatever you know about him?”

“...” Origami felt like their positions had now reversed, but after thinking on the issue briefly, she assented with a small nod. “His name is Shido Itsuka. Age sixteen.”

“Yes.”

“His family consists of his father, mother, and younger sister. Currently, his parents are on an overseas business trip, and the house is empty. Skilled at all household chores.”

“Hmm.”

“Blood type AO, Rh positive. Height one seventy point zero centimeters. Weight fifty-eight point five kilograms. Sitting height ninety point two centimeters. Upper arm thirty point two centimeters. Forearm twenty-three point nine centimeters. Chest eighty-two point two centimeters. Waist seventy point three centimeters. Hips eighty-seven point six centimeters.”

“...Sorry?”

“Visual acuity right eye, zero point six; left eye, zero point eight. Grip strength right hand, forty-three point five kilograms; left hand, forty-one point two kilograms. Blood pressure between one twenty-eight and seventy-five. Blood sugar is eighty-eight milligrams per deciliter. Uric acid level is four point two milligrams per deciliter.”

“S-stop! Stop!” Mana cried out, flustered. “I didn’t ask about that!”

“Oh,” Origami said.

“And, er, why do you have such detailed data? Is this a joke?”

“Not at all,” Origami replied with a serious face. “These values are accurate.”

“...” Mana furrowed her brow, sweat springing up on her face. “Excuse me for asking, but what is your relationship with my brother, Master Sergeant?”

Origami opened her mouth not even a heartbeat later, with absolutely no hesitation or indecision.

“I’m his girlfriend.”



“Hey. What are you doing, Shido?”

“Huh?!” Shido let out a baffled cry when abruptly posed this question in the living room of his own house. He looked back and found a girl in a school uniform, her long hair tied back in pigtails with black ribbons, standing there dauntingly with her hands on her hips.

Shido's younger sister, Kotori Itsuka—in *commander* mode.

Her adorable round eyes were scrunched up grumpily, and the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth stuck out like the tail of a threatening animal.

"What do you mean, what? I'm going to school." He looked down at himself. He was wearing his (summer) uniform, schoolbag in his right hand, lunch bag in his left. This was headed-for-school style from any angle.

Kotori shrugged like something out of an American sitcom as she shook her head. "Wohkay, let's do this again. What's that in your left hand, Shido?"

"Lunch."

"For you?"

"No. For Tohka."

His own lunch was tucked away in his schoolbag. Shido had made this lunch for the girl who lived in the building next door, his classmate Tohka Yatogami.

"And how are you going to give it to Tohka?"

"I was going to drop it in her mailbox..."

Since he couldn't exactly go giving it to her at school, he used the spare key for the mailbox and left a lunch there every morning.

"Oh!" he cried. "Is that it? It's starting to get hot now, so are you worried it might spoil? Don't worry. I put an ice pack in there and an antibacterial sheet for good measure. Although, well, I guess it would've been better if I had some pickled plums in there, too. But you know, Tohka doesn't really like—?!"

Kotori kicked his shin, and Shido doubled over, groaning. He dropped his bag, but he managed to somehow hang on to Tohka's lunch.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

"You're talking like you're asleep," she snapped. "Why're you gonna go all the way to her mailbox?"

"I can't give it to her otherwise. To start with, we leave for school at different times—"

"Right there." Kotori grabbed the Chupa Chups in her mouth and snapped it in

Shido's direction. "It's been two weeks since Tohka moved next door. How many times have you walked to school with her?"

"Huh? Umm." He sent his gaze upward and counted in his mind. "Now that you mention it, I haven't. Not once." He scratched his cheek with his now-free right hand.

For a variety of reasons, Shido and Tohka had lived together in this house for a brief period, but during that time, they'd staggered their departures for school to keep weird rumors from starting in their class. But they were neighbors now, no longer living under the same roof, so there was no longer any need to be so cautious. In fact, they walked home together pretty much every day.

He supposed they hadn't managed to shake the habit, and Shido left for school a little earlier even now. Well, there was also the fact that Tohka had a bit of a harder time getting out of bed than he did.

"You live next door to each other and are in the same class." Kotori planted a hand on her forehead in exasperation. "I don't know why you have to go out of your way to pass up on a walking-to-school-together situation. And you won't be able to give Tohka your everything when another Spirit shows up. So make sure you're with her the times when you can be."

"Uh. Uh-huh..." Shido half groaned and fell silent.

This world faced sudden disasters known as spacequakes. As the name would suggest, the space around its origin was gouged out with a tremendous explosion. It was a serious natural disaster—even in their modern age, even with means of predicting spacequakes and rapidly rebuilding buildings.

Although it wasn't publicly known, the cause of these spacequakes was deemed to be a creature called a Spirit. When the Spirit, which normally existed in a separate dimension, appeared in this world, the spatial environment distorted, which had been theorized to be the spacequake trigger.

Naturally, the people who knew about these Spirits espoused various strategies to avoid this catastrophe. There were two main methods. One was to annihilate the Spirits with force. And the other was...

“I hope you remember. When the next Spirit shows up, you’ll have to make her blush and giggle again.”

“I—I understand,” Shido replied with a baffled sigh.

Yes. This was the other method: contact the Spirit when she appeared, chat her up, date her, increase likability...and seal it with a kiss.

He didn’t understand exactly why, but Shido apparently had the ability to lock away the Spirit’s powers by doing so. And it was Ratatoskr, the organization Kotori belonged to, that had noticed this power.

“Good. So then you’ll walk to school with Tohka today. Okay?”

“Mm. Roger that.” He had no particular objections. He picked up his bag and started toward the front door.

“Hey, Shido. You forgot this,” Kotori said, and Shido looked at his hands.

“Huh? Did I have anything else?”

“This. Here.” She set a small earpiece in the palm of her hand and stretched out her arm. And then she held up the index finger of her other hand and pointed at her ear, as if to say he should put in this earpiece right now.

“...Uhhh? Why do I...?”

“It’s a perfect opportunity. We’ll do a bit of training at the same time. C’mon, put it in. There we go.”

The corner of Kotori’s mouth curled up as she half forced the earpiece into his ear.

“Tr-training? What exactly are you going to do this time?”

“Right, yeah. Today’s assignment is to act in a way that doesn’t make Tohka jealous.”

“Huh? Not make her...jealous? What does that mean?”

“Mm. You remember when Yoshino showed up last month?”

“...! O-ohhh.” Shido nodded.

Yoshino was the small girl Spirit who had appeared after Tohka. Tohka had

been strangely sulky for some reason when she appeared.

“The gist of that is Tohka doesn’t care for you getting chummy with other girls.”

“Huh...? Wh-why not?” Shido asked.

Kotori let out a contemptuous sigh. “Any. Way. When you’re friendly with other girls, Tohka’s mental state grows unstable, and as a result, her Spirit power flows back into her body again. If that happens every time a new Spirit shows up, we’ll be in a real pickle. And so.” She turned her pointed finger on him. “While you’re walking to school today, our staff will play some tricks to rouse her jealousy. You intercept them and keep her cool.”

“Keep her cool?” Shido looked confused. “What exactly am I supposed to do...?”

“Whatever. Just go.” Kotori was apparently not interested in what he had to say. She turned him toward the front door and gave his back a shove. “It’s just about time for Tohka to leave. I’ll fill you in over the earpiece.”

“No, b-but...” Shido still hadn’t processed the situation, but over these last two months, he had learned painfully well that it was pointless to fight Kotori when she was in this mood. With no other choice, he slipped his feet into his shoes.

“Ohhh, right,” Kotori said from behind him. “One more thing. We got a guest today. Make sure you chat with her a bit. Although I’m sure it’ll just be a basic hello situation.”

“A guest?”

Without replying to Shido’s question, Kotori stormed up the stairs. She’d said she would instruct him over the earpiece, so she was probably going to the balcony to be collected by *Fraxinus*.

He stared after her, baffled. But that wasn’t going to change anything. He opened the door and stepped outside. Instantly, daylight burned his retinas.

“Ngh...”

It was June 5. The rainy season should have started already, and yet for some

reason, they'd been blessed weather-wise—almost like the sky had used up its supply of rain last month.

The sunlight that would have been intercepted by the clouds in a normal year reflected off the surface of the earth and raised the temperature. There was a good chance he wouldn't have been able to bear the heat, and Shido had switched to his summer uniform that day.

"Huh...?"

He caught sight of a figure standing in front of the Itsuka house and opened his eyes wider.

A girl about the same age as Kotori. Clad in a thin, breezy dress, with a white straw hat tilted far forward as if to shield her eyes. Hair blue like the ocean spilled down from the brim, and from this distance, he could tell the sapphire eyes were turned toward him. The most distinctive thing was her left hand. For some reason, she was wearing a comical rabbit puppet.

"Yoshino?!"

There was no way he could forget the name of a girl with such a distinctive look. Shido opened the gate and walked over to her.

"Heya, Shido. Been a while, huh?!" The rabbit puppet flapped its mouth open and closed.

"Y-yeah, haven't seen you in ages. Umm, Yoshinon," Shido replied to the puppet. The puppet's name was Yoshinon. It was Yoshino's friend.

The thing itself was a normal puppet, and he was sure that the voice was actually ventriloquism. But when Yoshino was wearing it, another personality called Yoshinon existed alongside her own. The puppet's actions and speech were not connected with Yoshino, it seemed.

"What's up? Are you all finished with your tests for today?"

"Hmm, finished the tests themselves a while ago. I was juuuust practicing a bit, okay?" Yoshinon said, waving its short arms happily.

"Practicing?" Shido asked, and Yoshinon yanked up the brim of Yoshino's hat.

"...!" Yoshino's shoulders jumped up. But after swallowing hard, she opened

trembling lips.

“G-good. Morning. Shido...!” she said, her voice just a little bit clearer than it had been last month.

“Oh?!” He opened his eyes wide and reeled slightly.



The shy, introverted Yoshino left pretty much all responses to the outside world to Yoshinon, preferring not to speak too much herself. At least, this was the first time he had heard her speak in such a loud voice.

Here, he heard a snort of satisfaction in his right ear. Kotori. He assumed she was aboard *Fraxinus* now.

"What do you think? She can talk with me and Reine now, too, y'know."

"Really? That's amazing, Yoshino!" Shido said, and Yoshino yanked down the brim of her hat, embarrassed, but the corners of her mouth slid hesitantly upward.

Shido could hear Kotori flick her Chupa Chups to one side. *"In the near future, I want to have Yoshino live off-ship, too. Maybe because she's got Yoshinon here to talk to, she accumulates stress less than Tohka. And sure, it's fine if she remains on the ship, but Ratatoskr does want the Spirits to learn how to be in the world and live happy lives."*

"Hmm. That sounds like a good idea."

"Mm. So she's just popping in to say hi today."

"Meaning?"

"If Yoshino were to live off the ship, the first choice would be there, yeah?"

Shido lifted his face and looked over at the apartment building towering next to the Itsuka house.

The building that Tohka lived in was a special residence for Spirits specially commissioned by Ratatoskr. It was built so that even if the worst happened, it wouldn't be destroyed easily.

"Well...I guess so, yeah." He nodded.

"In which case, it'll be rough if she can't actually talk with Tohka."

"Ohhh..."

That was very true. They would probably be in different apartments, but in a sense, they would be neighbors.

Above all, Tohka and Yoshino were both Spirits. Yoshino still seemed to be a

little awkward around Tohka, but it was obvious that it would be better if they could really talk with each other.

The automatic door of the apartment building slid open, and a girl walked out, yawning.

Long hair the color of night contrasted sharply against the sunlight. Beautiful face. Eyes like sparkling crystals. This was Shido's classmate, the Spirit Tohka Yatogami.

"...!" Shido gasped.

Tohka was not in the blazer she'd been wearing up to last week but her summer uniform—a short-sleeved blouse with a ribbon around her neck.

Well, Shido was technically also in summer clothes now, so there wasn't anything strange about it. But his heart unexpectedly skipped a beat at this outfit that emphasized the silhouette of her body.

"Mm? Shido?!" Tohka finally noticed him and cried out, eyes open wide. "What's wrong? It's weird to see you in the morning!"

"Y-yeah," Shido said, looking anywhere but at Tohka. "I just thought it might be good to go to school together once in a while. You know."

Her cheeks colored slightly as her face lit up. "You did! Mm-hmm, that's—um, I think it's great!" She nodded, overjoyed.

Her unabashed delight made him tongue-tied. At a loss for what to say next, he held out the lunch bag in his hand. "Also, here. Lunch."

"Ooh!" She took it, a smile spreading across her face. "So! What's in it today?!"

"Asparagus wrapped in bacon, a ground-meat cutlet, a fried egg, pasta salad, and mini tomatoes," Shido said. "Oh! And chicken rice."

"Wow...!" Tohka shivered as she whirled her head around to check out the area and clutched the lunch bag to her chest. "I-is this okay, Shido?!"

"Huh...? I-is what okay?" he asked with a blank look.

Tohka lowered her voice. "To have both asparagus in bacon and a ground-

meat cutlet for lunch. Won't it be real trouble if everyone else finds out that we're living in such luxury...? In the worst case, a violent fight could break out over this lunch—"

"Yeah, you don't have to worry about that."

"R-really? I hope not. B-but making chicken rice is like turning your nose up at a god... It doesn't breach any international laws, does it?" Tohka spoke with a very serious air.

Where exactly had she picked up words like that?

"No, forget it," he said. "Oh! Do you not like chicken rice? I can trade you mine if you want?"

Because Origami would pick up that bone again if their lunches were exactly the same, he had been changing the menu slightly for the last two weeks. His was actually leftovers from supper the day before, though, so it hadn't taken him any extra effort.

But the instant Shido made this proposal, Tohka shook her head from side to side so vehemently, it threatened to fall right off, as she clutched the lunch bag.

He had to smile at this. It did make all his morning efforts worthwhile when she was this happy about her meal.

She shifted the lunch bag to one hand with a slightly nervous look on her face and took a deep breath as if to calm her racing heart. "Mm?"

Her eyes abruptly grew rounder, and she turned her face toward the girl next to Shido. Apparently, she had only just noticed her.

"Oh! Yoshino! I haven't seen you in forever!" Tohka called out, a carefree smile spreading across her face. Although she'd had her own quarrels with the girl, she seemed to not care too much about that anymore.

"...!" But Yoshino trembled as she took a step back.

"C'mon! You can do it!"

"O-okay..." Cheered on by Yoshino on her left hand, she managed to hold her ground somehow. She took a deep breath and braced herself before raising her eyebrows.

“Oh! She sells seashells at the seashore...!”

For some reason, she shouted vocal warm-ups.

“Mm.” Tohka furrowed her brow in confusion and turned her eyes toward Shido. “Does this...mean something? Is it a code?”

“No... Yoshino?” Shido asked, smiling wryly.

“Aah!” Yoshinon flapped its hands. “Wipe that from memory, please! She just went too far with our practice! Retake! One more time!”

Yoshino nodded and stood in front of Tohka once more. “G-good...morn...ing...” Her voice was quieter than it had been with Shido. But it was clear; she got the words out.

“Ohhh, morning!”

“...!” Yoshino shivered again, but she managed to keep from retreating.

There was a brief silence as the two girls faced each other.

“Why aren’t you saying anything, Shido?” Kotori’s shrill voice echoed in Shido’s ear. “Yoshino’s anxious. Give her something to talk about.”

“Huh...? O-oh.” He glanced over at Yoshino. Now that she mentioned it, there was something a bit different about her from the last time he’d seen her.

“Yoshino, you’re wearing a straw hat today, huh?”

The last time he’d seen her, she’d been wearing a cap. Today, it was a cool white straw hat.

“...! Y-yes!” Yoshino held her ground, hiding behind Yoshinon for a second. “It’s hot...today, so. Um. Reine...said...”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Shido said. “It looks good on you. Very cute.”

“...!” Yoshino turned bright red as she dropped her eyes to the ground.

It seemed that she still hadn’t gotten over her shyness. He grinned unconsciously.

“Hey, you’re gonna just let the convo end there? You gotta bring Tohka into it.”

“Oh... Right. H-hey, Tohka. Don't you think so, too?”

“Mm?” Perhaps not expecting the conversation to involve her, Tohka turned her eyes on Shido, looking slightly surprised. She then dropped her gaze to Yoshino. “Mm. Mm-hmm, very cute, Yoshino.”

“...! Th-thank. You...,” Yoshino stuttered, still looking at the ground, before suddenly raising her face to look at Tohka. “U-um... T-Tohka. You're...cute. Too...”

“Mm? Wh-why... This is embarrassing.” Even as she spoke, however, she scratched her face like she wasn't displeased. She laughed awkwardly before glancing over at Shido. For some reason, her cheeks were slightly flushed. “Y-you... You think so, too, Shido?”

“Huh?” he replied, baffled. He hadn't imagined the conversation would come back to him.

“I'm wearing a different uniform today than last week... How is it?”

He had noticed that the second he saw her. The breezy Raizen High summer uniform suited her perfectly. She looked so cute that his head might snap clean off from nodding too hard in agreement. He was silently giving thanks to the heat of summer in Japan.

“Y-yeah,” he managed to say. “It really suits you.”

“Mm. It does?” Tohka fell briefly silent once again.

In the next instant, he heard an angry buzzer in his right ear.

“Yeah, no.”

“Wh-what...?”

“Don't 'what' me. What are you doing, Shido? Your training's already started, you know.”

“Uh...? Wh-what do you mean?” he asked, lowering his voice.

“I told you.” Kotori let out an enormous sigh. *“The task of the day is to not make Tohka jealous. Shido, why did you tell Yoshino she's cute but not Tohka?”*

“Huh...?” he said stupidly and reflected on his own actions. Now that she

mentioned it, he felt like he had only said the uniform looked good on her. “W-was that bad?”

“Well, yeah. There you are telling another girl how cute she is right in front of her, without saying it to her. Tohka might not be aware of it, but her mood meter’s dropped a bit.”

“B-but Tohka’s not gonna care that—”

“Listen,” Kotori rebuked him. “It’s true that Tohka is a Spirit. Lots of stuff about her is different from a person. But with this sorta thing, you shouldn’t act like she’s special. Tohka is a regular girl.”

“...!” Shido bit his lip. He was embarrassed by his own self now. He’d been talking all this talk about how Spirits should be able to live a normal life, while maybe thinking that Tohka was somehow a bit different from humans.

He clenched his fists and turned back to the girl. “T-Tohka!”

“Uh...?!” Her shoulders jumped up in surprise when he raised his voice. “Wh-what, Shido?”

“Y-you’re cute, too!”

“Wh-what...?” Her face turned beet red as she pulled back.

He was aware that his own face was red now, too, but he kept going regardless.

“Yeah, cute! Super cute! Incredibly cute! You look great in the summer uniform! For real. The second you stepped out of the apartment building, I was shocked! I couldn’t take my eyes off you! For a second, I couldn’t speak! That’s how cute you are! So much that I can hardly stand—”

Here, his mouth was covered by Tohka’s hand, blocking the flow of words.

“M-mmph!”

“I—I get it! Please stop!” Tohka begged and whirled around.

He gasped. What he had said wasn’t a lie, but he had maybe gotten carried away and gone too far.

While he was thinking about this, peals of laughter echoed in his earpiece.

"Pft! Hngh heh! Ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Kotori, obviously. When he listened closely, he could also hear the sound of a chair squeaking. She was rolling around in her seat.

"Amazing, Shido. Are you an idiot?"

"Sh-shut... I know, okay?" he groaned, the sweat on his forehead catching the light. "But I made Tohka mad again. C'mon, Kotori, what should I do?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Huh?"

"Tohka's mood meter shot up like a rocket, plotting a max single-day gain. She's never been in such a good mood. How about you go around and take a peek at her face? It might be of interest."

"Uh...? Wh-why?" He gave voice to the question.

Kotori didn't answer him, however. *"Well, at any rate, I'll let this go with no penalty. We'll be collecting Yoshino soon. And you and Tohka are going to be late if you don't hurry up and get to school."*

Yoshino lowered her head in a neat bow. "I...have to...go. Now. Have fun. At school...Shido, Tohka."

"Okay. Come say hi again sometime."

"Mm. See you."

Shido and Tohka waved. Yoshino bowed once more and trotted off to the other side of the road.

"Okay. Should we get going, Tohka?"

"Mm, I guess so."

They started walking along the asphalt baking under sunlight.

"Tohka? Hang on a sec." Shido stopped, sensing something off in her back.

Yes. She was wearing the thin summer uniform. The lines of her underclothes—her bra—should have been faintly visible. But...

"Mm?" She turned to look at him. "What's wrong?"

“Tohka, are you...um...? Do you have one on?”

“Do I have what on?”

“...A—a bra.” He stumbled over the word.

Tohka looked at him curiously. “A bra? What’s that?”

“...!” He gasped before pushing her back inside the apartment building.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Shido?!”

“It’s too late for that!” he yelped. “Y-you mean to tell me you haven’t been wearing one all this time?!”

“W-wearing what?!”

“...!” Shido tapped his earpiece.

“Oh my. We did provide some for her, at any rate. I guess she didn’t know what they were for.”



“Don’t ‘oh my’ me! With the winter uniform, it was one thing, but wearing no bra with this shirt is serious!”

“I guess so. They should be in the top drawer of Tohka’s dresser. Could you teach her how to put one on?”

“M-me...?! ”

“Is there anyone else there? C’mon, if you don’t hurry, you’ll be late.”

“...! Aaah, dammit!” Shido made up his mind and turned back to Tohka. “Tohka, you have to take me to your apartment for a sec!”

“Mm? Oh, sure...” Still perplexed, Tohka led him to her room. They had to pass through three defensive walls on par with a bank safe’s to get to her apartment, which were probably there for emergencies. For however large the building looked, her actual living space wasn’t that big.

“This is it,” Tohka said and opened a door. Inside, the setup was that of a normal apartment.

When Shido closed the door, he pointed to the hallway while standing in the entryway. “G-great! Now bring me what’s in the top drawer of your dresser!”

“Mm...? O-okay.”

Tohka tilted her head to one side, confused, while she took off her shoes, and then she came back just as Shido had instructed with a pale pink bra held casually in one hand. “Is this what you want?”

“Ngh! Y-yeah.” He didn’t have much experience looking at the underwear of a girl his age. His face turned red as he beckoned Tohka with one hand. “L-listen, Tohka. So this thing...”

It wasn’t like anyone was there listening, but he was still embarrassed somehow and lowered his voice.

After he’d whispered to her the purpose of and how to put on a bra, Tohka’s face was also red.

“Wh—?! Wh-wh-what are you talking about, Shido?! ”

“Sh-shut up! It’s embarrassing for me, too, okay?! ”

Tohka held up the bra with both hands and stared at it intently. “This goes... directly on my chest...?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“M-mm. Do I absolutely have to wear it?”

“...You do. Otherwise, it’d be...dicey.”

“D-dicey in what way?”

“Y-you’re probably fine right now, but if it rains or something. I mean, you know...”

After a period of shock, Tohka seemed to understand what Shido was saying, and her flushed cheeks grew even redder. If this were a manga, smoke would have been pouring out of her ears.

“Wh—?! What are you thinking?!” Tohka shrieked and covered her chest with her hands.

“Th-that’s why I’m telling you to put it on already!”

“...Mm,” she groaned as she looked at the bra again, the blush reaching up to her ears. “F-fine. I’ll try!” She trotted off down the hallway.

“Phew.” He let out a sigh of relief. “That was a close call.”

However... A few minutes later, Tohka popped her face out from the hallway. “Sh-Shido... Can you help?”

She stepped forward. For some reason, she had taken her blouse off, and now she had her arms through the sleeves backward.

“Tohka? Wh-why’s your shirt on backward?”

“H-how am I supposed to fasten this?”

“Oh...” He suddenly understood. This *was* her first bra. Fastening the hooks by herself was a difficult task. He considered his options.

“Nope. Don’t go racking your brains over this. Go and hook her up already.” Kotori sounded annoyed.

His face stiffened. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to argue with her, but he had

no alternative proposals. He swallowed hard and then opened trembling lips. “I-I’ll fasten it for you. Turn around.”

“Wha—?!” Tohka’s eyes opened wide, but apparently, she couldn’t think of any other way, either. After a moment’s hesitation, she tentatively turned her back to Shido.

A bewitching back peeked out from the gap in her unbuttoned blouse, and he unconsciously held his breath.

“D-don’t stare...” She turned her face away, embarrassed, as she grabbed her own shoulders tightly so that she wouldn’t accidentally drop the bra.

Shido shook his head with a gasp. “I-I’ll do my best...”

Nervous, he fastened the hooks with shaky hands, chanting “Control your urges” to himself...while he resolved in his heart to make sure she had front-closure bras from now on.

“Mm... It’s kind of hard to move with this on.” Tohka fidgeted, not used to the bra.

“...Put up with it. It’s that kind of thing,” Shido told her as he put a hand to his still-overheated forehead.

“M-mm.”

They had been walking for maybe ten minutes, making awkward conversation, when he heard footsteps. Someone was running toward them just as they were approaching the T-shaped intersection.

“Hmm?” He raised an eyebrow, but by the time he turned his eyes in that direction, it was already too late.

A high school girl came at them from the right, toast hanging out of her mouth.

“I’m gonna be late!” she cried as she ran at top speed, the embodiment of a shojo trope no longer seen in modern manga. And despite the toast in her mouth, her words were perfectly clear.

“Wha—?!” He tried to pull back at the sudden arrival, but he was indeed too late. The girl tackled Shido and knocked him flat on his backside.

“Ah! Ow-ow-ow.”

“A-are you okay, Shido?!” Tohka knelt down beside him, looking worried.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He stood up and brushed himself off before turning his eyes to the girl who had crashed into him. The impact had been enough to knock even Shido, a boy, down. A girl would have been helpless to resist gravity.

“Owww!” the girl cried out loudly, a short distance away, just as he’d feared. However...

“What the...?!” His face turned beet red, and his shoulders shook.

A natural response. Because the girl was sprawled out on the pavement with her skirt flipped up very neatly, revealing an impressive panty shot. He got the feeling that she had deliberately flipped up her skirt after falling.

“Eek?!” The girl’s shriek pushed this doubt out of his mind. She covered herself and stared at him with a flushed face. “Y-you saw, didn’t you?!”

“N-no, I mean...” Shido was at a loss for a reply.

The girl slowly stood up and came over to him. “A man has seen me. I can never get married now.”

“Huh...?! No, uh.”

The girl loomed in close to him.

“Eeah...?!” Shido yelped.

“Wha—?!” Tohka was close behind.

The girl paid this no mind and traced a finger across his chest. “You will...take responsibility for this, yes?”

“Uh. Oh, I mean, I don’t...” Shido averted his eyes, face burning. Aah, it was so hot. So, so hot.

“G-get away from him, you!” Tohka grabbed her shoulders, whirling the girl around and away from Shido.

“Please think it over, okay! Our. Future,” she said and then, for some reason, ran back in the direction she’d come from.

Tohka gaped after her, baffled for a moment, before pushing her lips out in a pout and turning her gaze on Shido.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Tohka?”

“...Nothing.” She whipped her face away and started stalking off toward the school.

“Uh. Hey, Tohka—”

Bzzzt. He heard a buzzer through his earpiece. *“You’re out, Shido!”*

“Huh...?” He furrowed his brow.

“What are you even doing?” Kotori sounded exasperated. *“That was a horror show. And now Tohka’s pouting.”*

Shido finally understood what was going on. “W-was that girl...from Ratatoskr?!”

“Yup. My crew. What? Were you happy to get hit on or something?”

“...Ugh.” His face stiffened, and he ran his hands through his hair.

“Aah, I really wonder why you can’t react well when things come your way. Or why you can’t follow up properly.”

“F-follow up?”

“Right. Like you clasp her shoulders gently and whisper in her ear, ‘Don’t sulk. There’s no way I could have eyes for a woman other than you, you know.’”

“I could never do that!” he shouted. “And as if that would cheer Tohka up!”

“Hee-hee, it might work surprisingly well. You forget what happened before? Girls want you to put your feelings into words.”

“Ngh...!”

“Come, come. Should you really be just standing there? You’ll lose sight of Tohka.”

“Ah!” He gasped and looked forward. Tohka was already gone. “Crap...”

He started running in a hurry. He found her surprisingly quickly.

She was standing around the bend with her cheeks slightly puffed out, hiding.

“T-Tohka...”

“Mm. Let’s go, Shido.” Apparently, she’d been waiting for him, but she was still grumpy.

“R-right,” Shido answered, frantically flipping through possibilities in his mind.

He swallowed hard, made up his mind, and was about to throw his arm around Tohka’s shoulders. But he couldn’t actually muster up that kind of courage. He settled for patting her shoulder awkwardly and having Tohka turn toward him.

“D-d-don’t sulk. Th-there’s no way I’d have eyes for any girl but you. You know that, right...?” He knew it was hopeless before the words were even out of his mouth, but he gave Kotori’s words a try.

“...!” Tohka’s eyes grew wide. “Wh-wh-wh-what are you talking about, Shido...?! ”

“U-uh. I-I’m sorry. Just forget it...” Instantly embarrassed, he waved his hand and tried to pretend it had never happened.

“M-mm,” Tohka said, quietly for some reason, and started walking again.

He wasn’t sure, but he felt like she had a little pep to her step.

Raizen High School was about a thirty-minute walk from the Itsuka house. Shido would normally arrive at around eight o’clock, but because he’d waited for Tohka and dealt with a few extra surprises that day, he was a little later than usual.

The hands of the clock affixed to the school’s exterior wall indicated that it was 8:20. Ten minutes before homeroom started.

“Whoops. We better pick up the pace,” he said and stepped into the school entryway.

“Mm. Right.” Tohka nodded.

“Itsuka!” A tenth-grade girl lying in wait called out to him.

“Huh... Me?”

“Yes!” The girl fidgeted awkwardly before offering him what looked like a

letter. “I’ve aaaaaalways had a crush on you! Please read this!”

“H-huh?!” His eyes flew open, and he stared at the object the girl had thrust out at him. An envelope sealed with a heart sticker. A stereotypical love letter. “A...! A love letter?!”

Shido took a step back but then quickly realized what was going on. After everything else that had happened that morning, there was no way this was a real girl confessing a crush. She was probably from Ratatoskr. If he didn’t firmly reject her, he was sure that buzzer would sound in his ear again and some punishment would be carried out.

He swallowed and put out a hand out to take the letter. He was going to rip it up, but the girl was staring at him with damp eyes, and he stopped unconsciously. Even if he knew she was from the organization, he did still feel bad.

He returned the letter to the girl and shook his head. “I-I’m sorry. I just don’t feel the same way.”

The girl looked about to burst into tears. “I—I guess not. I’m so sorry to spring this on you!” She whirled around and ran off down the hallway.

“Oh dear.” He heard Kotori’s voice in his ear. *“What a shame.”*

“Hmph. Like you’re going to trip me up with such an obvious event.”

“...We did actually have a love letter event set up, but it hasn’t started yet, you know.”

“What?” His cheeks twitched.

And then he noticed another girl peeking a frowning face out from around the corner. Like the earlier girl, she had a letter in her hand.

“I-is that...?”

“One of us.”

“...S-so then, who was that other girl?”

“If you’re lucky, you get a love letter from an underclassman once in a lifetime, and you let it slip away. Nice work on destroying things before they could even

begin."

"..." Shido let his mind race wordlessly. Huh? What is this? I don't get it.

"Well, at least you didn't do something as stupid as accepting a love letter in front of Tohka, so I'll give you this one."

"Y-yeah?" he stuttered, still dumbfounded.

"What did that girl want, Shido?" came Tohka's curious voice from behind.

"Oh." Shido shook his head. "N-nothing."

"But in that case, I guess that means no penalties today?" He heard Kotori's voice again. "Toooooo baaaaaad."

"...What were you planning to do if I failed?"

"Hmm? Oh, we were just going to hand out pictures of you taken the first time you used wax in your hair. You were peering at yourself from every angle like you were such hot stuff."

"You've got to be kidding me!"

"Wohkay, I got homeroom soon, too, so I'll take my leave and head to school. Don't go forgetting today's training, hmm?"

The transmission ended.

"Honestly..." He sighed and walked down the hallway with Tohka.

When he opened the door and went into their classroom, his classmate Hiroto Tonomachi was scribbling on the board near the entrance. He looked over at Shido.

"Huh? What's going on? You're late, and now you show up with Tohka? Whoa, whoa." He glared at Shido before roughly sketching an umbrella on the board with the chalk in his hand. Naturally, the names he wrote under it were Itsuka and Yatogami, symbolizing their love.

"What are you, five?" Shido laughed dryly.

But Tohka looked troubled as she stared at Shido and Tonomachi in turn. *"M-mm. Was it bad that we came to school together? I didn't know that."*

“N-no, totally not bad, Tohka.” Flustered, Tonomachi erased the drawing and waved his hands. “It’s more a beauty-of-form kind of thing. And I wish all the couples would blow up as a single person, myself.”

“Huh? What?” Tohka’s eyes grew wide.

“Just talking about a damn nice guy like Itsuka who’d never make a girl unhappy.”

“Hey...” He glared at Tonomachi.

But his friend didn’t so much as flinch. “We’re good!” He flashed a toothy grin.

“Mm. Really? But...I don’t want that. Shido exploding, it’s...very sad. Isn’t there anything we can do?” Tohka said, quite seriously, clearly not poking fun or making a joke.

Faced with her innocence, Tonomachi shouted, “D—! Daaaaaaaaaaaaamn!” and ran toward the hallway.

“Wh-what’s wrong with Tonomachi?” Tohka frowned.

“Oh. Don’t worry about him. He’ll be back soon,” Shido said and walked over to his seat, second row from the window.

He glanced at the desk to his left. A beautiful girl was sitting there like always. Pale skin, face somehow like a doll. She was mysterious with an aura that made her seem not of this world.

“M-morning...Tobi—”

“...”

He felt an incredible pressure.

“O-Origami.” He just barely managed to correct himself in time.

“Morning, Shido,” the girl—Origami Tobiichi—replied with a tiny nod.

The usual greeting. But it didn’t stop there that day.

Origami caught sight of Tohka over Shido’s shoulder, and her gaze sharpened. “Did you walk to school together?”

“Huh? O-oh. Y-yeah, we did.”

“You did.”

He could see no particular change in her expression or tone. But for some reason, he felt a vague threat growing.

“Mm?” Maybe noticing this aura or maybe not, Tohka set her schoolbag and lunch down on the desk next to Shido’s and turned toward Origami. “What? You need something?”

“No.”

“Hmph.” Tohka snorted, not bothering to hide her displeasure.

As a general rule, she was friendly in her interactions, but this girl alone was different. And it was actually no wonder at all.

Origami was a member of the Self-Defense Forces’ AST—the squad tasked with using force to eliminate Spirits like Tohka.

Until Shido had sealed Tohka’s power, she had indeed come up against them time and time again in seriously life-threatening battles. On top of that, Origami’s parents had been killed by a Spirit, so her hatred of and hostility toward the Spirits was on another level. It was only natural that the two girls wouldn’t be able to get along.

The bell rang.

“...! C-c’mon! It’s time for homeroom! Tohka, sit down. Okay?!”

“Mm? O-okay...” Tohka sat down obediently. For now.

Shido also settled down in his chair as he expressed his gratitude for this divine intervention from the bottom of his heart.

His scattered classmates took their seats. Tonomachi too had returned, slipping in through the rear entrance so as not to draw attention. He was surprisingly conscientious.

Soon after, the front door opened, and a small woman with curly hair and glasses stepped in. She looked just like the students, but despite her youthful appearance, she was a full-fledged member of society. Social studies teacher

Tamae Okamine (aka Tama), age twenty-nine.

“Okay, hi. Good morning, everyone.” After her usual, somewhat spacey greeting, Tama moved to open the attendance book on the podium, but then her hand stopped. “Oh, that’s no good. I had an announcement for you all today.”

She looked up at them with excitement in her eyes.

“Hee-hee, it’s, well, we have a transfer student!” she cried, snapping a finger out at them and striking a pose. A clamor rose up from the class.

This was to be expected. A transfer student was a big event in school life. Everyone had gotten swept off their feet when Tohka joined their class, too.

“Mm?” Shido looked visibly confused.

Tohka had only just transferred to their class a couple of months ago (or that’s the story they were going with), so he wondered why another transfer student would be assigned to them so soon. It wasn’t like this class was noticeably smaller than any of the others.

“Okay. Come in!” Ms. Tama called out with glee, interrupting Shido’s thoughts.

The door slowly opened, and the transfer student walked through it.

Instantly, the class fell silent.

The new student was a girl. Despite the sultry season, she was wrapped tightly in a winter blazer, and her legs were hidden in black tights. Her black hair was best described as shadowlike. Long bangs hid the left half of her face, and he could only see her right eye.

But even so, he could easily tell that this girl had a bewitching appeal on par with or greater than that of Tohka, a Spirit with superhuman beauty.

The sound of the class collectively gulping reached his ears.

“Okay. Please introduce yourself,” Tama urged.

“All right.” The girl nodded gracefully, picked up a piece of chalk, and wrote the name *Kurumi Tokisaki* in a beautiful hand on the board.

“My name is Kurumi Tokisaki.” The girl—Kurumi—continued in a voice that carried well.

“I am a Spirit.”

“...?!”

That word.

Shido felt a fist squeezing his heart tightly.

Amid the chattering students, only Tohka and Origami evinced the same reaction as he did.

Perhaps noticing this, Kurumi looked toward him and smiled briefly.

“...!”

“Uh, um, okay! That was a very idiosyncratic introduction!” Sensing that Kurumi had nothing else to say, Tama clapped her hands together to indicate that they were done. “So then, Tokisaki, would you mind sitting at that empty desk?”

“Not at all. But I have one request first.”

“Hmm? What’s that?” Teacher Tama asked.

Kurumi put a finger up to her chin. “As I’ve only just now transferred to this school, I’m unfamiliar with the campus. I’d very much appreciate it if someone could show me around. After school would be fine.”

“Oh, of course. That’s true. So then the class rep—”

Kurumi took a step forward before their teacher could finish and came to stand directly in front of Shido’s desk. “Would you mind, Shido?”

“Huh?” His pupils shrank to tiny points in surprise. “M-me...? And, like, how do you know my—?”

“Is that a no...?” A sad look came over Kurumi’s face that practically screamed that she would burst into tears if he refused.

“N-no, I mean, it’s not that...”

“All right then, it’s settled. Please and thank you very much, Shido.” She

flashed him a pert smile before walking over to her seat with a light step, under the gaping stares of her new classmates.

Chapter 2

Ask a Spirit

After morning homeroom, Tama left the class, and Shido pulled his phone out of his pocket to call Kotori.

It rang for a bit before he heard her languid voice.

"Hello? Big Brooo?" She sounded laid-back somehow, totally different from her thorny tone earlier. This was non-commander mode, regular Kotori.

"Hey, Kotori?"

"Ugh, why are you calling me at this hour? If my phone had rung ten seconds earlier, the teacher would have confiscated it!"

"I told you, you gotta turn it to silent when you get to school."

"I just forgot today," she replied grumpily. *"So what's going on?"*

"Ohhh. Right. The truth is, okay," he said, as he glanced toward Kurumi.

Despite the fact that she said she was "a Spirit" when she introduced herself that morning, clearly marking herself as a weirdo from the perspective of the average person, there was a group of people clustered around her desk, lobbing a stream of questions at her. It wasn't just students from their class, either. People from other classes had also come to get a glimpse of the rumored beauty of a transfer student. Just like the day when Tohka had transferred.

Then he suddenly met her eyes. She turned a bright smile on him, and he held his breath, his face growing hot.

"Shido?"

"Y-yeah. A new student transferred into our class today. And so, like, she said."

"What?"

“I am...a Spirit.”

“...” Kotori immediately fell silent. He heard the rustling of fabric from the other end of the line, almost like she was replacing the ribbons that tied her hair back. *“Give me all the details.”* Her tone was different now.

“Details? I mean...I already I told you everything. When she was introducing herself, she said, ‘I am a Spirit.’ ...I’ve got no proof, but I feel like she was saying it to *me*.”

“Are you sure it’s not because you think everything is about you?”

“...”

“Well, whatever. It’s weird that she even knows what a Spirit is. We’ll check into it.”

“Great. Thanks.” He hung up, and the bell rang to indicate the start of first period.



In one corner of the Tengu Garrison, the measurement room where Spirit signals for the entire southern Kanto region were monitored, AST Captain Ryouko Kusakabe groaned.

“...! Impossible.”

She turned her gaze on the man operating the console—Lieutenant Ashimura. “Are you sure there’s no mistake?”

He shook his head from side to side, sweat beading on his forehead. “Unfortunately, no. This is the most accurate device in the country.”

“Right.” She ran her eyes over the numbers displayed on the screen once more and confirmed that her own understanding wasn’t wrong before changing her bewilderment into a sigh and expelling all the air from her lungs.

The scanning data of a particular person was displayed on the screen. Actually, *person* was maybe a bit of a misnomer. At any rate, these numbers indicated the subject was a world-killing catastrophe.

“A Spirit transferred to the high school? If this is a joke, I’m not laughing.”

Around nine that morning, the base had received a transmission from Origami requesting Spirit confirmation after a new girl in her class declared herself to be one. They had scanned the girl, not really expecting anything, but...

Ryouko wiped her forehead. Her sleeve was damp. The air conditioning should have been working perfectly, and yet her skin was clammy. But that was no surprise, really.

In order to transfer to the high school, a birth certificate, some proof of residence, and other documents were necessary. This meant a dangerous creature with enough power in a single finger to destroy the entire town had the knowledge to understand and apply the strictures of human society—*after* somehow slipping past their measurement devices to appear in this world. It would have been strange if a shiver *hadn't* run up her spine.

“Captain? Is something here the matter?”

She heard a curiously polite voice from behind. She could think of only one member of her team who spoke like that. When she glanced back, Mana was standing there, just as Ryouko had expected.

“Hmm?” Mana glanced at the screen and frowned in annoyance. “This is... I see. So you have indeed shown yourself then, Nightmare?”

“Nightmare?” Ryouko asked.

“Codename Nightmare.” Mana sighed, irritated. “The worst Spirit. I’ve been chasing her.”

“The worst...Spirit,” Ryouko repeated, as though shuddering at the imposing phrase.

“Yes. This Spirit has produced over ten thousand dead. If we include the unknown victims, this number will inflate even further, I suspect.”

“T-ten thousand?! Th-that’s impossible. Was the evacuation order not given? Or was the spacequake that large—?”

“That’s not it,” Mana said solemnly, cutting Ryouko off. “The spacequake Nightmare brings about is the standard level. Of course, it’s not zero, but the number of dead doesn’t reach one hundred.”

“S-so then why...?”

“The reason is simple. She kills them directly with her own hands. There’s been over ten thousand victims.”

“...!” Ryouko was speechless.

Although the spacequake damage Princess and Hermit did when they appeared in Tengu City was serious, the Spirits themselves had never assaulted any human beings. But if a monster that could easily split the earth were to try and kill people... An AST member could easily imagine how terrifying that would be.

“—All right, then. Shall we prepare?” Mana asked, stretching lightly.

“What?” Ryouko said, baffled.

“A Spirit has appeared. In which case, there’s nothing to do but kill it.”

“Well, yes. But the citizens haven’t been evacuated. How on earth will we—?”

“No need for concern. Please leave everything to me. My area of expertise is eliminating that thing.”

“Uh. H-hey!” Ryouko grabbed Mana’s arm before she trotted off.

“Is there something that is the matter? Time is of the essence here.”

“...! Explain yourself. I’m your captain. You are not permitted to act on your own.”

“...” Mana fell silent, apparently running through various scenarios in her mind, before raising her hands. “Understood. I will obey.”

However, she quickly turned eyes on Ryouko like she was assessing her.

“But please make sure you do not forget. I’m from the *company*. If I were so inclined, I could act under the authorization of the chief of staff.”

“...I know that.” Ryouko screwed up her face in displeasure and let go of the girl.



The hands of the clock above the blackboard were already pointing at three o’clock.

Shido watched the usual end-of-day homeroom play out. Tama entered the classroom as the bell rang, opened the attendance book on the podium, and made the usual announcements. It was a typical scene. But he was tortured by unusual nerves.

“...!”

Kurumi shot a look toward him and waved out of the teacher’s line of sight.

“Uh. Um.” He figured it would be rude to ignore her, and so he waved back with a pained smile.

““ ...””

Seated to either side of him, Tohka and Origami glared with such intensity that their eyes threatened to set his skin on fire.

“S-so what am I supposed to do?” He sighed.

Tama clapped the attendance book closed. “That’s about it for announcements. Now, please go home in groups and make sure not to be out after dark.”

“Hmm?” He raised an eyebrow at the sort of admonishment they gave to classes in elementary school.

Now that she mentioned it, he felt like he’d heard something in this vein on the news that morning. It had caught his attention because they’d mentioned Tengu City.

Shido’s own safety was one thing, but he would have to make sure that Kotori was more careful. Although in the case of his little sister, this was more likely a needless fear.

The order to stand and bow rang out. Obediently, he stood up and bowed with the rest of the class.

“All right. Good-bye then,” Tama said and left the classroom.

All around him, he could hear the clatter of people standing up and chatting and laughing. Time to go home.

Shido, however, still had a job to do.

He fished the small earpiece out of his pocket and secured it in his right ear just in time for a shrill voice to shake his eardrum.

"It's time, hmm? You ready, Shido?" Youthful, yet imposing. Shido's little sister, Kotori Itsuka, in commander mode.

He couldn't see them from here, but the elite forces of Ratatoskr were doing everything they could to prepare Spirit strategies on the bridge.

"Can't believe she's actually a Spirit. To be honest, I thought you were just saying stuff, Shido."

"...Hey." He narrowed his eyes.

But could he really say he was surprised? He himself half doubted this truth. A Spirit transferring into his class? It was a bit much.

The results of the measurements Kotori had ordered done on Kurumi were delivered to Shido's phone over lunch. The conclusion was that she really was a Spirit.

"But this is actually good for us. Can't believe she'd go and invite you out. And so long as the alarm's not ringing, the AST can't do anything. It's all coming together. You raise your likability and get her into you."

"Mm. I...guess," Shido said, feeling uncomfortable.

She was exactly right. Something dark and anxious settled over his heart, possibly because he couldn't get a handle on what Kurumi was even doing there.

"What? You sound unconvinced. You still don't want to kiss the Spirits?"

"...! Th-that's not... Uh, I mean, it's not like I'm totally comfortable with it."

"Whatever. Doesn't look like we've got a whole lot of time to chat here."

"Huh?" Shido felt a *pat, pat* on his shoulder.

"Shido. Shido."

"Whoa?!" He cried out in surprise.

"I'm so sorry. Did I scare you?" The girl standing there—Kurumi—seemed apologetic.

“T-Tokisaki...”

“Hee-hee-hee! I don’t mind if you call me Kurumi.”

“R-right,” he stammered. “Okay, Kurumi.”

She grinned happily. “You will show me around the school, yes? Thank you so much for doing this.”

“S-sure.” He nodded and pressed a hand to his chest as if to calm his heart, which was suddenly beating a whole lot faster.

A beautiful face as if made to order. Refined gestures. Graceful movements. All of these passed through Shido’s senses to create a powerful impression. It felt like his eyeballs and brain had determined that any matter other than Kurumi was an impurity and excised it from their conception of the world. Her bearing went beyond the sort of finishing school manners of a girl from a wealthy family; not a soul would doubt her if she were to announce that she was part of a royal family somewhere.

“Wah-hak!”

“...!” He came back to himself at this deliberate clearing of a throat. When he looked up, Tohka was glaring at him with her arms crossed. She must have seen right through him.

“Oh. Um, so, like...” Shido started to try and plead his case.

“Now, then! Let us hurry. Hee-hee! I’m excited.” Kurumi was still speaking when she set out into the hallway on light feet.

“Uh. H-hey!”

“Hee-hee-hee! You must also hurry, please, Shido!”

“Shido, focus on Kurumi now.” He heard Kotori’s voice in his ear. *“Tohka’s mental state isn’t so bad that it’s reached the danger zone. She’ll be back to her usual self if you pick up some kinako buns for her on your way home.”*

When he glanced to his side, he saw Tohka still indignant. But he couldn’t do anything about that now. “Sorry!” he called out and then chased Kurumi into the hallway.

“So then, where will you guide me first?” Kurumi asked, cocking her head to one side, when he found her lying in wait immediately outside the classroom.

“Uh. Yeah... Right.”

Shido wasn't exactly sure of that himself, and Kotori's voice whispered in his ear.

Fifteen thousand meters in the sky above Tengu floated the airship *Fraxinus*, which belonged to the secret organization Ratatoskr. Tasked with the somehow ridiculous but difficult job of making Spirits—dangerous creatures that appeared irregularly and destroyed this world each time they did—all weak in the knees to render them powerless, the crew were currently in the middle of a mission. Thirty members of the organization, including their commander Kotori, sat on the bridge in the central part of the ship, each assigned to their own post operating consoles with practiced hands.

“Likability, forty-five point five. No change.”

“Mental state, all green. She's stable.”

“Spirit signal, one-fifty point zero. Delta of minus three point four from previous measurement. Within tolerance.”

“Hmm. Well, looks good anyway,” Kotori said, as she moved the cherry Chupa Chups in her mouth and reclined in the captain's chair in the center of the bridge.

The ribbons that tied her hair back were black. The jacket hanging over her shoulders was deep red. She was the very picture of a girl overly influenced by movies and cosplay. Looking almost absurdly out of place on the bridge, she glared down at her subordinates on the lower deck before coolly turning her eyes to the main monitor.

The enormous screen showed a torso shot of the Spirit in question, Kurumi Tokisaki. Her parameters were displayed on the edge of the screen, while the text produced by the *Fraxinus* AI was shown instantaneously in the window at the bottom.

Yes. It looked almost like the screen of a dating sim.

On the monitor, Kurumi cocked her head to one side and moved her adorable lips. *“So then, where will you guide me first?”*

“Uh. Yeah... Right.” Shido’s voice echoed through the speakers.

Kotori knew without asking that he was panicking at having to suddenly decide on a destination. She sighed as she pressed the transmit button and brought her mouth close to the mic. “Give us a sec, Shido. We’re analyzing things on our end.”

A new window popped up on the main monitor. It showed a rough overview of Raizen High School. The names of classrooms and facilities were displayed, and a red dot indicated Shido and Kurumi’s location. Several courses within the school were laid out, taking into consideration the distance from their current position and lines of movement.

The first place they would go was one of the following:

1. THE ROOF
2. THE NURSE’S OFFICE
3. CAFETERIA/SCHOOL STORE

“This is our chance, hmm?” came a voice from behind the captain’s chair where Kotori was seated.

She glanced back to find a tall young man standing there with his hand on his chin. *Fraxinus* Vice Commander Kyouhei Kannazuki.

“It’s fortunate that he’s allowing us to make the decision of where to go in what order. Depending on how we combine the destinations, we’ll be able to create some interesting situations.”

“Mm, true. Choices, people! You have five seconds!” Kotori barked, and the results soon displayed on the small screen next to her.

She looked at the breakdown of the options and licked her lips. “Hmm, so the roof is the top choice?”

“Well, it’s the most obvious answer. The roof is the perfect spot for youthful hijinks! A space to give you a taste of freedom and the perfect view! There is no better place to kick things off!” Dimension Breaker Nakatsugawa spoke up from

the lower deck.

“But you normally can’t go out onto the roof of the high school, right?” Deep Love Minowa remarked. “It’s too dangerous.”

“What?!” Nakatsugawa stroked his face and lowered his voice. “I-is that true...?”

Kotori cleared her throat. “No problem. We have several agents undercover at the school. It’s plenty possible to get one of them to unlock the door before Shido and Kurumi get there.”

“O-of course! Then indeed the roof is—”

“Please wait a moment.” Bad Marriage Kawagoe looked at her from the right. “How can you skip past the nurse’s office? The neatly ordered beds, the curtains to block the outside world. Isn’t *this* the preeminent spot for excitement on campus?!”

“Wh-what?! It’s far too transparent! How dare you compare this with the majesty of the roof?!”

“Pft! If you have objections, perhaps you could stop that nosebleed first, Nakatsugawa?”

“Ah!”

“Right.” Kotori turned her eyes to her screen once more. “And who is the single vote here for option three?”

A hand went up from a seat nearby. “...It was me.”

The excessively sleepy-looking woman moved eyes ringed with dark circles to look at Kotori. Reine Murasame, Ratatoskr analyst. Kotori placed great faith in her.

“You, Reine? That’s a surprise. Mind telling me why?”

“...Mm-hmm. Although I don’t have any serious reason. It’s a simple process of elimination.”

“Process of elimination?” Kotori repeated. “You’re saying the roof and the nurse’s office are no good?”

“...That’s not what I mean.” Reine shook her head. “It’s just, the school nurse is still in the office. It would be better to wait half an hour or so to unleash the full potential of that space... Likewise for the roof. Once the sunset starts, it would be lovely, wouldn’t it?”

“Gotcha. You’re quite the romantic, Reine.” Kotori lifted the corner of her mouth as she leaned toward the mic. “Shido, can you hear me? Show her the cafeteria and the school shop first.”

“Hmm. Okay, how about we take a look at the cafeteria and the school shop?” Shido suggested. “You probably need some stuff, I bet.”

“All right. That’s fine with me,” Kurumi assented, an adorable smile spreading across her face. She stood next to him and tapped her feet, half dancing. “Shall we?”

“S-sure.” He was a little overwhelmed by how excessively upbeat she was, but he managed to put his feet into motion somehow.

If they were going to the shop on the first floor, it was probably best to take the stairs on the west side of the building. He started down the hallway at a leisurely pace.

Curious eyes followed them as students moved past on their way home.

“Wow, who’s she?”

“The transfer?”

“That’s Itsuka from Class Four beside her, right? Why is he with her?”

“Ohhh, I heard she asked for him to show her around the school.”

“What? Isn’t he Yatogami’s husband?”

“Nah, I heard Tobiichi’s got him cornered, and he’s gonna be her boy toy now.”

“Whoa, whoa, he’s not satisfied with two-timing? He’s gotta go after the transfer student, too?”

“No way. Itsuka’s a real ape!”

...Say whatever you want. He managed to ignore the rude whispers around

them and hurried forward.

“Mmm?” He heard Kotori groan in his right ear, separate from the other voices.

“Something wrong, Kotori?”

“No. *There’s a signal that’s moving like someone is glued to the two of you. It’s possible you’re being followed.*”

“Wh-what...?” This was unsettling news.

“Quiet. *We’ll confirm a few things here. Right now, you focus on Kurumi. And, like, shouldn’t you at least say something while you’re walking with a girl? Rude much?*”

“Huh? Oh!” Shido cried. He was so overwhelmed from nerves at walking with a girl, so many curious eyes on them, that he’d forgotten about the actual person beside him. “Crap.”

He glanced over at Kurumi, and his heart started to pound. Which only made sense. After all, she was staring at him with her right eye, the one not hidden by her hair.

Their eyes met, and Kurumi smiled like she was delighted from the bottom of her heart. Almost like she’d been waiting for Shido to look at her.

“K-Kurumi. You should face forward when you’re walking, you know...!” His voice was shrill.

Her eye flew open wide. “I’ll be careful. You’re so kind to be so thoughtful of me, Shido.”

“O-oh... It’s nothing!”

“Please, don’t be so humble. It’s my fault for being so captivated by your face in profile.”

“C-cap...?!” His cheeks grew red, and he touched his face. *Wh-what did she just say? Captivated? No, that’s impossible.* He knew better than anyone that there was nothing worth looking at on this utterly average face of his.

“*What good’s it gonna do, her seducing you, Shido?*” he heard Kotori say with

a sigh, and his shoulders jumped up.

“S-sorry...”

“It’s true this is a type of Spirit we haven’t seen before, though. Not only does she blend in with human society, but she’s even the one putting the moves on you, of all things,” Kotori remarked. *“She’s fascinating. I’d like to dig deeper for info. Maybe we can get some questions in as we get your likability up... And a selection of options comes up at the perfect moment. Hang on a moment.”*

Once more, a window with options was displayed on the main monitor of the *Fraxinus* bridge.

1. “WHAT ON EARTH IS THIS SPIRIT YOU MENTIONED THIS MORNING?”
2. “WHERE DID YOU GO TO SCHOOL BEFORE, KURUMI?”
3. “WHAT KIND OF PANTIES ARE YOU WEARING RIGHT NOW, KURUMI?”

“Choices! Now!” Kotori shouted, and the crew on the lower deck moved to press a key at hand.

The results were displayed on her personal terminal.

“I knew it. One, is it?” Kotori tapped on her chin. The aggregated results matched her own selection.

“Quite reasonable,” Kannazuki observed from behind her. “Kurumi can’t know that Shido knows about the Spirits. It might be a fine idea to shake her up a little.”

“Mm-hmm. By the way, Kannazuki, which one did you pick?”

“Three. Why?”

“Let me hear your reasons,” she demanded, turning slightly.

“Panties viewed through black tights are the ultimate gift to humanity. There is no room for doubt on this matter.”

Kotori snapped her fingers. Instantly, two muscular giants stepped onto the bridge and grabbed Kannazuki’s arms.

“Take him away,” she commanded.

“Yessir!” the giants bellowed in unison and dragged Kannazuki off.

“C-Commander! Have mercy! Mercyyyyyy!”

Psht. The doors shut behind them.

On the now-quiet bridge, Kotori opened her mouth with a sigh. ““What kind of panties are you wearing right now, Kurumi?”...Hmm. What’s up with this option?”

“W-well, a sassy comment can sometimes lighten the mood,” a crew member from the lower deck offered with a wry smile.

Kotori’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh!”

When she shifted position earlier, she’d accidentally pressed the mic switch with her elbow. Which meant that Shido had heard what she just said.

“H-hey... What kind of panties are you wearing right now, Kurumi?”

Having mistaken this for an instruction, the Shido on-screen was parroting her words exactly as is.

“Panties...?” Kurumi asked in return, stunned.

“...!!” Shido finally realized what he had just said. “Oh. Ah. No. I was...” He waved his hands and tapped his earpiece in protest.

“Idiot. That wasn’t an instruction! The real answer is one. ‘What on earth is this Spirit you mentioned this morning?’”

“H-huh...?”

“Just make up an excuse! Say it was a joke and segue into the real question!”

“R-right!” He nodded and turned back to Kurumi. “Uh. So, um, Kurumi.” Shido, however, stopped as soon as he caught sight of her.

She was holding the hem of her pleated skirt tightly, looking up at him anxiously. “Are you curious?”

“Huh?! Oh. I—I mean... No, uh...” There was no way that he wouldn’t be curious, but he couldn’t exactly say *that*.

While he was faltering, Kurumi whirled her head around to check the area

and then stepped behind a nearby cleaning supply cabinet.

“K-Kurumi?” He raised an eyebrow, not understanding what she was doing.

Her cheeks grew red as if she were embarrassed, and she parted her small lips. “I...don’t mind. If it’s you, Shido.” She started to slowly raise the hem of her skirt.

“Huh... What...?!” His eyes grew wide at this entirely unexpected development.

She kept pulling her skirt up, gradually revealing more of those legs in black tights until the forbidden delta zone peeked its face out. Through the black material stretching out to either side, he caught a glimpse of white underwear.

“—?!” He immediately closed his eyes, grabbed the hem of her skirt, and yanked it down.

“Oh my goodness!” Kurumi said as if intrigued. “Whatever is the matter? If it’s you, Shido, I don’t mind, you know?”

“No! I’m good! Okay! Let’s keep going!”

“Hee-hee-hee. So you’re a shy one. Oh, but if we’re going to continue, would you mind releasing my skirt?”

“...!” His eyes flew open with a gasp. To an outsider, it would have looked as though Shido had dragged a girl into a hidden place and was now holding her skirt. He definitely would come off as a big perv.

“I-I-I-I-I-I’m sorry!” He hurriedly pulled his hand away, but Kurumi giggled, not seeming particularly upset.

“*Shido, don’t panic. Get it together,*” Kotori commanded.

He cleared his throat deliberately and returned to their previous route as he moved on to the question he’d been given earlier.

“Uh. So, um, Kurumi.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“This morning, you said you were a Spirit. What exactly is that?”

Kurumi looked briefly stunned but then quickly smiled. “Hee-hee-hee. You

don't have to feign innocence, Shido. You know very well what a Spirit is, don't you?"

"...!" He gasped.

"What is with this girl?" Kotori sounded equally confused. *"She's certain you know about the existence of Spirits? What does that mean?"*

He quickly realized this question was not directed at him. He opened his mouth as if to ask Kotori's questions for her. "H-how do you know about me?"

"Hee-hee! That is...a secret!"

"Huh...?"

"But I did come to this school to meet you, Shido. I've been burning with excitement ever since I learned of your existence. To the point that there hasn't been a day when I don't think about you. Which is why I'm so happy right now." Her cheeks flushed a cherry pink.

"...!!" Shido felt his face grow hot. He couldn't see it himself, but smoke might have actually been shooting out of his ears.

What? What was this? This went far beyond flirting or playing the coquette. A feeling came over him that Kurumi was so precious and beloved, he could hardly stand it. An easy intoxication, like the time he'd gotten into the whiskey his dad kept in the glass cabinet when he was in junior high. He felt like if he let his guard down even a little, he'd crumple to the ground right then and there.

"You're supposed to be doing to her what she's doing to you!" Kotori's voice brought him back to himself.

"Ah! W-we should hurry!" He took a deep breath and started moving, trying to avoid Kurumi's eye as much as possible.

He wasn't sure why, but he got the feeling that if he looked into her eye any longer, he was going to end up rooted to the spot.

"Tch. So she's not gonna spill her secrets so easy? All we can do is keep going with our strategy. Pretty pathetic, though. She's leading you by the nose, pal."

"Sh-shut up..."

“Her having the run of things is annoying. How about we try shaking things up a bit?”

A set of options was displayed on the bridge’s main monitor.

1. “KURUMI, YOU’VE GOT PRETTY HAIR.” CASUALLY STROKE HER HAIR.
2. “W_HOA, YIKES.” P_RETEND TO STUMBLE AND PRESS UP AGAINST HER.
3. “C’_MON. T_HIS WAY.” S_MOOTHLY TAKE HER HAND.

Kotori flicked up the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth.

All the options were designed to initiate sudden physical contact. It was a little adventurous, but Kurumi’s mental state seemed stable, so the AI had apparently calculated that it was possible. It was true that this would be an effective means to close the emotional distance between them.

“Choices now!” she called and looked down at the results on her personal screen.

“I suppose so. One is a bit too familiar, and two is too obvious,” Kannazuki said, having returned at some point to his position behind her.

His shiny blond hair was a mess, and his chest had been laid bare. He also happened to not be wearing any trousers; all that covered his lower half was a pair of boxers with cute characters printed all over them.

“Oh my! You managed to get away from them, Kannazuki?”

“I was worried for a moment there. Who exactly are they?”

“I keep them on standby. Just in case.”

“For some reason, they tried to remove my boxers.”

“All in your mind.”

“What? I guess it was.” Kannazuki laughed out loud before his face snapped back to serious mode. “However, if we’re planning physical contact, isn’t there one other method?”

“Tell me.”

“First, Shido must suddenly lie down in the corridor.”

“And then?”

“From that angle, he will be able to gaze upon the Spirit’s panties through her black tights.”

“This again?” Kotori was about to snap her fingers once more, and Kannazuki hurriedly stopped her.

“Th-there’s more. The Spirit will feel embarrassed at having her panties viewed.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“In which case, of course, she will come to step on Shido lying in the corridor! It’s obvious that this will serve to deepen their rela—”

Kotori snapped her fingers, and the two giants stepped onto the bridge and dragged Kannazuki away once more.

“C-Commander, whyyyyyyyyy?!”

Ignoring his cries, she pulled the mic toward her.

“Shido, it’s three. Try holding her hand.”

“...Roger.” Shido nodded slightly at Kotori’s instruction. He’d heard a scream like someone in the agony of death before this command, but for some reason, his sixth sense told him he didn’t need to worry about that.

“...” He swallowed hard and looked at the path ahead of them. A T-shaped intersection. If they turned left, they would be at the stairs.

This was perfect. He would grab Kurumi’s hand when she tried to keep going straight and guide her in the right direction. “Oh, it’s this way. C’mon.” He ran several simulations of the moment in his mind.

However...

“Ee...?!” His eyes grew round in surprise. Just as they were about to step into the T-shaped intersection, Kurumi grabbed *his* hand.

“*What did she do?*” Kotori cried out, stunned.

But her shock didn’t begin to compare with Shido’s. Slender, soft, slightly cool fingers wrapped around his palm and squeezed tightly. A fleeting, innocent

pressure. If he were to let his guard down, blood threatened to come spurting out of his nose.

“K-Kurumi...?” He turned his head toward her awkwardly, the movement of a robot in a film back when there was no CG. “Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what’s up?”

Still holding his hand, Kurumi lowered her eyes, embarrassed, and turned her face away. “So...would you prefer if I didn’t do this?”

“...!! Th-that’s not... No, but...”

The tension eased out of her shoulders as though she were heaving a sigh of relief. She smiled shyly. “You really are so kind, Shido.”

“Uh! N-no...”

Augh, I don’t know where to look. Look away. I can’t think straight. Crap. Dammit, Kurumi. You’re super cute. Kurumi’s cute. Kurumi. Little Kurumi’s an angel. These thoughts that weren’t really thoughts flitted through his mind.

“Say, Shido?” Kurumi parted her small lips.

“Wh...at?”

“I have a favor to ask of you... Will you hear me out?”

A strange sensation. If it was a favor for Kurumi, he was ready to bob his head up and down, no strings attached.

“Uh. Y—”

However, in that moment...

“Nwah?!”

“...!”

He jumped at the shout and bizarre crash he heard from behind.

The cleaning supply closet had fallen over. The brooms and rags inside scattered all over the hallway. And then the culprits, two students, tumbled out on top of each other.

“T-Tohka... and Origami?!” Shido cried out.

Yes. Lying there were, without a doubt, Tohka and Origami.

“Oh, dear me! What are the two of you engaged in?” Kurumi looked at them curiously, still holding Shido’s hand.

Tohka and Origami both leaped to their feet.

“Th-this is...you know! Shido is showing Kurumi the school, so, um...maybe that’s what you’re doing, but no one told me anything about *that*!”

“—Kurumi Tokisaki. There is no need to hold hands in school. Release him immediately.”

“Yeah! What she said!” Tohka nodded, for once agreeing with Origami.

“Uh...” Shido realized that she was still holding his hand. He hurriedly tried to pull it away, but Kurumi squeezed it at exactly that moment, and he wasn’t able to free himself from her grip.

Kurumi glanced at him before turning her gaze on the other two girls and declaring theatrically, “The truth is, I suffer from *terrible* anemia. Shido, being the kind person that he is, was thoughtful enough to take my hand. I’d ask that you please don’t reproach him.”

Tohka and Origami listened to this and then turned their eyes on Shido with expressions that seemed to ask, “Really?”

“Uh, umm. It’s, well, yeah...,” Shido replied, rather vaguely, feeling like he had to avoid the question for some reason.



Origami abruptly fell to her knees.

“Origami?! What’s wrong?” Shido cried.

She yanked her face up and opened her mouth. “Anemia.”

“...” Shido’s face stiffened. Naturally, a drop of sweat trickled down his forehead.

“I can’t walk by myself.”

“...”

“You. Kind person.”

“...R-right.” Feeling a strange pressure, Shido held out his free hand.

Origami took it with a speed that seemed very un-anemic and pressed herself to his side.

“The both of you! Pathetic!” Tohka looked at Kurumi and Origami and sniffed in disgust as she crossed her arms. “Ah!”

A look of realization came across her face as she assessed Shido’s hands again.

“Sh-Shido! I’m also anemic!”

“You are...?”

“M-mm-hmm. The truth is, I don’t have a lot of meat on my bum!”

“Uh, that’s not what anemia means.” Shido grimaced.

Tohka waved her hands, flustered. “A-anyway! Me too!” She tried to take his hand, but Kurumi and Origami were already there.

“Hnnngh.” Tohka looked as though she were about to burst into tears and then stepped directly in front of Shido and dropped her hips like she was about to tackle him.

“H-hey, you’re not going to—”

The buzzing of a cell phone somewhere interrupted him.

Origami pulled her phone from a pocket. “Hello?” After some vague grunts

into the mouthpiece, she gave Kurumi a sharp look for some reason. "...Roger." She quietly hung up.

"Something came up," she said and gave Shido's hand a tight, regretful squeeze before letting it go.

Instantly, Tohka slid in and grabbed hold of his newly freed hand.

"..." Origami glanced at Tohka and then turned a gaze like knives on Kurumi once again before finally walking away. Her parting words in Shido's ear were, "Be careful of Kurumi Tokisaki."

"Wh-what...?"

"Shido? Shall we continue?"

"Huh? O-oh..." Urged on by Kurumi, Shido started walking, both arms held captive.

It went without saying that the stares of those around them grew even more intense.

Six PM.

Having finished the tour of the campus, Shido slipped through the school gates with Kurumi—and Tohka, who had half forced herself into the tour—and walked down the road, illuminated by the evening sun. Naturally, both of his hands were now free.

"And that's basically it. Questions?"

"No. I'm so grateful... Although it would have been so much nicer with just the two of us," Kurumi noted with a laugh.

"Ha... Ha-ha." He gave her a wry smile in response.

To be honest, he was grateful to Tohka. Because she had tagged along, Ratatoskr's instructions had been relatively softball, and even when they visited places like the roof and the nurse's office, he'd been able to make it through without anything getting particularly romantic.

If he was thinking about it from the perspective of raising Spirit likability, then maybe he should have been concerned. Maybe. But he got the feeling that if

he'd been tossed into a moody space alone with Kurumi, she would have eaten him alive. That was the kind of charm she had. Almost like—like a carnivorous plant that took all comers prisoner, oblivious to any argument.

“No, no.” He shook his head slightly at his own thoughts. He may not have said it aloud, but the thought that a girl would eat him alive or that she was a carnivorous plant was just rude.

“Well then, Shido, Tohka. I will take my leave of you here,” Kurumi announced as they came to the crossroads, and she bowed.

“Huh? O-okay.”

“Mm. Really? See you tomorrow then.”

Shido and Tohka waved, while Kurumi disappeared into the setting sun.

“—Aah, aah,” Kurumi sighed after leaving Shido and Tohka, as she walked alone at dusk. “That simply won't do. I must be patient. I've come all this way, after all. I'd like to taste a little more of the pleasures of school life.”

She spun herself around, giddy.

“Hee-hee-hee! I really must save the most exciting bit for last.”

She half danced down the road and then abruptly ran into something.

“Whoopsy.” She braced herself to keep from falling as she looked up.

She had slammed into a man's back. One of a boorish group gathered on the side of the road.

“Oh goodness! I am so sorry.” Kurumi bowed her head and moved to leave.

However...

“Hey, hang on there, miss. You weren't paying attention. You think sorry's gonna cut it?” growled the man she bumped into, a leering grin spreading across his face.

His friends moved to surround her.

“Oh my, oh dear?” Kurumi seemed visibly surprised.

One of the men whistled. “Look at what we got here; she's a pretty one. We

went and won the lottery.”

“Say there, miss, what’s your name? Let’s be friends.”

They spoke one after the other, eyes roving over Kurumi’s body.

Ohhh. Kurumi suddenly understood.

“Gentlemen. Are you perhaps wishing to have relations with me?” Kurumi asked, a bewitching smile on her lips, and the men gaped for a moment before putting hands to foreheads and laughing.

“Whoa now. ‘Relations,’ she says. Straight to it!”

“Nice, perfect. Now we’re talking. So you’re into that kinda thing?”

“Yes. As much as anyone else,” Kurumi said. “Perhaps we should move to a different location? We will draw attention here.”

The men chattered excitedly as they entered an alley, still surrounding her.

When her back was up against a wall in the dead end, the man Kurumi had bumped into reached out a hand, a lecherous smile on his face. “Well. Time’s a-wasting.”

But his hand dropped lower and lower, never actually reaching Kurumi.

“Uh? What’re you doing? If you won’t tap this, I—,” one of his friends cut in with a shrug.

“N-no!” The man reaching out toward Kurumi cut him off desperately. “My body’s just—!”

“Your body?”

And now the friends noticed the shadow at Kurumi’s feet. Several white hands stretched out to pull the man down.

“...?! What the—?!”

“Wh-whoaaaaaa...?!”

His friends cried out—but it was too late.

“Hee-hee-hee. Hee-hee!” Kurumi twisted her lips into a smile, as the white hands wrapped around their feet and began to drag their bodies into her

shadow.

“Now normally, you would all be little nothings not worthy of *eating*. But I’m refraining from digging into the main dish for the time being, so I will make you a teensy snack, an hors d’oeuvre.” She clapped her hands together. “—Bless this meal!”

Instantly, the screams of the men echoing around her stopped.

Kurumi lowered her eyes briefly, as though savoring dinner, and then let out a sigh and patted her stomach.

“Oh my?” Her eyebrows jumped up at the sensation that abruptly came over her. A feeling like her whole body was being rudely caressed. If you swallowed whole an enormous creature without chewing, it might have felt something like this.

It wasn’t the first time she’d felt it. This was the force field produced by the Realizer that the modern wizards used, a Territory. And this one was special even among those. There was no doubt—it was her.

“Tch! Am I a second too late?” A girl appeared in front of her as if to prove her guess to be fact.

Her hair was tied up in a ponytail, and she looked to be of junior high age. Her clothing was casual, a pastel hoodie with culottes, but the air around her was as serious as a bird of prey having locked onto its target.

“It seems you’ve been kind enough to feed in a showy fashion again, Nightmare.”

“Oh my goodness. You’re...Mana Takamiya, was it?” Kurumi asked as she tilted her head to one side.

Mana snorted her displeasure. “I will credit you for remembering my name, but it does make me want to vomit hearing it in your mouth.”

“Oh, then I must apologize.” Kurumi bowed her head. “But names are quite important. It does make me sad to be called ‘Nightmare,’ you know. Would you mind please calling me Kurumi Tokisaki?”

Mana frowned, even more unhappy. “They *are* important, which is why I’d

rather you didn't use mine. They *are* important, which is why I won't use yours."

"You can be so difficult."

"Quiet, Spirit." Mana's gaze grew sharper.

Kurumi felt a prickling on her skin.



After leaving Kurumi, Shido went with Tohka to pick up groceries for supper and now walked down the dark road, a heavy grocery bag in his right hand.

"Aaah, we got to the store at just the right time today." His face naturally broke into a smile. Yes. They had entered the store just as the sale was starting, so he'd been able to snag a fair bit of ground beef for 30 percent off.

"Shido! What's for supper tonight? Salisbury steak?" Tohka asked excitedly. She'd gotten accustomed to guessing the day's menu from the ingredients over the last few weeks.

"Oh! My vote's for that, too."

He heard Kotori's voice through the earpiece still connected to the airship.

"Aah, I don't know." He shrugged before breaking out into a grin. "I could also do some meat fried with daikon. Or a bowl with minced beef and egg maybe."

"M-mm. Well, that wouldn't be bad, either, but is Salisbury steak not okay?" Tohka asked, eyebrows raised in concern.

"What are you talking about? You went and bought all that ground beef. Don't mete it out in dribs and drabs—just use it all in one go," Kotori argued through his earpiece.

Up ahead, Shido heard the sound of a sneaker scraping the asphalt of the road and abruptly turned his face in that direction. "Hmm?"

A girl about the same age as Kotori was standing there, eyes wide open in surprise, hair up in a ponytail and a beauty mark under one eye. She was dressed casually in a hoodie and culottes. Red stains stood out on her white sneakers, looking fresh for some reason. Almost like blood.

“...?”

The face was unfamiliar. Or at least it should have been, but Shido couldn't figure it out. For some reason, he had a slight sense of déjà vu. He couldn't help but feel that he'd met her somewhere before.

That was when he realized that the girl was staring intently in his direction.

Unconsciously, Shido glanced behind him. He figured there was something in her line of sight that was surprising her somehow.

But there was nothing. All he could perceive on the familiar road of his neighborhood was the electrical poles at regular intervals and the garbage collection spots with their crow-deflecting nets.

Shido was basically the only thing she was looking at.

“Bru.” The girl moved trembling lips.

“Bru?” he questioned.

She started to run and leaped into his arms.

“Wha...?”

She wrapped her own arms around him and squeezed with all her might. Given that the victim was Shido and the perpetrator this girl, it was all well and good, but if their positions had been reversed, the police would have been dispatched in a heartbeat. Actually, Shido might have been arrested even in this situation.

“—Brother...!!” the girl cried, her face buried in his chest.

“Wh-what?!”

In that instant, the voices of the Itsuka siblings were magnificently in sync on the ground and on the bridge of *Fraxinus* in the sky above.

Chapter 3

Sister War

“Ooh! So this is your home now!” the girl observed, sounding polite but also not, as her hair that was a little too short to be an actual ponytail swung about. They had come to stand in front of the Itsuka house.

Shido’s self-professed sister. Mana Takamiya.

She was a deeply suspect girl, but after she hugged Shido on the street, she sank down to the ground and told him in great detail about how much she’d missed him, all with tears in her eyes. So he hadn’t had much of a choice but to bring her along.

Naturally, he’d gotten Kotori’s permission. Or rather it had been none other than Kotori who instructed him to bring Mana to the house.

“Mm. I’m surprised,” Tohka noted, staring intently at Mana. “I didn’t know Shido had another sister.”

“Yeah, I don’t remember having another one, either.”

“Really? She sure does look like you.”

“Naturally! I *am* his younger sister, et cetera!” Mana crossed her arms, very smugly, and then gasped as she turned to look at Tohka and Shido with a complicated expression. “But, my dear brother. I’m not particularly impressed.”

“Huh? With what?”

“It’s most obvious, of course!” Mana cleared her throat, her cheeks coloring. “You have Tobiichi—er, let’s see, my future sister-in-law, and yet you also have relations with other women.”

“H-huh?!” Shido cried out, his eyes snapping wide open.

“Whatever is the matter?”

“I don’t even know where to start! First of all, what? You know Origami?”

“Yes. Well, by chance,” Mana said, averting her eyes as if to hide something. He was very curious about where they had come across each other, but there was something even more deserving of his attention in that moment.

“And what on earth is this ‘sister-in-law’ stuff about?”

“Oh,” she replied. “I mean, I don’t feel totally gung ho about calling her that, but that *is* who she will be in the future, so...”

“I don’t plan on it!”

“I-is that so?” She frowned, perplexed. “But in that case, her suspicions that you’re cheating on her...”

“Cheating. What’s that?” Tohka looked at them quizzically. She had once again latched on to the inflammatory bit.

But before Shido could distract her with an explanation, Mana turned to Tohka. “I’ll ask you directly. It was Tohka, wasn’t it? Are you in the process of dating my brother?”

“Wha—?!” Shido’s cheeks grew red, and he pushed himself between the two of them. “Wh-what are you talking about?! We’re obviously not going out!”

“Tohka?” Mana poked her face out from Shido’s side to turn doubtful eyes on the older girl. “Have you ever gone on a date with my brother?”

“Oh! I have!” Tohka grinned.

“...” Mana stared at Shido long and hard.

“N-no, that was...” This was hard to deny, given that it wasn’t a lie. He took a step back, his face burning.

Cheeks still red, Mana began to question Tohka again, more timidly now. “Tohka. Have you perhaps already smooched...?”

“Smooched?”

“K-kissed.”

“Mm. We have?” Tohka replied, ever so casually.

“...!!” Mana’s eyes grew wide as saucers. “How i-immoral!”

“C-calm down...”

“That my own brother would be such a gigolo! ...My heart breaks! Rectify this! This must be rectified!”

“Shido, what’s a gigolo?” Tohka asked, once again brimming with curiosity.

“Aah, come on!” Shido messed up his hair and gave Tohka a push in front of the neighboring apartment building.

“Mm? Shido, why did you push me?”

“This is getting complicated, so go back to your place for now! Okay?!”

“Mph, but it’s jus—”

“I’ll make Salisbury steak for supper!” he cried.

“Ooh! Really?!” Tohka’s eyes lit up. She waved and ran off to the apartment building. “And give me a fried egg on top, too!”

He shooed her away in exasperated assent and watched her go.

“...You do seem too accustomed to handling women,” Mana said, half glaring at him.

Shido pretended he hadn’t heard that and slipped through the gates of the Itsuka house. He put his hand on the doorknob and opened the door.

“—Welcome home, *Big Bro*.” Kotori was waiting for him in the entryway in casual clothes (the ribbons in her hair black, of course), and she put a peculiar emphasis on the *Big Bro* as she greeted him. She had gone ahead of them on *Fraxinus* in order to welcome their guest.

“H-hey, I’m home,” he replied, raising a hand slightly, his forehead sweating under the indescribable pressure he felt.

Kotori deliberately shifted her gaze to Mana at his right. “Oh my! And who is this?”

A standard question. Which was no surprise. It would have been strange for Kotori to have known about what happened on the street earlier since she had (supposedly) been in the house all this time.

“O-oh... We just met outside. She’s—,” Shido started, but Mana pushed ahead of him.

“Are you a member of this family?! You have taken such good care of my brother!” she said, beaming, and grabbed Kotori’s hand, half forcing her into a vigorous handshake.

Strangely, Kotori shrank back and started to sweat. “Brother? You mean Shido?”

“Yes! I’m Mana Takamiya! I’m his younger sister!”

Kotori exhaled through her nose, shook Mana’s hand off, and indicated the interior of the house. “Well, come in anyway. You can tell me all about it.”

“Yes!” Mana replied energetically and followed her.

“...Aah.” He couldn’t help but feel that this was going to be a whole lot of trouble. He sighed before slipping his shoes off and following the girls into the living room.

Tea and sweet treats were already laid out on the table when he got there, and Kotori and Mana were sitting facing each other. Kotori jerked her chin to indicate that he should sit next to Mana, and so he did. It felt somehow like a parent-teacher conference at school.

“Now, I’d love to ask you a few things.”

“All right!” Mana replied, cheerful.

“Mana, was it? So you say you’re...Shido’s little sister?”

“That’s exactly correct.” Mana nodded.

Kotori flicked up the stick of the Chupa Chups in her mouth as she continued, seeming dubious of her reaction. “I’m Kotori Itsuka. I’m also Shido’s little sister.”

“...?” Mana cocked her head to one side. “Oh! Then would that mean that you’re...my older sister...?!”

“No!”

“Oh! Excuse me. I’m sorry, Kotori. I just assumed you were the older one.”

“You are *not* my sister, okay?!” Kotori raised her voice, which was unusual for her in commander mode. Surprised, Shido turned his gaze on her, and she cleared her throat.

“Oh, ha-ha! I simply assumed there was a sister of whom I have no memory.”

“Honestly...” Kotori ran her fingers through her hair with a sigh. She had apparently been seriously knocked off her stride. “But...sister, hmm?” She scowled at Mana.

Normally, if out of the blue, a person said she was your sister, you would never believe it. But Shido’s personal circumstances made it impossible to definitively state that she was not. He had no memory of any sister other than Kotori, but he wasn’t actually related to the Itsuka family by blood. They had raised him as a member of the family ever since his real mother abandoned him when he was little.

So he couldn’t say for sure that Mana was totally lying or telling random stories. Given that he didn’t remember his childhood, she might very well have been his real little sister. Although it was a bit hard to swallow that the younger Mana would remember that childhood where they had been torn apart when his own memories were so hazy.

“Umm, Mana,” he began. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes! What is it, Brother?” Mana replied so energetically, so thoroughly delighted, that she practically leaped out of her seat.

Kotori snorted with displeasure for some reason.

“Um. Sorry, but I don’t remember you at all...”

“Well, that’s no wonder.” Mana crossed her arms and bobbed her head up and down.

He swallowed hard before asking the question that most concerned him. “I wanted to ask you one thing... Your mom, where is she now?”

Yes. If Mana was Shido’s real sister, then she would have to know the mother who had abandoned him.

However...

“No idea,” she admitted with a blank face.

“Huh?” He frowned. Had Mana actually been abandoned herself, after he was?

Perhaps guessing at his thoughts from the look on his face, she shook her head from side to side. “Oh! No, that’s not it. Not at all. That’s not what I—”

She smiled, embarrassed, and took a sip of the tea in front of her before continuing.

“The truth is, I don’t have a single memory of the past.”

“...What did you say?” Kotori asked, sounding deeply suspicious. She adjusted her position, turned to Mana, and opened her mouth once more. “The past? How far back exactly?”

“Hmm, right. Well, I do remember the last two or three years, but before that’s a little...”

“Two or three years... So then, how do you know Shido’s your brother?” Kotori asked, and Mana pulled out the silver locket around her neck to show them the faded photograph inside. A picture of a young Shido and Mana.

“Is this...me?” Shido asked in surprise.

Kotori had a doubtful look on her face. “Hang on a second. Shido’s around ten years old here. He was already living with us then.”

“Oh... Now that you mention it.” He tapped his face. But the fact remained that the boy in this picture looked like none other than himself.

“Is that so? There are strange things in this world, hmm?”

“Strange? Are you sure it isn’t just someone else who looks like him? ... Although it really *does* look like him.”

“No, there’s no mistake. He’s my brother.”

“How can you be so sure?” Kotori asked.

“It’s that—the bond between brother and sister!” Mana pounded her chest proudly.

“...” Kotori shrugged like there was no talking to this girl and let out a long

sigh. For some reason, she looked almost relieved, at least a little.

Mana lowered her eyes, deeply moved, as she continued. “Oh, I was also surprised indeed. It was actually a shock. When I saw him, I felt this, hmm, zap of electricity.”

“Huh? This isn’t some cliché love-at-first-sight sitch.”

“Oh! So this is love at first sight? Kotori, please let me have him.”

“As if!” Kotori shouted reflexively, before coming to herself with a gasp and deliberately clearing her throat. “Anyway. I’m not exactly convinced by your inadequate reasons. First of all. Shido’s part of *my* family now. And you want to go dragging him out of here—”

“But I have no intention of doing that,” Mana replied.

“Huh?” Kotori’s eyes widened.

“I cannot begin to express my appreciation to the people of this household for welcoming my dear brother as family. If he is happy, then I am more than satisfied with that.” Mana went around the table and took Kotori’s hand again.

“Mmph.” Kotori pinched her lips together, looking uncomfortable. “Hmm... Well, so long as you understand.”

“Yes. My memories are hazy, but I do remember that my brother went off somewhere. I was sad, but more than that, I was anxious about whether or not he was well. So now that I see that he is living a good life, I’m extremely glad. And he has such an adorable small sister, as well.” Mana smiled.

Kotori’s cheeks flushed, and she looked away awkwardly. “Wh-why would you say—?”

“But of course,” Mana interrupted. “You’re no match for his *real* younger sister.”

“...”

Shido felt like he heard an electrified crackle rip through the air.

“H-hey, Kotori?” he said, but it seemed that she wasn’t listening.

As she wrestled the twitching muscles in her cheeks under control, a very

strained smile rose up on her lips. “Huh... Is that so?”

“Oh, well, most certainly. Blood is thicker than water.”

“But they do say that a neighbor nearby’s better than family far away,” Kotori noted.

Although she had been all smiles thus far, Mana’s forehead twitched. A beat later, she released Kotori’s hand and slammed her own on the table. “Oh! Ha-ha... But consider this. When it comes right down to it, there is a comfort to be found in a sister who shares his blood. After all, they do say that the child is the father of the man, yes?”

“Hngh. M-mm-hmm. But the thing is, you know, even if you’re not related, it’s all about the time you spend together.”

“Oh dear, but in the end, a stranger is still a stranger. On this point, his real sister is his blood relation. We share the same blood! The sister index standard value is simply on a different level!” Mana cried in a high-pitched voice.

Sister index. This was a phrase he hadn’t really heard before.

“Blood, blood, blood. Can’t you talk about anything else?” Kotori retorted, without the slightest hesitation. “Adopted or not, I’ve been his little sister for over ten years! It’s pretty obvious who’s got the higher sister index!”

“You make me laugh!” Mana cried. “Siblings ripped apart in childhood are crossing time to be reunited here! Is that not moving?! Time is nothing in the face of a true bond!”

“Shut up! Blood is nothing!” Kotori shouted. “His real sister can’t marry him now, can she?!”

““Huh...?”” Shido and Mana yelped in harmony. He felt somehow like something very strange had just been said.

Kotori’s eyes grew wide, and she seemed flustered as she pounded the table to apparently try and distract them. “A-anyway! I’m his sister now!”

“What?! It’s obvious his real sister is more powerful!”

“Powerful? What? That’s got nothing to do with this!”

“O-okay, calm down, both of you.” Shido tried to talk them down, perspiring, while Kotori and Mana whirled to face him at the same time.

“Shido, you—!”

“Which faction do you belong to: real sister or adopted sister?!”

“H-heeah?!” he squeaked, faced with this sudden and unexpected question. “N-no... I mean, faction...?”

““ ...””

Kotori and Mana stared hard at him. It was very easy to see that whichever he chose, nothing good would come of it. He racked his brain to try and find a way to dodge the subject.

“O-oh right.” He clapped his hands suddenly. “Mana?”

“Yes?” Mana looked at him with wide eyes, puzzled.

“You said you don’t remember the past, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. And?”

“So then, where are you living now? I mean, you can’t live with your family, right?”

“Ohhh... Mm.” Mana had been crisp and clear in her responses, but now she faltered for the first time. “W-well, you know.”

“Do I know...?”

“Er. I guess I work somewhere with employee housing.”

“You work somewhere?” He frowned. “Mana, how *old* are you? You’re about the same age as Kotori, right? What about school?”

Although Kotori herself was the commander of a secret organization and all. But she did go to school at least.

“Th-that’s... Umm.” Mana looked away, uncomfortable. “I-I’ll visit again soon!”

“Huh? H-hey...,” he protested as she raced away like a startled rabbit. “Wh-what was that...?”

He scratched his cheek and stared vacantly at the door through which Mana had disappeared.

Kotori stood up from the seat across from him and, for some reason, collected the teacup that Mana had used.



The next day, the familiar school chimes rang in his ears. The hands of the clock pointed at 8:30. It was time for morning homeroom to start. The classmates who had been chatting happily around him began to take their seats.

“Huh?” In the midst of this, Shido appeared to be at a loss, having gotten to his desk earlier.

Even though the bell had rung, there was no sign of Kurumi.

Tohka whirled her head around, questioningly, with apparently the same thought. “Mm,” she said. “That Kurumi’s late on her second day!”

“—She’s not coming,” came a quiet voice from Shido’s left. Origami turned only her eyes toward Tohka as she spoke.

“Mm? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Kurumi Tokisaki is not coming to school anymore.”

“Huh? You mean—,” Shido started as the classroom door clattered open and Ms. Tama came in, carrying the attendance book in both hands. The class representative immediately gave the signal to the students to stand up and bow. “Whoops.”

Although he was curious about Origami’s statement, he couldn’t exactly ignore the order. He stood up and bowed together with everyone else and then sat down again.

“Good morning, everyone. It’s time to take attendance,” Tama said and opened the attendance book before reading out the students’ names in order.

“Tokisaki.”

When she got to Kurumi, there was no reply.

“Hmm? Is Tokisaki not here today? Oh goodness. I thought I told you all to make sure you contact me if you’re going to be absent.” Tama puffed out her cheeks in a pout as she moved to make a note in the book.

“Here.” A clear voice suddenly rang out from the back of the classroom.

“Kurumi?” He looked back, and his eyes grew wide. Yes. Standing there, having opened the rear door quietly, was Kurumi, her hand raised as a gentle smile crossed her face.

“Tokisaki. You’re late.”

“I do apologize. I felt slightly ill while I was en route to school.”

“Hmm? A-are you okay? Do you need to go to the nurse’s office?”

“No, I’m quite all right. I’m so sorry to have worried you.” Kurumi bowed and walked over to her desk on light feet.

“Huh. So you *are* here, after all.” Shido let out a sigh of relief and turned his eyes on Origami, who had delivered the ominous pronouncement. “Uh...?”

Her forehead was creased the barest hint, and she was staring at Kurumi. It wasn’t that the change in her expression was so dramatic. But for some reason, Shido more or less understood that Origami was completely stunned.

“Ori...gami?” he called to her in a quiet voice.

The tips of her fingers twitched, and she pulled her gaze away from Kurumi.

“All right. That’s all for today’s announcements.” Tama quickly brought homeroom to a close and left the room.

In that moment, the phone he had tucked away in his pocket began to ring cheerily. The timing was very bad. If it had started ten seconds earlier, his phone might have gotten confiscated.

He looked at the screen. Displayed there was the name Kotori Itsuka.

“Hello? Kotori?”

“Hey, Shido.”

“Why are you calling me? I would’ve been in trouble if you’d been ten seconds earlier.”

“Oh dear. My most excellent brother always says to put phones on vibrate at school.”

“Hngh.”

“Well, fine. Anyway, Shido, the situation’s not great. Even speaking generously, it’s the worst.”

Shido gasped at her pained tone, so unlike Kotori. “Did something happen?”

“Yes. We’re not even sure what to do over here. I never dreamed this could actually happen.”

His anxiety only grew at the heaviness he heard in her words. He cupped a hand to his mouth to keep his voice from echoing across the classroom. “What exactly happened?”

“Well, the truth is...”

Someone grabbed his shoulder.

He looked up and saw Kurumi, head cocked to one side, a curious look on her face.

“Whatever are you doing, Shido?”

“...! O-oh,” he said. “Just a phone call. Can you give me a sec?”

She produced an exaggerated look of surprise before bowing her head. “You will have to excuse me. I had no intention of intruding.”

“Oh... It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” He flashed her a smile and turned his focus back to the phone. “So what, Kotori? What exactly—?”

“Hang on, Shido,” Kotori cut him off, abruptly serious. *“Who were you just talking with?”*

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Just now, you were talking with someone. I’m asking you who it was. Tohka? Origami Tobiichi? Hiroto Tonomachi?” She peppered him with questions like she was interrogating a criminal.

“Wh-whoa. You don’t need to get so angry,” he grumbled in reply. “Someone just started talking to me is all.”

"Just answer me," she said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Shido said the name with a sigh. "Kurumi."

Kotori suddenly fell silent.

"Kotori? What's wrong?" he asked, confused.

After talking to someone on the other end of the line, she said to him, *"Shido. Go straight to the physics prep room at lunch. There's something I want to show you."*

"The physics prep room? Why do I have to go there again?"

"Doesn't matter. You make sure you come," she said, then hung up.

"Wh-what the hell...?" he muttered, raising an eyebrow high on his forehead.



At 12:20, the bell rang, signaling the end of fourth period. The students bowed, and the teacher had barely left the classroom when preparations for lunch began.

Tohka was no exception. Her eyes glittered like she'd been waiting for this moment, and she slid her desk up against his.

"Shido! Let's eat!" she said, pulling her lunch box out of its bag.

Shido frowned. Normally, a desk would also close in from the left to fuse into three bodies. But Origami wasn't moving her desk that day. Thinking this strange, he glanced in her direction.

She had an unreadable expression on her face and was staring at her hands.

"...?" He was curious, true, but Origami was free to have lunch whenever she wanted. He was about to pull his own lunch out of his bag when his hand stopped. "Oh, right."

He'd been told to go to the physics prep room over lunch. Although he hadn't been given a specific time, this was Kotori he was dealing with. He got the feeling there'd be some kind of penalty if he was late.

"Sorry, Tohka. I actually have a thing to do today."

"Mm?" Tohka turned a blank face at him, her hand already on the lid of her

lunch box. “Where are you going? I’ll come, too!”

“Oh...” He scratched his cheek awkwardly. The fact that Kotori had told him to come to the physics prep room almost certainly meant whatever she wanted him for involved Ratatoskr. He couldn’t assume that everything they discussed would be appropriate for Tohka’s ears.

“Sorry. You can’t today. Go ahead and eat without me. Okay?” He clapped his hands together apologetically and set out toward the hallway.

“Ah! Shido...”

He heard her sad voice from behind and felt saddled by extreme guilt. He shook his head and stepped out into the hallway.

He moved through the building until he finally arrived at the physics prep room. When he knocked on the door, it was yanked open as if someone had been standing behind it waiting impatiently for him.

“You’re late.” Kotori, in her junior high uniform, popped her head out, her lips pursed with displeasure.

“I’m not. I didn’t even eat before I came.”

“Whatever, just get inside. We don’t have a lot of time.” She jerked her chin to invite him into the room.

It was then that he realized she didn’t have the usual visitor badge pinned to her chest. When he looked closely, he saw that she wasn’t wearing the visitor slippers but the indoor shoes from her junior high school.

“Wait. Did you come today without telling anyone?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t have been a problem if I’d come after school, but a junior high student can’t be showing up at a high school at this hour.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess.” He nodded, convinced, and turned his face toward the interior of the room.

The very person he’d expected was sitting in the swivel chair in the back: Ratatoskr analyst and Raizen High School physics teacher Reine Murasame.

“...Mm, so you’re here, Shin.” As usual, she called him by the nickname that

had absolutely nothing to do with his actual name (and he was tired of correcting her by now). She indicated the seat next to her. He was sure this meant he was supposed to sit there.

So he sat himself down.

Kotori settled into the chair beside him as if to squeeze him in... It was the exact same placement as in the dating sim training two months earlier.

“So then what did you want to show me?” he asked, and Kotori indicated the monitor on the desk.

Reine moved the mouse in her hand, and a video started to play on the screen. Girls with colorful hair popped up one after the other before displaying the title “Fall in Love: My Little Shido 2—Are You Afraid of Love?”

“A sequel?!” A shiver ran up Shido’s spine.

“...Oh, wrong window. I meant to pull up something else.” Reine moved the mouse once more. The screen abruptly went dark.

“H-hang on a minute! What was that just now?!”

“You’ll go bald if you stress about every little thing, Shido,” Kotori replied, sighing with irritation.

“This isn’t a ‘little thing’! I’ve had enough of the dating sims—” He cut himself off. A new video had appeared on the dark screen.



For some reason, Kurumi and a girl with a ponytail were standing facing each other in a narrow alley.

“Hmm? Is that...Mana?”

Indeed, the girls in the video were Kurumi and Mana.

“Yes. This is from yesterday. Take a good look at the area.”

“Wha—?” Shido furrowed his brow. In this utterly ordinary corner of the residential area, he could see several people clad in mechanical armor. “The... AST?” He choked the name out, half-stunned.

AST. Anti-Spirit team. Superhumans in mechanical armor tasked with annihilating the Spirits, dangerous creatures who wronged humanity and the world. He’d seen them any number of times before. There was no way he could mistake them here.

His classmate Origami Tobiichi was also on the edge of the screen. And they were all equipped with larger-than-life weapons. Just like when a Spirit appeared together with a spacequake.

“Yes. For some reason, we caught an AST signal in town out of the blue. A member of my crew dispatched a camera that way just in case. I was surprised when I saw this.” Kotori crossed her legs.

“Wh-why would the AST...?”

“Because there was a Spirit, obviously,” she replied nonchalantly.

Shido swallowed hard. “But...there was no spacequake. The people around them didn’t evacuate, did they? If the Spirit ran wild—”

“...Well, they were confident they could take her down before she did,” Reine explained.

“...!” He gasped.

There was still something he didn’t understand. The girl who insisted she was his younger sister was standing there for some reason. Mana Takamiya.

“Wh-why is Mana—?” he started to say, just as the Mana on-screen glowed briefly. White mechanical armor sprang up around her. “Wh—?”

It was a little different from what the rest of the AST was wearing, but there was no doubt that it was a wiring suit.

As if in response, Kurumi threw her arms out, and the shadow at her feet crawled up her body to form a dress. A frilly band on her head. A corset tightly binding her torso. A skirt that was all ruffles and lace. All of it a black reminiscent of darkness, covered in a film of light that was red like blood. Finally, her hair was pulled up to the sides, in two uneven bunches for some reason. Almost like the long and short hands of a clock.

“Astral. Dress,” Shido said, dumbfounded.

Astral Dress. A Spirit’s castle, her impregnable fortress. A divine film to protect her.

Kurumi raised a hand above her head. The shadow crawled up over her once more to concentrate in her palm. And then she danced up into the air.

“Huh?” He let out a dazed cry, unable to understand what was happening on-screen. But a second later, he got it.

Mana had launched a beam of light from the unit on her shoulders, piercing Kurumi’s stomach.

Kurumi shuddered.

It looked less like she was shivering in fear and more like she was letting out a high-pitched laugh. Why?

The rest was over in a few seconds. Kurumi moved to counterattack, but before she could, Mana’s attack shot through her. Bright red blood splashed across the narrow alley. When Kurumi fell faceup on the road, motionless, Mana brought her sword of light down on her neck.

Kurumi’s life had been plucked before she even had the chance to mount an attack on Mana.

“Ngh...!” He instinctively held his head and averted his eyes.

Because the scene was simply too unreal, it took him a second to really feel it. He finally felt nausea rising up in his throat by the time Mana had finished dissecting Kurumi. Even though it wasn’t cold, his teeth chattered, and his body

shivered.

A person—well, not a person in the strictest sense, but a being that looked just like a person had been killed. And he had witnessed it, albeit on video. No one would reproach him for this reaction.

On-screen, Mana stretched her neck from side to side, looking like she had just finished a mundane task. The CR unit on her body vanished, and she was back in the outfit she'd been wearing before.

Shido frowned. He felt an absurd sense of disconnect. He was this shaken up just watching it through a screen, no smell or sensation reaching him, while Mana herself looked as though she felt nothing at all.

No guilt.

No panic.

No despair.

Not only that, not even any sense of accomplishment.

Like this was an extremely routine task. She was simply accustomed to it, just going through the motions of a task she'd done countless times. That's how indifferent Mana was to Kurumi's death.

"What...?" He gasped, after he finally managed to push back the nausea.

"...Just as you saw. Yesterday, Kurumi Tokisaki was killed by AST member Mana Takamiya. Not badly injured or in critical condition. Her existence was completely, utterly, without a shadow of a doubt eliminated."

"I-it's." Shido couldn't string any words to that beginning. After all, he had only just seen it with his own eyes. Kurumi had been killed. There was no way she was coming back from that.

He gasped. His attention had been wholly taken up by the shocking footage, so he'd forgotten. But there was a very obvious contradiction here.

"But Kurumi came to school today like nothing happened," he pointed out, and Reine and Kotori crossed their arms perfectly in sync.

"...Yes. We don't understand that, either."

“When you said you were talking to Kurumi, I thought you were starting to hallucinate,” Kotori said, half-jokingly, as she shrugged.

Shido couldn’t react to anything resembling a joke at the moment. His mind was racing as he opened his mouth again. “So then she...came back to life from that state?”

He glanced at the screen. The AST members had just started cleaning up Kurumi’s body and the traces of blood. He saw Origami among them and finally understood her reaction that morning.

Of course she was surprised. The girl she had watched die the day before had turned up in class that morning, totally unfazed.

“I’m not sure. We can’t say anything at the current stage.”

“I...guess.” Although the video was still flickering in the back of his mind, he managed to calm his breathing and his racing heart. He unclenched the hands he had clenched at some point.

Kotori recrossed her legs at the same time. “But, well, at any rate.” She unfolded her arms and thrust a finger out at him. “As long as Kurumi is alive, we continue the mission. You have tomorrow off for the school founding day, right? Ask her on a date. She’s coming at you pretty hard, so if we’re lucky, we might be able to seal her power in one go.”

“...Huh?” Shido could feel his eyes widening, and his throat closed over. “W-wait. This happened, and you’re still—”

“Shut it.” She cut off his protests. “It’s *because* this happened. Like I said before, Kurumi’s abilities are unknown. It’s plenty possible this is some kind of conditional regeneration or a one-time miracle, and the next time she’s killed, it’ll be game over.”

“Unh...”

She was exactly right. Kurumi was okay right now (although this was also weird), but they didn’t know if she’d come back to life again the next time.

“We have to strike as soon as possible. Origami Tobiichi knows that Kurumi’s alive. She’s probably already told the AST. And Mana Takamiya, too, of course.”

“...!” Shido scowled at this name. It made him remember the scene he’d just witnessed. Even though he had only met her yesterday, he loathed that the girl who called herself his little sister would kill Kurumi with that kind of emotionless, accustomed manner. “...Roger. I’ll try.”

Before Kurumi was killed again.

Before Mana killed her again.

“—I’ll make Kurumi fall head over heels for me.”

This was serious stuff, but when he put his decision into words, it did sound a bit ridiculous.



After watching Shido leave the classroom out of the corner of her eye, Origami stood up slowly. She was curious about where he was going without eating lunch and even leaving Tohka Yatogami behind, but there was something more important she had to do.

She slipped past a dejected Tohka and walked toward the desk of her target.

“I need to talk to you,” she said, casting a cold gaze on the owner of that desk, Kurumi Tokisaki.

Kurumi tipped her head exaggeratedly to one side and opened her right eye wide. “Origami...was it? You need to speak to me?”

“Come,” Origami replied curtly and stalked out of the classroom.

Kurumi placed a finger on her chin in a display of hesitation, but when Origami was about to step out into the hallway, she stood up hurriedly from her desk.

“P-please wait a moment. What is the matter?”

“...” Origami glanced back and saw a girl desperately chasing after her, pumping arms and legs so slender they looked like they might break if she touched them. Somehow, this cute girl seemed to rouse a desire in other people to protect her. However, Origami felt nothing but a strange revulsion.

She didn’t slow her brisk pace and kept walking toward the door to the roof. She had brought Shido here before. People generally never came this way,

which was useful when you had something to discuss that you didn't want anyone else to overhear.

"Haah... Haah..." Kurumi panted as she leaned against the guardrail after climbing the stairs all in one go.

Once her breathing was more or less under control a minute or so later, she opened her mouth, eyebrows drawn down in a show of concern. "Um. What do you need? I haven't gotten the chance to eat my lunch yet."

"Why are you alive?" Origami demanded, the look on her face not changing in the slightest.

"What...?"

"You died yesterday."

Yes. Origami had seen it herself. Mana had cut off her limbs and crushed her head, completely annihilating her. On Ryouko's orders, Origami and the rest of the AST had been posted in the area in case Mana failed to take down the Spirit, although Mana herself hadn't been too happy about that decision.

"..." Kurumi raised the end of one eyebrow. She looked Origami's face over with the eye exposed to the elements.

And then...

"—Ohhh. Ohhh. You. It's you. You were there with Mana yesterday."

"...!" Origami jumped back from the spot. She had no logical reason for this. Her brain had sensed an indescribable feeling that triggered her fight-or-flight mode.

"Oh my! An excellent reaction. Marvelous. Truly fantastic. However..."

"...!" Origami gasped. Someone was grabbing her ankles.

She looked down and saw that Kurumi's shadow had stretched out beneath her feet, and two thin white hands had sprouted from it. The shadow was steadily getting larger, crawling up from the ground to the wall. Countless hands popped out of the wall now and clasped tightly around Origami's arms and neck from behind.

“Ngh!” She struggled, but the thin fingers didn’t budge. In fact, they tightened their grip, pinning her to the wall.

“Kee-hee-hee! Hee-hee! That’s no use. It’s pointless to struggle!” Kurumi laughed, a twisted smile plastered onto her face, unimaginable on the Kurumi of a few seconds earlier. Just the sound of her voice made something cold spread in the pit of Origami’s stomach.

“I do appreciate all your efforts yesterday. Were you able to clean everything up nice and neat? The. Pieces. Of. My. Body.”

Kurumi brushed her hair back as she approached Origami. Instantly, Origami caught sight of the left eye that had been hidden by her bangs. An inorganic gold. This eye seemed impossible for the organ of a living creature, and in it, she could see twelve characters and two needles. Almost like a clock.

“Was it not the teensiest bit careless to make contact with me all by yourself when you knew what I am? And you were even kind enough to prepare a location away from prying eyes.”

“...!”

Kurumi was right. Maybe Origami had gotten the wrong idea after seeing her disappointingly abrupt end the previous day. Or maybe she’d had the wrong idea because they were at school. Either way, it was Origami’s mistake. She always insisted the Spirits were a threat, but in some part of her mind, she’d let her guard down.

“What...do you...want?” she wheezed, even as her throat was crushed.

“Hee-hee-hee!” The corners of Kurumi’s mouth slid farther up. “I was not lying when I said I wished to attend school at least once. But yes, I suppose my main objective is really...”

She paused for a beat and brought her face in so close that Origami could feel her breath.

“...Shido.”

“...!!” Origami was stunned into silence.

Kurumi’s smile grew even more delighted. “He’s wonderful. He’s amazing. He

looks truly *delicious*. Ah, how I yearn for him. How my heart longs for him. I want him. I want his power. I came to this school to obtain him, to become one with him.”

Origami shivered in fear and broke into a cold sweat across her back. She never expected that a Spirit would appear targeting a single person—and that it would be Shido of all people.

However, this gave rise to a question in her mind. What Kurumi had just said. “His power.” *What exactly does that...?*

“...!” She gasped at the sudden sensation of Kurumi’s fingers seductively trailing across her body.



“Origami. Origami Tobiichi. You are also very *good*. You look extremely delicious. Ah, I simply cannot stand it. I just can’t. I want to eat you up right now.” Her cheeks were flushed, and her breathing ragged as her left hand crawled along Origami’s chest, while her right wandered up her legs, threatening to slide into her skirt.

“...! Don’t touch me.”

“Heh-heh. You mustn’t be so cold and cruel.” Kurumi stretched out a long tongue and drew out a line of saliva on Origami’s cheek.

“Ngh...”

“Aah, aah. But I can’t. I simply can’t. It’s very, very vexing, but I must put off these pleasures until later.” Kurumi shook her head dramatically and pulled away from Origami, leaving just a kiss on her neck. “I’ll save you for after Shido. Please make sure you become even more delicious.” She turned on her heel and trotted down the stairs.

When Origami could no longer see the other girl, the hands restraining her were sucked into the shadows.

“...! *Koff! Koff!*” She crumpled to the ground.

The shadow in the hallway shrank toward the stairs, as if to return to its master.

“Shi...do—” Origami didn’t understand why, but for some reason, Kurumi was after Shido.

She had to tell HQ about this right now, but she didn’t know if they would believe her that the Spirit was targeting a single person.

In that case, Origami would have to protect him herself. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.



“...Mm.” Still seated, Tohka raised her face and looked at the clock above the blackboard. It was almost the end of lunch break.

Her stomach growled. She hadn’t had a bite to eat since breakfast that morning, and being the glutton that she was, she was already so hungry that

she felt dizzy. But she still didn't open her lunch. Shido had said to go ahead and eat, but now that she knew how much better food tasted when she ate with him, she somehow couldn't bring herself to do that.

"Shido..."

Those students who had left the classroom to go hang out somewhere else were already starting to trickle back into the room. The quickest among them were getting ready for their next class. But there was no sign of Shido.

"Unh... Unh..." For some reason, her eyes grew hot, and it was getting harder to breathe through her nose. She sniffled and wiped her eyes. The sleeve of her uniform came back a little damp.

"Huh? What's wrong, Tohka?"

"What? You still haven't eaten?"

"Class is about to start!"

Three girls who had eaten outside had no sooner entered the classroom than they were calling out to Tohka. They often concerned themselves with her. She was pretty sure their names were Ai, Mai, and Mii. They said they became friends because of how similar their names were.

"Whoa! What's going on, Tohka? You're crying!"

"Did someone do something to you?!"

"Hey! Who did this?! Show yourself!"

They surrounded Tohka in a magnificent combination, speaking all at once. The boys in the classroom flinched.

"N-no! No one did anything!" Tohka hurriedly waved her hands, and the three girls got to work on her.

"What? You sure?"

"So then what's wrong?"

"Allergies? Is it allergies?"

Tohka shook her head back and forth and lowered her eyes to the lunch box before her. "Shido's still not back. And I was just thinking how I haven't gotten

to talk to him hardly at all today, and then I don't know why, this..." Large tears spilled from her eyes.

"Ah! Tohka! It's okay. If it's too hard, you don't have to say anything else!"

"But, like, that Itsuka is something else! I can't believe he'd make a cute girl cry!"

"Cut his head off and feed him to the pigs!"

The three shouted, getting excessively excited.

Tohka stopped them once more in a panic. "I-it's not Shido's fault! It's just, I'm..." Pulling words from her meager vocabulary, she explained that Shido was not to blame and that the reason was that she was used to having him around.

Hearing this, Ai, Mai, and Mii groaned.

"So you're saying that for you personally, talking with Itsuka, eating with him, and hanging out with him on top of that makes you super happy?" Ai asked to confirm, and Tohka bobbed her head up and down.

"Ngh! It's just so pure. A hundred punches won't be enough for Itsuka." Mai pretended to wipe away theatrical tears, and Tohka's eyes grew wide.

"I'll go get the iron maiden and the wooden horse from the shed at home then," Mii said with a serious face, and Tohka blinked at her.

The three girls slapped their knees with a "Wohkay!"

"If it's for Tohka, I'll pitch in and help!" Ai announced and pulled two pieces of paper out of her bag.

"A-Ai, those are...!"

"Yes. Tickets for the Tengu Quintet Aquarium! We have tomorrow off for school founding day, right? Tohka! You can have these. Go with Itsuka tomorrow!"

"Ai! I thought you were going to go with Kishiwada—," Mai started, and Ai checked her with a hand.

"Not another word! You'll make Tohka feel like she has to turn this down," Ai told her, and Mai and Mii made a gesture like they were holding back tears as

they each clasped one of Tohka's shoulders.

"Tohka! Please don't say a word. Just take them!"

"Do this for Ai! Do it for Ai as a woman!"

"M-mm...?" Tohka was reluctant to destroy whatever mood was happening and meekly accepted the tickets.

Ai collapsed on the spot instantly. "Tohka... May you find...happiness...with Itsuka."

"Ah! Aiiiiii!"

"Stay with us! This isn't the end of the world!"

"...?! ...?!" Tohka was baffled and whirled her head from side to side, still holding the tickets. Maybe she had done something she wasn't supposed to. Tears filled her eyes, and she pushed the tickets back into Ai's hand.

"Aaaaaaah!" Ai came back to life.

"Ai!"

"It's a miracle!"

"Wait. No, no." Suddenly calm, Ai handed the tickets back to Tohka. "You can't give them back, Tohka. I'm telling you to take these and invite Itsuka out."

"I-invite him out...?"

"Yup. You get out there on a date tomorrow."

"...!" Tohka opened her eyes wide. Date. She was pretty sure that was when a girl and a boy went to hang out together.

Ah, this was very good.

Now that she was thinking about it, she hadn't gone on a date with Shido in forever. A date at last. That seemed like a terribly wonderful thing.

But there was one problem.

"I—I ask him...?" she said, a nervous sweat popping up on her brow.

"Yeah. Just do it, just get in there. It's good for the girl to ask sometimes, too."

“B-but...what if he says no?” Tohka asked anxiously, and the three girls shrugged and sighed.

“Okay, okay. First of all, I don’t think he’s going to, but if he does dare to say no, he’ll be punished with a public shaming. But I’ll teach you my special secret techniques.”

“S-secret techniques...?”

“Yup. Boys are basically motivated by sexy times. If you ask him like this, you’ll have the power to overthrow an entire country.”

“O-oh, I don’t need to do that...”

“It’s fine; you’re fine. So first...”

Tohka listened to Ai’s secret techniques, nodding intently.



When the last period, homeroom, was over, Shido got up from his seat and immediately headed for Kurumi. He felt Tohka’s bashful eyes on his right side and Origami’s absolute-zero demon eyes on his left, but he ignored them somehow and kept moving.

“Kurumi, you got a sec?” he asked, pointed toward the hallway, and started walking.

She followed him meekly.

Once they’d walked out of earshot, he turned back to her.

“Shido. What is it that you need?”

“R-right. I know this is sudden, but... Are you free tomorrow?”

“Yes. I don’t have any plans.”

“So then, um, if you’d like, maybe I could show you around the neighborhood?”

“Hmm? So you mean...”

“W-well...put simply...a date, I guess.”

Instantly, Kurumi’s face lit up. “Do you mean it?!”

“Y-yeah. Are you interested?”

“Of course. It would be an honor.”

“Yeah? Okay then.” He paused thoughtfully. “Let’s meet in front of Tengu Station at ten thirty tomorrow morning.”

“All right. I’m looking forward to it!” She beamed at him.

“Okay, see you then!” He raised a hand in a wave and returned to the classroom.

When he opened the door, Origami was standing there. “Eep...?!”

“What were you talking about with her?” she asked in a quiet, inflectionless voice, as she stared at him with sharp eyes.

“U-uh, nothing.”

“Answer me. This is extremely—”

If she pressed him any further, he might let it slip. He slid past her, ran over to his desk, and grabbed his bag. “I-I’m in a hurry, so I’ll see you later, Origami! Tohka! Come on, let’s go!” He fled before she could interrogate him.

“Mm? Uh, uh-huh!” Tohka chased after him.

“Haah... Haah...” After running for a while, he checked that Origami wasn’t following them before slowing down a bit.

“What was that about, Shido?!”

“O-oh. Anyway, um... Should we get going?”

“Mm. Okay,” Tohka agreed, seeming hesitant.

He thought this was a bit weird, but, well, it wasn’t anything to interrogate her over. He headed down the hallway, changed shoes at the entryway, and stepped onto the school grounds.

“Ah. Uuuuuuuuummmmmmm, Shido!” Tohka had been unusually quiet, but now she called out to him in a strangely excited tone.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Tohka?”

“Oh. Ohhh. Um... Yeah.” She dug around in her bag, and then whirled her

head around to check their surroundings before looking down, her face turning red.

“Wh-what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“N-nothing...!” she shouted, looking anywhere but at him, and trotted off ahead as if to lead him. “Let’s hurry back to the house!”

“What the...?” Scratching his head at her odd behavior, he set out on the road home behind her. He didn’t know why, but she was clearly avoiding looking at him the whole way.

Soon, they arrived at the Itsuka house and the special Spirit apartment building rising up next to it.

“Okay. See you later. You’re having supper at our house again today, right?” Shido said good-bye as usual and raised his hand. And then stopped.

The reason was simple. Tohka was heading not for the apartment building but toward his house.

“Tohka? You’re not going to change?”

“I-I’m fine, so just hurry and open the door!”

“Uh... Sure, fine, I guess.”

She would come over to eat supper anyway, so there wasn’t really a problem. He pulled his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door.

“I’m home.”

The fact that the door was locked meant that Kotori wasn’t back yet, but he said this out of habit. He took his shoes off in the entryway, stepped into the house, and headed to the living room, where he tossed his bag onto the sofa and stretched lightly.

“Mm...”

Here he heard a clacking sound. Tohka had apparently locked the door again after following him into the house. Head hanging, she trudged into the living room.

“Hmm? You didn’t have to lock it, you know? Kotori’s going to be coming

home.”

“...” Rather than answering him, Tohka dropped her bag, thrust her hand into it, and pulled out what appeared to be two tickets. “Sh-Shido. If you want...um.”

She suddenly lifted her face with a gasp, as if remembering something. “O-oh yeah. I have to do this right.”

“Do what right?” He seemed confused as Tohka ran over to the living room window, flustered somehow, and yanked the thick curtains shut.

“U-uh, Tohka?”

“Wait a second! I-I’m getting ready!”

“Ready? F-for what?”

Tohka did not reply.

She pulled a sheet of paper out of her bag and set it on the table. And then she put a hand to her chest as she stared at this with a frown and rolled up the top of her skirt. This was a little trick the girls used to temporarily shorten their skirts. Tohka’s healthy thighs were gradually exposed.

“Uh, hey, Tohka?” Shido frowned, unable to figure out what she was up to, face growing hot.

Next, she loosened the school uniform ribbon around her neck and began undoing buttons on her blouse. Two... Three... All the way to the fourth one. Her pale bosom peeked out from the gap in her blouse, and he averted his eyes.

“Wh-what are you doing, Tohka?! If you’re going to change, you should—”

“Sh-Shido!” She interrupted him, put the tickets between her lips, and dropped down to her hands and knees, striking a so-called leopard pose. Her face was as red as a ripe tomato. “Heaah...”

“Wh-wh-what?! What is going on?!” he cried, completely baffled.

She took the tickets from her mouth. “Th-this isn’t working!”

He couldn’t even tell what she wanted.

She glanced at the sheet of paper on the table once more. “O-okay!” she yelled, like a battle cry, and picked up the tickets. Now she stuck them in her

exposed cleavage and then tilted her head, frowning.

She hadn't managed to get them in there properly. She leaned forward a little, pulled her breasts together with her left hand to create a valley, stuck the tickets in there, and turned her gaze on Shido.

"Wha—?!" He took a step back, feeling like he was looking at something that he very much should not be looking at.

"Shido... There."

"Y-yeah. What?"

"...D-do you want to go...on a date tomorrow?"

"Huh? A d-date?"

"Y-yeah!" She nodded and showed off the tickets in her cleavage.

So was that it? Was he supposed to take them?

If he didn't take the tickets, there was a chance she would escalate things further. He was in grade eleven, a boy in the very height of youth. It would have been a lie to say that he wasn't interested, but he really couldn't just let her continue this behavior. With sweat on his face, he stretched a trembling hand toward her chest...and plucked out the tickets, taking particular care not to touch her breasts.

"O-oh!" Her face brightened in an instant, and she stood up properly again. In the next moment, she had returned her skirt to its original length, hidden her chest, and picked up her bag.

"Tomorrow! We'll meet at ten in the morning in front of Pachiko at the station! O-okay, I'm going to go change!" She left the living room so fast she was a mere blur. She raced down the hallway, opened the front door, and dashed outside.

"Wh-what was that...?" he muttered, puzzled, and dropped his eyes to the tickets in his hand. For the aquarium. Where exactly had she gotten these?

His eyes kept going down to the piece of paper she had left on the table. *Tohka Bewitching Attack Collection* was written in a round hand. There was a numbered list below this.

1. CRAWL LIKE A LEOPARD.
2. STICK TICKETS IN BOOBS.
3. IF NEITHER OF THOSE WORKS, JUST KNOCK HIM TO THE GROUND.

He didn't really get it, but he might have actually been in danger there.

"What is this?" He shook his head, and there was another clacking sound from the entryway. He braced himself, thinking that Tohka had returned, but no. Striding into the living room was Kotori, her hair tied up in black ribbons.

"I'm home. Hmm?" She frowned, perhaps finding the gloom of the room curious. "Just what kind of indecent things are you doing that you've got the curtains closed in the middle of the day, Shido?"

"I—I wasn't doing anything!"

"Well, whatever... What's that you got there?"

"Oh," he said. "Actually, Tohka...asked me on a date."

"Wow." Kotori whistled in admiration. "*She* invited *you*? That's a good sign. When exactly? I'll back you up."

"Oh, tomorrow, but..."

"Tomorrow?" She scowled. "Hey. You've got a date with Kurumi tomorrow."

"Oh." Tohka's seductive poses had been so shocking that this fact had flown right out of his mind. He had made a date with Kurumi for the next day. "Crap. Should I go tell her no?"

"No way." She shook her head from side to side glumly. "It's obvious that her mood will plummet if you take back a date you already agreed to go on. Especially when her sadness meter's been on the rise since this morning."

"Wait. It's not exactly like I agreed..."

"What matters is what Tohka thinks. Well, we're stuck now. We'll back you up, so make sure you make both dates a success somehow."

"H-huh?! I—I can't—," he started when the phone in his pocket began to vibrate.

He looked at the screen and saw he had a call from an unknown number. Thinking this a little strange, he picked up and heard a quiet voice through the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Mm? This voice. Origami, is that you?"

"Yes." Origami indicated her agreement, briefly.

"Huh?" He was starting to perspire again. "Did I give you my number?"

She didn't respond to this and was silent for a moment before continuing.
"Tomorrow's a holiday."

"Uh, yeah? It is."

"You can't be by yourself."

"Huh?" he asked.

"Eleven in the morning," she said, her tone not changing at all. *"I'll be waiting at the fountain in the plaza in front of Tengu Station."*

"Huh?"

"For a date."

"...Uh?"

"Make sure you're there." She hung up.

...She never did answer his original question.

"Who was that?" Kotori asked.

"Uh. Origami. But like... Sh-she asked me on a...date."

"What?!" Kotori cried, her eyebrows squeezing together. "A date... Don't tell me it's for tomorrow."

"I-it...is."

She put a hand to her forehead and sighed.

Chapter 4

Triple Date

“Listen. You meet with Tohka at ten and head to the Aquarium in East Tengu. Then you make up a reason to slip out. Fraxinus will pick you up once you get outside. You’ll meet Kurumi at the station at ten thirty, go somewhere, get back to the plaza at eleven, and link up with Origami Tobiichi. At that point, you’ll have left Tohka alone for half an hour. So get back to her right away. After that, we’ll have to break it down into intervals and arrange it so none of them is alone too long. We’ll handle the timetable on our end, Shido. You just keep up the sweet talk so they don’t get angry. Our top priority is making Kurumi fall head over heels and getting all the way to a kiss. But you can’t put Tohka in a bad mood, and it won’t be great if Origami Tobiichi catches on that something’s up. You have to— Hey, are you listening?”

“...I-I’m listening.”

Whether any of this is making it into my mind is another story.

Shido cleared his throat so that she wouldn’t catch a hint of this muttering to himself, as he replied to Kotori over his earpiece.

Unable to decline the invitations from Tohka and Origami, Shido had ended up forced into a triple date. Normally, he should have focused on the Kurumi mission as his number one task, but if he reneged on his promise, Tohka’s mental state risked worsening, causing her Spirit power to flow back into her. And given that Origami was likely to barge in on his dates with Tohka and Kurumi, he couldn’t leave her out, either. The result was this grueling schedule.

“There’s no point in just listening. You have to get all this in your mind.”

“Unh...” She had read his mind. He was starting to feel hot under the collar.

“Aah. Well, fine. Basically, follow this schedule. Ready?”

“Y-yeah... Probably.” He turned his face down and looked over his outfit. He was keeping it simple in a navy polo shirt and beige chinos.

According to Kotori, “girls are subtractive in doling out style points to boys.” Since fashion beginners were bound to fail regardless of effort, his best option was the safest one, cutting a nice clean figure.

“Now, it’s just about time. Let’s start our ‘war’—a date.”

“Y-yeah.” He took a deep breath to try and calm his nerves.

He was already standing in front of the dog statue at the east exit of Tengu Station. He was pretty sure its official name was technically something else, but because it so strongly resembled the faithful Hachiko dog at Shibuya Station, locals called it Pachiko, with a mixture of fondness and contempt. It was a sad little dog. That said, because it had been placed immediately outside the station, it functioned as a meeting spot, just like the original dog statue. A fair number of people besides Shido could be seen in the environs.

“Shido!” As if parting this sea of people, Tohka’s familiar voice reached him.

He turned to look at her. She was beaming so brightly she was almost more dazzling than the sun. And she was not in the usual uniform but rather a thin tunic and shorts. This suited her so well, it seemed made to order.

“Y-you...” He gaped at her and then heard Reine’s voice over his earpiece.

“...Oh, Tohka asked me what she should wear. Not bad, right?”

“Y-yeah,” he muttered, dazed. Not only was it not bad—it was very good. For a moment, he couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“Shido?”

“Uh, oh! Sorry. I spaced out... That looks good on you. Very cute, Tohka.”

“Wha—?” Her face turned red, and she waved her hands as she shook her head before turning on her heel. “O-okay, let’s just go! C’mon! Hurry!”

“Wh-why are we in a h—?” he started to say and then ran into her walking ahead of him when she abruptly stopped. “Tohka? What’s wrong?”

“M-mm...” Her brow came together, as if she were troubled, and she looked

back. Her cheeks were still a little pink. “Shido. So where exactly should we go?”

“Huh? Aren’t we going to the aquarium?”

She suddenly looked extremely uncomfortable. She clearly didn’t know where the aquarium was.

“Ha-ha! Hang on a sec.” He pulled the tickets out of his wallet and dropped his gaze to the map on the back. “Umm? Tengu Quintet? Okay, that’s the other way.”

He pointed in the opposite direction. Tohka whirled around and glued herself behind him. She probably meant for him to start moving.

Smiling wryly, he began walking.

“...?!” He felt like he saw a familiar figure in the corner of his eye and frowned. Keeping himself facing forward, he shifted just his eyes to the left.

Origami Tobiichi was standing in front of the fountain in the plaza across the road from the station. She was in a sleeveless turtleneck and a miniskirt with a small bag hanging off her shoulder, perfectly upright, perfectly motionless. He wouldn’t have been surprised if a stranger mistook her for a mannequin.

He was pretty sure he was meeting her at eleven. It was currently five past ten. She was extremely early.

“Mm? Is something wrong, Shido?”

“N-no, nothing! Okay, let’s go, let’s go, right now, right this instant!”

It would be very bad if they stayed here too long and Origami spotted them. He made Tohka walk on his right, as if to hide behind her, and kept his face turned toward her.

“Goodness! Looks like you’ve actually learned some consideration. A girl shouldn’t walk on the side closest to the road,” Kotori said. *“Don’t take your eyes off her. Yup. That’s better. This is the kind of thing a girl really loves.”*

“O-oh yeah?” he whispered, a wry smile on his face. That wasn’t what he had intended. But, well, he’d accept that the result was all good.

Once they were out of the danger zone (Origami’s line of sight), he slowed a

bit. He wiped his forehead with his arm and exhaled at last.

“That reminds me, Shido!” Tohka called out.

“Mm? What’s that?”

“What is an aquarium?”

“What...? I thought you wanted to go?”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I just wanted to do a date with you.”

“ ...”

What was this? His face grew hot. It seemed to him that normally this conversation went more like, “D-don’t get any weird ideas! I just wanted to go to the aquarium!” And this was somehow...the opposite.

He cleared his throat to get his thoughts back on track. “An aquarium is... Well, it’s a place where there’s a lot of fish and things.”

“What?!” Tohka cried, eyes wide. “Grilled in salt?!”

“No, no, no.”

“So boiled?”

“No, not like that.”

“Then *acqua pazza*?”

“Huh...?”

“Oh! Steamed fish? *Qing zheng yu*?”

“They’re not the eating kind! And how do you know so many fish dishes?!”

He didn’t know where she’d picked up this knowledge, but it was very specific. If he hadn’t known a thing or two about cooking himself, he might not have even known what she was talking about with the last two.

“Mm. They’re not?”

“No. You have fun watching the fish swimming.”

“Fish...swimming...?!” She furrowed her brow.

Now that he thought about it, Tohka had maybe only seen fish once they had

been deliciously prepared.

“Oh... Well, a picture’s worth a thousand words. We’ll just go, and you can see.”

“Mm. Okay. R-right.”

He pulled her along down the street.

Soon, they arrived at their destination, Tengu Quintet, a new mixed-use commercial facility that had only been completed the previous year. Nearby were a hotel, an indoor amusement park, a movie theater, and a shopping mall managed by the same group, and together, they almost made up their own little town. It was very popular as a new tourist destination, and there were a lot of people in the area, even though it was a weekday.

“Okay. I guess that’s the aquarium.”

“Shido.” Tohka abruptly squeezed his hand.

“...?! T-Tohka?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-what’s wrong?”

“Mm. With this many people, we’ll get separated.”

“Ohhh... R-right.” He tried to calm his pounding heart and racing pulse as he gripped her hand back, and they walked into the aquarium.

He handed over their tickets at the front desk, and they stepped into the dim building.

“Wh—?! What is this?!” Tohka said, loudly enough that her voice echoed through the building, as her hand in his twitched.

The other visitors all turned to look at them.

“T-Tohka. You have to be quiet here.”

“Mm. Hmm... Sorry. But, Shido. This is...amazing,” she declared, her voice a little quieter, as she lifted her face.

One wall of the building was all glass, containing fish of every size on the other side. It was on a scale that made even Shido sigh in admiration. It was only natural that Tohka would have been surprised.

“Th-these are all fish?” she asked, without looking at her feet as she walked.

“Yeah. They are. Pretty, right?”

“M-mm-hmm. Very pretty.” As she spoke, she let go of his hand, staggered forward, and planted her hands on the glass wall. A school of small fish cut in front of her.

“Ooh...” Her eyes were as wide as saucers as she chased after the school with her gaze. She looked strangely cute, and he smiled without realizing it. “Sh-Shido, let’s keep going!”

“Ha-ha! Sure. So—”

A cheery alarm sounded in his earpiece, and he jumped.

“Shido, it’s time for you to go meet Kurumi. Fraxinus’ll pick you up, so get outside, somewhere away from other people.”

“...!”

“Shido? Are you coming?” Curious at why he would suddenly stop, Tohka stared at him with a baffled look on her face.

“Ohhh... Uh!” He sent his eyes racing around the room before grabbing his stomach and leaning forward. “Ah! Ow-ow-ow!”

“Wh-what’s wrong, Shido?!”

“Oh, uh, my stomach’s a little... I need to go to the bathroom. Can you just wait a bit?”

“Wh—?! A-are you okay? I-if it’s really bad, we could call Kotori—”

“N-no! It’s not that serious. Don’t worry! Okay?!”

“M-mm...” The look on her face was one of the deepest concern as she stared at him.

An incredible feeling of guilt washed over him.

But if he dawdled here, he’d end up making Kurumi wait. With a feeling akin to walking away from a box of abandoned puppies, Shido turned toward the exit. “I-I’ll be back as soon as I can, so you go look at the fish!”

“O-okay. I understand. If it’s really bad, you have to call Kotori right away!”

“R-right.” He nodded and started walking, clutching his stomach.

He turned the corner, and once he was out of Tohka’s line of sight, he straightened up and raced off as fast as he could.

“S—! Sorry I’m late...!”

When he reached the east gate of Tengu Station, panting, Kurumi was already there.

She was in an expensive blouse and long skirt, but perhaps because it was all black, it almost looked like she was wearing mourning clothes.

“Not at all. I only just arrived myself,” she reassured him and smiled.

Once he got his breathing under control, he turned to face her again. “Sorry.”

“Hee-hee-hee! You needn’t have rushed so.”

“O-oh. Well... Ha-ha.” He gave a vague laugh.

Although he took a shortcut via *Fraxinus*, he’d still had to move to a place with no obstacles blocking the sky above and with no people around for the transfer. He had to run a fair distance to get from the aquarium to the station, when crowds were milling around both of them.

“Now,” Kotori said. “*This is the main mission of the day. Keep it together.*”

Shido tapped his earpiece to show that he understood. His most important objective that day was to kiss Kurumi and seal her Spirit power. As he was made aware of this once more, he caught sight of her lips and instantly felt awkward.

“Thank you so much for inviting me out today.” She bowed her head. “I’m honestly delighted. Now, where are we heading first?”

“Mm. Right,” Shido began to say, and heard a “*Wait*” from Kotori in his right ear.

A selection of options was displayed on *Fraxinus*’s main monitor.

1. GO ON A CASUAL SHOPPING DATE AT THE MALL.
2. VIEW A SWEET ROMANTIC MOVIE TOGETHER.
3. WATCH HER TRY THINGS ON AT A LINGERIE SHOP.

“Choices now!” Kotori barked, and the results were immediately displayed on her small terminal. “Hmm.”

“It has to be two!” a member of the crew spoke up from the lower deck of the bridge. “The dark space! He can place his hand on hers! This is the only option!”

“No, no, one is the only option! Girls love shopping!”

Indeed, either of these seemed likely to work. Kotori, however, scratched her chin. The nearest shopping mall and movie theater were at Tengu Quintet, where Tohka was. She doubted they would bump into each other, but she also couldn’t go deliberately introducing more variables. That said, however, the remaining option was...

“She’s definitely going to recoil at three, I bet...,” Kotori moaned, stumped.

“...Oh.” Reine’s voice came up from below. “Looking at the numbers and her reaction yesterday, I can’t say for sure she’ll say no.”

“Hmm.” Kotori frowned. It was risky, but if Kurumi said yes, then it would also be evidence that she trusted Shido a great deal. A useful litmus test. “Shido, three. Take her to the lingerie shop in the station building.”

“Roger that. Wait. What...?!” Shido’s baffled voice came through the speakers.

“Uh, um... Kurumi, is there anything you wanted to buy? Or see? L-like, you know, things you wear...or something.”

“Do you mean clothing? Ohhh, I *would* like to look at clothing.”

“N-not so much clothing as...like the stuff you wear under it...”

“Under it?” Kurumi’s cheeks colored ever so slightly as she realized what he was hinting at.

“A-actually, that’s weird, isn’t it?! Right, so let’s just—” He was about to start walking, sweat beading on his forehead, when Kurumi grabbed his sleeve. “Huh?”

She looked up at him from under her long lashes. “Shido... Would you like to pick some out for me?”

“Huh?! Uh... S-sure.” He nodded, bewildered.

“Hee-hee!” She smiled shyly. “My only request is that you choose something pretty.”

“Uh. Um... Okay.” Given that he was the one who had asked her, he could hardly say no now. He started walking, body stiff like a robot.

“That’s a surprise. Can’t believe she’s on board.”

“...Hey.” He tapped his earpiece to insist on the fact that it was Kotori who had told him to take her to such a place.

The plaza across the road came into view. And he spotted Origami standing in front of the fountain in the exact same position as half an hour earlier. It wasn’t that there had been absolutely no change. A group of three boys had started talking to her with an excessively friendly manner, likely trying to pick her up. She didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow, however, almost as if she didn’t even notice their presence.

One of the boys, seemingly growing indignant at being ignored, tried to grab her shoulder. Origami nimbly deflected his hand and flipped him to the ground.

It must have hurt a lot; tears sprang up in his eyes, and he cried out. His friends were too scared to even move from where they stood. While all this was going on, onlookers began to gather, hearing the commotion, and in the end, a police officer came and took the boys away.

And then, as if nothing at all had happened, Origami snapped back to her previous statuesque stance.

“...”

“Shido, is there something the matter?” Kurumi asked, curious about why he had suddenly stopped and started sweating.

“Oh. N-no, nothing.”

Taking care to keep from catching Origami’s attention, he went into the building next to the station. They took the escalator up three floors to the lingerie shop. He’d been in this station building any number of times, but this was obviously the first time he’d ever set foot in this space.

Right near the entrance, ridiculously sexy underclothes were laid out. Naturally, the clerks and customers were all women.

When he stepped inside, he immediately found himself the target of curious stares. Although it seemed to be okay, since he had Kurumi by his side, it wasn't a particularly comfortable space for him.

"My! How adorable! Shido, which do you prefer?" Kurumi spotted something she liked right away and pointed to two bra-and-panty sets. Both were very cute designs adorned with delicate lace, and his face automatically felt hot.

"R-right... Umm..."

"Shido, hang on a second."

A set of choices was displayed on the bridge's main monitor.

1. THE ONE ON THE RIGHT. BEWITCHING BLACK LACE ON PINK FABRIC.
2. THE ONE ON THE LEFT. A FRESH DESIGN IN PALE BLUE.
3. "I PREFER SOMETHING THAT SHOWS MORE SKIN..." POINT TO THE UNDERCLOTHES HANGING TOWARD THE BACK.

"Choices, people!" Kotori shouted, and the results popped up on her terminal. The margin was narrow, but the most votes were, surprisingly, for (3).

"We've come this far; we should press in for the kill! We put her senses into a stupor and reduce her resistance to a kiss!" a crew member's voice rang out.

Kotori put a thoughtful hand to her chin. "Well, the AI *did* offer up this third choice. There might be value in trying it out. Shido. Three. Select the underclothes behind Kurumi."

The Shido on-screen pointed at the area behind Kurumi.

"H-hmm. Both are great, but I like those more..." As instructed, he pointed at the underwear behind Kurumi. And here, his expression stiffened.

Hanging there was something borderline obscene in a see-through fabric.

"Is this the one you prefer, Shido?"

"Uh. Oh, it's, you know," he stammered, and Kurumi returned the sets in her hands to their original places before hesitantly picking up the sexy lingerie he'd

pointed at.

“Ah, Kurumi, you don’t have to—”

“No. You went to all the trouble of choosing this one for me, Shido. I shall try it on. Will you look to see if it suits me or not?”

“Huh? Uh... S-sure,” he agreed, and she stepped into the changing room in front of her and closed the curtain.

Naturally, this meant that he was now alone in the store. He felt the gazes on him grow sharper.

“...” He fidgeted awkwardly. And then there was a *tap, tap* on his shoulder. “Hmm?”

He looked back curiously and found three girls standing there. His jaw went slack for a second, but he instantly remembered who they were. They were his classmates, the trio of Ai, Mai, and Mii.

“Hey, hey, Itsuka. What’re you doing here? You into drag?”

“And, like, isn’t today your date at the aquarium with Tohka?”

“Wait. You didn’t actually stand her up, did you?”

Ai, Mai, and Mii each started to voice their thoughts.

“Huh? Oh. No...,” he stammered. He was curious about how they knew about his date with Tohka, but now was not the time for that. If they saw he was with Kurumi, there was a chance things would get messy later.



All three of them glared at him.

“Huh? Are you for real? No way. You turned Tohka down—”

“N-no! I wouldn’t do that! I was just on my way now!” He shook his head in a panic, and the three girls looked at him doubtfully.

“You mean that, right? If you’re lying, we’ll come for you. My dad’s a big shot at a black magic company. I can get him to curse you so that your life gets a year shorter every time you touch a girl.”

“Yeah. We won’t let you get away with making Tohka cry. My mom’s a dominatrix. I’ll get her to school you until you thank her through your tears.”

“Know that not even your bones will remain. For real. My uncle is a hitman overseas. I’ll use the kill-one-get-one-free coupon he gave me for my birthday.”

“Like I’m gonna get killed with a coupon like some menswear service! And wait, does that mean you’ve already killed someone else?!” Shido snapped and then let out a sigh. “A-anyway. I didn’t break my promise to Tohka, so you can rela—”

And then the curtain to the changing room opened.

“How does it look?” Kurumi pulled her legs together, embarrassed, as she revealed underwear far too skimpy for a high schooler to ever don, along with a sinful amount of pale skin.

“...Hey, Itsuka?”

Instantly, he felt the temperature in the room drop.

“Uh, um. So this is...” Just when he was about to try and come up with some excuse, he heard a bright alarm in his right ear followed by Kotori’s voice.

“Shido, it’s time... You really should be focusing your attention on Kurumi right now, but if you’re late for your meeting and she comes looking for you, it’ll be a whole thing. Head for where Origami Tobiichi’s waiting.”

“E-easy for you to say...”

“Just go. Oh! You have to tell Kurumi she looks cute, though.”

“...R-roger.” Shido braced himself and then clutched his stomach.

“Ow-ow-ow! Sorry, Kurumi! My stomach’s not feeling great! I’m going to go to the bathroom! Wait here! Also, that set looks great on you! Very cute!”

He ran off, while behind him, Kurumi’s cheeks flushed.

The three girls who had witnessed this development yelled with fury at his receding back.

“Hey! Wait! Stooooooooop! What is Tokisaki doing here?!”

“You’re helping her pick out sexy underwear?! Was Tohka just a game to you?!”

“I don’t know whether to stab you to death or shoot you!”

Ready to burst into tears, Shido raced along the polished floor.

“S-sorry... Origami... I’m a little late!” he panted.

“No problem.” Origami stared at him, the expression on her face not changing. “I just got here.”

I highly doubt that, he had the urge to say but managed to repress it. She had been here for an hour at the very least, but he wasn’t supposed to have known that.

“Uh. Umm. Where are we going today?”

“Movies.”

His cheeks stiffened. The nearest movie theater was...

“H-hey, Origami, which theater are you thinking...?”

“Tengu Quintet.”

“...Of course.” He tapped his earpiece, a strained smile on his face.

“Mm. Right. There’s the possibility of running into Tohka, so it’s not my first choice. Try sounding her out on switching to a different location.”

“Uh. So, um, Origami. Maybe we could go—,” he started, and she handed him a ticket.

“I’ll give you this now. Don’t lose it.”

“...Okay.”

She had completely beaten him to the punch. It would be unnatural to say no now when she'd even gone and gotten the tickets.

"Welp, that's that then. It's a big area, and you're going to a different building, so it'll probably be all right."

"R-right," he whispered before turning back to Origami. "Okay, should we get going?"

She nodded, and they started walking alongside each other.

Then she abruptly snaked her arm through his and yanked him close to her, so he unconsciously tensed up.

"Uh. Um... Origami...? What are you doing...?"

"I'm holding your arm."

This was obvious. Realizing that arguing was pointless, he started walking again, his heart pounding. Each time it did, he felt a soft sensation brush up against his arm, and he looked anywhere but at Origami.

The time passed strangely slowly. They followed the same route as he'd taken with Tohka, and when they arrived at Tengu Quintet, he felt he had easily lost a year of his life to nerves.

Once they entered the center, Origami started walking toward the aquarium for some reason.

"...! O-Origami! Wh-wh-wh-where are you going?! The theater's over here!" Panicked, he yanked on her arm.

"We have time before the movie." She quietly pointed ahead. "Let's grab a quick bite to eat for lunch."

"Huh?" He looked at where she was pointing and saw a chic little restaurant next to the aquarium. "O-oh... Okay, yeah." He let out a sigh of relief.

But it wasn't great for his mental health to be a hop, skip, and a jump from Tohka in the aquarium. There had to be other places nearby where they could eat. Shido was about to suggest exactly that, but Origami half dragged him along.

“H-huh?”

They stepped inside the restaurant, where he learned she had made a reservation. When Origami told them her name, they were shown to a table by the window. An order for their meal had already been put in, so the waiter only asked what they’d like to drink and then left.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

For a while, they faced each other, silent.

“You have to say something, Shido.”

“Oh...! Uh...” He scratched his cheek. “Hey, Origami? Why did you invite me on a date today?”

She stared into his eyes. “I wanted you to not be alone today if at all possible.”

“Huh?” He frowned.

She paid this no mind and continued. “Once our date is over, I want you to come to my house.”

“...?! Wh-what do you mean?!”

“And I want you to stay at my house for the time being.”

“H-huh?!” he cried out involuntarily. The other diners turned surprised eyes on him, but he didn’t have the mental bandwidth to pay them any mind. “Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-where is this coming from...?”

“I’m serious.”

“Uh. Ummmmmm...” His eyes darted around the room. Origami *was* serious; her words were the truth. He couldn’t imagine her ever making a joke.

And then a lifeline from heaven. The server brought their meals. She set the plates down on the table with a practiced hand and briefly described the dishes to them before placing the bill on the table and walking away.

“A-anyway, let’s eat before it gets cold! Okay?!”

Origami nodded, in some kind of agreement.

He brought his fork to his mouth in silence, his head in turmoil. To be honest, he wasn't tasting much of anything.

Once they were finished eating, he heard an alarm in his ear.

"Shido, Tohka's getting anxious. Go back to her for a minute. You can walk from there, yeah?"

He tapped the earpiece to indicate his assent and stood up.

"O-Origami! Sorry. I'm just going to go to the bathroom!"

Shido breezed past the bathroom and stepped out of the restaurant.

He showed his ticket stub at the front desk and went back inside the aquarium where he found Tohka not far from the entrance.

Her eyebrows were twisted up with worry, and she was looking around the area, searching for someone.

He didn't have to wonder who. It would have been none other than Shido himself.

"Tohka!" he called out to her, drawing near, and the clouds immediately disappeared from her face.

"Shido! A-are you okay?"

"Y-yeah. Mostly." He patted his stomach, and she let out a sigh like she was relieved from the bottom of her heart... His conscience was eating him alive.

Then her stomach grumbled rather adorably.

"Mm... Hmm." She lowered her eyes, embarrassed, and he couldn't help but smile. It sounded like she was hungry.

Which was no wonder. It was already lunchtime.

"Tohka, if we keep our ticket stubs, we can leave and come back. Did you want to go and get something to eat?"

"Mm. Yeah! I think that would be great!" She nodded with excitement.

"Okay, so then how should we do this? Is there anything you particularly want

for lunch?”

“Mm. What do you want to eat, Shido?”

“Huh? Me? I...” He patted his stomach. He wasn’t hungry at all because he had only just polished off a meal. “Oh, I’m...good for now. We can get what you want.”

When he said this, a look of concern popped up on her face again.

“Shido... D-does your stomach still hurt? Maybe we *should* call Kotori...”

“Unh...”

He got the feeling somehow that he was going to have to eat again.

“O-okay, I’m back...!”

Having finished lunch with Tohka, Shido returned to Kurumi and the station building and slapped his stomach.

“Wonderful. But are you all right?” Kurumi asked, worried. She was holding a paper bag from the lingerie shop in her hand.

“Yeah. Basically. So did you maybe buy that underwear?”

“Yes. You said it suited me.”

“...” Feeling uncomfortable, Shido picked at his skin. He looked around for a way to change the subject. Which made him appear plenty suspicious, whirling his head around in front of a lingerie shop. “Th-that reminds me. What happened to those girls...?”

“They departed after you went to the restroom.”

“Th-they did...” He let out a sigh of relief. He felt like he had dodged a bullet somehow.

“Oh! They did leave a message for you, however. Let’s see. ‘Itsuka, we’ll make you weep,’ I believe they said.”

“...” He took that bit about relief back. He was going to be in serious trouble the next day.

Kurumi peered at his face intently as she parted her lips. “By the way, Shido.”

“Hmm...? What is it?” He raised an eyebrow, and she uttered words that filled him with despair, an innocent smile on her face.

“Are you perhaps getting hungry?”



“Haah... That Shido. We’re finally on a date, and yet he can’t stay still.” Kurumi let out a sigh as she sat down on the bench in the park.

It was 3:30. Shido had just gone to the washroom for the thirtieth time. Although five hours or so had passed since their date started, they’d barely spent thirty minutes together.

“But that’s all right.” She brought her hand to her chin and giggled.

Yes. This was a trivial issue. It was all a process, nothing more than a path.

“In the end, he’ll be mine, after all.” She tapped her chin with her index finger and hummed a little tune.

When she closed her eyes, Shido’s face popped up. This feeling might have been equivalent to love for humans. Ever since she had learned he existed, she had seen his face, awake or asleep. She wanted to know more about him.

His hobbies.

His thoughts.

His...taste.

“—Hee-hee.” Her laughter grew deeper as she stood up and stretched lightly. When these visions raced through her head, her body always grew hot somehow. She wanted a cold drink.

She was pretty sure there had been a vending machine along the way they’d come. Shido wasn’t likely to come back anytime soon, so there was no real issue with her straying a little from the spot. She cut across the park on light feet.

“...?”

She slipped through the park, came out into a quiet alley, and stood in front of the vending machine when she raised a single eyebrow.

She had been in such a good mood, and now her ears were picking up unpleasant voices.

“...”

She moved wordlessly and arrived at a dead end in the alley.

“...Oh my goodness. What are you doing here?” She stared quietly.

“Eep?” A boy jumped at the sound of her voice and looked back.

There were four of them, all with guns. This was Japan, remember. They were probably model guns in their hands, facing the end of the alley.

She could make out a small, squirming shadow. A cat. A relatively newly born kitten was mewling, dragging a leg behind it.

And now she understood. They were either test-firing reworked model guns or relieving stress. Well, something like that. Kurumi narrowed her eyes.

“What the hell?! Don’t creep up on us.”

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Oh... This girl.”

And now the rest of them noticed her presence. They turned their gazes on her.

“Aah. Sorry, we’re kinda in the middle of something. Could you go away?” One made a shooing motion at her.

Kurumi took a step forward and flashed a bewitching smile. “Oh my! Please don’t say that. I do know a few things about the handling of guns myself. Would you mind if I joined in?”

“What?” One of the boys glared at her with a dubious look and raised his eyebrows.

He finally realized that he was faced with a gorgeous girl. Instantly, an overly familiar smile rose up on his lips, and he moved toward her.

“Oh, what? You wanna try, too?”

“Yes, I’d love to.”

“Well, since you asked nicely. Okay, here, first you—”

“Hee-hee-hee. No need to worry about me. But might we change the rules ever so slightly?”

The boys looked at each other.

“Rules? What do you mean?”

“It’s really nothing so difficult—we simply switch targets.” Kurumi’s lips slid up in a bloodthirsty grin.



“Mm. Where’d Shido disappear to?” Frowning, Tohka whirled her head around to search the area.

The place was filled with people, but she couldn’t see Shido among them.

She was worried about him, after he’d run off on her any number of times. She’d tried following him, but he had vanished completely after stepping behind a building with no one around.

This was supposed to be a date, but because he kept disappearing, she wasn’t getting to spend any real time with him.

“Mm.” She groaned, displeased and anxious.

Dates with Shido were a lot of fun. Just walking and talking with him gave her a feeling like time didn’t even exist. Because of that, the sadness after he left was even more immense.

Lost in thought, she bumped into someone walking along in the opposite direction.

“Mmph!” She landed on her butt. She quickly stood up, brushing her bottom off. “S-sorry. I was in a hurry.”

“It’s fine. I wasn’t paying attention, either,” the person replied in an inflectionless voice.

For some reason, it was a voice she was familiar with. She frowned suspiciously and lifted her head. There she found the face she least wanted to see.

“O-Origami Tobiichi?!”

“...! Tohka Yatogami,” Origami announced at the same time, sounding somehow annoyed. “Why are you here?”

“I—I was going to ask you the same thing! What are you doing here?!”

“I’m under no obligation to tell you.”

“Wha—?” Tohka was about to fire off a hot retort but then rethought it. She didn’t have time for Origami right now. “Whatever. I’m busy. I don’t have time to waste on you.”

“I see. I’m also busy.”

“Hmph. I don’t know what you’re doing, but...”

“I have to find Shido.”

“...What?” Tohka frowned. “Wait. Shido is on a date with me. Why are you here to get in the way?”

“He can’t be. He’s on a date with me today.”

“Wh-what?! You’re lying!”

“I’m not. You are the one who should stop getting carried away in your little daydreams.”

“I-it’s not a daydream! I definitely went to the aquarium with Shido today!”

“This Shido, is he a dog? A puppet?”

“I’m obviously talking about the human Shido!”

“...” Origami appeared to sink into thought before lifting her face as if she’d just realized something. “Impossible.” She walked away, leaving Tohka behind.

“H-hey! Wait! We’re not done talking! What’s going on?!” Tohka chased after her.



“Haah...! Haah...! Haah...!” Exhaustion eating into his entire being, Shido somehow made it to the park bench where he had left Kurumi.

Although they weren’t that far apart, he had now done over thirty laps

between Tohka, Kurumi, and Origami. His body was reaching its limit.

He frowned slightly as he wiped away sweat with his sleeve. “Huh...?”

“What’s wrong, Shido?”

“Oh...Kurumi’s not here.”

“What? Hey, camera team. What happened with Kurumi?”

“Th-the video cut off. Maybe something happened to the camera...”

“...Excuse me?” Kotori snapped.

“Commander! It’s weak, but we sense a Spirit signal nearby!”

Shido heard the voice of a different male crew member suddenly through his earpiece.

“Where?”

“An alley near the east exit of the park! The signal is—there’s no mistake, it’s Kurumi Tokisaki!”

“...?!” His shoulders straightened, and he lifted his face with a gasp, turning his gaze to the east exit.

“Hmm. Maybe something happened. Shido, can you head over there?”

“G-got it...!” Swallowing hard, he cut across the park. He followed *Fraxinus*’s directions past the vending machine and into a narrow alley.

“—Huh?! ”

The moment he reached his destination, he opened his eyes wide and froze on the spot.

Red filled his field of view. An ocean of red splattered over the gray walls and the road. Three large, deformed lumps sat on the ground like tiny islands.

The scene was so bizarre that he couldn’t process it for a moment.

No. It was more than a moment, more than several moments, more than several seconds.

Even as he became more and more certain of what he was looking at, his brain shied away from the truth.

It shouldn't have been possible.

Not in a town like this. Not in the middle of the day.

—People didn't just die.

"Unh...aaaaaaah?!" he screamed, the facts finally overcoming his rejection of them.

"Shido! Calm down!" Kotori's voice came into his ears, but it didn't have any meaning to him.

The instant his brain acknowledged the situation, the strange smell in the area assaulted his nostrils, and he felt an irresistible urge to vomit. He clamped his hands over his mouth to somehow fight the sensation of the many lunches he had eaten rising up from his stomach. "...! Unh...!"

"—Oh?"

He lifted his eyes at this voice. A girl in black stood in the center of the crimson ocean.

"Shido. Are you back already?" Kurumi Tokisaki asked, outfitted in a red-and-black Astral Dress. In her left hand, she held an ornate ancient pistol. He had no idea where she'd gotten it.

He noticed one other thing.

A man crouched on the ground toward the back of the alley, his body shaking intensely. He was young. For some reason, three concentric circles were drawn in blood on his stomach, almost like a target.

"Hee—! Heeee—!" He was breathing like he was about to expire at any second as he turned his eyes on Shido. "H—! Help...me! This... She's... Monster!"

"Oh my goodness." Kurumi turned back to him and pointed the gun in her hand at his stomach.

"Kurumi! What. Are—?" Shido squeezed dazed words from his throat, and she giggled.

It wasn't her usual cute laugh. It was a disturbing sound that made his teeth

rattle just hearing it.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that a person would try to kill something without being prepared to be killed themselves? That *is* what it means to turn the barrel of a gun on a life, hmm?”

“...S. Sto...,” the man panted, barely breathing.

Without any hesitation whatsoever, Kurumi pulled the trigger.

An inky black bullet like a hardened shadow shot out of the barrel, carved out a pitch-black trajectory, and was sucked into the target drawn on the man’s stomach.

“Hngh!” His body jerked. And then no more sound came from him.

“One hundred points. An A-plus.” Kurumi let out a short sigh and dropped the gun. It disappeared into her shadow as she turned back toward Shido. “I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting. I’m afraid you’ve caught me in a rather uncompromising position.”

“—do! Shido! Run! Now!”

Shido realized that Kotori had been shouting at him through his earpiece this whole time. He pulled himself to his feet somehow, braced his shaking legs, and ran.

However...

“Hee-hee-hee... I’ll don’t think soooo.” He heard Kurumi’s voice from behind.

“Whoa?!” His legs were abruptly swept out from under him, and he slammed into the ground, hitting his skull hard. “Ngh...!”

He grimaced at the dull pain that made fireworks go off in his field of view. But now was not the time for that. He had to get away. Except someone was holding on to his ankle, and he couldn’t move.

A white hand poked out from Kurumi’s shadow and had his leg in a vise grip.

“Wh-what...is that?!” He rolled over and kicked his legs to try and shake it off, but the fingers held on with impossible strength, and he couldn’t get away.

Kurumi slowly closed in on him. “Hee-hee. Gotcha.” She grinned as she knelt down beside him and laid her body over top of his.

“...Ngh.” It hurt like his heart was being crushed. But this wasn’t because of Kurumi’s beautiful face and audacious action; it was simply out of terror.

Yes. Shido was afraid of Kurumi the Spirit. A world-killing catastrophe. The enemy of humanity. Words he’d heard as words any number of times.

This was the first time they really sank into his brain together with the metallic smell in the air.

“—Aah, oh dear, I’ve failed. I’ve failed terribly. I should really have taken care of this more quickly. I did so wish to enjoy my date with you a little longer.” She ran her hands over his cheeks.

“...! ...” He tried to run. He tried to scream.

But he couldn’t. His legs spasmed, and only hoarse breath left his throat.

She drew closer to his face—not coming in for a kiss; it was almost like she was going to sink her teeth into his neck.

“...! Huh...?” Finally, a voice came out of his throat.

Just when her mouth was on the verge of touching him, a curious sensation enveloped his entire body. Something mysterious he’d never experienced before. Bizarre like the air around him had become a highly viscous fluid with a will of its own and was now caressing the surface of his body.

“...!” Kurumi gasped and flew backward. Her slender limbs slammed into the concrete wall, leaving fine cracks in it.

“Wha—?” Shido stared dumbfounded. What on earth...?

“Are you all right, Brother?” He heard someone say as his mind raced to try and comprehend the situation.

“Uh...?” He managed an idiotic grunt and lifted his face.

Mana was standing with her back to him as if to protect him, clad in a wiring suit. She had something like a shield or wings on her shoulders. This was the equipment he had seen in the video the day before.

“Ma...na...?” he managed, voice hoarse, and she turned her eyes toward him.

“Yes. That was very close. Are you badly injured?”

“Uhhh,” he replied, stunned.

He didn’t know how Mana interpreted this, but she looked down at her own outfit and scrunched up her hair. “Ohhh. I suppose this would be a surprise. It’s just, well, there was a situation.”

He heard small bits of concrete dropping to the ground up ahead.

“Well, we can talk later,” she offered, while Kurumi slowly stood up.

“My goodness... Interrupting me and Shido on our little rendezvous is a serious violation of manners, yes?”

“Shut your mouth,” Mana barked. “What are you thinking, targeting a person’s older brother?”

Kurumi’s eyes widened in surprise. “Are you and Shido siblings, Mana?”

“Hmph. It’s none of your business,” Mana spat and turned her head. With this movement, the equipment on her shoulders tilted forward and began to transform, the tips splitting into five prongs almost like a hand. Then a pale light appeared in those combined ten tips.

“Please go ahead and drop dead now, Nightmare.” Mana snapped her fingers, and ten beams of light jetted from her shoulders, stretching out toward Kurumi.

It happened in the blink of an eye. Kurumi, however, twisted her body and neatly sidestepped the beams.

“Hee-hee-hee. That’s quite dangerous.”

“Tch.” Mana clicked her tongue in annoyance and moved her fingers the tiniest bit.

The beams of light abruptly changed course and came at Kurumi once more.

“Guh...”

This time, she couldn’t get entirely away. Light pierced her legs and her stomach, and Kurumi let out a curious cry as her legs crumpled beneath her. Blood spilled out onto the ground.

“...!” Shido grimaced at the overly gory scene.

“You just *have* to make me work, don’t you? Disgraceful monster.” Without so much as lifting an eyebrow, Mana raised her right hand. The equipment that had opened up like a pair of hands returned to its shield form, and an enormous sword of light appeared at one end.

“...!” Shido gasped.

He had seen this before. The sword from the video she’d used to deliver the killing blow.

“Ma...na...!” he cried out.

“Is there something that is the matter? I’ll clean this up right away, so please wait.”

“You...can’t! Kill—,” he gasped.

Mana stared at him. After a moment, she lowered her gaze and shook her head.

“Now that I think about it, this girl transferred into your school as a human being, hmm? Brother, I can’t tell you the details, but you need to forget her. She isn’t human. She is a presence that cannot be allowed to live.” She started walking to Kurumi on the ground.

“...! That’s not the issue! Stop! You have to stop!” he pleaded.

Kurumi wheezed, her voice threatening to fade out at any second. “Hee. Hee... You...really are so kind... Shido.”

Mana’s sword came down on her.

Thwk! There was an unpleasant sound, and then Kurumi stopped saying anything at all.

“Phew.” Mana waved her hand gently, and the equipment in it returned to her shoulders.

“Why...?” Shido asked her back in a shaking voice.

She let out a small sigh as she turned toward him and set her feet in motion. Her unit and wiring suit seemed to flash faintly, and then in the next second,

she was in street clothes again.

“It can be a bit of a shock when you know the face of the person dying, but if I hadn’t killed her, she would have killed you,” she told him.

“...” He didn’t know what to say to that.

“I’d ask that you listen to me. Think of today as a bad dream and forget it as quickly as possible. You also shouldn’t concern yourself at her death. She is something that shouldn’t exist; it’s only natural she dies.”

Shido found that he’d clenched his hands into fists. “O-of course the AST would say that! I’ll thank you for saving me! But... But you can’t say that kind of thing just because she’s a Spirit.”

Mana frowned. “Where did you learn all that?”

“...!” His eyebrows shot up. Now that he was thinking about it, he remembered that she didn’t know he knew about the Spirits and the AST.

A few seconds later, she crossed her arms and nodded. “I bet it was Master Sergeant Origami. Honestly, that personage... She is so soft on you.” She let out an exasperated sigh and turned her gaze back on him. “But, well, in that case, this will go a lot faster. I have no idea how deep your knowledge is, but basically, that’s how it is.”

He felt a shiver run up his spine. “Why...? How can you be so calm? You just did that...to a person...”

His throat hurt, maybe because he hesitated to actually say the words. But he forced them out anyway.

“You...killed a person!”

“That’s not a person. It’s a Spirit,” she replied, voice cold.

“Still! How could you so casually—?”



“Because I’m used to it.”

“...!” He gasped.

“Of all the Spirits, Nightmare—Kurumi Tokisaki—is special.”

“Special...?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “*She doesn’t die*. No matter how many times you kill her, no matter how you do it. That girl inevitably appears again somewhere else as if nothing happened and kills more people.”

“...?! Wh-what does that...?” Even as he protested, he felt this explanation click into place. The video he’d seen the day before suddenly made sense.

“You heard me. I don’t know what else I could tell you at this point.” Mana let out a sigh and lifted her chin. The look on her face was sheer exhaustion, as if she had aged in an instant. “—And so I continue to kill her. That girl. Nightmare. Kurumi Tokisaki. I chase her relentlessly. Over and over and over.”

Shido scowled.

“You’re wrong...!”

“What?”

“You’re not used to it or whatever. You’re just worn down... Your heart is worn thin!”

She trembled slightly. “What...are you trying to tell me, Brother?”

“Stop it already, Mana. You said you’re my sister, right? So then...just listen to me, just this one time!” He pushed the words out of his throat like a prayer.

This wasn’t some trick of his imagination. He knew that your heart got worn down when too great of a burden was placed on it. And if that burden was never lifted, at some point, your heart would be so broken that it could never go back to the way it was.

Just like Shido’s heart almost was when he was abandoned by his mother.

Just like Tohka’s heart almost was when she faced constant enemies and hostility.

“...That’s impossible,” Mana said, with a hint of self-deprecation. “For so long as Nightmare comes back to life, and for so long as she continues to kill people, I must grab that girl by the neck. Otherwise, she will kill more people. It’s something only I can do.”

“...!”

No. That wasn’t the only way.

Before Shido could give voice to this, Mana turned her face upward, searching. “—Mm. That will have to be all for today.”

“Wha—? But I still—”

“Reinforcements are approaching. There will be some problems if you’re here.” She half forced him to turn around and gave him a push.

“Mana! You—”

“There’s no reasoning with you, huh.” She smiled dryly and held up a finger. He floated up into the air.

“Wha—? How...?”

There was no mistake. This was the Territory the AST deployed with their Realizers, but Mana was deploying it without a CR unit equipped.

“We shall meet again. With more time at our leisure.”

“Wai—” Mid-word, his body was flown out of the alley and given a gentle landing.

“...!” He didn’t care about the AST. He quickly turned back to the alley.

But an invisible wall blocked the entrance, and he couldn’t go any farther. This had to be Mana’s doing as well.

“...!” He sank to his knees and hit the ground with his fist until he nearly drew blood.

“...Aah.” Having moved Shido out of the alley, Mana scratched her head. She felt like she had told him too much about all kinds of things. She certainly couldn’t tell Origami about this.

She wasn’t sure why, but she had wanted him to hear it.

“This is just routine work.” She dropped her gaze to the body of Nightmare—Kurumi Tokisaki—sprawled cruelly at the end of the alley.

Then from out of nowhere, a tiny kitten approached the corpse, dragging a hind leg behind it. Thinking this strange, she bent her knees to pat its head. The kitten mewed in a tiny voice.

“Now, look. You’re going to get all filthy with blood here,” she cooed, picking the kitten up. She looked at Kurumi’s corpse once again. “Why?” She voiced the question Shido had asked her.

Now that she was thinking about it, why *had* Mana continued to kill Kurumi?

Kurumi was the worst of Spirits, who went around killing people, and Mana had a knack for using the Realizer. So she tried to use that power to help everyone else out... Supposedly. Certainly. But...

“Ngh!” She winced at a sudden pain in her head. Her memory was hazy; she couldn’t really recollect any details. She shook her head slightly and tried to get rid of the headache.

“Hmm?”

She spotted something strange on the ground. A small device was lying right where Kurumi had attacked Shido. She scooped this up and took a good look at it.

“Is this...an earpiece?”

Yes. It appeared to be a small communication device of the type that was equipped in the ear.

“What is this doing here?” She stared at it, puzzled, and brought it up to her ear.

“Shido! Answer me, Shido! We’ll take you back to Fraxinus for now! Move!”

“...?” She heard a voice she’d heard before, yelling her older brother’s name.



Shido staggered over to a bench in the park and dropped down lifelessly.

“...”

The scene that had just unfolded before him spun around and around in his mind. Kurumi killing people; Mana killing Kurumi.

In his mind, he understood. After all, this was the relationship between Tohka and Origami, simply pushed to the extreme.

Tohka, however, was not interested in killing. And Origami didn't have the strength to kill a Spirit.

Over the last two months, Tohka had grown accustomed to this world, and he couldn't deny that he'd grown less tense as she did. If the balance had tipped even the slightest bit, it was plenty possible that he would've seen something like this much earlier.

A murderous Tohka. And an Origami with the power to kill a Spirit.

Kurumi and Mana were what Tohka and Origami might have been if they had chosen the worst.

"I mean, that's just... What...?" He couldn't accept any of it.

How could Kurumi kill a person so easily? How could Mana kill Kurumi so easily?

He'd been naive somehow. It was convenient for him to think all the Spirits were actually good people like Tohka and Yoshino, even as he screamed that they were dangerous. When it came right down to it, he'd had this arrogance, assuming there was no way the AST could kill a Spirit.

And now...

"Shido!"

He heard a familiar voice and lifted his face with a gasp to see Tohka racing toward him. She'd probably come looking for him when he hadn't come back. He could also see Origami behind her. He assumed they'd run into each other at some point.

"Shido! Where did you go?!"

"What exactly is going on?"

Tohka and Origami both sounded grumpy as they came to stand in front of

him.

At the moment, he didn't have it left in him to make excuses. "Sorry." He could only squeeze out a brief word of apology before falling silent once more.

"...Shido?"

"What's wrong?"

Tohka and Origami peered at his face, worried.

"Shido, you're not hurt, are you?!" Tohka grabbed his hand.

He hadn't noticed before, given the shocking things that had just happened, but he saw now that he had scraped his hands. That was probably from when his feet were knocked out from under him and he fell. The instant Tohka touched his hand, he saw Kurumi's face covered in blood.

"Eee..." A sound like a gasp-wheeze slipped out of his throat, and he pushed her hand away.

"Huh... Uh, Shido?" Tohka looked back and forth between her own hand and his, dumbfounded, before turning her gaze back on him. "S-sorry... Did that hurt?"

"...! S...orry." He bowed his head slightly and clasped one trembling hand with the other.

Tohka was just worried about him, and he had rejected even that, which was so pathetic that he wanted to cry.

"Sorry... I'm really sorry."

"I-it's nothing to get so upset about," she assured him. "What happened?"

"...Sorry...!" he said again, before standing up and running away.

"Sh-Shido?!"

"Where are—?"

He heard Tohka and Origami from behind. But he couldn't stop his feet from moving.

They didn't come after him.

How long did he run after that?

Once he came out onto a road with no one around, he felt a curious buoyancy envelop him.

“...! This is—” He knew this feeling. It was *Fraxinus*’s transporter.

Just as he’d expected, a second later, his field of view changed from a deserted corner of the park to the interior of *Fraxinus*.

“I’m so glad you’re safe.”

A voice came from behind him. When he looked back, Kotori was standing there in her crimson uniform jacket, a complicated expression on her face.

“...Kotori.”

“You finally moved to a location where transfer was possible, hmm? Do you know how many times I yelled at you to do that?”

At this, he put a hand to his right ear, and his eyes opened wide. “My earpiece is gone.”

Right. The earpiece that he always wore when he was on duty was not there. It must have fallen out somewhere, but he hadn’t noticed until that very moment.

“You dropped it? When?”

“Sorry. I don’t really know.”

She groaned and touched her face, thinking. “The only time I can think of is when Kurumi attacked you. So then that voice before—”

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s nothing.” She sighed as she shook her head from side to side. “Anyway, let’s get your wounds treated. Follow me.”

“...! Okay... But Tohka and Origami—”

“Once Tohka’s alone, we’ll pick her up and give her a simple explanation of the situation. Origami Tobiichi... Well, it’ll probably be fine if we just leave her be. Follow up with her at school tomorrow.”

“Okay...,” he replied lifelessly and trailed after Kotori. “...Hey.”

“What?”

“What I’m— What we’re doing is the correct thing, right?”

The echoes of her shoes against the hallway stopped, and she turned sharp eyes on him. “What do you mean by that?”

“I...I couldn’t stand it that the Spirits were being attacked unjustly. They weren’t trying to make the spacequakes happen. That’s why I’ve been helping you.”

“...Yes, right.”

“But...Kurumi, she—”

She killed people. Not in a spacequake, but with her own hands. Deliberately. This was just too unbearably sad and frightening.

“What are you trying to say?” Kotori asked.

“I...can’t...” He finally spat the words out. “It’s only gone well up to now because Tohka and Yoshino just happened to be good guys. In the end...I couldn’t—” He stopped himself there. Or to be more precise, he was stopped there.

Kotori grabbed his collar and slapped his cheek with an impressively flat hand.

“Huh! Ah...”

“You’ve really lost all your nerve, huh!” she said, scowling. Or maybe she was on the verge of tears. He couldn’t tell in that moment. “You? *You* can’t? ... Hmph. You can’t be whining over every little thing! You used to have more guts back in the day, you know!”

“What are you—?” he asked, pressing a hand to his stinging cheek, unable to really get what she meant.

“You!” She grabbed his shirt and continued. “You’ve faced a much scarier Spirit, haven’t you?! You saved her, didn’t you?! Don’t go telling me you can’t do it. If you give up, Kurumi will kill even more people. Mana and Kurumi... they’ll keep on killing their own hearts! You’re the only one who can stop

them!”

“...!” He swallowed hard. He didn’t know if the “much scarier Spirit” was Tohka or Yoshino, but the latter part of her speech sank into his brain.

Immune to dying when killed, Kurumi slaughtered people, and Mana killed Kurumi. Mana said that this cycle had been going on for a long time. And it would probably keep going. As long as Kurumi had her Spirit power.

The only person who could lock that power away was Shido.

“...” Wordlessly, he put a hand to his forehead.

He absolutely didn’t want Kurumi to murder anyone else. And he didn’t want Mana to kill Kurumi. That was the truth. It was how he really felt. As for what he needed to do to make this a reality, well, he knew that only too well.

“You’re right.” He walked ahead on shaky legs.

“Ah! Hey!” Kotori hurriedly chased after him.

“To keep Kurumi from killing anyone else, I have to lock her power away. To keep Mana from murdering Kurumi... I’m the only one who can do it. Fine. Are you happy now?”

“...Yes.” For some reason, Kotori sounded just the tiniest bit anxious.



That night, Shido lay on the living room sofa, his mind racing.

“...”

As he stared absently at the light of the incandescent lamp set in the ceiling, he let out a long sigh. Kurumi would no doubt be at school the next day. In which case, his job would begin again.

Increase his likability, kiss her, seal her power. Then everything would be resolved. Kurumi would stop killing people, so naturally, Mana would stop killing Kurumi.

This was the only way of reaching the lone happy ending available to him. However...

“...” He felt heavy, like a giant weight had been placed on his body. He

expelled gloomy air from his lungs.

Then he heard the sound of the front door opening down the hallway.
“Hmm...?”

He somehow managed to sit his burdensome body up and looked toward the living room door. About the only person he could think of who would come in without ringing the bell was Kotori, but she had said she was going to stay on the ship that night for work. So who was it?

While he considered this, the door opened, and Tohka poked her face inside, acting timid.

“Tohka?”

“Mm. Can I come in?”

Given that she had already come into the house, he couldn't help but feel that she had gotten the timing for that question a little wrong. He decided not to bother with such details.

“S-sure. Of course.”

She stepped into the living room and ran over to him.

“Shido... Is it okay if I touch you?” she asked thoughtfully. Maybe she was upset about how he'd brushed her hand away in the park.

“Y-yeah, it's fine,” he replied, and she crawled up onto the sofa and set herself between it and him. “What are you doing...?”

“It's fine. Just be quiet.” She wrapped her arms around him to squeeze him tightly from behind.

“T-Tohka? What exactly...?” he asked, perspiring when he felt something soft against his back.

“Mm. The TV said to do this when you're feeling sad or scared.”

“...And which program was this?”

“*Mommy and Me*...I think.”

The children's show of all children's shows. A smile slipped across his face. It seemed that they were right. He did actually feel a little better.

He didn't know how long they had sat like that when Tohka suddenly opened her mouth.

"...Reine told me."

"Told you...?"

"About Kurumi and Mana. I asked her why you seemed off, and she told me."

"...! Sh-she did..." He swallowed hard.

He knew that Reine didn't really like to tell Tohka too much about the Spirits and the AST. She had probably assumed that Tohka's mental state would have taken a turn for the worse if she didn't tell her something.

"Shido. Do you remember what I said when I came to live in this house?"

"Huh?"

"If another Spirit like me shows up...I want you to save them."

"Ohhh." He nodded. He remembered that quite well.

And he had said he would. That feeling wasn't a lie, and that resolve hadn't changed even now.

"But Kurumi's—"



“—The same as me.”

“Huh?”

She pressed her face into his back.

“You were there for me. You saved me. But no one’s there for Kurumi. She’s been there with no one holding out a hand to her a lot longer than I was.”

She squeezed him harder, to the point where it almost hurt.

“If you hadn’t been there, if I had kept going like that, constantly exposed to nothing but malice and hostility forever and ever...I might have ended up like Kurumi.”

“Y-you wouldn—,” he started and then cut himself off.

Two months ago, when he had first met Tohka, she was so wild it was almost impossible to believe it now. Sick of a fight she couldn’t see the end of, exhausted, worn to the bone, her heart was on the verge of being crushed. It wasn’t his place to casually comment on that despair now.

“If Kurumi really is such a bad Spirit that there’s no saving her anymore, then I’ll protect you.”

“Huh?”

“So... Shido. Please. Just look at her one more time. Don’t let her slaughter any more people. Don’t let her heart be worn down any more.”

“...!” He gulped.

Aah, I finally get it.

He couldn’t stand the idea of Kurumi killing people. He absolutely could not allow Mana to murder Kurumi. He had resolved to stop Kurumi to end this cycle. But there was an important piece missing from this thinking.

“...Thanks, Tohka.”

“Mm... Mm? Wh-what for? I didn’t do anything.”

“...No, it’s thanks to you.”

Right. Even though what he needed to do was kiss Kurumi and lock her power

away, he had been totally focused on the people Kurumi killed and on Mana. The incredibly shocking scene he'd witnessed had knocked the very obvious fact of saving Kurumi right out of his head.

The Spirit Kurumi had indeed killed any number of people. This was something that could not be overlooked, no matter how she tried to atone for it.

But...when he'd sealed Tohka's power, he had wanted to save her from the bottom of his heart. He'd prayed he could somehow help this girl with such irrational malice turned toward her.

When he'd sealed Yoshino's power, he had wanted to save her sincerely, too. He couldn't believe that this girl wouldn't be rewarded for how carefully she considered people who turned to her with hostility.

That's why he had been able to act. He had a power to recover that went beyond human intellect and the ability to seal away the powers of Spirits. But the only reason a high school boy with average physique, strength, and brains could even attempt to make this happen, coughing blood all the while, was his own single-mindedness.

Save Kurumi. Rescue this girl trapped in a chain and cycle of murder.

And Mana, too. He couldn't let this girl who said she was his little sister kill Kurumi anymore. He wouldn't let her wear down her heart any further.

Fine if it was an illusion. Fine if it was empty imaginings. Unless he truly believed he could do this, it would be impossible for him to reach out his hand.

“—Tohka. I'm all right now.”

“Mm. You're not sad anymore?”

“Nope.”

“You're not scared anymore?”

“...Well, I'm maybe a little scared.” He looked sheepish and smiled wryly. “But I'm okay.”

“Mm...okay.” She loosened her arms.

He got to his feet and stretched. At the same time, his stomach growled. Now that he was thinking about it, he had thrown up all his lunches on the street, so he felt like he hadn't had anything to eat all day.

"How about I whip something up? You're staying for supper, right?"

"Yeah!" Tohka nodded vigorously.

Chapter 5

Imitation Nightmare

“Reine.”

On the bridge of *Fraxinus*, Kotori called out to the analyst whose seat was relatively close to her own captain’s chair.

But she got no response. Thinking this strange, she peeked over at Reine’s hands, trying to figure it out. For some reason, Mana’s face was enlarged to fill the screen in front of Reine. Staring at this, Reine looked unusually troubled.

“Reine? Is something going on with Mana?”

“...!” Perhaps finally noticing Kotori, Reine turned eyes with dark circles under them toward her. “...Kotori? Mm, it’s just a little thing.”

She operated her console with a practiced hand, the screen zoomed out, and Mana’s face became smaller.

“...Anyway, how’s Shin?”

“I was a little worried, but he talked with Tohka, and I guess that got through to him.”

“...Oh, good.” Reine abruptly lifted her face. “Right. I finished the analysis you asked for.”

Kotori arched an eyebrow. She had given Reine the hair and saliva she’d obtained from Mana the other day and asked her to conduct a DNA test.

“So what’d you find?”

“...Mm, Mana is unmistakably Shin’s biological sister.”

“...! O-oh...” Kotori swallowed hard and put a hand to her chest. It wasn’t that she hadn’t been expecting it, but this confirmation made her heart pound a little. “His biological...sister. So what exactly is a girl like that doing with the

AST...?”

“...Oh,” Reine said. “I did a little digging, and she’s not actually with them.”

“What do you mean?”

“...She’s not a member of the SDF. She’s a contract employee from DEM Industries.”

“You mean, Deus Ex Machina...?”

DEM Industries. A global leader headquartered in the UK, the sole manufacturer in the world besides Ratatoskr’s parent company that could produce Realizers. All the Realizers secretly in place with the SDF, the AST, and the armies and police forces around the world were assumed to be DEM products. Because DEM was extremely active in hunting Spirits, they were rivals to Kotori and Ratatoskr. Naturally, they also had wizards equipped with CR units on their roster, and these wizards were said to be even more proficient with the devices than any nation’s elite forces.

“Hang on a minute. I’ve seriously lost the connection here. You mean Shido’s baby sister is a wizard with the DEM?”

“...I don’t know that yet, but...” Reine stopped, gritted her teeth, and clenched her fists, as though trembling with anger.

Kotori frowned. She had known Reine for years, but this was the first time she’d seen her like this. “What exactly happened?”

“...Take a look at this.” Reine tapped her console to bring up a picture of Mana and some detailed numbers.

“...! This is...”

“...Yes, her body has been treated with magic. This is the source of her abnormal strength... But the price she pays is serious. She’ll probably only live another ten years.”

“...! What?! Then—” Kotori groaned.

DEM Realizers were not perfect. Their core processing powers still lagged, so the human brain was forced to compensate. To amplify brain waves for this purpose, a small part had to be implanted into the head via surgery. Origami

and the other AST members would also have had an angular protrusion hidden beneath their hair.

But what had been done to Mana went far beyond this. A percentage of her body had essentially been made into a Spirit.

“...I don’t know what was going through her mind when she agreed to this. But...it’s better not to tell Shin just yet,” Reine reasoned, her tone somber.

Kotori swallowed hard and bit her lip.



The next morning, when Shido walked into the classroom, he saw that Kurumi was already at her desk.

This was clearly abnormal. Although he had experienced this once before, he still felt weird. The idea that this girl who was supposed to be dead would come to school looking like nothing had happened was unbelievable.

When she caught sight of him, she smiled gently and bowed neatly. “Oh my, Shido! What a pleasure!”

She looked exactly as she had the day before. If he were to insist that she had had both legs crushed, her stomach pierced, and her head cut off on the road the previous day, there was no doubt that it would be Shido’s mental health that people questioned.

“...Hey. Morning,” he whispered. He wasn’t too surprised. He had expected this.

“I had so much fun yesterday. Please do invite me out again.”

“Oh...yeah? You had fun?”

“Yes, quite a bit.” She grinned once more, and he couldn’t tell if she was talking about their date or what happened on the street. Whether she was aware of this thought or not, she continued to speak, a cute smile plastered on her face. “But I was a tiny bit surprised.”

“...? About what?” he asked.

She narrowed her eyes. “I assumed that you would be absent from school today.”

He was at a loss for words for a second, but he recovered. “Oh, well... Sorry about that. Should I not have come?”

“No, I’m very happy that you made it to school,” she told him with a carefree smile.

He patted his chest to try and get his heartbeat under control before moving to stand in front of her. “—Kurumi.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve decided to save you.”

“...? Save me?” Her face lost its color. “...You say the strangest things, Shido.”

“Let’s stop with that stuff. I won’t let you kill anyone else. I won’t let Mana kill you anymore. I came to that conclusion yesterday.”

“Would you mind not pushing your morals upon me? I really dislike naive ideals.”

“Yeah? That’s too bad. Sorry, though, I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to save you. Whatever it takes.”

Kurumi frowned. After a few seconds’ thought, she opened her mouth again. “Then allow me to confirm whether or not what you’re saying is indeed true.”

“Huh?”

“Please come to the roof after school today,” she said and looked away from him.



Standing on the roof of Raizen High, Kurumi smiled coquettishly and tapped her foot lightly.

The weather was fine, not a cloud in the sky. The intense midsummer sun poured down on her, projecting a shadow even blacker than usual onto the ground. The time was 9:10. Perhaps because first period had already begun, the chatter from the school building had mostly died down. In its place, she could hear the scattered sounds of instruments from the music room and balls bouncing from the gym.

She took a dancing step—spinning around to draw out a circle on the ground.

“It would have been nice to spend a little more time enjoying this school life with Shido.”

If someone were to look down on this scene from above, they might have noticed the strangeness of it. The place where Kurumi was dancing had grown dark—almost like the shadow was not disappearing from her orbit.

“It’s almost time, hmm?”

She thrust a heel into the ground. The circle drawn in dusky lines began to creep outward. It covered the entire roof, moved onto the exterior walls of the school, and ate into the building as if to eventually blanket the area of the city centered on the school itself.

“Kee-hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.” Her lips twisted up in a half smile. “Aah, aah, Shido. My dear Shido. Dear, precious Shido. Will you still say that you’ll save me? Would you say you would rescue me?”

“Mm?” Shido looked out the window in the middle of first period, World History. It felt like it had suddenly grown a little darker, so he figured some clouds must have been drifting by.

The sky outside was still clear, however. He couldn’t see even a trace of a cloud.

“It couldn’t be.” He looked over at Kurumi. She had sounded so ominous earlier, so he thought just maybe.

She wasn’t doing anything as far as he could tell. She was sitting and paying attention to the teacher.

“Maybe I’m overthinking things.” He let out a sigh and sat up straighter.

At any rate, the moment of truth would be after school. He took a deep breath to psych himself up.



She turned the rusted knob and pushed the door open. Flecks of paint peeled off and fell to the ground while the decrepit door squealed in protest.

“...Tch.” Kotori clicked her tongue, frowning, and stepped out onto the roof of

the abandoned building on the southern edge of Tengu City. She didn't make a hobby out of exploring abandoned buildings. She had a reason for coming to this remote area.

“—I've been awaiting you, Kotori.” The girl who had arrived at the rooftop first—Mana—called out to her.

Yes. When Kotori returned to her house that morning, there had been a piece of paper on the window of her bedroom with a time and place and Mana's name on it.

Kotori snorted, not bothering to disguise her displeasure. “...Honestly. What's with this place? If you're going to call me out, make it to somewhere with tea and cake at least.”

“My apologies. I simply assumed that a place with no prying eyes or ears would be best for both of us.”

“...Hmm. So what exactly do you want?”

“I merely wished to talk a moment.” Mana pulled something out of her pocket and tossed it in Kotori's direction.

It gently circled toward her, and Kotori caught it in both hands. “This is...” She frowned as she looked down at a supersensitive, small earpiece, the kind used by Ratatoskr. It was the one Shido had lost the previous day.

“Ratatoskr.”

“...Ngh.” Kotori jerked an eyebrow up.

“I've heard the rumors. Rather than eliminating the Spirits by force, this organization aims to win them over through conversation. Although I assumed it was an urban legend when first I heard of it.” Mana glared at Kotori. “I can't believe you and my brother...”

Kotori tucked the earpiece into her pocket and flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups around. “I see. So that transmission yesterday was your work.”

Before it had been made clear that Shido had lost the earpiece, *Fraxinus* received a strange message. Although it had indeed been Shido's voice, after he confirmed Kotori's name and a number of things about the current situation,

the line closed abruptly, and they hadn't heard anything after that.

Kotori clicked her tongue too quietly for Mana to hear. She'd been careless. Her replies had likely confirmed the existence of the organization Ratatoskr for Mana.

Mana shrugged. "It's a simple thing to change one's voice within one's Territory."

"...Mm-hmm." Kotori pushed her hair back and narrowed her eyes. "What's your endgame? You must want something if you went to all the trouble of getting me out here, right?"

Eyes still trained on Kotori, Mana opened her mouth. "I have no intention of reporting this to my superiors."

"...Oh?"

"In exchange, please release my brother from Ratatoskr immediately."

Kotori frowned. "Meaning?"

"Meaning nothing. How could you allow my brother to be exposed to such danger? It's a far cry from reasonable to allow him to face Spirits without so much as a weapon, much less a Realizer."

"So you're saying from now on, he should hold a gun to the Spirits' heads and make them talk? That would make him no different from a rapist. Or are you a masochist?"

"Please do not joke with me." Mana's gaze grew even sharper, her tone firm. "What exactly do you believe Shido is? If I hadn't been there, Nightmare would have killed him."

"..." Kotori pinched her lips shut. She was under no obligation to share any further information.

Mana clenched her teeth. "Kotori. Kotori Itsuka. It's very regrettable. You are not fit to be my brother's sister. I cannot entrust him to a person such as yourself."

"...!" Kotori's expression stiffened, and she flicked her Chupa Chups stick upward. "Oh really? So if I'm not fit, what're you going to do about it?"

“I must consider taking in my brother’s person.”

“You can’t be serious.” Kotori grimaced. “You’re saying hand Shido over to a corrupt company like DEM?”

Mana uncrossed her arms, shocked, shoulders shaking. “...! How did you—?!”

“Got a friend who’s in the know. Looks like we both got each other by the throat,” Kotori declared.

Mana exhaled slowly. “Well, if you’ve discovered that, there’s no need to hide it. Yes, it is not the case that I was originally with the SDF. When I was sent by DEM Industries, I was merely assigned an appropriate rank.” Her gaze became sharp again. “However, I cannot simply let pass you saying DEM is corrupt. They took me in after I lost my memory and gave me a reason for existence. I cannot thank them enough.”

“...Seriously? Then you’re clearly insane.”

“How rude. Do you even hear yourself?”

Kotori sensed something off in Mana’s tone. *Does she...?*

“Hey, do you not know...? About your body, I mean.”

“My body? What are you talking about?” Mana looked at her, baffled.

“...!” Kotori gulped, a shiver running up her spine. “...What?”

This wasn’t entirely unexpected. Reine had worried that this was the case, but Kotori couldn’t believe she was right. She frowned, walked over to Mana, and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?”

“...You have to listen to me. You of all people need to leave DEM. Ratatoskr will take care of you.”

“Excuse me...? Why are you suddenly—?” Mana furrowed her brow.

Before she could finish, her cell phone began to ring, along with Kotori’s at almost the same moment.

Kotori frowned in annoyance before picking up. “It’s me. What?”

“C-Commander! There’s a powerful Spirit signal at Raizen High School!”

“What...?” She glanced over at Mana. From the look on her face, it seemed that she was receiving similar news.



Shido took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. He tried to replace all the air in his lungs to reset his body.

“Wohkay.”

The time was 4:30 PM. Around him, he could hear the voices of students heading off to practice and other extracurricular activities.

He hadn’t spoken with Kurumi again after their earlier exchange. When last homeroom ended, she had quickly slipped out of the classroom without so much as a glance in his direction.

“...You’re okay, right, Shin?” an excessively sleepy voice asked over the earpiece in his right ear. Reine.

“Yeah. I’m surprisingly calm.”

“...That’s the most important thing. But make sure you’re very careful.”

“I know.” He swallowed hard. And then a question popped into his mind. “Reine? I just realized I’m not hearing Kotori’s voice...”

“...Oh, Kotori stepped out for a minute.”

“Wait. Why would she step out at an important time like now...?”

“...She is very aware of how important it is. But after taking that into consideration, she decided that this would increase the chances of success for the mission... External interference would cause the most trouble.”

“Huh...? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“...You concentrate on Kurumi. She’s not so weak that you’ll be able to seduce her without being completely focused on the job.”

“...! Y-you’re right.” He was curious about this “interference,” but Reine was correct. He had to keep his mind on Kurumi and Kurumi alone. She was probably already waiting for him on the roof. He turned toward the stairs.

“Wha—?!” He frowned. He felt a sudden change in the world around him. He didn’t know what was happening physically, but the area abruptly grew darker, and an extraordinary feeling of weariness and lethargy came over him. A heaviness tangled his limbs, as though the air had transformed into a viscous fluid.

“Wh...at...is...?” He somehow managed to keep from dropping to his knees. But the students around him sank to the floor, groaning in agony. Frankly, it was a bizarre sight.

“Ah...! Hey! Are you okay...?!” He hurriedly shook the shoulders of a girl who’d collapsed next to him. But she must have passed out; he got no reaction.

“Reine. What is...happening...?!”

“...We’ve confirmed a strong Spirit signal in a region centered on the high school. There’s no mistake—the signal is Kurumi’s work. A large force field... Looks to be the type that weakens all humans inside of it.”

“Wh-why would she...?”

“...Faster to ask her that yourself,” Reine told him. And she was exactly right.

Shido swallowed hard and straightened up. He felt like it was a little hard to move, but not to the point where he was going to fall down. “Oh. So then why am I...?”

“...Did you forget, Shin? You’ve got Tohka’s and Yoshino’s Spirit powers locked inside of you. You might not actually feel it, but it’s basically like your body is protected by Spirits.”

“Spirit power...,” he murmured, and then his eyes flew open. Shido opened the door of the classroom he’d just come out of and shouted, “Tohka!”

She should have still been inside. He told her to go on ahead of him since he had something to do, but she had insisted on waiting until he came back.

There were about ten students left in the classroom, and all of them were passed out on the floor or at their desks. And in the midst of this...

“Oh, Shido,” Tohka said, holding her head. Although the better part of her power was sealed off, she was indeed a Spirit. It seemed she had more

endurance against Spirit power than a human being.

“Are you okay?!”

“Mm.” She groaned like she was tortured by a high fever, and her head wobbled. “But I feel kinda heavy... What’s happening...?”

“...*Shin.*”

He heard Reine’s voice in his ear. He knew what she was going to say.

“Tohka, rest here. I’m going to do something about this right now!”

“Shi...do...?”

“It’s okay. I’ll save you.” He gently stroked her hair before bracing himself and stepping out into the hallway.

Kurumi was on the roof.

He ripped through the air that clung to him to climb the stairs. He silently yelled at his exhausted legs to keep on going and somehow made it to the door that led to the roof. It was unlocked.

Actually, to be more precise, the area beneath the knob was smashed up like it had been shot with a gun, and it no longer fulfilled its function as a lock.

He didn’t have to think too hard to know that this was Kurumi’s doing. He took a deep breath before grabbing the knob and opening the door.

“Ngh.” He grimaced. The viscous air didn’t let up in the slightest when he set foot onto the roof. In fact, he felt like the heavy blanket of lethargy covering him grew heavier.

He looked to both sides. A desolate space encircled by a tall fence. And in its center...

“Welcome. I’ve been waiting for you, Shido.”

Kurumi pulled up the hem of her frilly Astral Dress and curtsied.



“...!” Origami felt the abnormality when she was walking down the first-floor hallway of the east building.

It was like the world did a one-eighty in the blink of an eye. An incredible sluggishness overcame her, like her vitality was being sapped from her skin into the air. The students around her started to collapse.

“Ngh.” She couldn’t lose consciousness now. With this snap judgment, she pulled a device small enough to fit in the palm of her hand from her pocket and put a finger on the surface sensor as she moved her lips. “Identification. AST. Origami Tobiichi.”

Fingerprint and voice authentication were complete in an instant. The device deployed with an electronic beep.

“Basic Realizer launch,” she commanded and touched the device to the transmitter that protruded the tiniest bit from the back of her head.

A Territory snapped into existence around her, just large enough for her to fit neatly inside, and the weariness that tortured her faded. At the same time, she felt an intense pain in her head, like a bomb had exploded in her brain. She gritted her teeth.

“Deploy wiring suit.”

A faint light flashed inside the Territory, and in the next moment, her high school uniform turned into the AST standard wiring suit.

“...! ...Ngh.” Although the headache at last went away, she still fell to her knees on the spot.

This emergency device allowed her to instantly deploy the suit she usually equipped at the base. It was all fine and good that she had permission to carry it in case of emergency, but she didn’t think she would ever get used to the way it felt to actually use it.

Equipped with a basic Realizer, this device could deploy a Territory in theory. And once she was inside that Territory, then it was a simple matter to change outfits in a flash.

To do so, however, it was necessary to deploy the Territory without a wiring suit, albeit only for an instant. It was impossible to describe the load on the brain in that moment... Well, Mana somehow managed to perform this operation without any difficulties.

“...”

Once she was breathing normally again, Origami expanded her Territory to the usual three-meter radius.

Although the Spirits and the AST were confidential matters, this was an emergency. Plus, if everyone was passed out, then she didn't need to worry about being watched.

She didn't know what was happening to the school. She could easily imagine that Kurumi Tokisaki was involved.

“...!” Origami issued commands in her brain, neutralizing gravity, and kicked at the floor to speed down the hallway with incredible force.

At the same time, she heard Ryouko over the transmitter equipped in her headset. “—Origami?! The fact that this line's open means you used the emergency equip, yeah? We're measuring a powerful Spirit signal around your school right now! Status?!”

“A range field has been put up. It's extremely dangerous. Request back—” Origami cut herself off. “...Ngh.”

The reason was simple. A girl of concentrated shadow stood up ahead of her. She was not wearing the usual high school uniform but rather a gothic dress in red and black.

“Hee-hee-hee. Origami.” She placed a hand to her mouth, giggling. “Where could you be off to in such a hurry?”

“Kurumi Tokisaki.” Origami's eyes sharpened, and she put a hand to her hip to grab the hilt of her laser blade.

“What on earth's going on, Origami?!”

“—Contact with Spirit. Engaging.”

“...! What?! It's too dangerous. Retre—”

She needed to focus. Origami gave a command in her mind, and the transmission ended abruptly.

“Hee-hee.” Still giggling, Kurumi continued. “I would rather you did not

interfere just now. I can't allow you to go any farther than this."

"...?" She frowned slightly. She didn't understand what Kurumi was talking about. But that, too, was only for an instant. There was no need to listen to the ravings of a Spirit on the battlefield.

Origami tightened her grip on the hilt of her No Pain laser blade.



"Shi...do... Shido!!" Tohka called after him. But there was no sign of him returning. She dragged heavy feet and started to walk. "Shido..."

The words he'd spoken echoed in her mind.

It's okay. I'll save you.

Such strong, reassuring words. Just hearing him say that blew away all the sadness and anxiety lurking in her heart.

At the same time, the face of a new anxiety peeked out.

After all, he'd said the same thing two months ago when he'd reached a hand out to her, and a month ago when he'd headed off toward Yoshino's barrier. It had felt the same both times. She was sure he would save everyone. He wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice himself to that end if that was what it took. That was the kind of person who had saved her.

"Aaah!" She lost her balance, got tangled up between desk and chair, and fell to the floor. "Ngh. Gah..."

She tried to stand up once more but couldn't get her legs under her. It was hopeless. There was no way. But she didn't have the time to crawl. She had to get to Shido right now.

"Shido... Shido... Shido...!!" she shouted and suddenly felt something shake loose in her head. "Wh-what...?"

She knew this sensation.

Last month, when Yoshino had manifested her Angel and was about to shoot a beam of light at Shido, she'd realized that he would die if that happened. In that moment, her head had swooned. And her Astral Dress and Angel had manifested.

“...This is...!” she cried out, as she looked down at herself. Although it wasn’t complete, her Astral Dress with its films of light had wrapped itself around her body once more.

She felt lighter than she could have even thought possible a second ago. She leaped to her feet and stood up tall.

“Okay... I can do this!” She clenched her hands into fists and left the classroom. “Shido! Where did you go, Shido?!”

There was no reply.

In that case, her only option was to search the area. She raced down the hallway and then gasped and jumped backward.

“...?! ”

For good reason. A bullet-like object was closing in on her from the opposite end of the hallway, drawing a black trajectory in the air.

“Wh—?! Who’s there?! ” she shouted.

Slow footsteps echoed in the shadowy corridor.

Finally, she was able to make out who it was.

“...! You—”

“Hee-hee-hee. A pleasure, Tohka. Would you be so kind as to spend a moment with me?”

The girl in a dress, clutching a gun—Kurumi Tokisaki—had one corner of her mouth sliding upward in a grin.



“Kurumi... What exactly are you doing?! What’s this barrier...?! ” Shido asked, standing on the roof of Raizen High, spreading his hands out.

“Hee-hee-hee, wonderful, isn’t it?” Looking pleased as punch at his reaction, Kurumi grinned even more broadly. “This is the City of Devouring Time. It’s a barrier that sucks up the time of anyone who steps into my shadow.”

“Sucks up...time...?” he parroted doubtfully.

Kurumi walked over to him, giggling, and pushed back her hair in a graceful

gesture, revealing the left eye that was normally hidden by her bangs.

“Wha...?” His eyebrows knitted together when he saw it.

It was obviously wrong. Numbers and needles in an inorganic gold. Yes. Her left eye was the face of a clock. And strangely, its hands were spinning around counterclockwise.

“That’s—”

“Hee-hee, this is my time. I suppose you could also call it life or a life span,” Kurumi explained, as she whirled around. “My *Angel* has simply marvelous, amazing power. But the price to use it is horribly high. Each time I use its power, it devours a vast amount of my time. So I make sure to occasionally replenish it from outside like this.”

“Wh—?!” A shiver ran up his spine. After all, if what she was saying was true, then everyone collapsed inside this barrier was having what was left of their lives sucked away.

When she saw the look on his face as he came to this realization, her expression grew a little sad for some reason. But she quickly plastered over that with a lurid smile and nudged his chin up with a finger.

“That’s how it is with Spirits and humans. You’re all my pitiful, pretty food. There’s nothing more, nothing less than that.” Her face twisted up as if she were challenging him. “Aah. But, Shido. You alone are different. You alone are special.”

“...Me?”

“Yes, mm-hmm. You’re incredible. I’ve come all this way to become one with you.”

“What...?” He frowned. “Become one... What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means exactly what it sounds like. I wouldn’t kill you or anything. There would be no purpose in that. I am granting you the honor of being *eaten* by me.”

He couldn’t tell whether this “eat” was literal or metaphorical, but it was enough to make something churn in the pit of his stomach. He couldn’t flinch

now, however. He clenched his hands into fists.

“If I’m what you’re after, then you should just go after me! Why would you —?!” he shouted.

“Hee-hee-hee. It was getting closer to the hour for me to replenish my time. But...” She abruptly shot him a sharp look. “Before I eat you, I really must have you take back those words you spoke this morning.”

“This morning?”

“Yes. That nonsense about saving me or what have you.”

“...!” He unconsciously gasped at how cold her eyes were on him.

“Say, Shido? Don’t you think I’m frightening for doing these things to fulfill my agenda? Don’t you just despise me for involving people who have nothing to do with this? Isn’t it obvious that I am not the sort you could say a word like ‘save’ to?” Kurumi gestured theatrically as she continued. “Which is why I would ask that you take those words back. And I’d appreciate it if you could promise not to say them again. If you do that, I might be inclined to take down this barrier. After all, my original objective was you, Shido.”

“Wha...?” His eyes grew wide. This was too easy. To the point where he wondered if she wasn’t trying to trick him.

“...Kurumi’s serious,” Reine whispered over his earpiece, as if reading his mind. *“I can’t see any sign in her mental state that she’s lying. Shin, if you agree to this condition, she really will release the barrier.”*

Kurumi twisted back and forth, an eerie smile rising up onto her lips. “Kee-hee-hee! Hee-hee! Now, you really must hurry and stop me. Otherwise, there might well be some people for whom it is too late, hmm?”

“...Ngh.” Shido met her eyes.

All he had to do was take back what he said. That was it. There was nothing to it. And if he didn’t, he exposed any number of people inside the barrier to the risk of losing their lives. His back was against the wall. He made his decision.

“...Take down the barrier,” he demanded.

Kurumi sighed. Almost as if in relief. “Then you must say it. You mustn’t say

you will save me or any of that nonsense anymore.”

Shido swallowed hard. "I...can't do that."

“What...?” Kurumi gaped, eyes and mouth wide open. She looked ridiculous. He’d never seen an expression like this on her face before. “Oh my. Oh dear.”

Her face quickly clouded over with dissatisfaction.

“Did you not hear me? So long as you do not retract your comments, I will not release my barrier.”

“...! Take it down. Right now!”

“Then say it.”

"I won't! I can't take back what I said!" Shido shouted and shook his head.

After all, if he took that back, nothing would change. He would never be able to extend a hand to Kurumi again.

“—I do despise unreasonable people!” she cried and stepped back to get some distance from him. She threw her right hand up above her head.

The air began to shudder around it.

Vwnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnmmmmm.

“...! The spacequake alarm...?!” Shido groaned, face twisting up in fear. He had heard this sound so often it was eternally drilled into his brain—the signal that a spacequake was about to occur, the spontaneous catastrophe that devoured this world.

For a moment, he thought another Spirit had appeared somewhere else nearby. After all, it was the distortion in space-time when a Spirit appeared in this world that caused the spacequakes.

Kurumi's mad grin, however, silently rejected this possibility.

This spacequake was one that she was deliberately trying to trigger.

He had never heard of a Spirit being able to do a thing like that. This situation, however, was proof that they could.

“Kee-hee! Kee-hee-hee! Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Sooo, what

shall you do? I wonder whatever would happen to all the people inside the barrier if a spacequake were to occur now, hmm?”

“...!” He didn’t know what to say.

Normally, when the foreshocks of a spacequake were detected, all residents in the area evacuated to underground shelters, but in this case the people inside Kurumi’s barrier had passed out. There was no way they’d be able to evacuate.

However...

A question abruptly popped up in his mind.

Not noticing this change in him, Kurumi licked her lips triumphantly. “Now then, Shido? What shall it be? Aren’t you terrified of me? I’m very loathsome, yes? Can you say the same thing even now? You’re weak flesh to a powerful predator!”

“ ...”

Why?

Even though his heart was pounding and his breathing was ragged, his mind was so calm he almost couldn’t believe it.

One question: Why was Kurumi trying so hard to make him take back what he said?

After all, it was nothing. Whatever he said, words were words. If her objective was to “eat” him, then she could just do that, regardless of his argument. So why was she so taken up with this?

Kurumi, the supposedly powerful predator. The words of the supposed weak flesh that was Shido.

“...Shin,” Reine called out in his ear. *“...Kurumi’s mental state is changing. Almost like... The numbers look like she’s afraid of you.”*

“What...?” he whispered, quietly enough to keep Kurumi from hearing him, and frowned slightly.

She was afraid of him?

This was so removed from reality that for a moment, he was completely baffled. But he got it soon enough.

“Ohhh. She is.” He exhaled carefully and looked at her once again.

A Spirit so afraid, so terrified she could hardly stand it.

“Now! Shido, what will you do? If you do not take back your words, many, many people will die. You do realize that, don’t you?!” Kurumi brandished her right hand high in the air and clenched it into a fist, never taking her eyes off of him.

Eeeeeeeeeeen. An earsplitting noise reverberated through the area, almost as if the air itself was shrieking.

“Ngh.” There were words that he had to say to Kurumi. There were conversations they had to have. But right now, he had to do something about this spacequake. Without taking back what he’d said.

He desperately racked his brains and then suddenly remembered something she’d said earlier. “...Kurumi.”

“What is it? Heh-heh, you’re finally inclined to retract?” she asked, breaking into an audacious smile.

He ignored this. “You said...your goal was to eat me.”

“Yes. That’s right. There would be no meaning in killing you or some such. You will live on forever inside of me. Hee-hee-hee, wonderful, hmm?”

“...” Now he was sure of it. He spoke to Reine in a quiet voice, “Reine. Even if I —, I’ll be okay, right?”

“...? Mm-hmm. With your recovery ability, I think you’ll be all right as long as your luck isn’t terrible... What exactly are you planning?”

“I see.” He ran from the spot where he stood to the edge of the roof and clambered up the tall fence. He stood on top of it and turned his face toward Kurumi.

“...!” She looked perplexed. “What are you planning to do?”

“Stop the spacequake. Otherwise—” He snapped a finger out toward the

courtyard. “—I’ll fall from here and die!”

“Hah... Huh...?!” she cried, stunned. She clearly had not been expecting this. “Wh-what are you saying? Have you gone mad?”

“I hate to disappoint, but I’m perfectly sane. I can’t take back what I said this morning. I wouldn’t be able to save you anymore.”

Kurumi screwed up her face, unhappy, but Shido ignored this.

“But I can’t let you cause a spacequake. So—”

“So you’re using yourself as a hostage? Honestly, there is such a thing as being too simplistic. Don’t you realize you’re not a fugitive from justice backed into a corner?!”

Shido had to laugh at this. It made him remember those scenes from movies and overseas news footage where the criminal holds a gun to their own head. It was the crazy act of a desperate person, someone with no other means left to them in the end.

Given that he himself was Kurumi’s target, however, this was absolutely not a meaningless act. She had gone to the trouble of transferring to his high school to capture him. He was fairly certain his life had value as a hostage.

Kurumi scowled and let out a short sigh. “Did you really think this sort of threat would be effective? If you are prepared to jump, then go ahead and try it!”

“...Okay,” he said in a quiet voice and threw himself off the opposite side of the fence.

Even though he was dizzyingly high up, he was strangely unafraid. Maybe he was in an excited state due to some secretion in his brain and this had numbed his terror.

“—!”

“...Shin?!”

He heard Kurumi gasp and Reine call to him.

He felt a strange buoyancy as his body plunged toward the ground.

“...! ...Ngh.”

He nearly lost consciousness. It was like the sudden drop on a roller coaster. He couldn't breathe, his limbs were numb, and his bladder threatened to let go.

In the middle of his descent, however, someone caught him, jerking him to a halt.

“...Ungh?!” The sudden jolt pushed an idiotic grunt from his throat.

Kurumi's torso had materialized from the shadow crawling along the school wall, and she had caught him in something like a princess carry.

“H-hey, Kurumi—”

She stepped completely out of the shadow and climbed the vertical wall of the school with Shido still in her arms. Once they were back on the roof, she tossed him aside in a tangled ball.

“Ah...” He finally exhaled. “I thought I was a dead man...”

“Of! Course! You! Did!” Kurumi shouted, overwrought. “I cannot *believe* you! What were you thinking?! What was your thought process?! If I had not been here, you truly would have died! Don't you know that?!”

“Aah. Right. Yeah... Thanks.”

“Do you care so little for your life?!”

“Uh, you don't get to say that...,” he interjected.

“Aaaaaaah, honestly!” She pulled at her hair. “You are *such* a fool!”

“Kurumi.” He stood up and turned to her. “Why did you save me?”

“...! Because if you were to die, I would be unable to accomplish my objective.”

“Oh yeah? So then I do have value as a hostage, huh?”

“...!”

“Okay then, how about you stop the spacequake?!” He pointed a finger at her. “And take down this barrier while you're at it! Otherwise, I'll bite my tongue off and die!”

“Y-you’re bluff—”

“You think I’m bluffing?”

“Hngh...” She looked vexed for an instant before snapping her fingers.

The earsplitting squeal that filled the air stopped. This was followed by the disappearance of the heavy air blanketing the area.

“W-well, I don’t mind doing so. After all, my original objective was you, Shido. There is absolutely no problem with that. No issues whatsoever!” she cried, as if trying to convince herself, throwing her hands open and turning toward him.

Shido had no intention of simply sitting quietly and getting eaten. “Okay. Maybe you could do one more thing for me?”

“Th-there’s more...?!” she cried out, baffled.

He nodded. “Just one time’s enough. Kurumi. Would you let me give you just one chance to do this over?”

“What...?” Her eyes flew open in surprise, and then she quickly frowned. “Are you still talking about that? I’d ask that you refrain please. Your ‘help’ is not wanted. I love killing and being killed! You have no right whatsoever to say anything to me!” she shouted, as if to reject him.

In place of the frightening unfathomableness of her voice up to that point, he heard something like fear in it now.

Reine’s words came back to him. Yes. He was sure Kurumi was afraid. No one had ever before held a hand out to her, and she was fearful of this unfamiliar gesture.

“Kurumi. You... Have you ever had a life where you’re not killing anyone and no one’s trying to kill you?” he whispered.

“...!” She trembled. “That’s...”

“So then you don’t know, do you? You don’t know if killing and being killed every day is the best way! You just might end up liking a new kind of quiet life...!”

“But it’s—”

“You can do it! With me!” he shouted, and she gasped, overwhelmed. “I can’t forgive everything you’ve done. You’ll have to spend the rest of your life making up for it! But...! No matter how wrong you are, Kurumi! There’s no reason I can’t save you!”

“...!” She retreated a few steps.

As if chasing after her, he took a step forward.

“I—I... I—” Her eyes raced around, confused, and she cried out, “Shido, could I...really...?!”

“—No, noooo. Don’t be fooled by his words.”

A voice came from out of the blue.

Shido frowned suspiciously. After all, the voice he’d just heard was...

“Hngee...?!” Kurumi made a strange sound in front of him.

“Kurumi...?” He turned toward her...and froze.

“No. Ah. Ah...” Her eyes were wide, the orbs practically leaping from their sockets, and her pained voice echoed in the air.

He dropped his gaze. A single red hand protruded from her chest.

“Huh...” He finally understood what had happened.

Someone had popped up behind her and ripped right through her.

“I—I. Am.”

“Yes, yes, I understand. That’s why—” The hand yanked free from Kurumi’s chest, and the Astral Dress cloaking her melted into the air, exposing her pale skin. “—you can go to sleep now.”

“Ngh.” She collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut. Her body shuddered once before going completely still.

“Wha...?” Shido couldn’t move. It was all too sudden; his brain couldn’t keep up.

After all, standing behind Kurumi was...

“Oh dear me. Whatever is the matter, Shido? Your face is pale.”

...Kurumi Tokisaki herself.

“Ku...rumi...? Huh? How...?” He looked at the Kurumi he’d been talking to before turning his gaze on the new one.

There was no mistake; it was definitely Kurumi. Hair black as shadows, pearly skin, the clock shining in her left eye—all of it was the same.

He couldn’t see any of the confusion that had been on the face of the Kurumi who had collapsed. This one was wearing a bewitching, confident smile.

“Honestly. That girl really does cause all kinds of trouble.” Kurumi flicked the blood off her arm as countless hands grew up from the shadows and pulled Kurumi’s corpse into the darkness. “Getting that flustered! The version of myself from *that time* might have been a little young still, hmm?”

“Wh—?”

“Ohhh. But...but...! Your words were wonderful, Shido. I hope you know that.” She twisted back and forth in delight as she laughed.

He stood rooted to the spot, at a loss for words. He didn’t understand.

Just now, there had been two Kurumis before him. *Kurumi killed Kurumi, and the first Kurumi was eaten by the shadow.*

“What...is...?” he squeaked, dumbfounded.

“Now, now.” She laughed even more adorably. “How about we end this dull game?”

Hands sprang up from below him and grabbed tightly on to his legs.

“Whoa...?! ”

“I will now...have your power, Shido.” She approached him and reached out her hand to pat his cheek. It was so cold.

And then she half screamed, “Hngee...!”

It looked to him like a white shadow dropped from the sky, and the hand Kurumi was touching him with danced up into the air before dropping down to the ground.

“—Oh dear... Oh my.” Grimacing in pain, she whirled around and leaped

backward.

A second later, Shido saw another person added to the space between himself and Kurumi.

“Mana!”

“Yes. You were in another dangerous situation, it seems,” Mana commented, outfitted in her wiring suit, massive laser blade equipped in both hands, as she glanced toward him.

She quickly readied her shining blade once more and sent a sharp gaze after Kurumi. “It seems you’ve been putting on quite a show, Nightmare.”

“Ngh. Hee-hee! Hee-hee! I know it’s always like this, but I’m impressed. I can’t believe you sliced through my Elohim so easily!”

“Hmph. Sorry, but an Astral Dress is pointless against me. Be quiet and—”

Kurumi spread out her hands dramatically and whirled around on the spot. “Buuuuut... I really cannot *allow* you to kill *this* me, hmmm.”

She stamped her feet against the ground rhythmically.

“Now, then! Now, then! Come to me. Zaaaaaaafkiel—Time Emperor!”

A massive clock slowly appeared from the shadow behind her. The enormous dial was nearly twice her height, with hands in the center that were an intricately ornate ancient rifle and pistol.

“...! Is this...an Angel?!” Shido cried out.

An Angel. The miracle made manifest. A Spirit’s sole weapon, boasting absolute power.

“Hee-hee-hee...” Kurumi laughed, and the gun that was the short hand came off the face of the massive clock and made its way into her hand.

“Zafkiel. Fourth Bullet Dalet,” she chanted, and a shadow oozed from the *IV* carved into the clock to be sucked into the barrel of her pistol.

Shido watched this and narrowed his eyes.

The moment the shadow spilled out of the number, the clock of her left eye started to turn in the correct direction at a terrifying speed.

“Wha...?” Mana’s dubious voice reached his ears. He couldn’t see her face from this position, but he had no doubt that her expression was very similar to his own.

Kurumi placed the barrel of the pistol under her own chin.

“What the—?” Mana started.

Kurumi grinned and pulled the trigger without the slightest hesitation.

Bang! Her head flew back.

This was clearly a suicide.

Shido and Mana, however, were forced to revise that narrative in their heads a moment later.

“Huh...?” He himself was aware that he looked like a slack-jawed idiot. Anyone who witnessed this scene would no doubt have had the same look on their face.

The moment Kurumi shot herself with the gun, her severed hand danced up from the ground into the air like a movie being rewound and flew back to her. When this hand touched her arm, it connected and fused together very neatly like nothing had happened to it. Perfectly complete with the long glove.

“Hee-hee-hee. You’re a good one, hmm, Zafkiel.”

“...I haven’t seen that trick before,” Mana said, annoyed. “I see. That’s a very impressive ability to recover.”

“Kee-hee-hee! Hee-hee.” Kurumi shook her head, giggling. “That is not what it is. I just *turned back* time.”

“What did you say?” Mana’s brows knitted together.

Kurumi only responded with an audacious smile before brandishing her right hand high in the air. The long hand of the clock Zafkiel behind her—the rifle slipped into that hand.

“Aah, aah, Mana. Dear Mana. Today alone, I’m afraid you will have to allow me to win.” She readied the two guns in front of the hands-less clockface. Almost as though she were indicating a time. “Now then, shall we begin? I’m

delighted to show you my Angel.”

“—Hmph. That’s perfectly fine with me. I will kill you just as I always do.”

Kurumi laughed like this was the funniest thing in the world. “Kee-hee! Hee-hee! Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! You stiiiiiiiill don’t understand? You can neeeeeeeeeever *completely* kill me!”

“That’s got nothing to do with anything,” Mana replied. “It’s my mission and my reason for living to keep murdering you. If you do not fall, I’ll kill you until you fall, and if you do not die, I’ll kill you until you die.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. Aaah, is that so? I see, I see. You’re that sort of person. Heh-heh-heh! Heh-heh! Aah, oh my, that’s rich. I love this. So whatever shall you do? Will you remove my head? Pierce my chest? Sever all my limbs?”

“Hmph. I know a single creature who has come back to life from each of those attacks. I shall atomize you so that not a single particle remains.”

“Oh-ho? That will be a first indeed. How wonderful. Simply marvelous!”

“As usual, you’re completely unhinged.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Doesn’t that go for you, too? Honestly, you don’t even cause me to raise an eyebrow any longer. Sad. When you first killed me, you still had that air of innocence about you.”

“I would appreciate you shutting up. Or perhaps you wish me to send your mouth and throat flying?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Heh-heh! I wonder if you could?” Kurumi brandished the pistol in her left hand. “Zafkiel. First Bullet Aleph.”

Shadow oozed out of the / on the clockface and was absorbed into the pistol. She once again turned the barrel toward her chin and pulled the trigger.

Kurumi was erased from the spot, and Mana was knocked off to the side.

“Hngh?!”

“Ah! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I suppose. You. Didn’t. See. Me?”

“...!”

Kurumi disappeared like mist again, and in the next moment, she materialized

behind Mana and brought her heel down on her back.

“Hngh!” Mana’s gaze sharpened, and Kurumi’s movements grew dull momentarily. Most likely, Mana’s Territory had caught her.

Mana slid her laser blade to the side to cut Kurumi in two, but the other girl was already dodging it and whirling around to land on the top of the water tower.

“Heh-heh! I’m impressed that you’re able to respond to my movements when my time is *sped up*!”

“Hmph. That’s an interesting ability, but it’s not so compatible with me and my Territory. As long as it can detect you, I’m able to read your movements.”

“Aah, aha, I suppose so. Well, then.” Once more, Kurumi moved toward Mana in a blur. “Zafkiel. Seventh Bullet Zayin!”

The shadow that began to ooze out of the VII on the clockface was sucked into her rifle. She immediately turned the barrel toward Mana and fired.

“I told you. It’s no use!”

There was no way the bullet would reach Mana within her Territory.

However...

“Huh?” Shido said, dumbfounded.

Mana froze in midair.

“Mana!” he shouted, but she didn’t move or respond in any way. It was almost like *time had stopped* for her.

“Aah! Ha!” Kurumi laughed and launched bullets at Mana.

Both of Kurumi’s guns were old-style, single-shot guns. Each time they fired a round, however, the shadow at her feet oozed up, became a bullet, and was loaded into the gun again.

A few seconds later, Kurumi came to stand on the ground again.

“Gaaaah?!” Mana also crashed to the ground, blood spilling out of her, after countless bullets had shot through her.

“Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Oh my goodness! Whatever is the matter?”

“Wh—? Just now...”

“Mana!” Shido shouted and raced over to Mana, who was kneeling on the ground.

“Bro...ther. It’s too dangerous. Please get back...”

“Idiot, what are you talking about?!”

Bam! He heard a door being thrown open behind him.

“Shido!”

“—Shido.”

Two new voices calling his name appeared on the roof.

“Tohka—and Origami?!” He wondered why they were able to move inside of Kurumi’s barrier, but that question disappeared when he turned to look at them. Tohka was clad in her Astral Dress and Origami in her wiring suit.

“Are you okay, Shido?!”

“Any injuries?”

They spoke at the same time and then glared at each other, irritated, before turning their eyes back on Shido.

They quickly noticed Kurumi ahead of them and a bloody Mana on her knees, and they moved to stand in front of Shido, facing Kurumi with sword and laser blade at the ready.

“Master Sergeant Tobiichi... Tohka,” Mana whispered, her breathing pained. “You’re both safe? But...Tohka. What is that dress?”

“Shido sister number two. What are *you* wearing?” Tohka asked dubiously. “It’s almost like AST—”

Mana and Tohka exchanged suspicious looks, but they were interrupted by peals of laughter.

“Oh my, oh my, oh my! Everyone’s all here,” Kurumi cried.

“Kurumi...!” Tohka gasped. “You ran away all of a sudden! So *this* is where you

were!”

“Your actions are incomprehensible,” Origami said. “What exactly is this?”

“Huh...?” Shido furrowed his brow. What were they talking about? “Ran away...?”

Tohka nodded, keeping her eyes on Kurumi. “She came and got in my way. But after that explosion before, she ran off somewhere.”

“That’s strange,” Origami objected. “Kurumi Tokisaki was locked in battle with *me*.”

“What?” Tohka looked doubtful for a moment but then quickly shook her head and turned her gaze back on Kurumi. “Too bad for you, Kurumi. I can’t show any mercy so long as you’re trying to hurt Shido.”

“I agree with that alone.” Origami, too, turned back to Kurumi.

“Heh-heh-heh! Heh-heh!” Kurumi spun around, seemingly happy. “Aah, ooh, I’m so scared. This is so frightening! Such powerful forces ready to attack poor, weak little me.” She giggled and giggled, clearly not meaning a bit of this. “But I’m also serious today. Isn’t that right, *girls*?”

“Huh?” Shido frowned.

“*Wha—?!*” Shido, Tohka, Origami, Mana—all four spoke as one.

Their shock was only natural. Countless white hands popped out from inside of Kurumi’s shadow covering the roof. And it wasn’t only hands. They had only shown themselves up to the elbow so far, but now, more of her gradually, steadily appeared aboveground.

“What...is this...?!” Shido cried out, his throat tightening.

The pale hands... They were all Kurumi. All of them, so many, practically filling the spacious rooftop.

Kurumi Tokisaki crawled out of the shadow in her Astral Dress.

“Hmm hmm!” “My goodness.” “Heh-heh-heh.”

“Oh my, oh my.” “Surprised?”

“Shido.” “Now, whatever shall we do?” “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee!” “You look quite tasty.”

“Now, then.” “Shall we play?”

“What do you think?” “Heh-heh!” “Hee-hee-hee!”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.” “What shall we do?”

Countless Kurumis laughed and chattered.

“Wh-what?!” Mana cried.

“Heh-heh-heh! Heh-heh!” Kurumi jerked her chin up as she spread her arms out, guns in either hand. “What do you think? Beautiful, isn’t it? This is my past. My history. These are the *mes* from various time axes.”

“Wh—?”

“Heh-heh-heh. That said, these *girls* are nothing more than copies of me, recreations. They don’t have as much power as I do, rest assured. So?” she continued. “Mana, do you see now the reason you cannot completely kill me?”

“...!” Mana gasped. As did Tohka, Origami, and Shido.

“Now, then.” Kurumi whirled around. “I shall put an end to this.”

“...! Don’t...underestimate me...!” Mana shouted.

Using her Territory, she forced herself to her feet and danced up into the air before making her equipment transform and firing multiple beams of light.

The light pierced several of the Kurumis squirming nearby, and they dropped to their knees. But the surrounding Kurumis evaded the attack and leaped into the air after Mana.



“Hmph!” Mana transformed her equipment once more and sliced at the assaulting Kurumis’ necks, arms, torsos. Scattered Kurumi “parts” tumbled across the roof.

When the gun-toting Kurumi in front of Zafkiel equipped Zayin, the Seventh Bullet, and launched it at Mana, she stopped for an instant in midair once again.

Taking advantage of this, a crowd of Kurumis clustered around her.

“Mana—!” Shido cried. But there was nothing he could do.

Tohka and Origami had set themselves up to protect him and were swinging their swords, but the difference in numbers was just too great. Kurumis swarmed from all sides and held them back.

There was nothing Shido could do. Kurumis grabbed his hands and pinned him down.

It all happened in less than five minutes.

This was the expected outcome. Tohka was unable to manifest her full powers, and Origami didn’t have her usual range of equipment. The battle had been decided the moment the Angel neutralized Mana, the only one who could likely resist the complete Spirit.

“Tohka... Origami... Mana...!” Shido managed to shout from where he was pressed to the ground.

“Ngh.”

“—”

Tohka and Origami were similarly pinned down nearby. They were both injured, and their breathing was labored.

He couldn’t see Mana from where he was. He only knew that she had fallen to the roof, but an overwhelming number of Kurumis blocked his view.

“Heh-heh-heh! Heh-heh!” Laughing lazily, the Kurumi with the gun approached him. “Aah, aah, it’s taken a long time. But now I can finally *have* Shido.”

“St-stop, Kurumi! Stay away from him!”

A few seconds later, the laughter was overwritten by a question mark.

Kurumi looked around doubtfully.

And no wonder. There had indeed been an earsplitting noise like time and space had scraped against each other. The air had shaken like a bomb had gone off nearby. But that was it.

“...?” Shido, too, frowned at the discrepancy.

He’d seen the aftermath of a spacequake any number of times, everything gone like space itself had been gouged away. But the town spread out as usual around Raizen High.

“What...is the meaning of this...?” Kurumi frowned.

“Oh, didn’t you know?” a new voice asked. “So when a spacequake comes up against a shaking of space on a similar scale happening at the same time, they cancel each other out.”

“...! And who would you be?” Kurumi’s face stiffened as she looked upward, gripping a gun in her right hand once again.

Shido also lifted his face, and his eyes grew wide.

The sky was red.

That was his first impression.

A ball of flames was floating above the roof, above the heads of Shido and the Kurumis. And inside the flames was a girl.

She was dressed in a traditional Japanese style. Kimono sleeves fluttered in the wind and shimmered as though they were almost one with the flames, and the flaming obi belt that wound around her waist and arms was like the raiment of an angel. Two inorganic horns grew out of her head. The look of a princess—or a demon.

But that wasn’t the reason Shido couldn’t take his eyes off of this girl. Dumbfounded, he opened his mouth.

“Ko...tori?”

Yes. Shido’s little sister, and the commander of Ratatoskr. The girl clad in

flames looked to be none other than Kotori Itsuka.

Kotori gradually descended and glanced down at him. “I’m just taking *this* back for a bit, Shido.”

“Huh...?” He frowned, unable to parse the meaning of this statement.

“...! That’s—” For some reason, Origami was colored with more shock than Shido had ever seen.

“—Burn, Camael,” Kotori ordered.

Flames flared up around her once more and formed a cylinder, an enormous staff.

When Kotori took this staff in hand, a bright red blade materialized from its side.

It was an impossibly large battle-ax.

Shido was stunned into silence as Kotori nimbly brandished this massive battle-ax and turned to Kurumi.

“Now, then. How about we start our ‘war’—a date?”

To be continued.

Afterword

It's been a while. I'm Koushi Tachibana. For those of you who bought all three volumes to binge-read, it's nice to meet you. I'm Koushi Fitzgerald Tachibana.

I've brought you *Date A Live: Killer Kurumi*. The structure is a bit different from the previous volumes. What did you think? I hope you enjoyed it.

By the way, the kanji characters for Kurumi are not read *Kyouzou*. That would clearly be extremely un-cute.

An announcement. Of all things, *Date A Live* is in the process of being made into an anime! That happened fast, huh? We're still only on Volume 3. The cougar's surprised, too.

I'd appreciate it if you could wait a little longer for a subsequent announcement of the details. Or rather, as I write this, I only heard about it two days ago, and I'm still in shock.

Hmm... An anime, huh? Just three years ago, I was an amateur, so this is a strange feeling. But now that I'm thinking about it, if I count from *Blue Sky Karma*, this would be my tenth book. That's a nice, neat number. It feels wonderful.

That I could have such important news is truly thanks to Tsunako, who always draws such magnificent illustrations for me; my editor, who sweats blood every volume; everyone on the publishing side; and everyone who has picked the books up.

Rather than get carried away, I would like to further polish my game. I do hope you'll continue to join me on this journey.

Now then, I'm sure all of you reading know this, but the cliffhanger to the next volume is more serious than usual this time.

And next time, for *Date A Live*, Vol. 4, a certain character will be on the cover at long last. I'll keep this a little vague for those of you who have not yet read the main text.

I pray that we will meet again.

Koushi Tachibana

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