

I SAVED GIRLS AND CAUSED THE APOLLO CALYPSE

LITTLE



14

Author: NAMEKOJIRUSHI
Illustration: NAO WATANUKI

**“R?!
What’s
wrong??”**

The doctor immediately called out to her. R was practically a daughter to the doctor, and she was worried. If R was contacting her this way, after all, then it wasn’t good news.

Agency
Researcher
**The
Doctor
(???)**





"Come
back
safe..."

She said
in her
usual
whisper.

REKKA NAMIDARE

A high school freshman. Thanks to the Namidare bloodline, he keeps getting involved with girls that are in trouble.

V
B
O
U
T

IRIS FINERITAS CYPERCALL

A high school freshman. A space princess who's presently studying to be a bride on Earth.

SATSUKI OTONO

A high school freshman. She is the girl-next-door childhood friend, and heir to the Omniscent Magic.

D
H
A
R
K
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C
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E
R

A demi-material being sent from the future in order to get Rekka together with a girl.

HARISSA HOPE

A sorcerer from another world. She lives at Rekka's place and helps out with the housework.

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**TETRA
METRA
PETRA**

Daughter of the mole people. After moving her people to the artificial world, she started a part-time job at Nozomiya.



**TSUMIKI
NOZOMI INO**



**HIBIKI
BANJO**

A second-year high schooler. A relative of Rekka's who carries the Banjo bloodline.



LEEA

Leviathan, the Strongest Beast. After losing most of her power, she's now living in human society.



**ROSALIND
BATHORY**

A high school freshman. Also a centuries-old vampire. She has strong opinions about maids.



**CHELSEA
MARGARET**

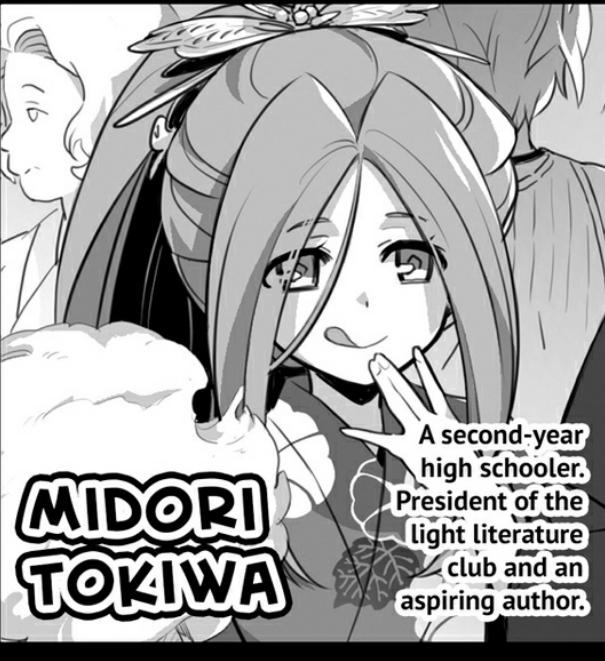
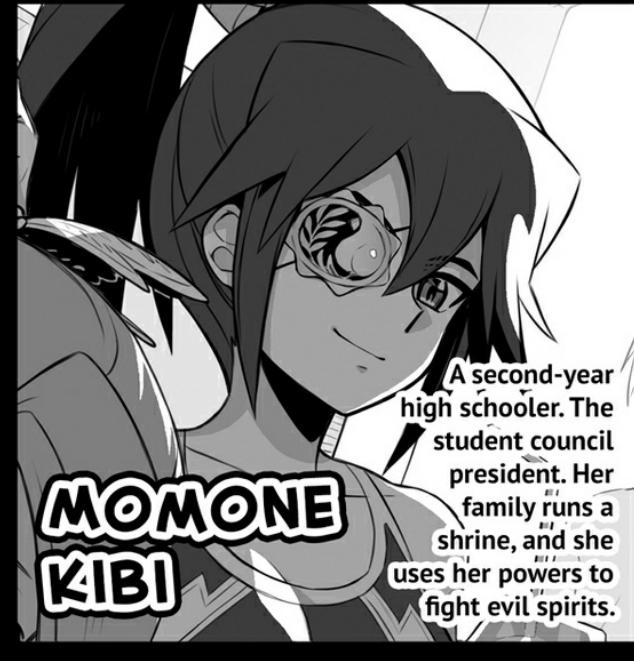
A wandering treasure hunter. Currently acting as a go-between for Rekka and the head of the Margaret family.



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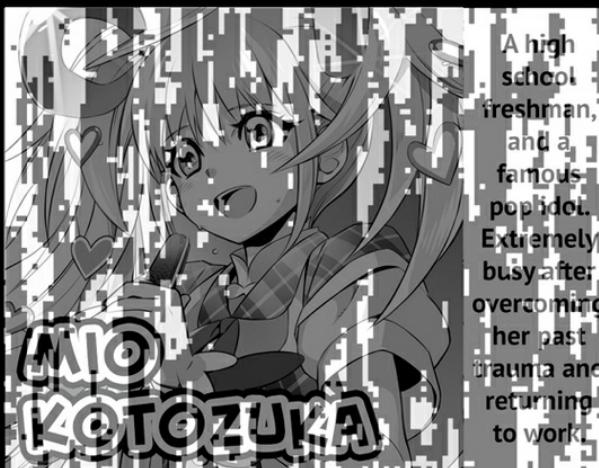


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A psychic. Part of the newly reformed organization working to protect psychics.



A high school freshman, and a famous pop idol. Extremely busy after overcoming her past trauma and returning to work.

ELLICA OTTO

MIO KOTOZUKA

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FLYING SYPHEED

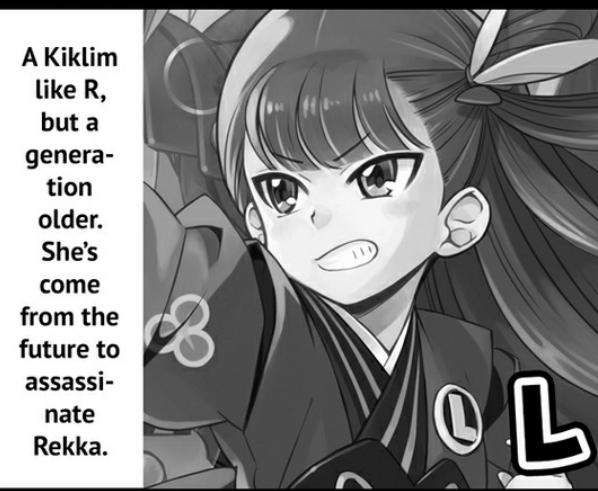
A greater wind spirit. Working with her little sister to help promote the alliance between spirits and sorcerers.



A former hero and Demon King of another world. She left her domain to a regent and is currently staying at Rosalind's mansion.

**ZAA
GARDENDOS
CORONA**

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A Kiklim like R, but a generation older. She's come from the future to assassinate Rekka.

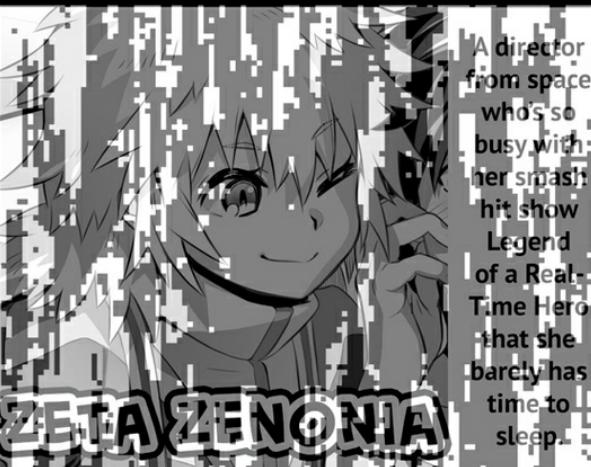


The kitten Rekka and Satsuki cared for as children who's taken the form of a nekomata. Currently living happily with the local yokai alongside the mole people.

L

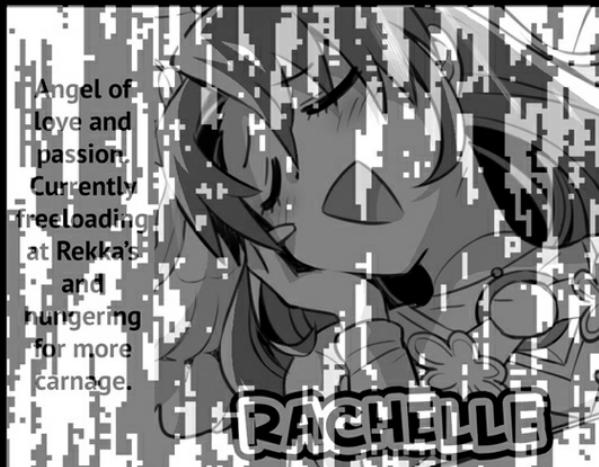
AI

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ZETA ZENONIA

A director from space who's so busy with her smash hit show Legend of a Real-Time Hero that she barely has time to sleep.



RACHELLE

Angel of love and passion. Currently freeloads at Rekka's and hungering for more carnage.

S E E T A C A H A G U O B B N



A nun/exorcist whose current mission is spreading the word of God at a church in Rekka's neighborhood.

YULIA



Third-year middle school student, superhero, and star of *Legend of a Real-Time Hero*.



The former ruler of the Atlantians. After waking up from cold sleep, she's now staying at the Great Library of the Heavens.

The former
ruler of the
Atlantians.
After
waking
up from
cold sleep,
she's now
staying
at the
Great
Library
of the
Heavens.

A samurai from the past currently living at the Great Library of the Heavens after being dismissed by her master, Princess Izuko.



A fairy
living a
peaceful
life in the
woods
near the
campsite
in the
mountains.
Loves to
see people
having fun.

POPPY



GYANYAN ATLANTA



**SHERLYN
4DOTEYES**

The glorious phantom thief. She's moved in with Chelsea and has her eyes set on Rekka for her next heist.



TOUKO IWAZU

The mysterious fortune teller behind the string of strange incidents at the school festival.



A knight
in the
game
world who
makes her
living
hunting
monsters
with her
massive
hammer.

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Prologue

In a distant future far after Rekka Namidare's time, during the age of the War of All, there existed an agency working to put an end to the fighting. It very well may have been the only organization of its kind—the only one willing to take a stand against the War of All.

And right now, that agency's headquarters was currently in the middle of being infiltrated by someone... or something.

"Ah, damn..."

A woman from the agency let out a tense sigh as she stared down at the smoking facility still under attack. She was a scientist, but not just any scientist—she was the woman R referred to as "Doctor." She was also an executive leader of the agency, but her scientific standing put her in an especially important position even among the other executives. It should come as no surprise, then, that she was the one put in charge of the agency's greatest project: ensuring Rekka Namidare settled down with a heroine in order to prevent the War of All from ever happening in the first place. And while the infiltrators' objectives were still unclear, it was more than plausible to think the doctor was really their target.

It'd be no laughing matter if I got captured.

There were plenty of groups, not to mention countries and worlds, that didn't approve of the agency. Power, politics, money, money, and more money... The War of All, true to name, affected everyone and everything. There were literally hundreds of millions of opinions and interests at play, and not everyone was interested in peace.

In the most extreme example, there were certain parties making bank off of the war. It was like an extended payday for them, and they weren't anxious to see it end any time soon. In fact, they would go to great lengths to make sure that never happened. The doctor would have loved nothing more than to line said parties up and —— them all... But, well, personal feelings had to be set aside for the time being.

Instead, the agency focused on the objective politics of the situation. It was thanks to that effort that they'd never been attacked directly before... At least, not until now.

"Hahh..."

The doctor let out another sigh. She couldn't afford to dawdle, but at the same time, she knew that panicking would only make things worse. She took a moment to focus and calm herself. She drew a deep breath and let the oxygen flow to her brain. Before anything else, she had to think.

"Who are we up against?"

For the most part, the agency was a neutral organization. Though there were the aforementioned parties who were none too pleased with the agency, they didn't dare oppose it directly. That meant that, whoever they were, these infiltrators were different in that they'd chosen to come forward with their hostility. It was hard to think some newly-formed cause would be powerful enough to come straight for the agency's headquarters like this. It was a possibility, certainly, but there were far more likely scenarios.

"..."

The defense system the doctor had developed for HQ was eliminating the infiltrators one after another right before her eyes. While the agency sought universal peace, it was by no means a peaceful organization. They were prepared to fight for their goals—and more than happy to defend themselves. The system the doctor's world-class brain had invented was capable of withstanding everything from cutting-edge technological attacks to otherworldly magical ones.

Yet as far as the doctor could tell, the intruders were doing a good job of holding their own against it. She didn't want to praise them, but they'd clearly planned this operation carefully. It seemed safe to assume at this point that they were more than just a bunch of trigger-happy terrorists. The possibility they were some new threat the agency had been oblivious to was becoming less and less likely by the minute. However...

That means that someone—and someone fairly strong—has to be behind this attack.

Their power said one thing, but so did their size. In a world where there were as many ongoing battles as there were stars in the sky, even the most powerful forces were always lacking in numbers. War had broken out everywhere, after all. So what was the meaning of an attack like this? Who would go out of their way to make new enemies now?

“Who would benefit from this attack?”

There was nothing to be gained from making an enemy of the agency... But then again, with so many parties and interests potentially at play, there had to be a bigger picture. Some part of this attack must benefit *someone*, whether it was in service to a military agenda, revenge, religious beliefs, or commercial profit. Maybe it was even personal. But, that being the case, the doctor had to change the way she was thinking about this.

“Okay, what’s currently going on with the agency?”

And so the doctor began deducing the enemy’s goal by working backward through the situation. The attack had started at dawn, and was presently still ongoing. Several facilities within the headquarters had been damaged or destroyed, though the vital areas of the most important facilities remained intact. Still, the agency couldn’t make a move until the attack was over.

“So... were they aiming to suspend the agency’s function?”

If the enemy was prepared to run this attack like a siege, the agency could be out of commission for some time. In other words, the enemy’s goal was—

“Doc... tor...”

Suddenly, a semi-transparent screen appeared before the doctor’s eyes. It was the doing of a long-distance communication device she used. But this screen was special—it connected her to the past. Moreover, the call was coming in on the lone emergency line—one she’d set up so that R could contact her safely and directly in the event of an emergency.

“R?! What’s wrong?!”

The doctor immediately called out to her. R was practically a daughter to the doctor, and she was worried. If R was contacting her this way, after all, then it wasn’t good news. A crisis here, a crisis there... Naturally, the doctor wasn’t

optimistic enough to believe the two incidents were unrelated.

But all the doctor's thoughts were interrupted when R's broken voice spoke to her through the device again.

"There's... no time... for details... Please... save... Rekka..."

Chapter 1: Daily Life 1

Beep, beep, beep! Beep, beep, beep!

I woke to the sound of my alarm before reaching over and slapping it silent.

“Ngh...”

It was too early for all that noise...

Now that fall was over, it was gradually getting colder out and rapidly getting harder to get up in the morning. Just ten more minutes would make all the difference. Yeah, just ten more minutes...

Telling myself that, I rolled back over.



Needless to say, I was late for school that day.

My history teacher paused mid-lecture to scold me personally before I slunk to my desk and silently pulled out my books. The teacher went right back to the lesson, but since I’d missed the first half of it, I had no idea where we were or what we were doing. I tried to remember what we’d covered last class and find my place in my textbook, but I hadn’t taken any proper notes... In the end, I gave up trying to figure it out. Stifling a yawn, I leaned back in my chair and just pretended to listen.

“...”

Glancing left and right, there wasn’t even anything particularly interesting to look at—just the window and the door. I had to fight back another yawn. The classroom was so boring. But just the classroom, mind you. I couldn’t say school was boring on the whole thanks to the troublesome bloodline I’d inherited from my father.



Come lunchtime, just as I was about to walk to the cafeteria, someone called out to me from behind.

“Namidare.”

“Yes?”

I turned around to see the vice president of the student council.

“Can I help you?” I asked, wondering if this was just the usual business.

“The president wants to see you.”

“Understood.”

I nodded obediently and followed her back to the student council office. As I walked through the door, I couldn’t help thinking about how much time I spent here for someone who wasn’t on the student council.

“Hey, Prez. You called?”

“Indeed. I’ve been waiting for you, Rekka Namidare.”

The to-the-point response I got came from the girl sitting at the desk farthest into the room as she beckoned me closer. It was, of course, none other than the One-Eyed Student Council President that ruled over Mitsuhashi High, Momone Kibi. She was most recognizable by the patch she wore over her right eye, but for the record, she wasn’t blind in it or anything. She just used the eyepatch to seal her spirit sight in her everyday life. Actually... putting it that way made it sound pretty abnormal, but abnormal *was* pretty normal for President Momone. I could only begin to imagine what she’d summoned me for.

“Yeah, so, uh... What’s up?” I asked.

“Nothing too serious this time,” she answered, tossing the papers she was holding onto the desk. “The guys in the soccer club are saying they saw something strange in the sports shed.”

“Something strange, you say?”

I raised an eyebrow at her vague phrasing. Chances were she had something very specific in mind when she said that.

“C’mere,” she said, beckoning me even closer.

I approached as ordered, and she threw her arm around my shoulder like usual, butting her forehead against mine as she leaned in close. Then she whispered in my ear so that the vice president wouldn’t hear...

“It seems like a stray yokai has taken up residence there. Just go talk to it.”

As soon as she said the word “yokai,” I had one thought: *I knew it.* That was what she’d really meant when she said “something strange.” You see, President Momone’s family ran a shrine that had made their living dealing with yokai for generations. I had to ask for her help with similar issues sometimes, and in turn, she would occasionally call me over to handle supernatural incidences around school on her busy behalf.

“I get that you want me to talk to it, but what if it’s violent and won’t listen like the last one?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve called Hito too, so go over there with him.”

“Hito? There’d be a lot of trouble if someone, say, you know...”

Hito was, well, a yokai that was basically just a giant floating head. If anyone so much as caught a glimpse of him—even in broad daylight—they’d probably scream bloody murder.

“Deal with it. Pon’s out on his part-time job distributing tissues.”

For the record, Pon was a tanuki that was more or less the leader of the local yokai. Since he could transform into a human, he acted as a go-between.

“Ah, that’s fair. It’s not like we could ask him to come help out with this while he’s at work.”

That go-betweening included working a part-time job to make enough money to feed everyone. It just wouldn’t feel right to take him away from that.

“Ah, ahumph... Ehem!”

Our conversation about it, however, was interrupted when the vice president cleared her throat in an overly exaggerated fashion.

“How long are you intending on standing so close, President?”

“Hm? Oh, you’re right.”

Once the vice president pointed it out, President Momone stepped back.

“Good grief... You’re too close to Namidare, President.”

“Hahaha, don’t be jealous.”

“What?! I am not jealous!”

The vice president blushed bright red at President Momone’s teasing. Although... the vice president probably had a point about President Momone’s lack of awareness about personal space. She was manlier than most high school boys, but she was beautiful to look at and it honestly made my heart skip a beat when she leaned in close like that. It’d be nice if she learned how to rein that in some. But, oblivious to my misery, President Momone was only laughing.

“It’s just me and the problem child. It’s not like you need to keep an eye on us, Vice President.”

“It’s a matter of public decency.”

“Isn’t it an abuse of your authority to try and reprimand us when there’s nothing unwholesome going on here? Don’t you think so too, problem child?”

“Honestly, I have to say I agree with the vice president...”

“See? Even Rekka Namidare agrees with the president’s opinion.”

President Momone smoothly ignored that I’d said *vice* president and only heard what was convenient for her.

“That said, I’m a blossoming young lady myself. I have my own interests in love, and no one has any right to say what I feel for whom.”

“Wha?!”

“Huh?!”

President Momone’s sudden declaration made the vice president and I both shout at once. But while our jaws were on the floor, she broke into a wicked grin.

“Hm? What’s wrong? I didn’t say a word about Rekka Namidare, now did I?”

“It’s nothing,” I replied as bluntly as I could, but her grin only broadened.

“Well, that’s how it is. I’m leaving the sports shed to you.”

“Hahh... You sure don’t hold back when it comes to favors,” I said a little unhappily, making President Momone smile wryly.

“Don’t be like that. I heard you were late again today.”

“Ugh, word sure spreads fast around here...”

“I’ll tell them you were helping out the student council as usual, so go earn your keep.”

“Yes, ma’am.” My shoulders slumped as I nodded and left the student council office. “Jeez. The president sure keeps a close eye on me...”

Honestly, my bloodline was such a pain. The so-called gift that I’d inherited from my father was constantly getting me caught up in the crazy stories that surrounded heroines in danger. That was how I’d gotten involved with the local yokai in the first place, not to mention everything else that had come of it. But all said and done, President Momone was definitely the one that pushed me around the most. Granted, helping her out counted as helping the student council, which was probably about the only good thing going on my student record right now.

“I had a lot of unexplained absences during the first semester, after all...”

In other words, I was now paying for that. Ever since my parents moved overseas for work, I haven’t had anyone to wake me up in the mornings, so the tardiness was something of an inevitability... But the unexplained absences were just me skipping school, I have to admit. Wait... Huh? Why *did* I have those unexplained absences again? And so many of them...

I said I was skipping school, but it’s not like I’m a delinquent or anything, you know? Really, I’m just your average high schooler. I’m no honor student, but I’m not a troublemaker, either. Actually, I guess I can’t say I’m average when my grades are markedly below average... But did I even have the guts to just straight-up skip school? I definitely remember taking those days off, though... Was I just too tired to come to school one day? And then... I just let it happen over and over? Was I just so in the doldrums that nothing really memorable happened?

“Have I stopped being attentive without Mom and Dad around...?”

Something about it all didn’t make sense, but I just had to resolve myself to be more diligent in the future. Tapping my own head in reprimand, I headed outside where Hito was waiting for me.



Negotiations with the yokai living in the sports shed went well. Hito should be taking him to Pon's place right about now. And so, eventually, the school day came to an ultimately uneventful end.

I quickly left my boring classroom and headed for the light literature club room, which was located on the second floor of the old school building. I climbed the creaky wooden stairs and made my way down the hall.

“Toki... Huh?”

When I opened the door, the room was empty.

“I’m pretty sure we were supposed to meet today...”

I checked my phone, but didn’t have any messages about a sudden cancellation.

“If she’s not here, then...”

From the club room, I made my way back into the main building. My destination was the nurse’s office. Walking against the grain of the flood of students in a hurry to leave school, I eventually made it there.

“Excuse me...”

“Hm? Oh, it’s you.”

The school nurse sure had a sharp tongue...

“You’re after Tokiwa, right? She’s sleeping over there.”

“Got it.”

So she was here after all. Tokiwa—Midori Tokiwa, the president of the light literature club—spent most of her school day in the nurse’s office. She even did her schoolwork here, and her condition sometimes impacted our club activities too.

“Tokiwa, it’s time for club,” I said, opening the curtain around her bed.

And to my surprise...

“T-T-Tokiwa?!”

“Mm... Rekka?” Tokiwa sleepily called my name as she rubbed her eyes.

But that wasn’t the surprising part. In her sleep, her shirt had ridden up, leaving her extremely exposed. Her b-bra was showing!

“Tokiwa! Fix your clothes!”

“...Mmwah?”

Tokiwa apparently wasn’t quite awake all the way, and moved slowly as she made herself decent. She may be my upperclasswoman too, but her lack of awareness was of a different flavor than President Momone’s.

“Ahem, anyway... Um, it’s time for club activities, so I came to get you,” I cleared my throat and informed her.

Tokiwa remained in a daze for a moment.

“...Carry me?” she ultimately replied, lifting her arms as if to ask for a piggyback ride.

She was probably too sleepy to walk on her own, but...

“Come on... Please use your own two legs.”

“Hmph...”

Tokiwa puffed out her cheeks in a pout. When she behaved so cutely, it almost made me buckle...

“Why don’t you just carry her, kid? It’s not like it’d be the first time, right?” the school nurse said irresponsibly.

“No, it wouldn’t be the first time, but that’s not the problem...”

“What? You don’t want to give a piggyback ride to your big-busted upperclassman?”

“It’s *because* she’s big-busted!”

I realized the error of my ways as soon as the words left my mouth, but Tokiwa only lazily cocked her head to the side. The nurse, however, got a good hearty laugh out of it. When she finally pulled herself together...

“Go on, take her with you already. I’ll be the one who catches hell if I just let

her live in that bed.”

“...”

With a resigned sigh, I turned around for her. I immediately felt a soft sensation squish against my shoulder blades as Tokiwa—who was surprisingly light for how heavy her, um, assets looked—climbed onto my back.

“Have fun now, kids! Thanks for taking care of her!” the nurse chortled as she waved us off.

“Oh, shouldn’t you take out your hair ornament?”

The ornament Tokiwa wore was big and flashy enough that it was forbidden by the school dress code. That was why she normally took it off while walking around in the hall.

“Mm, it’s probably fine.”

“But if a teacher sees you...”

“Then you should flee in a wild dash.”

“...Am I a horse to you?”

“Just my darling underclassman.”

She shook her head and nudged her forehead against me. Fighting off the ticklish sensation on the back of my neck, I made my way to the club room in the old school building for the second time today.

“All right. We’re here.”

“Mm...”

After lowering Tokiwa into the chair in front of the computer, I finally took a breather. Fortunately, no one had seen us on the way here. My heart was still pounding, though... I was worried Tokiwa could hear it with how closely she’d been clinging to me.

As for Tokiwa, she combed her hair over her shoulder as the computer slowly booted up. The light literature club consisted of just the two of us, but Tokiwa was the only one who ever did any real work. I’d only joined as a ghost member to keep it from being shut down, so I didn’t really have a whole lot to offer the

club. When we had meetings, mostly I'd read the books in the club room or manga I brought from home. Sometimes I'd just nap, and sometimes I'd even do my homework when the mood struck me—which was rare, I'll admit. And as I whittled away my time, Tokiwa was always typing away at the computer next to me.

Clackity clack clack...

This was the daily life of the light literature club and how I spent my time after school. I honestly didn't hate it. If anything, I enjoyed it.

It was because I had these pleasant afternoons that I didn't hate school altogether. There were also the infinite favors and errands President Momone asked of me. I'd hate to admit that I actually enjoyed any part of that, but it was always at least a good way to kill time.

"Now then..."

What should I do besides babysit Tokiwa today?





Once we're done with club activities for the day, I always walk home with Tokiwa. She was in danger of collapsing at a moment's notice, after all... Sometimes we'd meet up with President Momone if she was done with her student council affairs for the day too, but usually it fell on me to make sure Tokiwa got home safely.

"All right then, Tokiwa. See you tomorrow."

"Do you want to come inside?"

"No, it's already pretty late."

"My mom and dad aren't coming home tonight."

"...That's all the more reason not to."

Every now and then, Tokiwa will say or do something that leaves me wondering if she really appreciates the fact that I'm a man or not. I wish she was a little less oblivious about how charming she could be to the opposite sex. Maybe I should ask President Momone to educate her a little...

"Well, I'm headed off now, Tokiwa. See you tomorrow."

"Mm... See you."

Tokiwa waved from the door, and I waved back as I walked off. With winter almost upon us, the sun was setting earlier and earlier. The walk home was dark, illuminated only by the streetlights. It was also quiet, and honestly a little lonely...

"Hahh..."

Soon it would be cold enough for me to see my breath when I sighed like that. For now, the road was still lined with dry leaves. And the sound of my lonesome footsteps... Somehow, the whole scene was just so melancholy. What was that about? I don't remember feeling this way when I walked home yesterday. I just couldn't escape the feeling that my commute wasn't always this solitary...

"..."

Just my imagination, I guess. There were moments like this that I thought it

would be nice to have someone that was always around. Someone like a childhood friend, I guess... But I didn't have anyone like that. My imagination had really been running wild lately.

"Rekka?"

"!"

The moment someone called my name, I whipped around to see who it was. I almost thought my delusions had come to life, but I'd gotten my hopes up a little high.

"Wh-What's the matter, Rekka?"

"Oh... Hey, Yulia."

My shoulders slumped as I gave a modest wave to the surprised girl. Apparently, I'd wandered by the church without realizing it. Yulia, you see, was the nun who'd recently moved to town to take care of it.

Really, there was a considerably large nonhuman population around here, possibly drawn to the town by me and my bloodline. And Yulia, while a nun, moonlit as an exorcist. That had initially put her at odds with the local supernatural authority, President Momone, but the two of them had reached a compromise, and Yulia was beginning to explore other ways to work out her aggression for nonhumans.

"Um... So, what's up? Did you need something?"

"No, not at all. I just happened to spot you, so I called out to say hello," Yulia said before clearing her throat. "You seem to be rather flustered, though. Were you having more strange hallucinations about the opposite sex?"

"No! Nothing of the sort!" I denied in a much louder voice than necessary (since I had actually been daydreaming about a childhood friend and whatnot).

But Yulia wasn't convinced.

"You're surrounded by enough temptation as it is, so you must always remain vigilant. To begin with, you..."

There, she launched into a sermon. I was stuck on the spot, hesitant to remain but unable to leave. To someone raised under the holy roof of the

church, I must have seemed like the very personification of frivolity. And while I couldn't deny that, Yulia seemed to have mistaken my frivolity for carelessness when it came to women. She saw that as an immoral flaw, and would try her best to correct it whenever we crossed paths like this.

"Hey, are you listening to me?"

"Hweh?!"

She suddenly leaned in close, making me squeak in surprise. She was trying to rebuke me for not paying attention to what she was saying, but...

"S-Say, uh, do you think you could let me off for today?"

"I'm not done talking yet."

"Um, that's..."

Yulia didn't seem to realize it, but she was standing so close now that she was practically right up against me with her shapely body. She was wearing her habit, which didn't do much to disguise her curves when I could feel them... I knew it would only enrage her if I pointed that out, however, so I tried to skirt the issue and chose my words carefully.

"Yeah, okay... But could you step back a little first, though?"

"Are you planning on running? I won't let you get away."

I'd dug my own grave. Yulia grabbed my tie with an iron grip to make sure I wouldn't be going anywhere, which, unfortunately for me, only brought us closer together.

"Close! Too close!"

"Is that inconvenient for you?"

"I-I wouldn't say that. It's just..."

If I said anything about her breasts, I was sure she'd probably reply with her battleaxe. I needed another way to phrase it... I know!

"How am I supposed to stay calm with someone so beautiful standing so close to me?"

"...!"

At my unbearably cringeworthy line, Yulia recoiled in surprise. She then smote me directly in the forehead with an admirable karate chop.

“It’s the temptation around you that leads you to say such things without a care in the world!”

“Th-That’s not exactly the problem...”

While I was freed from Yulia’s grasp, she was even angrier than before. There was no way I could tell her now that the only temptation in front of me was her. Yeah, it was safer just to stay quiet on the matter.

“Good grief. Both you and that Momone... Just watching the two of you worries me. If you don’t put any effort into changing your ways now, you’ll never make it into heaven.”

“R-Really?”

“That’s right. Ever since I met you, you two have been...”

Crap. Another sermon was starting.

To someone of the cloth, President Momone and I probably did seem rather lax about a lot of things. Yulia, meanwhile, was absolutely unyielding, and she’d been that way ever since I met her. She was faithful to the church’s teachings, a devoted exorcist, and probably lived a very wholesome life herself. Actually, now that I think about it, it was kind of a miracle that President Momone and I had managed to talk her out of killing the local yokai in the first place. Hm? Wait a minute...

“Hey, Yulia.”

“That’s why I’m saying you... What?” Yulia asked back, pausing her sermon.

“This might sound weird, but... When you first met me and President Momone, was there someone else with us?”

“Someone else? Do you mean that nekomata girl?”

“No, someone other than Ai...”

Someone who would’ve been able to persuade Yulia. It was just too hard to believe President Momone and I had done it ourselves... But what made me

think that? Even though I'd been the one to ask, I wasn't quite sure why. But Yulia couldn't seem to think of anything, either.

"...Sorry, I don't recall."

"I see. Thanks. I just had the feeling there was another girl there with us for some reason."

At that comment, Yulia raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Another girl, you say?"

"What? No!"

"It seems I need to thoroughly retrain your mind. Come to the church anytime. I'd be happy to provide you penance."

"Give me a break!" I yelled, fleeing from her like a startled hare.

Yulia yelled after me, but I pretended not to hear her as I kept running. Being too laid-back like President Momone and Tokiwa was a problem, but being too rigid like Yulia was equally problematic. That said, she definitely had her soft spots... Heh.

"Wait, what am I thinking?"

Whenever I had stupid thoughts like that, she would normally make a witty remark... Huh? Wait, who?

"Hngh..."

I was so close to remembering, it was on the tip of my tongue... Something important...

"It's no use. I can't remember."

Was my memory always this terrible? Well, I guess so... I'd always been bad at subjects that required memorization. It was a miracle I'd even made it into high school. I barely ever studied, either. And over summer vacation, I didn't even do my homework until just before the annual festival... Huh? Why did I even do it before the festival? Had I promised to go with someone? Going to the festival with someone, hmm...

Bzz... Bzzzz...

“...”

What a strange day.

Bzzzz... Bzz...

Misunderstandings, forgetfulness, my imagination... Too many little things kept bothering me.

Bzzzzzzzz...

But there was no need to be worried by it. I'd stop worrying soon anyway.

“Oh, Rekka.”

“Hm?”

Hearing my name, I suddenly snapped back to my senses. For a second there, it was almost like my head was filled with static.

“What are you doing looking so dazed?” asked the girl who'd called out to me.

It was Yorun, casually dressed and peering at my face quizzically.

“Oh, it's nothing,” I said, shaking my head and waving my hand to reassure her.

“If you say so,” she replied with a smile.

Yorun was another of my acquaintances, though we'd met under extraordinary circumstances. President Momone brought me a cursed video game that had sucked us into the game world, which was where we'd found Yorun. Thinking back on it, it was a pretty incredible experience. I'd thought she was a game character at first, but as it turns out, she was just stuck in the game like we were. In the end, we brought her back to the real world with us when we escaped, and she'd been living at Kibi Shrine ever since.

“What are you doing out at this hour, Yorun?”

I knew there were families that preferred to eat earlier or later, but it was pretty universally dinnertime. It seemed strange to find Yorun out and about right now considering she was depending on the Kibi family. Surely she wasn't out to have dinner by herself.

“We ran out of soy sauce, so I’m headed to the shopping street to get more.”

“Oh, so you’re in the middle of an errand.”

“Yep. The president’s family has been looking after me, so this is the least I can do.”

Now that I took a closer look, she was carrying an empty shopping bag on her arm. It made perfect sense that she was on her way to the supermarket.

“Come to think of it, my fridge is pretty bare.”

With my parents out of town, I had to take care of feeding myself.

“Do you want to go together then?”

“Sure. Let’s go.”

With no reason to refuse, I headed to the shopping street with Yorun. It was just a little past 6:00 P.M. now, so the supermarket wasn’t particularly empty or crowded. It was pretty average traffic as we walked around, but we both knew exactly what we’d come for. Yorun grabbed some soy sauce, and then we went to the to-go counter so I could grab a premade meal.

“Do you always get these?”

“Nah. Sometimes I go over to the Otomos’ next door to eat. They’re good family friends, so they look out for me.”

“Hmm... Do you cook yourself?”

“Sometimes.”

It would have been more accurate to say “rarely,” but there was a valid question about whether or not heating up instant noodles in the microwave actually counted as cooking or not.

“Let’s see...”

While I was contemplating which dinner to choose, Yorun picked up a random rice ball.

“If you like, I can come over and cook for you sometime,” she then murmured.

I couldn't help looking at her in surprise.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised."

"Did I say something that weird?"

"Not weird, but..."

I honestly didn't think Yorun was much the type to cook, either. But when I told her that, she pegged me in the face with the rice ball she'd picked up.



“You can be kind of rude sometimes, Rekka.”

“I get that a lot...” I replied as I peeled the rice ball off my face.

I then placed the now-crushed rice ball into my basket and glanced over the ready-made side dishes at the counter, picking up some potato salad and fried chicken. That should be enough for tonight.

“So, how about it?” she asked.

“Mm... Well, I’d appreciate it if you did, but what brought on the offer?” I asked back.

She scratched her cheek and said, “Truth is, we may have found my family.”

“WHAT?!” I yelled without thinking before quickly covering my mouth.

The people around us looked at me strangely, but my surprise took priority as I stared at Yorun’s face fixedly.

“You’ve seriously found your family?”

“Yeah. The president and her grandfather were investigating the previous owners of that game... and they think they found a family that fits the bill.”

“Ooh!”

As expected of President Momone. She really was reliable. No, she was just plain incredible. She’d found Yorun’s family in practically no time at all with hardly any clues to go off of.

“Since I was in the game for so long, my memories of reality are pretty fuzzy. It’s all a little scary. I mean, what do I do if I don’t recognize my parents when I see them? They might not recognize me, either...”

“Yorun...”

Though she was mumbling with a forlorn look on her face, it quickly perked up into a smile.

“Well, I guess I’ll find out when I meet them! But that’s why I thought we should have a meal together. To celebrate finding them, I mean. I haven’t properly thanked you for saving me yet either, so it’ll double for that too.”

“In that case, then I suppose it’s all right.”

“Hmph. That reply sounds so forced.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I waved my hands in denial at her sulking protest. It really was happy news. If anything, I was the one who should be congratulating her.

“I know! Since it’s a celebration, let’s invite everyone over. Like President Momone and Tokiwa.”

I was thinking we could turn it into a party, but Yorun let out a heavy, despondent sigh.

“Hahh, Rekka, sometimes you’re just so... No, you’re just downright thickheaded.”

“Wuh...?”

Did she not want a party?

“Well, fine. In that case, you have to be the one to contact Touko, okay? I don’t have her info.”

“Got it.”

We then set a tentative date and agreed to get together at whatever time everyone could manage. From there, we parted ways when we left the supermarket. Groceries in hand, I walked past Nozomiya as I left the shopping street, and I made it home without running into anyone else in particular.

Slam!

“Hm?”

Just as I was about to unlock my front door, however, my next door neighbors’ opened. My dad had always been good friends with the Otomo family, so they were sort of looking after me now that I was living alone.

“...”

Figuring that I should greet them if they were going out, I stopped what I was doing and turned to say something. The person who’d just come out of their house, however, wasn’t who I was expecting.

“Oh...”

It was a young girl in a red kimono named L. I think she was around nine? I wasn't exactly sure; I was just going based on looks. She wasn't the Otomos' daughter or anything. She was just someone they'd taken in recently. I didn't know the details, but apparently they'd found her shivering under the bridge one rainy day. I was curious what her story was, but Uncle Itsuki had never said anything about it. They seemed to have whatever was going on under control. But as for L...

“Tch.”

She looked my way and clicked her tongue.

“Yeah, uh... Good evening to you too.”

“Tch...”

For some reason, L hated me. She glared at me every time she saw me.

“What are you even doing?” she asked.

“Huh?”

What was I doing...? Her sudden accusatory tone left me bewildered. But instead of explaining, she continued to silently glare at me for a little while before running off somewhere.

What was that about? Did she just hate me that much? Or... was she mad because I wasn't doing something I should have been? I wanted to know, but the only person I could ask was already gone.

I had that nagging feeling in the back of my mind, but there was nothing for me to do other than go inside now.



After dinner, I was reading manga on my bed.

“Wahahaha!”

Laughter resounded from the portable TV sitting on my desk. There wasn't anything I was particularly interested in watching, but having the background noise made the otherwise quiet house seem a little less lonely. I was actually

supposed to be doing my literature homework right now, but I couldn't find the motivation and was dragging out the inevitable as usual.

“Wahahaha!”

More laughter from the TV. It was honestly just a waste of battery to have it on while I wasn't really watching it, but I left it on anyway because anything was better than silence.

“Oh, that's right. I have to contact Touko.”

Remembering the invitation Yorun had tasked me with at the supermarket, I picked up my cellphone. I pulled up my contacts list and selected Touko Iwazu's number.

Brrring, brrring, brrring...

“...She's not picking up.”

Could she not hear the phone ringing? Or was she just away from it right now? She didn't seem to have a voicemail set, though. It just kept ringing. I gave up after counting 20 rings and decided to try again later. I then went back to reading my manga, but...

Knock, knock!

Suddenly, someone was rapping at the window.

“Hm? Oh, it's you again.”

This was the second floor, but that didn't give me too much pause as I opened the window. Hanging just outside was a girl with cat ears and a broad grin.

“Meow! Good evening, Rekka!”

“Ai, I told you not to come in the window.”

“I'm sorry, meow.”

Her apology sounded genuine, but never once had Ai entered my house through the front door. Honestly, I'd kinda given up on it, so I didn't say anything more as I let her inside. For the record, Ai's cat ears were the real deal. She even had a tail sprouting from her backside. That was a roundabout way of describing it, but Ai was a nekomata. She was a kitten I'd found and looked

after at the local shrine when I was a kid, but she'd grown up into a yokai. It was a rather strange story, but I was happy to have been reunited with her. And that was thanks to my bloodline. She'd come to me because she was in trouble, and President Momone and I had worked together to resolve the problems with the local yokai. Ever since, Ai would come over to play like this sometimes.

"Come to think of it, Rekka, I heard you found another new yokai."

"Well, it was President Momone who found him. Speaking of which, is he getting along with the locals?"

"Things are going just fine for now. He's not violent, at least. We'll give it some time and then discuss the possibility of him staying with us permanently," Ai replied as she rolled around on my bed.

The local yokai and nekomata were technically separate groups, but they'd formed an alliance in the face of adversity that they continued to uphold even after the food shortage was solved. They clearly communicated on the regular, considering Ai already knew about the yokai I'd recruited earlier in the day with Hito.

"Rekka, will you pet me on the head?"

"Sure, sure."

I sat down next to Ai and stroked her head gently. Her hair had a curious texture, closer to animal fur than human hair. Doing this almost felt like petting a real cat.

"Mrow..."

And when I scratched between her ears, she comfortably began purring. This was nice and relaxing for both of us, but I honestly preferred petting Ai when she was in cat form. She looked unhappy the last time I'd asked her to transform for me, however, so I made sure to save asking for when she was in a really good mood.

"Oh, meow! That's right!"

"Huh?"

Ai suddenly sat up, stuck a hand in her pocket, and announced, "I found

something strange earlier, meow! So I'm giving it to you as a present, Rekka!"

"Something strange?"

"Meow! A strange creature, to be precise!"

So it was alive, huh? But what kind of creature would a nekomata consider strange? If it fit in her pocket, maybe it was a bug or something? I wondered as I waited for her to show me, when...

"Here mew go!" Ai declared as she pulled an exhausted fairy out of her pocket.

"Poppy?!"

"Mrow?!"

Ai recoiled at my sudden shouting, but I had bigger things on my mind at the moment.

"Poppy! Hey, are you okay?!"

I immediately snatched the fairy from Ai's hand and called out to her. Poppy was yet another girl I'd met thanks to my bloodline. She was probably on her way to visit me when she coincidentally ran into Ai, who didn't know about her. Ai had probably handled her carefully so she could bring her to me, but just being grabbed was enough to seriously hurt a palm-sized fairy.

"Poppy! Poppy!"

I kept calling her name, worried the situation had taken a turn for the worst. Then...

"Ugggh..."

Poppy let out a pained groan as she slowly opened her eyes. I heaved a sigh of relief to see her safe for now, then went downstairs to get her some water and breadcrumbs.

"...Phew, I'm alive again."

"I'm glad to see you're okay."

"I had no idea you were Rekka's friend. Please forgive me, meow..." Ai said, bowing her head to the recovered Poppy.

“It’s okay. My wings aren’t broken or anything, so I’m just fine.”

“I’m really sorry, meow...” Ai apologized again, her tail drooping.

Poppy flapped her wings and flew up into the air so she could pet the dejected catgirl on the head.

“See? I can fly just fine, so there’s nothing to feel bad about.”

Pet, pet...

“Mrow...”

Consoled by Poppy, the smile returned to Ai’s face. Despite the difference in their sizes, Poppy almost looked like Ai’s mother right now.

“I’m Ai, meow.”

“And I’m Poppy. It’s nice to meet you, Ai.”

“Likewise, meow!”

Poppy shook the finger Ai had extended to her in a handshake of friendship. Things had been tense for a moment, but it now seemed like the two of them would be good friends.

“Now that there’s three of us, should we do something?” I asked.

“I want to watch TV, meow!” Ai immediately raised her hand and volunteered.

“Oh, that sounds nice. I’d like to watch TV, too,” Poppy agreed with a nod.

Both Ai and Poppy often came by on their own, and now that I thought about it, they both usually ended up settling down in front of the portable TV when they came over. Were they that interested in it because they didn’t have TV where they came from? They both lived outside, after all.

“All right, let’s watch TV.”

“Okay! Oh, but isn’t the TV a little small for the three of us...?” Poppy suddenly realized with a look of surprise.

It was true that the portable TV was ill-suited for multiple people watching it at once. But there was no need to worry.

"There's a regular TV in the living room, so let's go down there."

"There's a TV downstairs too, mrow?"

"So you have two of them? That's amazing!"

It was honestly kind of silly to have my own personal TV in my bedroom when I was the only one in the house... Huh? There it was again. That strange feeling. Except it wasn't really a feeling this time so much as it was a question. And a simple one at that. Why had I bought a portable TV after I started living alone?

If it had been while my parents were still in the house and there was something I really wanted to watch, it would've made sense. But why had I gone out of my way to get one when I had the regular TV all to myself? Was it just to have background noise while I was reading manga? No, that didn't make sense either. I could always just read manga on the couch in the living room. So was it to watch TV while I was on the computer? I never really did that, though. Was it to watch TV somewhere other than the living room? Maybe outside? No, that still couldn't be it. There was nothing wrong with the living room, and it wasn't like I ever took the TV outside.

Though I had a monthly allowance—no, *because* I had an allowance, I had to be careful how I spent my money. And a portable TV was definitely a luxury for a high school student with no job. Spending money eating out every day was one thing, but had I really bought something so expensive without a good reason? Even for someone as stupid as me, that was a little... And yet, here it was. So the question remained: why had I bought it? Was it... really for myself?

"Rekka?"

"Are you okay?"

"Ah, sorry. Was just thinking to myself."

Ai and Poppy both looked concerned, but I brushed their worries off with a smile. I had spent so much time today pondering so many weird things that I was starting to get a headache. Honestly, right about now, turning my brain off and watching some TV sounded great. Homework could always wait.

With that settled, it was time to go downstairs. And just as I was thinking that...

BOOOOOOOOM!

An incredibly loud explosion sounded from outside.

Chapter 2: Daily Life, Destroyed

“Wh-What?!”

“Mrow! What’s that noise?!”

“Eek!”

The tremendous sound that echoed from outside made us freeze in shock on the stairs.

“...”

We then all stood silent for several seconds, bracing ourselves for whatever would happen next...

KABOOM!

Another explosion, or at least what sounded like one... or rather two, and then three in sporadic succession.

“What on earth...?”

I had no idea what was going on. I turned around on the stairs and headed back up to my room. Opening the window that Ai had entered through earlier, I leaned out to see what I could see, which...

“Wha?!”

How should I put it? I’d seen them on television and in comics before, but I’d never even heard of something on this scale existing in real life before. It was a robot. No, scratch that. It was a giant robot. And not your typical kind, either.

It had a stout, headless body with short arms growing out of its spherical torso. All told, it was roughly the size of a two-story house. It walked on two stubby legs, leaving cracks in the road where its heavy-looking feet plodded. Its arms stretched out too, leaving gaping gashes in the houses and other buildings it walked past. But the biggest problem was that this wasn’t the only robot... There was a whole swarm of them, and they were collectively destroying the town.

“Mrow?!”

“Wh-What is...”

Ai and Poppy were rendered speechless upon seeing the unfathomable destruction. I considered myself to be pretty well-adjusted to crazy stuff (I mean, here I was about to go watch TV with a fairy and a catgirl), but this was the first time I had ever seen something so unthinkable. I had no idea what to do. In the end, the first one to unfreeze was Ai.

“That’s right, meow! We have to check if everyone else is safe!”

“R-Right!”

Ai probably meant the nekomata and other yokai. But when she said “everyone,” my mind turned to the likes of President Momone and Tokiwa. Of everyone I knew, I was worried about them the most.

“I’m headed to Tokiwa’s house! Ai, you head to the mountain where the nekomata are! If you can meet up with them safely, I’d like you to stay put. As long as the robots don’t come towards the mountain, anyway. If things go south, head for Kibi Shrine. President Momone will know what to do.”

The yokai were probably already on top of things, but having a backup plan never hurt. If anyone could help them, it would be President Momone and her family.

“Mew got it!”

With a meow, Ai leaped out of the window. I grabbed my cellphone, then ran down the stairs and out the door.

“Wait for me, Rekka!”

“Poppy? Aren’t you going to check on your friends too?”

“They all live in a forest far from here. I’m sure they’re safe, so I’d rather help you right now, Rekka!”

“Thanks!”

I sat Poppy on my shoulder and ran into the chaos. As far as I could see, there were five or six robots. They didn’t seem to be moving in any sort of methodical way. They were mostly just thrashing about wildly.

“Run for your lives!”

“This way! Over here!”

“Move it!”

“You’ll run over someone if you use your car! Move on foot!”

“Help! Has anyone seen my child?!”

The streets were full of people fleeing their homes in a panic. Fortunately, however, our town wasn’t as densely populated as the larger cities, so there was still room to maneuver. I did my best not to run into anyone as I squeezed my way through the shopping district and hurried towards Tokiwa’s place.

I remembered that she said earlier that her parents wouldn’t be coming home tonight. And with her weak constitution, it’d be dangerous for her to try and evacuate by herself. It was possible her childhood friend—President Momone—was already en route, but I couldn’t count on that. President Momone was strong, but she also had a strong sense of duty. More than just the local yokai were relying on her right now, and I knew it would be hard for her to turn her back on them to prioritize helping one person. Especially since... Just the same as I was predicting her actions right now, she was probably predicting mine. And that meant she was counting on me to go help Tokiwa in her place.

Moreover, I had this strange feeling. It was like once I started running, I left all the hesitation and doubt inside me behind. It was almost like my brain and body were conditioned for this. I mean, I had been involved in plenty of crazy stuff before thanks to my bloodline, but nothing ever on this size or scale.

But in spite of that—in spite of all the chaos—I somehow managed to stay calm. Even as I was rushing around, I was thinking a step ahead. Was I always like this? I even had the leisure to be wondering things like that as I kept running. Granted, that didn’t mean I had time to come up with an answer.

Before I knew it, Tokiwa’s house came into view. Since the robots hadn’t reached her neighborhood yet, there were no noticeable signs of destruction here other than a few cracks in some concrete walls from all the tremors. That said, there were no signs of life here, either. It seemed everyone had already evacuated. Hopefully Tokiwa had managed to get away safely too... But I had to

know for sure. I opened the front gate and ran right up to her door.

Rattle, rattle, rattle!

“It won’t open...!”

Do people really bother to lock up when fleeing in situations like this? I guess it’s not impossible... But my gut told me it was more likely Tokiwa was still inside. I didn’t have a key, though. It was a shame I didn’t have the strength to kick down doors like people did in the movies. If only she were here...

“Nngh...!”

Suddenly feeling dizzy, I staggered on the doorstep.

“Rekka? Are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little lightheaded.”

I swear someone’s face flashed through my mind just now, but... I didn’t have the time to be worried about that. I still needed to find out if Tokiwa was okay.

If her front door had had a glass panel, I could’ve smashed through it with a rock and unlocked the door from the inside. But all there was was the mail slot, which was too narrow for me to get anything more than my hand through. Yet just as I was about to go look for another way in...

“Wait, Rekka!”

“What’s wrong, Poppy?”

“I’m pretty sure I can get through there!” Poppy declared, pointing at the aforementioned mail slot.

It was true a fairy had a fairer chance of getting through it than I did.

“All right! Give it a go!”

“Wish me luck!”

Poppy took off from my shoulder and flew for the door. I opened the mail slot for her and nervously waited to see if she’d be able to fit through. Fortunately she managed to squeeze in, and a few seconds later, I heard the click of her unlocking the door from the inside.

“Poppy, you’re the best!”

“Let’s hurry and find this Tokiwa person!”

“Yeah!”

I left the ground floor to Poppy and headed to the second floor myself. As I climbed the stairs, I briefly wondered if it would’ve been better to leave the upper floor to Poppy, since she could fly and all... but it would be a waste of time to backtrack and switch with her now. Or perhaps I just had a feeling. That if Tokiwa was still in the house, she’d be upstairs. I knew where her room was, so I went and opened the door... and there was Tokiwa, collapsed on the floor.

“Tokiwa!”

I ran over and sat her up, but she was unresponsive. I looked her over to make sure she wasn’t hurt, and luckily that didn’t seem to be the case. Just to be safe, I checked to make sure she didn’t have a goose egg on her head or anything. After all, it was possible she’d fainted and hit her head on something. Thankfully, however, that didn’t seem to be the case either.

“Hngh...”

Just then, Tokiwa’s eyes fluttered. In order to hear her, I leaned in close.

“Rekka...?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Are you hurt anywhere, Tokiwa?”

“My head’s in a daze... but it’s probably just my anemia.”

Or so she said, but she genuinely did seem to be mostly fine. And with that, I sighed in relief. A second too early, apparently. Just then...

BOOM!

A huge tremor shook the house.

“Rekka, the robots outside...”

“I know. Let’s get out of here.”

The thunderous sound and the shaking was probably a sign one of the robots was getting closer. They’d all been a good distance away when I first arrived at Tokiwa’s house, but it seemed they’d closed in quickly while I was checking on

Tokiwa. As the noise and shaking grew more severe, Poppy came flying upstairs.

“Rekka! The robot is right outside! We’d better flee!”

“I know. But first, Poppy...”

“What is it?”

“Can you go ahead and find us an escape route? It should be easier to scout from the air.”

“Leave it to me!” Poppy replied as she darted outside.

“I must be hallucinating. I thought I saw a fairy just now...”

“No, you’re not hallucinating. That was the real deal.”

“What?”

“I’ll explain later. For now, Tokiwa, can you stand?”

“Mm, probably...”

Tokiwa staggered to her feet, but her legs were clearly unsteady. There was no way she was running in this condition... Argh, fine! I’ll do it myself!

“Grab on, Tokiwa. I’ll carry you.”

“...Sorry,” Tokiwa apologized as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

I guess, to be fair, I was used to carrying her like this. I supported her with one hand and grabbed the banister with the other as I flew down the stairs. I stopped at the front door so Tokiwa could put on her shoes, and then we bolted outside.

“Rekka!” Poppy called as she came over and landed on my shoulder. “Don’t go right! The robots are blocking the road!”

“Left it is, then!”

I drew a map in my head as I ran. Going left would put us back in the center of town with the shopping street and the school. It probably would have been most efficient just to make a beeline out of town to get away from the robots, but I couldn’t climb walls or anything with Tokiwa on my back. We’d have to stick to the roads.

I considered just trying to hide out, but these robots could destroy entire houses with a single push or kick. If we bunkered down somewhere, it was possible we might get trapped there. In the end, it was all I could do to keep running while searching for a way to safety. Thankfully, Poppy was able to get a bird's-eye view and tell me in advance which roads were blocked. We pressed forward, running down road after road while giving the robots the slip, when...

"Huh?"

"Is something the matter?" Poppy asked, seeing me tilt my head as we ran.

"Is it just me... or are there more robots now?"

I was really hoping it was just me, but I couldn't help asking. Poppy's face paled when she heard my question, however, and she immediately flew up overhead to see if my suspicions were right. Roughly half a minute later, she came back down with an answer I really didn't want to hear.

"You're right... There really are more."

By Poppy's count, their number had more than doubled. Now there were 13 robots around town, which closed the ranks on their encirclement and made it that much harder to escape. But more importantly...

"Where are they coming from?" I uttered the real question at hand.

It shouldn't have taken me that long to get to it, really. Our fairly rural town was pretty far inland. If more kaiju had just walked out of the ocean, we should've had some kind of warning considering how long it would've taken them to get here. It would've been all over TV, and we hadn't seen any emergency broadcasts or anything while we were watching the tube in my room. The first we heard of it was literally that first earth-shattering boom that sounded like an explosion.

But if there was really no advanced warning, how had they gotten here? Did they just drop from the sky? Did they warp in? Ugh... I taxed my brain, but my pathetic imagination couldn't fathom anything else. I wasn't approaching this the right way.

How they'd gotten here wasn't as important as why they were here. Why were giant robots in my hometown in the first place? Why had they come all

the way out to the countryside where nothing ever happens? Hypothesis one: their location was chosen at random. Hypothesis two: they're just passing through. Hypothesis three: they're simply on a rampage, and the setting doesn't matter.

Let's put the first hypothesis aside for now. The second was an inconvenience, but it was honestly the ideal scenario since it would mean they'd leave eventually. The third, however... That would be the worst. I was praying that one wasn't it.

"Hmm..."

I pondered over the possibilities, but nothing quite seemed right. I didn't have enough information. Even with all the havoc they'd caused, I still couldn't tell if the robots were manned or not. All that was observable from a distance was that the robots themselves were a stark white, quite unlike the colorful ones you'd see in anime. It looked like they had a smooth, glossy armor to them rather than just being giant hunks of moving steel.

I know I've really harped on how unbelievable this all was, but was it even possible for modern technology to produce something like these robots? They looked like they were from space... No, they looked like they were from the future.

Wait... Aliens? Space? I felt like something was on the tip of my tongue again... Something important. But now wasn't the time...

No...

Now *was* the time. Now more than ever. I couldn't count how many times today I'd fought off this strange feeling, but it was too many—that much was certain. Now throw in some giant robots and some other weird stuff... Could this really all be a coincidence?

Roughly half a year had passed since my Namidare bloodline awakened. So far, I'd saved seven heroines: President Momone, Tokiwa, Ai, Poppy, Yulia, Yorun, and Touko. I remembered them all quite well, but just now—no, this whole day—I'd been feeling like I was forgetting something.

Had I really only gotten caught up in a handful of stories so far this year? Had I

really been living out my life in relative peace as a high school student after my Namidare bloodline awakened? If this was how things were gonna be, why had my dad been so worried about me on my sixteenth birthday? Was this really the first time something so crazy had happened? Something told me that wasn't the case.

Sadly, however, my memory was a total blank. I had nothing to back that hunch up. No matter how desperately I racked my brains, I just couldn't remember. It was almost like someone was reaching into my head and covering up those memories...



I was lost in thought for a moment there, but someone suddenly called out to me and snapped me back to reality. Two someones, actually.

“Rekka!”

“Hey, Rekka!”

To my surprise, it was Yulia and Yorun. They were both carrying their weapons—a giant battleaxe and an oversized hammer respectively. The incredible sight would have been enough to stagger me on a normal day, but somehow in the midst of all the ongoing chaos, it didn’t faze me but so much.

“You two haven’t evacuated yet?” I asked as they ran over.

“We’re in the middle of looking for any stragglers who got left behind. Is that girl injured?” Yulia replied as she looked to Tokiwa on my back.

“No, Tokiwa just has a weak constitution, so I’m carrying her.”

“I see. So she’s all right, then?”

“Yeah.”

“President Momone has turned her family shrine into a temporary shelter. You guys should head there, Rekka!” Yorun said before turning to Yulia. “Let’s go that way next.”

And with that, they were gone as quick as they’d come.

“Are they going to be okay?” Tokiwa whispered in my ear worriedly.

It was a valid concern. As strong as Yulia and Yorun were, we were talking about giant robots here. I didn’t honestly expect normal weapons would have much effect on them. Yet nonetheless...

“Yeah, I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

At the very least, both Yulia and Yorun had more combat knowledge and experience than your average person. I was confident they’d know when to retreat. We’d have to have faith in them for now.

“Yorun’s right, though. We should head for President Momone’s.”

“Okay.”

“Then I’ll go back to giving directions!”

“Thanks, Poppy.”

The three of us then made our way to Kibi Shrine like Yorun had suggested. It took us about five minutes to reach it, and by the time we arrived, roughly 30 of the local townsfolk had already gathered there. About half of the crowd was injured, and the other half of the crowd were family and friends that had helped carry the wounded to safety. Honestly, it was a smaller turnout than I’d been expecting. Even though we lived in a fairly small town, this was a massive emergency. I was sure more people would be here...

“Hey, problem child.”

“President Momone!”

When she spotted us, President Momone—still in her school uniform—came running over from the shrine’s main building.

She took one look at Tokiwa and said, “Looks like you’re unharmed. Well done.”

The second part of that was directed at me. It probably would’ve made me blush ordinarily, but I chose to ignore it for now. There were more important things at hand.

“I was trying to escape with Tokiwa when we crossed paths with Yulia and Yorun. They told us you’d be here,” I explained.

“I see. Well, it would’ve been difficult to get out of town while carrying Tokiwa. You made the right choice coming here,” President Momone said with an approving nod.

“I gotta say, though... There are less refugees here than I expected. Is that because Yulia and Yorun haven’t been able to find that many people? Is the evacuation not going well?”

“Well, you’re one-third right.”

So, what? I was more than half wrong? Ideally I’d be completely wrong and everything was really going fine, but I couldn’t be that optimistic. Curious, I asked President Momone for more information.

“The roads are torn up everywhere. The evacuation plans aren’t going well in the sense that we’ve only been able to cover about half the town thanks to all the delays.”

“What should I do? Can I help too?” I offered.

But she immediately shot me down.

“Strength and endurance aren’t your strong suit, so don’t force yourself.”

“Ouch...”

“Listen, the reason I said you were only one-third right is because most of the residents have already successfully gotten out of town. The evacuation itself is mostly going fine. We’re just running the shelter here for the stragglers and people who can’t get away on their own.”

“What? Really?”

I didn’t think it’d be so easy for so many people to get away from the dozen or so robots now rampaging around town.

“The robots looks like they’re going berserk from a distance, but they don’t actually attack if you get close to them.”

“They don’t attack? But they’re out there destroying the town...”

“This is just a theory, but I suspect they’re looking for something. I think they’re destroying buildings and such in their search, rather than actively trying to harm anyone.”

“...”

Not only was she helping to run a shelter for refugees, she’d already gathered enough information and given the situation enough thought to come up with theories about what was really happening—all while her hometown was being destroyed, mind you. Surprised as I was, I should have expected that much from President Momone.

“The people still here are the people who are too injured to move and their families. Everyone who could make the trip was directed to evacuate by Yulia and Yorun as soon as they found them. They’re bringing the wounded here, and once they’ve cleared the whole town, we’ll all leave together.”

“I understand.”

If that was the plan, then President Momone would have her hands full during the evacuation too. That meant it’d be better for me to stay on standby here at the shrine until Yulia and Yorun returned so that I could carry Tokiwa out with everyone when the time came.

“Tokiwa, I’m going to put you down for now. Let’s find somewhere to sit and take a load off.”

“Okay.”

I set Tokiwa down on the stone steps leading up to the main shrine. On an autumn night like this, the stone was cool to the touch. I instinctively huddled up a bit, but then I realized Tokiwa was trembling like a leaf next to me. Oh...

“Here, Tokiwa. Sit on this.”

Belatedly, I offered her the jacket I’d grabbed on my way out of the house. I laid it on the steps and gestured for her to move over onto it instead of sitting on the cold stone.

“But...”

“Don’t worry about me. After all that running, I’m still sweating bullets.”

I couldn’t really hear all of what she said, but it sounded like protest. I reassured her it was fine, and after a moment’s hesitation, she accepted. I watched as she scooted over onto my jacket, and once she was in place, she suddenly leaned over and put her head on my shoulder.

“Tokiwa...?”

“Thank you, Rekka.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s just a jacket.”

“Not that... You came to my house to save me, right?”

“Ah, that’s what you meant... I mean, even that was just me being my usual worried self.”

“But is it really that strange for me to thank you for worrying about me?”

“Er, uh... No, I guess not,” I said in a fluster, making Tokiwa giggle.

“Maybe that’s being too harsh... Really, I like that you never make anyone you help feel bad about it. I think that’s cool.”

“...!”

Suddenly hearing that Tokiwa thought I was cool took me by surprise. Calm down, Rekka, calm down... She didn’t mean *I* was cool. She just said I did something cool. There was a difference...

But then the fairy on my other shoulder decided to pipe up.

“Rekka has been really cool today,” said Poppy.

“R-Really?”

“Yeah. It’s almost like you’re used to this kind of stuff.”

“Yeah... I thought so too,” agreed Tokiwa.

Wait, both of them thought I was acting cool? I mean, I was totally shocked when the robots first appeared, but after that... First, I gave Ai immediate orders. My next thought was Tokiwa, and then searching for an escape route. I’d done everything right—everything I should have in an emergency. But that made it all the stranger. I really was being too calm and casual about all this, wasn’t I?

I was plenty familiar with the supernatural and the unexpected thanks to the mess of trouble my bloodline got me into, but I had never once been involved in a story that actually put my life at risk. The closest thing to genuine danger I’d ever been in was getting stuck in that video game with Yorun, but even a pro racing gamer would still get nervous the first time they took a real race car out on the road. My point is that whether this was a supernatural occurrence or not, the life-risking factor should trump everything else. I mean, I certainly didn’t want to die... I really would’ve thought I’d be more afraid for my own life than this.

But as I was thinking all this over, I spotted President Momone out of the corner of my eye.

“Problem child, I need you a minute.”

“Coming.”

I excused myself to Tokiwa, then followed President Momone as we walked around to the back of the main shrine. There was just enough light coming from the rear entrance of the temple that we could see our feet and the gravel below.

“What are we doing here, President Momone?”

“Something we can’t do out front.”

There, President Momone stopped walking and turned around to face me. Then... I felt something staring at me from the depths of the darkness.

“Huh—wha?!”

When I looked to see what it was, I saw a pair of glowing eyes. No, dozens of them. And they were all staring at me and President Momone from the shadows.

“...Wait, that’s Ai, isn’t it?”

“Meow!”

Ai threw her hand up and waved as she stepped out of the darkness. The glowing eyes behind her followed suit. Apparently it was just the rest of the nekomata.

“We’re here too!” another voice called.

“Pon!”

After the nekomata came the local yokai. At the head of the group was their acting leader, Pon the tanuki (who was currently in animal form).

“I see what you mean now. This would certainly cause quite a fuss out front.”

Most of the refugees at the temple right now were normal civilians who were already exhausted and afraid after being chased out of their homes by giant robots. Throwing yokai into the mix would only cause chaos and panic.

“So, what are all the local yokai doing here?”

“Well, it isn’t that complicated,” President Momone declared as she stood her wooden sword against the ground with both hands. “Right now, this shrine is being protected by an invisibility talisman my grandfather and I set up so that

the robots can't see us."

"Does that kind of stuff really work against robots?"

"Who knows? We never thought we'd have to use it against mechanical beings. The talisman actually uses a technique that makes us difficult to perceive even if we're still visible *per se*, but considering we haven't been found yet, I think it's safe to assume it's working."

Her answer was a bit roughshod, but President Momone was right in so far as what really mattered right now was results. The robots hadn't found the shrine yet, and that was a good thing.

"However, the invisibility talisman is merely a temporary solution. We have no idea when the robots might show up here, so the next step is to plan our escape."

"I don't have any objections to that, but how are we gonna get out of here?"

"I've investigated several escape routes already. Those robots are all over town, but they're scattered. It's not like they can be everywhere all at once, so we'll wait for the right time—when they're all clear of the escape route we choose—and then we'll make a run for it."

President Momone had said that running past the robots was relatively safe. At the very least, they didn't attack on sight. The real risk would be them discovering the shrine before everyone was ready to leave. If they came in to destroy the place with everyone here, it would be bad news. But if we waited too long, then... Ultimately, I was glad the timing of the operation would be up to President Momone and her grandfather. As for my role in all of this...

"That will leave the roles of escorts and decoys to us," President Momone announced.

"Figures..."

I'd kind of expected that, so I gave a resigned nod without any protest. I did have one question, though.

"Are you and your friends going to be decoys too, Ai?"

"That's right, meow."

“But you guys aren’t that strong, are you?”

If I recalled correctly, the nekomata had lost to Pon and his crew when they had their turf war. Then President Momone singlehandedly beat up all the local yokai. None of them were remarkably strong.

“That’s so mean, Rekka! We can do it if we try, meow!”

“That’s a nice thought and all, but...”

“You’ve got it wrong, Rekka,” Pon interjected. “This is for our sake too.”

“Really?”

“We cannot flee with the other humans, so we’ll need to move on our own regardless. That being said, there’s no guarantee we can escape safely on our own.”

“Yeah... I guess you’re right.”

“That’s why, in exchange for our work as decoys, the Demon Slayer’s granddaughter and that blond axewoman will accompany us. That will greatly increase our chances of survival.”

“...”

That still wasn’t a guarantee, but if Pon was satisfied, then I wasn’t in any position to argue.

“Can I be of help too?” Poppy asked President Momone, raising her hand from where she still sat atop my shoulder.

“Of course. We may be escorts and decoys, but that doesn’t necessarily mean there’s going to be any fighting. Someone as small and hard to see as you would make a great scout,” President Momone said, patting Poppy’s head with the tip of her finger. “Like I said before, the robots haven’t shown any interest in people so far. All of this planning is mostly a precaution. Our real priority will be avoiding danger.”

Pon had mentioned that Yulia—and presumably Yorun, too—would be joining us for the operation. That meant that more or less everyone familiar with the supernatural would be in on this.

Touko...

Thinking of all our friends gathered here, my mind turned to one who wasn't: Touko Iwazu. She wielded the power of words, meaning practically anything she said became reality. If she were here, we could have this whole robot disaster cleared up in a snap.

Except that it goes against her beliefs to use her power for the good of others...

Knowing it was probably hopeless, I tried calling her anyway... but she didn't answer. Come to think of it, she hadn't picked up earlier either.

“Oh, well...”

I gave up on Touko for now, put my phone away, and turned to President Momone.

“Um, so what should I do?”

Though I was lumped in with everyone else because I was familiar with the supernatural, I didn't have any special powers or useful skills like everyone else. I couldn't do much as an escort, and my usefulness as a decoy was also questionable.

“First, let me give you these talismans. One for distraction and one for defense. You can activate them even without any spiritual power.”

“Okay. How do I do that?”

“You visualize using them and then throw them into the air. The rest is intuition.”

So much for instructions...

“Right, okay. Got it.”

I nodded, but President Momone raised a dubious eyebrow.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. It's just that you normally whine a bit more. You're being oddly obedient today.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And today isn’t the usual yokai diplomacy errand, either. It’s a genuine emergency, yet you’re more resolute than ever before. It’s almost like you were ready for this.”

“...”

I was ready for this? Tokiwa has said something similar. That made two people who thought that... No, I had to admit it was three of us. A similar thought had crossed my mind, as well. It was getting harder and harder to say it was just my imagination. That being said, I still didn’t have an explanation.

Maybe, just maybe... The answer had something to do with what was going on.

“...”

I continued to ponder it until Yulia and Yorun returned.



After half an hour or so...

“We’re back! Huh? What’s wrong, Rekka?” Yorun asked as she looked at my face curiously.

“Nothing, I was just thinking...”

“Yeah? You okay in there? If you push it any harder, I think smoke’s gonna come out of your ears.”

I gave a casual wave of my hand so she’d think I was fine, but truth be told, I really wasn’t. At this rate, my brain genuinely was going to overheat, and I wasn’t even anywhere close to arriving at an answer.

Time was up, however. Now that Yulia and Yorun were back, we needed to prepare for our escape. I could dwell on personal stuff later.

“Problem child!”

Right on cue, President Momone called me over. Her grandfather was around front rounding up the refugees and filling them in on what was going to happen. Meanwhile, the rest of us were behind the shrine with President Momone—who had changed into her shrine maiden outfit—going over the

escort and decoy plan.

“Listen up, everyone. We cannot let the refugees see the yokai, so we’ll have to maintain a safe distance from them. That said, we can’t stray too far. We’ll have to strike a balance. We’ll be following behind the main group, but use side streets as necessary.”

“How will we contact each other?”

“We’ll use shikigami.”

“Not cellphones?”

“My grandfather isn’t very good with technology. Even if you handed him a cellphone that was actively on a call, he’d find a way not only to hang up, but to break the phone.”

“Sounds like one of those nasty gremlins that destroys machinery,” Yulia muttered with a shrug of her shoulders.

“...!”

A sharp pain ran through my head when I heard her say something about gremlins. It bothered me, and I would’ve loved to get to the bottom of it, but I forcibly stifled the odd feeling rising in my chest and focused on the important discussion at hand.

“Like I said before, the goal here is to avoid danger. Drawing attention to yourself is strictly forbidden. Especially you flying yokai—make sure you stay low to the ground. As for the nekomata, I don’t have a problem with you running along fence tops, but stay off of roofs.”

The yokai all nodded at President Momone’s instructions as she rattled off precaution after precaution. As I listened to her too, I checked to make sure I still had both talismans she’d given me. The talisman of distraction was in my right pocket, and the talisman of defense was in my left. I double-checked and then triple-checked just to be certain. They were all I had to protect everyone—and myself—if it came down to it. Of course, President Momone had her own talismans too. If she ran out, though, I’d be more than happy to give her mine. She was the real powerhouse of the escort and decoy team, after all.

Once the mission briefing and ensuing discussion were concluded, we temporarily disbanded to take care of individual preparations. It wasn't like I had any weapons or anything to get ready, however, so I didn't really have much to do. Mostly I just needed to tie my shoelaces and go to the bathroom one last time. But then...

"Ah, Tokiwa."

Just as I was about to go back around to the rear side of the shrine, I ran into Tokiwa loitering around.

"...!"

Her expression brightened significantly when she spotted me...

Tmp, tmp, tmp, tmp... WHUMP!

And she made an unusually powerful running jump for me, arms outstretched.

"What's the matter, Tokiwa?" I asked.

"..."

Instead of replying, Tokiwa simply hugged me tighter. Clinging to me, she refused to let go. To be honest, it was bad for my heart when she pressed herself up against me like this... I was glad Poppy had wandered off to do her own thing for the moment.

"Tokiwa... what's wrong?" I asked again.

After a pregnant moment...

"Rekka, are you really... going to be a decoy with Momo?" she whispered into my ear.

She'd probably heard about the operation from President Momone herself. Concerned, she pulled back a little and peered up at me with a desperate look. If this were a movie, I was dead sure a dramatic kiss scene would have followed. But unfortunately, Tokiwa and I weren't in that kind of relationship. So instead of a kiss, I had to use words to reassure her.

"It'll be fine, Tokiwa. President Momone keeps saying we're decoys, but that's

really only in a worst-case scenario. Our goal is to avoid any and all danger, and I have every confidence things will be just fine with President Momone taking the lead.”

“I know Momo’s strong, but...”

“It’ll be fine! She’s your childhood friend, right? Have some faith in her.”

It was a little unfair of me to phrase it like that, but it was the only way.

“...”

Tokiwa continued to look up at me with an unconvinced expression, watching me with worried eyes. And I...

“Don’t worry.”

For some reason...

“If it comes down to it, I’ll figure something out.”

Those words slipped my lips like they were nothing.

Despite the fact that I was completely powerless... Despite the fact that I was the weakest member of the team... I had taken it upon myself to see the plan succeed.

Was I getting overconfident because President Momone had complimented me earlier? Well, maybe that was part of it, but rather than something so fickle, this felt more like... It really did feel like it came naturally. Yeah, it was almost like I was prepared for this. Like I had been through it plenty of times before.

“...”

Tokiwa stared at me intently, but then she wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned in close.

“Don’t get hurt,” she whispered before kissing me on the cheek.

As she stepped back, I watched the ornate butterfly hairpin she wore in her long hair pull away from me. My cheeks were burning hot... and probably bright red, too.

“So soft...”

I couldn't say anything else. If I did, I would remember the sensation again. It would probably make my whole body—and not just my cheeks—overheat this time.

Hands on my cheeks, I made my way around back again. I now had to find a way to calm myself down before we left. The moment of escape would soon be upon us.



Roughly 20 minutes after Yulia and Yorun returned to Kibi Shrine...

“Let's get moving.”

At President Momone's signal, we all stepped out of the barrier placed around the shrine grounds. Of course, President Momone was in the lead. I was behind her, basically acting as lieutenant. Yulia and Yorun were positioned in the middle of the group, both of them with their weapons at the ready. Ai and Pon were in charge of their respective nekomata and yokai groups in the event anything happened. And together, we formed the escort and decoy team.

The refugees had evacuated ahead of us, and we followed about 50 meters behind them. It was far enough that we lost sight of them whenever they turned a corner ahead of us, but President Momone had a paper talisman that looked like an origami crane that she used to keep in contact with her grandfather.

“There are no issues here. Proceed as planned,” it reported.

“Understood. Things are quiet back here too,” President Momone replied.

Once their transmission ended, President Momone turned to the rest of us.

“Continue forward,” she ordered, running ahead to take the lead again.

I mean, I said running, but because we had to keep our distance, it was more like a brisk jog. Almost half of the refugees were injured, so they couldn't move but so fast, and we had to match their speed. Not that that was really a problem, I guess. You could say we were all saving our stamina in case something bad happened.

“...”

“...”

“...”

Almost everyone in the escort and decoy group—human and yokai alike—had a tense look on their face. But that was to be expected. No matter how we hid as we moved...

Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk.

We could hear the clunking sound of the robots' footsteps from every direction. To be honest, it really put me on edge.

“How much longer?” I asked.

“We only just left,” President Momone replied bluntly.

She then stopped at the corner and quietly checked to make sure the coast was clear.

“...All right, let's go.”

But just then, a transmission came over the crane talisman.

“Momone,” her grandfather called.

“What is it?” she replied.

“The roof of a house has collapsed along the intersection between Second and Third Street. We may need to change our route.”

“You can't get through the rubble?”

“We're trying now, but we can't waste too much time clearing the way. Is there a detour we can take?”

“I'll have a look,” President Momone replied.

There, she pulled a map from the pocket of her shrine maiden outfit and began scouring it for an alternate route between the intersection and our current position.

“How's it look?” I asked. “What about the route headed east? That's probably the closest one from here.”

“No, the scouts put an X over that road. That means it's impassable.”

It seemed President Momone and her grandfather had carefully chosen the route we were on because it appeared to be the only one that was clear. When I got a closer look at President Momone's map, I could see that it was covered in X marks. With the number of roads that were blocked off to us, trying to find an alternate route would mean a rather roundabout detour.

"Damn it all..."

The longer we took—both to find a detour and then to follow it—the greater the risk we ran of being discovered by the robots. President Momone and I stood there contemplating the map until Ai suddenly poked her head out from the group of humans and yokai gathered around us.

"Over here, Rekka! We can pass through here, meow!"

"That's a house, Ai."

"No, meow! I mean the garden! It's just a wooden fence and some hedges, so even you humans should be able to get through!"

"Ah!"

I had to admit it was a rather cat-like approach. I certainly wouldn't have thought of it. And better yet, the house next to the one with the garden had a back gate that connected right to the intersection in question.

"Nice one, Ai. Let's go with that," President Momone said, patting Ai's head as she praised her.

"Thank you, mrrrow! But I'd rather Rekka pet me."

"We've got a special request for you, problem child. Make her happy."

"E-Er, okay...?"

"Mee-yow!"

As I petted Ai's head in President Momone's stead, she contacted her grandfather.

"...So we're going to check and see if we can get through."

"Destroy the fence and hedges if possible. Several of the refugees have injured legs and can't climb anything. It'll be difficult enough to get them over

even small obstacles.”

“Well, we can always blame the damage on the robots.”

“This is an emergency. Don’t hesitate to do what you need to.”

“All right, kids, you heard the man. Let’s get to work.”

With those last words directed at us, President Momone took off running. We followed her about a minute down the road to the house Ai had been pointing to earlier. It was a single-story home made of wood that was lucky enough to have escaped the robots’ destruction so far. It was also surrounded by a low fence and hedges just like Ai had said. Passing through the yard shouldn’t be a problem. Hope bloomed within us all.

“Yulia, Yorun. You two work with the yokai to remove the hedges here. I’ll check around back with the problem child.”

“Okay.”

“You can count on us.”

Yulia and Yorun both put away their weapons and got ready to get their hands dirty with the yokai at President Momone’s request.

“Now, problem child... You and Ai come with me.”

“Roger!”

“Got it, meow!”

We followed President Momone around to the back of the garden. The pathway through the garden was clear, but there was a slightly taller hedge dividing the garden from the next house over. The children and cats in the group would have no trouble crawling under it, but not so much the adults and the elderly refugees.

“It’s going to take some time removing this. Should we call for some more help?” I asked.

“No, I’ve got this,” replied President Momone. “You two just step back.”

There, she drew her wooden sword...

“Hah...”

And raised it high above her head.

“Hiyah!”

She then swung it down directly on the hedge, which rattled and rustled as its branches gave way. It looked like they were snapped right off—no, sliced—leaving a neat gap.

“Hiyah!”

President Momone swung again, making the gap large enough for a person to pass through. I guess I’d been expecting her to beat down the bushes, not trim them... It was a wooden kendo sword, after all.

“Say, uh, Prez... Have you ever killed anyone during club activities?”

“How rude. I’m using a technique that brandishes my spiritual power. I would never use such a thing in kendo practice,” President Momone said with a sullen face, kicking away some fallen branches.

The three of us then worked together to clear out the rest of the plant-y debris and uproot the stumps so there was a safe path to walk through.

“Gramps, we’ve taken care of the fence and hedges. Now we just need to make sure this connects to the intersection—”

As President Momone was reporting the status of our operation to her grandfather, she was interrupted by a terrible sound.

“Kyaaah!”

“Nooooo!”

It was screaming coming from around front.

“Damn!”

I was the first to take off running. Dashing through the garden, I came back out on the road where Yulia, Yorun, and the others were supposed to be clearing away the fence. And there, I saw...

Whirr-clunk!

A robot crushing houses as it walked this way.

“Eeeeek!”

The yokai had completely fallen into a panic and were scattering in every direction.

“Calm down! Remember: they don’t attack people!” I yelled in a voice loud enough to surprise myself, making all the yokai freeze in place. Even the nekomata who had jumped onto the roof stopped in their tracks. “Just stay out of the way and hide! Wait until it passes by!”

“G-Got it!”

“Stay hidden, meow!”

The direct instructions seemed to help abate the panic and confusion. The yokai quickly began helping each other find places to hide as the robot approached. But as it drew nearer...

“Mew! Mew!”

I spotted a kitten that had been left out on the road, too scared to move.

“Crap!”

It had to be one of the nekomata. Fear had probably taken hold of it and forced it out of its human transformation, leaving it frozen in place. In the heat of the moment, everyone had been too focused on other things. No one had seen the tiny kitten on the ground. And worse yet, its fearful cries had been drowned out by all the chaos.

“Hup!”

If I was the only one who noticed it, I had to save it. I leaped out of my hiding place and made a run for it. I’d be fine, right? The robots allegedly didn’t attack on sight, so I’d just grab the kitten and get the hell out of the way. Or at least, that’s what I told myself as I snatched the kitten up and clutched it close. All I had to do now was run. And even though I knew that... I couldn’t help but turn my eyes towards the robot.

“!”

The sound of its heavy footsteps grew louder as it approached. With no head, it was hard to tell where the cockpit was at a glance. Was it that weird part

sticking out of its torso?

Whirr-clunk!

The robot took another step forward. Its large frame made it look lumbering, but the robot actually had surprisingly smooth movements. The hulking two-legged robots in old TV shows were always slow and wobbly, but the low center of gravity on this one made it quite stable.

Whrrp!

Suddenly, its large body lurched forward. Rather than falling over, however, it appeared to be looking down at something. It almost felt like we were meeting eyes. But the next thing I knew...

Vwoom!

It was reaching its massive arm out right for me!

“Wah!”

I jumped to the right in a fluster to evade it, but... Was it really aiming for me just now?! I thought President Momone said they didn’t attack people! I was ready to have a full-on freak-out, but the second arm was already coming for me.

“Bah!”

I dove for the ground, rolling out of the way.

“Mrow!”

The kitten in my arms squealed, so I let go of it as soon as I stopped moving.

“Mew!”

“Get out of here!” I shouted to the frightened kitten, running away from it as fast as I could to put some distance between us...

But the robot’s arms were faster than my legs! Just as it looked like it was about to catch me...

“Rekka!”

WHAM!

Yorun jumped out of nowhere, deflecting the robot arm with her hammer.

“You okay?!”

“Yeah!”

With Yorun covering me, I collected myself and looked up at the robot once more... It really did seem like it was coming for me, but why? Everyone else had said the robots didn't attack on sight. Pondering the issue, I couldn't help remembering President Momone's conjecture...

“This is just a theory, but I suspect they're looking for something.”

If that was true and they really were looking for something, could that something be...

“Is it me?”

That would explain why the robot in front of me had tried to grab me. But seriously, why me? There was nothing special about me other than my bloodline, so what gives? No, wait. Was this a new story I'd gotten caught up in? If that was the case, who was the heroine? I hadn't met any new girls lately...

Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk.

What was that, more footsteps? It sounds like they're getting closer! Don't tell me...

“Rekka! The robots are heading this way!” Poppy reported in a panic from the air.

Damn, they really were after me!

The robot on the street hadn't visibly done anything, but it probably had some sort of communication device installed inside. It had likely contacted the other robots. And if they'd given up searching other parts of the town to come here, that had to mean that whatever they were looking for was here. But the robot here had only contacted them after seeing me... Yeah, all signs pointed to it being me they were after.

Just then, the robot in front of us reached out for me again. With both arms this time.

“Take that!”

Yorun knocked its left arm away with her hammer, but its right arm was coming at me faster than she could ready a second swing. Thankfully...

“Rekka!”

“Problem child!”

Yulia and President Momone came running, working together to deflect the incoming arm.

“Tch! I thought I’d at least be able to bend the iron plating, but there isn’t even a scratch!” President Momone said with a click of her tongue.

The wooden sword in her hand was emitting a faint light like before. It was probably another spiritual technique of hers. Keeping one eye on the robot, President Momone then turned to me.

“Yo, problem child! Did you do anything to piss off these robots?!”

“Not that I’m aware of!”

“Then I guess they just instinctually hate you, huh?!”

That didn’t sound too good, either...

“Momone, this isn’t the time to be messing around!” Yulia cautioned as she readied her axe again.

“I know,” President Momone replied casually as she glanced up at the robot. “But why are these things after the problem child?”

“I don’t know, but I cannot abide them targeting a poor, defenseless boy. Not to mention destroying the town and hurting innocent people... It’s time for a smiting.”

“Yeah!” agreed Yorun. “But we don’t know what they’ll do if they get their hands on Rekka, so we have to make sure to keep him safe too!”

There, President Momone, Yulia, and Yorun all squared off with the robot. Unfortunately, however, none of their weapons were really up for the task. President Momone had professed confidence in her ability to bend iron, but as far as I could tell, the armor plating on the robots was far stronger than any

ordinary metal. I also was just now belatedly noticing it didn't appear to have any seams or other weaknesses in it...



Now, I'm not a scientist or anything, but wouldn't it take some fairly advanced technology to make something like that? That was a stupid question. It was obvious just from the way these robots were moving that they were made with advanced technology.

Fortunately, however, they only seemed to have an interest in me. They ignored the girls completely. At least that much was consistent with the stories I'd heard. Yet it only seemed like more evidence I was their real target...

Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk. Whirr-clunk.

As I contemplated my fate, the footsteps of the other robots drew nearer. They'd probably be here in a matter of minutes. This might be the end of the road. I had one hell of a decision to make...

Somehow, I managed to calm my shaking legs.

“Sorry!”

“Huh? Rekka?!”

I grabbed Poppy from my shoulder and threw her to the side. Then...

“Hey! I’m over here!” I yelled at the robot before making a break for it.

“Problem child?!”

“Rekka?!”

The voices of President Momone and the others called after me as I ran. The robots had been ignoring them so far, but there was no telling when that would change. More robots were on the way. Worse yet, we didn't have the means to even scratch them, let alone defeat them. The more the situation escalated, the more dangerous it would become. I had to act before it reached critical mass, which was why I'd run. If I was really the robots' target, they should leave the girls behind and follow after me. I couldn't stay behind and put anyone else in danger.

“Tch!”

I ran through the hedge President Momone had cut away earlier and onto the road past the neighboring house, fleeing in a random direction. My only goal

was to get as far away from the girls as possible right now. That was more important than getting out of town. I'd just pick whatever road looked clear and run. This was the town I grew up in, after all; I knew my way around pretty well.

Going road by road, I ended up closing in on the station. In other words, I was in the middle of town. I'd basically backtracked to where I'd been earlier in the day, but I didn't really have a choice about it. Besides, if I led the robots back this way, it would make it easier for the girls and the refugees to get out of town.

"Wow... You really never change, Rekka."

What? Who was that talking just now? The voice was familiar to me, like I'd heard it many, many times before... It was a young girl that sounded strangely exasperated. I looked around, but didn't see signs of anyone nearby.

"Was I hearing things...?" I wondered aloud, cocking my head to the side.

I listened carefully for a moment, but didn't hear anything else.

Déjà vu, giant robots, and now auditory hallucinations... Today was playing out like the opening chapter of a manga where the main character was about to get wrapped up in some crazy battle. I mean, that was totally possible considering my bloodline.

"Just what the hell am I supposed to do...?" I muttered as I continued running.

Speaking of my bloodline... I wonder if Dad ever got mixed up in a story this ridiculous. I remember him telling me about the Namidare bloodline the day before I started high school, but he never mentioned anything about *this*. I'd only ever been caught up in slightly unusual problems so far, like with President Momone and Tokiwa, so I'd never considered it before... But had Dad been through life-and-death situations like this? He didn't particularly strike me as a hardened warrior or anything...

"Maybe I should've asked him more questions..."

It may have provided me with some kind of hint as to how to get through this. For example, it'd be really convenient if we had some legendary weapon stashed away in the storehouse at home. Wishful thinking, right?

While my mind ran away with me, I kept running. When I actually made it to the station, it was in flames. Half of the main building was already gone.

“Damn it all!”

Honestly, why did things have to end up like this?

“Did I do something?” I wondered, turning back.

“...”

The looming robots, of course, offered no answer. They just silently closed in, completing their encirclement. I now had a dozen robots surrounding me on all sides. There was enough room to pass between them, but if I got that close, I was sure they’d be able to grab me. I was cornered...

So now what? What should I do? Honestly speaking, whatever these robots wanted, I knew nothing good would come of being captured. I’d rather not find out what they had in store for me, so I had to think of some way to escape...

All I had in my pockets was the talisman of distraction and the talisman of protection. Could they do anything? There was no guarantee, but I had to try.

Whirr-click. Whirr-click. Whirr-click. Whirr-click. Whirr-click. Whirr-click.

The ground trembled beneath me as the robots stepped forward, closing their ranks.

“Damn it!”

I tried making a run for what looked like the biggest opening, but...

Whirr!

The closest robot immediately stretched an arm out for me.

“Take that!”

As it did, I threw the talisman of defense into the air.

Crackle!

There was a staticky sound and flash of light as a round barrier appeared in the air and deflected the arm coming for me. I’d had no idea what the talisman would do, but it seemed that its power was creating a spherical shield of sorts.

If I could just duck under the robot's arm like this, then...!

But the second I looked up to see how the robot was responding, there was a bright flash of light and a loud boom. At first, I didn't even know what had exploded. The next thing I knew, however, I was hitting the ground hard after being sent flying through the air.

"Urgh... ah!"

Every bone in my body was groaning. I tried to force myself to my feet, but it hurt so bad that my legs collapsed under me. My entire body felt like jelly.

Was... Was that a laser beam just now? I didn't know if that was the scientifically correct term for it or not, but I didn't particularly care right now. The scorched hole in the ground just behind where I'd fallen was all the proof I needed.

But, man, robots and laser beams... This really was starting to play out just like a sci-fi manga. It was almost comical at this point, but I certainly wasn't laughing. That laser just now, unlike everything so far, was clearly meant to kill. Come to think of it, I had drawn the robots away from the girls in order to keep them out of harm's way, but the robots hadn't whipped out their lasers until I was away from everyone... That had to mean their goal wasn't to capture me, but to kill me. This was literally do-or-die.

Whirrrrr!

Light began gathering at the center of the robot's torso. So that was the beam's launch point...

I was surrounded on all sides with nowhere to run or hide, and there was no telling how long the talisman of protection would hold up. Would it even block another laser? I squeezed the talisman of protection, half bracing myself for my death. Then the beam came at me.

"!"

The light was so bright that I reflexively closed my eyes and raised my arms to cover my face. There was no way I could throw the talisman in time now. Surely this would be the end. But one, two, three seconds passed... and I was still conscious. Did that mean... I wasn't dead?

“...?”

I fearfully opened my eyes. Standing tall in front of me was a young girl in a crimson red kimono.

“...L?”

“What are you doing?” my newest next-door neighbor scoffed in a disgusted tone.

“Um... I could ask you the same.”

Really, what was she doing here? And where had she appeared from just now? It was too dangerous for a little girl like her to be here where... Wait, what happened to the laser?

“...!”

Question after question rolled around together in my head, ultimately rendering me speechless. And as I stood there like a fool, L was bravely squaring up with the robots.



“...”

For some reason, they'd stopped moving. What was this? A standoff?

“L, what do you think you're doing?”

What the?! The robots talk?! They'd been acting so, well, robotically that I'd just assumed they were on some kind of autopilot. Did this mean there was really someone inside? Were they remote controlled? Of course, thinking about it rationally... There had to be someone behind them. Same with this attack. And their assassination attempts. Someone somewhere was behind this all—and they wanted me dead.

“...”

The moment I realized that, I broke out in a cold sweat all over. Damn it... Just who could it be? Whoever was controlling the robots knew the answer. And it seemed like L might, too.

“L!” the robot called out to her.

But she stayed silent. The robot called a second and third time, but she still didn't answer. She just kept looking between me and the robot... Then aggravatedly pulled at her hair.

“Argh, fine!” she shouted, turning her back on the robot and reaching for me.

“Huh?”

“Just stay still!” she shouted again, grabbing me by the collar.

The next moment, I could hear an intense whooshing sound like something heavy had shifted suddenly. Everything in my field of vision shook.

“How dare you, L?! Wait—”

The enraged voice coming from the robot faded away rapidly, as did my consciousness.

▽

“Rekka...”

Wha...? Where am I? I was slowly waking up to someone calling my name,

when...

“Rekka Namidare, get up this instant!”

Wham!

A furious kick rudely brought me back to reality.

“Ow!”

“Just how long were you planning on sleeping?!”

Opening my eyes, I saw a teary-eyed L standing over me. I’d apparently passed out half on top of a pile of rubble, so I was looking up at her from an awkward angle, but there was no mistaking how she was glaring at me. What was it this time? She was always in a nasty mood whenever we ran into each other, but this was a little different. She was definitely mad, and it was definitely at me... But whatever.

“Yeah, uh, thanks, L... You were the one who saved me, right?”

I thanked her for getting me (both of us, really) away from the robots, but I still wasn’t totally sure what had happened. I had no idea whatsoever what was going on. I was oblivious as to why a group of giant robots was trying to kill me, much less how or why L would protect me from such a technologically advanced threat.

Completely lost, I took a quick glance around. Buildings were busted, and there was rubble everywhere, but the area was still familiar to me. If I recalled correctly, this was the neighborhood on the far side of the school opposite my house.

“This... is pretty far from the station, isn’t it? How did you get me here?”

I doubted a little girl like L had carried me all this way. Moreover, I doubted anyone—little girl or not—would have been able to escape the robots’ encirclement. But lo and behold...

“So you *have* forgotten,” L replied with a sigh.

“Forgotten?” I asked quizzically.

If I’d forgotten something... A lapse of memory or amnesia... Yeah, that would

actually explain a lot of what had been bothering me today. But...

“What have I forgotten?”

L seemed to know, so I turned to her for answers. Her first response, however, was to click her tongue.

“I can’t trust you! Even if everyone else forgot, you should’ve remembered! You... You dumbass!”

“Sorry...”

Getting reamed like that seemed a little unfair, but I decided to humbly apologize anyway. I guess that’s just how important whatever it was was to me... And to L. This had to be why she was so angry, so I needed to remember as soon as possible.

“L, please tell me.”

L took a deep breath to calm herself, and then said...

“Satsuki Otomo.”

“Satsuki...? Guh!”

The back of my brain prickled. The Otomos were my next-door neighbors... They were Dad’s friends... And they’d been taking care of L... But no, that wasn’t it. No, no... There was something more. Something else that connected us. It was... Satsuki.

Satsuki was a girl’s name, but Auntie Otomo’s first name was Sanae. So who was Satsuki? Their... daughter?

“Gah...!”

My forehead felt like it was splitting down the middle. Memories were slowly starting to flow out of the recesses of my brain... Sixteen years’ worth of them. And on the surface of it all was the name and face of my childhood friend who lived next door.

“Yeah, Satsuki...”

I was remembering...

“Uargh!”

But the torrent didn't stop. Far from it. It was like the floodgates had opened.

Iris Fineritas Cyphercall. Harissa Hope. Tsumiki Nozomuno. Tetra Metra Retra. Lea. Hibiki Banjo. Chelsea Margaret. Rosalind C. Bathory. Suzuran. Shirley Madagascarwel Blood. Rain Waterchild. Fam. Mio Kotozuka. Ellicia Otto. Zaia Gardendos Corona. Lyun Sylpheed. Rachelle. Zeta Zenonia. Kiri Hayashibara. Nyanyan Atlantia. Chirika Shinomiya. Sherlyn Doteyes.

The names and faces of girls I knew resurfaced one after another.

"Guh... Agh!"

So much was pouring into my mind that I thought it was going to blow, but it still didn't stop.

A draconic Demon Overlord. The ultimate mage. A king from the Galactic Federation. A family restaurant in dire straits. Mole people. The Perfect Beast. A scientist from another world and his sleeping love. A nine-tailed fox. The clayman war. A darkness-eating demon. A sick little brother. A binding past. A pre-programmed puppet. Space pirates. A dying planet. An underground dungeon. The Ghostdemon sickness running rampant in the spirit world. The Psychic Hazard. The third Demon King. A live-action show filmed on the fly. Enormous kaiju and the superhero who fought them. A violent tale of love and passion. The plague of Shangri-La. The fall of Atlantis, and the falling Laputa...

"A-Ah... Damn it..."

I wiped the spittle dribbling from my mouth and coughed another two, three times.

"How could I forget... such a crazy half a year?"

I'd practically been shotgunning stories, saving heroines left and right with the help of my new friends. Remembering it all, I shook away my headache and got to my feet.

"So you finally remember?"

"Yeah. Thanks, L."

"I didn't do it for you," she declared with a huff. "I just couldn't find Satsuki on my own. So this... This is probably something that only you can solve."

“Satsuki, huh? I see...”

Apparently L had been searching for her while I was oblivious. I wish she’d told me sooner, but I guess she had her own conflicted feelings about it. I was basically her enemy, after all. But seeing as how she’d saved me, I was filled with nothing but gratitude for her right now.

“For now, L, please tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t know everything myself,” she replied, shaking her head in disgust. “All I know is that several of the heroines around you—Satsuki included—disappeared and everyone forgot about them.”

“Everyone did?”

I guess they had to... If I’d been the only one who’d forgotten, it would’ve been easy to pick up on the discrepancy. But Ai hadn’t mentioned Tetra at all, and Yulia hadn’t mentioned Suzuran at all. That was unusual, so it was safe to assume they’d forgotten too. The heroines had been erased from everyone’s minds, including mine. It was hard to believe, but here we were... I’d have to accept it if I wanted to move forward.

“But what about President Momone and Tokiwa, L? R told me they were heroines too.”

“I don’t know. It’s just...”

“Just?”

“They were technically part of R’s story, yeah? I know because I was originally created to fulfill the same role as R, but those girls were meant to be heroines in your daily life prepared for when you run away from the more brutal stories.”

“...”

I had to wonder... I didn’t remember R’s explanation perfectly, but I do think she mentioned that President Momone and Tokiwa were a slightly different type of heroine from Satsuki and the others. I believe she said there wasn’t that much difference between them overall, but now that they and the other everyday heroines were the ones left behind, there had to be something special about them. Wait...

“Speaking of which, where is R?”

I glanced around once more, but there was still no sign of anyone floating around in a military uniform. Just where had that carefree, snarky girl gotten off to? I was hoping L knew, but she merely shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t know of her whereabouts, but the unthinkable must have happened for her not to be at your side.”

“Yeah...”

Whether it was outer space or other worlds, R always followed me wherever I went. She said that was part of her job, part of her functionality. So...

“Does that mean R has ceased to function?”

“That’s not a bad way of thinking about it.”

L answered my question with a nod, but that opened up many more. In particular...

“Who could even do something like that?”

First and foremost, R’s existence should only be perceivable by me. So if no one could see her, then no one should know about her. And if no one knew about her, then no one should have been able to do anything about her. Moreover, I knew she could defend herself. I’d seen her do it against L, and she was proud of those abilities. The only time I’d ever seen someone get the better of her was against Touko and the power of her words...

“Touko, huh...?”

Come to think of it, I still hadn’t managed to get in touch with her.

“Let’s see...”

I hurriedly took my phone out of my pocket. Thankfully, it wasn’t broken, so I dialed Touko’s number in a hurry.

Brrring, brrring, brrring...

It rang and rang and rang without any hope of her picking up.

“Damn...”

It was hard to believe Touko would do something like this maliciously. But in this ridiculous situation, it wasn't impossible to think the enemy was taking advantage of her somehow. I was worried about her, but unfortunately I didn't even know where she lived. I couldn't even go check on her.

Damn it... I finally regained my memories, and now there was so much to think about. It was like one massive, tangled knot of a mess. But still... I had to sort things out in order.

"L, what is your relation to the giant robots?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Don't play the fool now. You were talking to one of them, and they knew who you were. What's the deal?"

I distinctly remembered the robot pilot calling L's name. They'd asked her what she was doing when she stepped in to save me. There was clearly some kind of connection between them. I patiently waited for L's response, and she eventually sighed heavily and clicked her tongue.

"Fine... They're fellow hardliners."

"Hardliners?"

"Yeah, we're a faction from the future that's taken, well, a hardline stance regarding you," L explained as she drew circles in the air with her fingers to demonstrate the two factions. "The agency, including R and others, is trying to change the future by keeping you alive. We call them the moderates. Us hardliners are trying to change the future by killing you. That's the short of it."

"Yeah, R kind of mentioned something like that..."

The War of All was set to take place in the not-so-distant future and would span all of space, every parallel universe, and any alternate worlds. And the cause of it all? That would be me. L and R were both agents sent from their respective factions in the future to do something about it, but their methods were drastically different. R wanted me to settle down with a heroine to prevent the war. L wanted to kill me to prevent the war.

So if these giant robots had also come from the hardline faction, it suddenly

made sense as to why they were after my life. Fortunately, the moderates like R seemed to outnumber the violent hardliners, but... Honestly, what was going on in the future was something I had never really given much thought. Did all this mean they'd finally come for me...?

"Say, L, if you're also one of the hardliners, shouldn't you know where they hid Satsuki and the others?"

It was hard to imagine the disappearance of the heroines was unrelated to the rest of this craziness. The hardliners had probably done something with them... Or so I imagined, but L seemed reluctant to confirm one way or the other.

"L..."

"..."

"I understand that you have your own circumstances, but I want to save Satsuki and the others. You do too, right?"

L had said she was searching for Satsuki. So, setting her feelings for me aside, we should at least be able to work together on that. Surely that's what she wanted, too. There was no reason for her to have saved me otherwise. But then again... If she'd known about today's attack in advance, why didn't she save me sooner? Moreover, why hadn't she saved Satsuki? She'd specifically said, "I couldn't find Satsuki on my own." Did that mean I was wrong about her involvement? Don't tell me...

"Is it possible you don't really know anything about what's going on, L?"

"...!"

She didn't say a word, but her face said everything. Despite being a hardliner, L hadn't been clued in on today's attack. That's why she didn't know where Satsuki was, and why she'd been searching for her alone.

"Yeah, you got me... I knew nothing about this attack. If they could send those huge standalone armaments into the past, then it should have been easy for them to fix the communication issue with me... But they didn't tell me anything!" L shouted in an explosion of emotion.

Tears welled in her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks.

“...”

I reached out and patted her on the head.

“...”

Normally she would have shaken me off, but today she simply hung her head and said nothing.



After taking some time to collect ourselves, L and I began sorting out the situation.

“Part of this is just guesswork, L, but I assume it was the hardliners that did all this. I mean kidnapping Satsuki and the others, wiping everyone’s memories, *and* sending the robots to kill me. Is that right?”

“Most likely.”

“Hmm... There’s still so much we don’t know, though.”

Putting the whole assassinating me thing aside, why would they kidnap the heroines? Or rather, why would they leave some behind? How had they managed to wipe everyone’s memories selectively? Where were R and Touko? And why hadn’t the hardliners contacted L?

“I gotta ask, L... That robot earlier wanted to know what you were doing.”

“What about it?”

“Well, I don’t really know how to say this, but...”

I tried to choose my words carefully, but couldn’t think of a nice way to put it. I watched L’s expression closely as I continued.

“It’s just, if—and I mean if—you’d been completely abandoned by the hardliners, I don’t think they’d have bothered to ask what you were doing. Even if they didn’t contact you before, the fact that they’re willing to contact you now means they haven’t completely abandoned you, I think.”

“Yeah...”

L frowned a little when I repeated the words “completely abandoned,” but ultimately nodded. The robot pilot had asked L what she was doing because they wanted to know her true intentions. In other words, the other side was asking why L would save me—why she would get in their way. It was a bit of an odd inconsistency. There was nothing to be gleaned from it yet, but it was something to keep in mind.

“Is there anything else that’s been bothering you, L? Any other odd details about this?”

This story was clearly centered on the future, which was something I personally didn’t know a whole lot about. L was a much better expert on the subject, so I was hoping she could fill me in on anything I might have missed.

“Something bothering me?” After pondering it for a moment, she suddenly looked up. “Now that you mention it, yeah. I wonder why she hasn’t done anything yet.”

“She? You mean R?”

“No, I mean the doctor. The person who created both me and R.”

“The doctor?”

Thinking back on it, this “doctor” figure had come up once before in a conversation—or rather a yelling match—between R and L.

“If R has ceased to function, then she should be aware. But for her not to react at all... It’s strange,” L murmured, her brow furrowed in irritation. “Tch, what is she doing at a time like this?”

“Hmm...”

From what I could remember of their conversation/yelling match, L had complicated feelings about her.

“I guess we should be relying on the doctor, then.”

“What?! Why on earth would you say that now?”

“Well, if you’re angry that she hasn’t done anything, that must mean you trusted her to do something if R was in trouble, right?”

Her words revealed her true feelings. It was precisely because L hoped the doctor would do something that she was disappointed she hadn't.

"N-No! I wouldn't trust her for anything!"

"Don't say that. She's like a mother to you, right? I'm sure she's doing what she can for both of you in the future right now."

"Probably not for me..." she muttered, averting her eyes.

To be fair, L was right to be wondering what the doctor was up to right now. If she was constantly monitoring R's status, then she should have indeed noticed the abnormality occurring here. And it would follow, then, that she should have taken some sort of action by now. It was possible she had, I guess. But since the robots had made it here, it was probably safe to assume it wasn't going well. But if that was the case, what had gone wrong?

Was the doctor not actually monitoring R? Had she somehow failed to realize what was going on? If we discounted unlikely, hard-luck scenarios like that, then there was one possible scenario that came to the forefront... Perhaps it wasn't that the doctor hadn't done anything. Perhaps she *couldn't* do anything. For example, what if the moderates in the future were also under attack? That would definitely explain a delayed response. Honestly, things weren't looking good...

The worst part of all was that Satsuki and the others had been kidnapped. I'd only gotten through as many crazy stories as I had because of them and their powers. That wasn't to say I thought President Momone, Yulia, and the others left behind were useless. I just didn't think we'd be enough to face off with a dozen super-powered robots. In order to defeat them, we'd probably need Lea or Corona... But they weren't here right now.

Rather than wishing for what I couldn't have, however, I was better off spending my time coming up with an alternative solution. Preferably, I'd like to wait for the doctor and a rescue from the future. But it wasn't the wisest choice to sit around waiting for something that may or may not happen. I racked my brain trying to think of other ideas. Iris's father held an important seat in the Galactic Federation... But that wouldn't do us any good. Without Iris or Shirley, we had no way of getting into space in the first place. And without our mages,

there was no way to get to other worlds, either. That meant I had to think of something here on Earth. Let's see... That included the psychic organization Ellicia was a part of, Chelsea's Margaret family, and the king of Laputa.

“Hrm...”

Only Ellicia knew how to contact Yang, the organization's leader. And even if I could get in touch with Nartessia, the head of the Margaret family, I doubt she'd help me without a down payment of some kind. The most realistic hope I stood was going to the king of Laputa, who lived within walking distance. The mountain she lived in, however—the crash-landed island of Laputa—wasn't outfitted with any real weapons. The king didn't exactly excel in combat, either. She was constantly complaining about how difficult it was to get around without her flying sphere... Even though she had a Segway to use now instead.

I'd been through plenty of crap before, but things this time around felt even more hopeless than usual.

“Say, L...”

“What?”

“How would you hold up against those robots?”

“You have a rather casual way of asking the most audacious things,” L replied unhappily. “I wasn't originally intended for combat. I do have a few weapons, but they were designed for use against human targets. I'm not equipped with any armaments capable of destroying something so large.”

“I see...”

When she said “against human targets,” she probably meant me specifically. But I chose not to focus on that for now.

“Then how did we escape earlier? I blacked out, so I don't really remember, but you had to have used some kind of teleportation device, right?”

“The particle relocator, yeah. You shouldn't use that anymore.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“It was designed for use by Kiklim like me and R. Not for humans. You seem to be a special case since you have... some sort of experience with things like it.”

But there's no guarantee it won't do you any harm in the future. I only used it because it was an emergency."

Huh? Experience? Did she mean with Iris's warp watch and Harissa's connection magic and stuff? Jeez, I was only okay because I'd done stuff like that so many times before? Talk about by the skin of my teeth. We could get a lot more done with a way to get around, but our options were seriously limited if we were stuck on foot. We were just plain running out of cards to play...

"Hey, what are you getting all gloomy for?" L suddenly demanded, arching an eyebrow and folding her arms. "You're Rekka Namidare, aren't you? The womanizer who caused the War of All in the first place? That's you, right?"

"Could we maybe redact the womanizer part...?"

"Oh, shut up!" L retorted with a sharp glare. "This is all because of you! If you take away the part of you that saved all those heroines, you'd just be a sniveling mess! So why don't you get it together and do the one thing you're good at?!"

"Erk...!"

Those words came as a hard slap in the face, waking me up to how weak I'd been about all this. The fact everyone was gone must have shaken me more than I realized. L was right. I had to get it together. Never giving up was my only redeeming feature.

"My bad, L."

"So? What are you going to do now?"

I thought silently to myself for a while before answering, "The fact of the matter is that this story originated in the future. Which means, at the very least, we need some kind of pipeline to it."

L hadn't received any communication from the hardliners on her end, so the only way for us to get in touch with anyone was...

"Let's take over that robot."

"Are you serious right now? You think you can beat it?"

"We're not going to fight it; we're just going to steal it. There has to be some way."

If we didn't have any cards left in our hand, we just needed to take one from our opponent. That was the plan for now. But just as we decided to make a move, a large shadow loomed over us.

Shoom!

To our surprise, the robot we thought we'd shaken off earlier appeared out of the blue. And it wasn't alone. It didn't have all of the robots with it, but there were enough of them to completely block us in.

"Wh—how?!"

If something so huge was approaching, surely we should have noticed it. Even if L and I were in the middle of a conversation, it wasn't like we'd lowered our guard. But all of a sudden, the robots were right on top of us... How could that be?

"Particle relocation..." L murmured.

"Huh?"

"I guess these guys come equipped with their own devices."

Right, she meant the teleportation device she used earlier. So the robots had them too?

"But I thought you said those weren't meant for human use. What about the pilots inside?"

"I told you, these robots are weapons. They're unmanned and remote controlled."

"But that one talked to you!"

"All that takes is a speaker. As long as it has one installed, whoever's controlling it can talk through it from anywhere."

"...Fair point."

I'd just assumed it was the pilot inside talking to her, but... Now wasn't the time to be worried about that. We were under attack.

Pew!

A beam of light shot out from the robot in front of us. It was a laser.

“Not so fast!”

Quick to act, L deflected it with a dome-shaped barrier that was just barely big enough to shield us both. My head was practically sticking out the top. But nevertheless, it was strong enough to completely negate the laser beam.

“If you had something like this up your sleeve, you should’ve said so sooner!”

“Shut up!”

Despite L’s verbal abuse, she continued to protect me from incoming beams.

“Will we be all right with this barrier for a while?”

“Yeah, but only for a while! There’s a huge difference in our energy reserves, so I won’t be able to keep up forever!”

“Damn...”

So there was a time limit on this safety zone, huh? The enemy was solely focused on attacking right now. All of the robots were bombarding us with beams as they stood in place, blocking our escape. If they tried to approach, we might be able to do something to knock them off-balance or something, but they seemed to realize that.

“Tch!”

L gritted her teeth as her barrier began to flicker. What could I even do to help her...? Oh, I know!

I grabbed my phone from my pocket and tried to call Touko again. The odds of her picking up and me being able to convince her to help in the time we had left before L’s barrier collapsed were... No, there was no point in thinking about that. If there was a chance—if there was any chance at all—it was better to try than to do nothing. But as I was dialing her number...

Brrring!

To my surprise, my phone started ringing. And even more surprisingly, the name on the Caller ID was... Jigen Namidare.

“Dad?!”

I could hardly believe my eyes—my dad was calling me. And as I stared at my

phone in disbelief, it kept ringing. I didn't have the time to catch up with him right now. Should I just reject the call and try and contact Touko again? That's what I was thinking, but I had this strange feeling... For some reason, I felt like I shouldn't ignore my dad's call.

Beep.

So I reluctantly answered...

"Dad?"

"Yoohoo! Where are ya right now, Rekka?"

But Dad was the same as ever. Was I the fool for expecting anything?

"Hey, uh, Dad... I don't really have time to talk right now."

"I know. So where are ya?"

"Um..."

"You're in a rush, right?"

Dad's tone took a sudden change for the serious, and when I heard that...

"Th-The neighborhood opposite the high school from our house!"

I answered him seriously too.

"Got it. Be there in a sec."

I didn't even have time to ask how; he really did appear in a split second. And when he did, he immediately cut the robot diagonally from shoulder to waist with the long katana he was carrying, causing it to explode in a firework-like burst of flames.

"Heya. Sorry to keep you waiting."

He then rested his sword on his shoulder and turned to greet me, seemingly without a care in the world for the ridiculously superhuman feat he'd just performed.

"Dad, why... How? You're supposed to be overseas..."

"It's a parent's duty to come running when their kid's in trouble. See? Your mother's here, too."

“Mom...?”

I looked up in the direction Dad was pointing—up into the air—and was struck speechless. There was my mom, Kanon Namidare, flying in the sky.

“Awaken! Child 1897!”

It was the first time in a good while that I’d heard Mom’s voice, but as it came down from the sky, so too did light. It was a bright blast of natural light, completely different from the robots’ beams... It was lightning. It broke into several branches and struck each robot with directed precision.

“Wh-Wha...”

While I was still at a loss for words, Mom landed on the ground gracefully.

“Honestly, Rekka, just what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into while I was gone?”

Mom was dressed in her favorite suit. She looked like her usual self. Her blue eyes looked right at me. She had her hair tied up and was wearing the same pair of earrings she always wore. Yeah, everything was perfectly normal... except the rapier hanging at her waist.

Unless I’d lost more memories than I realized, that was probably something... No, that was *definitely* something I’d never seen her with before. What was she even doing with something like that? And that lightning just now... Was that her handiwork?

“Just... Just hold on. I’m gonna need a minute to get my head around all this...”

Dad also possessed the Namidare bloodline, so I could just barely accept the fact that he might have gained some sort of strange powers because of it, but...

“What on earth is going on?! Why can Mom use crazy magic like that?!”

I was truly yelling from the bottom of my heart. I wanted answers, but...

“Who cares?” Mom replied bluntly.

“I do!”

There was no way I was accepting that for an answer, so I shot Dad an

imploring glance. He grimaced.

“Well, son... You’ve learned all about the Namidare bloodline by now, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Then I assume you know about other worlds, too?”

“Don’t get me started. I can’t even count how many times I’ve come and gone from them at this point.”

“Oh? Well... I suppose that simplifies things.” Dad looked dubious for a moment, but then resumed his explanation. “You see, your mother is a princess from another world that I once saved. She’s a spellsword that traveled the other world with me.”

“Mom’s a spellsword...? Aaah...”

I crouched down on the spot and clutched my head. It wasn’t that I was confused. Really, that simple explanation summed it all up pretty well. What made me clutch my head right now was just how readily I’d accepted this ridiculous situation. Ridiculous as it all was, however, I had to put aside my emotions for now.

“Okay, Dad... I get that you and Mom aren’t ordinary people. But what are you doing back in Japan? I mean, why now?”

“This kind of timing wasn’t just a coincidence,” Mom sighed with near exasperation. “The Otomos called us.”

“Uncle and Auntie did?! But how on earth—”

I was about to press for details, but I suddenly realized the answer to my own question. Satsuki came from a family of mages, and her parents were longtime friends of my mom and dad. It was possible they’d known each other’s secrets all along, which likely meant...

“They brought you two here from overseas using magic, didn’t they?”

“Bingo!” Dad confirmed with nod and a smile.

When the robots attacked and the Otomos realized that they were in over their heads, they’d immediately gone to pick up Mom and Dad to protect the

town. And after getting Mom and Dad here, the Otomos had gone to help the evacuees. They'd probably met up with President Momone's group by now.

"Yeah, it all makes sense now, but wow... I had no idea you could use a sword, Dad."

"Oh, this is just an old mallet handle I keep handy. And the blade's just a dusty old thing from the storage shed."

"There's no way it was dusty. Harissa and I cleaned the shed over summer vacation."

Harissa... Saying her name out loud made my chest tighten with worry. And that worry wasn't just for her, but if I started wondering where all the heroines were right now, I'd never be able to stop.

"Harissa? Rekka... don't tell me you've been involved in stories other than today," Mom asked, drawing closer with a quizzical look on her face.

She glanced over at L, who was standing beside me in a daze, unable to keep up with what was going on.

"Is this Harissa?"

"No, this is L."

"Then is she the heroine of the current story?"

"She, uh... Maybe?"

Mom laid pressing question after question on me, leaving me at a loss for how to answer. I mean, who *was* the heroine right now? There was so much to think about that I hadn't gotten that far yet.

I couldn't dismiss the possibility it was L, but somehow that didn't seem right. She did have a deep connection with the hardliners, but it wasn't like she was their target right now. Actually, even if Mom knew all the ins and outs of the Namidare heritage, wasn't she asking a lot of questions? Dad had a kinda cagey look on his face just now too. I didn't think I'd said anything strange, but...

Creeeak!

While we were standing around talking, three of the robots that had been

struck with lightning earlier lurched to their feet.

“Oh, my, they can still move after all that?” Mom eyed them with a raised eyebrow, then turned around and casually drew her rapier. “I’ve already defeated my final boss and maxed out my level, so you small fry ought to just sit back down. How about this then?”

Mom pointed the tip of her rapier into a pile of rubble lying around and chanted another spell.

“Awaken! Child 0026588!”

It was similar to the one that had spawned the lightning earlier, but the effect was different. The rubble she pointed her sword at started to flicker to life. Additional chunks of concrete, roofing shingles, and wood debris started to gather and come together as though they were moving on their own. Once there was enough material, it started to shape itself into something.

“Uh, Mom, what is that?”

“Just a golem I made from the rubble.”

A golem... Its silhouette was somewhat similar to the robots, but it carried a large hammer in one hand and for some reason wore a hat-like thing on its head, making it look much cuter than the enemy.

“Though it’s been a while since I made one. I wonder if it’ll move properly...” Mom cocked her head as she put away her rapier, then pointed at the rising robots. “Destroy them.”

“Urоророророг!”

With a throat-gurgling roar, the golem charged towards the enemy. Once it approached the robots, it raised its hammer into the air, and...

Ga-thunk!

It smashed its hammer against the robot so hard that its solid outer armor was dented. Whunk, thunk... The robots that had been slowed by the lightning strike had no power to evade the golem’s attacks. They all crumpled one after the other under its blows.

“Oh! Wait!”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Rekka?”

“Leave one alive, please. I want to investigate the inside for enemy information.”

“You want one of these moving ones?”

“They’re unpiloted and being controlled remotely. The moving ones have a higher chance their connection is still linked, so if possible, yeah.”

“Sure thing. Golem!”

At Mom’s order, the golem left one of the robots intact, knocking its legs out from under it to pin it down instead.

“Wow! With your mother here, it looks like you didn’t need me!”

“Your strengths lie elsewhere, Jigen. Be patient.”

Dad smiled at Mom, laughing heartily. From my point of view, Dad was also quite formidable, but... it’s true he was being overshadowed by Mom. At any rate, it hadn’t even been ten minutes since they first arrived. They were both insanely powerful. It made me realize just how weak I really was. Saying this about my dad was a little, y’know... But he was like a real hero.



“It’s kinda infuriating.”

“Huh? Did you say something, Rekka?”

“No.”

I turned away with a huff. That left me facing L, which suddenly made me feel a little embarrassed. Maybe I was being a bit childish...

When all the robots were taken care of, Mom and Dad stowed their weapons and walked back over to me.

“Now that things have finally calmed down and we know the evacuees will be fine since the Otomos are with them, how about you tell us what happened here, Rekka?”

“Tell us everything you can.”

“All right.”

I gave them a rundown of the days’ events. I told them about how the heroines around me had suddenly disappeared, about how the robots had been sent from the future to kill me, and about how L had saved my life in the nick of time. I wondered whether or not I should tell them about R, but the War of All was extremely difficult to explain if I left her out, so I just told them the truth. Mom and Dad took it well and listened without asking too many questions... But when I brought up Satsuki—my childhood friend and the daughter of their longtime friends—they had no idea who I was talking about. L had been able to trigger my memories, so did this mean it had to happen on an individual level? I put that question out of my mind for the time being to finish catching my parents up to speed.

“Well, that’s quite the story...”

“Our boy is going through something even more outrageous than you did, Jigen.”

When all was said and done, Mom and Dad’s reactions had gone past shock into exasperation.

“Huh...?”

Something felt odd about how they were acting. Something told me we weren't quite on the same page.

"Hey, Mom, Dad... why have you two been looking so dubious for a while now?"

I decided to just go ahead and ask what it was, but my mother furrowed her brow and tossed a worried look my dad's way.

"..."

And as for Dad...

"Hmm, how should I put this...?" he pondered aloud, scratching his head.

"What? Just spit it out."

"Well, I actually don't know what it means, but..." he began explaining, "The pace that you're being involved in stories is completely abnormal, Rekka."

"Huh?"

That wasn't what I was expecting him to say.

"No, but... Isn't the Namidare bloodline all about that?"

At age sixteen, a supernatural power to get caught up in "stories" awoke... That was the gist of the Namidare bloodline. It was Dad himself who'd told me that. R had filled me in on all the details, but there was no way Dad didn't know about all that.

"Yeah. It's normal for we Namidares to get involved in stories, but I said the pace you were doing so wasn't normal. In half a year, you've saved, what? Thirty girls? I've never heard of someone doing that."

"...Is it really that weird?"

"At most, it should've been five or six... There are even some cases like me where I got sent to another world and traveled for years in one single story."

At most, there should only be five or six stories... Then what had happened to me? I had to wonder. I wasn't really shocked to hear all this, but I was a bit unnerved to hear my strange penchant for trouble was unusual even in my oh-so-unusual family. What... was up with me?

“Allow me to answer that question.”

Just then, a third party interrupted us. I turned with a gasp to see who it was, and there stood a woman in a strange outfit lined with blue and red. She looked quite neat, which made her stand out amongst all the rubble and wreckage. I couldn't say for sure whether she was a friend or foe, and it seemed my parents couldn't either. L, on the other hand, seemed to know exactly who we were dealing with.

“Doctor?!” she gasped loud enough that her astonished voice echoed through the area.

Wait, did L just say “doctor”? As in, *the* doctor? I'd only ever heard of her, and surely Mom and Dad didn't know her... This would be our first time meeting her.

“L... long time no see.” The doctor approached L before anything else and hugged the little girl close. “I received R's report, but I'm glad to finally see you again.”

“Wha... Wh-What do you want?! Don't touch me!”

L shoved the doctor away with a gasp, and the doctor's face clouded with sadness.

“L, I've heard what happened. And I'm sorry for not being able to see you back then. I know being busy wasn't an excuse. It was my fault for not considering how you would feel when you were all alone.”

“Shut up, shut up! I don't want to hear it!”



L shook her head furiously, pushing the doctor away at every turn. But then...

“Now listen here.”

My mom walked over and flicked L on the forehead, cutting off her temper tantrum.

“Ow!”

“I don’t know what happened between you two, but you should talk it out properly.”

“...”

Holding her forehead, L fell silent. She wasn’t trying to back away from the doctor anymore, however. Seeing that, the smile returned to the doctor’s face, and she stood up. Then she turned to look at me... and looking kinda turned into staring.

“Um...”

“Ah, sorry. It’s been a while since I’ve seen Rekka’s face, so I couldn’t help myself,” the doctor laughed shyly.

“It’s been a while...? Uh, we haven’t met before, have we?”

“We have, although I’m from the future, so you could say that I know ‘future’ Rekka.”

“In other words... You know me, but not really *me* me? That’s a little confusing.”

“Heh, that’s an interesting way of putting it, but yes, that’s about the size of it,” the doctor said with a mischievous laugh. “But truth be told, you also know a different version of me in this time line.”

“Huh?”

“Can you tell who it is?”

A different version of the doctor in this time line, huh? In other words, I’d met her past self before. Put on the spot like this... I knew how smart she was, so I was tempted to say Shirley, but her hair color was all wrong. Hmm... Seeing me struggling made the doctor chuckle again.

“Sorry, sorry. Now’s not the time for a quiz. Just so you know, the answer is the king of Laputa.”

“Whaaat?!”

I couldn’t help but shout in surprise. That expressionless little girl turned into such an emotional and beautiful woman... Nope. I just couldn’t picture it.

“Heh, I’m sure it’s confusing, so feel free to just call me Doctor,” she said with a smile, seemingly satisfied with my surprise.

“Um, okay then, Doctor...”

I glanced at L as I started to speak to the doctor. I felt bad for interrupting their emotional reunion, but there was something I really needed to ask the doctor.

“You’ll answer my question now, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me ask you this... What am I?”

I was an anomaly even among the Namidores, something that surprised even Dad... Despite being slightly nervous about it, I asked anyway.

“It may not be the answer you’re looking for, but I’ve researched this abnormality of yours with your cooperation—or rather, the cooperation of the future Rekka Namidare,” the doctor began quietly. “Firstly, I started my research on what exactly the Namidare bloodline was. Why is it that you Namidores, with completely average strengths and spirits, hold the power to overturn helpless tragedies?”

“...”

“I spent quite a lot of time researching it, but I couldn’t find a logical explanation for it with existing scientific or magical means. That’s why, well, this is just a theory, but... I believe the Namidare bloodline possesses the ability to activate a certain power.”

“Power? But I don’t have any special powers.”

“Power isn’t necessarily something that can be perceived with your eyes.

Electrons and neutrinos existed long before methods of observing them were invented, for example.”

A power that couldn’t be observed, but was definitely there... When I thought about myself that way, I couldn’t help but look at my arms and legs. Of course, nothing had changed from this morning. They were just ordinary limbs.

“At first, I thought the power of the Namidare bloodline was simply to turn bad endings into good ones. You used the tremendous good inside you to convert them, you could say. And so, through your involvement, you were guiding the stories and their heroines to happiness.” There, the doctor paused. “But I’ve also found precedent for Namidares turning bad endings into even greater tragedies, so that idea was scrapped. If the power of the Namidares was really to change things for the better, whether consciously or not, then it shouldn’t be possible for their involvement to make things worse.”

The same as how if you keep adding positive numbers to a negative one, the sum eventually becomes positive. I got that. But according to the doctor’s interpretation, the power of the Namidares didn’t explicitly act as positive numbers.

“Then what kind of power is it?”

“The final conclusion I reached was actually rather simple.”

“And that was?”

“The power to change.”

Her answer was to take the good and bad out of the equation. It was simply about changing.

“The Namidares have the power to change stories. However, whether that change is from a bad ending to a good one, from tragedy to something less unfortunate, or even from tragedy to worse misery... That’s all up to the Namidare in question.”

“Hm...”

“Now, let me ask you this: what exactly is the Namidare power changing, then?”

“Hm? Isn’t it the stories?”

“That’s a nice idea, but I think the real answer is a little different. You’re changing fate,” the doctor declared, holding up a finger.

“Fate...?”

“That’s right. What you’re actually saving varies to a great degree. Someone’s life, the well-being of an entire kingdom, the existence of a world, sometimes even the flow of history itself... It’s the so-called power to change fate that heroes of legend possessed, and it’s been passed on through the Namidare bloodline... Or so my theory goes.”

“...”

“Standing at the crossroads of fate, you shoulder the burden of choosing a direction. Thus we’ve dubbed you the crossroad keepers,” the doctor said in a serious voice.

As for what that meant for me and my dad, the Namidares in question... The doctor’s description of us felt a little more grand than warranted, making us exchange dubious glances, unsure of whether or not we should be embarrassed or surprised.

“And so, that leads me to the main topic of you, Rekka Namidare...”

Finally, I thought we were about to get to the real heart of my question. I was dying to know what the doctor was going to say, but when she opened her mouth...

RRRIP!

An ear-splitting tearing sound came from on high.

“Wh-What?!”

Caught off guard, I looked up at the sky in a panic. And there...

“That’s...”

It looked like a large hole had been cut in the sky. In mid-air. In empty space. It literally looked like someone had sliced the air open with a sword, and it was gradually widening with that obnoxious tearing noise.

“No way...” L murmured with a nervous expression.

I actually recognized the phenomenon too. It was the same as when L had first appeared in my room—it was the end result of someone using the time translocator. And it was kind of...

“Huge...”

The tear in the sky now didn’t hold a candle to the one L had caused. Please tell me this doesn’t mean more robots...

“Another herd of small fry?”

Mom held her rapier at the ready while Dad drew his sword. My parents were ready and raring to go. But...

Ka-clink! Thunk, thunk, thunk...

The first thing I could see on the other side of the tear was feet.

“What?”

And they were way too big. Just from its ankle to its knee, this robot was already as tall as the ones we’d been fighting. And as the rest of it started to come through, the tear in the sky only grew bigger. When it fully emerged, unlike the slow, round robots from before, this one was actually humanoid with a distinct head.

Ba-dooooom!

“Crap!”

Just the impact of it hitting the ground was nearly enough to knock me off my feet. I managed to keep upright by grabbing hold of a nearby broken fence, so I extended an arm to help support L too. Eventually, the tremors quieted. We then turned to look back up at the robot... The gigantic robot.

“...”

Seeing it tower over us like a mountain, I reflexively gulped. The robots and golems that had been fighting until now looked like children in comparison.

“To think they’d be able to send something like this...” the doctor muttered to herself with a pained expression.

While there wasn't really a need to confirm it, her reaction told me that this gigantic robot wasn't a rescue team from the agency. No, it was enemy reinforcement.

"Hey, you! Don't tell me the hardliners snatched the time translocator!" L roared, turning to the doctor.

"Rather than taking the device, they may have simply stolen the technology..." she replied with a still-pained expression. "You remember the people from the agency who previously prepared you to be sent here to this time line, right? It seems they may have leaked the design for the time translocator to the enemy, but..." There the doctor trailed off, mumbling as though she were talking to herself, "Who exactly would be able to use the device to this degree?"

"Well, let's leave the rest of the thinking for later," my mom interrupted, brandishing her rapier. "I assume it's okay to destroy this thing, no?"

"Totally okay," I nodded in immediate response.

"Golem!"

"Urorororogh!"

As Mom called for her golem, she took off running.

"Awaken, awaken, awaken..."

The spell she chanted made the blade of her rapier glow with light. Its twinkling luminescence danced in the air, forming some kind of strange characters. Was it a language from another world? The string of letters then all focused onto the rapier at once.

"Hah!"

Mom used her rapier to stab the light into the golem's leg, where it seemed to funnel. The next thing I knew, I was hearing clattering and rattling all around us.

"What is that?!" I asked, looking around in surprise. "The robots are..."

The various parts of the robots that Mom and her golem had defeated earlier were rolling across the ground, pushing through rubble and floating into the air.

They were all coming to gather around her golem. Just as I realized what was happening, the parts began merging together with the golem.

“Wh-What?!”

In no time at all, the golem had grown easily as large as the gigantic robot that had appeared. So Mom could do even that... Right before my surprised eyes, the giant robot and giant golem started to fight.

“Urorororogh!”

The golem threw the first attack with its hammer. The robot stopped the strike aimed at its head with both hands.

Creeeak! Whirrr...

The robot then counterattacked by slamming its knee into the golem’s body. Loose rubble dropped down from its crushed body, making us spectators run for cover. The brawl continued after that.

“Urorororogh!”

Creeak...

The golem and robot exchanged blow for blow. They appeared to be evenly matched in that department, but the golem was slowly being worn down as the robot knocked off more and more of its parts.

“Too bad... The materials are too different.”

“Can’t you win, Mom?”

“In the end, this golem’s just a pile of rubble. If only orichalcum and mithril existed on Earth...” Mom said with a resigned sigh.

“What about that lightning magic you used earlier?”

“I can use it, but it probably won’t have much effect on that giant thing.”

“Is there a limit to the amount of force you can put in your magic or something?”

“My magic is the power of awakening—it awakens an object’s inherent power and amplifies it. Golems are just one application of that.”

So earlier she'd magnified the static electricity in the air into full-blown lightning, huh?

"How about you, dear?"

"I'm getting old, honey. This'll be tough even with your help."

Mom and Dad consulted with each other, but they were short on good ideas.

"..."

And if Mom and Dad didn't know what to do, we really might be out of options. Just as I was about to hang my head...

Stomp!

"Yeowch!"

Something heavy fell on my foot with great force, making me yell out in pain and surprise. No, nothing fell on me... L had stomped on my foot!

"Stop looking down!"

She... She was right. Honestly, today hadn't gone well at all. I was just getting jerked around from one thing to the next.

"...Isn't that the norm for you?"

"Huh?!"

R...? I could swear I'd heard R's voice, but she was nowhere to be seen. Was it a figment of my imagination? A hallucination? Or did L's violent scolding remind me of R's scathing tongue?

"All right!"

Remotivated, I started thinking again. Mom and Dad were a famous duo that had once saved another world, but I was the one with the active Namidare bloodline right now. Saving this story would be up to me. Using everything I had at my disposal, I'd have to come up with some way to make it work.

"Magnifying power, huh?" I pondered over my mom's explanation of her magic. "Hey, doctor..."

"Hm?"

"You know that sphere you used to fly around on as the king of Laputa? How did it float?"

"Oh?" The doctor cocked her head at my sudden question, then answered, "That was just a simple anti-gravitational device. I don't use it anymore, though."

Anti-gravitational...

I looked south. The former island of Laputa where she'd lived was a 30-minute walk from here, if I recalled correctly. Which meant it'd be, what? Fifteen minutes if I ran? I'm sure the doctor would be able to convince the current king of Laputa. At the very least, there was a chance...

But could we pull it off? The story this time was pretty straightforward. The enemy came, so we fought it. We defeated it, even, but then a stronger enemy appeared. Rinse and repeat. It was a simple test of power. There wasn't really room for any of my usual tricky, rule-breaking maneuvers. But I had to try.

"Dad, Mom, everyone! Listen up!"

It was only a matter of time before Mom's golem lost. Before then, I had to get everyone up to speed on the plan I'd just come up with. And so I began explaining... After hearing me out, my mother had a very reasonable response.

"For real?" she asked.

"For real," I answered.

"..."

She then gave my dad a questioning look, to which he replied...

"Sure, why not?"

"Really, Dad?"

"You're my son, after all. I did something similar when I saved your mom, I think."

Dad's casual response made Mom rub her forehead and sigh.

"Goodness me... They do say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

She then turned to me and poked her finger into my chest.

“Do what you need to. We’ll be here to pick up the pieces.”

“Can’t you just pray for my safety instead?”

“If only prayers worked like that... Even if you use all your bravery and knowledge, there may come a time when things don’t work out. And when that time comes, accept your noble death with dignity. Your father and I will mourn for you... and then have another child.”

“Wow, thanks, Mom...”

“I’m a princess from a world that was constantly at war, after all. You can’t be a warrior without walking hand in hand with death. Show me how you do it.”

I knew I was pretty strange, but as it turned out, my parents were even stranger. It’d just taken me 16 years to realize it. I probably could’ve gone my whole life without knowing, but I was honestly glad to know now.

Boom!

Just then, the robot punched a giant hole in the golem’s torso. Time was up.

“Okay, let’s go!”



We could hear the sound of the golem collapsing behind us as we ran.

“Mom, please take the doctor and go on ahead!”

“All right!”

Mom then used her magic to awaken the breeze around her and lift both her and the doctor up into the air.

“I’ll make sure to convince the me in this time line!” called the doctor.

“Thanks!”

“We’ll be waiting for you!” she called once more before flying off with Mom.

That left the three of us: me, L, and Dad. The road was smashed up with gaping holes everywhere, making it impossible for a car or even a bicycle to get through. All we could do was run.

“Hey! Wouldn’t it be faster to just use the particle relocator and get there

instantly?!"

"You're the one who said it wasn't for human use, L! Anyway, our goal is to lead that giant robot towards Laputa! It won't follow us if we just teleport away!"

If we moved outside its range of perception, it would probably just start rampaging like the other robots had when they were trying to find me. That would mean using the particle relocator was a last resort. But until things came to that, we'd just have to run.

Creeeak!

We heard the giant robot turn to come after us as soon as it defeated the golem. It had spotted us running away immediately. I glanced over my shoulder and saw its chest transforming with all sorts of loud clanking. Its chestplate split and slid to both sides to reveal a strange, cylindrical barrel... Wait, was that some kind of gun? Oh, crap!

"It's a beam!"

"Eek!"

So that's how it's gonna be?! Damn! Come on, then!

Violent words filled my head, but there was hardly anything I could do.

"L, use your barrier!"

"As if I could block something that big!"

In the middle of L and I yelling at each other...

"Goodness gracious. Seems my little boy still needs Daddy's help..."

My dad suddenly made a U-turn.

"D-Dad?!"

"Don't worry. You kids just go on ahead."

He placed his hand on his sheath and stood at the ready as the robot fired its beam. The flash of light was so bright that I couldn't even see what happened next.

“There we go.”

My eyes were burning even though I’d had them shut tight, but I could hear my dad’s voice just fine. When I could finally see again, Dad was standing right there safe and sound.

“Your father... He just cut the beam,” L informed me in a rather astonished voice.

“Hm? What are you two standing around in a daze for? Hurry up and run already.”

“R-Right!”

At his urging, I took off running again.

“But, Dad, aren’t you kind of ridiculously strong? Is that the power of your sword?” I asked him once he caught up.

“That’s part of it, but thanks to your mother’s magic, I’m able to bring out 100 percent of its power. You see, her awakening spell has amplified my own strength several hundred times right now.”

That was cool and all, but then he made sure to add on that if he used it too frequently, it would shorten his lifespan.

“Well, now’s not the time to be worried about that!” Dad shouted, glancing behind him as we ran.

Whirrr, clank!

With earth-trembling footsteps, the giant robot was finally pursuing us. This was where things would really get tough.

Thud, thud...

Just like its build, the robot’s stride was massive. That said, it was relatively slow... just as the doctor had said it would be. Before we started this fleeing act, she’d told us several things in advance, including...

“Rekka. There’s one thing you should know while you’re running away from the extremists. Their weakness is...”

Apparently, they couldn’t kill anyone in the past other than me. No, it would

be more accurate to say they didn't want to. They were from the future, meaning there was a certain overlap between my world and theirs. Anything that happened here had the potential to change the future. That much was common sense, but in that sense, the hardliners were the same as the moderates in that they wanted to cause as little damage here as possible. Well, at least they were going for minimal loss of life. Killing anyone other than me could have serious consequences.

If you killed someone here and now, their children would no longer exist in the future, and neither would their grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on. But it wouldn't just affect people directly involved, either. For example, if they killed me here and now, I wouldn't be able to save any of the heroines that needed help in the future. And that didn't apply to just me, and it didn't apply to just life-threatening cases. Think about people who were motivational or emotional support for other people. Think about mentors and those who are there to help others change their lives. If you took out any one of those people, it had rippling consequences. That's why the hardliners had focused their goal and were targeting me alone.

It made sense, thinking back on it. The robots hadn't attacked anyone before they saw me, and they *only* went after me even when other people were around. They were very careful not to harm anyone else. And that's why the giant robot was moving so slow right now—it was running multiple sensors to make sure no one was in its way. It seemed the hardliners had even sent the smaller robots first to chase away as many people as possible.

“What about me, then? They fired that beam right at me... I thought they were only after you, son?”

“You're a Namidare too, so maybe they just consider you collateral damage?”

“That's so mean...”

Dad and I joked around a little, but we never stopped running. It had only been five or so minutes now, so we still had two-thirds of the way to go.

“Wait... Whoa!”

The road was extremely uneven, making it hard to even run, but we kept pushing forward. The next obstacle that would befall us was a group of the

smaller robots cutting us off down the road.

“There were more?!”

I thought Mom had defeated them all. This must have been a backup squad they had on standby in case something like this happened.

Whirrr, clank!

Worse yet, the giant robot was now closing in quickly.

“Rekka, I’ll slow down the guy behind us, so you go on ahead.”

“But, Dad...!”

“Don’t worry. This isn’t a death flag.”

Dad laughed off my anxious look and turned towards the giant robot. His posture was different than when he stopped the beam earlier. He was now challenging the towering robot all by himself, and I knew my dad wasn’t the type to back down. I knew because I was the same way. All I could say to him now was...

“I’m telling Mom on you if you die!”

“That’s terrifying,” I heard Dad reply before I lost sight of him.

He’d charged straight into the punch that the giant robot sent into the ground, but I couldn’t afford to wait and see the aftermath. I had to turn around and keep running. We needed to widen the distance between us as much as possible... The next hurdle would be the smaller robots in front of us.

“Damn it!”

“Out of the way, idiot!”

I dodged what I could and L blocked what she could, but we both kept running. Forcing my poor, tired heart to keep working, I took deep breaths to keep oxygen pumping through my veins. Ah, damn it all...

This wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough at all. I was the weak link holding everyone back.

“Tch! This...!”

L tried to make up for my shortcomings, but she was approaching her limit. We hadn't even made it halfway to our goal yet!

"Oh, no!"

One of the robots reached their arm around L's barrier and attacked me from behind. Worse yet, its other arm was coming around front. I was pincered in place with no escape.

"Take this!"

"Hyah!"

Just then, Yulia and Yorun leaped over the fence and deflected the robot arms with their axe and hammer respectively.

"What are you two doing here?!"

"Eyes up, Rekka!" Yorun shouted sharply.

While I had been distracted by the two of them, another robot was preparing to fire its beam at me. L was behind me, and I knew her barrier wouldn't make it in time. I concentrated all my strength into my legs, prepared to make a desperate leap to safety. But then...

Snap!

I could see a girl jump up on top of the robot's head.

"If slashing doesn't work, let's try stabbing."

It was President Momone, armed with a glowing wooden sword she stabbed down into the robot with a smirk. It must have severed something inside, because the beam never fired after that.

"President Momone... What about the refugees?!"

"I left them to my grandfather and some couple claiming to be mages."

Ah, she must mean Satsuki's parents. President Momone then descended from the robot's head and began running alongside me.

"The robots all started heading your way after you separated from us, so the refugees should be perfectly safe now."

That was great to hear, but...

“Then why did you come back, Prez? If you were able to get to safety, then you should have gotten as far as possible!”

“Fool.” President Momone nudged me lightly in the head with her sword. “As if I could run and leave you behind.”

“That’s right!” Yorun jumped in.

“Honestly... You make us all worry too much,” Yulia added.

President Momone then nodded and asked, “So, why are you running right now?”

“To defeat the big guy back there,” I pointed and answered.

“I see. I don’t know what you intend on doing, but I assume you’re basically leading it into a trap?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“How far is it?”

“Just a little further.”

“Then we’ll help you out a little more. This has something to do with that bloodline of yours, doesn’t it?”

“It’s dangerous, President Momone.”

“I can see that. Anyway...” President Momone trailed off for a moment, then grinned with a laugh. “You played decoy for us earlier, and I always repay my debts, you know?”

There, she turned and waved to Yulia and Yorun.

“All right, you two! Let’s go!”

“Got it! Come on, Rekka. Let’s go!”

“Follow behind me!”

The three of them took a triangular formation surrounding me and took turns blocking the robots’ attacks. I also used her barrier to defend us against the beams. She had a little more freedom and power now that President Momone,

Yulia, and Yorun were here to defend us against everything else.

Whirr-clack! Whirr-clack! Whirr-clack! Whirr-clack!

But just as I started to think we were getting an edge, another robot emerged from the right.

“Tch...!”

If any more enemies showed up, we’d simply be overwhelmed. We’d never make it... What should we do?

Just as I was thinking that...

“Here we go, meow!”

“Ai?!”

A whole clowder of nekomata appeared out of nowhere, charging straight for the robot reinforcements.

“We can do this, meow! We have to protect Rekka, meow!”

“What does she think she’s doing?!”

I started to charge right after them, but President Momone grabbed my shoulder.

“Don’t.”

“But...!”

“You saved them earlier too, so let them repay the favor. Don’t worry, though. They’re not fighting; they’ll just run around in circles to distract the enemy and buy us some time. I told them not to do anything too dangerous.”

It seemed our nekomata backup had been President Momone’s work. The enemy had prepared reinforcements, and so had she.

“Wait...”

Everything was connected. Even though I was the only one who’d regained my memories, it wasn’t like the girls were any different. Who was it that had written them off, thinking they weren’t strong enough to make a difference in this story? Who was it that they were protecting right now? I was an idiot for

underestimating them.

“All right, let’s go!”

I tossed my fears aside and focused that energy into my legs. We’d reach Laputa soon enough. Now... Where was that giant robot? I glanced over my shoulder as I ran.

“Rekka! Watch out!” I heard Dad yell.

Bwoosh!

A wayward portion of a split beam grazed the top of my head. It must have been one my dad cut in half. It continued flying past me after it grazed me and impacted the road up ahead. It melted the asphalt like butter, leaving behind a massive crater roughly ten meters in diameter. Not even an Olympic athlete could jump that... We had no choice but to take a detour around it.

It was too bad we were now sandwiched between the giant hole and the giant robot behind us... Not to mention all the smaller robots we’d yet to take out. Moving forward was impossible, and turning back was life-risking. But I knew standing still wasn’t the answer!

I pumped my brakes, coming to a stop to look for another way... when all of a sudden President Momone grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Keep running!”

“Huh?! But...!”

“Just believe in us and run!”

I didn’t have time to argue. I believed in her. I believed in all the girls.

“Hiyah!”

I took a sprinting leap towards the hole and, of course, after several seconds in the air, I began falling.

“What?!”

Or so I thought. But just as I began to fall, something pulled me upward with a tug. Who could it be? The only heroine who could fly right now was...



“Wait, Poppy?!”

“Hnnngh!”

Poppy had grabbed me by my sleeve and was flapping her little wings with all her might. But looking closer... I realized it wasn't just her. Dozens of fairies had grabbed on to my clothes and were lifting me up. Poppy had probably gone and gathered her friends for my sake... To save me should the worst come to pass. I was inarticulately grateful. And slowly but surely, we reached the other side.

“Poppy! Fairies! Thank you! You saved me!” I shouted to them in gratitude.

“Hee... Hee... Just do your best from here!” the worn-out Poppy encouraged as she saw me off.

It was about then that L appeared next to me via the particle relocator.

“What about President Momone and the others?” I asked.

“I filled them in on your plan. They'll watch out and withdraw when they need to.”

If we were talking about President Momone, I knew I could trust her.

“All right, then all that's left to do is run!”

“That's all we've *been* doing!” L yelled angrily, but ran along with me anyway.

There were no longer any residences around us, only fields and empty lots. I could see small mountains ahead. And, at last, we arrived at our destination—a giant pit.

“Hahh... Hahh...”

We still had a little further to go, however. I continued to run, heading for the bridge at the back of the pit. And just as I reached the other side...

Whirrrrrr!

The giant robot came flying at us in a single leap. L and I were the only ones here now, so it was free to attack as it pleased.

Ka-thud!

The ground rumbled as it landed.

“Ah... W-Wah!”

I reached out and caught L, who had trouble regaining her balance after the shock wave. It wouldn’t be funny if we got caught now after coming all this way just because of a little stumble.

Whirrr, clack!

The giant robot’s head looked down at us. I took out my cellphone and called Mom.

“Now, Mom!”

“Got it. Don’t get caught in the crossfire.”

Our exchange was short. There was nothing else to say. I looked up... up past the robot’s head. It hadn’t noticed yet since it was always looking down at us, but far above its head was an anti-gravitational device amplified by my mother’s magic. That’s right; it was the former island of Laputa made to fly again. And it was currently falling back down towards the pit.

“Wait... isn’t it kind of slightly off to the side? Like, it’s coming right at us?!”

“WHAT?!”

L and I hurriedly scrambled away from the edge of where Laputa had once crash-landed. Several tense moments later...

Whirrr...

The falling Laputa crash-landed for a second time, this time right on top of the giant robot. Like I said, the story this time was a simple test of power. So in order to defeat something large, we just needed something larger. And we’d ended up crushing it!

“Ugh, bleh! I got dirt in my mouth!”

“We’re both covered in it.”

L and I had both been blown away by the impact of the crash landing, and it took a good deal of coughing before the dust settled. I looked back up behind me to see that the island of Laputa was once again the mountain of Laputa... although slightly askew from before.

“L!”

“What?”

I lightly lifted my right hand in silence. L probably knew what I was trying to do, but she didn't respond immediately. However, after a pause...

“Hmph!”

Clap!

L smacked my hand violently, making our awkward high-five echo throughout the foot of the mountains.



Next Prologue

After the giant robot was defeated, the other robots suddenly disappeared. They'd probably retreated to the future. L and I returned to town and met up with my parents, President Momone's group, the doctor, and the current king of Laputa.

"Your Majesty, thanks for saving us this time. Sorry for asking something like that on short notice."

"We don't mind... It was an emergency, after all. You can help... clean up the library later."

"Ugh..."

I groaned a little just thinking about how many books she owned. Nevertheless, we'd succeeded in driving off the enemy. But...

"But at this rate, they'll just recuperate and send more robots..."

They'd probably be even stronger when they returned. It was a gloomy situation, but...

"I actually have something to discuss with you concerning that matter, Rekka," said the doctor.

"Oh?"

I turned to face the doctor as she started talking with a serious expression.

"I'll get straight to the point. Rekka, I want you to come with me to the future."

"What?!"

My eyes widened at the unexpected proposal. No, was it really that unexpected? I'd half figured something like this would happen. Back when I tried to capture an enemy robot and get in touch with the future...

"Something happened in the future, right?"

The heroines disappearing and the robots attacking... Everything that had happened today probably originated in the future.

“What exactly is going on there?”

“First, the moderate faction was attacked by extremists—the hardliners, as they call themselves,” the doctor prefaced. “I didn’t understand why they would do such a thing at first, but everything changed when I received a certain transmission from R.”

“From R?” I asked, cocking my head. “Come to think of it... what happened to R? Do you know, doctor?”

“She’s sleeping right now.”

“Sleeping?”

If memory served, R didn’t sleep...

“In the first place, kidnapping the heroines from this time line and erasing them without a trace was only possible because the enemy mastermind used Touko Iwazu’s power of words.”

“Touko?!”

I mean, I guess that made a certain amount of sense. Her power could do practically anything, but...

“I don’t think she’d do something like this...”

“I didn’t say her personally—I said her power. After she was first rendered powerless to resist, her power was copied with the Doppel Stone.”

“The Doppel Stone...”

The stone that had the power to copy supernatural abilities... It had previously been at the center of a dispute with Nartessia and the Margaret family. If it was used to copy the power of words, then...

“But the enemy made a miscalculation. You remember how R was once forcefully removed from your side with the power of words? After that happened, I developed a device to shield its user from the power of words to prevent that from happening again.”

“Really?”

“R realized the enemy’s scheme before anyone else, but that was after they

made their move... So she used the device to protect the heroines of her own story.”

The heroines of R’s story were the heroines of my everyday life, like President Momone and Tokiwa. R had saved them... Furthermore, I’d only been able to regain my memories because R had shielded me from half of the memory-blocking effect in the first place. It was thanks to her that one crack in the floodgates was all it had taken to blow them wide open.

“But why did R disappear, then?”

“That device was still in development and had issues regarding energy supply. R compensated for that by using her own energy instead. As a result, R’s demi-material existence lost its physicality, and she was unable to maintain herself, putting her in an indefinite state.”

“What?! Is she dead?!”

“She’s fine. I said she was asleep, didn’t I? Once things have calmed down, I’ll be able to bring her back with... a certain amount of certainty.”

Hearing that, I—as well as L, secretly—heaved a sigh of relief.

“But the problem right now is the enemy mastermind who planned this... We don’t know their objective. If they were aiming for your life, there would’ve been easier methods that didn’t involve kidnapping the heroines. However, that action was the precise weak point that had a profound influence on both the past and future... as well as the War of All itself.”

“What exactly does that mean?” L asked the doctor.

“The truth is that even though we know the extremists exist, we still don’t know who’s behind it all. L, I believe you were recruited by their leader... Do you know who it is?”

“I haven’t met them directly, no.”

“I figured not. Whoever it is, they’re very thorough in making sure they don’t reveal themselves.”

“...”

A mastermind with an unknown identity and goal, huh? How unsettling.

“Rekka.” The doctor took a deep breath there before continuing, “If I bring you to the future, you may be dragged into the War of All whether you like it or not. I actually wanted to avoid that, but I hope you can forgive us for failing you there... However, at the same time, I can’t help but feel hopeful that this may just yet be the key to resolving the War of All.”

“...”

“I believe I told you about how you Namidares are crossroad keepers with the power to change fate. And of all the Namidares, you possess an unusually strong power to do so.”

The doctor had said that was the reason I’d gotten caught up in so many crazy stories at such a crazy rate.

“If there was anyone who could stop the War of All involving countless worlds, countless dimensions, and as many intersecting lives as there are stars... Then it would have to be a very special crossroad keeper like you, Rekka,” she declared bluntly. “We still don’t know who the enemy mastermind is, but they’ve quietly played a very fearsome hand. We have to make a move too, or we’ll be cornered. I know I’m asking for the impossible, but...”

“You don’t need to say any more than that, Doctor,” I interrupted. “R and Satsuki and the others... even the future world will be in trouble if I don’t go, right? So I’m going.”

“...Thank you.”

“It’s fine. What will you do, L?”

“I’ll go too... I’ll make them pay for what they’ve done.”

And so the doctor, L, and I were headed for the future. Because of the attack on the agency headquarters, that was all the time translocator was capable of right now. I turned to my mom and dad who had been listening to the conversation...

“So I’m gonna be away for a bit.”

“Away to the future, huh? Even I haven’t been there yet,” Dad said lightheartedly, patting me on the shoulder. “Well, do your best. Make sure you

bring me back a souvenir!"

"No way!"

As if I'd have the time for that.

"Well, you know I'm worried. But I also know I can't stop you," Mom said with a sigh, shaking her head tiredly.

"Sorry to worry you, Mom."

"All children worry their parents, son," Mom said, hugging me once. "If it gets dangerous, make sure you run away. You take after your father... You're both so reckless."

"..."

That would probably be impossible, but I nodded silently. Mom probably knew it was an empty promise, but she smiled as she let go of me gently. I then approached President Momone.

"Um, so that's how it is. I'll be absent from school for a while."

"Don't worry. I think school will be closed for some time. But is that really all you have to say to us?" President Momone said, raising an eyebrow unhappily.

That seemed to be the consensus of everyone there, as several other pairs of eyes began glaring at me too.

"Um... E-Er..."

"Tch. It was our mistake for expecting something tasteful from you at a time like this," President Momone said with a bitter smile.

That... That felt profoundly insulting.

"Pfft. Well, it's fine. That's just what I'd expect from you anyway."

"R-Really?"

"Yeah. I've taken a liking to that part of you. I'll cry if this ends up being our final farewell, so don't make me cry."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

Hearing her encouragement, I nodded eagerly. Ai, Yulia, Poppy, and Yorun all

walked over to me next. We exchanged words, but not words of farewell—promises to meet again. As I was returning their temporary goodbyes... Tokiwa suddenly clung to me.

“Come back safe,” she said in her usual whisper.

Everyone freaked out when she jumped on me, but it was somehow comforting to see her acting like normal. That said, it felt like she was clinging to me a little tighter than usual...

“Well, I’ll be off now,” I said, waving at everyone.

“Let’s go.”

There, the doctor activated the time translocator. The next thing I knew, my vision blurred, and I found myself in a strange space. When I asked, apparently we were in what was known as the stream of time—what made time travel possible. It was weird. I couldn’t feel my limbs at all, but I was hyper-aware of everything. It seemed the time translocator was actually what was moving us through the stream of time.

“Hey...”

Fortunately, I could still move my mouth. I didn’t know how long it would take to arrive in the future, but it would be awkward to just stay silent the whole time. So I decided to ask the doctor something that had been on my mind...

“What is ‘future’ Rekka doing right now?”

The War of All was the result of me not settling down with a heroine, so what on earth was future me, the cause of everything, doing in the future? It was something I’d been wondering for a long time now. And hearing my question, the doctor replied...

“In the future, you’ve been missing this entire time.”

—***To be continued—***

Afterword

It's the fourteenth volume of the super space-time-defying romantic comedy, and we've finally entered the final arc! Hello again to everyone who came from volume 13, and hello for the first time to everyone who bought all 14 volumes at once.

This is the first multi-volume story since volumes 7 and 8. Moreover, this is a story I always wanted to do (I feel like that's been happening for the last several volumes), so I'd like to write the conclusion properly.

It's a little soon, but now on to the acknowledgments... To Nao Watanuki, I'm sorry for causing so much trouble submitting the manuscript late this time. Thank you very much for the doctor's design and the wonderful two-page spreads. To my editor, Mr. Kinoshita, thank you very much for checking the plot and manuscript this time, too. Last but not least, my sincerest thanks to everyone who's involved in the *Little Apocalypse* series: the editors and marketers at HJ Bunko, the shops that stock these books, and the readers that pick them up! Please continue to support the series. Thank you all, so, so much.

It's the illustrator, Nao Watanuki, and it's time for the usual afterword page!

In this volume, we finally meet the doctor, who's only showed up in text before. Until I read the manuscript for this volume, I had no idea about her background... Did any of you pick up on it? I like how you can still see a hint of you-know-what in her hair.

Whenever there are characters I can't fit into the insert illustrations, I always want to put them in the afterword. But this time there were too many characters that didn't get to make an appearance, so...

At any rate, Rekka sure has his hands full!

To Namekojirushi and the editors, thank you for all your hard work. Since everything came down to the wire this time, the supervisors had to take on a lot of extra work, but thanks to them, this volume has safely reached the world like all the others. Thank you very much! We're finally approaching the real meat of the Little Apocalypse series. I hope to see you again next volume—same time, same page! Thanks for reading.



挿絵担当・和狸ナオと申します!

恒例のあとがきページ、よろしくお願ひ致します。

これまで文字上では何度か登場した博士が
いよいよお目見えとなりました。

今巻の原稿を読むまでは彼女の素性が全く
分からなかった私です…。お気付きました。
読者の方はいらしゃるでしょうか？

アレの名残のゆるふわな髪がお気に入りです。

挿絵に出せなかったキャラクターがいる
このコーナーで拾いたくなったりするのですが。
今回は出番の有無がかなり激しく
いかんともしがたい…

とりあえず烈火はお腹いっぱいになりました！

なめこ印先生、編集様方、大変お疲れ様でした。
色々ギリギリになた為、後の作業担当様方にもご負担
をお掛けしましたが、お陰様でいつも通りの一冊分
描くことが叶いました。ありがとうございます！

リトル黙示録の核心について近付きつつ
ありますね。次巻も是非このページでお会い
出来ればと思います。
お読み頂きありがとうございました。

和狸ナオ 拝



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I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse: Volume 14

by Namekojirushi

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Edited by Megan Denton

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I SAVED GIRLS AND CAUSED THE APOCALYPSE

Too Many

LITTLE



14

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