



I SAVED GIRLS AND CAUSED THE APOCALYPSE

Too Many

LITTLE

13

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Critical hit!

Game
World
Knight
Yorun

"Make
way!"

The
slime was
obliterated
with one
overhead
swing.



R was gone. Whether it was in other worlds, outer space, or even the past, she had always stuck with me. So to see her gone, I finally understood that something was very, very wrong.

**“Rekka
Namidare,
I challenge
you.”**

Mysterious
Fortune
Teller

**Touko
Iwazu**



**"I busted
my butt
making
that!
There's no
way it'd be
anything
other than
delicious!"**

"PHEEEEEET!"

I instantly spat it out.

REKKA NAMIDARE

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



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

IRIS FINERITAS GYPHERCALL



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

SATSUKI OTOMO



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

R

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

HARISSA HOPE

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**TETRA
METRA
RETRA**

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



**TSUMIKI
NOZOMUNO**

A high school freshman. She works at her family's restaurant, Nozomiya, and practices her cooking every day.



**HIBIKI
BANJO**

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



LEA

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



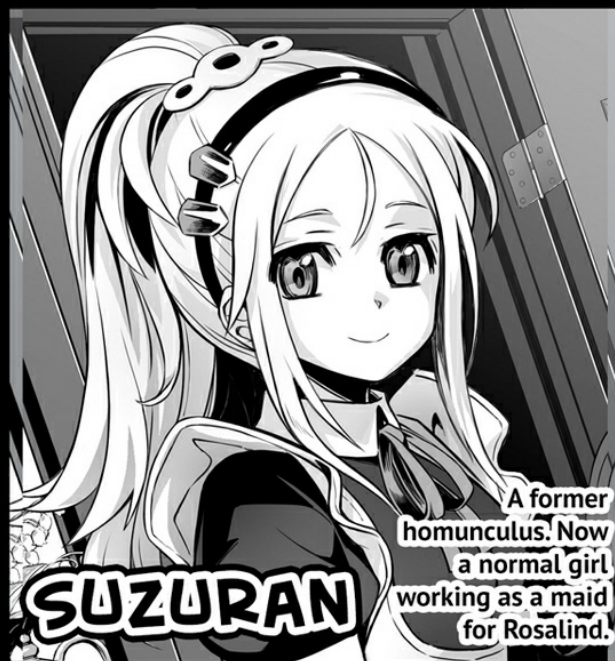
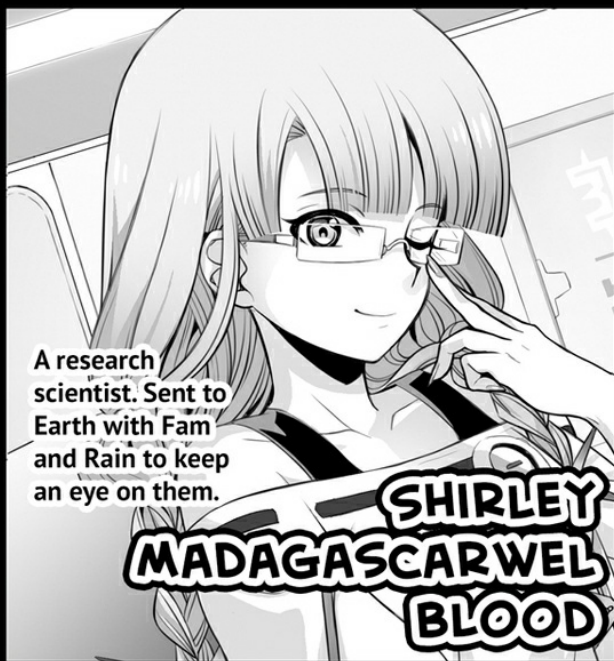
**ROSALIND
G. BATHORY**

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.



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



YULIA

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



**KIRI
HAYASHIBARA**



**CHIRIKA
SHINOMIYA**

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

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



**NYANYAN
ATLANTIA**

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



**SHERLYN
DOTEYES**



**TOUKO
IWAZU**

NEW!

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.



NEW!

YORUN

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Prologue

Fall, the time of year for warm food, good books, and sports. It's a colorful, bustling season full of all kinds of things to do. And for Mitsuhashi High, that includes getting ready for the annual school festival.

"Hey, problem child. Go see the disciplinary committee next and get their schedule for the day."

"Yes, ma'am."

Even though I'd only just returned, I immediately left the student council room on President Momone's orders. I'd been recruited to help her—really, the whole student council—prepare for the upcoming festival because I owed her a few favors. I'd thought we were even after I went to go take care of a sick Tokiwa in President Momone's stead a while back, but she was quick to inform me that I owed her *multiple* favors. This would hopefully get me one step closer to being in the black.

"But, jeez... Isn't this a bit much?"

"I know, right?"

I complained to R, who was lazily somersaulting in the air, as I hauled butt down the hall. I would've loved to trade places.

"Everyone sure does seem busy. Are preparations for school festivals always this chaotic?" R asked as she casually observed her surroundings.

Students were milling about all up and down the hall, which was strewn with upturned desks and chairs, half-made signs with drying paint, and other miscellaneous materials leaning against the walls.

"Well, this year's festival is being held in conjunction with Juumonji High, Hibiki's school, so the festival committee and disciplinary committee really have their hands full."

And by extension, the student council—which oversaw both committees—was especially busy. Granted, President Momone had said something about wanting to make this year's festival more exciting, so she personally seemed

pretty motivated. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

“ ... ”

This would be my first school festival as a high schooler, but I had to admit there was a particular energy filling the campus. It was like everyone was really getting into the spirit of things. Was this the fruit of President Momone’s efforts?

“Oops, President Momone will scold me if I dawdle.”

I’d unwittingly stopped to take in the atmosphere myself, so I picked up the pace and scuttled off down the hall. Things were pretty crazy, but still fun... Or, at least, that’s what I thought at the time. I had no idea what kind of trouble was about to come down the pipe.

Chapter 1: RRPg (Real Role-Playing Game)

The school festival was almost upon us, and preparations were in full swing. At our school, each class would be hosting some kind of event or exhibition for the festival, and clubs were encouraged to contribute too. Which is why I was currently in the light literature club room after school with Tokiwa trying to think of something for us to do.

What about a lounge? Somewhere for students to come take a load off during the festival?

After reading the suggestion Tokiwa had typed out on her laptop, I rubbed my chin.

“Isn’t the club room a little small for that? Plus, this place is like a heat sink. I’m not sure it’d make a very comfortable lounge.”

Curse you, global warming...

“Besides, is anyone even gonna come to the old school building during the festival?”

I have absolute faith in your ability to attract people.

“That doesn’t thrill me...”

I could feel my shoulders slump as we continued to lazily wade through discussing what we’d do for the festival.

“How about we just make a club zine or something like that? Though it’d end up being more like a feature on you, Tokiwa.”

I submit all my writing for the New Writer’s Prize...

“Eh, I guess that’s a no-go then.”

We’d been talking for nearly an hour already and hadn’t come up with a single good idea. Festival applications for clubs had to be submitted to the festival committee, and the deadline for submitting them was the end of today. At this rate, we weren’t gonna have anything to submit in time... What could two club members even do by themselves? That was the real issue.

“...”

I was at a complete loss when Tokiwa leaned back in her folding chair and looked up at me. Because we mostly communicated via her typing on her laptop, I naturally stood behind her so I could read over her shoulder. When she leaned back like this, her head fell right on my abdomen between my chest and stomach... But today she suddenly reached up, wrapped her arms around my neck, and pulled me closer.

“Wah!”

My nose was just millimeters away from her cleavage, and I could feel my head overheating at the feminine scent tickling my nasal passages.

“Since we can’t decide, shall we just spend the day of the festival lazing about in the club room together?” Tokiwa whispered in my ear.

She had such a quiet voice that she needed to be this close to someone in order for them to hear her. That’s why we’d agreed on communicating through typing instead while in the club room, but she’d still break her promise every now and then and cling to me like this. I mean, I wanted her to stop because it was embarrassing, but when she did it, it was so hard to actually tell her to...

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Hey, I’m coming in... What are you two doing?”

“Waaah!”

President Momone stepped into the clubroom with a suspicious look on her face, and I immediately tore myself away from Tokiwa.

“Don’t just come barging in!”

“I knocked first.”

“Yeah, before you barged in!”

I tried to object, but I realized my argument was weak.

“A-Ahem... So, anyway, did you need something, President Momone?”

“Hmm. Well, you’ll do,” she said nonchalantly.

She then produced what looked like a CD-ROM case, but the packaging was

completely plain. She cracked it open and pulled out a disk, which looked totally normal, but...

“What is that?” I asked.

“Someone brought it to the shrine. Allegedly, it’s got a cursed game on it.”

That apparently got Tokiwa’s attention.

“...!”

“So, I want to install this on your laptop. Neither my grandfather nor I have a computer, and the vice president is using the one in the student council room right now for festival prep,” explained President Momone as she turned to Tokiwa, whose sleepy eyes were uncharacteristically sparkling.

I said Tokiwa had to whisper into someone’s ear for them to be able to hear her, but President Momone was an exception. The two of them were childhood friends and had known each other forever.

“That makes sense,” I interjected. “But isn’t that kinda dangerous?”

“It might be, but I can’t turn down an exorcism request.”

“You don’t say...”

I sighed in exasperation, but I could understand the position she was in.

“So, if you will, Midori...” President Momone said, handing the disk over to Tokiwa.

Holy crap, they really were gonna do it right here and now.

“Okay, but you have to stop as soon as it gets too dangerous,” I warned President Momone.

She laughed in response.

“What’s this? You’re worried about me?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Haha, how cute,” she laughed, slapping me on the shoulder. “If something happens to me, I’ll be counting on you to save me. That’s your specialty, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but... Wouldn’t it be better for me to just go and get your grandfather?”

President Momone’s grandfather, the Demonslayer of Kibi Shrine, was practically a living legend. He was an expert with this kind of stuff. I figured he’d be way more useful than me, but...

“Unfortunately, my grandfather won’t be any help in this case. He’s terrible with technology. We don’t even let him use the microwave at home. He’d break it in five seconds flat.”

Go figure.

“I guess a computer would be out of the question, then...”

“That’s right. So if I end up in a bind, I’ll waive all the favors you owe me in exchange for your assistance.”

I would rather she just not put herself in a situation where that might happen, but it was pretty clear she wasn’t about to yield. The One-Eyed Student Council President had nerves of steel, so she was unfazed by things like this.

“...”

“Thanks, Midori. Is it ready now?”

Her eyes still sparkling, Tokiwa silently—at least to my ears—hurried President Momone to launch the game.

“All right, I’m counting on you if something happens,” she said to me before walking over to Tokiwa and her laptop. “Start it up, Midori.”

“...”

And with a click of the mouse...

Vwoom!

An intense flash of light poured out from the screen with a strange sound.

“What?!”

“...?!”

The next thing I knew, President Momone and Tokiwa had vanished like

they'd been swallowed by the light.

"H-Huh...?"

I was dumbfounded by this sudden and bizarre turn of events. I was frozen for a good ten seconds or so before rushing over. I touched the chair where Tokiwa had just been sitting in disbelief. She was gone, but her warmth still lingered. There was no sign of President Momone, either.

"..."

My eyes were naturally drawn to the computer screen. A single window was open, which read in pixelated letters, "Dragon Install: The Legend of the Demonic Dragon King." Judging by the design of the logo, it seemed to be some kind of fantasy RPG. I guess this was the aforementioned cursed game. President Momone and Tokiwa had disappeared the second they launched it, which had to mean...

"She said *if* something happened... But right off the bat, huh?" With a sigh, I turned and left the room. "Looks like you'll be wiping the favor ledger clean today, Prez."



I managed to snag Satsuki, Iris, and Rosalind before they left school, and I returned to the light literature club room with the three of them.

"You mean to say the girl with the eyepatch and the well-endowed girl got sucked into the game?" Rosalind asked with an exasperated sigh.

For the record, she meant President Momone and Tokiwa. I needn't say why she referred to Tokiwa as "well-endowed."

"So this time it's a game world, is it? What will they think of next?" Satsuki said with a sigh too.

Honestly, I'd had the same thought, but it seemed there were still a surprising number of worlds we hadn't been to yet. The possibilities were endless. Which wasn't a good thing, mind you.

"Going into a game world sounds awesome! Video games on Earth are always so interesting, but it's like something is missing without the full-immersion

experience,” cooed Iris.

She was the only one who was all smiles right now. Indeed, the rich girl from space had taken quite a liking to our silly little Earthling games recently. But I wasn’t exactly complaining. It was kinda nice to have someone cheerful and excited about things. It made me feel a little more lighthearted too.

“All right, let’s hurry up and get President Momone and Tokiwa out of there.”

“According to the Magic of Omniscience, entering the game will transform us into characters within the game world.”

Dragon Install was exactly the fantasy RPG it appeared to be, meaning monsters, magic, and all.

“Okay. Let’s get to it.”

Worried about President Momone and Tokiwa, I took the lead and reached out for the laptop. My hand slipped right through the screen like it wasn’t even there. Apparently, this was how to enter the game.

“Wait, Rekka. We should all hold hands and go together. It’d be terrible if we were separated.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

I was nearly on the verge of jumping the gun, but I turned around and offered my other hand to the girls. While I didn’t have anyone particular in mind, it seemed they all did.

“Me! I’m going to be the one to hold Rekka’s hand!”

“Are you kidding?! It should be me!”

“I was the one who suggested it!”

And so they began bickering about who would take my hand.

“Please just pick someone already...” I moaned.

“You stay out of this!” they all shouted back at me.

Eventually, they decided to settle things with rock, paper, scissors. The three of them stared each other down intently as they clenched their fists tightly. It was almost like they were getting ready for a duel and not a game... It certainly

wasn't any testament to the cooperation and teamwork we'd need to be able to get through what was to come.

"Rock, paper, scissors, shoot! Shoot! Shoot!"

"Okay, this is clearly going nowhere. How about we go in the order of who beats me?" I suggested, starting to worry we'd never leave at this rate.

We were somehow able to decide the order that way, but nevertheless, it was a shaky start to our digital journey.

Entering the game was simple enough. After sticking my arm halfway through the screen, the rest of my body was sucked right in. By the time I even realized what had happened, I was already surrounded by different scenery.

"Are we in the woods?"

We'd been transported from the club room to somewhere outdoors... Er, we were just inside a game, so did that mean we were really still indoors? Whatever.

"We do seem to be in a forest, but the trees and soil here appear to be a bit strange..."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, they do look a little pixel-y."

Computer graphics were so cutting-edge these days that honest-to-god pixel art games were hard to come by. I think the last time I played one was all the way back in elementary school. But anyway...

"All right, shall we look for President Momone and Tokiwa?" I asked, trying to urge my three companions toward our goal.

"Yeah, let's hurry."

"Hey, do you think monsters will show up around here? Like slimes and stuff?"

"Hmph, I'll take on any creature that dares to get in my way."

And so we began our journey, steadily making our way through the pixelated forest.

"Hey, uh... Doesn't it seem a little too easy to move around here?"

“Even though we’re in the forest? Yeah...”

That wasn’t a bad thing, mind you, but it made both me and Satsuki rub our chins. I remember walking around the woods collecting firewood for the barbeque being exhausting. This, however, felt like a breeze in contrast.

“I guess it’s because the ground is perfectly flat.”

Moreover, there wasn’t underbrush all over the place. And even though it wasn’t well maintained, there was still a clear path for us to follow.

“This kind of thing sure makes it feel more game-like,” observed Iris.

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, you know how you always walk at the same speed in a video game, no matter the terrain? There’s also always a road or something, so it’s not like you really need to know where you’re going.”

“Huh, yeah... I guess you’re right.”

It was pretty easy to tell where you were and weren’t supposed to go in old video games. An obstacle meant you should turn back, and a path or road meant you should follow it. So in that sense, this setup was indeed pretty game-like.

“Hmm, speaking of games...”

We’d been walking for a while now. When exploring in an RPG, the one event you were guaranteed to trigger was...

Wibble!

Yup, it was a monster encounter. And the monster we happened to encounter was a round, translucent blob. In other words, a slime.

“Whoa!”

Compared to the forest around us, the slime appeared to be a lot more developed. Er, I said “developed,” but it really just looked like some kind of protoplasmic jelly.

“Ugh... It’s gross compared to the ones in video games,” Iris whined, wrinkling her nose.

I didn't have the heart to remind her we *were* in a video game. She held her arms up and backed away, making it clear she wasn't going to touch the slime or go anywhere near it.

"How pathetic. I'll clean this up myself," declared Rosalind, stepping forward to attack it in Iris's place.

Slimes were the standard low-level small fry mobs that littered the beginner maps of any RPG you could possibly name. Defeating one should be a breeze for a powerful vampire like Rosalind, but...

Whap!

"What...?"

The result of Rosalind's attack left her dumbfounded. She'd thrown a furious punch... or so she thought. All it did was jiggle the slime a little, making a sound comically reminiscent of a baby slapping its own bottom.

"What's going on?"

In the midst of Rosalind's confusion, the slime made its move. It extended a gelatinous feeler and tangled it around her legs. She immediately began screaming.

"Waaah! M-My clothes are melting!"

"R-R-Rosalind!"

Just like she'd said, the knee-high socks she was wearing were gradually melting away, revealing her bare legs. I mean, she wore short socks in the warmer months, so it wasn't like I hadn't seen them before... But the whole melting-clothes situation had a strangely erotic undertone that made me feel a little weird about looking. A-Anyway...

"Huh?! I can't use my magic!" shouted Satsuki.

"What is this?! I can't do anything either!" shouted Iris.

It seemed the two of them were having troubles of their own. What was going on here? Perhaps it made sense that Satsuki couldn't use her magic in a game world, but how was it that Iris and Rosalind's straight-up punches and kicks had suddenly gotten weaker?



“Kyah! I-It’s getting my clothes too!”

“Iris!”

I rushed over to try and help, but there wasn’t really anything I could do. It was four of us against a single slime—and the slime was winning. Seriously, what on earth is going on?!

“My, my... Rekka’s party has survived Demon Kings and dragons only to get wiped out by a lone slime?”

Wow, thanks, R! Great time to be joking around!

As frustrated as I was, just then...

“Make way!”

First someone called out to us. And then came the hammer.

WHAM!

The slime was obliterated with one overhead swing. The feelers attacking Iris and Rosalind suddenly liquefied, oozing to the ground. I still hardly had any idea what was happening, but it seemed the danger had passed. As for the person who’d saved us...

“Hey, are you guys all right?” she asked, resting her massive hammer against her shoulder.

By the look of the armor she was wearing, I would have said she was definitely a knight.



Said knight introduced herself to us as Yorun.

“It’s dangerous to be walking around out here without any gear equipped. Shall I escort you to the village?”

After what we’d just been through, we happily agreed, and she kindly led us to the nearby Kinawa Village.

“The locals call this place the Furthest Reaches.”

“Sounds like your typical starting village...”

“Huh? Well, it’s a rather quaint town.” Confusion overtook Yorun’s expression for a moment, but she quickly returned to smiling. “What an eventful day, though. It’s rare to have so many visitors in these parts.”

“Have there been that many? Did someone else come by here?”

“That’s right. Before you guys, there were two girls.”

Two girls? Could it be...?

“Where are they now?”

“I took them to the inn.”

I immediately asked Yorun to take us there as well.

“Hey, problem child. That was fast.”

It didn’t take long to find President Momone. Of course, Tokiwa was there too. She was lounging on a bed in the room where they were staying, but she immediately leaped up and...

Stomp, stomp, stomp... Crash!

“Waaah!”

“WH-WHAAAAAT?!”

“How’s it going, Rekka?”

My shouting was almost completely drowned out by the other girls screaming. Tokiwa alone remained calm as she clung to me, asking trivial questions.



After inviting us to come and find her at her room at the inn if we needed any help, Yorun wandered off. Once she left, the rest of us piled into the room President Momone and Tokiwa were renting to regroup and catch up with each other.

“How did you get the money for a room at the inn, Prez?” I asked.

“I had it with me when I got here. See?” President Momone said, tossing a small pouch my way.

I looked inside to find several coins of a currency I'd never seen before.

"Midori has one just like it. Don't you guys?"

"Huh?"

At her behest, I checked my pockets and found an identical pouch with more coins inside it.

"But I didn't bring this with me..."

As we were all pondering over the mysterious pouches, Iris suddenly raised her hand.

"Ooh, I know! Isn't this a starting item or something? You know, like the stuff you automatically have at the beginning of a game? This money must be part of it, too."

"You mean this was, like, a scripted thing?"

I guess that wasn't impossible to believe. We were literally inside of a video game, after all. Actually, speaking of the game aspect of things...

"Come to think of it, were you two attacked by monsters in the forest?"

The four of us had struggled so much against a single slime that we might've been in deep trouble if Yorun hadn't shown up. Tokiwa couldn't fight, so how had President Momone gotten them both here safely on her own?

"We were attacked, but we ran."

"Huh? You ran?"

"Of course we did. We had no reason to fight. Did you think you needed to defeat it or something?"

"Erm..."

When she put it that way, I didn't have much to say for myself. The other girls all looked away, too.

"Grrr..."

Rosalind was especially frustrated, as she'd technically been the one to initiate the fight by attacking the slime first. But, really, we'd all been a little too

confident in our abilities and had ended up letting our guards down. Lesson learned, I guess.

“Well, whatever. As long as you’re safe, everything’s fine. But if you actually engaged the monster, surely you were able to learn a thing or two about it, weren’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“So speak up. That’s the kind of information that could be critical to surviving in this world.”

“Wow, it’s rare for there to be a heroine you can’t stand up to, Rekka.”

Put a sock in it, R!

At President Momone’s request, I recounted our battle with the slime... The only hitch was that it was a secret that Iris was an alien and Rosalind was a vampire, so I made it sound like I was the one doing the fighting.

“...And so it seemed like our attacks had no effect on it at all.”

Once I finished relaying the modified story, President Momone had only one thing to say: “Isn’t that because you’re just too weak, problem child?”

“Actually, no... That’s not the case here. I promise.”

I didn’t really have a leg to stand on since I’d said I was the one doing the fighting. But even though I couldn’t tell President Momone, I was quite sure Iris and Rosalind weren’t hurting for power.

“...”

“Hm? What’s that, Midori...? It has something to do with game cliches?”

“Game cliches?”

Tokiwa’s voice was too quiet to hear, but thankfully President Momone interpreted for us. This way, I didn’t have to be hugged. Well, leaving that aside...

“Wait, cliches...” I suddenly recalled Yorun’s words earlier. “She said it was dangerous to be wandering around without any gear equipped. Don’t tell me...”

“What is it, problem child?”

“If this is a game world that plays by game rules, then of course we’re completely powerless without any gear.”

“That’s what we just established,” President Momone said, looking exasperated at hearing me state RPG basics like I’d discovered penicillin.

“Whaaat?” asked Iris. “But aren’t there classes like martial artist and whatnot? Don’t they typically fight barehanded?”

“A profession like that might not exist in this game. Besides, they normally fight with knuckledusters for weapons, don’t they?” I answered to the best of my ability.

“What, really? Then I should’ve just used my laser gun.”

It seemed Iris had interpreted what I’d said as “any gear at all would have defeated it.” She put her arm behind her like she was reaching for something, and then...

“It’s gone!”

“Huh? What is?”

“My laser gun! No, my whole bag!”

“What?!”

Iris’s bag was an incredibly advanced—and incredibly useful—piece of technology. Despite its physical size, it could hold anything inside of it. Without that, we’d likely have a much harder time in this world.

“Did you drop it somewhere?”

“I don’t know... I would have noticed right away if I’d dropped it, but I swear I brought it with me...” Iris replied with a troubled expression.

“Don’t worry. I’ll search for it,” said Satsuki as she got up and left the room.

By “search for it,” she meant she was going to find somewhere private to use her Omniscient Magic.

“Hm? Where’s Otomo going?” President Momone asked, cocking her head to the side.

The same as she didn’t know Iris was an alien or Rosalind was a vampire, she

didn't know Satsuki was a mage.

"S-Satsuki's, uh, good at finding things. She'll be back soon."

"You don't say..."

I managed to dodge the question for now, and about ten minutes later... Satsuki returned looking even more troubled than Iris when she couldn't find her bag.

"Rekka, come with me for a minute."

"Sure."

I followed Satsuki out of the room, and we moved a little down the hall.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I can't use it."

"Huh?"

"I can't use the Magic of Omniscience."



I went back and grabbed Iris and Rosalind, and I took the four of us elsewhere so we could try and figure out what was going on with everybody.

"So on top of the Magic of Omniscience, Satsuki can't use any magic at all... We straight-up don't have any of Iris's alien tech... And all of Rosalind's vampire abilities are unusable, huh?"

"What's the meaning of this?" Rosalind muttered, tapping her foot against the floor in frustration.

"This might be part of the game too."

"What do you mean, Rekka?"

"You can't just start a game with high-powered gear and abilities. That would be broken. That's why we've been reduced to starter equipment, and why we don't have access to any of our special powers."

That was my theory, but I checked with President Momone to be sure. As it turned out, she couldn't use her demon eye here either, though it wasn't really

like that would make much of a difference in this world.

“What do we do now?”

“That’s a good question...”

We all regrouped and put our heads together. Based on what President Momone had already gathered from Yorun, we knew there was a Demon King that had invaded this world. It felt pretty safe to assume the goal of the game was defeating him, but we were more interested in getting out of the game than beating it.

“I guess if we don’t know what else to do, then we might as well go after the Demon King...” I murmured, feeling pretty disheartened.

While I had defeated several Demon Kings before, I’d only ever done so with the help of the heroines. And right now, they were just as powerless as I was.

Even if Harissa or Tsumiki happened to notice we were gone and found the game still running in the light literature club room, there wouldn’t be a point in them trying to come help us. They’d have their abilities sealed just like we did, and any helpful items they tried to bring with them would be lost in transition. Honestly, considering the potential danger we were in, I was hoping they *didn’t* realize we were missing.

But just as everything seemed to be coming apart at the seams, President Momone slapped her knees and heaved a great sigh as she pulled herself together.

“Well, there’s no point in thinking about it anymore. Let’s call it a night.”

“Yeah, that might be for the best.”

At this rate, we were just spinning our wheels. Like she suggested, we’d probably all be better off getting a good night’s rest and clearing our heads.

“In that case, I’ll go get a room.”

“Nonsense. You can stay here with us, problem child.”

“Excuse me?”

“Think about our resources. We have a limited amount of money, and we

don't know how long we'll be stuck here. If what you said is true, we'll also need to purchase equipment. We should be as frugal as possible. Fortunately, this room has three large beds. All six of us can stay here as long as we pair off."

She was right. Three beds *would* sleep all six of us.

"But..."

"Don't worry. Unlike the vice president and the disciplinary committee, I'm open-minded when it comes to relations between students. As long as both parties are consenting, you can do as you please."

How could President Momone be so reliable, yet still manage to say the weirdest stuff at the worst times?!

I mean, I understood what she was saying about being frugal. It was a good idea to limit our expenses as much as possible. But...

"Me! I'll sleep with Rekka!"

"No, I will!"

"Fools! It should be me!"

What on earth was I supposed to do? Iris, Satsuki, and Rosalind were violently squabbling over the sleeping arrangements.

"You will all obey my will!"

Rosalind went off the deep end and tried to use her charm to force the other two girls into listening to her, but...

"Nghah! I forgot I can't use my powers right now!"

She could only clutch her head in agony as Iris hit her dead in the face with a pillow she threw.

"I have the advantage in pure strength!" she announced triumphantly before a pillow came flying at her too.

"Oh, yeah?! Even I stand a chance in this world now that the playing field's been leveled!" shouted Satsuki, Iris's assailant.

"Hey! Now you've done it, Satsuki!"

“You’re the one who started this! I won’t forgive you, little girl!”

“Bring it!”

And so the bickering escalated into full-blown fight. It seemed like their physical strength and other stats had been appropriately reduced to that of level-one characters, so the three of them were actually pretty evenly matched. But the fact they could deal even the slightest damage to each other with pillows was a bit troubling. Did that mean friendly fire was turned on in this world? I found myself praying that wouldn’t be an issue down the line...

“HAAH!”

“ARGH!”

“RAAH!”

But for now, I had to focus on doing something about the pandemonium going on right in front of me. With a sigh, I tried to intervene before President Momone scolded us all.



Unsurprisingly, my intervention failed. The three girls kept at it until they’d knocked each other out, leaving Satsuki, Iris, and Rosalind all conveniently sleeping soundly on one bed. President Momone and Tokiwa took the second bed, and I guiltily took the third all for myself.

“I see you’re still a coward, Rekka.”

“Shut up. Let me sleep.”

R must have been bored without her portable TV and DVD player, and she took to talking to me instead. I felt sorry for her, so I decided to chat with her for a while until I actually felt sleepy. Of course, I made sure to whisper so the girls wouldn’t hear me.

“I know you’ve been to other worlds and even back in time with us, but I didn’t really expect you to be able to follow me into a video game too, R.”

“I’ve told you before I’m incredibly advanced.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

I brushed her off and felt a big yawn coming. I guess that was as good a sign as any I should call it a night.

“Hm?”

Just as I was about to tell R good night, a shadow appeared next to my bed.

“Gwuh!”

It collapsed right on top of me, flopping over my stomach. And when it did, I realized it was Tokiwa.

“T-Tokiwa, please wake up!”

“Mm... bathroom... mrgh, mmph...”

This wasn't good. She was completely out of it.

Squeeze!

“Hey, please don't hug me!”

I didn't know if it was out of habit or what, but Tokiwa clambered her way up my body to bring her lips to my ear. She was right on top of me though, so I felt every bit of it...

“Wow, Midori's *really* all over you right now.”

No, it wasn't like that...! Even if it did feel like it...

Regardless of R's commentary, I found myself in my most compromising predicament yet. I don't know who would have been able to keep their cool with a beautiful upperclassman climbing into bed with them.

“Oh, Rekka...”

“What's going on over there?”

“Yeah, tell us, Rekka.”

Like I said, no one could keep their cool right now...

“Um... I can explain.”

In response to my desperate plea, I took three flying pillows to the face. For the first time today, I found myself glad that we were in a game. If that damage had been calculated with their real-world stats, those three pillows would've

spelled a game over for me.



At last, morning came.

“Tell me... Why are there five people sleeping in one bed, problem child?”

“I wish I knew...”

I’d passed out at some point, so I wasn’t sure myself. When I came to, Satsuki, Iris, and Rosalind were all dead asleep... And they were all clinging to me. It was sweltering.

“I said I was open-minded, but I can’t say I’m thrilled about this fivesome of yours,” said President Momone, folding her arms and sighing.

“Please don’t call it a fivesome.”

Despite weak objections on my end, she helped me tear Satsuki and the others off of me one by one. When we were all done...

“I see we still get hungry in the game world,” said President Momone.

“Well, there are games with bars or gauges for hunger.”

And so we all went down to the first floor of the inn to grab some breakfast.

“Now that we know we need to eat as well, we’ll have to find some way to put food on the table,” said President Momone while minding the sleepy Tokiwa.

It was true we probably needed to come up with a way to make money. At this rate, we were all going to use up our starting money in no time.

“Morning! Did you guys sleep well?” a new voice to the conversation suddenly called out to us.

I turned to see Yorun, the knight who saved us in the forest yesterday, standing there with a plate of breakfast herself.

“Er... Honestly, it was only so-so.”

“Really? I think the beds here are pretty soft. Anyway, mind if I sit here?” Yorun asked before taking an open seat at our table.

I got a glimpse of it from yesterday's events, but she really did have an easygoing personality. She had no trouble fitting in with all of us.

"So, uh, Rekka, was it? You gotta be more careful. We don't want any repeats of yesterday. It's pretty dangerous outside the village, so don't go taking girls out there, okay?"

"I'll be careful from now on."

"You should at least have a weapon and armor prepared if you're gonna go out," Yorum continued.

She went on to give us all kinds of useful advice about this world. The monsters around the village were relatively weak, but not weak enough that they could be defeated barehanded. Weapons would be absolute necessities. Even if someone used magic, they'd still at least need to buy a tome. Kinawa Village was a small town, but it still had an armor shop and a weapon shop. And so on. That was all good to know, of course. But I still had one more question.

"What do we have to do to make money?" I asked.

"Well, there are lots of self-sufficient people in this village. If you don't have any connections, you're probably stuck slaying monsters or trying to trade items in the shops."

Yeah, that sounded pretty in line with this kind of video game. In other words, if we were going to stay in this world... the only way for us to make gold was to farm it.

"..."

Just then, Tokiwa started mumbling something in her usual inaudible voice.

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea," President Momone replied with a nod before turning to our new companion. "Yorum, we'd like to ask a favor of you."

"Hmm?"

Yorum dug in to breakfast as she listened to President Momone's request.



That afternoon, the group of us journeyed out into the forest once more.

“It’s spawned!”

When Yorun called out, we each readied the weapons we’d bought. The monster that appeared from the shadows of the trees was the same as yesterday—a slime.

“Here I go!” shouted Iris.

She was the first to jump out at the enemy. She had leather knuckles on her fists today. They were still only basic gear, but...

“Hiyah!”

The sound of the punch she threw was clearly different than yesterday, and it sent the slime flying.

“All right! Looks like we’re actually doing some damage this time.”

But we still couldn’t let our guard down. All the strengths we’d learned to rely on in the real world had been zeroed out here. Other than the equipment we’d just gotten, we were all just helpless level-one characters.

“Satsuki! Rosalind! Support Iris!” I called.

“Okay!”

“I know!”

After giving the girls orders, I took off running. We were currently practicing our teamwork against weaker monsters. Earlier, President Momone had asked Yorun to help us pick out gear and come up with a plan of attack for combat. Yorun had kindly agreed, and she was now observing our fight from a safe distance. The trees in the forest were getting in the way, so we had to adjust our formation even with just the four of us.

“Fire!”

Satsuki made the next move and used a basic spell to crisp up the slime a little.

“Hah!”

Next, Rosalind ran her rapier through its singed, globular body. She hadn’t really liked the range of weapons available at the armory and had complained

plenty about it, but the sight of her wielding it was simply elegant. I knew she would be a natural with it.

“Hyaah!”

Finally, I brought my longsword down on the slime’s head (?). The stereotypical RPG weapon was enough to make the slime shriek... but it wasn’t enough to finish it off.

“Come on! Don’t falter now!”

“Shall I lend you a hand?”

“You’ll get your turn, Momone. Too many people in combat brings the risk of friendly fire.”

“...”

And so, with Yorun, President Momone, and Tokiwa watching over us—Tokiwa still a little sleepy—we somehow managed to defeat the slime.

“Hahh... Hahh... Are you sure slimes are actually weak enemies, Yorun?”

Now that we were properly geared up, the slime didn’t pose any real danger anymore. But it still took an awfully long time to take it down with the four of us.

“Well, you guys are still level one, you know? Everybody’s gotta start somewhere.”

Apparently, Yorun thought this was all normal. But seriously... Wasn’t the difficulty set a little too high? At any rate, we continued to switch out party members and strategies for a little while as we honed our techniques hunting slimes. The afternoon quickly faded into evening, and right about the time we’d finally picked up enough coins to afford a couple more nights at the inn...

Doot doot doot doo, doot doot doot doo!

A strangely cheerful tune rang out from seemingly nowhere.

“What was that?”

“Hey, congrats! Sounds like you leveled up, Rekka,” Yorun said, clapping her hands.

“So, what? That was the level-up jingle?”

“Yup, that’s right.”

Because I was often left dealing the finishing blow, it seemed I’d pulled ahead of the others in terms of experience.

“You should be able to handle a slime by yourself now, Rekka.”

“Really? Even though we’ve been struggling to do it with four people?”

“Yup. One level difference makes *all* the difference.”

“That seems a little extreme.”

I decided to test it out and tried fighting a slime by myself. And just like Yorun said, I made quick work of it. Like, way quicker work than four of us had been able to pull off together. It seemed the game got exponentially easier as you leveled up and threw all your stat points into strength. Typical.

Anyway, we decided this was as good a time as any to call it a day and headed back to Kinawa Village.

“Hahaha, wow! I didn’t think you’d level up in a single day. That’s pretty impressive!” Yorun laughed heartily as she ate dinner.

We’d offered to treat her to a meal as thanks for helping us out, but at the rate she was going, she was threatening to eat us out of our profits for the day.

“So what now? Are you going to hunt more slimes tomorrow? I reckon you won’t need me around with you this strong now,” Yorun turned and asked me.

She had a grain of rice stuck to her cheek, so I leaned over and plucked it off in lieu of responding.

“Oh, thanks.”

“Wah!”

She then happily closed her mouth around my finger to make sure she didn’t miss a single bite of her dinner. But it wasn’t even her table manners I was concerned about... It was the glares I was getting that really hurt my feelings.

“So, what are you gonna do?” she asked again unabashedly.

I cleared my throat with a cough before pulling myself together and looking at everyone.

“I’m thinking of heading to the next village tomorrow.”

“The next village?” asked Satsuki.

“Yeah. We can’t just stay here forever. In order to gather new information, we have to keep moving to new places.”

In this case, I was referring to information on how to get the heck out of this world. Unfortunately, we hadn’t learned anything useful in Kinawa Village in that regard. To be precise, none of the villagers besides Yorun had said anything to us other than, “Welcome to Kinawa Village.” We wouldn’t have learned jack here if it weren’t for her.

According to Yorun, Kinawa Village was also called the Furthest Reaches since barely anyone ever came out all this way. Honestly speaking, I couldn’t see us making any progress by staying here.

“Hmm, I think that’s a bad idea, though,” Yorun protested with a conflicted expression.

“How come?” I asked.

“Sure, you can handle a slime by yourself now, but the road between Kinawa Village and Goshi Town sometimes spawns some pretty high-level monsters. There’s no guarantee you’ll make it there safely.”

“Ugh, really...?”

If that was the case, then the trip would indeed be dangerous. I was honestly shaking in my boots a little, but we were kind of in a pickle. We didn’t know where else to start, and we didn’t even have a clue as to how much time was passing back in the real world.

“Hm, well, I don’t really get it, but it seems like you guys are pretty serious about this,” Yorun said with an understanding nod. Then she grinned. “So how about I escort you to the next town over? I’ll make sure you get there in one piece.”

“Really?! I mean, are you sure?”

“Don’t sweat it. It’s not like I’m busy or anything. We should help each other out when we can, you know?”

“Thank you, Yorun. Thank you.”

I was more than happy to accept her offer.



The next day, we bought all the food and items we’d need for the trip before leaving Kinawa Village.

“You sure aren’t carrying much, Rekka. Looks like you’ve just got your items and your weapon there.”

“The same goes for you, Yorun. Besides your hammer, all I see is that knapsack.”

“That’s all I need. It’s carrying something important for me.”

“Huh...?”

“Now, let’s get going!”

Goshi Town was half a day’s walk from Kinawa Village, through the woods and then northwards along the road. Yorun took the lead as we first cleared the slime-ridden forest. Our experience from yesterday paid off. The fighting today didn’t seem as hard, and we were out of the area in no time. As we walked forward, the canopy of leaves thinned, and we stepped out into an open field that stretched as far as the eye could see.

“That over there’s Goshi Town,” said Yorun, pointing to what was practically a speck on the horizon.

While it was overwhelming to imagine just walking that far, they say a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step... So we all stepped forward in hopes of getting there sometime today. Nevertheless...

“Uwah! What the heck is this big-mouthed rabbit?!”

“The sky! Look to the sky!”

“I HATE BUGS!”

“Aah! Not my skirt again! Stop it, you beast!”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to Western-style swords.”

“...”

Thus, the journey there was utter chaos. President Momone was the least perturbed, but we were definitely up against tougher foes now. Compared to the slimes, we were missing a lot against the beast-type monsters in the field. It slowed things down a lot, but our defensive teamwork was solid, and we’d brought plenty of healing items, so it wasn’t like we were in any real trouble. Having Yorun there was a huge advantage, too.

“Yah!”

Her massive warhammer defeated most of the monsters in a single hit. She’d said level difference made all the difference, so having a high-level character like her around was especially reassuring.

“Hmm...”

Come to think of it, who was Yorun really? Kinawa Village had been filled with your typical NPCs—characters who were completely predetermined by their programming—but Yorun seemed to be moving and doing things of her own free will. Tokiwa had suggested she was a friendly NPC designed to help out new players in the beginning, but there was no telling what the truth really was.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Rekka?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Oh, yeah? I saw you looking at me just now,” Yorun teased, poking my forehead with the handle of her hammer.

She didn’t seem particularly miffed about me staring at her, but it was mostly out of curiosity. It wasn’t like I could just ask, “Who are you really?” Instead, I decided to try having a normal conversation with her and seeing what I could figure out.

“So, um, Yorun... What do you normally do?”

“Me? Well, I sometimes hunt slimes. Sometimes I go on journeys to hunt further away.”

“Have you always lived in Kinawa Village?”

“Yup!” she answered with a grin.

“Then... why were you staying at the inn?”

“Huh?”

“You know, if you’ve always lived there, then why are you staying at the inn? Don’t you have a house? Or... did you mean ‘always’ as in since becoming a knight?”

“Hmm...” Yorun’s expression suddenly clouded over as she trembled a little. “I wonder. It seems I’ve forgotten.”

“Is that the type of thing you really forget...?”

“Who knows? All I know is I can’t remember,” Yorun said lightheartedly. “I figure if I’ve forgotten it, then it wasn’t all that important in the first place.”

“That’s not... Gwuh!”

I was going to say that couldn’t be true, but Yorun gave me a hearty slap on the back that knocked the wind out of me.

“More importantly, we’re over halfway there now, so let’s stop for a break.”

At Yorun’s behest, we decided to take a load off in the shade of some trees by the road. It looked like the start of another forest. After a late lunch, we all inspected our equipment for damage. I said all of us, but it had mostly been President Momone and Yorun doing the fighting. But after lunch and gear checks...

“All right, ladies! Gather ’round for a sec!” Yorun suddenly declared, huddling the girls over where she was standing.

“What is it?” Satsuki asked.

“Psst, psst, psst...”

In response, Yorun whispered something to her and the other girls. Once she finished telling them whatever it was, she turned to me and waved.

“Okay, Rekka, we’re gonna go into the forest for a bit!”

“Huh? What for?”

“Something nice! Oh, but you can’t come, Rekka. Yell if a monster spawns, though!”

“Hey, wait a minute...”

Before I could even try and stop them, Yorun and the girls scurried off into the woods.

“What was that all about?”

“Who knows?” R said with a shrug.

Well, if Yorun was with them, I knew they’d at least be safe from any weaker monsters. But more importantly... How was it that Yorun didn’t remember anything about her home or her family? Was that just how her back story had been written?

“I don’t get it...”

“The way out of this game?”

“Well, I don’t get that either...”

Hopefully we’d find something out in the new town up ahead.

“I’ll be praying for your fast escape from here,” R said while somersaulting in the air.

That was her favorite thing to do when she was bored. She only wanted to get out of this world because there was no TV here. I felt for her, honestly. I wanted to get us home ASAP for both our sakes.

“Rekka.”

“Mm?”

I looked up when R said my name to spy a big, ugly monster running our way on the other side of the road. It was one we hadn’t seen before.

“Hey, that one looks kinda strong...”

Come to think of it, Yorun had said high-level monsters sometimes spawned between Kinawa Village and Goshi Town. If this was one of them, it was bad news. I could take on weaklings by myself with no problem now, but if the opponent was several levels higher than me...

“Tch! We have to get to Yorun and the others!”

Rather than yelling to them, it would be better just to go and meet up with them. And so I ran headlong into the forest after the girls. The trees were just dense enough that it made it hard to spot them, but I happened to hear Satsuki’s voice from a distance. I ran towards it and jumped out from the trees as I shouted...

“Yorun! There’s a monster—”

“R-Rekka?!”

Yorun cut me off in shock, just before...

“KYAAAAAH!”

All the other girls screamed at once. The reason was instantly clear—everyone was taking their clothes off next to a natural spring. It appeared they were cleaning themselves up, wiping off all the dirt and sweat from our journey so far. Fortunately, no one had stripped further down than their underwear, so the situation wasn’t quite as deadly as it could have been.

“Hey, nice. Gratz on adding a new cutscene to the library, Rekka.”

We aren’t in *that* kind of game right now, R!

“Um, I’m really sorry...”

I averted my eyes from everyone as they covered themselves with their clothes and armor. I tried to come up with an excuse, but soon remembered now wasn’t really the time for that.

“Raaghrahh!”

The monster from before had already caught up to me.

“An ogre?! Damn it!” Yorun yelled in a panicked voice.

Based on her reaction, I could tell this was one of the high-level monsters she’d been worried about. It was bad enough to run into one, but this timing couldn’t have been worse. The girls had all unequipped their gear, meaning they were practically defenseless in their current state.

“I’ll buy us some time!”

“Wait! That’s too dangerous, Rekka!”

Ignoring Yorum’s attempt to stop me, I readied my sword and jumped at the ogre.

“Raaghrahh!”

The ogre swung the club in its hands right at me.

“Ugh!”

I took the blow dead to my side and it sent me flying. It hurt like hell, too! If this wasn’t a game, that might have killed me.

“In that sense, I guess I’m lucky...”

As I got to my feet, I switched gears to optimism.

“Raagh!”

The ogre apparently had its sights set solely on me, as it came right after me again. Fingers crossed I had enough health to take one more hit...

“Rekka!”

But just then, Yorum jumped out from behind the ogre and brought her hammer straight down on it.

“Rrraaaaagh!”

It roared and thrashed about.

“Ugh!”

In its flailing, it managed to smash its club right into Yorum’s side. It knocked her to her knees, giving the ogre a chance to clobber her good this time.

“Tch... Ugh!”

“Yorum!”

She must have run out in a rush, because she wasn’t equipped with anything other than her hammer. She was somehow managing to withstand the ogre’s fierce onslaught with just her weapon to defend herself. But this was a game world. With no armor on, I knew she had no defense power. And based on what she’d told us earlier, the high-level monsters that spawned around here—in

other words, these ogres—were around the same level as Yorun. Even if their levels were equal, without any gear, Yorun was at a disadvantage.

“Rrr... Raagh!”

However, it seemed the ogre was still reeling from the blow it had taken from Yorun’s hammer. It was staggering slightly. This might be my only chance!

“Take that!”

I threw the sword in my hand at the ogre’s face. The sword made a direct hit, impaling the blade right between the ogre’s eyes.

“Raagh!”

It roared once more, then froze in place.

“Yorun! Now!”

“Hiyah!”

Yorun saw the opportunity and took it. While the ogre’s guard was down, she smashed her hammer into its chest.

“Rrraaaaagh!”

The ogre roared then fell backwards, loudly crashing into the ground and disappearing into thin air like it had vaporized. Items and coins scattered everywhere in its place.

“Ugh...”

But it looked like Yorun was in trouble too. She dropped her hammer before collapsing to the ground.

“Yorun!”

I hurried to her side to help her.



By the time we arrived at Goshi Town with the unconscious Yorun still on my back, the sun had already set.

“We need a doctor! Is there a doctor around here?!”

We ran through the town in a panic, but the NPCs that heard us asking for a

doctor just looked at us funny. We were at a complete loss.

“Argh! There isn’t even a hospital in this town!”

In the midst of my raging, Tokiwa tapped me on the shoulder. Then she leaned in close and whispered into my ear...

“Try going to the inn?”

“Huh? But Yorun...”

“I think the inn will probably do,” she said, pointing down to the ground.

Or rather, to this world.

“Because we’re in a game, her health should be restored if she sleeps at the inn.”

“Oh!”

She had a point there, so I took her advice, and we hurried to the inn. Once inside, we made a beeline for the counter.

“Looking for a place to stay?” the proprietor asked with a smile.

“Yes! Please give us a room!”

“Did you need anything else?”

“No! But we’re in a hurry, so please make it quick!”

“Here you are. Have a nice stay,” he said as he handed us a key.

As soon as we got Yorun in bed, her breathing relaxed and she seemed to be at peace.

“Whew...”

We all heaved a collective sigh of relief, and I sat down on the edge of Yorun’s bed, exhausted.

“Man... Thank God.”

“I’m relieved too, honestly. But now that that’s over with, I’m starting to get hungry.”

Several of the other girls’ tummies grumbled when they heard Iris mention

eating.

“Th-That wasn’t me, okay?!”

After Satsuki inadvertently admitted guilt, everyone agreed to head down to the tavern on the first floor for dinner.

“Aren’t you coming, problem child?”

“Nah, I think I’m gonna stay here and keep an eye on Yorun for a little while. Someone can swap with me when they’re done eating.”

“Hm... All right, then.”

President Momone nodded and then took everyone down for dinner. When the door clicked shut behind them, I let out a small sigh of relief for a different reason.

“Yorun ended up saving us again, huh?”

Treating her to a meal probably wouldn’t be enough to repay the debt this time. As I was pondering all this, my eyes fell upon the gear and bags everyone had left in the room.

“Guess I’ll clean up a bit.”

Since everyone had come and gone in a relative hurry, there was stuff just kinda thrown all over the place. And with little else to occupy me, I thought I’d do some organizing. I started by lining up the weapons over by the wall. Then...

“Oops, these are Yorun’s belongings.”

I picked up Yorun’s knapsack, which had gotten dropped on the floor at some point. It was lighter than I expected. She said there was something important inside it...

“Well, I guess I’ll leave it over here?”

I went to move the knapsack, but the drawstring had gotten loose. When I did, it opened, and something fell out of the bag.

“Ah, crap... Wait, this is...”

I froze in shock as I stared at the object that had fallen. It... It was a cellphone.

“H-How?”

It was definitely something that shouldn't exist in this game world based on what we'd seen of it so far. Why did Yorun have it?

“Rekka?”

Right about then, Yorun opened her eyes and called out to me.

“Oh, Yorun...”

“Hey! You shouldn't be peeking at a girl's belongings!” she shouted, leaping out of the bed and snatching her knapsack and phone from me.

“I know. I'm sorry... But what's with the cellphone?”

“Huh? This?” Yorun looked baffled until I pointed to the phone in her hand. “So this is called a cellphone? I had no idea.”

“You didn't...? But that's yours, isn't it, Yorun?”

“Yeah, that's right. I've been carrying it since before I can remember, so I know it's important. I just didn't know what it was called,” Yorun said with a giggle. She didn't seem mad anymore. “Anyway, did we make it to an inn? Is everyone down in the tavern?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Oh, boy, that means it's dinnertime! I'm starved!”

“Yeah, why don't you go on down? I think I'm gonna rest a bit more.”

“All right! But no more peeking, okay?”

After Yorun jokingly warned me away from her belongings, she left the room in a good mood. As I watched her go, I felt several times more exhaustion than earlier come over me and flung myself onto the bed.

“But still... How does she have a cellphone and not know what it is? Or did she forget that too?”

If she had one and couldn't remember it or where she'd gotten it, then... it had to be...

“Yorun's from the real world just like us, isn't she?” I asked.

“Who knows?” R replied with her usual feigned ignorance.

Not that I was expecting much else...

Anyway, what was really important here was *why* Yorun had lost her memories. Was it the result of an injury? Maybe she’d encountered a magic item or a monster that had stolen them? There were too many possibilities to consider. Including...

“...Staying in the game world for too long?”

It wasn’t impossible. Yorun was clearly different from the NPCs, but she fully believed she was a denizen of this world. Maybe she got sucked into the cursed game like we did; she just didn’t know any better.

“If so, this is bad.”

If that was the case, there was no way of knowing how long she’d been here. We’d been in the game a whole day already, and I hadn’t forgotten who I was. But what about tomorrow? The day after? Next week? We may have a lot less time to get out of here than we initially thought.

“We have to find a way to leave this game as quickly as possible!”

Too bad we still didn’t have any idea how to do that. If we completed the story and beaten the final boss—in other words, defeating the Demon King—the game should end. We would most likely be able to leave then, but now there was no guarantee we’d still remember who we were when the time came. Worse yet, we were in a game world—one where everything was bound by rules and programming. It wasn’t like I could just whip out a laser gun I got from Iris and shoot down the Demon King here to win.

“Damn it... Isn’t there any other way? Some way to leave this world without defeating the Demon Ki—wait.”

It suddenly dawned on me. I was getting too caught up on the wrong things. This was a game world, after all. One that ran on all sorts of rules and cliches. One where a vampire couldn’t deal any damage without a weapon equipped, and one where even grievous wounds inflicted by monsters could be healed just by sleeping in a specific bed. And if all of that followed... then shouldn’t I be able to do *that* too?

“If so, where would I do it? The church? Or do I need an item to do it?”

Thinking through it all, I suddenly remembered the words of the innkeep when we first talked to him.

“...”

The instant the pieces all came together in my mind, I flew out of the room. I ran down to the first floor and straight to the counter.

“Oh, hey, Rekka.”

“Where’s the fire?”

The girls were all seated at a table nearby, and everyone had questions when they saw me moving like greased lightning. But if I was right, showing them would be easier than explaining.

“Looking for a place to stay?” the innkeep asked with a smile just like before.

“Nope, not this time.”

“Did you need anything else?”

This was it! The NPCs’ dialogue was scripted, meaning the innkeep wouldn’t ask that if there wasn’t a reason for it. And that meant there had to be something else we could do at the inn other than stay the night. Hopefully it would lead to some kind of menu, and if I was right, then that menu would let us...

“Can I save and quit the game?”

“Understood. Now saving and quitting.”

A few seconds after he said that, we were all thrown into darkness.



The next thing I knew, I was no longer at the inn, but the light literature club room in front of the computer. We did it! We were back!

“Whaaat?! Where’s my dinner?!” Iris immediately screamed.

She’d apparently been in the middle of eating.

“Calm down, Iris. We’re back in our own world now.”

“You could have at least waited until after dinner! There was some weird gamey meat in it I’d never had before! I wanted to finish it!”

Iris almost looked like she was on the verge of tears. She must have really liked it... I honestly had to giggle a little, but I stopped dead when I realized Yorun was standing there with us looking dazed.

“Wh... Where are we?” she asked, glancing around and blinking repeatedly.

I took a deep breath before approaching her.

“This is the real world. We were only in a video game before.”

“A... video game?”

Yorun blinked slowly once more. There was a faraway look in her eyes as several silent seconds passed.

“That’s right... I remember now,” she murmured quietly.

She no longer had her hammer or any of her other gear with her. The only thing she still had was probably the one item she’d brought into the game world with her to begin with—her cellphone.

“What... What should... What should I...” Yorun continuously muttered to herself as she stared down at her phone.

I had no way of knowing how long she’d been in the game or how much of her memory she’d regained by leaving it. Surely it would take some time for everything to make sense.

For now, I could only imagine that she was feeling overwhelmed and confused. She was probably disoriented and didn’t know what to do *but* just sit there... despite feeling like there was something she needed to do. The knightly, reliable Yorun we’d known in-game was now reduced to feeling like a lost child. It was only fair, then...

“Yorun.”

“Eek! Y-Yes?”

“You saved our butts all the time in-game. Now it’s our turn to help you out,” I said, extending my hand to Yorun who was huddled up on the floor.

She really had saved us numerous times. Without her, I'm not sure we ever would've made it back to the real world safely. And now that we were here, I was determined to make sure we returned the favor. On behalf of everyone who'd probably been looking for her here in the real world, I smiled at her and said...

"Welcome home, Yorun."



Chapter 2: A Mysterious Forewarning and the School Festival

Preparations for it were absolute chaos, but we somehow managed to make it to the day of the festival. Thanks to all President Momone's efforts, this year's school festival was far more extravagant than previous years'. First and foremost, it had been extended to three days: Saturday through Monday. Secondly, it was being held in collaboration with Juumonji High School, so there was more to do and see than ever. There was even a shuttle bus going between the campuses, and events at local shops between the schools and the station for commuters to enjoy. Going to as many attractions at both schools as possible would also give stamps used to enter in a special event on the third and final day. An event I was scheduled to be involved in...

"Oops!"

I fell prey to the dangers of daydreaming while walking and accidentally bumped into a visitor.

"I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"Yes, thank you," the girl said before bowing and walking off.

"Well, I'm glad she wasn't hurt."

With a sigh of relief, I resumed my patrol of the school. You see, today I was granted the privilege of wearing a festival committee armband even though I wasn't actually part of the festival committee. That was President Momone's doing.

I thought she and I were even after I saved us from the game world the other day, but according to her, I still owed her one. I thought my grand debt was only three favors, which I thought I'd paid off by taking care of Tokiwa when she was sick, helping President Momone out with the student council, and then saving her from the cursed game. But when I brought this up with her, the conversation went something like this...

"There was the ghost business with Sakuya, the yokai business with Ai...

twice. But that still only makes three favors, right?”

“There also was the camp during Obon. That makes four.”

“Huh? That was doing me a favor?”

“You’re a member of the light literature club too, aren’t you? I even helped look after Midori while I was there.”

“Ugh...”

“What? Are you saying you’re too busy to help me out?”

“No...”

And now here I was, patrolling the school during the festival because she’d asked me to. With this, I would finally be in the black. And the gig wasn’t too bad, I guess. All she said I had to do was keep an eye out for any problems. I’d promised to meet up with Satsuki and the others later, so this was actually a perfect opportunity for me to scout the festival out beforehand, too.

Just as I had that carefree thought, I idly stuck my hand into the pocket of my school uniform.

Rustle...

“Hm?”

I felt something odd in my pocket, so I grabbed it and pulled it out. It was a single piece of stationery.

“A letter?”

“So it seems,” said R as she peered at it.

“That’s strange...”

I didn’t recall putting it there. Where on earth had it come from? Or, more importantly, *who* put it there?

“...”

For now, I opened up the folded piece of paper. Written on it in very plain language was the following...

Greetings.

This may seem abrupt, but a bomb has been placed somewhere in the school. If you want the festival to end without incident, find the four odd ones out. The only condition is that the search must be conducted by Rekka Namidare alone.

Yours sincerely.

“Wh-What...?”

At a glance, there was no sense of urgency in the note. But the contents were disturbing to say the least. Was this a genuine bomb threat? Moreover...

“Why have I been singled out?”

Did that mean the culprit knew me? Not only had they mentioned me by name, but they’d somehow managed to sneak the note into my pocket. There was no mistaking that they’d come after me specifically. But why?

Even though I’d been involved in all sorts of stories, at the end of the day, I was still your average high school student. I wasn’t a policeman, and I wasn’t a detective. And I certainly wasn’t part of the bomb squad. If you asked me if I had any enemies, I couldn’t deny the possibility... But come on! This was a bit much!

“Is it some kind of elaborate prank?”

That was my first thought. It was just too unbelievable otherwise. That might sound weird coming from a guy who’s been to outer space and other worlds, but magic and bombs are two totally different ballgames! Magic was unbelievable in a very fantastical way. But bombs were unbelievable in an all too realistic way.

I knew they existed, sure. But I couldn’t even get my head around there being one at school. As a resident of peace-loving Japan, bombs were something I only ever saw in movies. There was no way one should be here at school... And there was no way anyone should be here if there was. Some of the students might love for the school to get blown up. Who knows how long we’d be out of class if that happened? But that was wishful daydreaming, and this was real life with very real dangers attached.

That being the case, could I really just dismiss the note as a prank and throw it away? If there was even a chance it was serious... It said I had to conduct the search alone, so I couldn't even discuss this with President Momone.

"..."

My palms were sweating so much right now that the note was now practically glued to my hand.

"Uwah!"

What was I supposed to do? If this was a real crime, then wasn't the note important evidence? I took another look at it. The ink was smudged a little now, but it was still legible.

"Whew..."

Relieved, I carefully peeled the note from my hand. If I folded it up like it was, it would basically just glue itself together, never to be opened again. To prevent that, I went and opened a window to dry it out in the stiff autumn breeze.

"...I wonder what the four odd ones out are?"

I didn't really get that part. Judging from the contents of the note, finding those was what I had to do in order to prevent tragedy. But even if I complied and did what I was told, I was still a little hazy on why anyone would do this. What were they getting out of it?

"I could understand if they wanted money or for the festival to be canceled or something, but..."

I had no idea what they were after. Their motives were totally unclear. If this was a prank, were they just trying to cause trouble for me? As I was debating what the answer could be, without any warning...

BOOM!

There was an explosion in the sky over the school.

"Wah!"

"What was that?!"

"...Fireworks?"

The sudden event startled several students nearby, drawing everyone's eyes upward. Someone had said it was fireworks, and there certainly did seem to be smoke trails. Large ones, too.

"Was it to celebrate the start of the festival or something? I didn't see anything like that on the schedule."

"Who knows?"

Everyone commented on the unexpected noise, but then largely went about their business. Since no harm had been done, there wasn't much resulting chaos even among the visitors.

"...!"

Not so with me, however. Since I'd been lending a hand to both the student council and the festival committee, I knew there were no plans for fireworks. President Momone could be arrogant at times, but she would never pull a stunt like this. Even if she were planning a surprise for the festival, she would have told the committee about it. That meant this was...

"The work of the culprit, huh?"

Fireworks were an art, but they were still giant balls of gunpowder. They were only one step away from being used as bombs, which would be a catastrophe. Thinking about it, I gulped. I picked up the note that had been blown out of my hands by the blast and was now plastered on the opposite wall of the hall. This bomb threat... It was the real deal.

"That means there's only one thing for me to do."

I folded the now dry piece of paper and stuffed it back in my pocket before heading down the hallway.



"Find the four odd ones out." That was all the note had really said in the way of what I was supposed to do. Too bad trying to find anything based on instructions that vague was going to be like finding a needle in a haystack. I needed some direction before I started searching, but the only hint I had was...

"The note said I had to search alone, didn't it?"

At a glance, that seemed like a restriction, but it also served as a potential clue. For example, whatever the odd things out were, they had to be perceivable by me. I wouldn't be able to search for them by myself otherwise. That is, of course, assuming the culprit hadn't put me in a game that was impossible to win in the first place.

Just as terrifying to consider was the thought that I might just run myself into the ground searching... Which was starting to feel like a very real possibility. At this rate, the bomb was going to go off without me having a single thing to show for myself. There were too many worst-case scenarios to consider. I had to put those thoughts out of my mind for now and get moving before the culprit decided to do anything hasty.

First things first, I needed to try and figure out if the culprit really had any intention of letting me clear this little challenge of theirs. Better yet would be figuring out who the culprit really was. And if I failed at all that, it would be time to prepare for the worst... Meaning I'd have to locate where the bomb was planted.

With that plan in mind, my feet carried me to a certain classroom.

"Oh? This is Tsumiki's class. Are you going to start searching here?" asked R.

"Yeah. I'm going to go around to all of the events the people I know are participating in first."

If I couldn't find a single odd thing out between all those places, then I'd take that as a sign this really was an impossible challenge after all.

I took a deep breath. Before entering the classroom, I glanced over to the sign next to the door to see what kind of event they were holding. It read: "Nozo-mini: A Place to Rest Your Feet and Fill Your Tummy."

"Nozo-mini, huh?"

So it was going to be like a little restaurant, then? I guess I was about to find out. I went through the curtain and entered the classroom.

"Welcome! Oh, it's just you."

As expected, the one to greet me so unpleasantly was Tsumiki. She was

dressed in her usual Nozomiya uniform and holding the kind of metal spatula meant for making yakisoba and the like. When I got a look around the room, I could see the other students were all wearing Nozomiya aprons too, most likely brought in by Tsumiki. It really was like a mini Nozomiya in here. But as I was glancing around, I spotted two familiar faces.

“Hey, Tetra! You too, Lea! Fancy running into you two here.”

“Hey, good to see you!”

“It’s been some time, Rekka.”

Tetra and Lea both greeted me with smiles.

“Wait a sec... Why are you guys wearing aprons? Didn’t you come here as guests to enjoy the festival?” I asked.

“Oh, no. We came to help out with Nozo-mini,” said Tetra.

“At Tsumiki’s request, of course,” added Lea.

“I’m using their charms to attract more customers!” chimed in Tsumiki, giving me a big thumbs-up.

I could certainly imagine Lea and Tetra would rake in the customers, but...

“Isn’t asking outsiders for help against the rules?”

“They’re not outsiders! They’re both Nozomiya employees!” Tsumiki argued, puffing out her cheeks. Then she pointed her finger right in my face and declared, “I won’t lose to your class, got it?!”

Come to think of it, President Momone had mentioned something about a reward for the class that attracted the most customers during the opening ceremony...

“What is your class doing, Rekka?” asked Tetra.

“A maid cafe.”

When she heard those words, Lea’s ears perked up.

“Oh, so that’s why Satsuki and Iris have been coming by the cafe so much.”

By “the cafe,” Lea was probably referring to Linda Lovers, where she worked

part-time. It wasn't a full-on maid cafe, but the owner made sure it was full of cute girls in cute uniforms. Customer service was their specialty.

"The maid uniforms for our class were designed by Rosalind," I explained. "Since she likes them so much and everything."

"Does she?" asked Tetra.

"Well, she *does* make everyone living at her mansion work as her maids. I've never seen her so motivated over a school activity before..."

I was honestly pretty surprised when she raised her hand with such intense ferocity to volunteer for the job. I'd stepped in to stop her when I realized she was about to start using her charm on people to get her way, but I was otherwise happy to see her enjoying school activities for once.

"Actually, now that I think about it, it might be better to keep Rosalind away from here to make sure she doesn't see what you guys are up to..."

"Why's that?"

"Well, if she sees Tetra and Lea, she might feel compelled to go get her maids to compete."

In other words, Suzuran, Ulaula, and Corona. It'd be chaos if the three of them showed up at school too. Especially Ulaula, who was a known troublemaker.

"Hmph... Are you saying I'd lose to those three in terms of charm, Rekka?" Lea huffed unhappily as she leaned in close to complain.

"No, of course not."

"I won't lose either!" declared Tetra, leaning in on my other side.

Between the two of them, I was starting to panic a little.

"N-Now hang on... It's not that I'm saying the two of you aren't charming..."

I was frantically searching for the right words when I felt several staring pairs of eyes fall on me. No, they weren't staring; they were glaring. My male classmates in every direction looked like they were ready to kill me.

"Why are they so close with that guy?"

“That’s that Namidare guy, y’know?”

“I heard a girl who looked like his little sister delivered lunch to him in her pajamas... And now he’s got the older girls too...”

“Even the student council president’s taken an interest in him!”

“And he spends every afternoon in the old school building with some beautiful upperclasswoman...”

Deep-seated grudges were roiling to the surface. The classroom restaurant was suddenly a very dark place.

“We’re not going to get any customers like this, Rekka.”

“Er... Um, well...”

Cold sweat began dripping down my spine when Tsumiki started glaring at me too.

“Th-Then I’ll leave as soon as I get something to eat.”

“Hahh... Fine. Just make sure you order something expensive.”

Honestly, I wanted to get out of here ASAP, but I had to hang in there. I had been looking around the classroom and watching the girls until now, but I hadn’t spotted anything that felt or seemed odd yet. Maybe none of the four things were here...

“Okay, then... I’ll take the Nozo-mini deluxe meat yakisoba.”

“That’ll be 1,000 yen.”

“That’s expensive!”

“Duh, it *is* deluxe.”

It was a painful blow to pocket an expense like that right at the start of the festival, so I had to tell myself it was just paying for the inconvenience I’d caused. I handed Tsumiki a thousand-yen bill and took the pile of yakisoba she handed me on a paper plate. I could only assume that the “deluxe meat” part was actually Lea’s Leviathan meat, which did look quite delicious when it was cooked like this. My mouth started watering when the smell of it hit my nose.

“Wow, this looks great,” I commented.

“Right? So hurry up and eat it already,” Tsumiki encouraged.

“Yeah, thanks for the food.” I snapped my wooden chopsticks in half and dug right in. “Wow, this really is good!”

The amount, the taste... It was well worth the thousand yen I’d paid for it, even if that was a bit much for a student’s budget. Tsumiki proudly stuck her hands on her hips when she heard my reaction.

“Of course it’s good! It’s our signature dish, after all! I busted my butt to make it, too! There’s no way it’d be anything other than delicious!”

“PHBBBBBT!”

I instantly spat it out on reflex when I heard that.

“Ew, gross! What’s wrong with you?”

I couldn’t even answer her. I was too busy pounding on my chest as I tried not to choke on what was left in my throat. I thought my heart was gonna stop.

“Are you okay, Rekka?”

“What’s the matter?”

Lea and Tetra came over with worried looks and started cleaning up the mess I’d made. I felt bad for making extra work for them, but... I really couldn’t help it.

“Tsumiki, since when could you cook?”

The last time I tested something for her the other day, it had blown my soul out of my body and sent it all the way to the far reaches of the universe where it remained for some time before it was willing to come back. She’d gotten better with simple dishes like rice balls, but yakisoba... Maybe her just grilling the meat would have been okay, but letting her season anything was a terrible idea. There was no way she wouldn’t mess it up. At least, not under normal circumstances. Something was weird here. Yeah, something was definitely odd. Wait, odd? That’s it!

Just as I put my finger on it...

Bang!

I heard what sounded like something small bursting.

“Hey, Tsumiki! What are you doing over there?! Who let you cook?!”

The next thing I knew, Tsumiki’s friend and classmate—I think her name was Sato—was giving her the third degree.

“We agreed to use the name Nozo-mini because you said you’d stay at the front of the house!”

“H-Huh?”

Being so scolded by Sato, Tsumiki looked up at her and blinked a few times with a blank expression. It was almost like she didn’t know what she was in trouble for.

“What’s going on here...?”

How come no one else had noticed until I pointed it out? I was sure that Sato, Lea, and Tetra all knew that Tsumiki was a terrible, no, dangerous chef. Yet not one of the three of them had said anything about her cooking just now.

Curious, I took the note out of my pocket and looked at it.

“Find the four odd ones out.”

Just who had written this? And how did they bring about this weird situation? What kind of methods were they using? At the very least...

“It definitely isn’t somebody normal.”

I mean, no normal person would send a bomb threat in the first place. But since they were threatening to use a bomb, I had just assumed they were a normal human being. That clearly wasn’t the case anymore. Maybe they were a mage, a psychic, or even some kind of supernatural being... Either way, there was no mistaking they had used some kind of special power that defied logic. Figuring this out would be tough without Satsuki’s help...

“For now, let’s move on.”

I said goodbye to Lea and Tetra, waved to Tsumiki who was still being fussed at by Sato, and then put Nozo-mini behind me.



With one of the four oddities under my belt, I walked down the hallway to my next destination while quietly talking to R.

“That just now was strange, wasn’t it?”

“Sure was. Tsumiki’s cooking itself was strange, but the fact she and the others around her didn’t notice was even stranger.”

“Yet the moment I realized something felt odd, their perceptions went back to normal. What on earth is happening?”

All I’d done was notice something wasn’t right. I hadn’t done anything special, and it didn’t seem like anyone else had either. But poof. That was all it had taken for everything to go back to normal.

“Was it the realization itself that returned everything to normalcy, I wonder?”

“It could be because you said something about it out loud.”

“Either way, there’s something freaky going on here...”

I’d briefly considered that everyone was just hypnotized, but that wouldn’t explain how Tsumiki miraculously got better at cooking. I had no idea what kind of powers were at play here, but yeah... There was *definitely* something freaky going on.

“Hm? Oh, it’s you, problem child.”

As I was racking my brain over this, someone called out to me... and only one person in the whole school addressed me that way.

“Oh, hi, President Momone.”

President Momone was standing next to a door labeled “Haunted House” with a bamboo sword leaned against her shoulder instead of her usual wooden one.

“Perfect timing. Get in here.”

“Huh? Um, I’m kind of busy right now...”

“Just do it. I need you to inspect this place for issues before opening.”

“Issues?”

I wanted to know what was going on, but I was promptly kicked into the haunted house without any further discussion. The door slammed shut behind me, so with a sigh, I resigned myself to trudging the long way towards the exit.

The inside of the haunted house was, of course, quite dark, but there were black paper signs marking the way forward. The festival had only started an hour or so ago, but to think this place was only just now being inspected...

“This seems a little poorly executed for President Momone... Or maybe that’s just how thorough she’s been with it?”

Well, whatever it was, I started to make my way through the darkness. I doubted there would be any traps to trip someone, but there might be some jump scares that involved bumping into people or objects. That being the case, a thorough final check for safety’s sake made perfect sense.

“Are you sure you should be doing this?” R asked as she glanced around the haunted house.

I *should* be trying to handle the bomb threat right now... is what she was probably trying to say, but her words were strangely unconvincing when she was looking around at everything so curiously.

“Actually, I think this was the event Tokiwa’s class put together. Maybe we’ll run into her here.”

In the end, we hadn’t been able to decide on an event for the light literature club, so Tokiwa had said she’d help out with her class’s event some. Considering the incident with Tsumiki earlier, I now had pretty decent evidence that the oddities would all be connected to people I knew somehow. While I had no idea where Tokiwa was in this room, I figured I’d find her eventually as long as I walked the whole thing. So to get to it, I stood up and dusted the dirt off my pants.

“This is actually pretty well set up...”

A straight path extended from the entrance—probably to the window on the other side of the classroom, which had been blacked out—and the spooks kicked off with will-o-wisps floating around. It was atmospheric and rather clever, since the ones near the ceiling seemed to double as the main source of

light in the room.

“...Hm?”

The flames on the ghostly little balls of fire looked awfully realistic, actually. They were even flickering like genuine fire... No, that couldn't be. It'd be way too dangerous. I walked forward doubting myself, but it seemed like the will-o-wisps were moving out of my way as I approached...

At any rate, I made my way to the first corner. The real fun would probably start here. There might even be a jump scare right off the bat, so I readied myself as I stepped forward. Yup, there was a severed head.

“WAAAH!”

“Urrrgh...”

I screamed at the groaning, severed head spinning circles in the air. I'd thought the fire before was convincing, but holy crap... This thing was frighteningly real. But after the initial scare, the severed head flew up and over the wall, disappearing from view.

“Phew... That really startled me.”

“Wow, what amazing craftsmanship...”

“Wait, why'd you say it in that tone of voice?”

“Oh, it's nothing.”

“?”

R was acting weird, but that was normal for her, so I didn't let it get to me. Anyway, I'd fallen for the very first scare, so I had to pull myself together and press on. But it was just one thing...

“Boo!”

“WAAAH!”

After another...

“Rrrgh!”

“GYAAAH!”

After another...

“Mrow!”

“BWAAAH!”

What the heck?! This haunted house was actually scary! The paper umbrella monster, the fake wall monster, and the cat monster were all totally... Wait, a cat monster?

“...”

The moment I stopped to ponder things, a pale woman with long hair silently crawled out of a papier-mâché well. Actually, that long hair looked awfully familiar...

“Tokiwa?”

“...”

When I called out, the ghostly woman suddenly lunged at me and wrapped her arms around me.

“Ooo, ooo...! I’m a scary ghost...!” she declared rather ridiculously.

“Could you, um, let go...?”

Tokiwa was only wearing a thin white robe to give her that ghostly, ethereal vibe. So when she hugged me, she felt even softer than normal...

“Ah, looks like she went braless.”

“BWUH?!”

R just blurted out what I’d been thinking, making me do a spit take on nothing. And while I was going full-on slapstick...

“It’s Rekka, meow!”

“Wuh?!”

Someone suddenly grabbed me by the waist and tackled me from behind, knocking me over onto the floor with Tokiwa still in my arms.

“That voice... Is that you, Ai?”

“That’s right, meow! Long time no see, meow!”

I had a feeling back when the cat monster appeared, but...

“Say, Ai...”

“What is it, meow?”

“Are there real yokai in this haunted house right now?”

“That’s right, meow! Momone asked us to come play.”

“Thought so.”

No wonder the will-o-wisps and severed heads looked so real... Or rather, familiar. They were all monsters I had seen before when Ai’s people had their scuffle with the local yokai. I had heard they were taken in by President Momone’s family at Kibi Shrine afterward, but to think they were willing to come help out with a festival haunted house...

“It’s the perfect job for you, I guess...”

“Mrow?”

Ai cocked her head curiously at my muttering, but my attention was snatched away when I heard a quiet voice beneath me.

“Rekka...”

“Huh?”

It was Tokiwa. And here we were... Lying together on the floor of a dark room. No matter how you cut it, it didn’t look good.

“I-I’m so sorry!”

I jumped up in a panic and ran out of the room with Ai still clinging to my waist.

“Problem child?”

“Hahh... hahh... hahh...”

President Momone called out to me from where she was stationed over by the entrance, but I couldn’t reply right away.

“Was it that scary? I heard quite a few screams.”

“You could say that...”

While that last scream hadn't been one of terror, I was definitely scared.

"What a wuss. You coward. You're worthless."

R was hurling insults at me... But this time I was willing to take it.

"So, how was it? I believe I gave them instructions that were plenty clear, but they *are* yokai. Let me know if they went too far."

"Wait, so I was a guinea pig?"

"Just think of it as doing your job as a committee member."

I wasn't even, though. I was just a helper... I knew there was no arguing with her, however, and stood up with a resigned sigh.

"Well, I don't think there are any issues. It's supposed to be scary, after all."

"I see. Then it should be fine to let the general public in now too."

"If that's all you were waiting for, why didn't you check it yourself, President Momone?"

"If I went in to check, the yokai would be the ones who were scared."

She had that part right.

"Hm? Were you thinking something rude just now?"

"No, not at all."

I tried playing dumb, to which President Momone replied with an exasperated sigh. She turned her critical gaze on Ai, who was still clinging to my waist.

"And just how long are you going to slack off?"

"Mrow?!"

"Guests will be coming in soon. Make sure you're on standby."

"Got it, meow!"

Fearful of President Momone, Ai quickly scurried back inside the haunted house. Not a moment later, someone called out to President Momone from down the hall. We both turned to see the vice president dashing over towards us, but she took one look at me and made a sour face. She mistakenly thought I was some kind of womanizer, so she reacted poorly every time we crossed

paths. I'd yet to have an opportunity to clear up the misunderstanding.

"I finally found you, president."

"What's up?"

"There's a problem with some supplies someone left in the hallway. They're blocking traffic."

"Where's the disciplinary committee?"

"The number of visitors coming by car has increased since this morning, so they're organizing some auxiliary parking."

"I see. Then I'll deal with this myself."

With that, President Momone and the vice president turned to go.

"P-Please wait!"

I reflexively stopped them, and they both turned around to look at me.

"What?"

"What is it?"

I could feel the expression on my face grow more and more fraught. At a glance, there was nothing weird about their conversation just now. President Momone had heard about a problem. and she was going to solve it. That decisive attitude and her initiative were the same as always. But... something was still odd.

"Shouldn't you be investigating the fireworks from earlier that weren't on the schedule?"

That was it. The supplies in the hallway might be an issue, but there was a much bigger issue at hand. Someone completely unauthorized had fired off fireworks, and probably from somewhere on the school grounds. Yet here President Momone was concerned about a haunted house, and the disciplinary committee was trying to arrange for additional parking. No matter how I thought about it, it was weird. Looking into the fireworks should have been President Momone's top priority.

Bang!

There was that bursting sound again, and then...

“That’s right! I can’t believe something like that slipped my mind. I’m leaving the traffic issue to you, vice president. I need to head to the school courtyard for a bit.”

“U-Understood!”

President Momone quickly issued orders and then darted off without even waiting for the VP’s reply. Well, it at least seemed I’d found the second oddity.



Since the deluxe meat yakisoba had filled me up nice and good, I continued my search around the school for the third oddity without stopping for a break. I considered returning to my class and checking on Satsuki and the others, but it was currently lunchtime. This was surely when they’d be busiest, which would make it hard to talk to them and investigate properly. So, to kill time until the crowds calmed down, I decided to look elsewhere for now. As for how that went...

“I can’t find it anywhere...”

I sat down at the bottom of the stairs and heaved a hefty sigh.

“Sucks to be you, I guess.”

Thanks, R. That’s about as helpful and encouraging as usual.

I’d searched everywhere I could think of. Obvious spots around the school, places I frequented personally, the light literature clubroom... But I couldn’t find a single clue.

“Does that mean the oddities are really all centered around people I know after all?”

So far they’d involved Tsumiki and President Momone. In other words, people rather than places or things. If that was intentional, then it was possible the remaining oddities were amongst the friends I hadn’t checked in with yet. I couldn’t be certain, but it was as good a lead as I had right now, so I shifted my priorities accordingly. That meant my next stop should be my own class. I could poke around some while I waited out the lunch rush. But just as I stood up with

my destination decided...

“Sir Rekka!”

“Rekka!”

I heard people calling out to me. When I turned in the direction of the voices, I experienced a bit of déjà vu as someone ran up to me and grabbed me by the waist.

“Brother Rekka! I came to play!”

“H-Hey, Fam.”

“Jeez, Fam! It’s dangerous to tackle people like that!”

It was Fam that had practically run into me, and Rain who was chiding her. They were both dressed in regular street clothes.

“Good grief, what are you doing?”

“Sir Rekka, are you okay?”

One step behind them was Shirley and Harissa, who were both dressed casually too. They were the ones who’d called out to me initially. But there was a fifth party present also...

“What in the heck...?”

It was L, who was standing behind the other girls and giving me a disgusted look. She was in casual clothes too, most likely Satsuki’s old ones. They looked somewhat familiar.

For the record, Garnet was there too, dutifully following behind Shirley. She quietly bowed in greeting when she saw me.



“Come to think of it, you said you’d drop by after lunch. Did you bring everyone along, Shirley?”

“Well, I am their guardian, after all.”

“Thanks for bringing Harissa and L too. I hope you guys have fun.”

“You should go around with us, Brother Rekka!” Fam implored, her arms still wrapped around me.

I was busy as it was, so I almost immediately said no, but...

“Okay, sure.”

The exact opposite response came out of my mouth.

“Are you sure? Aren’t you busy?” asked Shirley.

“Nah, I’m just helping out,” I said, pointing to the committee band around my upper arm.

It was true that I was only supposed to be helping out, and besides, it was entirely possible that one of the oddities was with the group of girls who’d just arrived. Maybe I’d pick up on something while I was walking around with them, so I decided to give them a tour of the school as I continued my investigation.

“So, where do you guys want to look? Inside or outside?”

“Outside!” Fam shouted enthusiastically on behalf of everyone.

While there weren’t as many as there would be at a real festival, the school grounds were lined with quite a few food vendors, games, and other fun things.

“Hey, don’t run!”

Half of the school grounds was being used for temporary parking too, so we had to be mindful of cars. The disciplinary committee was managing the traffic, so it wasn’t that much of a concern, but still.

“Jeez, here.”

“Oh!”

Since it was dangerous, I grabbed Fam’s hand and stopped her from running ahead. She turned and stared at me blankly for a second.

“Heehee... I’m holding hands with Brother Rekka!”

“Just don’t run anymore, okay?”

“Okay!”

Fam happily started to swing our linked hands...

“...”

And I felt several pairs of eyes fall on me, specifically on my free left hand.

“Rekka, I’m afraid I might get lost in a crowd of so many people. Might I also hold your hand?”

“Huh? Oh, sure, Rain.”

“Thank you very much.”

Rain happily reached for my hand, but...

“Not so fast. I’ll hold your hand, Rain.”

Shirley grabbed hold of her.

“Sh-Shirley?”

“Yes? Is something the matter?”

For some reason, I thought I could see sparks flying between Rain and Shirley... Was I seeing things?

“Now, Rekka, allow me to hold your other hand,” said Shirley.

“Hey! That’s so underhanded, Shirley!”

Rain raised an objection to Shirley’s tactics, but someone slipped between them and grabbed my hand before either of them could act.

“Harissa?”

“Teehee, I have a right too.”

Shirley and Rain both narrowed their eyes at her, and I could swear they were practically growling.

“Ugh, what is this farce?”

Meanwhile, L was grumping behind everyone as she watched the scene

unfold.

“Would you like to hold hands with me, Miss L?” asked Garnet.

“I’ll pass.”

And so we walked along—Fam, Harissa, and I holding hands, Shirley and Rain holding hands, and L and Garnet trailing behind—as we checked out the various stalls set up outside.

“Come on! This way, Brother Rekka!”

“H-Hey, don’t pull.”

Fam sure was energetic today. It was all she could do to hold on in the beginning, but now she was dragging me this way and that, pulling me towards whatever caught her interest. But I tried not to complain too much. She was being a good girl and didn’t let go of my hand the entire time.

“You’ve turned into a dopey dad wrapped around his daughter’s little finger,” said R.

I didn’t think I had gotten that old yet...

Anyway, while I was minding Fam...

“Sir Rekka! I want to try those!” said Harissa excitedly, tugging on my opposite hand.

“Hm?”

I looked to see what she was pointing at, which turned out to be a stand selling chocolate bananas.

“Oh, sure.”

I approached the stand and placed an order.

“How many?” the student behind the counter asked.

“Two... No, four, please.”

I got one each for Harissa, Fam, Rain, and L, and then handed them out.

“Oh? And what about me?”

“P-Please cut me some slack,” I whined rather pathetically at the grinning

Shirley.

Including the deluxe meat yakisoba, I'd already spent quite a bit of money today, and it was still only the first day of the festival.

"So sweet!"

"It's delicious. Thank you very much, Sir Rekka."

"It's been decorated with chocolate, I see."

"H-Hmph! I won't be bribed by something like this."

In general, it seemed like the chocolate bananas were a hit with the younger crowd, although the youngest among them—L—was being stubborn about admitting it for some reason.

"Ah!" Harissa suddenly yelped.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"O-Oh, um..."

"?"

I peered over wondering why Harissa had raised her voice, and I saw the cause immediately—chocolate. She'd managed to get some on her clothes. It looked like she'd accidentally touched her shirt with the hand she was holding the banana with.

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be fine. You'll just have to wash it when you get home later."

"Aww, I'm sorry, Sir Rekka."

"You don't have to apologize to me. You're the one who's been doing the laundry lately, Harissa."

When I told her not to worry, Harissa began beaming brightly. She then opened her mouth and said...

"Then since we're doing the laundry, let's bathe together too!"

...something completely unthinkable.

"Wh-What on earth?!"

“What? What’s the matter? We can bathe together once in a while!” Harissa repeated those unthinkable words again, lightly tilting her head.

S-Seriously, what was with this? Harissa wasn’t the type to just blurt out stuff like that... Moreover, Shirley and the others hadn’t had any reaction to it whatsoever. The looks on their faces said that they thought this was all perfectly normal... But why? Wouldn’t a huge ruckus ordinarily be breaking out right about now?

“I want to bathe with Brother Rekka too!”

“You can’t, Fam! B-But if you insist, then I’ll be joining you as well!”

The next thing I knew, Fam and Rain were at it too.

“Hey, what are you two saying?” Shirley demanded, finally showing a reaction.

My head was practically spinning. Harissa’s sudden declaration. Fam and Rain jumping on board. Everyone else’s apparent indifference to it all. The whole thing was odd... That’s it!

“Hey, uh, Shirley?”

“What is it?”

“Isn’t it weird for Harissa to be saying things like that?”

“Huh? Is it?” Shirley tilted her head.

So far, whenever I’d pointed out the oddity of a situation, something would burst with a bang and snap everyone to their senses. But when I spoke up about what Harissa had said, nothing changed. Was I wrong? Was that not the oddity? No, something definitely wasn’t right with her... Could it be I’d just put my finger on the wrong thing?

“What is it then...?” I unwittingly murmured out loud as I scrutinized Harissa.

“I-Is something the matter?” she asked, faltering under my sudden staring.

She was wearing hand-me-downs I’d given to her, which she’d taken a liking to wearing on her days off recently for some reason. There was nothing strange in particular about her appearance, so what was the catch?

“Hmph! Brother Rekka! How long are you going to keep staring? Let’s go already!”

“Huh? Wah!”

An impatient Fam gave a good hard yank on my arm to motivate me suddenly, making me lose my balance. I fell straight forward on top of Harissa.

“Kyah!”

“S-Sorry!”

I quickly tried to get off of her, but I noticed something strange. I won’t say where exactly, but... Was it possible...?

“Harissa, have you turned into a guy?”

“Huh? S-Sir Rekka...?”

Bang!

The ridiculous sound rang out to confirm my guess. I knew it. Once I touched her—and again, I won’t say where—I’d figured it out instantly.

Phew, that meant I had three oddities down. I only had one more to go, but finding it would have to wait. I suddenly had a much bigger problem on my hands.

“REKKA!”

Once I’d pointed out the oddity and the spell was broken, Harissa returned to being a girl and everyone else returned to their senses... meaning they were all furious at me for touching her.



I fled into the school building to get away from the angry girls.

“Hahh... At least... hahh... there’s only one oddity left...”

“Right.”

R confirmed what I already knew as I tried to catch my breath. Once I had calmed down enough... I sighed once again.

“So the culprit can even change someone’s gender?”

It seemed like nothing was out of bounds with this enemy.

“But Harissa made a cute boy, didn’t she? Although, her being a boy would be troublesome in terms of my mission.”

“...Yeah.”

“Anyway, that only leaves one more oddity. How about you stop complaining already and get your butt to your class?”

“Understood.”

At R’s urging, I slapped my hands against my knees and stood up. Remotivated, I started walking towards my own classroom. It was already past two o’clock. It was nearly three, actually. If all the oddities were planted with the people I knew, then the last one surely had to be with Satsuki and the others. There wouldn’t be an issue if I found it, but... No, there was no point in thinking about that anymore.

When I got there, I entered our classroom which had been rebranded as “Maid Cafe Vampire” for the festival.

“Welcome!” all the girls shouted as I stepped inside.

I was surprised by their perfectly coordinated greeting.

“Ah, if it isn’t Rekka!”

Then one girl in particular jumped out from the crowd to greet me personally. It was Iris. The uniforms for the cafe were inspired by both vampires and maids, so the somewhat gothic outfit had a great deal of emphasis on the color black. I had seen what the maids wore at Rosalind’s mansion plenty of times before, but this was different. It suited Iris quite nicely.

“Well? Am I cute?” she asked, twirling around elegantly as she held her skirt.

“Yeah, really cute.”

“Yay!” she cheered, her twintails bobbing up and down as she bounced in joy.

“Hmph, it’s an outfit of my own design, after all. Of course it would be cute.”

That was where Rosalind chimed in, speaking proudly of her handiwork. She was also wearing the cafe uniform, which naturally looked quite good on her

too.

“Rekka,” Satsuki then called out. “Come have a seat over here.”

“Ah, sorry. I shouldn’t stand in the doorway and block traffic.”

At her prompting, I took a seat. Maid Cafe Vampire seemed to be relatively successful, with a fair amount of customers still around even past peak hours.

“Wh-What would you like to order, m-master?”

“Hm?”

Satsuki was asking for my order with a bright red face, so I tried to laugh it off to reassure her.

“It’s all right. You don’t have to treat me as a customer too. Isn’t it embarrassing?”

“I-It is, but that’s not...”

“Hm?”

I’d seen her blushing when greeting customers earlier, so I’d assumed she was having the same trouble with me... Was I wrong?

“She’s probably just embarrassed about calling you master,” R said with a sigh from where she was watching in the air.

“?”

I mean, my guess wasn’t that far off... Why did she seem so exasperated with me? Whatever. For now, I ordered a drink.

“C-Coming right up.”

With her face still red, Satsuki left the table to fetch my order. When she walked away, both Iris and Rosalind approached the table where I was sitting.

“Rekka, have a chat with me!” Iris cooed.

“Um, are you sure?”

“Yeah, yeah! It’s almost my break, anyway.”

“Fancy that,” added Rosalind. “It’s almost my break as well.”

The two of them then took seats next to me.

“I worked reeeally hard today, you know? I wish you’d been here to see it, Rekka!”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I had patrol duty and all that,” I said, pointing to my armband as an excuse.

“There were sooo many customers! We were sooo busy!”

“And it was all thanks to me,” huffed Rosalind as she crossed her legs and leaned back smugly in her chair.

“You did put a lot of effort into helping out with the cafe, setup and all.”

“Hmph, it was nothing.”

While the words coming out of her mouth were more modest than usual, her expression was still as proud as ever. I wished she would use that passion in her regular school life... At least, that’s what I was about to tell her. But when I realized I wasn’t particularly passionate about school either, I had to hold my tongue.

“Hey, you two! What are you slacking off for?” Satsuki returned, carrying my juice drink on a silver tray, and scolded Iris and Rosalind on sight.

“But it’s already break time!”

“Our break starts at three, you know? There are still three minutes left on shift.”

“Gosh, Satsuki. You’re always suck a stick in the mud.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“You should have more... Now, what was the word again? Chill, I believe? It won’t kill you to relax a little.”

“Not you too, Rosalind...”

The three girls went at each other noisily. Before I knew it, Maid Cafe Vampire was starting to sound just like our typical classroom. Y’know, business as usual. And with that feeling came...

“Why is that guy hogging all the maids to himself?”

“I can’t believe that blonde tsundere loli girl is already falling for him. No matter how you look at it...”

“Huh, is she? I can’t see anything through my tears...”

“Hey, wasn’t that guy with two other hotties earlier at Nozo-mini? Not to mention the little girls that surrounded him outside.”

“Argh! I’m losing my will to live! The world is so unfair!”

Yup, all the other guys in class were glaring daggers at me.

“Wherever Rekka goes, carnage is sure to follow, it seems,” said R.

I calmly sipped my juice as I wished for mercy.

“But, hmm...”

I had been observing the girls for a while, but I hadn’t spotted anything odd with the three of them yet. Maybe it was something that couldn’t be “spotted,” per se? Based on what had happened with Harissa earlier, I couldn’t write off the possibility...

Satsuki and Iris were one thing, but maybe there was something going on with Rosalind? After all, there was that incident a month ago where she’d grabbed me and I’d felt a little more than I expected... Wait, what am I thinking about?! I was supposed to be trying to find the oddity here, not staring at breasts.

I shook my head and checked myself. I tried to get back on track, but I still couldn’t see or find anything odd.

“Well... What do you think? It’s my first time wearing this myself, but don’t you think I look quite stylish even dressed as a servant?” Rosalind inquired, shooting me a rather flirtatious look all of a sudden.

My heart skipped a beat as I went speechless for a moment.

“Well, Rekka? Does it strike you?” she said expectantly, recrossing her legs.

Though Rosalind’s appearance was childlike, she *was* a vampire. She could be intensely bewitching at times like these. Not that I would ever say that out loud...

“Um, well, yeah... I think you look cute too.”

“Hmph, that’s not what I was hoping you would say at all,” Rosalind replied before leaning forward in her chair to get closer to me. “Do I have to call you master too to get what I want?”

She lifted my chin with a twist of her finger and met my gaze. Our faces were so close that I thought she was just about to kiss me, when...

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” Satsuki and Iris both raged.

“I can’t believe how... how... how Rekka you are! You clueless jerk!” Satsuki fumed, grabbing me by the collar and shaking me furiously.

“And you, Rosalind! Don’t you dare try to steal a march on him right in front of us!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, little Miss ‘I Kidnapped Rekka and Dragged Him to an Amusement Park in Space!’”

Iris and Rosalind both dramatically put one foot up on a chair and leaned in, glaring at each other as explosive tension mounted between them.

“Hey, um, I’m sorry to interrupt, ladies, but... Your shift is over now. Would you mind changing so the next maids can use the outfits?”

Unable to just sit by as things escalated further, one of our classmates intervened by calling out to Satsuki and the other girls. I looked at the clock to see it was already past three. It was time for their break, but...

“No way! Today’s the day I show this babyface my true power!”

“Hah! I’d like to see you try, little girl!”

Iris and Rosalind weren’t budging at all. And while they were going at it, Satsuki was still trying to shake me to death.

“You’re always like this, Rekka! I’m the only one you didn’t compliment in the maid outfit too... Ooh, I’m so mad!”

It was like she was completely oblivious to everything else. She just kept shaking and shaking and shaking... Wait a minute.

“H-Hey, uh, Satsuki?”

“What?!”

“It’s already three, you know?”

“I don’t care about my break right now!”

Aha! That was it! There was no mistaking it. And it wasn’t just Satsuki, but Iris and Rosalind too. It was already three o’clock, but not one of them had said a word yet.

“Then I guess we’re calling off our date to go around and see the festival together?”

We’d had an agreement to meet at three when they got off their shift. And no matter how heated things got between them, there wasn’t any way Satsuki, Iris, and Rosalind would ever forget about it.

Bang!

There went that bursting sound again.

“...Wuh?”

“...Huh?”

“...What?”

Suddenly, the three of them had blank looks on their faces like their rage had instantly evaporated.

“That’s right, Rekka! We’re going to eat crepes right this minute! Let’s leave these two in the dust!”

“What are you talking about, Satsuki?! Rekka is going to see the bands play in the gymnasium with me!”

“Hold it, you two! Rekka is most certainly going to sample the new products at the mobile bakery in the parking lot behind the school building with me!”

In no time at all, the three of them were back to their usual bickering over me. Actually, wait a second... How was this really any different than before? They were just as fired up, including Satsuki being wound a little tighter than normal.

Well, all that really meant was that I’d get dragged around even more than

usual as we went around campus... But eventually, at last, the first day of the school festival came to a relatively uneventful end.



When I finally got home that night, I fell straight onto my bed the moment I got to my bedroom.

“Man, I’m totally wiped out... That was way more work than I thought it’d be.”

I mean, I’d expected to be tired at the end of the day, but the day had turned out to be much longer and much more trying than I had anticipated. After all the unexpected nonsense, I was dead tired. And today was only day one... Would I even live through tomorrow?

For day two, the plan was to go visit the Juumonji High part of the festival and see what I could do to help out there as an emissary of the festival committee. I’d already promised to meet up with Hibiki and the others in the morning, but now I wasn’t sure I’d ever make it.

“...”

As my thoughts turned to tomorrow, I reached into my uniform pocket and grabbed the note. After what had gone down today, it now read...

Dear Rekka Namidare,

Congratulations! You cleared the game.

Maybe you’ll actually live up to all my expectations?

Yours sincerely.

I’d been pretty vigilant all day, so the chances that anyone had swapped notes on me were low. But what? Did that mean the note had changed on its own? Either way, I’d ended up searching the whole school even after clearing the challenge just to be sure, but I never found a bomb. Maybe it had been a false alarm all along, but there was still something freaky going on.

“I wonder what the point of all this was...”

That was still puzzling me. Who was the culprit behind the letter? Why had

they done this? There were too many unanswered questions, but I was way too tired to come up with any answers tonight.

“I’ll discuss it with Hibiki tomorrow...”

With that, I got up from bed and went to take a bath. Not with Harissa, mind you. Just so we’re clear, okay?

Chapter 3: A Banjo Twist

For the second day of the festival, I went to help out at Juumonji High School as planned. Granted, that didn't really mean much. All I had to do was show my face at the student council there and ask if things were going okay. They said they had everything under control, so I didn't even have to patrol like I did yesterday. Hell, that meant I'd actually get to enjoy the festival while I was here. President Momone knew I had friends at Juumonji, so maybe she'd set this up on purpose as a way of thanking me.

"I guess she has some compassion after all."

That was probably one of the reasons she was so admired as the student council president. I mean, she was a total hardass, and I wished she'd cut me more slack, but still...

Anyways, I made sure to double-check with Juumonji's student council and offered to help out again with any loose ends before I went to meet up with Hibiki at the school gates.

"Heya, Hibiki! Did I keep you waiting?"

"Nah, you're still ten minutes early," she replied, glancing up at the large clock on the school building.

"..."

"What is it?"

"Nothing... I mean, I guess you wear a uniform at school too."

"O-Of course I do!" Hibiki yelled in a fluster. "Y-You've even seen me in it before, remember?"

"Ah, now that you mention it..."

That was... back during the Couples Afro Incident, I think? In order to lure out the culprit who was targeting couples, Hibiki and I had pretended to go on a date together. She'd worn her sailor-style school uniform to seem more feminine.

“Good grief... Who do you think I am?”

“Well, you know. You’re just always in street clothes whenever we meet.”

“Your school has blazers for both the boys and girls, right?”

“Yeah. Even Hoshikawa Middle School nearby uses blazer uniforms, so I rarely see the sailor kind.”

Hoshikawa was where Rain and Fam went to school. They were having a festival of their own next weekend, and they’d invited me to come check it out. Actually, speaking of them, I had to wonder if they were stopping by Mitsunashi High’s festival again today... I forgot to tell them I’d be here instead. Well, Satsuki and the others will still be there, so I’m sure they’ll have fun even without me.

“Oh, it’s almost our designated meetup time. Who all’s coming today?”

“Chelsea and Ellicia, and Sherlyn too. Corona said she’d be bringing the spirit sisters Lyun and Sophie. Kiri and Zeta said they’d make an appearance too.”

“Wow, even Kiri and Zeta? I had no idea Kiri lived around here.”

“Well, you did meet her in Hokkaido, after all.”

Yeah, I’d just totally assumed she was a local. Apparently her sidekick Starmon had only teleported her there to defeat the kaiju that had shown up.

“If Zeta’s coming too, then there’s probably going to be another meeting for her show...” I grumbled a little unhappily.

Zeta, the director from outer space, was the creator of the show *Legend of a Real-Time Hero: Galactic Great*, which of course featured the main character Galactic Great... played by me. The show aired on an irregular schedule, but it involved me fighting secret evil organizations, space kaiju, and whatnot. Kiri was super enthusiastic about playing her companion role of Galactic Beauty, but she was already a superhero in real life. Me, meanwhile? A pleb like me was risking his life just to get into situations like that. Though I guess I can’t complain too much... I’m only reaping what I sowed.

“That sounds exhausting, but... Good luck, I guess.”

“Thanks. I’ll do my best.”

With a sigh, I looked up at the big school clock just like Hibiki had earlier. It should be about ten right now...

Thump!

Just then, someone bumped into me from behind.

“Oh?”

“Huh?”

I shouldn't say bumped, because it felt more like they crashed into me. The impact pitched me forward... straight into Hibiki. Just before we collided, I caught a momentary glimpse of a completely unguarded expression on her face from right up close. But there was no stopping the inevitable...

Thunk!

Our heads knocked together, and I saw stars as we tumbled to the ground. Everything then went black for a second, but I came immediately back to my senses after that.

“Owowow...”

I reached my hand out and rubbed my throbbing forehead. That was definitely gonna leave a mark... I tried to open my eyes, but the tears filling them made it hard to see.

“Hibiki, are you okay?”

“Yeah, mostly...”

Wait a minute. Our voices were...

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

Hibiki and I were both equally dumbfounded. It sounded like her words were coming out of my mouth and vice versa. Actually, come to think of it, why was she suddenly on top of me when I was the one who had fallen on her? I could feel my back on the asphalt and everything.

Confused, I wiped away my welling tears with the sleeve of my uniform. When I did, I realized it looked an awful lot like the sleeve... of a sailor uniform?

I immediately looked up over it and saw a familiar face staring back at me. Actually, that's an understatement. I saw my own face staring back at me, and the look on my face was one of utter shock. That makes two of us, buddy.

The only way I could think to explain this was if someone had suddenly shoved a mirror between me and Hibiki when we fell, but unfortunately that wasn't the case.

"..."

I glanced down at myself, and there were... Unfamiliar lumps on my chest, shall we say?

Damn it, does that mean I have to accept it now? I gulped as I looked back up at the "me" in front of me.

"Is that you... Hibiki?"

"Does that mean you're... Rekka?"

I got a question in response to my question, but I guess that was answer enough. It seemed that Hibiki and I had switched bodies!



"What do we do...?"

"Hell if I know..."

Hibiki and I were both at a loss, and we sat confounded in front of the school gates. Switching bodies just by bumping heads... Well, I guess that was a cliché in certain kinds of stories.

"Well, this probably ranks on the list of weirdest things that have ever happened to me."

"I guess so..."

Even Hibiki, who was usually far calmer than me, could only offer halfhearted replies. Argh, but being depressed wasn't going to get us anywhere! Hibiki was always the one pulling me along and helping me out, so maybe it was time for another reversal of sorts.

"Okay! For now, we're gonna try and figure out how to get back to normal!" I

stood up and energetically declared.

“How?”

“I dunno. Maybe let’s try bumping our heads together again.”

“Well, trying anything’s better than trying nothing.”

Hibiki seemed willing to give it a go. She got to her feet as well, and... Honestly, I was used to being taller than this. It was a little uncanny to be the one looking up for a change.

But I guess that made sense. We’d switched bodies, so I was seeing things from Hibiki’s perspective. I guess... she was actually a lot shorter than I thought she was.

“...”

I sorta got lost in thought over the curious sensation of looking up at myself for a minute there.

“Rekka?”

“Oh, sorry!”

But the sound of Hibiki’s voice returned me to my senses. Right now I had to focus on how to get back to normal.

“Um, so... Do you want to start, Hibiki?”

“Me?”

“Well, I can’t exactly reach...”

I stood on the tips of my toes, but I wasn’t anywhere near tall enough to bump heads with her. That meant she’d have to be the one to lean down and bonk heads with me.

“Right, I see... No wonder everything felt different than normal.”

It seemed she was a little weirded out by being taller than usual too.

“Okay, well...” Hibiki placed her hands on my shoulders and touched her forehead to mine, taking aim. “How hard should I do it?”

“We crashed pretty hard just now... You might have to do it as hard as you

can.”

“This is so weird. It feels like I’m headbutting myself...”

“Haha, well, I’m sure it looks even weirder to everyone who’s watching.”

Actually, what the hell *was* everyone going to think when they saw a guy headbutt a girl with all his might?

“H-Hang on, Hibiki...”

“What’s wrong?”

“Why don’t we, uh, go somewhere less crowded? I’m not sure this is something anyone should see.”

I didn’t exactly want someone to report me (since Hibiki was in my body) for assault.

“Ah, you have a point.”

Hibiki was perfectly understanding and pulled away from me, when all of a sudden...

“Hey, what are you two doing?” someone called out to us.

Hibiki and I both turned to see Chelsea standing there, quite taken aback. She was accompanied by the five girls standing just behind her: Ellicia, Lyun, Sophie, Corona, and Sherlyn. Corona was in her maid outfit while everyone else was in casual streetwear. And they all looked quite stumped. Lyun in particular, however, was blushing.



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十文字高校文化祭



“W-W-W-Were you two about to k-k-kiss?!” she demanded, thrusting an accusatory finger in our faces.

“What?”

“Huh?”

Confused, Hibiki and I turned to look at each other... And it was only just then that I realized how close together we were.

“Wah!”

“Eep!”

Hibiki backed away from me in surprise first, and it finally dawned on me that what we were doing didn’t look like a headbutt at all. To anyone else, it probably looked like we were leaning in for a kiss.

Since I’d only been looking at my own face (even if it was Hibiki behind it), that hadn’t even occurred to me. Mostly I was just fixated on how unruly my hair was being, as usual. But it didn’t look so innocent to the girls who’d walked up on us.

“Wait a second! This a misunderstanding!”

“How could it be?! What else could you have possibly been doing?!”

“Um, well, we were trying to butt heads...”

“Like I’d believe that!”

Yeah, I wouldn’t expect her to. Why would anyone be headbutting each other?

“Well, it’s the truth.”

“Shut up! Why would you do something like that right where we agreed to meet up right at the time we agreed to meet up?! That’s despicable! Were you trying to flaunt this in front of us?!”

Lyun’s fists were trembling with an intense rage that bubbled up from the depths of her heart. The wind fluttered about us noisily, responding to her anger as a sylvan.

“Don’t you have something to say too, Nammy?!” Lyun said, glaring at Hibiki standing next to me.

Oh, wait, no... She thought she was staring at *me*.

“Wait, no... I mean, yeah, I guess,” Hibiki replied belatedly, stumbling for words in her confusion.

Perhaps she wasn’t used to making excuses, as she kept hemming and hawing while Lyun’s displeasure grew and grew.

“Fine! If you won’t say it for yourself, let me ask you outright... Do you love Hibiki, Nammy?!” she demanded snappily.

Hibiki must have been totally flustered. I watched my own cheeks turn bright red as she yelled...

“N-N-No, you’re wrong! Th-Th-There’s no way...! There’s no way R-Rekka would love someone like me! That’s not possible...”

Hibiki continued to stammer and stutter, but no one seemed to be paying attention to the confusing way she was talking. No, they were all focused on what she’d inadvertently reached out and grabbed when she was trying to defend herself. When no one responded, however...

“...?”

She finally looked over and saw where her outstretched hand had fallen, which was right on my chest. Normally that wouldn’t be an issue since it was technically her own chest she was grabbing, but considering the body swap situation, that was going to be hard to explain. To everyone else, it looked like I was groping her.

“STOP MESSING AROUND!” Lyun finally snapped.

It looked like she was about to resort to her wind magic...

“Mark!”

But before that, Sherlyn activated her own magic with me—or rather, Hibiki in my body—as her target.

“Steal!”

And with that, she whisked her away.

“HEY!”

“Ahahaha! Rekka’s mine now!”

Sherlyn was really proving herself as a phantom thief. The execution of this heist was so flawless that not even Corona could stop her.

“Hold it right there, you!”

“Don’t you dare take Rekka!”

“I won’t let you kidnap a fellow Demon King!”

“Wait up, Sis!”

The girls took off after Sherlyn, leaving only a cloud of dust in their wake.

Wow. Really, it was the same scene as always, but seeing it from a different perspective was really eye-opening. Is this really what it looks like to other people? Me getting dragged away like that?

“My, my. It’s not every day Rekka leaves my side.”

It seemed like R was programmed to stay with me, no matter the physical form I took. Not that that was a problem, but... What was going to happen to my body?

“Aren’t you going to go after them too, Chelsea?” I asked the lone girl who’d stayed behind.

“I want to, but I’m worried about you too, Hibiki.”

She meant me in Hibiki’s body, I guess.

“But I gotta say, you sure surprised me just now. When did you two get to *that* kind of relationship?”

“Wait, hold it right there. That’s not what this was.”

I stopped her there and proceeded to explain what had actually happened.

“Huh... So you were trying to headbutt each other to swap back?”

“That’s right. It was not, by any means or measure, a kiss.”

“All right, all right. I get it now,” she said with a casual wave of her hand before looking at me closely. “Hmm, so that’s really you in Hibiki’s body? I swear, it’s just one thing after another with you, isn’t it?”

“You’re telling me...”

Chelsea and I sighed in unison.

I’d already lost track of all the crap I’d been through since spring, but I really wished the world would pump the breaks and life would be a little kinder to me. Pretty please?

“And here I just wanted to enjoy the school festival like normal...”

Chelsea looked pensive as I continued griping, but then the corners of her mouth suddenly perked up into a grin.

“Okay! Then let’s go around the festival together.”

“What? But I should look for Hibiki...”

“Hibiki will be fine. It’s not like her life’s in any danger or anything. There’s no harm in us taking our time to look for her as we walk around.”

She did have a point there.

“But walking around Hibiki’s school looking like Hibiki is...”

Who knew what I might slip up and say accidentally? If I screwed up badly enough, I might even weird out her friends or ruin her reputation or something else awful.

“I can help you out there. It’ll be fine! Unless...”

“?”

“You don’t want to spend time with me?” she asked sheepishly, looking down despondently.

When she made a face like that...

“That’s not it at all. Now come on. Let’s go around together.”

I couldn’t help but agree to her suggestion. Well, walking around the school would probably be the fastest way to find Hibiki and the others, anyway. If Chelsea

was willing to help out along the way, then all the better.

“But I’m seriously counting on you to help if something happens, okay?”

“You can count on me like you would an older sister! Heehee, how lucky...”

“Huh? What is?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just happy I get to go on a date with you, Rekka.”

“A what—?!”

“Now, let’s go!”

Chelsea took me by the arm as I yelped, leading me through the school gates. Juumonji High had so many stalls and booths set up outside that they’d had to move all the parking to the nearby community center. The place was overflowing with all kinds of stuff. I could hear the sizzling from the yakisoba stand and the vendors from the jumbo takoyaki stand calling out orders.

“It sure is lively here...”

“Wasn’t your school like this too, Rekka?”

“I don’t think our festival would lose to this one, but we didn’t have this much going on outside.”

I mean, we had outdoor vendors and games and stuff too, but the booths weren’t packed in as soon as you walked in the gates like this. President Momone would probably be displeased.

“Oh, Rekka! I want to try that!”

“Hm? Oh, katanuki,” I murmured as I looked in the direction of the stand Chelsea was pointing at.

“So it’s called katanuki, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s something you don’t see at festivals much anymore. It’s also called diecutting. Basically, you take a little toothpick and try and carve a designated shape out of the mold. If you do it well enough, you usually win some kind of prize.”

It was often prize money, but that didn’t feel appropriate for a school festival. The prizes here were all various items and such.

“Let’s try it, Rekka.”

“Hmm... I’ve actually never done it before.”

“Then it’ll be a first for both of us!” Chelsea said with a smile as she purchased two molds.

“Hey, wait...”

“It’s fine. You don’t have your own wallet right now anyway, right?”

“I’ll pay you back later.”

In my pocket right now was—of course—Hibiki’s wallet. I wasn’t about to open it without her permission, so I agreed to let Chelsea pay for me too. But setting that aside for now, this really was my first time trying katanuki.

“Let’s compete to see who finishes first.”

“Sure.”

And so we somehow ended up turning it into a race. I’ll spare you the uninteresting details about how we worked away in focused silence. Fast forward ten minutes...

“Yay, I’m done!”

“Gah! I was almost there!”

I lost by a hair’s breadth.

“Heh, it was easier than I expected.”

“I was so close. I almost had you.”

I wasn’t used to Hibiki’s body... No, that was an excuse. Anyway, I quickly finished up the rest of my mold so we could both get our prizes and move on.

“What did you get, Rekka?”

“A coupon for the festival. It looks like I can use it at my school too.”

Neat little things like that made the festival collaboration seem worthwhile.

“What should we do next?” asked Chelsea.

“Want to get something to eat?”

“Hmm, I’m not particularly hungry...”

“Then...”

I wasn’t all that hungry yet myself, so I looked around the stands for something fun to do.

“Ah, what about target shooting?”

“Sounds good!”

And so we walked over to the shooting range. At a hundred yen an attempt, it was a fairly cheap activity. That said, the shelves were lined with relatively inexpensive prizes, so it probably balanced out in the end. There was no flashy grand prize that was fixed to the shelves or anything, either. That aspect actually made the game more enjoyable, which was pretty nice.

“Rekka, how confident are you in your marksmanship?”

“I’m pretty good at target shooting.”

“Then let’s have another battle.”

“I’ll win this time for sure.”

Fired up, I leaned forward against the counter to steady myself and take aim... but I felt a strange pressure on my chest.

“Hm?”

Wondering why it was kind of hard to breathe, I looked down and realized I had two somethings squished between me and the counter.

“Uwah!”

I straightened myself up in a fluster, which relieved the pressure and instantly made it easier to breathe. I reflexively started to put my hand on my chest and sigh in relief, but stopped myself at the last second. That was a close call. Uncomfortably close.

“What? Why would you stop there? Feeling up your new boobs is totally on the top-five list of things boys want to do when they turn into girls.”

R insulted my restraint, but my heart was pounding too loudly for me to even properly hear her.

These weren't my boobs at all; they were Hibiki's. I wouldn't dare touch them without her consent. I'd just have to watch myself, though I have to say that they were apparently a lot more supple than I'd thought... And as my thoughts turned to my chest, I couldn't help but remember how Hibiki had grabbed it earlier.

"...!"

I could feel my cheeks turn bright red. I never thought the day would come where I'd have my chest groped by a girl. Honest to God.

"Argh, enough!"

I shook my head furiously and put such thoughts out of my mind for now.

"Um... Are you all right?"

The attendant at the shooting range called out to me in a concerned voice. I could understand why he'd be concerned about a customer suddenly starting to act strange with a loaded popgun.

"Sorry, I'll shoot now."

I choked back my blushing and readied my rifle once more. This time, I took a slightly more unnatural stance hovering over the counter instead.

"Heh heh...." Chelsea giggled with amusement as she watched me struggle.



After we left the shooting range, we found a stand serving freshly squeezed juice and used our coupons to buy drinks there.

"Looks like I've won twice in a row," Chelsea gloated with a grin as she took a sip of her juice.

"Urgh..."

I was honestly frustrated, but it was more about my... chest complications... than losing to Chelsea. I was getting more and more antsy about finding Hibiki and the others.

"Oh, Rekka, let's do that next."

"Hm?"

Chelsea was pointing to a tall apparatus with graduated lines marked up and down it. The lines indicated points, which increased as they got up towards the top of the pole-like structure. At the base of the pole was what looked like a flat, round disk that said “hit here.” Sitting next to that was a gigantic hammer.

“The ‘hammer challenge for two,’ huh? Do we hit that with the hammer or something?”

“It looks like the harder you hit it, the higher the little device goes up on the pole.”

“So you’re supposed to hit it as hard as you can?”

It was basically just a hammer version of the traditional hit-it-real-hard punching bag game.

“Welcome, ladies! Step right up to the hammer challenge!”

“The two of us would like a go,” Chelsea said as she paid the attendant.

“All right, then it’s another match.”

“What are you saying, silly? It says ‘for two,’ doesn’t it? We’re supposed to swing the hammer together.”

“Huh?”

“Come on! Hurry up!”

At Chelsea’s behest, I grabbed the handle of the hammer with her. It was ridiculously oversized, and there was plenty of room for four hands on the handle. That wasn’t the problem...

“Rekka, scooch this way some.”

“Oh, okay.”

I did as I was told and moved closer to Chelsea.

“Come on! Get closer! We won’t be able to put enough strength into it otherwise.”

“I guess... But, um, isn’t this a bit too close?”

“Who cares? I don’t, and you’re a girl right now anyway.”

“That might be true, but I...”

I tried to object quietly, but Chelsea didn't seem to hear me at all. Picking up the hammer together meant we had to stand next to each other. And I mean *right* next to each other. Any distance between us would make it hard to put our strength together. It was almost like the game had been designed just for this... Unfazed, however, Chelsea unabashedly moved closer to me. She pressed right up against me, causing a strange sensation to run up my spine. I didn't know where to look.

“Here we go!”

“O-Okay!”

“Ready, and...”

“...!”

When I put my back into lifting the hammer, I inadvertently leaned into Chelsea more. The indescribable sensation I felt in my spine before now shot all the way up to my brain. Out of desperation, I swung the hammer down with all my might.



After the hammer challenge, Chelsea and I took a breather.

“So the prize was a stuffed animal, huh? Too bad we got the rabbit. I would have preferred the panda.”

“Do you like pandas, Chelsea?”

“I love them. They're so cute. Pandas are actually a lot more ferocious than they look, you know.”

“...”

Was that the part she found cute? Well, people are allowed to like whatever they want, so I didn't say anything else about it as we sat down on the stairs by the soccer field and ate our shaved ice. It wasn't all that hot out, but I was definitely sweating after the workout I'd just gotten. Shaved ice was perfect after the hammer challenge for two.

“It feels like we’ve gotten into a lot of fun, and we haven’t even been inside yet.”

“Yeah. I wonder if Hibiki and the others are inside...” I murmured as I turned to look at the building behind us.

They were certainly a rather attention-grabbing group, so they definitely would have caused a commotion if they were nearby. Since we hadn’t heard or seen anything, I could only assume they were having some kind of fierce battle over me (Hibiki) indoors.

“It’s kind of weird to hear you say that in Hibiki’s voice.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“But nothing else really seems all that weird. You guys don’t sound all that different otherwise.”

“Hibiki does speak in a rather masculine way, I guess.”

Though she wasn’t nearly as commanding as President Momone.

“Well, I’m glad I got to spend all this time with you, even under the funny circumstances. Lucky me!” Chelsea said, smiling as she played with the stuffed rabbit in her hands.

When she put it that way... it was kind of embarrassing.

“W-Well, I think it’s high time we go...”

I was going to say we should go look for Hibiki, but I couldn’t even finish the sentence.

“Rekka?”

“...”

I didn’t even have the leisure to answer Chelsea. I was completely and utterly occupied trying to cope with the grave phenomenon happening inside me right now. To be frank... I had to go. Cold sweat began to run down my back as I crossed my legs and tried to hold it. This was the worst possible thing that could have happened. I mean, the juice and shaved ice just now were probably a bad idea. I should’ve known better. Hibiki would give me so much crap for this... No,

she would probably kill me. There was no way I could go to the bathroom in her body.

“...”

Just imagining it was enough to make my brain overheat in embarrassment. I literally couldn't do it. I just couldn't cross that line. Even if she didn't kill me, Hibiki would never speak to me again. I'd just have to hold it... but who knew that the urge to go was so agonizing for women? I had no idea it was so much easier to cope with as a guy. Thanks, plumbing.

“Rekka...”

I was completely lost in my thoughts—trying to distract myself from the urge to go by thinking about anything else—when Chelsea shook me by the shoulders and made me look at her.

“Sorry if I got the wrong idea... but do you need the restroom?”

She apologized, but her tone of voice made it clear she was pretty certain.

“Yeah...”

Since I didn't think I could hide it, I nodded honestly. Chelsea scratched at her head with a grimace.

“Well, it's a natural biological function, I guess. Let's go.”

“No, but...”

“It isn't good to hold it in too long. You can make yourself sick that way.”

“I know, but...”

I just couldn't fold so easily on this. I really wanted to stand my ground... but I was definitely reaching my limit. I unwittingly groaned as I crossed my legs tighter and tighter. Tears started to well in my eyes. Chelsea let out an agonized sigh as she watched me suffer.

“It's your first time in a girl's body, so it's not your fault if you don't know the tricks to holding it in, Rekka.”

“Chelsea...”

“I won't even tell Hibiki. Promise. It'll just be a secret between you and me,

okay?”

Chelsea pressed her finger to her lips and grinned mischievously, but she honestly looked like a saint to me right now. While I truly felt bad for Hibiki, I vowed to myself that I’d take this to my grave.

“S-Sorry, Chelsea...”

“No worries. I said you could count on me, remember? There’s probably a lot you don’t know, so I’ll help you out.”

“Thanks... And sorry again.”

I could barely stand on my own anymore, so Chelsea supported me as we made our way to the girls’ restroom at a turtle’s pace. All the while, R kept muttering her usual nonsense.

“Good for you, Rekka. This event’s in the top three.”

If someone handed me a roll of duct tape, I’d use it straight on her mouth.

What happened afterwards was... Well, for both my sake and Hibiki’s, I won’t go into any details. Let’s just say I owed Chelsea big time.



Immediately following what would, without a doubt, be my greatest crisis of the day...

“Ah, if it isn’t Hibiki and Chelsea! Hello there, you two!”

“Hmm?”

Just as we were able to relax, someone called out to us.

“We just got here! I’m glad we found you so quickly!”

“Kiri, my head is pounding after another all-nighter. Would you mind lowering the volume a little?”

“Of course! Sorry, Director Zeta!”

Turns out the two voices we were hearing were Kiri, who dressed in her middle school’s uniform, and Zeta, who was clutching her head. Apparently they’d just arrived at Juumonji’s festival.

“Say, Chelsea... Do you think it’s okay to let them in on things?” I leaned over and whispered.

“You could, but they did probably just see us come out of the women’s restroom.”

“Good point...”

I sighed heavily and could feel my shoulders slump. While it would just be simpler to tell them the truth, their timing was terrible. I didn’t really want anyone knowing that I’d used the bathroom in Hibiki’s body. Chelsea had made me feel at ease until now, but from here on out, I’d have to be on my guard with other people around.

“Listen, I’ll be fine. I told you I was here for you, and I meant it. Just act natural.”

Or so Chelsea said as she gave me a sympathetic pat on the shoulder, but...

“...”

What the hell did that even mean right now? Surely she meant to act like Hibiki, but... How did Hibiki normally act? The more I thought about it, the less I could remember. I was drawing a total blank in the heat of the moment.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Hibiki? You’re making a weird face,” inquired Zeta.

“What? No, I’m fine. Cut a guy some slack, will you? Heh heh...” I said, trying to play it cool.

“Psst, Rekka... Watch what you say,” Chelsea quietly whispered in my ear.

“Er, yeah! Girl... Cut a girl some slack.”

“Okay... If you say so.”

Zeta looked at me skeptically, but didn’t press further. Her headache from not getting any sleep must have been pretty bad. She still had her hand pressed to her forehead.

“Hibiki, Hibiki! Do you know where Rekka is?” Kiri leaned in and asked eagerly.

I was actually right here—or at least part of me was—but I couldn’t exactly

tell her that.

“Oh, um... I’m not quite sure. He and the others kinda went on ahead.”

“And left you and Chelsea behind? That isn’t like Rekka,” said Kiri, quizzically cocking her head to the side.

“Uh...”

I tried to think of a good excuse, but my mind was still almost completely blank. Thankfully...

“Sherlyn actually kidnapped Rekka and ran off with him, and everyone else went chasing after them,” Chelsea jumped in to explain.

“Sherlyn? Who’s that?”

Chelsea’s skillful redirecting of the conversation saved me. I’d just about blown it, too...

I secretly sighed in relief and thanked Chelsea over and over internally. I’d have to watch myself from here on out, and the first thing on the docket would be minding how I talked. As I went over things to say in my head...

“Oh! Let’s try that!” Kiri suddenly shouted, pointing to a flag with ice cream on it.

“Kiri, I said not to yell...”

“But ice cream will fix your headache, Director Zeta! Let’s go get some!”

“What? The ice cream on Earth can do that?”

Whether that was actually true or not aside, Kiri seemed pretty determined to get ice cream. At her urging, we made our way over to the classroom with the sign outside that boasted handmade ice cream.

“Welcome!”

The classroom was filled with tables and chairs like you might find in a bodega. There was also a freezer that was packed with a colorful variety of ice cream.

“Wah! It all looks delicious!” Kiri shouted again in awe, her eyes sparkling.

As the sign outside said, all of the ice cream here had been made by hand. The class hosting the event had packed single-serve cups with all different kinds, labeled by flavor and price.

“Oh, I know! We should all get different flavors!”

“Which one works best on headaches...?”

An enthusiastic Kiri and an unenthusiastic Zeta picked out the flavors they wanted, and Chelsea and I did the same. After checking out and getting spoons, the four of us sat down at a table together.

“Oh my gosh, this looks so good!”

Kiri excitedly scooped a spoonful of her ice cream into her mouth.

“Oh my gosh, it *is* so good!”

Wow, she really was worked up about ice cream. I guess that’s typical for middle school girls... Actually, I was about to write it off to her youth, but she actually sounded a lot like Iris right now. I bet she’d be just as excited about all this.

“That hits the spot. A little something cold works wonders on a tired brain...”

Perhaps Kiri just seemed more exuberant than usual sitting next to the haggard Zeta. Wait, no. That wasn’t a pass at her age or anything. I swear.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Hibiki?”

“Oh, uh, yeah...”

“Hurry up before it gets melty!”

Kiri cheerfully encouraged me to try mine, so I hurriedly took a bite.

“How is it?”

“Mine’s pretty good too.”

“So is this orange flavor,” said Chelsea. “It’s really good for handmade, actually.”

It was praise all around for the handmade ice cream. As I ate away at mine, I started to think I’d be willing to come back for seconds after I got back to my

own body.

“Hibiki, can I have a bite of yours?”

“Mwuh?”

I froze up with my spoon still in my mouth at Kiri’s sudden question. Wait, I get it. This is why she suggested we all get different flavors.

“S-Sure...”

“Thanks! You can try some of mine first!”

With that, Kiri scooped some ice cream up with her spoon and held it out towards me.

“W-Wait, what?”

“Open up! Hurry, before it falls!”

She’d heaped way much onto the spoon. The giant ball of frozen goodness was precariously balanced as she moved it closer to me.

“That’s okay, Kiri! I can use my own spoon! You eat that!”

“Nooo! If I move it any more, I’ll drop it, and it’ll be a waste!”

There were tears welling in her eyes as she pleaded with me. Even if I told her she could still eat my ice cream after dropping her own, she probably wouldn’t accept that. She’d just scoop up more and try this all over again. That persistence was just a part of her personality. I knew this was a losing game, so...

“H-Here goes nothing.”

Nom.

I ate Kiri’s ice cream, making sure to touch as little of her spoon as possible.

“...”

And it was just about as embarrassing as that time I had to share a couple’s drink with Hibiki.

“Well? What do you think?”

“Yeah, yours is good too, Kiri.”

“Yay! Then let me try yours next!” Kiri said happily before opening her mouth wide.

She almost looked like a cute little puppy begging for food... Maybe it was just because I was a guy, but feeding each other like this really was embarrassing. Granted, it was several degrees easier being on this side of the exchange.

“Um, okay. Here...”

But just as I started to scoop up some of my ice cream...



“There you are!”

An intruder appeared at our table, yelling loudly.

“I finally found you! Where have you been?!”

It was me. Or rather, Hibiki inside my body. She seemed to be... worn a little ragged.

“Jeez, what happened to you?” I had to ask.

“I think I finally understand what you go through on a daily basis...” she said rather earnestly.

Hearing that honestly made me feel bad for her.

“So, uh, I’ve kept the whole body swap thing secret from Kiri and Zeta. Chelsea knows, though,” I whispered to Hibiki.

“Got it. It was too complicated to explain, so I kept it a secret from Sherlyn and the others too,” she whispered back.

After that exchange, we nodded at each other in implicit understanding.

“Hey, Rekka! It’s been a while!”

“Sup? Seems like you’re having another rough day. I’m investigating the next evil organization we’re gonna bust, so I’ll be counting on you again soon.”

Kiri and Zeta both greeted “me” when Hibiki walked up to the table. Actually, what Zeta said was way more than a greeting. And she said it so casually, too... It would be weird for me to react to it while in Hibiki’s body, so I silently turned away and held my head.

“Hibiki, Hibiki! Don’t forget!” Kiri demanded, forcing my thoughts back to the here and now.

“Don’t forget...?”

“We were feeding each other ice cream!” she answered cheerfully.

Hearing that, Hibiki’s face froze up. Really, I should say my face with Hibiki behind it.

“...!”

She then glared at me fiercely, but when she saw how excited Kiri was about ice cream, she didn't interrupt.

"H-Here you go, Kiri..."

"Hom! Oooh, delicious!"

"Ugh..."

A middle school girl happily eating ice cream with a frustrated high school boy watching her, fists clenched... It must have been an odd sight for everyone else. And the fact that people would think one of those parties was me was unsettling, to say the least.

But as that scene unfolded...

Bam!

Someone came stomping into the classroom.

"Hey, it's Corona."

"Oh, no!"

Upon hearing Corona's name, Hibiki's eyes went wide.

"Here you are, young man."

The classroom was suddenly abuzz at the unexpected appearance of a beautiful, purple-haired woman dressed in a maid uniform. The maid in question, however, paid them no mind, and she zeroed in on Hibiki. As soon as she was close enough, she snatched "me" into her arms.

"I finally caught you."

"Mrgh!"

Unable to fight against the strength of the former Demon King, Hibiki grumbled in Corona's grasp. God, is this what I usually look like to other people? It's no wonder my male classmates are always glaring at me.

"Have you only just now realized how lucky of a pervert you are?" R asked, her shoulders slumping exaggeratedly.

"Ugh..."

As for Hibiki, she seemed unsure of how to deal with the situation. She didn't know how much strength was appropriate for "me" to use.

"Now, come eat those Russian takoyaki-like things with me."

"H-Hey... Hold on, Corona."

I tried to stop Corona from leaving with Hibiki in her clutches.

"Hm? What's wrong, Hibiki?"

"Erm..."

What would Hibiki say at a time like this? I agonized over what to say next, when...

"We found you!"

Lyun, Ellicia, and Sherlyn burst through the classroom door with enough force to break it.

"Tch! They caught up already..."

"I commend you for escaping a phantom thief, Rekka!"

"Whaaat?! Now you're touching Corona's chest?! I'll never forgive you for this, Nammy!"

"It's my first time seeing Rekka in ages, so you should all let me have a little more time with him!"

"No way!"

"Not happening!"

Ellicia was shot down from every direction.

"Come! We're running, young man!"

"Ah, wait!"

This time, Corona leaped out of the classroom before anyone could stop her with Hibiki still clutched in her arms. The other three girls chased after them, leaving the rest of us in the now noisy classroom.

"Those guys are like a storm, huh?"

“Who was that guy?”

“He was being chased by so many beautiful girls...”

“That wasn’t our school uniform.”

“Wasn’t that a Mitsunashi High uniform?”

“Hey, that’s the guy I saw in the hall earlier. He was being chased by pretty girls then too.”

“I saw him eating crepes at the crepe stand with that red-haired lady earlier.”

“Damn, that bastard came to another school just to show off, huh?!”

“I think I’ve heard about him from some friends at Mitsunashi before.”

Conversations like that were breaking out all around us. It seemed rumors about me were starting to take hold even at Juumonji...

“You okay, Hibiki?” Chelsea asked out of consideration.

“I think I have a headache...” I replied, rubbing my forehead between my brows to try and suppress the pain.

“W-Wait up, Sis...”

Just then, a panting Sophie belatedly arrived at the classroom, several minutes after her sister had already left.

“Hey, Sophie.”

“Oh... Hello, Hibiki.”

“Are you okay?”

Even Zeta seemed worried. She kindly led Sophie by the hand over to her seat and had her sit down.

“Here, you can have my ice cream. It’s a little melted now, but it’s still good.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Sophie took a bite of the ice cream and let out a sigh. She’d apparently been chasing her sister all over campus, but she was at her limit and just couldn’t keep up anymore. At this rate, the only way she was going to see the festival was on a wild goose chase. I felt sorry for her.

“Do you want to walk around with us after this?” I offered.

“C-Could I?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“But, um, my sister...”

“We’re looking for Rekka as well. I’m sure if we find him, your sister won’t be far behind.”

“And it’s really all right if I go with you?”

“Sure.”

And so we collected Sophie and continued our walk around the school.

“Hibiki, what’s that?”

“Oh, that’s...”

Sophie was filled with childlike curiosity, tugging on my sleeve every time something interesting caught her eye. Chelsea and I made sure to let her try out everything she wanted to.

“Heh, having Sophie around almost makes me feel like I’ve got my own little sister.”

“We have our hands full just babysitting Kiri, though.”

“Hey, Director Zeta! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

We continued touring the school like so. We heard tales of Hibiki and the others here and there, but we just managed to miss them every time. And so the afternoon passed without us ever making contact, until...

“Hibiki!”

“Hm?”

Someone suddenly called to me, stopping us in our tracks. I turned around to see a familiar looking girl, but I couldn’t quite place her. She was apparently a friend of Hibiki’s or something, but where had I seen her before...?

“Erm... L-Long time no see?”

“What? We saw each other this morning. Did you hit your head or

something?” the girl asked with a dubious look.

Yeah, but it’s way more complicated than that... is what I wanted to say.

“Haha, yeah. I must have... It’s funny. I can’t seem to remember a thing. What’s your name again...?”

“Are you serious right now? It’s me, Kanae!”

“Ah, yeah, that’s right. I remember now.”

She was the girl we’d run into during the Couples Afro Incident. If I recalled correctly, she was one of Hibiki’s close friends. I’d heard she was sickly, but it seemed like she was participating in the school festival.

Kanae then sighed and said, “You’re going to break my heart if you keep this up. But for now, we gotta go.”

“Go where?”

“Did you forget that too? It’s almost time for our shift. We have to hurry to the classroom. Are these your friends? My apologies, but I’ll be borrowing Hibiki for a little while.”

“Er, ah, wai—”

Kanae grabbed me by the hand and started to walk off. She was surprisingly forceful.

But a shift, huh? It must be something for their class event. Hibiki’s a student here, after all. I should have expected something like this. I guess I’d been taking things a little too easy... I reflected on that as I watched my footing down the stairs, Kanae still dragging me by the hand.

I wanted to ask what event Hibiki’s class was doing, but I held back so Kanae wouldn’t start to think I was acting *too* weird. My biggest fear was still affecting Hibiki’s reputation. Whatever it was, I’d figure it out when we got to the classroom anyway. Little did I know...

“Welcome!”

We were greeted brightly by some of their classmates in very unique outfits.

“Oh, it’s just you, Kanae. I’m glad you caught Hibiki,” said a girl dressed as a

caped vampire.

Behind her was a magician, some girl in a uniform that looked like it was from an anime, and more. Their classmates waiting on tables were all dressed up in some fashion or another.

“...A cosplay cafe?”

“Of course. Or did you forget that too?” Kanae said with a sigh at what I’d let slip.

“Good grief! Ditching your shift to go flirt with boys from other schools is inexcusable. Now hurry up and go get changed,” the vampire girl said with a wry smile.

She then handed Kanae a white nurse’s uniform. And me... a butler’s outfit? Well, it seemed like it would suit Hibiki just fine, and I didn’t have any particular qualms about wearing it myself...

“Wait, get changed?!”

“What are you acting so surprised for, Hibiki?”

What I’d reflexively shouted earned me a weird look from Kanae, but that wasn’t what I was worried about most right now. The butler outfit aside... Changing? Me? While still in Hibiki’s body? No, no, no! No way, no how! I can’t do that!

“Ooh! This is the event boys say they want to try most when they become girls! On the public ranking list, that is. I don’t know if you’re mature enough for the private version yet, Rekka.”

Public or private, both are awful!

While I was internally screaming at R, Kanae once more took my hand and dragged me out of the classroom. Our destination was... the girls’ changing room.

“Wait! Hold on a sec! This is the one place I can’t go!”

“Where else are you going to go change? Did you want to do it outside?”

Considering the situation, anything would be better than... Wait, where?!

With everyone thinking I was Hibiki, it would be perfectly natural for me to use the girls' changing room. But I couldn't. I didn't want to get arrested.

Back in the girls' bathroom, I'd kept my eyes shut the entire time while Chelsea basically did everything for me, so there wasn't much to fuss over. (There wasn't much of anything at all, if you know what I mean.) But I didn't have Chelsea this time, and unlike in the bathroom, there weren't private stalls in the changing room. Even if Chelsea were here, I couldn't have her help me change in front of Kanae. It'd be too weird. I couldn't risk people spreading rumors about Hibiki because of me.

So... I guess I had no choice but to run. I started to steel myself to flee, but Kanae suddenly cracked a grin.

"Aha!" she said, peering up at me with a sly look on her face. "Hibiki, did you want to wear something different today because Rekka's coming?"

"Huh?"

I reflexively let out a dumb, confused noise upon hearing my own name come up so unexpectedly.

"Though the butler outfit suits you, it is a bit lacking in feminine charm. I can understand why you'd prefer something else to wear for your lovely suitor."

"Um, I'm sorry... My lovely what?"

I had no idea what she was talking about, but Kanae simply giggled in reply.

"It's fine, you know. You don't have to hide it. I can tell just by your face after listening to you talk about him day in and day out."

Tha-thump.

Wh-What? Was I on the verge of hearing something totally outrageous under outrageous circumstances in the most outrageous way possible?

Tha-thump. Tha-thump.

My heart was pounding surprisingly loudly. Without knowing any better, Kanae continued...

"Hibiki, I know that you lo—"

My body froze completely stiff in anticipation of what she was about to say next.

“HOLD IT RIGHT THEEEEEERE!”

But just then, “I” came running over with a desperate look on “my” face. And I mean really running.

“Oh?”

“Bwah!”

Kanae quickly stepped to the side, but I was still standing there practically frozen in place. And so Hibiki, who was still booking it at a dead sprint, crashed right into me.

THUNK!

Our foreheads collided and bounced off of each other. Limbs tangled, we went tumbling forward through a door or something, sliding along the floor.

“Ow, ow, ow...”

I sat up with a hand pressed to my forehead. This was the second time today I’d smacked my head on something...

“A-Are you okay, Hibiki?”

“Yeah, somehow...”

Wait, that was my voice... Did I have it back?

“?! ”

Hibiki and I looked at each other in shock. I looked down at Hibiki’s face as she looked up at me... meaning we were back to normal!

“We’re back! We’re back, right, Hibiki?! ”

“Yeah! There’s no mistaking it!”

We shared a celebratory laugh. A second collision was really all it had taken to get things back to normal... How simple! But I was okay with that. Simple is best, after all.

“I-Incidentally, Rekka...”

“Hm?”

“D-Did you hear the rest of what Kanae was trying to say?”

What she’d said there at the end?

“Hibiki, I know that you lo—”

“Nope. I didn’t hear all of it.”

“I see.”

With a sigh of relief, Hibiki’s expression relaxed.

“Well, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s.”

I lent Hibiki a hand to stand up, then looked around me... and immediately froze in place again.

“...”

I was surrounded by girls, girls, girls... All of which were in various states of undress, and all of which were glaring at me. When Hibiki realized it too, even she flinched.

“Right...” she muttered. “This is the girls’ changing room.”

Yeah, that door we’d tumbled through earlier? Turns out that led straight to the changing room. By the time we noticed, it was too late. And Hibiki acknowledging it was like a starting pistol. I heard all the girls in the room inhale together, and then...

“KYAAAAAH!”

They all screamed.

“I’m s-s-sorry!”

“DIE, PERVERT!”

Words of abuse and various thrown objects all came flying at me. Knowing I was completely in the wrong here, I took the punishment until they were satisfied. After that, with Hibiki and Kanae’s testimonials, I at least managed to avoid getting the cops called on me. But that didn’t stop word from spreading

that I'd barged in on the girls' changing room. First to Chelsea and the other students of Juumonji, then to everyone at my school, L, and eventually...

"So you've finally started to cause trouble for other schools too, have you? I hope you're prepared, problem child."

President Momone, who had dispatched me to Juumonji High School in the first place. I would eventually receive a punishment so severe that putting it into words wouldn't do it justice, but that's a story for after we return to Mitsuhashi High School.



Jumping back a little to just before we left Juumonji High for the day...

"Wow, even I thought you were dead for real this time, Rekka. Not physically, but socially."

"..."

Listening to R's unfunny jokes, I tried to walk as casually as possible down the path to the school gate. I wished I was invisible. Who wouldn't after what I'd just done? If possible, I'd like to just disappear. Needless to say I left Juumonji as quickly as I could. I let out a sigh once I made it past the school gates unnoticed.

"Found you."

Just as I passed someone, I thought I heard them say something to me.

"?!"

Was I being arrested after all?! I spun around in serious surprise to see...

"..."

Nobody there.

"Huh?"

"What's the matter, Rekka?" R asked, turning back from where she was floating a few feet ahead of me.

"It's nothing..."

I turned back around feeling a little strange. I'd heard that voice way too clearly for it to have just been in my head... A lingering, unpleasant doubt took hold in the back of my mind.

Ever since the bomb threat yesterday, weird things had been happening one after the other without any real explanation. Nothing really bad had happened yet, so I couldn't say it was a genuine problem, but...

"It just doesn't sit well with me."

After muttering to myself out loud, I continued on down the road towards my house.



Chapter 4: The Limits of Endless Possibilities

At long last, we reached the third and final day of the school festival. Normally the festival only ran for two days, so this was kind of like a bonus extension, but it left me wondering what strings they'd had to pull to get that in this day and age where some parents were opposed to the very idea of school festivals in the first place. I asked President Momone out of curiosity, but the only answer she gave me was a sly grin. It was an answer that told me that I had better not ask too many questions or it wouldn't happen again next year. It made me realize just how in over my head I was with her. But anyway...

"It's almost time, I think."

I was currently waiting for someone in front of the Mitsuhashi High school gates. And not just anyone, mind you—a VIP guest whose appearance was supposed to be the grand finale of the Mitsuhashi-Juumonji school festival. It would be no exaggeration to say that arranging for her appearance had been the most important thing I'd done for the festival committee. Actually, honestly, I think that might have been the entire reason President Momone forced me to help the festival committee in the first place. There were way more responsible, diligent, and useful people she could've recruited other than me.

"R, go take a look from overhead."

"You know you don't have to be so impatient, right? She's way busier than an average high school student like you, so can't you just chill a little and wait for her without the ants in your pants?"

"I don't have ants in my pants; I'm just worried. I mean, she's so famous... What if someone's harassing her on the way here?"

"Wouldn't be our problem."

"Oh, okay. I see what's really going on here. You're just lazy."

As R and I continued to bicker, I caught a glimpse of a girl running our way out of the corner of my eye.

"S-Sorry for the wait!"

“No problem. You didn’t have to run. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine...”

There, our special guest for the day—Mio Kotozuka—took several deep breaths. She was wearing a hat and glasses to keep people from recognizing her as her idol persona MIO.

“No one spotted you on your way here, right?”

“Right. I’m not wearing my wig right now, and no one’s ever recognized me with my glasses on,” she said with a confident nod.

She insisted, so I had to believe her. But today, it would be my mission to protect her. If her identity was revealed, there would be a screaming rush of fans all over campus... And President Momone would yell at me again for sure. The plan was to keep Mio a secret until her surprise performance at the end of the festival.

“Thanks again for coming today, Mio. I know you’re always busy.”

“Don’t mention it, Rekka. I’d be happy to help you out with anything,” she said with a bright smile.

Mio really was a sweet girl. I could totally see why her fans on the internet extolled her as the angel of pop.

“The concert won’t be until this evening, so feel free to enjoy the festival until then.”

“Sure. What about you, Rekka? What are you up to?”

“I’ll be sticking with you today. I’ve got orders from the student council president to guard you with my life if it comes to that.”

“You don’t have to listen to orders like that...” Mio said with a furrowed brow. My bad. I may have phrased that poorly.

“Haha, don’t worry. She was mostly just kidding, anyway.”

“Really? If you say so... But I don’t want you feeling like my bodyguard or anything, Rekka.”

Ah, of course... I guess Mio actually had real bodyguards and stuff. I’d seen

idols on TV before surrounded by men in black suits to protect them from rabid swarms of fans. She probably didn't think I was kidding when I said something about protecting her with my life.

"Like I said, don't worry. If it gets that bad, we'll run together."

"Yeah."

There, Mio and I exchanged smiles.

"Well," I said after a moment, "is there anything you want to see?"

"I'd like to just walk around a bit first. Oh, but I would like to see Tsumiki."

"You got it."

With that plan in mind, I turned to walk off with her, but...

"Um..." she called out to stop me.

"What is it?"

"Would you... hold my hand?" she practically mumbled.

"Yeah... sure."

It was a little embarrassing, but I agreed and extended my hand, which she took happily. It was a little awkward, but I was more worried about getting separated and losing her than anything else. This was the lesser of two evils. Just as I convinced myself of that, we entered the school. I changed into my indoor shoes while Mio changed into slippers.

"Now, where shall we go first?" I asked.

Our school had two major buildings. First was the building that housed all the regular classrooms, which was where most of the class events and stuff were taking place. But then there was also the auxiliary building that contained special classrooms like the science lab and whatnot. There were some exhibits there too, so we had our choice of things to check out.

"To start, I think I'd prefer whichever is quieter... In more ways than one."

"Huh...? Okay, well, let's go check out the auxiliary building then," I suggested, wondering what she'd meant.

“It wouldn’t exactly be quiet anymore if you ran into the other heroines, now would it?” R said, shaking her head in exasperation as she floated behind me like usual.

But as I’d expected, the auxiliary building wasn’t quite as crowded. The main attractions here were exhibits that various clubs had put together, so it didn’t have the same pull that the main building did. Which, incidentally, was probably why there weren’t any food carts or anything over here either. I was worried Mio might get bored quickly, but she seemed to be enjoying herself more than I thought she would.

“Wow, this embroidery’s so detailed...”

Right now, she was in awe of the display from the arts and crafts club.

“Do you do any needlework yourself, Mio?”

“I’d like to, but I don’t really have the time... Oh, but I do love sewn things like stuffed animals.”

“Heh, yeah, I can totally see you with one of those giant teddy bears.”

I was casually joking around a bit, but Mio’s eyes lit right up.

“I have one of those at home! It’s huge!”

“Ah...”

It seemed I’d hit the nail on the head. All I’d said was that I could picture her with one, but Mio was smiling just as big and bright as could be.

“I hug it when I go to sleep at night.”

I bet that must be adorable. Just imagining Mio cuddling with a stuffed animal made me feel warm and fuzzy. After putting any and all weird thoughts out of my head, we took our leave of the arts and crafts club room. We then headed down the hallway, wondering what we should do next, when all of a sudden...

Knock, knock!

“What was that?”

It sounded like someone knocking on the window, but we were on the third floor... Dubious, I turned to look at the window.

“Bwuh?!”

“Hiya, Rekka!”

As luck would (unfortunately) have it, there was a dumb angel flapping her wings on the other side of the window as she rapped on the glass.

“Rachelle?! What are you doing here?!” I flung the window open and yelled.

But she didn’t seem the slightest bit concerned.

“Weeeell, I detected some rich love energy coming from this direction, so I just happened to wander over here,” she said, casually putting her hand on her face.

That was honestly where I wanted to plant my fist right about now with ten times the force, but in order not to make a scene, I held myself back. Speaking of making a scene...

“Look, Rachelle, someone’s going to see you like this.”

“It’ll be fine! They’ll just think I’m a cosplayer or something.”

“And how exactly are you going to explain the flying part?”

“Won’t they think it’s a magic trick or something?”

As Rachelle continued to spin whatever optimistic nonsense was convenient for her...

“H-Huh? Is that... an angel?!”

Mio saw right through her. On top of being annoying, Rachelle really was hopeless.

“Argh, fine! Just get inside already!”

“Oh, you’re inviting me in? Don’t mind if I do!”

Rachelle then entered through the window, which was bad enough as it was, but at least she was standing like a normal person now. As long as she wasn’t flying, maybe we could actually sell people on the whole cosplay thing. It would have to do...

I placed a hand against my forehead and sighed.

“Um... R-Rekka?”

“Oh, sorry, Mio. This is your first time meeting Rachelle, right? As you can see... Well, she’s an angel.”

“Nice to meet you! I’m Rachelle, the angel of love and passion!”

“O-Oh, um... It’s nice to meet you too.”

Mio seemed a bit taken aback by the overly-friendly angel.

“You really are surrounded by extraordinary people, Rekka...”

“No, not Rachelle. She’s just extraordinarily stupid.”

“Personally, I think that’s what makes her cute,” R interjected.

But that was easy for her to say when she wasn’t the one who actually had to deal with Rachelle. She went on rampages *way* too easily.

“Jeez, I’m begging you... Just behave yourself today, okay? Otherwise the disciplinary committee is going to kick a sketchy character like you right out of here.”

“Oh my gosh, Rekka, you are so mean! How could you say something like that to a sweet angel like me?”

“...What are you getting at?”

“Teehee, I thought you’d never ask!”

With a giggle, Rachelle started to open her shirt. I immediately turned to look away, but a familiar face caught my eye.

“P-Poppy?!”

“Hello, Rekka!”

It was the little fairy I’d met in the mountains with Satsuki and the others at the family barbeque. What was she doing here? Moreover, what was she doing hidden in Rachelle’s shirt?

“I spotted her loitering around the building by chance, and when I talked to her, I came to find out she was a friend of yours too, sooooo... I brought her along with me!” Rachelle happily gushed, apprising me of her side of the story.

“Okay, that explains why the two of you are together, but what are you doing here at the school, Poppy?”

“Um, it just seemed like a lot of people were having fun over here, so I just... came to check it out.”

“Fairies do love festivities, after all!” Rachelle added with a grin.

“So the festival managed to attract both of you, albeit for very different reasons, huh?”

“Like I said, Rekka, you really are surrounded by extraordinary people...” Mio said in awe as she poked at Poppy with her finger.

“Heehee!”

It must have tickled, because Poppy began giggling happily.

“How cute...”

It seemed her reaction tugged at Mio’s heartstrings, too. But anyway...



We decided to keep strolling around the festival as a group of four. Mio was a given, but Rachelle and Poppy also had to keep their real identities a secret here. I was worried about Rachelle blowing it in particular, and it would be much easier to keep an eye on her if she was nearby.

“Wow, so you’re an idol, Mio?”

“Yup. I’ll even be doing a little show later. Will you come see it, Poppy?”

“Of course! That sounds like so much fun!” Poppy replied brightly to Mio’s invitation.

Currently, she was secretly hiding under the brim of Mio’s hat. Fortunately Mio was pretty short, so it was unlikely anyone would see her this way, but the two of them might give it away if they got too excited.

“Hey, uh, Poppy? Could you lower your voice a little?”

“Oh, I’m sorry!”

At my warning, Poppy muffled her mouth with both hands.

“Aww... How cute.”

Mio seemed even more enchanted with the little fairy, and she let out a small sigh of wonderment. She’d really taken a liking to Poppy. And Poppy seemed pretty content as well, as she continued chatting with Mio cheerfully. All in all, there was a wonderful, harmonious energy to our group... There was just one idiot who couldn’t read the room.

“Auuugh, Rekkaaa... I don’t feel much love energy in this direction. Let’s go that way instead!” Rachelle griped.

There weren’t all that many people in the auxiliary building, so there wasn’t enough love energy—in other words, carnage—here to satisfy her, which led to her complaining nonstop about going to the main building. To be honest, she was the entire reason I *didn’t* want to go there... But since I was showing Mio around the festival, it was only inevitable we’d end up there eventually.

“Hey, look, a fortune teller’s shop. Wanna go in?”

I tried to delay the inevitable as long as possible by pointing to a nearby

attraction and suggesting we check it out.

“A fortune teller, huh...?”

“Not interested in fortunes, Mio?”

I actually really wasn't much interested in that kind of thing either, but I thought Mio might be.

“I was once a guest star on a show where a famous fortune teller did a reading for me...”

“Yeah?”

“It was all staged.”

“Oof.”

“All my reactions were decided beforehand and everything.”

While she'd done her job—it was for work, after all—she'd had conflicted feelings about fortune tellers ever since.

“Then let's go find something else to do.”

“No, that's okay. It's up to the individual whether they believe the fortune or not. And as long as it's with you... I think I might want to do it.”

I could hardly make out what she said there at the end because she was mumbling so much, but it seemed she'd resolved herself to go see the fortune teller after all.

“So... shall we go in?”

“Sure.”

“Hmph!”

Rachelle was the only one who didn't want to, but we outvoted her.

School festivals were one of the biggest events in high schoolers' love lives. Throwing an angel that incited jealousy and preyed on the ensuing carnage into the mix would spell disaster for everyone. I'd have to watch her like a hawk as soon as we went to the other building.

Dreading all that, I stepped through the dark curtains hanging over the

fortune teller's door. I was greeted with silence. The interior of the room was dim, and all the windows had been covered with blackout curtains. The only source of light was a lone candle placed atop a desk in the middle of the room that was draped in a purple tablecloth.

There was only one person present... I think? Even when I rubbed my eyes and looked again, there was only one person—the fortune teller presumably, based on the way she was dressed—sitting at the aforementioned desk.

“Welcome to my shop,” she said.

How should I put it...? Her outfit was so unique that it made Rachelle look plain by comparison. It was of an exotic, vaguely Arabic design with only sheer material covering her legs, which left her thighs and calves visible even through her clothes. She was also covered in accessories from head to toe, all of which were extravagant enough that they'd be against the school dress code if this were any normal school day.

But the most eye-catching feature of all was her hair illuminated by candlelight... It appeared to be all seven colors of the rainbow. Radiating from the top of her head was a gradient of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. She had the perfect mystical look you'd expect from a fortune teller, but did she really have to go all out like this just for the festival? Must be pretty gung-ho.

“Have a seat,” she said, beckoning us towards the desk.

There were exactly three open seats, which was perfect for... us...? Wait a minute, were there chairs there a minute ago? Maybe I'd just missed them because it was so dark, but it seemed like they'd appeared out of nowhere. Was it just my imagination?

“Um, thanks...”

It felt awkward to stay standing, so we all approached and took a seat.

“Did you come seeking any knowledge in particular?”

“Hmm...”

I hadn't really come in here for me, so I couldn't think of anything.

“What about you, Mio? You seemed like you wanted your fortune told about something earlier.”

“Ah, um... Yes, I... Um, if you would...”

Mio turned to the fortune teller and leaned across the desk to whisper something directly to her. She was probably telling her what she wanted her fortune told regarding, but why couldn't we hear it too?

“Understood,” the fortune teller said with a nod before taking out a small crystal ball.

It was almost made like a pendant, connected to her necklace by a gold chain. She swung it gently from left to right, and it glinted in the candlelight, catching all of our eyes.

“I can see it...” the fortune teller murmured as she watched us from the other side of the crystal ball.

At this point, I belatedly noticed her left eye was a different color than her right. One was blue, and one was green. Her odd eyes looked at me and Mio in turn.

“The results are favorable between you two.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes. However... What is this, I wonder? It seems Rekka over here has multiple connections with the opposite sex... The same kind of connections that you desire, Mio. And there's quite a number of them, no less.”

“I already knew that...”

Mio had looked so happy at first, but now let out a heavy sigh.

“As for you, Rekka...”

“Yes?”

“You have terrible luck with women.”

“I'm well aware...”

I sighed just like Mio. But... grim results aside, I guess the fortune telling was pretty accurate so far. Was this fortune teller just that good? I had no real idea

what the metric for fortune telling skills was.

“Hey, what about me? What’s my luck like?” Rachelle inquired, raising her hand and waving it enthusiastically.

“Let’s see...”

The fortune teller started swinging her crystal ball once more...

“Yeah. I’ve had enough of this.”

And then suddenly changed her tone.

“Huh?”

Without any explanation, the fortune teller leaned back in her chair and said...

“For now, only Rekka Namidare should remain in the room.”

And those words seemed to have a mysterious power to them. Suddenly she and I were the only ones in the room. Everyone else had disappeared.

“M-Mio! Rachelle? Poppy?! Where did you guys go?!”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s not like they’re dead,” the fortune teller reassured me unconvincingly upon seeing my panic.

“You! What did you do with them?!”

“Take a seat.”

“Don’t mess with—”

Just then, something caught my attention and made me look around at my surroundings carefully. Everyone was gone... Including R. Whether it was in other worlds, outer space, or even the past, she had always stuck with me. But now she was gone.

“...”

Seeing that, I finally understood that something was very, very wrong. This stood out even among all the other strange situations I’d been wrapped up in over the past couple of days.

Ah, damn it... That’s right. I see now.

It was only then that I realized it. While I was helping out with the festival committee, I'd seen the master list of all the events, displays, booths, and exhibits that were part of the festival. And a fortune teller's shop wasn't on it. This very place should have raised red flags from the start.

"What's wrong?" the fortune teller asked.

"..."

I took a moment to calm myself before engaging the fortune teller. Since I had no idea who she really was or what she wanted, I'd have to get some information out of her before anything else.



“So, who are you?”

“Come to think of it, I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name is Touko Iwazu. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rekka Namidare.”

The fortune teller—Touko Iwazu—offered me her hand with a smile. I shook it silently and calmed myself once more.

“...You seem to have some kind of business with me. What are you after?”

“Very good. I’m proud of you for staying cool and collected. It wouldn’t be any fun otherwise.”

“I can’t say I find this fun at all.”

“Oh, it’s very fun. A normal human would be panicking by this point. Some of them just go into denial. But not you. And I find that very exciting,” Touko said happily. “I don’t just mean today, either. With both the bomb threat and the body swap, you were able to accept the situation and diligently work towards overcoming it.”

There, she flashed a smirk.

“So that was all your doing too?” I asked in response.

It seemed I had been her goal all along. I felt badly for dragging Mio and the others into this, but moreover...

“Making the girls disappear from the room, swapping Hibiki’s body with mine... Just how are you making these things happen?”

“Cutting straight to the chase, I see.”

I guess she wasn’t going to answer me so easily. Or that’s what I thought, but then...

“Well, whatever. I’ll spell it out for you,” Touko said readily. “I wield the power of words, you see... So what I say can shape the very essence of reality.”

“Wh-What?”

The power... to shape reality?

“By simply articulating my desires, I can change the perceptions of people

around you, launch unplanned fireworks, swap minds and bodies, instantly erase people, and much, much more... I dare say I can do anything."

"What the hell...?"

I'd fought a rather wide variety of enemies before, but someone who could straight-up bend reality to their will? That was just unfair, although it did make a certain amount of sense. All the strange, unexplained incidents recently... She'd willed them to happen.

"Was that cursed game your doing too?"

"Game? What are you talking about?"

Was she playing dumb? No. She'd been upfront about her power already, so there was no reason for her to lie now. Which meant... she really had nothing to do with the game? I guess that didn't matter right now. I was getting the information I needed, but there was still one thing I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"So you have the power to do anything and everything... but why would you go through such lengths to come after me? What's your reason for that?"

That was what I really wanted to know now. What would someone who could do anything want from me? But upon hearing that question, Touko grinned.

"Rekka Namidare, I challenge you."

"Challenge?"

"The nature of said challenge is up to you. Challenge me at anything you like; just make me lose at something before the festival is over."

"What...?"

I guess now I knew what she wanted from me, but this was rather strange. She wanted me to make her lose at something, huh?

"I don't really understand."

"I meant exactly what I said. And if you can't manage to win against me, I'll do terrible things to the people around you," she laughed with a wicked grin.

"Terrible things...?"

“That’s right. As long as I can speak, no matter how cruel and heartless, inhumane and atrocious, unthinkable and inconceivable the words... I’ll talk until I have nothing left to say.”

“...!”

To her, putting something into words was the same as making it happen.

“So what will you do? I doubt you’ll refuse me. You’re the type of guy who would throw everything into taking care of a bomb threat with nothing to go on, after all.”

That felt a little underhanded... But either way, I had no choice but to accept her demands for now.

“All right, I g—”

“Oh, and if you’re confident enough, I don’t mind if the challenge is something perverted.”

“As if I’d do that!”

“So you’re not confident, hmm?”

“I can’t hear yooooouuu!”

She must have found it fun to pick on me, as she was still grinning wickedly. Damn it! I didn’t stand a chance against someone like her, even though I knew she was just trying to provoke me...

“Fine! Since you insist, I’ll make you lose as much as you want!”

“So you’ll go with a perverted challenge after all?”

“NO!”

I really was bad at dealing with this...

“Anyway, I accept your challenge. However, you first have to give Mio and the others back.”

“Very well. You may have them back.”

Again, according to the mysterious power of her words...

“Kyah!”

“Wah!”

The very next moment, Mio and Rachelle fell back into their seats.

“Huh? What happened to us?”

I could practically see the question marks hovering over Mio’s head, but she didn’t seem to be hurt or anything.

“Ooo...”

I peeked under her hat just to be sure, and I found a very dizzy-looking Poppy.

“Rekka.”

Upon hearing my name, I turned around to see R with a solemn expression on her face.

“I’m sorry. My fixed coordinate function was forcibly terminated, temporarily removing me from my position. My canceler works against most magics and psychic powers, but hers appears to be capable of great interference.”

An ability so powerful that even R, an advanced lifeform from the future, feared it...

“Now, shall we begin the challenge?”

“Yeah...” I said with a nervous gulp.



Now, even though I’d agreed to challenge her, coming up with something on the spot wasn’t easy. Thankfully, however, we were in the middle of a festival. There were countless activities I could challenge her to here.

“First up is a shaved ice eating contest!”

“Oh, do they still sell shaved ice in the autumn?”

Touko was impressed by the wrong thing, but she accepted the challenge readily. I honestly didn’t think it was the right season for shaved ice anymore either, but it was cheap and easy to sell. It did feel pretty nice after working up a sweat walking around all day, too.

“Okay, whoever finishes eating first is the winner.”

“Understood.”

Touko and I stood facing each other, shaved ice in hand.

“Do your best, Rekka! I’m cheering for you!”

“G-Good luck!”

Rachelle was frantically waving her hands in a show of support from a short distance away. Poppy was also cheering for me, but in a quiet voice from under Mio’s hat so no one else would hear her.

“U-Um, then...” Mio mumbled as she took her place between me and Touko.

We’d asked her to act as a referee, so she’d be overseeing the match.

“Begin!”

She then swung her raised hand downward, signaling the start.

“NomRRRRRAAUGH!”

I quickly shoveled as much shaved ice into my mouth as I could, and my frozen brain made me groan in response. This was the real challenge of a shaved ice eating contest. Now, to see if Touko could do any better...

“Wow, you’re pretty fast,” she said in awe as she leisurely watched me eat.

The spoon in her hand hadn’t budged an inch. Was she even going to try? I had to wonder, but I soon got my answer...

“I guess I’ll just eat mine in one bite,” she said.

Then, true to her word, she lifted her spoon and ate all of her shaved ice in a single bite.

“H-Huh?!”

What on earth just happened...? I hadn’t taken my eyes off of her for a second, yet I had no idea how all her shaved ice was gone. The spoon shouldn’t have even been able to hold all of it at once... But I’d also just seen her do it. I was terribly confused.

“Aah... that hit the spot!” Touko furrowed her brows with a laugh.

She was probably holding back her brain freeze just like I had been a few

moments earlier. It wasn't as though she had physically turned a heap of shaved ice into a bite-sized amount, nor did she simply make the shaved ice disappear... She'd eaten it all in one bite, just like she said she would.

"She's distorting the laws of causality... What an amazing power."

R put a name to the phenomenon, but I didn't need her to do that in order to realize Touko's power was truly incredible.

"Now that puts you at zero wins and one loss. What will you challenge me to next?"

"..."

Well, I hadn't expected to win so easily. There hadn't been a limit on the number of challenges set, so I had intended on using the first few rounds as bait to test the waters of her mysterious power.

"All right, next is..."



Next up, we swung by Nozo-mini.

"Another eating contest? How unexciting."

"What can I say? I've always been a rather dull guy," I replied lazily as I walked through the curtain to Nozo-mini.

"You came back, Rekka!"

Lea welcomed me warmly when she saw me enter, but a very sulky Tetra standing right next to her had a different reaction.

"Who's this, Rekka?"

"Ah, this is..."

"Hello. I'm Touko Iwazu."

Touko introduced herself before I could finish my sentence, taking Tetra by the hand and shaking it emphatically.

"Er, um... It's nice to meet you," Tetra replied, somewhat taken aback.

She was probably stumped trying to reconcile Touko's ostentatious outfit and

her friendly demeanor. But as that was going on, Tsumiki walked over too. Rather than sulking like Tetra, she was straight up glaring at me.

“...And? I heard you went to Juumonji High yesterday. Did you ensnare another new girl while you were there?”

“Please don’t put it that way... Anyway, I only met Touko today.”

“You only met her today, yet you’re already close enough to go around the festival together?”

“No, no, no. It’s not like that.”

“You see, I’m in the middle of a challenge with Rekka Namidare,” Touko explained, unexpectedly offering me a helping hand from Tsumiki’s sharp attack.

“A challenge?”

“That’s right. And if he wins, he’s entitled to whatever he wants with me as a reward.”

“WHAT?!” the other girls all yelled in shock.

“That wasn’t the deal!” I protested.

“Ooh, I felt a wonderful surge of love energy just now!”

And, of course, Rachelle was basking in the chaos like she hadn’t a care in the world. She made an interesting counterpoint for the aloof and deadpan R, so I guess it kinda all evened out in the end.

“Love energy? The angel sure says interesting things,” remarked Touko.

“Hey now, despite all appearances, whether or not I get love energy is a matter of life and death for me, you know? Why, before I met Rekka, I was on the verge of starvation...”

“Hmm...”

Touko half-listened to Rachelle’s rant about love energy as she sneakily leaned in close to whisper to me.

“Hey, is this girl actually a real angel? I thought she was just a cosplayer at first, but her wings and halo don’t look like any costume.”

“Can’t you just figure it out with your power?”

“There are ways, certainly. But if you just tell me, then I won’t have to resort to something so pointlessly cruel.”

“Er, yeah... She’s a real angel.”

“My, how amazing! Come to think of it, back when I made the girls disappear in my shop, you called out to someone named Poppy, too. Where is she?”

“...”

Touko apparently hadn’t spotted Poppy yet. She’d definitely used her power to make her disappear earlier, yet she didn’t know where Poppy actually was? What did that mean?

“Poppy’s a fairy. Right now she’s hiding under Mio’s hat. It’ll be trouble if anyone finds out she’s here, so if you have to peek, do it discretely.”

“Certainly.”

Touko nodded, then lifted Mio’s hat a little and excitedly proclaimed...

“Goodness, a real fairy!”

Her surprise seemed genuine, indirectly confirming for me that she really hadn’t known where Poppy was this entire time. That had to mean the power of her words worked exactly as she stated them, whether or not she was aware of the consequences. That was pretty brutal.

Tactics like ambushes only worked by taking an opponent by surprise. In other words, the key element was the opponent’s lack of awareness... But if Touko’s powers could work on targets she didn’t even know were there, I’d never be able to fully catch her off guard. I’d have to think of another way to win. And as I was turning that over...

“Eek!”

I suddenly heard a small yelp. I turned around to see what it was, and lo and behold...

“Ow, ow, ow...”

“Wuh?! H-How did I get bigger?!”

A human-sized Poppy was sprawled out on top of Mio, both of them on the floor.

“H-Hey, what’s going on here?!”

“What? It would have been difficult for her to enjoy the festival like that, so I simply made her a little bit bigger.”

“Y-You can even do something like that...?”

“But of course,” Touko said nonchalantly.

“Wow, thank you so much!” Poppy happily bounced on her heels as she thanked Touko over and over again.

Her excessive gratitude drew a little attention, but it seemed no one had actually seen her get bigger, so no one really questioned anything. After that...

“So, what did you guys come here for?” Tsumiki asked, impatiently tapping a serving tray against her shoulder.

“Oh, that’s right. We came to have a contest,” Touko said, clapping her hands together as she turned to look at me. “What’s it going to be this time?”

“This time...” I said, pointing at Tsumiki before declaring the terms of our challenge. “We’ll take turns eating Tsumiki’s cooking, and whoever lasts longer wins!”

“So the aim is to hold out the longest? Does that mean this is a binge eating competition?”

“No. If anything, it’s a battle of stamina and your will to live.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Tsumiki demanded, kicking me square in the pants.

“Sorry! I’ll thank you for this later, so just play along for now, okay? Please?”

“Ugh... Since you’re so insistent, fine,” Tsumiki finally agreed, albeit reluctantly.

While I felt a little bad, I knew the only way I could combat an exceptional power was with another exceptional power. And Tsumiki’s cooking certainly fit the bill. Anyone who ate it unprepared immediately suffered great physical and

mental consequences. Sometimes there were even explosions involved. The only people who'd ever eaten more than a plateful of it and survived were Lea, Corona, and the poor fool that had been playing the part of Tsumiki's taste tester for months—me!

Not ten minutes later, Tsumiki walked over to us with a large, heaping tray of a mysterious substance. The mysterious substance—what I referred to as dark matter—bore no resemblance whatsoever to food. Needless to say, it was about as appetizing as you'd imagine. First of all, it was wriggling for some reason. And though I was staring directly at it, I couldn't clearly discern its shape. My sense of smell was completely befouled in less than three seconds, and my tongue lost all sensation shortly thereafter. And I hadn't even bitten into it yet, mind you. This stuff was just that destructive. Surely it would make even Touko cower...

“My... Shouldn't this be blurred out?”

“Hey! What are you saying my cooking looks like?!”

Or not. She was just chatting away with Tsumiki, which I have to say I found rather strange. As far as I knew, beyond wielding the power of words, Touko was a perfectly normal human. Yet she hadn't even batted an eye at the black, wriggling mass on the table. Meanwhile, I was already sweating nervously.

“Well, I'll dig in now.”

“?! ”

I was just sitting there trying to come up with an excuse to go after her, but then she up and volunteered to go first anyway!

“Let's see here...”

Without showing fear or faltering, and without saying anything that sounded like she was using her power, Touko chowed down on the dark matter.

Munch, munch, munch... Gulp.

“It has a strange texture.” And that was her only reaction after cleaning her plate. “But it was yummy.”

Upon hearing those words, everyone in the room—including Tsumiki—was

stunned into astonished silence. I think the two words running through everyone's heads simultaneously were, "No way."

"Now it's your turn, Rekka."

"R-Right..."

I was pressured into picking up my chopsticks.

"..."

I tried poking at the dark matter and heard a faint groan (?) in response. I still refused to believe this stuff was actually food. Moreover, I couldn't believe anyone other than Lea thought it was good. It'd be one thing if she'd used the power of words to *make* it good, but I hadn't heard her say anything like that. Could it be that the dark matter looked as gross as ever, but actually tasted pretty decent nowadays? No, there was no way... Still, even if there was a one-in-a-million—no, a one-in-a-billion chance, then... I convinced myself that I might be about to witness a miracle, and...

"Hom."

I dug in.



"You're now at zero wins and two losses. But more importantly, are you all right?" asked Touko, her arms folded.

"...Somehow," I muttered, staring at my own ghastly face in the mirror in the nurse's office.

To think I would pass out after one bite despite all the resistance I'd built up...

"How did you eat that crap without using your power, Touko?"

All I'd heard her say was that she would go first.

"What? It's simple—I did use my power. I used it while you were being kicked and apologizing to that Tsumiki girl."

Ah, so that's what happened. It was true I'd been too occupied at the time to be keeping a close eye on Touko. No wonder I hadn't noticed her using her power.

“Incidentally, what did you say?”

“That you, Rekka Namidare, would suffer all of the effects of the next thing I ate.”

“You jerk!” I yelled without thinking.

I was wondering why the dark matter had taken so much more of a toll on me than usual, but that would explain it, huh? I’d basically taken twice my share of suffering. Go figure I passed out.

“Hahaha, this is your own fault for trying to make an innocent girl like me eat that stuff.”

“Grrr...”

Unable to argue, I fell silent.

“You may have nothing to say, but you should feel bad for Tsumiki,” R said with an exasperated look.

Well, that much was true. Still, I’d had no choice but to resort to Tsumiki’s dark matter, although... I guess that was kind of R’s point.

“By the way, where did Mio and Rachelle go?” I asked Touko.

“Oh, I told them I’d look after you so they could go explore the festival at their leisure. That fairy girl was itching to go anyway.”

“I see.”

Poppy finally had the chance to enjoy the festival properly now that she was full-size, so of course she wanted to go check everything out while she could. Mio had rearranged her busy schedule to come here for the day, so I wanted her to enjoy it as much as possible too. I’d feel bad if they both spent their limited time looking after me.

“Thanks for doing that, Touko,” I said gratefully.

“Don’t worry about it. It was no big deal,” she replied with a laugh.

In that moment, she didn’t seem like the kind of person to threaten people into challenging her. She’d even been nice to Poppy earlier without anything in it for her, so she couldn’t be all that bad of a person deep down, right?

“Well, then,” she said. “I think it’s time for the next challenge now.”

“Right.”

I slapped my cheeks to pump myself up. I’d known this from the beginning, but in a way, Touko was my most formidable foe yet. She’d yet to show any sign of a weakness. But before I could even set myself to figuring that out, there was something else I still didn’t understand.

“Hey, Touko,” I called out to her as we walked down the hallway.

“What is it?”

“Why did you want me to challenge you?”

After the bomb threat and body swap incidents, it was clear that Touko had singled me out as her target from the beginning. There had to be a reason for that, but what was it?

“My fortune.”

“Your fortune?”

“Yup. It’s my hobby,” Touko said with a smile. “Is there someone in this world who could win against me? If so, where are they? When I looked into my future for those answers, it led me to you. Then I located you and set up various little tests for you. I wanted to see if it was really possible.”

I decided not to ask how she had “located” me. There was now no doubt in my mind that she was the one who’d been behind all the freaky stuff going on this weekend, but I still didn’t get her angle.

“Why do you want me to make you lose so much? Shouldn’t it be the opposite?”

I could understand the feeling of wanting to win. I could even understand certain situations where strategic loss was really a victory, but I couldn’t imagine why someone would so genuinely want to just straight-up lose at something.

“You say that, but I’ve never lost at anything my entire life.”

“Y-You don’t say...”

“Well, you could call it a simple case of curiosity. I want to know what defeat tastes like... or something,” she said with a bold laugh.

“...”

I still didn’t get it, but I sighed through my nose and gave up asking questions for the time being.

“Oh, Sir Namidare.”

Just then, a friendly voice called out to me from over by the school entrance. It was one of the most crowded areas of the festival considering it was where everyone was coming and going, but standing amidst all the people was...

“Suzuran, what are you doing here?”

“Helping Sister Yulia.” Suzuran said, glancing over at Yulia standing next to her.

She was dressed in her usual habit and talking to all the passersby, saying things like, “Please consider a donation for those less fortunate.”

“I see. Charity work, huh?”

I saw that both Suzuran and Yulia were holding donation boxes, and I kinda put two and two together.

“Yulia in her robes makes sense, but I dunno how I feel about you collecting donations in your maid outfit, Suzuran...”

It felt rather mismatched, or rather, strangely indecent. Or maybe I was the indecent one for thinking that way? Beats me.



“Pardon?” Suzuran, however, innocently tilted her head at my comment.
“Would you like to donate too, Sir Namidare?”

“Ah, sure. Here.”

I casually dropped some spare change into the donation box.

“Thank you very much.”

Suzuran bowed her head politely, then looked at Touko beside me afterwards.

“Would you like to as well?” she asked, holding the box out towards her.

In response, Touko said, “Sorry. It’s against my principles to give any kind of charity at all.”

“Very well,” Suzuran said, relenting easily...

“Huh... People normally get offended by that, but not you.”

“What? Why would that offend anyone?”

“When you refuse to do good, people typically make the assumption that you’re evil.”

“Is that so? It’s my understanding that all good things are to be considered a blessing. Their absence isn’t a comment on one’s character.”

Touko’s eyes went wide upon hearing Suzuran say that, and then she burst into laughter.

“Ha! You’re pretty interesting.”

“Is something the matter, Suzuran?” Yulia asked as she walked over, apparently drawn by Touko’s loud laugh. “Oh, Rekka!”

“Hey, Yulia.”

After Yulia greeted me, she eyed Touko carefully... then turned to look at me again with an angry expression.

“Rekka.”

“Y-Yes?”

“While it’s fine to surround yourself with love, don’t you think you’ve had a little too much love? I’ve heard that the number of girls following after you has increased yet again.”

“U-Um...”

“If that’s really true, then why don’t you undergo some training under me at the church for a time? I’ll work all of your worldly desires right out of you.”

“Please, no...”

Yulia’s training would undoubtedly be harsh, and in order to avoid getting myself dragged into anything, I quickly grabbed Touko and made an exit.

“That took up a fair bit of time. Let’s hurry along with the next match.”

“Yeah.”

Or so I said, but what was I supposed to do? I wasn’t really an ace at anything, and my grades and stamina were only average at best. The only thing special about me was my bloodline. It didn’t seem like there was much I could do against someone who could bend reality.

“There he is. Hey, Rekka!”

“Rekka!”

Just then, I heard two female voices call out to me. I turned to see Chirika and Nyanyan, both dressed in casual streetwear.

“Hey! You two came to check out the festival too?”

“Yup.”

“More female friends? You certainly do have a lot of those. No wonder that nun got angry.”

Peeking her head out from behind me, Touko gave her simultaneously impressed and exasperated opinion.

“Rekka... who’s that?” asked Nyanyan.

“Touko Iwazu. I’m currently challenging her because reasons.”

“Hey, isn’t that introduction a little sloppy?” Touko booed unhappily, but I

ignored her.

“Oh, what’s this about a challenge?” Chirika asked, folding her arms with a look of keen interest.

Did word of a challenge stir her samurai spirit? Wait a minute...

“Touko, do you want to try challenging Chirika once?”

“Hm? This girl?”

“Anyone will do as long as you lose, right?”

“Mm... Very well. I accept,” Touko agreed after a moment’s hesitation.

“Then, Chirika, would you mind coming with us?”

“Hmm...” Chirika looked pensive for a moment before replying, “While I don’t know the details, I cannot refuse a request from you, Rekka.”

From there, we moved to the old gymnasium adjacent to the old school building that housed the light literature club room. Normally it was only used by the kendo and judo teams, so there was no one there during the festival. I was hoping we could settle this uninterrupted... and without getting in trouble, of course.

“So, what kind of match will this be?”

“Kendo.”

“Hmm, so I can use one of the bamboo swords here?”

Touko looked through the available bamboo swords disinterestedly. She currently was oblivious to the fact that Chirika was a samurai. It seemed she’d investigated me a fair bit, but she hadn’t known about Poppy and Rachelle. That being the case, there was no way she knew about Chirika and her origins.

“Do you think you can win, Chirika?”

“I just have to beat her before she has a chance to use her ability, right? No problem,” Chirika replied simply as she picked up a bamboo sword for herself.

“Next is armor...”

“Ew, I don’t need that. It’s smelly.”

“But what if you get hurt?”

“I can heal that much myself with chi. My opponent can wear it if she so wishes, however.”

“That’s all right. I don’t need any either.”

Hmm... W-Well, they were just fighting with bamboo swords, right?

My concerns aside, the two girls took their positions two meters apart from one another.

“How shall we start?”

“Rekka Namidare, you give the signal,” Touko ordered.

“All right. Nyanyan, please step back.”

“Okay.”

After giving Chirika a worried look, Nyanyan backed up all the way to the wall. Seeing her safely out of harm’s way, I raised my right hand.

“Begin!” I shouted as I lowered it.

“...!”

In the blink of an eye, Chirika stepped forward. All I really saw was her shadow. She was putting the fully honed skills of a finely trained samurai on display. By the time I processed what was happening, she was already on top of Touko.

“Ah...”

Touko noticed Chirika just a second later, leaving her without time to do anything but gasp. Chirika swung her bamboo sword, aiming for Touko’s chest...

“?!”

And missed. The sound of her swing cutting through air surprised both Chirika and me watching the whole thing. Touko clearly hadn’t moved.

“Take this!”

Touko swung her bamboo sword down on the stupefied Chirika. She just barely managed to dodge it, then stepped back to get some distance.

“Why didn’t that connect...?”

“Sorry. I always have a prayer up that repels any ill will or hostility directed at me.”

By prayer, she probably meant that she’d put the power of her words into effect beforehand. Then she’d provoked Chirika just enough before the match to actually stir up a little hostility. She’d planned this all out...

“But it doesn’t seem like I can hit you with my bamboo sword either,” Touko admitted before continuing “So would you mind throwing the match for me?”

“...?!”

The second she heard those words, Chirika froze in place. She then cast aside her bamboo sword and bowed her head towards Touko like an offering.

“Wh-What... is this...”

“There. I win,” Touko declared as she tapped Chirika on the head with her sword.

That was a head strike, which meant Touko had in fact won.

“You can just make someone lose with your power...?”

Eating shaved ice in one bite, transferring the effects of dark matter to another person... This was unlike anything she’d done before. She’d put safeguards in place in advance, and then used her power cleverly in the heat of the moment. Even though it was plain as day she’d never be able to beat Chirika in a real fight, she’d used her words to force the results she wanted. It was a completely unfair display of power that made me question whether she really wanted to lose or not.

“So, what’s our next challenge?”

Seeing Touko’s smile, I couldn’t help the cold sweat running down my back.



I... I just couldn’t win against her...

“That’s zero wins and 58 losses for you. You really can’t win, can you?”

Touko sighed, looking down at me sprawled out on the ground in a lonely

corner of campus. It was already past four o'clock now. The festival would be ending in roughly two hours. But even if I had all the time in the world, I didn't see any way I could beat Touko now. After the match with Chirika, I'd sought help from Satsuki, Iris, and Rosalind. I then went to Hibiki, Shirley, and everyone else who'd come to visit, but not one of them could beat Touko at something either. The power of words was just too overwhelming. She was practically invincible. No matter the challenge presented to her, all she had to do was will her opponent to lose and she would be the victor. I didn't want to say it, but I was afraid she was invincible.

"...Can we establish a rule about you not using your power in the next match?"

"That would make coming to you for all this meaningless."

"Guess so, huh?"

"There's still time. Do your best. I know you can do it."

I was being cheered on by the very culprit who'd stomped me into the ground. Or so I thought, when...

"But I guess if you're saying you want to give up, then I'll just have to destroy the world..."

She casually uttered those dark and threatening words in a joking tone. I guess I should say it was a half-joking tone considering there was a very real chance she could actually do that.

"Hey."

"What?"

"It's just... I still don't get it. Why do you want to lose so much?"

"Mm... Probably because it feels hollow having everything go my way all the time."

"That doesn't sound like you, Touko."

Touko's eyes went wide, and she fell silent for a moment before asking, "Why do you think that?"

“Intuition.” I gave her the short version first. “But if I had to explain, for someone who thinks life is hollow, you have a really happy laugh. You sound and act like any normal person.”

What I realized after one day with her was that other than her power of words, Touko was no different from a regular girl. Maybe she was a bit on the mature side, but it wasn’t like that was a bad thing.

“Hmph.” Touko huffed through her nose dramatically before flashing a bittersweet smile. “You think I’m normal?”

“That’s right.”

“Even with a power like this?”

“I know plenty of people with the power to destroy the world, you know.”

Upon hearing my answer, Touko burst into laughter.

“Can I tell you a short story, Rekka Namidare?”

“I’ll listen to whatever you have to say,” I assured her, finally sitting up.

“The power I possess—the power of words—will always work in a way convenient for me, even when the words I use are vague.”

“Right.”

When she asked for everyone other than me to disappear back in the classroom, people she wasn’t even aware of like Poppy and R had been affected too. When she deflected the effects of Tsumiki’s dark matter onto me, she hadn’t even known what said effects were. And when she asked Chirika to lose the match, she hadn’t specified how. What she’d said was vague, but the results were always optimal for her. It really was the ultimate power.

“However,” Touko continued sadly, “there’s one thing the power of words can’t do... and that is to take back things that have already occurred.”

“...!”

The power of words could change the present reality, but it couldn’t change the past.

“For example...” she began. “Let’s say that I accidentally, impulsively, or

perhaps emotionally end up erasing something precious but unfavorable to me. That would be a source of great regret, so I create that something once again. But from that moment of onwards, it's automatically something that is now favorable for me."

Something unfavorable but precious... I could think of plenty of things that fit that description. For example, friends. Not everything always went the way I wanted with my friends, but that was part of what made them precious to me in the first place. We could butt heads and disagree all we wanted, but they were and would always be precious to me. I'd even say it takes a truly precious friend to tell you when you're wrong, even if you don't want to hear it.

And what if one day, in a fit of rage... you made them disappear. You might immediately bring them back if you had the power, but it wouldn't be the same. They would never disagree or fight with you ever again. And that would just be...

"Touko..."

Just what had she done in her past? I almost asked her, but hurriedly swallowed my words. It would be too cruel a thing to make her relive... I shivered at my own thoughtlessness.

"That's why I absolutely refuse to do anything for others. You see, I am just a normal human... pathetic and weak, always foolishly relying on my power. If I wanted to save someone, I could solve any difficulty ever. But that's precisely why I choose not to save anyone at all, no matter how small the matter. Because once I do that, there'd be no end to it."

"...I don't get what you mean there."

"For example, you know how that nun and maid were collecting donations earlier? You know how they say a paltry 100 yen could save dozens of children in Africa?"

"Yeah."

I'd seen commercials and posters like that before.

"I could save hundreds of thousands of children from starvation and disease with just a few words, all without the need for donations. But is that really

something I should do?”

“That’s...”

Surely it was, right? That’s what I wanted to say, but Touko opened her mouth first.

“Let’s say I did that for all the children of Africa. But there are plenty more children starving outside of Africa, right? In America, China, Japan, Russia... They’re everywhere. So does that mean I should just do the same for the whole world?” Touko continued, “But if I did that, won’t the people who’ve worked hard for their food be unhappy? My power comes free, after all. So does that then mean I should feed every single person in the world? Yet once I do that, what will become of all the farmers and ranchers who make their living producing food? Meanwhile, my power always works favorably for me. If I wanted to have the cooking of a five-star chef, I could easily. It would be simple.”

“...”

I was gradually starting to see what Touko was getting at.

“The point is that my power is too strong. It has too much control over reality, and it’s too easy to make mistakes that way.”

“...Are you afraid of using your power?”

“Rather than my power, I’m afraid of myself,” Touko said with a dry laugh. “They call it indulgence, right? For someone else’s sake, for the sake of justice, because I feel sorry for them, because I can’t let them be... If I start giving in to those things, I’d end up overusing my power. It’s like a faucet you just can’t turn off when it starts. If I give in to those emotions and impulses, I’ll never be able to go back. From there, things would just spiral out of control.”

“I get that...”

Honestly, that struck a chord with me.

“You’d do anything for the sake of the heroines, after all,” R said with a tired sigh.

“That’s why I only use my power for myself. The desires of a single person

shouldn't have too much effect on the rest of the world in the end."

I now somewhat understood the burden Touko was shouldering. However...

"So what does that have to do with making you lose?"

"Were you listening? I said shouldn't..." There, Touko looked me dead in the eye. "You know, I once tried to seal my own power."

"And how'd that go?"

"Well, the seal easily undid itself when I tried to save a drowning dog. If I utter words that contradict themselves, the words that are more favorable for me are the ones that take effect."

"..."

"I'll say this once again: I am weak. I don't know when I could lose control and end up changing the world to a critical degree. That's why I wanted restraints. I wanted to know if there was anyone or anything in this world that could stop me."

"I see, so that's why..."

That's why she'd asked me to make her lose. That was why she'd done her best to win even though she really wanted to lose. She wanted to know if there was really anyone that could genuinely beat her, and she'd been testing me all day to see if I fit the bill. I hadn't met her expectations yet, but was there some way I could? Might there be someone else who could stop her? Even among my friends and the strongest enemies I'd ever fought, I wasn't sure there was anyone in this world that could actually stand up to her...

"Wait, in this world?"

I suddenly stood up with a gasp. Then I grabbed Touko by the hand and dragged her along with me as I broke out into a run.

"Wh-Wh-What's wrong?"

My abrupt actions inspired a rare glimpse of confusion in Touko.

"I just thought of something."

As I entered the school through the main doorway, I turned to look at Touko

and said...

“Let me teach you how big the world really is.”



From there, I took Touko to the student council room where the festival committee was headquartered. Since I was a helper for the committee, they let me in without issue.

“Here, have some tea.”

While we waited for President Momone to return, the vice president poured us some tea.

“Ah, thanks.”

“So, what kind of women trouble have you gotten yourself into now?” the vice president whispered scornfully as she glanced over at Touko.

“Er, well, I can’t say it’s not trouble... but it’s probably not what you’re imagining.”

I wasn’t very good at dealing with the VP, so my reply wasn’t exactly convincing.

“Hmm...” she scoffed with a dubious look as she returned to her seat.

All I could do was sigh. But just then, someone called out to me from the door.

“Hey, Rekka.”

It was Yorun.

“Hey, Yorun. How’s life been treating you on this side?”

“It’s okay. Momone has been very good to me.”

Ever since the whole cursed game debacle, Yorun had been staying at President Momone’s house. She used to be a resident of this world, so she was adjusting to her forgotten life here as she searched for her true origins. She had no real leads and couldn’t remember anything, so the prospects were pretty grim, but Yorun herself was pretty optimistic.

“You’ve been with the student council the whole time, haven’t you? Don’t you wanna go see the festival?”

“Well, I feel calmer around people I know. And I did go have a look at your class event earlier, Rekka.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, I went all the way there, but you weren’t even around. But now you’re visiting me here, so I guess we’ll call it even,” Yorun joked with a cheerful laugh.

“Honestly, Rekka Namidare, there really are girls following you around no matter where you go.”

“Please refrain from saying anything that might invite misunderstanding, Touko...”

I broke out into a cold sweat as I pleaded with her. The vice president was already glaring this way...

“Anyway, it would be nice if you could tell me why you brought me here already. It looked like you asked for something from that girl with the eyepatch earlier, no?” Touko asked without a care for my predicament.

“Yeah, she’ll probably be back with it soon.”

Just as I said that, President Momone returned to the student council room.

“Here, problem child. I went and fetched it just for you.”

“Thank you very much, President Momone.”

I accepted the plastic bag President Momone offered me and peeked inside before thanking her.

“But what are you going to do with that thing?” President Momone asked, dubiously cocking her head to the side.

“Well, a challenge... Oh, that’s right. We actually need to play this, so can I borrow your computer?” I asked, pointing to the PC in the student council room.

“Hmm...” President Momone pondered the matter before agreeing. “Fine. Knowing you, you have your reasons for this.”

With that, President Momone summoned the VP, and the two of them left the room together. Now it was just me, R, Yorun, and Touko left inside. Doing this shouldn't be a problem with that lineup.

I then walked over to the PC with Touko.

"Okay, Touko. It's time for our next match."

"Sure. What are we doing?"

"Well, we're playing a computer game."

"A game?"

"Yup. It'll be a one-on-one duel inside the game. We'll decide the winner that way."

"That's fine with me, but... are you sure? A fight in a game where the rules are clear and victory is so easily definable, I'll win no matter what. You know that, right?"

"That's... Well, we won't know until we try."

"Hmm, very well."

"Then here we go," I said as I booted up the game.

The next moment, Touko and I were sucked into the light of the computer screen. Before I knew it, we were in the inn—the very same inn where I'd last saved the game.

"...Where is this?"

"The game world. This is a cursed game," I explained to a dumbfounded Touko.

But she soon accepted the situation and said with a strained laugh, "I was wondering how we were going to battle in a role-playing game... So this is what you meant, huh?"

"Yeah. This game allows friendly fire, so we can hit each other. We'll use that to decide the winner."

"And the rules?"

“One-on-one. We’ll both use the starter gear we can get at the shop. Sound good to you?”

“Sure.”

Touko readily agreed, just like she had to all of our previous matches. We promptly went and bought equipment, then moved to an isolated section of road some distance from the town.

“Not only are you acquainted with an angel and a fairy, but you had something like this up your sleeve... Honestly, today has been one surprise after another.”

“Right? This world has lots to offer that you don’t know about, Touko.”

“So it seems. However... that doesn’t mean things won’t go my way in the end.”

“Yeah? Let’s test that theory!”

My voice became the signal to start. I kicked off the ground and swung my longsword. Compared to a samurai like Chirika, my movements were embarrassingly amateur. Despite that, Touko continued to remain expectant, waiting silently as I approached... then she sighed.

“I understand your earnest approach, but it won’t work. You’ll never be able to hit m—”

Thunk!

I swiftly brought my longsword down on Touko’s shoulder, leaving her unable to finish her sentence.

“Wh-What?! O-Ow...”

With a confused look, she backed away from me in a fluster. Her face made it all too clear how confounded she was that I’d managed to slip past her power.

“If you’re wondering what just happened, the answer is simple.”

“Huh?”

“This is a game world. The rules of the game control everything. In other words, anything that isn’t reflected in your stats doesn’t exist here.”

“...!”

With that meager explanation, Touko seemed to understand everything. Or perhaps it was the pain in her shoulder that had opened her eyes.

“Hahaha!”

Nevertheless, she laughed. And quite heartily, at that.

“But we’re still evenly matched! In a game like this, there’s no discrimination in the stats between men and women, right? So I still have a chance at winning, and that’s all I need!” she declared, lifting her longsword up and rushing at me like I had at her earlier.

I readied myself and parried the incoming attack with my own longsword, which was identical to hers in every way.

“Huh?”

“Sorry, but we’re not evenly matched at all,” I said with a grin. A daring one, or maybe even a sly one, I should say. “I told you stats were everything, right? I’ve played a little bit of this game already, so I’m currently level two. And naturally, since you just started, you’re still level one.”

And that made all the difference in a game like this where level difference was absolute. The only way Touko would stand a chance against me would be to gang up on me with other characters.

“...What’s with that?” Touko said with a wry smile.

“Well, that’s how it is. If you want to surrender, now’s your chance.”

“No way,” Touko laughed. Despite her strained smile, she continued laughing. “I’m finally set to lose, so at least do me the honor properly.”

“Roger that.”

This was the defeat she had yearned for, so I would gladly grant her wish. We both raised our longswords and brought them down together.



Epilogue

When the sun finally started to set, most of the stalls started to shut down. Then it was at last time for the grand finale of the third day of the collaboration festival—MIO's surprise concert.

"Students of Mitsuhashi and Juumonji High Schools, as well as all the visitors who came to the joint festival! Thank you for three days of hard work and good fun! As a little reward for everything you've done, please enjoy my special performance and close out this year's festival with a bang!"

Mio's lovely voice echoed all over the campus through the PA system, causing all the students, families, and faculty members to cheer at once. There were fans of MIO's in the crowd who were unbearably excited to hear about the surprise event she was having here. It really was a great way to close out the festival with a bang.

"Wow, Mio really is amazing..." I remarked in wonder.

Her singing voice was enchanting crowds all over the school. Some people were listening intently, and some were just enjoying it as the background music to the final moments of a great festival.

Which was it for me, I wonder? I was honestly feeling a bit wistful, but maybe that was just from the overwhelming relief of having saved another girl from her suffering.

"She sings some good songs," Touko murmured beside me, looking up at the stage.

After losing to me in the game world, I let her recover at the inn before we returned to reality. She had a calm, refreshed look on her face I hadn't seen before.

"But I still have to say using that cursed game was unfair," she said.

"The power of your words is way more unfair," I said right back, retuning her banter with more banter.

"You may be right," she agreed with a laugh. "The world truly is a big place..."

Far bigger than I ever imagined.”

“Don’t worry. Even outside the game, there are plenty of other worlds and even outer space. In the grand scope of things, your power only plays a small part in the picture.”

“Somehow that’s actually convincing coming from you,” Touko replied with a laugh. “I feel like everything will be okay. I can live with a little more peace of mind thanks to you. Because if I ever lose control, you’ll make sure to stop me, right?”

“But I know you won’t, Touko.”

In her own words, she might just be a weak human, but...

“You’re too kind.”

“Huwah...?”

Touko let out a strange noise, taken aback by the sudden compliment. She must have been embarrassed, because she quickly turned away.

“I think I figured out why you’re always surrounded by girls,” she said, fiddling with her bangs.

I could get why she was feeling bashful, but I didn’t think it was anything worth blushing over.

“Rekka!”

As I was chatting with Touko, Satsuki and the other girls spotted us and came over. Though my first high school festival was long, fraught, and exhausting, I think everyone ended up having fun in the end. Maybe next year I’ll join the festival committee proper so I can help President Momone plan something even bigger and better... It might have just been wishful thinking, but all kinds of grand, dreamy thoughts passed through my mind as the seemingly magical night wore on. Endless possibilities lay ahead.

—*Fin*—

Afterword

This is the thirteenth volume of the multi-dimensional battle love comedy with the outrageous character map at the front. Long time no see to everyone coming from volume 12, and it's nice to meet all of you who bought all 13 books at once.

This volume was sort of like a collection of short stories, but they all vaguely connected to the overall storyline. The story about the game world was something I'd wanted to write about for a while now, the same as the tour of the legendary lands last time. Speaking of games, however, I recently started a pen and paper RPG with some authors I know. The only analog game I've ever played before was cards, so it was an interesting experience.

It'd be fun to see the characters of *Little Apocalypse* play a pen and paper game too, but there are just too many of them to manage! (Right?!) Honestly, playing a tabletop game opened my eyes, though. I had no idea there were so many different kinds of games. I've had an author knowledgeable about them teach me all kinds of things, and it's been very fun.

Now for the acknowledgments. To Mr. Nao Watanuki: We've finally passed the 30-heroine mark, but thank you very much for always giving them such charming designs. Touko's rainbow hair and her mysterious aura were wonderful. The colored game-style illustrations were my personal favorites. Thank you as always.

To Mr. Kinoshita: Thank you for checking the plot and manuscript for this volume.

And to all the personnel in the HJ Bunko editing and sales departments, the bookstore attendants that stocked this series, the readers that picked up this book, and everyone who has taken part in *Little Apocalypse* before, please accept my sincerest gratitude! Please continue supporting it.

I plan on bringing you volume five of *Boku to Kanojo ga Geboku de Dorei de Shuujuu Keiyaku* (from Fujimi Fantasy Bunko) next. I also have some other cool stuff planned for this year, so please look forward to it! Let's meet again soon.

This is the illustrator Nao Watanuki, here for a New Year's afterword!

Thanks for sticking around until the end.

Your rough this time is of the new knight Yorun. Her little topknot (?) is my favorite part. She's a tall, sleek powerhouse! I spent a lot of time thinking about her design, and I hope the illustrations accurately depict her strength.

Bubble: Oh, and here's a guest from the manga!

I had a lot of fun imagining what the other characters would have been if they ended up in the RPG world. I like world-crossing stories like that.

(Tsumiki would either be a merchant or a beast tamer. I wonder which...)

To Namekojirushi and the editors, thank you for your hard work. I'm grateful for all your support again this time around!

Rekka

Fight

>Run

Evade

Talk

Satsuki

Fight

Run

>Magic

Jealousy

Iris

>Fight

Run

Scuffle

Plead

Rosalind

Fight

Run

Tear

>Boast

I hope you'll all help me out in the new year too!



挿絵担当・和狸ナオと申します。

明けましてあとがきコーナー

あとがきまで、お付き合い
ありがとうございます。

ご紹介するラフ案は女戦士ヨレン。
てっぺんのちょんまげ(?)がお気に入りです。
高身長でありつつ細身でパワーキャラ!
デザインに悩みましたが、力強さが伝わる絵に
なていれば幸いです。

コミックスからの
ゲストも!

他ヒロインがRPG世界に行ったら
何になるのでしょうか~異世界トリップ的
な話も好きなので 想像してみるのも
楽しそうです。

つみきは商人とまもの係。
どちらだろう...

なめこ印先生、編集様方、お疲れ様でした。
今巻も手厚いサポートを頂き感謝しております!

【おまけのドット絵 & フォント】

れっが



たたがろ
にけ"る
よける
せとく

さつぎ



たたがろ
にけ"る
まほう
やぎもち

イリス



たたがろ
にけ"る
かぐとろ
アビール

ロサ"リツ



たたがろ
にけ"る
ぎりさく
いは"る

今年もよろしくお願ひ致します!

和狸ナオ拝。



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I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse: Volume 13

by Namekojirushi

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Edited by Megan Denton

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I SAVED AND CAUSED THE APOCALYPSE

Too Many



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Illustration: NAO WATANUKI