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I worked on
digging up
sand and
shoveling it
to the side.

“This
reminds me
of how we
used to go
clamming.”

Yulia and Suzuran then happily began talking.

“Before God’s love, we’re all the same.”

Nun Yulia

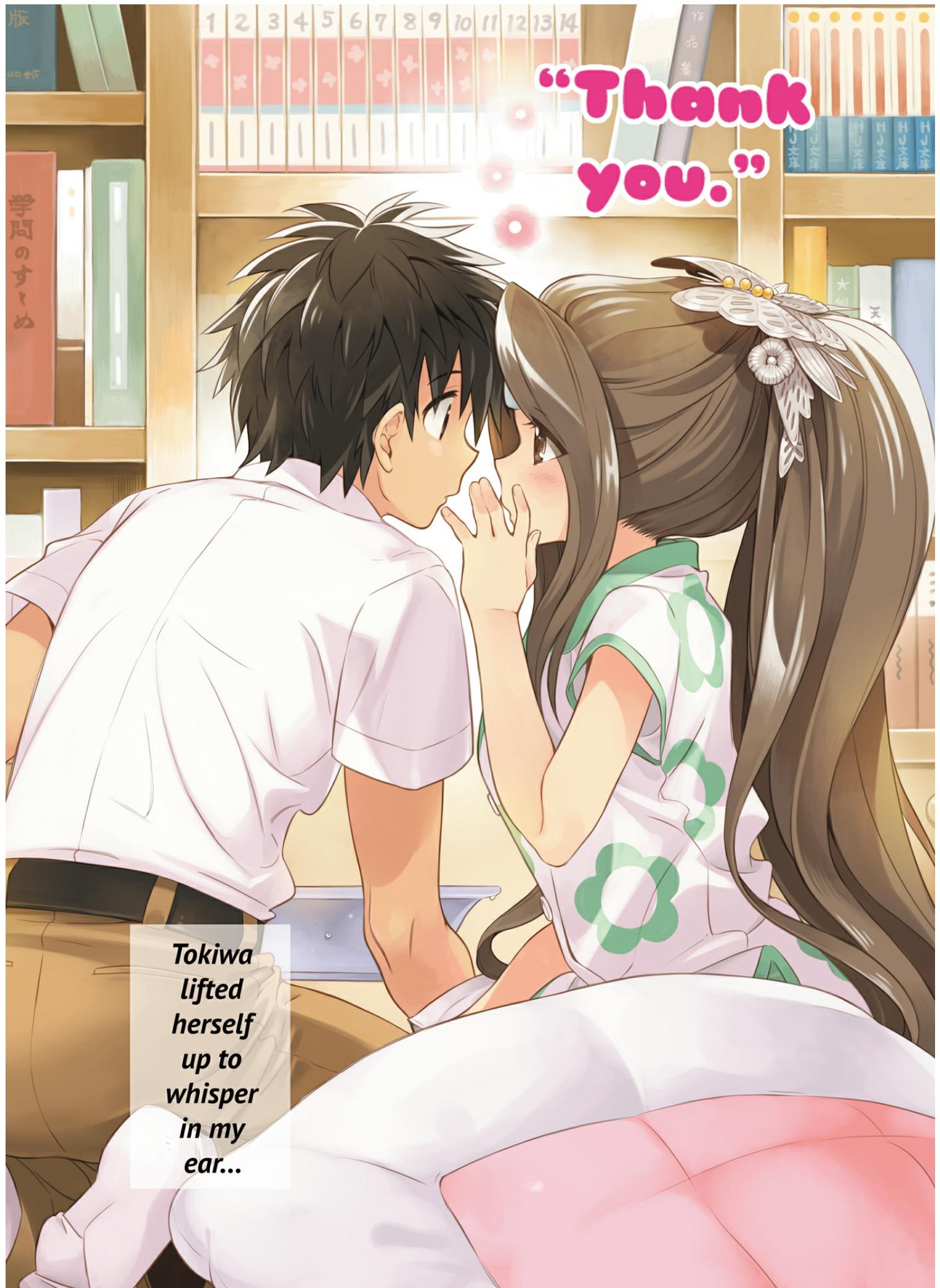




“H-
Humans??
Eek!”

**Fairy
Poppy**

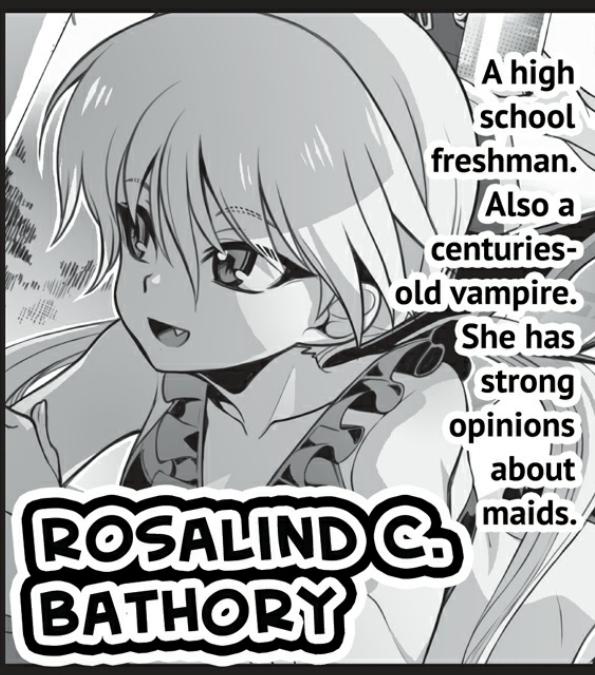
*The
poor little
fairy was
trembling
just at the
sight of
us.*



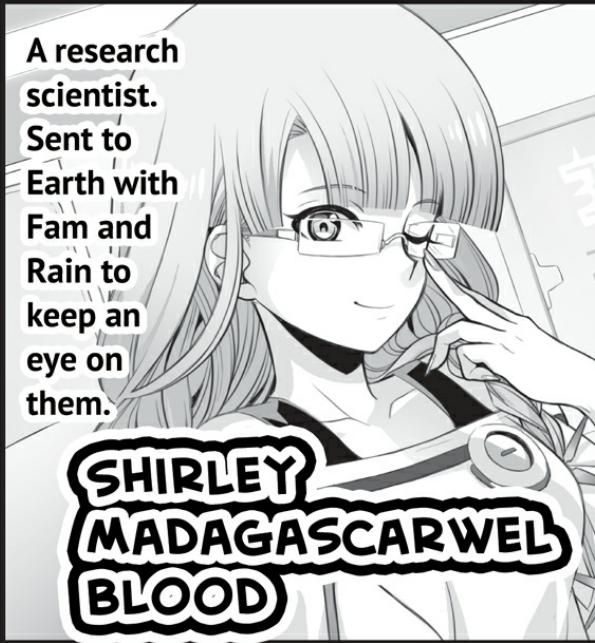
*Tokiwa
lifted
herself
up to
whisper
in my
ear...*



S
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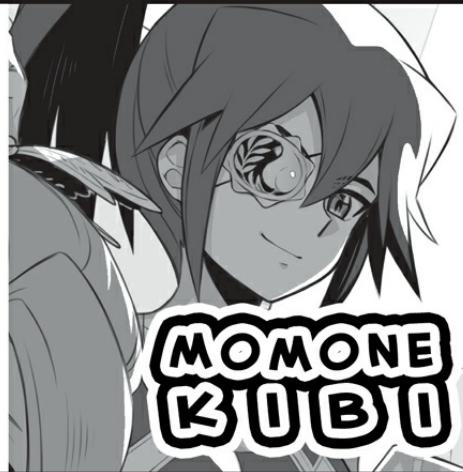


T
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B
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S
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C
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C
E

A second-year high schooler. The student council president. Her family runs a shrine, and she uses her powers to fight evil spirits.



**MOMONE
KUBU**



**MIDORI
TOKIWA**

A second-year high schooler. President of the light literature club and an aspiring author.

A
I
C
A
H
A

AI

A nekomata. Actually the kitten Rekka and Satsuki used to take care of as kids who's taken the form of a yokai. Currently worried about the other nekomatas.

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



**ZAIA GARDENDOS
CORONA**

R
A
C
E
T
I

Angel of love and passion. On the verge of starvation, she comes to Rekka for a taste of the carnage he brings.



RACHELLE



A mysterious assassin. She suddenly appeared before Rekka and is trying to kill him with all kinds of techniques and weapons.

B
O
U
T
B
A

POPPY

NEW!

A forest fairy who was recently discovered by some kids that like to chase her around for fun.



NEW!

YULIA

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Chapter 1: Deserted Island × Childhood Friend

On the first weekend after second semester began...

After taking an unexcused leave of absence during the opening ceremony, I was given a mountain of assignments to do as punishment. This was my first day off after finally finishing them all, and I was melted into the sofa even more than usual. Despite it being September, we were still running the air conditioner on full blast. It was just too hot, completely draining all desire I had to go play outside.

But as I was being a couch slug, the front doorbell rang. Now with a reason to get up, I peeled myself off the sofa and walked over to the door.

“Coming... Oh, it’s you, Satsuki.”

“Hello, Rekka. Oh, you’re looking a little messy,” Satsuki said, quickly moving to fix my sleeves and collar.

I stood there and let her preen me to her satisfaction. She then took off her shoes and changed into house slippers.

“So, what brings you here?” I asked.

“Well, you see... It’s about the barbecue in two weeks.”

“Oh, right. The barbecue’s coming up.”

Come to think of it, it was almost time for that annual event. Well, I call it an event, but it was really only a shindig with my family and the Otomos next door. Every year around this time, we’d get together and go to the mountains to have a barbecue by the river. But things would be a little different this year. Both my parents were overseas, so they couldn’t come. And this would be my first time bringing Harissa along.

“So, I wanted to ask Harissa if she had any food preferences—like, if there was anything she couldn’t eat or didn’t like—before I went shopping to buy ingredients.”

"She's never mentioned anything like that before... but it wouldn't hurt to ask."

"Okay."

Satsuki and I headed upstairs to Harissa's room and knocked on the door.

"Hey, Harissa, can I talk to you for a..."

"Oh, Sir Rekka!"

"...What are you doing?"

Harissa, who'd turned to look at me in surprise, was standing in the middle of her room performing some kind of experiment.

"Is that a Red Thread? Did you cut it up or something? Is this how you make the catalysts for your connection magic?"

"Um, yes and no."

"What?"

I asked her for details, and she explained that she was in the middle of working on an upgraded version of her connection magic. The basic spell she'd come up with linked an object with a place, meaning that an object of significance was required to get anywhere with it. And the upgraded version she was working on would hopefully allow the user to bypass the need for an object.

"To put it simply, I'm trying to bind two places together in advance, creating a point where you can travel between them freely."

"Like a warp point in a video game? That'd sure be way more convenient."

"Yep! Heeheehee," Harissa giggled bashfully. "So, did you need something, Sir Rekka?"

"Oh, that's right. Satsuki wants to talk about the barbecue coming up the week after next," I started to explain before deferring to my childhood friend standing behind me.

"I just wanted to ask if there are any foods you don't like or can't eat. If so, could you tell me which ones?" Satsuki asked, notepad in hand.

“Let’s see, I...”

Harissa considered the question carefully, tilting her head and looking diagonally up at the ceiling as she pondered... distracting her just enough that she accidentally let the experimental magic item in her hand slip to the floor.

“Ah!” all three of us yelped in unison.

Not one of us had the supernatural reflexes to catch it in time, so we all watched in horror as it smashed into pieces. But something in the disjointed mess of parts caused a magical reaction, filling the room with bright light.

“Wah! Oof!”

“Wh-What?!”

“Sir Rekka! Satsuki...!”

I heard Harissa’s voice grow quieter as a strange floating sensation came over me. And then...



When my vision returned after being blinded by the bright light in my room, I was greeted by the sight of blue water and white sand as far as the eye could see.

“...Huh?”

“Where is this?”

I turned to my side to see Satsuki, who was looking back at me with the same dumbfounded expression that was probably on my face, too. I then took another glance around the area, but there weren’t houses or buildings anywhere. Not even a beach shack. In fact, there weren’t any signs of human civilization at all.

“Where... are we?” I murmured, echoing Satsuki’s question from a moment ago.

“It’s so hot...” Satsuki said, squinting at the sun’s rays glaring down at us.

“Yeah... it’s really boiling.”

“Was it this hot in Japan?”

“Well, the weather report did say it was going to be around 30 degrees again today.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

We both then fell silent for a long moment.

“Hey, Rekka...”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I know.”

I hadn’t traveled through space and other worlds for nothing. I’d seen the signs in Harissa’s room. And here we were. So I decided to disregard my common sense and just accept the situation I found myself in. After all, it was pretty clear what had happened.

“We were sent to a deserted island.”



According to what Satsuki learned with her Great Omniscient Magic, we were on an uninhabited island located near the equator.

“And this is because of that bright light, right?”

“Well, most likely. She did drop an unstable magic item, after all.”

Plus, Harissa had outright told us she was working on her connection magic. If that went awry, it wasn’t all that strange to think we’d ended up somewhere we weren’t supposed to. Like, you know, a deserted island.

“Satsuki, what about your phone? You had teleportation magic you could use with that, right?”

“Yes, but it requires a lot of preparation beforehand... and I left it at home. I told my mom I was just going over to your house, so I didn’t think I’d need it. But what about you, Rekka?”

“Mine’s sitting on my desk... I don’t usually carry it with me around the house.”

No big deal. It’s not like we’d get reception out here anyway. Wait, couldn’t Iris call me from anywhere in the galaxy? Not that it would help now...

"Well, it doesn't seem like Harissa was sent here with us, so I'm sure she'll gather the others and come searching for us eventually."

"Yeah, you're right."

We had aliens and scientists and psychics in our circle of friends. Even an (idiotic) angel and a Demon King. If they put their heads and their powers together, surely they'd be able to find us... even if they didn't have any clues about where to start looking...

"If only you hadn't been dragged here with me..."

If Satsuki were still back home, she could have easily located me or anyone else with the Magic of Omniscience. But for some reason, she was pouting over me suggesting that.

"What? Did you want to be here with Harissa instead of me, Rekka?"

"Huh? No, if anything, I would prefer not to be here at all."

No matter how used to these freakish occurrences I get, I'd still at least like to enjoy my rare day off... Wow, I'm starting to sound like a worn-out nine-to-fiver, aren't I?

"...And we're finally alone for once, too."

"Huh?"

"Hahh... Whatever. The closest island is out of flying range, so I guess we'll have to wait for help to come," Satsuki sighed as she walked off.

"Hey, wait! Where are you going?" I called after her in a panic.

"Well, we need shelter from the elements as well as food and water, right? I made a mental map of the resources on the island with the Magic of Omniscience earlier, so I'm going to secure the supplies we need before the sun sets."

"You're so calm about this..."

"I've followed you into space and other worlds before. This doesn't seem so bad."

Apparently I wasn't the only one who'd picked up on things over the past half

a year.



“This is my first time seeing a coconut in the wild.”

“Same here.”

Satsuki and I were staring up at the coconuts growing in the trees in naive wonderment. For the record, we’d already found a cave by the water for shelter. Food was the next item on our to-do list. But even though we’d been stranded on a deserted island, we were working this all out rather methodically. Once again, it made me realize just how convenient and useful the Magic of Omniscience was.

“I’ll go and grab a few,” said Satsuki as her feet left the ground and she took off into the air with her flight magic.

“Cool, thanks. If it seems too difficult to actually pluck them from the tree, I’ll climb up and give it a try myself.”

“Picking them should be easy enough with magic,” Satsuki giggled as she made her way up to the hanging coconuts.

“Rekka, if you look up right now, you’d have the most amazing view possible of her panties.”

“Nope. Not looking.”

R was whispering her usual temptations into my ear. But I behaved myself and turned away while I waited for Satsuki to nab some coconuts.

“Hmm, yeah. They’re actually pretty hard to pick. Ah... kyaah!”

Satsuki’s cheerful voice overhead suddenly turned into screaming.

“Satsuki?!”

I reflexively turned back around upon hearing it... And locked eyes with her as she fell right towards me.

“Bwah!”

I tried to catch her and cushion her landing, meaning I fell flat on my back.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Satsuki?!”

“A-A bug!”

“A bug?”

Upon closer inspection, there was a hairy caterpillar on Satsuki’s shoulder. So that’s what it was... She’d hated bugs ever since she was little.

“I see, I see... So Satsuki is bad with bugs. It was surprising to learn Hibiki had such a weakness, but it seems a lot more believable with Satsuki. Now I’m curious what it would look like if we sorted the heroines into bug-okay and bug-terrified.”

Just what would that prove...? Anyway, I plucked the hairy caterpillar from Satsuki’s shoulder and flung it somewhere with a small sigh.



After that, Satsuki and I worked through the survival basics of gathering food and broken branches for firewood. According to Satsuki, there was more food in the forest... but also wild animals. So we decided not to wander too deep.

“Hmm... We picked a lot of fruits and nuts, but will this be enough?”

“We don’t know how long we’ll have to last before we’re rescued.”

From what Satsuki could tell, Harissa was still in Japan. The Magic of Omniscience was powerful, but it wasn’t capable of reading minds, meaning there was no real way for us to tell how far along the search was right now.

“What do you want to do? The forest is dangerous, right?”

“Yeah,” Satsuki nodded with a solemn expression.

“I forgot to ask before, but what kind of wild animals are actually in there?”

“I don’t think you’d know it even if I told you the name... But it’s a large cat.”

“A cat? If it’s just a cat, then...”

“You know ‘large cats’ refers to tigers and such, right?”

“What?! Th-There’s a tiger on the island?”

“Relax, it’s not a tiger. But if certain species of wildcats can take down boars,

it's in our best interest to steer clear of them."

"G-Gotcha."

Satsuki made sure to emphasize that point, and I nodded meekly in response. While it did sound scary, I also loved cats... I really didn't want to do anything that might get either me or them hurt.

"Let's go to the shore and search for shellfish."

"All right."

Following the directions Satsuki had gotten from the Magic of Omniscience, we made our way to the harvesting point she'd discovered.

"If I search for every shellfish individually, I'll run out of magic in no time. So from here on out, we're on our own."

"Got it."

We both left our shoes and socks high and dry so they wouldn't be washed away by the waves, then waded into the shallows barefooted. We stopped where we thought the shellfish might be and squatted down to sift through the soft sand with our hands.

"This reminds me of how we used to go clamping."

"Well, it's basically the same thing."

As we reminisced about trifling things from the past, I worked on digging up sand and shoveling it to the side.

"Ah, I found one!"

"Great."

"And here's another!"

"Wow, you're fast. Hmm... I can't find any at all."

"You're digging too deeply in one spot, Rekka. Try searching by moving your hands through the top of the sand like you're patting it. If you feel something hard, then that's probably a shellfish."

"Okay, I'll give it a try."

I followed Satsuki's advice and started patting around in the sand with my palms from left to right.

"Hm? There's something hard here. All ri—OWW!"

I grabbed something thinking it was a shellfish, but it grabbed me right back. Turns out it was a crab that wasn't too happy with me. It snagged my finger in its pincers, and I yelped in surprise and pain.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, just—ouch. Ah, I'm bleeding."

I looked at my finger to see the crab had pierced the skin. Red blood was oozing out of the wound, and the salt water made it sting a little.

"Give it here," Satsuki said, taking my hand and then putting the injured finger into her mouth.

"Wh-What are you do—?!"

I was so shocked, I didn't even finish my sentence correctly.

"What do you mean? I'm treating the wound," Satsuki moved her mouth away for a moment to say.

"D-Don't you have magic for that?!"

"I'm saving my magic. It's not like I can use it endlessly."

True. We needed Satsuki's magic to survive on this deserted island. We couldn't afford to keep using it on every little thing. I knew the logic behind what she was saying. I knew the logic, but...

"Now let me continue..."

"!"

Soft...! I knew she was just trying to help me, but I couldn't help the way my body temperature was rising. This wasn't good... Stay calm, Rekka! And you, R! Stop grinning!

"Is it okay now? Has the bleeding stopped?"

"I-I'm fine! I'm fine now!"

I waved my hand at Satsuki in a panic, trying to tell her I was all right.

“Really? Okay, then. Let’s get back to it.”

“Y-Yeah...”

We both squatted back down and resumed our search for shellfish... Was it just me, or did Satsuki’s face seem kind of red? I hesitated to bring it up out loud, so I decided to stick to rummaging in the sand.

“Actually, now that I think about it, even if we gather shellfish, we don’t have a pot to boil them in... or clean water.”

“Huh, you’re right... What should we do?”

Apparently that had also slipped Satsuki’s mind, causing her to frown.

“...Hey, why don’t you use the Magic of Omniscience to find a spell you could use?”

“A spell...? Oh, I see! That’s a great idea, Rekka!”

“Aw, shucks. It was nothing. Hahaha...”

I scratched my cheek and tried to laugh off her praise. Satsuki didn’t remember it, but learning new spells with the Magic of Omniscience was something I’d seen her do previously under less than fortunate circumstances. That was a really terrible time for me...

But thanks to that, Satsuki now had access to a log of magics she hadn’t before. It was too bad all the teleportation spells that could get us back to Japan either required tools or magic power she didn’t have. All we could do for now was do our best to dig up some dinner, but...

“This is actually kinda tiring barehanded.”

“Yeah.”

As it turned out, digging through wet sand with your hands is actually pretty hard work. And if I was getting tired, poor Satsuki must be exhausted.

“Hmm...”

How the hell had we managed this as kids?

“Oh, right. We just need some kind of rake or shovel. We collected plenty of wood, so do you think you could make something like that with your magic?”

“Sure! I’ll give it a try.”

Satsuki immediately went about searching for an appropriate spell, and... Voila! A magically crafted rake and wooden spear for our convenience. The latter was my personal request.

“Thanks, Satsuki.”

“What are you going to use the spear for?”

“I saw some fish in the shallows earlier. I’m going to try to bag some.”

“Can you really do that?”

“It’s not a matter of can and can’t. There are times when a man simply must.”

“You didn’t need a wooden spear, Rekka. You should just use the one you already have to seal the deal on a summer fling with Satsuki.”

I seriously tried to stab R for that one. But she dodged it easily.

“You need to cut it out with those dirty old man gags.”

“Being pure and innocent isn’t going to save the future.”

I bickered with R in a low voice as I stood in the shallows with the spear at the ready.

“...Do you think there’s a trick to doing this?”

“Let’s see... Perhaps you should stay as still as possible so the fish don’t run away?”

“Stay still, huh...? That’s pretty difficult with the waves.”

“Just think of yourself as a pebble. A small, dirty pebble rolling along the road, unnoticed by anyone.”

“I feel like that was more descriptive than it needed to be, but okay. I’ll give it a go.”

I stood still. Completely unmoving. I was a stone, rolling in the waves. A stone... A stone...

“Rekka?”

“...”

“Reekka?”

“...”

“Rekka, if you want fish, I can use my magic.”

“...There!”

Splash!

There was a brief struggle in the water, but when I lifted my spear, I actually had a small fish on the end of it.

“Wow! That’s amazing, Rekka. You really caught one.”

“What an unexpected talent.”

Satsuki and R both looked at the fish I caught with expressions of surprise. I held my head high on that one.

“All right! Time to catch as many as I can!”

I rolled up my sleeves and once again picked up the spear, becoming a stone. R adjusted her hat as she watched me.

“Let’s just hope it wasn’t beginner’s luck,” she murmured.



I’ll be honest. It was beginner’s luck. I stuck it out for around an hour after that, repeatedly stabbing my spear into the water, but didn’t catch even one more fish. But I tried hard and long enough that I nearly broke the spear.

“Your base stats are just too average. You’re not bad, but you’re so great, either. People have their expectations. You never go above and beyond, but you never completely fail them.”

“Please stop.”

I was about to fall to my knees at R’s flatly delivered harsh criticism. My heart was weaker than the beaten-up spear right now.

“R-Rekka... Are you all right?”

Seeing my gloomy mood, Satsuki called out to me worriedly.

“Ah, yeah... Sorry, for only catching one fish.”

“It’s fine. If you want more fish, I can... No, one fish is more than enough. We found lots of shellfish, too, so let’s go back to the cave before it gets dark.”

“Yeah.”

Satsuki was in the middle of saying something but had stopped herself, instead opting to cheer me up. We started to head for the cave like she suggested... when a rather large wave came crashing at us.

“Kyah!”

Losing her balance because of it, Satsuki fell forward.

“Satsuki! You okay?”

“Y-Yup, I caught myself, so I’m not hurt, but...”

Satsuki looked down at herself. Her clothes were completely soaked now. It was hot back home, so she was in a nice, light, and thin outfit. And when that got wet...

“D-Don’t look this way!”

“Ah, sorry!”

Satsuki flushed bright red and shouted, making me whip around in a hurry. I’d be in for a lot of trouble yet on this deserted island.



The noisy campfire sputtered, crackled, and popped in the cave.

“Are your clothes dry yet?”

“Um... Not yet,” Satsuki’s dejected voice answered from behind me.

After we returned to the cave, the first thing we did was make a fire for Satsuki to dry her wet clothes. But in the meantime, there was a problem with privacy. The cave was just one giant open space, so it wasn’t like there was a separate room for her to wait in while her clothes dried. I offered to just wait outside, but Satsuki insisted that I stay, saying it was dangerous to be out alone

in the dark at night. And so here we were, sitting back-to-back while we waited.

“So, uh... That coconut juice was surprisingly good.”

Bored of the silence, I decided to try striking up a conversation with the first thing that came to mind.

“We were lucky to end up on an island with sweet ones. There are some types of coconuts that aren’t sweet at all inside.”

“Huh? There are different types of coconuts?”

“There are several. Some you can extract oil from, others are used as the raw materials for coconut gel.”

“Wow, you sure know a lot.”

“Thanks to the Magic of Omniscience.”

“I gotta say, it’s really convenient. I’ve been feeling that all the more since arriving on this deserted island. I bet you could use it to get perfect scores on all your tests, too.”

“I don’t use it to cheat!”

“I’m joking, I’m joking!”

I laughed it off as Satsuki lightly slapped my back. “Ow,” I said while laughing, and she broke into a giggle fit, too. Being able to joke around like this was one of the perks of being childhood friends. Even if I was stuck on a deserted island, as long as Satsuki was here with me, I didn’t have anything to be nervous about. It was a nice feeling.

“Oh, the fire’s dying.”

“Do we have enough firewood? I could kindle it with magic, but I’ve used my Magic of Omniscience too much today, so I’m running a little low...”

“Nah, it’ll be fine.”

I threw another branch onto the fire. We’d collected plenty of them earlier in the day and sorted them by size for exactly this reason.

“This kind of reminds me of that outdoor class we had with the campfire...”

“During elementary school?”

“Yeah, that one.”

Satsuki and I were in the same class in elementary school, and we ended up in the same group for a special outdoor camping class. As we were reminiscing about that, Satsuki suddenly burst into laughter.

“I also remember you putting too much water in the curry. Our group was the only one eating what could have passed for soup! Everyone else looked so miffed, heehee...”

“Ugh! Y-You’re the one that got worn out during orienteering and needed me to carry you back!”

“That was because you insisted on carrying me even after the teacher said I could go back and rest!”

“But I thought you’d be lonely if you had to go back by yourself while everyone else was still having fun.”

“That’s true... But what I’m trying to say is that it was your idea, Rekka!”

“What is this, a married couple’s comedy routine?” R sighed tiredly from her comfy spot, lounging in the air as she listened to us bicker.

“Wait... Come to think of it, didn’t something strange happen at the campfire back then?”

A vague memory suddenly resurfaced in my mind. When I brought it up, Satsuki flinched nervously. I could feel her trembling as she leaned against me.

“Let’s see... What was it again? I remember the girls in the class were whispering with each other, so I was wondering what the guys were up to... Then these three girls pushed you forward while another girl pulled me by the arm so we were standing next to each other in front of the campfire... Hmm... And then...”

I tried to recall what happened next, but it was just so long ago... The details were all hazy. Maybe nothing had really happened at all.

“Huh? Are you sweating, Satsuki? My back feels a little damp...”

“N-Nowpe, nowt me! I’m t-t-totally fine!”

“Why are you so nervous?”

We were sitting back-to-back, so there was no way for me to see her expression, but I could tell from her voice that something was eating at her.

“Well, anyway... After that, didn’t the girls make us do something? I didn’t really understand what was happening, but I remember the girls egging you on... Actually, they may have been cheering you on...”

“R-Rweally now? I don’t rwemember that!”

“They were shouting things... Stuff like ‘just say it’ and ‘you can do it,’ or something like that.”

I remember how oddly fidgety Satsuki had gotten. Her face was almost as red as the campfire flames, too.



“Were you trying to tell me something back then, Satsuki? You never ended up saying anything, though.”

“R-Rweally?”

“What’s up with you?”

Satsuki had been reacting oddly for a while now. Speaking of which...

“Ooooohh...”

Why was R acting weird, too? She had been writhing and groaning ever since this topic came up. I shot her a dubious look, which she thankfully noticed. She pulled herself together with the heaviest sigh of disappointment I think I’ve ever heard.

“Fine... Rekka, what do boys talk about on overnight camps?”

“Huh?”

Why was R asking about that all of a sudden? But overnight camps, huh...? After it was lights out, everyone was always too excited to go to sleep. We’d start talking underneath the blankets with flashlights and stuff... mostly about our crushes.

“Now, just so you know, Rekka, girls mature earlier than boys, so their elementary school conversations are on par with your middle school ones. You follow?”

Huh... Satsuki and I were in the same group, but the boys and girls slept in different quarters. The boys would get into super heated pillow fights and end up getting scolded by the teacher, but what were the girls doing? They stayed up all night talking, right? Following what R said... That meant they were talking about their crushes, right?

If that’s what they were talking about, then that last day at the campfire... The girls pushed me and Satsuki towards each other... They were cheering for her, telling her to say something... And she really did turn red... Um... Er?

“R-R-Rwekka?! The fwire’s getting weaker, down’t you thwink?!”

“Hm? Oh, you’re right.”

Satsuki was still talking oddly, but she was right. The fire had already started to die down, so I threw on another branch. After that, we both fell silent. The cave was perfectly quiet other than the sounds of the fire. But it wasn't awkward or anything. It was a gentle, comfortable silence.

"Rekka..." Satsuki eventually stirred.

"Hm?"

"Rekka... do you..."

"What is it?"

I urged the mumbling Satsuki on. I could feel her fidgeting behind me.

"What do you... think of me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like..." Satsuki trailed off.

The silence this time felt a little heavier than before... But really, what had she meant just now? As I was wondering, she started stirring again, tickling my shoulders with her squirming.

"Rekka... you've saved a lot of girls ever since your bloodline awakened, right?"

"Hm? Well, yeah."

"Is there... anything that makes me different from those girls?"

"Different?"

"Yeah... I sometimes wonder if you just see me as one of them. One of the many girls you've saved..."

"..."

"The Magic of Omniscience can't read people's feelings, after all..."

She said no more after that.

The difference between Satsuki and everyone else... I searched within myself for an answer.

"Satsuki..."

And just as I opened my mouth, I caught a glimpse of something at the entrance to the cave out of the corner of my eye. It was a hairy beast walking towards us on all fours...

“!”

I grabbed the wooden spear I’d left within arm’s reach just in case, then rose to my knees, ready to defend Satsuki. I didn’t want to startle the beast, so I chose not to yell out.

“...!”

My movements caught Satsuki’s attention, and she immediately grabbed her nearly dried clothes to cover herself, making sure she was ready to move at a moment’s notice.

“Satsuki, is that...?”

I tried to ask using as few words and staying as quiet as possible.

“Yes, it is. So whatever you do, don’t make the first move. Who knows what will happen if you anger it...” Satsuki explained in short.

Apparently, this beast was the wild animal Satsuki had warned me about earlier. Looking at it now, its face did kind of resemble a cat’s, but its eyes were filled with apprehension as it stared us down.

“Aren’t wild animals supposed to be afraid of fire?”

“Some of them certainly are, but a small campfire like this might draw attention for some...” Satsuki said, biting her lip.

“I thought the fire was hidden from the outside...”

“I guess it happened to pass close by and spot it. How unlucky...”

Well, this was a rather dangerous situation. We were cornered in the cave, which didn’t extend very far inward. We were surrounded by stone walls on all sides, and the beast was blocking our only exit. Satsuki had already used a huge amount of magic today, and it wasn’t like I had anything up my sleeve. No supernatural abilities, no special gadgets. Nothing except for a brittle wooden spear. To win against a wild animal with just that would take a miracle, and I only had one chance...

“Let’s try giving it our leftover food,” suggested Satsuki. “Maybe it’ll leave then.”

“Okay.”

I hesitantly laid my spear on the ground, picked up the food we’d collected for tomorrow, and tossed it towards the beast. But it didn’t even look. It just glared straight at us and let out a screech. This... was bad.

“Mrowr!”

“Kuh!”

I threw my spear out at the leaping beast. To no avail, of course. It hit the ground and snapped right in two.

“Oh, guardian wind!”

I started to think I was a goner, but Satsuki summoned a shield of wind to deflect the beast’s claws in the nick of time.

“Mrowr!”

The beast lunged at me a second time and was once again deflected by the shield. After that, it backed off a little.

“Ugh...”

“Satsuki!”

Now having used too much magic, Satsuki swayed on her feet. The wind shield protecting us started to waver, too. She really had used too much Omnidient Magic today...!

“Satsuki... I’m going to draw its attention. You take that chance to run.”

“No way. You won’t be safe alone. I can’t even cast healing magic on you right now...”

“That’s exactly why I’m doing this. You can’t heal yourself in this state either, right? And you’ll collapse if you run out of magic. So we have to do something to save at least one of us before that happens.”

If Satsuki used even one more spell, she was in danger of passing out. Then she wouldn’t be able to run at all. So we had to do something while we still

could.

“But I can’t leave you here, Rekka!”

“Look, I’m not abandoning you either, but I can’t run away from that thing while carrying your unconscious body.”

“But... But...”

She could only repeat that one word. Satsuki was smart. Certainly smart enough to realize that we were out of other options. But she just couldn’t accept what I was saying, and refused to listen to me. I couldn’t blame her, though. If I were in her position, I was sure I’d do the same. I knew that telling her to run despite that was selfish, but...

“I didn’t need a reason to save you, Satsuki. My bloodline had nothing to do with it. I saved you because you’re you.”

“...!”

The day R appeared to me was the day the bloodline of the Namidare awoke within me. I had no resolution back then. I barely even believed the whole bloodline thing myself. If the first story I’d gotten caught up in wasn’t Satsuki’s, but someone else’s... would I have ever jumped in to save them like that? To be honest, I couldn’t say for sure. If it had been anyone else, I would have at least thought things through before agreeing to anything. But with Satsuki... I hadn’t hesitated at all. I’d jumped right in to save her because she was my precious childhood friend. If there was a difference between her and the other girls, that was it.

“Now, dismiss your shield on my signal. I’ll get its attention.”

“Okay...”

After being repelled by the wind wall a couple of times, the beast was cautiously approaching again. Its eyes were aglow with hostility, and it looked ready to pounce the moment it got the chance.

“All right... Three, two—”

“...!”

Just as I was about to finish the countdown, a blinding white light suddenly

filled the interior of the cave.

“Sir Rekka!”

“Rekka, are you all right?”

From the light stepped Harissa, clutching her staff, and Shirley, who called out in a worried voice.

“Mrowr!”

The beast was momentarily stunned by the light, but immediately bared its fangs when it saw the new intruders. However...

“Oh, my.”

Shirley suddenly threw a ball into the air. It burst with an ear-splitting, dissonant screech that filled the cave. I reflexively covered my ears. The shock of the sound made the beast drop like a bird shot out of the sky. It flopped to the ground in a trance, its limbs feebly twitching.

“Shirley, I-I think my eardrums burst...”

“It has a safety set to just shy of that line where they may or may not burst. You’ll be fine. It’s just a simple device designed to shock through sound.”

Well, if that was the case, then the beast would probably be fine, too. It may have attacked us, but we were the uninvited guests here. And besides, it was really just a big kitty...

“Wait, how did the two of you get here?”

Harissa had probably sought help from Shirley, who lived right across the street. I was sure they’d be able to work together and find us, but I wasn’t expecting them to do it so soon.

“Well, we considered a lot of options at first. Like using either my or Iris’s spaceship, or even Ellicia’s connection to the organization to borrow a psychic with the power of teleportation... But in the end, we realized a far more simple solution.”

“I-I remembered that I could easily find you if I used my connection magic, Sir Rekka.”

“Oh, of course!”

Thinking about it carefully, the experiment that blew us into this mess was a form of her connection magic... All she needed to do was use one of my personal belongings and follow its connection to me. The answer was right under our noses all along.

“I should have put it together sooner, but I was in such a fluster... I’m sorry, Sir Rekka, Satsuki.”

“No, it all worked out in the end, so don’t worry about it.”

“Thank you, Harissa.”

Satsuki and I both thanked her, at last putting an end to our ordeal on the island... Or so I thought.

“So, Rekka...” Shirley narrowed her eyes behind her glasses, staring at Satsuki and me inquisitively. Then she said coldly, “Just what were you two doing for Satsuki to end up looking like that?”

“Huh?”

Wondering what she was talking about, I unthinkingly turned to Satsuki behind me... and spluttered spectacularly.

“Aaaaah!”

Harissa looked too, and she let out a half-shocked, half-enraged scream as she clenched her staff tightly in both hands. Hint one: in order to dry her clothes, Satsuki had been undressed by the campfire mere moments ago. Hint two: a fairly violent struggle had gone down in this narrow cave. So, what situation does that leave us with now?

“N-Nooooooooo!”

My answer was a loud, ringing scream as Satsuki slapped my face with all her might.

Time Traveler L's Life on the Streets: Log 1

L was a girl from the future. Though, to be precise, she wasn't exactly a "girl." She was an artificial life-form called a Kiklim. Crafted with a mixture of cutting-edge sciences in the future (though she was now a generation outdated by her little sister, a newer model), she was an absolutely flawless agent (supposedly) that had mastered all kinds of technology (yet she always tripped over her own feet, for some reason). And this pinnacle of science... had now joined the ranks of the homeless.

"How pathetic..."

As she dragged her feet down the country road against the sunset backdrop, L vented all of her inner irritation with a heavy sigh. It had been one, maybe two weeks since she arrived here from the future. Ever since she'd failed to assassinate Rekka Namidare at the end of summer vacation, L had remained here in this era all alone. Abandoned, to be precise. After all, the conspirators that had sent her to the past to help her betray the agency... Well, they'd all been captured by the agency.

Granted, half the reason she'd failed in her assassination attempts was because of those guys being unable to operate the Space-Time Translocator properly, so she felt their capture was well deserved... However, the Space-Time Translocator that allowed travel between the past and the future was now under the management of the doctor, its inventor. L had come to the past with the help of the agency traitors, and losing them had meant losing her ride home. As a result, she now found herself wandering aimlessly around in this era.

Fortunately, target Rekka Namidare lived in a peaceful rural town, and L was the walking embodiment of future technology. She had nothing to fear in terms of material danger. No, the real problem was the three staples of survival: food, clothing, and shelter. Well, clothes weren't so much of an issue right now. The long-sleeved kimono L wore was made from superfibers from the future. It was

specifically designed never to get dirty or frayed. And as for shelter, she could sleep anywhere she wanted as long as she set her system to sleep mode, so she managed to get by with that. All that was left was...

Grrrumble...

“Why can’t this blasted thing be turned off?” L muttered, pressing a hand against her abdomen as her low-energy alarm rang out.

The stomach-grumbling feature and others like it were all installed by her creator, the doctor. The doctor had wanted L to resemble a human as closely as possible, from the way her five senses worked to the movement of her joints. While certain aspects of the human body were structured very logically, others could be improved dramatically with more efficient mechanical parts, L believed. Grumbling stomachs, for example.

“I guess I have to eat something after all...”

If she could connect to the future, she’d be able to replenish her energy supplies. But that wasn’t possible at present, meaning she’d have to eat something instead.

Actually, it was possible for her to use the main energy source in this world—electricity—to recharge her Kiklim body. In order to do that, she’d need to either stick her finger into a power socket or lick dry cell batteries, which weren’t exactly socially acceptable things to do... Perhaps she had been influenced by her foster parent a little too much, as she couldn’t help but associate energy replenishment with the idea of food.

Of course, if it came down to it, she’d be willing to sneak into a store and steal electricity as a last resort, but her first choice was definitely a meal. That being said...

“There’s no way it’ll be that easy...”

This was an age that placed a particular emphasis on the assets of the individual, after all. And she had none. The alternative, going into the mountains to find food, would also be difficult.

L’s goal was to simply assassinate Rekka Namidare and save the future, so she didn’t feel any animosity towards the past or its people. She wanted to avoid

causing them any trouble if she could help it. She didn't want to steal food any more than she did electricity. That would strictly be a last resort.

But she didn't have any currency that would work in this day and age. And the people here didn't barter. So if she didn't want to steal, she'd have to find a way to be self-sufficient.

"That's right! I can just go fishing!"

If she recalled correctly, she should be allowed to catch any non-prohibited fish in this era.

"Um... It should be okay if I use up a little of my energy, right?"

L infiltrated a local communication line on the spot and looked up all the wildlife and fishing laws that applied to the region.

"All right, this all checks out! Now I'm good to go."

With renewed determination, L triumphantly marched towards the river that flowed a little bit north of town.



It was about the time that she reached the river that L realized she had completely overlooked the tactical side to this mission. She had no fishing gear.

"Oh my God... I never thought I'd be in a situation saying those words, but here I am."

L was mumbling from the ground. The shock had brought her to her hands and knees.

"Th-Then I have no choice! I'll just have to make it myself!"

L got to her feet, pulled herself together, and immediately began her search for suitable materials to improvise a fishing rod. One hour later...

"I can't catch anything..."

After putting together a fishing rod, she dropped the line in the water and waited half an hour... with no results.

Now, this makeshift rod of L's was fashioned from a thick tree branch and some string she'd found on the ground by chance. She couldn't find anything to

use for a hook, so she'd attached one of her volsppear-style knives. With such a flagrantly unfit-for-fishing fishing rod, there was no way L was going to catch anything. Despite her eager enthusiasm for the task, she was simply just wasting her time.

"Hahh..."

It was only natural for one's thoughts to turn negative when things weren't going well. And right now, L was muttering a long string of curses aimed at the agency's researchers in the back of her mind.

The development of the artificial life-forms known as Kiklims was spearheaded by the doctor, but not even the doctor could build everything alone. There were several assistant researchers on the job that had investigated what abilities and functions the Kiklim—in other words, L—needed in order to complete her time-traveling mission. And one of their topics of discussion had been what to do about her living necessities while she was in the past.

They couldn't expect Rekka Namidare to cover all her expenses himself, although he likely would end up looking after her. But they couldn't have L put any sort of burden on him, lest it end up hindering the progress of his stories. It was an issue they'd spent a long time debating, and they'd eventually agreed to install a feature that allowed energy to be forwarded to L from the future. They also gave her basic crafting skills in case she ever needed to make a shelter for herself. While there were other reasons R had ultimately ended up replacing L and taking over her mission, minute details like these undeniably played a small part in influencing the final decision. Just thinking about it was unpleasant for L.

"Argh, damn these stupid fish! Why won't they bite already?!"

She could just raise the output on her volsppear knife and zap the whole river into submission. And she was actually entertaining such a dangerous idea when...

Splash!

The sound of something unnaturally heavy hitting the quiet river echoed in L's ears.

"Hm?"

L looked around, wondering what the source was. She hadn't sensed anyone around, so it couldn't have been someone throwing a boulder into the water.

"...?"

L peered into the river depths, pondering what had fallen in... when she spotted a shadow swimming in the water. One awfully large to be a fish.

"?!"

The shadow suddenly rose to the surface at a rapid speed, bursting out of the water with a massive splash.

...A dragon?

The moment the figure entered her sights, L instantly searched that word out in her internal library. Its long, tremendous body was covered in a mysterious pattern of sparkling scales. Its appearance was majestic as it soared through the air with more grace than any bird... But its face was sharp and angular like a serpent's, giving it an overall intimidating look.

"Aaah, swimming in this form really does feel the best... Hm?"

The dragon muttered something to itself before it noticed L and turned its terrifying gaze upon her.

"Eep..."

L flinched as their eyes met, her face paling as her whole body trembled.

"Hey, aren't you..."

The dragon looked down at L and started to say something, but L reached her breaking point long before the dragon ever finished.

"KYAAAAAAAH!"

L ran down the bank with tears in her eyes, fleeing from the dragon as fast as her legs could carry her.

"What was that, what was that?! Oh my God, oh my God! Scary, scary, scaaaaary!"



"She ran away..." Lea, having returned to her human form from her Leviathan form, muttered sadly as she looked in the direction L had fled.

She was just a little hurt.

Chapter 2: Maid × Nun

My little deserted island day trip with Satsuki ate up most of the weekend, and before I knew it, the calendar had rolled back around to another gloomy Monday. Hahh, there's nothing quite like the sinking feeling that comes at the start of the week... All Mondays should just be half-days at school, seriously. When I said that out loud, Satsuki scolded me. I was at least hoping my childhood friend would back me up, but no.

For the record, all R had to say was, "Honestly, Rekka, you're useless no matter what day it is."

What she said was one thing, but the way she said it was worse. She was looking at me like I was some insect...

Well, anyway, I dragged my sleepy butt to school on Monday and managed to suffer through class, doing my best to fulfill my obligations as a student. And when it came to after school, I had a couple of routines.

First and foremost was just the regular going home routine. I usually walked home with Satsuki and Iris, or Rosalind. Sometimes all three. Sometimes I even walked home with Tsumiki, but she normally went straight to Nozomiya after school, so that was a rare occasion.

My second routine was club activities. And by "club activities," I really just mean stopping by the light literature club room and saying hi to Tokiwa every now and then. I guess it wasn't much of a routine. Since Tokiwa was the only one who regularly did anything for the club, she often preferred to do her writing from the comfort of her own home. Some days I would show up to the club room and find the door locked. But there were also days Tokiwa would call me over to her classroom and then drag me to club with her. It was kind of a toss-up.

As for my third routine... That pretty much was the "everything else" category. Sometimes Iris would invite me to hang out somewhere, Tsumiki would cart me off to taste test some of her latest recipes, or Rosalind would

take me to the bakery by the station to try their new pastries. R called them “the after-school events of a dating simulator” and would often ask me who I planned on raising my affection with for the day... That being said, it was always the girls inviting me out and not the other way around, so it wasn’t like I had much of a say in the matter.

Incidentally, the after-school event that I’d managed to trigger today was Rosalind’s bakery trip... Actually, putting it that way, it really did make it sound like a dating simulator, so forget I said that.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Rekka?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about how good this purple sweet potato cream bread is.”

“Indeed. It’s scrumptious,” Rosalind agreed, nodding with a contented expression.

She seemed none the wiser that I was actually thinking about some rather strange things. Relieved, I took another bite of the bread in my hands. The purple sweet potato cream had a gentle, sweet aftertaste, and I continued chatting with Rosalind until we finished our coffee.

“Well, I guess it’s time to head home.”

“Yes, let’s... Oh?”

“Huh?”

Rosalind suddenly looked towards the entrance of the store. I followed her gaze just in time to see Suzuran, dressed in her usual maid outfit, come through the chiming door.

“Oh, hey, Suzuran!”

“Oh, Sir Namidare. And you as well, mistress.”

Suzuran politely bowed when she saw us, then approached our table.

“Are you out shopping right now?” Rosalind asked.

“Yes. I heard your favorite bakery had come out with a new item, so I came here to buy you some... but I see you’ve already tried it, mistress.”

“Regardless, you were right to come here. Please buy two to three more samples for a midnight snack.”

“It’s not good to eat too much.”

“Are you my mother?”

“I am your maid.”

“That’s right. Well, it’s not like I know my mother, either... However, as my maid, you must abide your master’s wishes.”

“It is also a maid’s duty to mind her master’s health.”

“Mind you, I am a vampire. And vampires *don’t* need sermons on health.”

They continued discussing whether or not to buy more cream bread for a while, and eventually settled on a compromise: they’d get it, but for breakfast the next morning rather than a midnight snack. After they checked out, the three of us left the store together.

“Are you going shopping for dinner ingredients now, Suzuran?”

“Yes, I’ll be heading to the market from here.”

“Then I’ll come along with you.”

“Very well.”

“Hmph... If Rekka is going, then I shall, as well.”

And so the three of us made our way towards the shopping street.

“Suzuran, what is the menu for supper tonight?”

“I was thinking of making a meat and potato stew.”

“Hmph, I’d much prefer a Western meal this evening.”

“But you asked me to start making Japanese cuisine just the other day, mistress.”

“I’m tired of it already.”

Typical Rosalind and her spoiled ways... Suzuran looked a little troubled, but eventually nodded with a relenting sigh.

“Understood, mistress. Dinner for tonight shall be a stew, then.”

“Good. A Western-style stew, I hope.”

“I hate to break it to you, Rosalind, but I dunno how different Japanese-style and Western-style stews really are...”

I’ve heard that Japanese curry is different from European or Indian curry, but did that really apply to stew, as well? I wasn’t so sure... Come to think of it, what was for dinner at my place? Harissa’s cooking was good, so I was always looking forward to it.

“But you sure have to cook a lot, huh? There’s Rosalind, Suzuran, Corona, and Ulaula... Isn’t it tiring cooking for four people?”

“Miss Corona and Miss Ulaula both help me out, so not particularly.”

“Are those two any good at cooking?”

“As far as preparing the ingredients.”

“Hmm...”



Suzuran had only become a maid recently, but it seemed she'd already settled into the role perfectly. Now she was even the head maid of the house. She was fitting right in and excelling. Which was a great thing, really. It had been a long, fraught road for her to get to where she was. Suzuran was originally a homunculus created to kill Rosalind, after all.

“...”

But after becoming human, she was now living her own life. Following her own path. Seeing her hold a potato in each hand and seriously contemplate between them... It was kind of a relief.

“I’m glad to see you’re enjoying yourself, Suzuran.”

“Hm? Did you say something, Sir Rekka?”

“Nope, not a thing.”

I shook my head as I stood next to her at the cashier.

“Thank you! Come again!”

Once we were done with the shopping, I took two of the supermarket bags and left the store with Suzuran and Rosalind. My intention was to carry their groceries halfway for them.

“Oh?”

But as we were walking down the street, something seemed to catch Suzuran’s eye. She was looking up ahead with a surprised expression.

“What is it?”

Wondering what she’d spotted, I looked up as well... and saw a confused-looking girl at the fork in the road in an outfit that rivaled Suzuran’s maid getup.

“Is that... a nun?” I muttered to myself as I stared at her outfit.

I think it was called a habit?

“Urk...”

When Rosalind saw the nun, the corner of her mouth twitched.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

"I despise those types... Rekka, carry my share as well. I shall take a different route."

"Huh? Uwah!"

Rosalind forcibly shoved the shopping bags she was carrying on me. I tried to stop her in a fluster, but she turned on her heels and was gone in the blink of an eye.

Those types, huh? Being a vampire and all, maybe she must consider nuns a natural enemy. But for someone so prideful to turn tail and run like that... She must have *really* meant it when she said she despised them. Either way, Suzuran and I were abandoned with all the groceries.

"What shall we do, Sir Rekka?"

"Hmm... She appears to be lost, so let's at least ask if she needs help."

Suzuran and I walked over to the nun, who—I gotta be honest—really stood out wearing her habit in the middle of town.

"Excuse me."

"Yes?"

She reacted to my voice and turned around, her blond hair waving behind her. From what I could see, she didn't look that much older than me. And it seemed she hadn't expected anyone to approach her, because she looked a little surprised. She was clutching a map in her hands too, so I guess she really was lost.

"Do you need something from me?"

"No, it just looked like you were lost... We were wondering if you might need some directions."

"Oh, my! That would be very helpful."

The nun clapped her hands together in delight, smiling widely. Turns out she was headed for a church not too far from the shopping street.

"I've just been transferred to this town. My name is Yulia."

"I'm Rekka Namidare."

“And I’m Suzuran.”

After we all introduced ourselves, we took off for the church. Suzuran and I were going to show her where it was since she didn’t know her way around town. Yulia’s suitcase... was rather oddly shaped. It looked more like a guitar case, and awfully heavy even for that. If I hadn’t had Rosalind’s shopping bags to carry, I would have offered to help her out with it.

“So, Yulia, you’re a nun, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Did you come from overseas?”

“Yes, I’m from the European countryside.”

Europe, huh? That was where Chelsea was from, too. Granted, Europe was a pretty big place... They may very well be from different countries.

“What kind of job is a nun?”

Yulia tilted her head curiously at Suzuran’s question.

“You don’t seem very Japanese yourself, Suzuran. Have you never met a nun before?”

“I am ignorant of the ways of the world.”

“...”

Well, she *had* spent most of her life as a homunculus, so it’s not like she could really help her lack of knowledge when it came to human society. But despite the strangeness of it, it seemed like Yulia could tell Suzuran was being completely serious. She smiled gently and crossed herself as she answered.

“Our job is to help shepherd little lost lambs into the fold of God’s love.”

“God’s love...?”

“Yes.”

Yulia then paused for a moment as she folded her hands in prayer before smiling again. Suzuran was pensive and quiet for a moment, as well.

“Then... what is love?”

“Huwah?! We have to start there?!”

Yulia’s jaw nearly hit the sidewalk. But again, Suzuran did used to be a homunculus, so... yeah.

“V-Very well, then! As gratitude for leading me to the church, I shall make sure to teach you everything there is to know about love!”

“Please do.”

Yulia was strangely motivated, and Suzuran bowed politely to her.



Three days later...

“Rekka, is that nun still in town?”

After school, Rosalind made her way over to my desk.

“Hm? By ‘that nun,’ do you mean Yulia? I mean, she said she was transferred here for work, so... probably?”

“Tch... I see.” Rosalind clicked her tongue in irritation.

“Are vampires bad with religious stuff and people?”

“I’m not bad with them. I just despise them.”

So... was that a yes?

“But vampires *are* typically depicted as weak to those affiliated with the light attribute...”

“The light attribute? You’ve been playing too many video games...”

“I guess that wasn’t the right way to put it... I mean those who do battle against demons.”

“Are you talking about exorcists?”

“That’s right, exorcists!

They used holy water to fend off stuff like demons, vampires, and ghosts, right? Did that really work? All my knowledge on the matter was completely sourced from video games and manga, so I had to ask Rosalind for confirmation. When I did, however, she just sighed.

“Rekka... Give it a moment’s thought. There’s no way something as plain as water could truly harm the likes of vampires and demons and whatever other nonhumans you can think of. The idea that some mystical, universal weapon exists... It’s pure hogwash.”

“What? But...”

“More importantly, Rekka, you’ve met not only vampires and demons, but yokai and biblical beasts before. While you may file us all under the general category of ‘nonhuman,’ we are all, in fact, different species. We may share some similarities, but that certainly doesn’t mean we all have the same weaknesses.”

“When you put it that way...”

“You see, those so-called exorcists with their so-called holy water have really just brewed concoctions to deal with each threat—one for demons, one for vampires, and so on.”

“Okay, so you’re saying that holy water for demons is different than holy water for vampires? That there are different flavors, I guess?”

“More or less. They’re like potions—poisons, if you will—catered to each species. And all those poisons go by the general name of ‘holy water.’ It’s far catchier for their religious marketing. The same goes for their other ‘holy’ weapons as well.”

“Huh...”

So... holy water was kind of a lie? Or, as Rosalind put it, a marketing strategy? I’d always thought it worked against anything evil. I mean, that’s kinda how they sell it to you... What a rip-off. That was a lot to think about.

“At any rate, if that Yulia girl is your run-of-the-mill nun, there’s no doubt she has it out for nonhumans like me. Vampires are especially hated in the West. I was basically a fugitive there,” Rosalind said with an annoyed click of her tongue. “I guess I’ll have to avoid the area around the church for a while, which is a shame. That means I can’t go home with you, Rekka.”

After that, we said goodbye for the afternoon. Rosalind packed up her things and left the classroom.

“Rekka, let’s go home together.”

“Rekka! Time to go homey-home!”

“Right.”

Satsuki and Iris were waiting for me, so I grabbed my bag and left, too. The three of us chatted as we left the school gate, walking along the road with other students heading home.

“Hey, Rekka. Let’s grab something to eat at the shopping street.”

“Not again, Iris. I’ve told you before you can’t be stuffing your face all the time.”

“I’m not asking you, Satsuki! So, how about it, Rekka? Let’s go!”

“No, Rekka, don’t do it!”

Being pressured from both sides, I looked around for an escape route.

“Ummm... Ah, I know! Did I tell you guys I met a nun named Yulia the other day?”

Desperate, I started talking about the first thing that came to mind. And when I let my mouth run free, I ended up blurting out what I’d been talking with Rosalind about just earlier. But... Somehow I just managed to make things worse. The fire in Satsuki and Iris’s eyes increased twofold.

“Really?”

“Again?”

“What do you mean, ‘again’? I’ve never met a nun named Yulia before.”

“That’s not what we mean...”

“Jeez! Why are you like that, Rekka?”

“Wait, like what?”

I felt like I was being falsely accused of something here... But I’d at least managed to change the subject, so I decided to run with it.

“Suzuran and I ran into her at the fork in the road just past the shopping street, so we showed her the way to the church. And then...”

“Oh, Sir Rekka.”

“Huh?”

Someone suddenly called to me from behind. I turned to see who it was—and speak of the devil! It was Suzuran carrying her basket in one hand.

“Oh, hey, Suzuran. Shopping again?”

“No, but I will be later.”

“Later? You mean you’re doing something else right now?”

“Yes.”

Now that she mentioned it, it was a little early for her to be out shopping for dinner. What was she up to, then? It was unusual for Suzuran to take detours.

“Where are you headed now?”

Unable to hold back my curiosity, I ended up asking her.

“The church.”

“The church?”

Wow, super speak of the devil—er, God? I’d just been telling Satsuki and Iris about the church.

“Would you all like to come along with me?” Suzuran asked.



Since we didn’t have anything better to do, we all followed Suzuran to the church. It was a little off the beaten path, a couple blocks from both the main roads leading to the station and the shopping street, so it wasn’t a particularly popular destination. The building itself was getting pretty up there in age, too. For as far back as I could remember, it had always looked antiquated.

“Huh, the interior’s actually pretty nice.”

I’d walked by it plenty of times, but this was my first time seeing the inside.

“Oh, hello, Suzuran. And you too, Rekka.”

Yulia, who was sweeping the floor, noticed us as soon as we came in the door. She set the broom aside and approached us in a warm and friendly manner.

Then, realizing we were accompanied by some unfamiliar faces, she tilted her head and smiled pleasantly.

“And who have you brought with you?”

“I’m Satsuki Otomo. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hi, I’m Iris.”

“We bumped into Suzuran by chance on her way here, and decided to tag along.”

Following Satsuki and Iris’s introductions, I explained how we’d all ended up here at the church together.

“Oh, my! Are you two girls also interested in the teachings of God? Oh, pardon me. Where are my manners? My name is Yulia. I’m the one in charge of this church.”

Yulia delightedly led us over to a pew and urged us to take a seat. The church was so small, though, that the benches only sat three people. Satsuki, Iris, and I sat down on one, and Suzuran and Yulia sat down on the bench in front of us.

“Oh, I’ll just go and get some refreshments,” Yulia said as she retreated into the back room of the chapel.

The three of us who had come here on a whim fidgeted and looked around for lack of anything else to do. The silence of the church made the atmosphere strangely tense.

“So... have you been coming here ever since we met Yulia, Suzuran?”

“Yes, I come here every day.”

“Every day?!”

That was more than I’d expected. Although she did seem awfully friendly with Yulia now... They must have gotten close.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what exactly do you do here every day?”

“We mostly talk about the world, really. I tell Yulia about the town, and she tells me stories about her nunhood... But when I first started coming, it was to learn about things I don’t understand.”

“Things you don’t understand? Like what?”

“Love,” Suzuran answered decisively.

“Did you just say...”

“Love?!”

“Yes?”

Suzuran gave Satsuki and Iris something of a funny look for their over-exaggerated reactions. But, honestly, I wasn’t really expecting her to say that, either. I hadn’t realized she was so interested in love before. Did she have her eye on someone, maybe?

“Sorry for the wait!”

Yulia returned to the sanctuary with snacks and tea for everyone.

“Ahh... Today’s green tea is delicious, Yulia.”

“Yeah, this is good... But you should consider buying some traditional Japanese teacups.”

“Oh?”

Because, honestly, drinking Japanese tea out of a Western one was a little surreal.

“Well, then, shall we have a little talk today?” Yulia asked, turning to Suzuran.

“Yes, please.”

When Suzuran mentioned she was learning things from Yulia at church, I’d envisioned something like mass... But this was more like a low-key friendly chat.

“...So everyone is equal before God?”

“Indeed. God looks down on us all from heaven, watching over us and loving us. And before God’s love, we’re all the same.”

With the snacks and tea placed between two benches, Suzuran and Yulia began talking. Because we were here today, they were intentionally speaking loud enough so we could hear them, but it was basically like they were having their own conversation. We were just listening in.

“Then...”

Suzuran seemed to be quite an eager learner. Every time Yulia finished one explanation, Suzuran would throw another question at her. And Yulia took it in stride and then some, passionately answering each and every one of Suzuran’s questions. Satsuki has always been serious, so she was intently listening to the two of them, but Iris and I started to get sleepy midway through. I kept my eyes open, but Iris totally zonked. And so the afternoon passed like that until it was time for Suzuran to go shopping. The rest of us decided to use that as an excuse to make ourselves scarce, too.

“Thank you for today,” said Suzuran.

“It was my pleasure. Please come again tomorrow. And Rekka... We’ll be starting masses this Sunday, so if you and your friends have no other plans, feel free to drop by.”

“Okay, sure. Thanks.”

“Oh, and there’s one more thing I’d like to ask you.” Just as we were about to depart, Yulia stopped us. “Have you heard of anything strange occurring in this town?”

“Strange? What do you mean?” I asked.

“Let’s see... I mean something so out of the ordinary that you would never think it possible.”

“Uh...”

The four of us glanced at each other. We were all probably thinking about the same thing—the stories I kept getting wrapped up in. That, and all the other trouble we’d gotten into with ghosts and yokai and whatnot. But it wasn’t like we could just casually bring up that stuff, so... In the end, we all silently agreed just to say we didn’t know anything.

“Is that so? Thank you anyway.”

“No problem. Why do you ask, though?”

“Oh... It’s just that I’m bad with scary stories and such. I was hoping to hear there wasn’t anything like it in this town. That’s all.”

“I-I see...”

Now that I thought about it, this town sure did have a lot of strange stuff going for it... But nothing I could think of that would bother humans, so I didn't think she had anything to worry about.

After that, we bid our farewells to Yulia and left the church.



“Love, huh...?”

Later that evening, I was in my room working through my homework at a 1:4 ratio of breaks to slow progress as I reconsidered the events of the afternoon. Hearing me mumble to myself, R shook her head in slight exasperation.

“Good grief, if you have time to be saying things like that...”

“Wait, what's happening? Did you say love? Don't tell me a dramatic story of passionate love and hate has started to unfold around you again!”

The girl from the future spat her harsh words at me as the idiot angel who'd recently taken up residence in my room interrupted. Although, since I was the only one who could see and hear R, Rachelle had no idea she was interrupting.

“...”

Wow, her eyebrows were awfully scrunched up. It was pretty rare to see R so displeased. But putting her aside, I pushed Rachelle away from me as she started breathing down my neck.

“No, there's no carnage.”

“Whaaat?”

The disappointment in her voice was palpable.

“Come on... Aren't angels supposed to be at least a little bit angelic?”

“What are you talking about? I am totally angelic.”

“Shut up. I'm telling you to stop trying to bring carnage into everything you can.”

“But I can't help it! I'm the angel of love and passion, after all,” she said,

puffing out her chest proudly for some reason.

Like she said, she was an angel of love and passion... But a twisted one. She craved love and passion so intense that what she really wanted was violence. And ever since I'd helped snap her out of her love-drunk rampage the other day, she'd been freeloading at my house...

"Well, I'll forgive you for whatever delusions you're under, but no provoking everyone and starting another jealous war like you did last time. That's strictly off-limits, and I'm not kidding. Got it?"

"Hmm... Whatever should I do?"

"I'll seal you away like an evil spirit, you dumb angel."

I was pretty sure I had Sakuya's jar in the storehouse somewhere.

"I-I was just kidding!" Rachelle waved her hands in a fluster and tried to pretend like she was innocent.

I decided to let it slide this time.

"Jeez, I can't believe a nun is more pure and inspirational than a freaking angel."

"No kidding, huh? She's definitely devoted. Mad respect."

"You... Are you sure a fallen angel should be saying something like that?"

"I told you I'm not a fallen angel! I'm as pure as can be."

Like hell she was.

"Aren't angels also servants of God? How on earth did the two of you end up so different...?"

"Apples and oranges, really. We angels serve God directly, but that's not the case with humans. Humans can't meet God, after all. So really, what they operate off of is their own faith."

"Faith? Huh..."

They seemed pretty similar at face value, but I guess they were kind of different. We continued to chat for a while as I ignored my homework, when all of a sudden there was a knocking at my window. And my room is on the second

floor, mind you. There were only a few possibilities as to who it might be.

“Ai?”

“Rekka!”

The one who jumped in through the window was a rather panicked Ai, the nekomata I knew from my childhood who lived in the mountains. She would stop by sometimes for a visit while she was in town, but I could tell from the tone in her voice that something wasn’t right.

“What happened?”

“I-It’s terrible, meow!” Ai practically shouted as she grabbed the sleeve of my shirt. “My friends are being attacked by a girl in weird clothes, meow!”



From my house, Ai dragged me by the arm to the mountain behind school.

“What happened this time? Why are you being attacked again? Didn’t you resolve things with the local yokai, like... just the other day?” I asked.

“They’re being attacked, too! A strange girl wearing strange clothes suddenly showed up and started attacking us out of nowhere, meow!”

“A girl in strange clothes...?”

Now, what would a yokai like Ai consider to be strange clothing? I pondered that in the back of my mind as we hurried up the mountain trail. And then...

“?!”

When we arrived on the scene, the first thing that caught my attention was the sight of yokai being tossed this way and that through the air.

“Eeeeek!”

“Heeelp!”

A floating head was spinning around in circles as an umbrella with a leg screamed for its life. Ai’s nekomata friends were also scurrying about, trying to escape the cause of all the ruckus. In the middle of everything stood...

“...Yulia?” I murmured her name in a daze.

The girl dressed in a nun's robes—which Ai had probably called strange because they were extremely uncommon around here—reacted to my voice and slowly turned my way.

“Oh, my... Rekka? Why are you out so late? And in a place like this, no less?”

Yulia greeted me with the same gentle smile she had when we stopped by the church earlier. But the giant battle-axe she was holding looked like it was grinning, too.

“What are you doing?”

I mean, it was probably exactly what it looked like... But I still had to ask.

“Goodness... Whatever should I do?” Yulia mumbled, placing a hand pensively against her cheek.

My sudden appearance here was probably quite a surprise for her. She was acting rather calm, but judging by the way she was tapping the end of her axe handle against the ground, she must have been in something of an anxious fluster. But, honestly, I was too. Why the heck was a nun attacking yokai like this? Pondering that, the conversation I'd had with Rosalind earlier came to mind.

“Hey, uh, Yulia... Might you be an exorcist?”

“Bwuh?! W-Was it that obvious?” Yulia spluttered, swinging her axe in a panic. It startled the yokai around her, and they backed even further away. “Um, Rekka... I'm sorry to ask, but could you please keep that to yourself? It's... meant to be a secret.”

“Really? 'Cause...”

“Please?”

She was begging me, practically on the verge of tears.

“Yeah, I mean, sure. If that's what you want, then I won't tell anyone else, but...”

“Ah, thank you so much!” Yulia nearly shouted in earnest relief.

To her, the terrible spectacle that was currently happening—rather, the

terrible spectacle she was currently causing—wasn’t as big of a deal as the secrecy of her identity. But as far as I was concerned, there was something far more pressing to address at the moment. And the clear difference in our priorities right now made me a little uneasy. No, make that real uneasy.

“So... the whole transferring here as a nun thing was just a ruse, and you’re really here as an exorcist to exterminate the yokai?”

“That’s the gist of it, yes,” she agreed readily with a nod. “Although I really did transfer here as a nun.”

A chill ran down my spine. I could tell from the look on her face and her tone of voice that she wasn’t joking.

“Now, why are you here, Rekka? You don’t seem very surprised to see all these nonhuman creatures surrounding us. Why is that?”

“...You could say they’re acquaintances,” I answered briefly, trying to find the right words to get her to stop all this. “Yulia. Please, could you stop attacking these yokai?”

“Oh? Whatever for?” Yulia lowered her axe and tilted her head in a look of pure confusion that told me she truly didn’t understand what I was asking her to do.

“Well, these guys aren’t actually bad yokai. Honestly, what have they even done? What *could* they even do? They’re just taking life one day at a time. They’re way too concerned about themselves to be bothering anyone else.”

“Rekka... That’s mean, meow.”

Ai’s ears drooped sadly, but I could apologize to her later. My highest priority right now was getting Yulia to back down.

“Hmm... I’m sorry, Rekka, but I can’t just turn a blind eye to them.”

“Wh-Why not? Don’t exorcists hunt demons and ghosts and stuff because they terrorize humans? So if they haven’t done anything wrong, then there shouldn’t be a need to exorcise them, right?”

“That’s incorrect. The reason exorcists hunt the supernatural is because their very existences shun the love of God,” Yulia answered without any hesitation.

She then swung her axe in demonstration, the blade slicing right through the twilight air. All of the yokai who had been watching things unfold tensed at the sight.

“As such, it is my duty as an exorcist to slaughter the supernatural. *All* of them. There are no exceptions.”

“Meow?!”

Yulia then pointed her axe at her next target—Ai, who stood bolt upright at being singled out.

“...!”

I jumped between the two of them without even thinking. And that was nearly the end of me. I thought Yulia’s axe was going to split me right in two... but it stopped just before it reached my face.

“Rekka? Why are you getting in my way?” Yulia asked curiously, axe still held at the ready.

“I’m begging you, please stop. You can’t kill them all just because they’re not human. That isn’t a good enough reason.”

“...Are you taking their side, Rekka?” Yulia asked, narrowing her eyes and swinging her axe upward.

“Stop i—gwah!”

My eyes instinctively followed the axe head, which distracted me from Yulia’s next move. She unleashed a roundhouse kick aimed right at my blind spot. I went flying.

“And here I thought you were a good person... What a shame. But as I said before, I cannot overlook the supernatural. So kindly stay out of my way.”

“No, Yulia! Stop!”

I sprung to my feet and ran towards her. I would throw myself at her if that’s what it took... but I wasn’t going to make it in time!

“...!”

Before the imminently approaching axe, Ai squeezed her eyes shut and

ducked her head. But then...

Wha-chink!

The shrill sound of metal hitting something hard rang through the air—Yulia's large axe had been stopped by a wooden sword.

“President Momone?!”

“Hey, problem child. You really must love sticking your nose into trouble like this, huh?”

The faintly glowing wooden sword was only barely holding back the large axe, but the One-Eyed Student Council President greeted me rather casually. I wasn't sure where she'd shown up from, but she was dressed in a shrine maiden's outfit. Her usual wooden sword was aglow, probably with the same technique she'd used to beat up the yokai over summer break. But for her to be able to fend off a giant, heavy axe with that...!

“Hmph!”

Realizing she wasn't going to win in a contest of strength, Yulia relented and took a step back.

“And what are you?” Yulia asked, eyeing President Momone with a wary look.

But President Momone didn't seem intimidated. The opposite, really. She rested her sword against her shoulder with one hand and flipped up her eye patch with the other to reveal her glowing right eye.

“The yokai under the protection of our shrine contacted me, you see.”

“Under protection? Nonhumans?” Yulia furrowed her brow with a suspicious look.

“From what I can see, you're not some stray, but an agent of the church, no? If so, then I'm guessing you've heard of the Demonslayer of Kibi Shrine before, haven't you?” President Momone inquired after seeing how stumped Yulia was.

“Oh, my... So, you're the famous Demonslaying Ogre Killer?”

“Nope, that's my grandfather. I'm only his successor. The real deal is a lot scarier,” President Momone said with a menacing laugh. “I'm sure the churches

of the West probably have a different way of doing things, but as they say... When in Rome, do as the Romans do. You follow? We're not going to just sit idly by and let you do as you please on territory under our jurisdiction."

Despite President Momone's light tone of voice, the sharp glare in her eyes was no joke. Me and all the other yokai present nervously awaited Yulia's response. Eventually, she let out a sigh and lowered her weapon.

"Then I suppose I must oblige... While it pains me to be unable to fulfill my duty, I can see this isn't worth causing unnecessary trouble. In regards to those present here, I will follow the proper procedures in dealing with them."

It seemed like she was willing to defer to President Momone—or, really, President Momone's grandfather. But it also sounded like she still hadn't completely given up yet.

"Now, just to make sure, the yokai under the protection of the Ogre Killer are limited to those present here—is that correct? There are no others?"



“Hm...?”

At Yulia’s question, President Momone looked around until her eyes fell on a tanuki peering out at us from the shadow of a tree.

“Pon, is everyone from your group accounted for?”

“Huh? Oh, ah, h-hang on a sec...” Pon, the tanuki leader of the local yokai, started a headcount. “Yup, everyone’s here.”

“How about you, nekomata?” President Momone asked, turning to Ai.

“Let me see, meow...” Ai mumbled before running over to her friends. She returned a few minutes later, slightly out of breath. “We’re all good, meow. The whole kitten catboodle’s here.”

“All right,” President Momone said with a nod before turning back to Yulia.

“Then yes, all of the yokai under our protection are present here.”

“I see... Very well, then. I shall stand down here,” Yulia said, lowering the head of her axe to the ground as she turned to walk away.

“The original mission I received from the church was for something else, anyway,” she muttered as she walked past me, just before she disappeared into the dark of night.

“Whew...”

Suddenly overcome with exhaustion, I dropped to the ground and sat down on the spot. The sticky situation had been resolved thanks to President Momone... but it got really tense for a moment there.

“Thanks a bunch, President Momone. You’re a lifesaver.”

“It’s no problem at all. Now you owe me three favors.”

“Urk...”

It was starting to feel like she was in the market for me owing her favors... The thought of having to repay her one day was kind of scary.

“But that nun sure withdrew easily.”

“Huh? Wasn’t that because you name-dropped your grandfather?”

“Maybe, but something doesn’t feel right.”

“...”

Now that she mentioned it, Yulia had crossed an ocean to come to this town specifically. She said it was true she’d been transferred here as a nun, but she didn’t deny she was also working as an exorcist. And if she wasn’t really after the local harmless gaggle of yokai, then who was she after? A target worth a trip all the way to Japan...

“Oh...”

Something suddenly clicked into place in my mind. It was only a theory, but there was a possibility... I knew at least one big target an exorcist might be after who was living right here in this very town.

The vampire Rosalind.



“Hahh... Hahh...”

Leaving Ai and the other yokai to President Momone, I took off running down the mountain path. My destination was Rosalind’s mansion. I had no idea what kind of transportation Yulia was using, so I hurried as fast as I could.

Vampires were particularly detested in the West. Rosalind had said herself that she was practically a fugitive there. Her story there had ended with her getting sunk to the bottom of the ocean a hundred years ago, but if the church had somehow found out she was back, then...

Of course, it was also possible I was just being paranoid. There was no guarantee that the “original mission” Yulia had mentioned was to eliminate Rosalind. I didn’t even know which way Yulia had gone after leaving the mountain. Perhaps she didn’t even know Rosalind was living here. But whatever the odds were, I just couldn’t shake the sinking feeling I had. Letting that fuel me, I ran until my breath was ragged and then some.

“Hey, Rekka, how about joining the track team and building some stamina sometime? Just a thought that crossed my mind.”

“Shut... up...!”

I didn't want to hear that from someone who just leisurely floated through the air all the time! Except... she was kind of right. I had to think about what building my stamina would do for me as I bent over and leaned my weight on my knees to catch my breath.

"Hahh... Hahh..."

After gulping down a few deep breaths of air, I looked up at the sloped road before me. Rosalind's mansion was just at the top of this hill.

"Time to go...!"

I broke into a sprint once more, R tagging along like a caboose as usual. About halfway up the hill, I could see the red roof of the mansion come into view... along with Yulia and Rosalind fighting out front!

"Rosalind! Yulia!"

"Rekka?"

Rosalind looked over when I called out to her, her arms crossed. And Yulia didn't waste that opportunity. Without a moment's notice, her axe cut through the air with a whooshing sound.

"...Hmph!"

However, Rosalind simply scoffed and transformed into countless bats to avoid the attack. The swarm flew straight past Yulia, putting a good deal of distance between them before turning back into a blonde vampire.

"The holy weapon I prepared doesn't seem to be making contact..." Yulia muttered flatly.

"I'm used to being attacked by your lot. And I must say, there's nothing more irritating."

"If running away is too much trouble, why don't you let me put you out of your unholy misery right here and now?"

"I don't consider myself benevolent or upright by any means, but being so denounced is quite infuriating. And, I'll have you know, I've never once run from the likes of you." Rosalind narrowed her eyes, spreading her arms wide in a provoking challenge. "I will take you out just like the countless rabble that

came before you.”

“What a talkative bat...” Yulia readjusted her grip on her axe, the tension between them mounting ever higher.

So... what was I supposed to do now? I hadn’t known Yulia for more than a few days, but I certainly couldn’t stand by and just watch her pick a deathmatch with Rosalind. There had to be a peaceful way to settle this.

“Yulia! Stop it!”

Finally, Yulia looked my way.

“You again, Rekka? I was surprised to see you earlier, but for this to happen twice in a row... Don’t tell me you’re going to stand up for this vampire, too.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly right.”

Yulia fell silent for a moment before the look in her eyes hardened.

“How frightening indeed... So this is the charm power that vampires use to control people. And poor Rekka has already become a thrall of this vampire...”

“Wh-What? No!”

While it was true I had been the victim of Rosalind’s charm before... multiple times... I wasn’t just some mindless puppet like Yulia was imagining. I tried to tell her that, but she seemed convinced already. She ignored me and turned back to what she deemed to be the real threat—Rosalind—with a furious look in her eyes.

“As a servant of God, I will never forgive you demons that wreak havoc on humanity! In the name of the Lord, I will cut you down where you stand!”

“Ha! I’d like to see you try!”

Rosalind snorted, then made to leap at Yulia when...

“Please wait a minute.”

A silver-haired maid calmly walked between them.

“Suzuran...?!”

Yulia’s surprise upon seeing me was nothing compared to the moment

Suzuran appeared. Her eyes widened in shock, and her face looked like it had frozen over.

“What is it, Suzuran? This woman here is my guest. Did I not tell you and the others to wait inside the house until I was done conducting my business with her?”

It seemed like Rosalind had been trying to keep her maids from getting tangled up with the people who were inevitably coming after her. However, Suzuran had disobeyed her orders and come to her aid anyway.

“Mistress, would you please allow me some time to speak with Miss Yulia?”

“I told you not to address the likes of her so politely... but fine.”

Seeing Suzuran bow so humbly, Rosalind had no choice but to grant her request, however reluctant she might be to do so. After giving Rosalind a word of gratitude, Suzuran turned around and faced Yulia.

“Miss Yulia.”

“...”

Yulia flinched and braced herself reflexively. But rather than looking like she was preparing to go on the offensive or defensive, she just looked uncertain. Meanwhile, Suzuran bowed her head.

“Miss Rosalind is my mistress. I serve as her maid. So, please, won’t you lower your sword—or, as the case may be, your axe?”

“This can’t be... Not you too, Suzuran...”

Yulia groaned with an expression several times more aggrieved than how she’d looked at me earlier. I suppose the shock must have been even greater to think that something had happened to a close friend.

“I can’t believe you would sink your evil fangs into the kindhearted Suzuran, too... Unforgivable! You have to be stopped, vampire!” she said through her clenched jaw.

It seemed Yulia had once again come to her own conclusion on things. She reached her right hand into her robe and swiftly pulled out something small and glimmering.

Ka-chink!

The silver flash of her throwing knife was deflected by a second—a knife Suzuran had thrown—and clattered to the ground.

“Kuh...! Please don’t get in my way, Suzuran!”

Yulia threw more knives in anger, but they all met the same fate as the first. Once she was done striking down Yulia’s knives, Suzuran calmly returned the rest of her own to the holster on her thigh.

“Those knives just now were all aimed at my mistress, correct?”

“...Of course. Why do you ask?”

“Why aren’t you aiming for me?”

“You’re being controlled by the vampire. It is only natural that I prioritize defeating her.”

Suzuran’s stoic expression remained unchanged upon hearing Yulia’s answer.

“Then, Miss Yulia, you perceive all nonhumans—vampires like my mistress included—as enemies to be defeated at all costs. Is that correct?”

“Yes, quite so.”

“Then you should readjust your aim,” Suzuran informed her plainly. “I may be a human now, but I used to be an artificial life-form called a homunculus—a being given life by an alchemist.”

“...What?” Yulia nearly gasped as she stared at Suzuran with a blank expression. “B-But, Suzuran, you’re clearly...”

“Yes, in my current form, I am. And that is all thanks to Sir Namidare over there. But it wasn’t long ago that I was a man-made life-form... A nonhuman, as you call them.”

“...”

Rosalind and I watched on silently as Suzuran told Yulia her story. I didn’t really know what she was thinking, but it was clear she was the only one Yulia was going to listen to. That’s what my gut told me. Suzuran tilted her head slightly, looking at Yulia questioningly.

“Now, what will you do with me, Miss Yulia? Will I be spared because I am currently a human? Or am I an enemy that must be eliminated because of my past as a nonhuman?”

“Th-That is...”

Yulia trailed off. She'd been rendered speechless. The head of her axe swayed from left to right, as though in reflection of her wavering emotions. Suzuran's status as a former-homunculus-turned-human was particularly unique, even among my lineup of unusual friends. If humans were good, and nonhumans were evil... Where did that leave Suzuran, who had been both at some point in her life?

“Suzuran wasn't a human before... but she is one right now... All nonhumans must be eradicated, but... the vampire... But... I... Oh, dear father in heaven, please give me guidance!” Yulia clutched her axe tightly, her eyes wandering this way and that as if she were searching for an answer.

“Miss Yulia.”

Yulia flinched when Suzuran said her name.

“Does your dedication to the teachings of God stem from the fact the church adopted and raised you?”

What? She was adopted and raised by the church?

“Hey, does that mean...”

“Yes, I used to be an orphan,” Yulia explained, prompted by my confusion. “Someone from the church adopted me when I was all alone, and they raised me to be the way I am today. A devout child of God... and an exorcist who protects people.”

Suzuran had mentioned before that she'd talked with Yulia about how she'd become a nun during their get-togethers at the church. That was probably how she'd learned about Yulia's past. And to an orphan like her, the church must have felt like a parent. That was why she was so faithfully devoted to it and its teachings... to an almost frightening extent.

“That's right... There's no way that God is wrong... Those who have turned

their backs on God must face their punishment... That's why... That's why...!"

Yulia continued to mutter as she tried to assure herself of her righteousness. She pressed a hand to her forehead like she was in pain, but her eyes were swimming as she looked at us through the space between her fingers.

"If you insist on battle, Miss Yulia, then as unfortunate as it may be, I will accept your challenge. However..." Suzuran reached for her holster once more, looking directly at Yulia. "Please refrain from doing so just because God said to."

"What?! What are you saying? For the devoted, God's word is law! Cutting down those who would sully his name is the only way—"

"A life dictated completely by the words of another is no life at all. Even if those words are the commandments of God himself," Suzuran stated clearly. "My former self was created in order to kill my current mistress, Miss Rosalind. For 200 years, I lived my life trying to fulfill the singular mission that had been bestowed upon me by my master."

"..."

"But once I became a human and looked back on that life... I realized what a terrifying thing it had been. Just the thought of it makes my hands shake now. I had been trying to kill someone with no motive of my own, simply obeying the words of another... And with this human heart, I can appreciate how wretched I truly was. That's why I'm asking you," Suzuran pleaded. "If you wish to subject me and my mistress to your judgment, then please do it because you so desire, Miss Yulia. I do not want to see you carry out such a dreadful task for any other reason."

"Say what you will, but this is my life! It's the only life I've ever known...!" Tears welled in Yulia's eyes as she leveled her axe at Rosalind and Suzuran. "You... You're just a servant of the devil trying to sway my faith and make me turn my back on God! As punishment, I shall... I shall...!"

"Hmph. Of course this is how it ends. What a waste of time," Rosalind muttered in a bored tone after watching their exchange unfold.

She then readied herself to intercept the attack Yulia looked like she'd be launching any moment now. As for me...

“Wait,” I said, stepping between the girls and spreading my arms wide.

“What now, Rekka? There’s no further point in a diplomatic approach. This girl is beyond reason. Her lot only know how to wail about God this, God that. They blindly believe in all the nonsense they’ve ever been fed, despite having never met or spoken to this so-called God of theirs.”

“Silence!” Yulia raged at Rosalind’s mocking words.

“That’s why I said to wait! If you’ve never had a proper conversation with the guy before...” I thrust my finger out, pointing in the direction of my house in the distance where Harissa and the others were. “How about we go ask God what he really thinks?”





From Rosalind's place, I went and got the freeloading angel from my house.

"What is it, Rekka? I only just finished showering... You're interrupting my beauty sleep on top of the clouds, you know?"

"Shut up. Try and be useful for once, you hopeless angel."

With my hands on her back, I pushed her along until we got to the top of the hill... and were standing right in front of Yulia. Well, Rachelle was an angel, so she was more floating than standing there, but whatever.

"A-An angel...?"

"Yep, that's me! The angel of love and passion, Rachelle, at your service."

It seemed not even Yulia had expected an angel to appear before her, and she stood there looking at Rachelle agape and wide-eyed as Rachelle oh-so-casually introduced herself.

"Are you... real?"

"What? Gosh... People have really been doubting me recently, but I swear to you that I'm a 100-percent authentic, totally real angel. You think these wings and this halo are just for show? Do I have to perform a couple of miracles to get you to believe me?"

"N-No! I apologize for my rudeness!"

Seeing Rachelle's discontent expression, Yulia fell to her knees in a panic and offered a prayer.

"Hmm... So, you're one of those so-called nuns, huh?"

"Y-Yes!"

"I see. So, Rekka, why did you drag me all the way out here?"

"Didn't I explain it on the way...?"

She really was a useless angel... With no other choice, I decided to refresh her on the key questions I needed answered.

"Rachelle, Yulia is both a nun and an exorcist. In the name of God, she makes

a living hunting nonhumans. Basically vampires like Rosalind and stuff.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So... what do you think God has to say about killing all those nonhumans?”

“Why do you ask?”

It seemed like Rachelle hadn’t quite gotten her head around what I was really getting at.

“I’m asking if God really condones all that.”

“Not really,” Rachelle replied flatly.

“B-But the teachings of the church—” Yulia immediately tried to interject.

“Yeah, exactly. Those are the teachings of the *church*, no? The teachings of a group of humans trying to manage other humans. It’s only natural for humans to fear vampires and demons, the same way it’s natural for rabbits and mice to fear foxes and cats. Of course they’d want them exterminated. And by spreading that idea through their teachings, the church recruits more people for their cause without directly getting any blood on their hands. However, the big man upstairs has never made a statement on the matter. It’s not something he’s asked for, and it’s not something he desires.”

Yulia desperately tried to argue, but Rachelle held a finger up to her lips as she explain the facts of the matter simply. Hearing it all, the strength drained from Yulia’s body, leaving her in a daze. She was probably at a complete loss after having the foundations of her faith so shaken. Straight from the horse’s mouth, too. Well, Rachelle wasn’t God, she was just a mouthpiece, but surely hearing it from an angel was persuasive enough.

“Anyway, serving God is the angels’ job, so there’s no need for you humans to worry about things like that. I mean, if you want to do my job for me, I won’t argue... Uuugh, actually, now that I’m thinking about it, I haven’t met my quota yet...”

Rachelle trailed off into moaning as she clutched her head. Serves her right, though. That’s what she got for slacking off at my place for days now. Next, Suzuran approached the stock-still Yulia.

“Miss Yulia, what is the matter?”

“...”

“Miss Yulia?” Suzuran asked again when she didn’t respond. “Let me hear your answer.”

“My...”

“That’s right. The God you believe in doesn’t wish for either me or my mistress to be eradicated from this world. So what will you do now, Miss Yulia? It’s up to you to choose how you deal with us.”

“...”

“Will you go back on your words? Will you now claim to defeat us in the name of the church that saved you rather than in the name of God?”

“H-Hey, Suzuran...”

I was a little nervous about her doing anything that might upset Yulia, but she seemed intent on pressing the matter.

“Sir Namidare, I would like Miss Yulia to decide for herself,” she explained.

She then turned back to Yulia.

“When I became a human thanks to Sir Namidare here... He freed me from the order my master gave me 200 years ago. The order that I was chained to. But being released from that chain was terrifying,” she said nostalgically. “I felt like I was losing something important—my purpose. And without that, I was lost. It was like I was starting over again from nothing, a blank slate... Just like you are now. But what you choose to write on the blank slate you’re given is up to you, I believe.”

Yulia silently listened to Suzuran until the end. And then...

“I...”



That Sunday...

“Welcome, lost lambs. Thank you for coming to today’s mass.”

Yulia stood at the pulpit dressed in her habit and greeted all the churchgoers in a quiet, welcoming voice. Suzuran and I had come to listen to her sermon, and were sitting together on one of the pews in the back.

So... in the end, Yulia hadn't exterminated Suzuran or Rosalind.

Anyone would have found it difficult to abandon teachings they'd been following their whole life, especially on the spot like that. But what Rachelle said about God from her point of view as an angel and Suzuran's story seemed to have moved her.

"I will put your disposal on hold for now, vampire. However, know that I have seen many humans suffer at the hands of demons like you before. I will not eliminate you without reason... but if I ever find that you've brought harm to humans, I will not hesitate to end you."

Those had been Yulia's parting words for Rosalind that day. Rosalind had scoffed, of course, but Suzuran and I both had breathed a sigh of relief. And now, after all that, here we were at the church...

"I believe some of those with us today are attending mass for the very first time, so I would like to begin with a small lesson about God's wonderful love."

Today was Yulia's first mass since coming to town. I was hoping she'd think carefully about what she wanted to do from here on out as she fulfilled her duties as a nun.

"...Come to think of it, why did you start coming to church to study love in the first place, Suzuran?"

The only real reason we'd been able to reach a peaceful conclusion to the situation was Suzuran, who'd made friends with Yulia by coming to church to see and talk with her every day.

"Because I wish to have a child."

"Bwuh!"

That unexpected answer made me choke on thin air. I rushed to cover my mouth, but it was too late. Yulia shot me a glare from the pulpit, then cleared her throat before continuing her sermon.

"Ahem... So, ultimately, God will always watch over everyone because he loves everyone equally. Furthermore..."

"...What do you want a child for?" I asked Suzuran in a whisper, careful not to disturb anyone else.

"I've found myself interested in the community called family. When I was a homunculus, I gave up on the idea of a family because I had no reproductive ability... But now that I am a human, I would like to have a child of my own," Suzuran answered plainly in a quiet voice.

"I-I see..."

So she wanted a family, huh? It kind of made sense when she put it that way, but there was still a major issue to address...

"Suzuran... You do know you can't have a child on your own, right?"

"I am aware. A man is necessary to successfully perform the reproductive deed with me. Is that correct?"

"You're not wrong, but could you lower your voice a little...?"

I glanced around with a red face. Suzuran had been speaking quietly from the beginning, but the church was so silent that I was still nervous about someone overhearing us. And as I continued to look around like a shady character, Suzuran added...

"Although, I do have a candidate in mind, so there is no need to worry about that."

"Huh...?"

A candidate in mind... Wait, she'd already found someone?! I was already surprised, as it was right after hearing that she wanted a kid, so I didn't have the courage to ask for details. Instead, I just silently sat there wondering who she might mean.

"...Thus, as humans, we must also must come to understand and forgive each other through love. That way, we can walk together towards living in peace just as God has intended." Yulia stopped there and crossed herself, offering a silent prayer up to God in her heart. "May the world be filled with love. Amen."

Time Traveler L's Life on the Streets: Log 2

Homeless time traveler L was currently in quite a pickle. That was a fact she vehemently didn't want to acknowledge, but there was no hiding from the undeniable truth. Yet that hadn't stopped her from trying. In fact, it was her dogged persistence in refusing to accept reality that had escalated the situation to its current level of seriousness.

"...It stinks..."

That was the short of it.

The kimono L wore was made of superfibers that would never fray or dirty. They even had deodorizing properties, but that was intended to compensate for normal daily use—not hardcore camping outside for a month and counting. After the way L had been living, her high-tech clothes could no longer keep up, leaving certain parts of her—which parts, exactly, need not be said—rather smelly.

Even if she was an artificial life-form, she was still a young lady at heart. She didn't want to cringe every time she smelled her own hair. She wanted to find a way to wash it. And if possible, the rest of herself, too.

But unable to come to grips with that, L half sighed, half groaned as she stared at the flowing water right in front of her. After coming to the river to fish, she'd coincidentally come across a rather convenient, protected space under a bridge. She'd been staying there ever since and had staked it as her home ground—quite literally.

"Ugggh..."

As long as she could stay out of sight, she could theoretically sneak into the river to bathe. Theoretically. But when she looked at the relatively clear water up close, she could see all the fish, frogs, and other animals living in it. With her Kiklim eyes, it was easy to spot the waste and microscopic toxins that polluted the river. That was natural, of course. And the levels certainly weren't high

enough to be cause for concern. Especially not for an advanced artificial life-form like L.

And yet... Even though she was willing to eat the fish she caught from the river, when it came to jumping in and bathing alongside them... Something made her hesitate. Why was that? It certainly wasn't rational or logical. But nevertheless, she just couldn't bring herself to get in.

"Oh, well. I'll just have to find somewhere else to wash myself."

L stood up from where she'd been squatting by the riverside... and then froze for a moment.

"It feels like I've been talking to myself more lately..." she mumbled forlornly with a heavy sigh.



And so L set off in search of clean water to bathe with. But with no particular destination in mind, she ended up wandering aimlessly. On top of that, she was currently in battery-saver mode, so she was walking around without her obstacle detector turned on. She was proceeding around corners with extreme caution just in case she happened upon her target, Rekka Namidare, which only tacked on to the time it took her to get anywhere. But eventually...

"I-I finally found one..."

L immediately fell to her hands and knees, panting as she was a little out of breath. The miracle she'd found was a public tap at a small park in town. As such, the water wasn't exactly pristine, but it was still several times better than the river. Now she could finally bathe... Or so she thought, but when it came to working out the exact details of how she'd go about it, a certain problem suddenly presented itself.

"All right! Let's play soccer in the park today!"

"Whaaat? But I wanna play kick the can!"

"Let's play soldiers instead! I can dig a pitfall in the sandpit!"

"I brought water guns!"

At roughly the same time L arrived, four children wandered into the park to

play.

“Why did they have to come now of all times?!”

Aren’t the children of this era meant to be so absorbed with handheld game consoles that they barely go outside? And at this time of day, the park should belong to elderly people basking in the sun on benches! Things like soccer should be forbidden! Really, the park shouldn’t have any kids in it right now at all! Children should be at home lazing about and playing games in the air conditioning!

Audibly grinding her teeth, L resentfully watched the playing children from where she’d hidden herself behind the park gate.

“Kids are really so troublesome!”

Appearance-wise, L herself was no more than a child. And as far as age was concerned, she was even younger than most of the children present. But either way... The important thing was that she wasn’t bathing with pesky kids around. She thought about the situation for a moment and came up with a plan.

“I’ll just have to drive away the kids with my power!”

She clenched a determined fist in the air and then proceeded quietly through the bushes so that the children wouldn’t see her as she made her way to the public restroom.

“No one’s here, right...?”

L checked each stall to make sure she was alone before taking out a small diamond-shaped crystal from the sleeve of her kimono. It was a tool used mainly for disguises that hovered over a user’s head and cast a hologram down over their body.

“Hmm... In this era, the most effective tactic against children should be to frighten them with what they fear the most... So... a scary adult? Yeah, that should do.”

L ran the search engine in her head for a list of “scary adults” that would fit in in the present day and age, and then filtered through those results to find a disguise.

“Aha! This ‘yakuza’ character looks perfect for the job!”

Once she picked something out, she activated the hologram gem to make her look like a yakuza gang member. She then looked in the restroom mirror to check out her disguise.

“Yup, this is perfect! Wait, I need to adjust how I talk, too. I need to sound gruff and ill-tempered. A-Ahem...! You brats’ll be in a world’a trouble if you cross me! All right, yeah, that should be perfect—I mean, yeah, thaz right!”

After using some installed software to modify the tone and pitch of her voice to make her sound like an older man, L was fully satisfied with her costume. And indeed, it was convincing. So convincing, in fact, that...

“Kyaaaaah!”

A woman walked into the restroom and took one look at L before shrieking.

“Eh?”

L cocked her head to the side wondering why the woman was screaming for a moment... before realizing she now looked like an adult man in the women’s restroom.

“W-Wait!”

“Nooooo! Someone heeeeelp!”

And her yakuza getup wasn’t doing her any favors. The woman seemed to be convinced L was going to attack her, and she screamed bloody murder.

“Ugh! Be quiet, would you?!”

“HEEEELP!”

“What’s going on here?!”

L grabbed the woman’s arm in an attempt to silence her, which only scared her more. She then tried to run. And to make matters worse, a police officer just so happened to be passing by as the two of them burst out of the restroom in a struggle.

“...!”

It only took one look for the officer to figure out what was going on. A yakuza

gang member was harassing an innocent woman—or at least, that's what it looked like.

“You there! Unhand that woman! I will protect the citizens of this town!”

“Why meeeeeee?!”

On the verge of tears, L fled the park... still dressed like a yakuza.



After L somehow managed to shake the police officer, she returned to the park out of breath and wheezing. She was hoping the children would at least be gone by now, but no such luck. They were still playing in the sandpit without a care in the world.

“They've sure got some nerve to be playing around while I was running for my life...”

Her indignation was really closer to spite, not that she could tell the difference right now. But at least the officer wasn't on her heels any longer. She'd just get back to her original mission. She took a deep breath, mustered as intimidating an aura as she could manage, and marched right over to the sandpit.

“Yo, brats!” she shouted as abrasively as possible.

The kids all looked up at her at once, though they weren't exactly making eye contact. They were actually looking well over L's head because the hologram made her appear taller than she really was.

“Hey, that's the guy who got chased out of the park by the cops!”

“Hrk!”

It seemed they'd witnessed her dramatic exit earlier. Having her momentum killed like that made L hesitate for a moment, but she managed to collect herself and press on.

“Whatever, brats! I'm takin' over this place, ya hear? It's mine now, so scram! Go cryin' home to yer mommies!”

Hearing a grown man yell at them so rudely, the children looked up at L in

terror.

All right, one more push and they should leave...

But just as L thought that...

“Who are you?! We were here first! Go away!”

Unexpectedly, the lone girl of the group angrily snapped back at L with a fierce look in her eyes.

“...!”

The hologram gem made L look like a yakuza, so for this young girl to talk back like that... She really had some guts. But L couldn't afford to back down, either. Her bath was on the line!

“Just beat it already! Otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

Yet no matter how threatening she tried to be, the little girl just wouldn't back down. Her attitude was so confident, it was almost like she'd been dealing with ruffians all her life. She and L stared each other down, and the little girl almost seemed to bristle like an angry cat. L then heard an odd cracking sound, but she was too caught up in the heat of the moment to stop and think about what it might be.

“Ugh, that's enough! I'm telling ya to get lost, ya hear?! Get lost, or you'll learn tha hard way what happens to little runts who don't listen!”

Irritated at how poorly her eviction plan was coming along, L stomped her foot and kicked the sand in the sandpit all over the place. That part wasn't so much an act... but it should have been a terrifying display nonetheless to the children.

“...?”

Yet for some reason, the kids were now all staring at her blankly. They looked like they had no idea what she was going on about, which was so puzzling to her that it stopped her in her tracks. The young girl who had been standing up to L aside, why did the rest of them seem to be so unafraid of her now?

“...?”

L had activated a hologram to appear as an adult to them. An authority figure. That meant she should be towering over them... so why was it that they were now actually looking her in the eye?

“...Huh?!”

L patted her body in a panic before finally looking up overhead. The hologram gem was gone... But where? Quickly looking around, L found it—or its remnants—smashed into tiny pieces at her feet. Why was a mystery, but it was certifiably broken. And the hologram would have blinked out the second that happened, which must be why the children were looking at her so dubiously now.

“Oh, so you’re just a kid, too.”

The girl—the de facto leader of the group of children—crossed her arms and huffed through her nose. L nearly let out a flustered gasp, but somehow managed to gather the remainder of her stubbornness to maintain her fierce attitude.

“Tch! I guess it’s come down to using force! Leave this park at once!”

L pulled a gun from her kimono sleeve and pointed it right between the little girl’s eyes. It was the gun she’d brought with her from the future to assassinate Rekka Namidare. One shot was enough to reduce a human to particle dust in an instant... although R had been able to block it easily.

“Hmph! You’re the one who should leave!”

The little girl didn’t seem to realize the danger she was in. Instead, she responded in kind and pulled out her water gun. She really, honestly, and truly had no intention of backing down. L had to stop and wonder what she should do now. She didn’t want to seriously fire a weapon at a child...

“Hm?”

But as L was hesitating, the little girl raised both eyebrows in shock and grabbed her nose. Then...

“You kinda stink.”

She uttered the ultimate forbidden word. Hearing it, the rope tethering L to

all reason snapped.

“Nooooo! Don’t say I stiiiink!”

Tears gushed from L’s eyes as the truth she’d been running from was shoved in her face—by a little girl, no less—and she reflexively squeezed the trigger.

“...”

But the little girl seemed to be bristling again...

Crack!

“Huh?!”

Before anything else happened, a strange sound came from the gun in L’s hand. And then, even when the trigger was fully pulled, nothing happened.

This broke, too?! This makes twice in a row... No, wait.

The timing was way too convenient for it to be a coincidence. Had the little girl done something? Was she the reason both the gun and the hologram gem had broken?

“Wah!”

But as L was contemplating all this, she was surprised by a splash of water to the face. Come to think of it, a water gun had been pointed her way...

“Wait, stop it! Stop! Don’t spray me any more! Please!”

“What do you mean?! You’re the one who started this fight! Face me fair and square!”

“I’m not fighting you!”

L ran in circles while covering her head as the little girl chased her with the water gun at the ready.

All I wanted to do was wash my hair! Why did it have to end up like this?!

“Aaagh! This is all R’s fault!”

L screamed aloud as her tragic flight continued. If R had overheard it, she would have undoubtedly replied with, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But R wasn’t who appeared next.

“Fam! What are you doing?” someone called from the park entrance.

When the girl chasing L—Fam, apparently—heard it, she came to a screeching halt and turned to look towards the entrance.

“Rain! Do you need something?”

Since they were quite far from each other, Fam cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled back loudly.

“It’s almost time for dinner! Hurry on home!”

“Got it! I’ll be there soon!”

Once she had responded to Rain, the girl who had come to pick her up, Fam turned to her friends she’d been playing together with.

“I gotta go home now! See you guys tomorrow!” she said with a cheerful smile.

The next moment, she had already dashed off towards Rain. She continued waving to her friends until she reached the gate, then departed.

“Fam’s gone now, so we should head home, too.”

“Yeah.”

“See you tomorrow!”

With their leader gone, the other children—who all seemed to be younger than Fam—decided to call it a day and split up too, leaving the park and wandering down the road their own homes.



“...”

The only one left behind was L, who was sopping wet after being hosed down with a water gun. In a way, her mission to drive the children away from the park had succeeded, but... why did it feel so terrible?

“Wait, so that was Fam, huh?”

If she remembered correctly, Fam was the gremlin in Rekka’s company who had the ability to destroy delicate machinery. Before now, L had mostly overlooked the heroines that Rekka Namidare had saved so far. She’d only scanned through the material available on them before departing on her mission from the future, and had put it out of her mind until now.

“Anyway, now I can finally wash myself...”

Forcing her exhausted body to stand up, L stumbled over to the tap in the park and loosened the sash around her kimono. Despite the grueling road to get here, she was at last where she wanted to be. She could refresh herself now, and no one would call her stinky again. But the moment she placed her hand on the faucet...

“Hey, you there! What do you think you’re doing?”

The police officer that had chased L as a yakuza out of the park earlier was now running towards her with a different menacing look than before.

“Huh? Umm, I just wanted to wash off some...”

“A girl like you shouldn’t be doing that in a place like this! Do that when you get home. Where do you live, little girl? I’ll take you there.”

“Umm...”

The officer had only stopped L with good intentions, but to her, this was unwanted interference. It wasn’t like she could just tell him where she lived. As she mumbled under her breath in hesitation to answer, the officer seemed to find her attitude suspicious and suddenly adopted a stern expression.

“Don’t tell me you’ve run away from home...”

“Uh...”

That was when L realized the situation was about to take an extremely troublesome turn.

“Why don’t you come with me down to the station?”

“No thank yooouuuuu!”

“Hey! Hold it right there!”

Why, oh why did it have to be like this? Why did she have to be chased by the police twice in one day? Everything had to be... Yes, surely it was...

“IT’S ALL R’S FAAAAUUUUUULT!”

L’s venting scream of agony echoed throughout the entire neighborhood.

About five hours later, L would come to realize that she should have just gone to the park in the middle of the night when there wouldn’t be any police officers or children around.

Chapter 3: Romcom x Sick Day

Monday, the following week...

After the deserted island incident two weeks ago and the Yulia incident last week, I was starting to worry that second semester was actually going to kill me. I felt safest while I was actually at school. I still hated studying, but with exams right around the corner, I had to suck it up... Wait a minute. I'm managing to get by right now, but what am I going to do about entrance exams in the future? How am I going to keep saving heroines and get into university at the same time?

“This really is gonna kill me...”

I fell flat across my desk when I realized what trouble I was in for. I was supposed to be the hero, but I was going to end up being the one that needed saving. Maybe I could just clone myself...

“I wish there was one more of me...”

“Shall I bring one over from a parallel world?”

“That feels like an invitation to get tangled in another story,” I replied lethargically to R’s indifferent suggestion.

“Haaahh...”

“What’s wrong, Rekka? That was an awfully long sigh,” Satsuki asked worriedly from the seat next to mine.

“Nothing... I was just worrying about the future.”

“I’m not sure why... But the barbecue is this weekend. If you’re feeling anxious, why don’t you try focusing on looking forward to that instead?”

“Oh, you’re right. I totally forgot about that.”

The barbecue was something I looked forward to every year. Remembering it lifted my spirits a little.

“What was that? What were you talking about?”

That was when Iris chimed in from the seat on my other side.

“Oh, the barbecue this weekend—”

“It’s nothing!”

Just as I started to answer her, Satsuki slapped her hand over my mouth to silence me. Iris pouted.

“What’s with that? Tell me what you were talking about!”

“I said it was nothing! Absolutely nothing!”

“I heard something about a barbecue! Are you going with Rekka? When?”

“None of your business!”

“Tell me!”

Satsuki and Iris immediately started bickering, though I wasn’t sure why Satsuki was trying to hide it. If Iris was free that day, we should invite her along. But just as I was thinking that...

“What a dumb face... You really must be an absolute simpleton,” R jeered in her typical curt and unwarranted fashion.

“Hmph! I get it! You’re trying to sneak out behind my back! Not so fast, Satsuki!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you of all people, Iris!”

In the split second I wasn’t paying attention, their conversation had gone off the rails, and they were now arguing about something totally different. I wished they would work it out, but I also wished they’d stop yanking on my arms...

“You there. Why are you two pulling on Rekka like that? Let me join in, too.”

“Please give me a break...”

Eventually, the noise lured Rosalind over, complicating the situation even more. Satsuki and Iris had me by either arm, and she was now tugging on my shirt as my classmates stared at me both longingly and resentfully. I had no idea what to do... I was just about ready to give up altogether when the classroom

door suddenly rattled open.

“Is Rekka Namidare here?” an upperclassman asked from the doorway.

“That’s me. What can I do for you?” I responded, unable to raise my hand or wave since both my arms were occupied.

“...What are you doing?”

The upperclassman took one look at me getting pulled from side to side by three different girls and immediately adopted a dubious expression. I guess anyone would feel that way about seeing someone in this kind of fray.

“You’re as much of a problem child as the rumors say.”

“Er, ahem... So, uh, was there anything you needed?”

She had no idea how much what she’d just muttered hurt me, but I tried to keep a straight face as I continued the conversation.

She shook her head in resignation and said, “The president is calling you. Could you come to the student council room?”



If President Momone was calling, I had no choice but to go. Breaking free from Satsuki and the others, I made my way from the classroom to the student council room. But I was definitely only going because President Momone had called and I had to. Totally.

“Hm? Why do you look so relieved?” President Momone asked when I entered, one eyebrow raised.

“No reason,” I replied with a wave of my hand.

“He was surrounded by three girls and grinning like a maniac.”

I’d tried to brush it off, but the upperclassman who’d escorted me here—the VP of the student council—dropped the bomb. And hey, I wasn’t grinning!

“Hahh... I see you’re still up to your usual antics, problem child.”

“President, should we get the disciplinary committee to keep an eye on him?”

“Hey!”

President Momone laughed, but the VP looked dead serious. I hadn't expected her to have such an exaggerated reaction to witnessing a single scene like that... Maybe it was because President Momone was feeding her lies about me? This sucks.

"You look pretty sour there, Rekka. You know lots of people would kill to be in this position, right? Check yourself."

R, everybody! Here to make things sting worse!

Just moments ago, I was thinking about how school was my last refuge... What is this sense of utter disenfranchisement? What did I have left? The bathroom at my house? Is that the only place people would leave me alone?

"Hm? What's with that faraway look in your eye?"

"No... It's nothing..."

Unable to admit that I was having trouble coming to grips with reality, I buried my face in my hands and lied.

"Well, whatever." President Momone readily ignored my plebeian student troubles and got straight to the point. "Are you free today?"

"Huh? Well, I guess, but..."

"Good. Then stop by Midori's house on your way home."

"Wha?"

It felt like the conversation had progressed several stages in the blink of an eye.

"Wh-Why? What do you want me to go to Tokiwa's house for?"

"Apparently she's caught a seasonally late summer cold," President Momone explained.

"Yeah? Well, it does still kind of feel like summer."

"That girl keeps the air conditioner running nonstop. I've told her countless times to set the timer when she goes to sleep, but... Anyway, that's not the important part."

With an exasperated sigh, President Momone waved her hand as if to sweep

her grievances aside for the moment.

“Both of Midori’s parents work full-time, so they get home late. Normally I’d go take care of her myself, but as you can see...” President Momone indicated her desk, which was decorated with a mountain of papers. “The cultural festival is next month, and I’ll be busy with preparations for the foreseeable future. I won’t be going home until late this evening myself.”

“Whoa, that’s quite a stack you’ve got there. Does the festival really take all that paperwork?”

“Well, there’s a lot involved... But to get back to the topic at hand, I’m sure you’ve figured it out by now, but I want you to go and look after Midori in my stead.”

“Yeah, I figured that’s where this was going, but... Why me?”

Firstly, I was a guy. Secondly, we weren’t even in the same grade. Lastly, Tokiwa was home alone, and her parents would be late. I couldn’t help feeling there were more appropriate candidates than me...

“You’re a member of the light literature club, aren’t you? You should gratefully accept the opportunity to go visit your sick club president.”

“Th-That’s not the issue...”

“And you still owe me, remember?”

“Ugh...”

That, I couldn’t argue with. I’d had to rely on President Momone to handle the conflict between Yulia and Ai the other day. And that wasn’t the first favor she’d done me, either. So, knowing I was in her debt, I sighed and nodded reluctantly.

“Understood... I’d be happy to go.”

“You should have just said so from the beginning,” President Momone said smugly before cracking a grin. “Oh, that’s right. Let me tell you something that’ll get your blood going a little.”

“What?”

“Midori’s three times more sensual when she’s down with a cold.”

I nearly fell straight to the floor.



President Momone gave me Tokiwa’s address, and I made my way there after school.

“So, uh... What are you guys doing here, Satsuki? Tsumiki?”

They had somehow heard that I was going to Tokiwa’s house to look after her and decided to tag along.

“I can’t let you be alone with Tokiwa.”

“Yeah! Who knows what you might do to her in her compromised state?”

“Wow...”

I thought I was going to cry. They trusted me so little...

It turned out Iris and Rosalind had also heard I was going to Tokiwa’s, but they had other things to do that afternoon... Nevertheless, it didn’t stop them from saying similar hurtful things before we all left school.

My shoulders slumped as I pressed the doorbell to Tokiwa’s house listlessly. Maybe it was broken? I couldn’t hear anything from inside.

“Well, President Momone said she’d let her know we were coming, so I guess we can just go in?”

I used the key I’d gotten from President Momone to unlock the front door.

“Hello? Anyone home? We came to visit you, Tokiwa!” I called from the front entrance, but there was no reply. “Is she asleep...? I guess we should be quiet then.”

We took off our shoes and did our best to keep the noise to a minimum. President Momone had told me Tokiwa’s room was on the second floor, but I figured we should stop in the kitchen first to drop off the ingredients we’d brought for porridge. Wait...

Whap... Whap...

Uh, what was that? It sounded like wet footsteps...

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

Satsuki and Tsumiki noticed it too, and the three of us stood there listening carefully. The footsteps seemed to be coming from down the hall? I turned to look... and saw a shuffling shadow creeping towards us with long, wet hair dripping behind it.

“KYAAAAAH!”

The second Satsuki saw it, she let out a high-pitched scream and turned to bolt, banging her forehead against the half-open front door.

“...!”

Tsumiki went pale and stiff. It seemed she was frozen with terror.

While it did look like something straight out of a horror movie, I'd been through this before. I knew it was probably...

“Tokiwa?”

“...”

Her voice was too soft to hear, but I could see her nodding. I knew it had to be her underneath all that hair. It was so long that it covered her almost completely. Only her toes were visible.

“What are you doing? Your hair's sopping wet.”

After realizing it was Tokiwa and regaining her composure, Satsuki was back to her normal self. Truth be told, this wasn't the first time she'd mistaken Tokiwa with her hair down for a ghost.

“...”

Tokiwa was saying something, but her voice was still too quiet to hear.

“Come again?”

“...”

I tilted my head slightly, and Tokiwa seemed to hesitate for a moment before

darting down the hallway towards us at a good clip. Her long hair swayed as she ran, exposing a glimpse of bare skin underneath.

“Wait, Tokiwa, are you naked right now?!”

Had she been in the shower?! That would explain why her hair was wet, I guess... But wait! Why was she coming at me?!

“Tokiwa! Don’t you dare hug Rekka in that state!”

“Nice save, Satsuki!”

Satsuki jumped in front of Tokiwa at the last second, successfully averting what would have been a disaster. I praised my childhood friend with a thumbs-up.

Whenever people couldn’t understand Tokiwa, she would cling to them so she could whisper directly into their ear... Her hugging me with clothes on was bad enough. I could only imagine how much worse it would be naked.

“As for you, mister, you should be looking the other way!”

“Hey—bwuh!”

I’d taken a moment to breathe a sigh of relief after avoiding that potential catastrophe, but it was a mistake. Tsumiki slapped me with all her might, turning my head a perfect 180 degrees.

“Otomo and I will help Tokiwa get dressed, so you wait here!”

“Yes, ma’am...” I held a hand against my stinging cheek and responded pathetically.

“Too bad for you, Rekka. You were so close,” R jabbed.



Apparently, Tokiwa heard we were coming over and decided to take a shower to wash off all the feverish sweat on her from being in bed all day. But she’d forgotten to bring clothes to change into when she was done. After drying herself off some, she was going from the bathroom to her room to get them, aaand... That’s when we showed up, of course.

For the record, her long hair had been (thankfully?) covering the view, but she

was at least wearing underwear. On the one hand, it was a relief. And on the other, it was still pretty...

“It’s important to dry yourself properly, especially if you have a cold.”

“...”

Tokiwa gave a meek nod from where she lay on the futon. I knew she had a penchant for being absent-minded, so it wasn’t like this was totally out of character. I couldn’t help the small sigh of resignation that escaped my lips.

“So, why are you two curled up in the corner? Satsuki? Tsumiki?”

“They were huge...”

“And so soft...”

They sat facing each other, hugging their knees to their chests and muttering. Had something happened when they were drying Tokiwa off?

“Ack...” Tokiwa coughed weakly.

“Jeez, this is all because you acted without thinking.”

I dunked a washcloth in the basin and wrung it out before laying it over her burning forehead. Tokiwa lifted herself up to whisper in my ear...

“Thank you.”

“I, uh, yeah... You’re welcome.”

“...”

Tokiwa smiled gently and carefully laid her head back down on the pillow so as not to disturb the washcloth. Because of her fever, her face was flushed... While it hurt my pride to admit President Momone was right, she did look more sensual than usual.

“Goodness me... The ‘oh, take care of me’ event is pretty standard romcom fair, but I had no idea you’d be so weak to it, Rekka.”

“...!”

R was as deadpan as ever, but I could swear she was grinning beneath it all. I quickly glanced around the room, trying to find any excuse for a conversation to

change the subject and hide my embarrassment.

“You sure have a lot of books, huh?”

The walls of Tokiwa’s room were lined with bookshelves packed with manga, novels, and thick reference books. There were even more stacked high on the floor. It was clear just how much she loved books and reading. She must really want to become an author...

Perhaps the fact she’d always been sickly contributed to that. Maybe she’d spent her childhood reading in bed rather than outside playing. But... did she read a lot because she wanted to become an author, or did she want to become an author because she read a lot? I guess the order didn’t really matter. Both aspects had played a big part in making Tokiwa who she was today. As I was reflecting on all that, Satsuki and Tsumiki finally emerged from their gloom and came over to us.

“Are you hungry, Tokiwa? If you are, we can make porridge for you. Would you like that?” Satsuki asked, and Tokiwa nodded her head once. “Then we’ll go make you some right now. We’ll just borrow your kitchen for a bit.”

“It’s gonna knock your socks off, so just you wait!”

At that, Satsuki and Tsumiki left the room and went downstairs together.

“I don’t think they’ll take too long. Oh, would you like something to drink in the meantime?”

Tokiwa nodded, so I handed her the vitamin-packed sports drink I’d picked up on the way... and managed to spill some of it.

“I’m sorry. Here, let me wipe—!”

Urk! Some of it had splashed right on her neckline!

“U-Um, Tokiwa...”

“...?”

I desperately tried to communicate without words, but Tokiwa just tilted her head and waited for me to take care of it. I reached out hesitantly and wiped the sports drink off her collarbone, careful not to go any lower than that.

Whew... What was I doing while Satsuki and Tsumiki weren't around? Man... If they'd been here, they could've done it for me or helped her change her shirt.

"Hm...?"

Huh? Belatedly, I realized something felt off. Like I had forgotten something extremely important...



About ten minutes later...

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your porridge."

Satsuki came in carrying a tray with bowls of porridge and a salt shaker on it. The white gruel was standard homemade porridge, but I gotta say, it looked pretty good.

"Eep!"

"..."

Tokiwa hugged Satsuki and whispered something to her. Probably a word of thanks.

"Can you eat it yourself? If you don't think you can manage, I'll feed you."

"..."

"All right, leave it to me. Sit back a little and open wide."

At Satsuki's request, Tokiwa scooted back in her futon and opened her mouth.

"Here, let me cool it off for you."

After blowing on the hot porridge, Satsuki moved the china spoon to Tokiwa's waiting mouth. It really did look good, and seeing Tokiwa eat it only made it look tastier. But...

"Tsumiki... what is this?" I pointed to the bowl in front of me and asked.

"...It's porridge," Tsumiki, the person responsible for making my portion, replied sulkily.

Porridge, huh? Well, she had said she was going to the kitchen to make

porridge, so that was probably what she at least intended it to be. At first, at least.

However, no one in the world would have guessed what was in my bowl was porridge. In fact, if it had been served to me without context, I would have just assumed it was toxic sludge and called a hazmat team... Okay, maybe that was going a little too far. But the short of it was that my porridge looked more like poison.

Ah, so that's what I'd forgotten... Why hadn't I stopped Tsumiki when she said she was going to make porridge? She'd left the room with Satsuki, so naturally, it hadn't even crossed my mind. But I'd dug my own grave now. What was I going to do with this... this goop she'd served me?

"J-Just eat up already!"

"Are... Are you sure this is my portion?"

"Even I wouldn't make Tokiwa eat that. N-Now, go on! If you can't eat it yourself, I'll feed it to you!"

That was practically what Satsuki had just said to Tokiwa... So why did it feel like a threat coming from Tsumiki? And why did I have to eat her cooking in the first place? I mean, I guess she did go to the trouble of making it, and it would be a waste just to throw it out... Oh, well, here goes nothing.

"I'll try it..."

I prepared myself and picked up the spoon... Oh, God, it was thick. I scooped a spoonful of the sludge that was still bubbling like a swamp and lifted it to my mouth, an oddly gooey string trailing behind it.

"...Hom!"

I figured it would be better to get it over with and shoved the whole spoonful in my mouth all at once.

"Hrk! Urgh!"

I couldn't do a spit take in a room full of books, but damn if I didn't want to! I desperately clamped both hands over my mouth and tried not to spew what I'd just forced myself to swallow. I hadn't had something this bad in a while. But

what was with the strangely medicinal taste...? Had she tried to make something healthy? The taste of ginger was overwhelming... I couldn't even identify all the other spices.

You'd think someone would've had to try to make food this wretched. Tsumiki's desire to make something good was sincere... The results were just bad. If you fed something like this to a sick person, it might just kill them. The only reason I was still standing was because I'd had the pleasure of trying Tsumiki's failed cooking multiple times before.

"Tsumiki..."

"What?"

"I acknowledge your efforts... But please just stick to salt for seasoning."

"...Okay..." Tsumiki's shoulders slumped as she nodded.

There were plenty of different ways you could season porridge, but she would need to master the basics before getting creative. People's lives were at stake here.

Tokiwa eventually finished eating Satsuki's porridge, and I somehow managed to suffer through eating Tsumiki's. I then helped take care of the dishes.

"All right... 37.2 degrees. Has your fever gone down a little?" Satsuki asked as she looked at the thermometer.

Tokiwa nodded. She seemed to be getting better bit by bit. Dare I say we were succeeding at the nursing mission President Momone had assigned me?

"It'll still be a while before your parents get home..." Satsuki said as she eyed the clock on the wall.

Tokiwa had already showered, we'd helped her get dressed, gotten her a wet washcloth for her forehead, made her porridge... We'd quickly burned through the standard taking-care-of-someone activities.

"What'll you do? If you're bored, you two can go home."

"NO!"

"NEVER!"

“Wow...”

Not “I’m still fine for time” or “I’ll stay a little longer,” but “NO” and “NEVER”... Man, they really were gonna make me cry today. They didn’t trust me at all.

“Then what do you guys wanna do? Even if we’re bored, we can’t just ditch Tokiwa... So how do you wanna kill time here?”

Since we couldn’t make much noise with Tokiwa trying to rest, our options were limited.

“I have the perfect idea. Let’s do our homework in the living room downstairs.”

“Boo...”

I naturally let out a groan of resistance at Satsuki’s suggestion, and she shot me some wicked side-eye.

“Rekka, you’re really racking up unexcused absences at school, so you at the very least need to do your homework. If you don’t, you’ll never make it to the next grade. We’re not in middle school anymore.”

“Ugh...”

She really hit it on the nose there. And I definitely didn’t want to repeat a grade... Man, high school is tough.

“But, hey, aren’t you in the same boat regarding unexcused absences, Satsuki? One way or another, you always end up getting caught up in my—er...”

I was about to say “stories,” but caught myself at the last second when I realized Tokiwa was in the room. That was close.

“Uh, anyway... I just have to do my homework, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” Satsuki replied.

“Then I’ll review for tomorrow’s classes, too,” said Tsumiki.

She was in a different class from us and hadn’t been assigned any homework for the day, so she was just going to study. It was probably just an excuse to hang out with us a bit longer, but I could respect that she was willing to study of

her own free will. I could never do that. My head would hurt too much.

“Ah, but if we go to the living room downstairs, Tokiwa won’t be able to call for us if she needs anything.”

Her voice was so quiet that she needed to really be in someone’s personal space for them to even hear her. She’d gone downstairs to take a shower earlier, but we couldn’t have her going back and forth every time she needed something.

“You’re right. What should we do...?”

Satsuki had overlooked that point, too, and pensively put a hand to her cheek.

“Tokiwa, if it wouldn’t disturb you, could we study at the little table here in your room?”

If we were nearby, we could help her with anything she needed.

“...ah.”

That was probably an affirmative sound just now. I could barely hear her say anything, but based on the way her lips moved, I think she said, “Yeah.”

“Thanks. We’ll set up here, then.”

After clearing away the mountains of manga that had been left out on the table, the three of us spread out our worksheets and textbooks. We’d gotten together to study like this over summer break, but that was mostly at the library. Doing it at Tokiwa’s house felt a little strange. But man, summer break sure was fun. I’d been skeptical, but the light literature club’s summer camp was pretty great. Playing baseball was loads of fun, and that curry was really good...

“Rekka, what are you spacing out for?”

“Whoops. My bad.”

I was daydreaming before I even knew it, but Satsuki caught me, and I got back to my homework in a hurry. Today’s subject was... math. Ugh, just looking at it made my head spin.

“Um, Satsuki, about this part here...”

“I taught you that the other day, Rekka.”

“Huh? Really...?”

“Good grief.”

Despite her exasperation, Satsuki carefully pointed to the formula in the textbook and taught me how to solve it anyway.

“Make sure you remember it this time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

There was no guarantee, but I still had to say that. Okay, now for the next problem... Urrrgh...

“So, Satsuki, about this one...”

“Honestly...”

Satsuki furrowed her brow and leaned over the table once again to show me how to solve it. She was great to have around as a friend. I’ve been relying on her for help with homework for as long as I can remember... Hm?

“...”

What? Why was Tsumiki staring at me like that? Was it because she didn’t have any homework to do? It was pretty hard to concentrate on studying without a specific task.

“What’s wrong, Tsumiki?”

“N-Nothing...”

I tried asking what was up, but she only looked away and mumbled.

“If you say so... Hey, Satsuki, what formula do I use for this graph question?”

“You should try figuring it out for yourself, Rekka. Let’s see. This one’s...”

“Hmph...”

Tsumiki huffed with a bored look on her face and began clicking her ballpoint pen furiously. Was she that bored? She seemed a little irritated for some reason..

Meanwhile, Tokiwa watched our antics with a sleepy gaze from her futon, still

coughing every now and then.





Despite getting distracted by the manga in Tokiwa's room halfway and accordingly being scolded by Satsuki, I somehow managed to finish my worksheet by six o'clock.

"It's time for me to go home..." said Satsuki, looking up at the clock.

"Me too," echoed Tsumiki.

"Then we can wrap things up here. President Momone said this was as late as we had to stay, anyway."

According to her, Tokiwa's parents usually came home around 7:00, but she said we could all leave by 6:00 to make it home in time for dinner. She said she'd be done with her student council work by 6:30 too, and that she'd be stopping by after that to check on Tokiwa herself, so we figured she would be all right on her own for at least a little while and started to quietly pack up our stuff. As I was putting my worksheets and pencils into my bag, my eyes wandered over to the futon where Tokiwa was sleeping soundly.

"..."

She seemed peaceful enough. Her breathing was calm and regular, and when I put a hand to her forehead, it felt like her fever had gone down quite a bit. Yeah, surely she'd be all right.

"Tokiwa, we're going to head off now," I whispered.

I knew she was asleep, but it still seemed rude to leave without saying anything... Except when I tried to get up, I realized I wasn't going anywhere.

"Huh?"

"..."

I looked down to see that Tokiwa had reached a hand out from under the covers and grabbed my sleeve.

"What's wrong, Rekka?" Satsuki turned back and asked.

"Nothing, Tokiwa's just grabbed my sleeve in her sleep..." I replied in a troubled voice, seeking help.

“Can’t you detach her?” Tsumiki asked. She then approached to get a closer look, and tugged at both Tokiwa’s hand and my sleeve. “Huh... She’s stronger than I expected. It’ll be hard to get you loose without waking her up.”

“What should we do? I’d feel bad waking her after she finally got to sleep...”

We all looked at each other, slightly lost for an answer.

“All right... You two go on without me. I’ll just stay here until she lets go.”

“You’re just saying that so you can do things to Tokiwa once we’ve left...”

“No! I would never! President Momone will be here soon anyway. She would literally kill me if I did anything funny.”

Both girls shot me dubious looks, but it seemed the threat of President Momone was enough to convince them. They reluctantly picked up their bags again.

“All right, we’re going now... I really, really won’t forgive you if you do anything weird, you got it?”

“I already said I wouldn’t.”

“If you do, I’ll make you try a hundred of my latest recipes. I’ll feed you until your stomach bursts. Capisce?”

“...”

The fact that I was a hundred percent sure that was possible with her cooking made the thought that much scarier. But after beating their incessant warnings into my head, Satsuki and Tsumiki finally left. I was as fed up as I was hurt.

“Haaahh... They must really not trust me at all...”

I’d been stabbed over and over by their cold words. It left me feeling empty and drained.

“That you can’t even process why they come at you like that is what makes you so useless, you know...”

“What do you mean?”

“Any more hints would be too obvious.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?”

If she was going to be so cryptic, I don’t really know where she got off calling it a hint in the first place. Granted, it was R’s typical MO to avoid saying what was really important, so go figure. After that, I started browsing Tokiwa’s manga to pass the time... Oh?

“...ka.”

“Tokiwa?”

At some point, Tokiwa had opened her eyes and sat up, resting her chin over my shoulder.

“When did you wake up? If you’re feeling better now, I should be heading home...”

Harissa had probably finished making dinner by now, and I didn’t want to keep her waiting... is what I wanted to say, but...

“Who were you talking to?”

That single question made my entire body go stiff and my mind go blank.

“U-Uhhh... What are you talking about?”

I tried to play dumb at first, but she wrapped her arms around me from behind and squeezed my neck.

“Don’t be silly. I heard you.”

“Er, no, I don’t think so...”

It wasn’t painful by any means, but she was pressing her chest up against my back this way... Since she clung to me so often, I could tell that the thin fabric of her pajamas made them about 1.5 times more impactful than normal, too!

But more importantly, what was I going to do? This would make the second time that Tokiwa had overheard me talking to R. I had just assumed she was still asleep and had let my guard down, so this was really all on me, but... How was I going to get out of this a second time?

“Um... I actually have a habit of talking to myself when I’m alone.”

“But it sounded like a conversation.”

“Ah, well... I mean... I guess you could say I have an imaginary friend?”

Damn it! Why did I have to humiliate myself like this?! I had no idea fabricating secrets about yourself could be so embarrassing...

“You really are mysterious, Rekka.”

Great. Now she thinks I’m some kind of oddball.

“A-Ahaha...”

“?”

Tokiwa probably hadn’t meant anything bad by it, but I couldn’t help the dry laugh that escaped my lips.

“Ugh...”

“You all right?”

“Mm... I’m just all sweaty again,” Tokiwa said as she turned off the heat in the room. “...It’s still hot.”

“Um, wouldn’t you be less hot if you let go of me?”

It would be a great help to me too, considering it would get a whole mountain range of temptation off my back...

“But you won’t hear me if I do that.”

However, my hopes were dashed as Tokiwa shook her head and gave another pesky cough.

“So hot...”

Tokiwa wiped the sweat from her forehead with her hand before rubbing her fingers against the futon.

“Hey, Rekka.”

“Yes?”

“Can I take off my pajamas?”

“O-O-Of course not! Obviously not!”

My life would be in danger if Satsuki and the other girls found out. And that

would be if I survived the wrath of President Momone.

“Then will you wipe me off?”

Tokiwa removed her chin from my shoulder and turned her back to me, lifting up the hem of her shirt.

“Erm...”

The glimpse I caught of porcelain skin under her pajamas instinctively made me flustered. The flow of conversation had made it seem like a compromise, but this in itself was a pretty high hurdle for me to clear...

“Mm...”

But Tokiwa was unexpectedly forceful. She put a towel in my hands and then sat there, patiently waiting until I complied.

“P-Pardon my reach?”

Giving in, I dipped the towel in the basin and wrung it out before pressing it to Tokiwa’s back and sliding it up her shirt.

“...!”

I could feel her warmth on the back of my hands from the shirt she was wearing, and I could feel her smooth, supple skin through the towel. I was basically stuck sitting there staring at the nape of her neck whether I liked it or not, too... I caught myself unwittingly gulping.

President Momone was a liar! This wasn’t just three times more sensual than usual! I already knew Tokiwa was overly trusting and unguarded, but to ask a guy to wipe her back when it was just the two of us alone in her room... It was just too much.

Squeak, squeak...

But my thoughts were interrupted when I heard an odd squeaking sound. I looked and realized Tokiwa was writing something on the small whiteboard hanging on her wall. She must use it regularly for novel ideas or something, because she wrote fluently on it with an accustomed hand... then held it up over her shoulder to show me what she’d written.

Come to think of it, Rekka, do you have a girl you like?

“Bwuh?!”

Wh-What was she asking all of a sudden?! And why at a time like this?!

“Oh, my, could it be that she pretended to grab you in her sleep to get you to stay just so she could ask you that?” R said with amusement.

I had no idea if that was just wild conjecture or not. Considering R was an advanced life-form from the future, maybe it was possible she had some way of telling if people were really asleep or not?

“Erm...”

As I struggled to come up with a coherent reply, Tokiwa wiped away her first sentence with the eraser at the end of her pen and scribbled out a new one.

It's for reference for the story I'm writing right now.

Reference... for her story? Oh, yeah, Tokiwa was in the middle of writing a high school romcom, wasn't she? I recalled her mentioning something about using me as a model for the main character. So that was it, then. She just needed help coming up with something for her story. Whew. That didn't change how difficult the question was, but it at least made it a little easier to answer.

“I don't think I'll be much help with that... I haven't decided on anyone in particular I like right now.”

“...ah.”

This time she didn't write anything down, but instead muttered something and nodded her head. It seemed to be some kind of acknowledgment.

Just then, I could hear someone coming up the stairs. It was probably President Momone, who'd come to switch out with me after finishing up her student council work.

“Hey, Midori. Problem child.”

President Momone casually waved a hand as she entered the room... before stopping cold and looking at me suspiciously.

“Problem child, why do you have your hands up Midori's pajamas?”

“Huh? Waaah!”

Yeah, I was busted. Wait, no, I was innocent!

“Th-This isn’t what it looks like! Tokiwa just asked me to wipe the sweat off her back for her! There’s absolutely nothing dirty going on...!”



I immediately yanked my hands out of her pajamas and waved the towel in a desperate appeal to President Momone.

“Hmm...”

President Momone nodded disinterestedly and grabbed the towel from me, approaching Tokiwa.

“How are you feeling? Uh-huh... Well, you seem more energetic than I expected... Did something good happen?”

As they smoothly communicated with a near-telepathic level of mutual understanding, President Momone briskly straightened out Tokiwa’s futon and prepared a fresh towel for her. As expected of childhood friends, their bond was really something else. Tokiwa would be fine if I left her in President Momone’s hands.

“Then... I’ll be headed home now. Harissa’s waiting for me.”

“Right. Thanks for today.”

“Now we’re even, right?”

“You still owe me two more favors.”

Tch, she still remembered that... Well, I’m sure I’ll end up repaying her properly someday. It certainly wasn’t like she was about to let me off the hook, that was for sure.

“Well, I’ll see you guys at school. Get well soon, Tokiwa.”

“...”

Tokiwa feebly stuck her hand out from under the covers and waved, mouthing the words, “See you for club.”

“Thanks for having me over.”

I gave a small bow as I left, and when I turned to close the door behind me...

“I see. So, there isn’t anyone, huh?”

I thought I heard someone muttering inside. But it definitely didn’t sound like President Momone or R, and I don’t mutter like that to my knowledge, which

left...

“Tokiwa?”

But at this distance and with a door between us, I shouldn't have been able to hear her... Moreover, why did whoever it was sound so happy? Puzzled by all this, I put both it and Tokiwa's house behind me as I left.

Time Traveler L's Life on the Streets: Log 3

The heat of summer continued to linger, but on one unusually chilly day when it had been raining nonstop...

“Uuugh...”

A girl in a red kimono was sitting with her knees huddled to her chest underneath a particular bridge. Meet L, a time-traveling girl from the future.

She was wiggling her toes inside her tabi socks and rubbing her hands together to try and keep warm. As a Kiklim, an artificial life-form created by cutting-edge future technology, she could have raised her own body temperature if she'd wanted to. But that would consume what precious little battery she had left. After her connection to the future had been severed, she had to find alternative ways to resupply herself with energy and couldn't afford to waste any of it carelessly.

Despite the chilly weather, it was still only September. If she caved and started using her thermoregulation feature this early, her energy reserves would be taxed to the max when winter actually rolled around.

Winter...

In this era, the season called winter would begin sometime in November in Japan. That was still almost two months away.

“How much longer do I have to stay here...?”

Originally, her coconspirators in the agency were supposed to distract R with a fake mission while she took on the real job of assassinating Rekka Namidare. It should have taken a week at the longest. Even if the mission failed, the plan was to bring L back to the future immediately, so she hadn't expected to stay in this era for an extended period of time. But now that she had no way of contacting the future, she also had no way of knowing when she'd ever be able to get back.

“Argh, jeez! This is all R's fault, too!”

L shouted the name of her annoying little sister—who was really just a newer model Kiklim—and stamped her feet against the ground. Her little outburst helped warm her up some, but her toes were still numb from the cold. That only made her more irritated, which fed an endless loop of resentment.

Granted, if she kept this up, she would eventually blow off all of her steam and come to her senses. Once that finally happened, she realized there was no point in repeating such useless actions.

“Hahh... For the time being, I need to focus on shelter. This bridge is convenient cover from the rain, but I have no protection from the wind.”

There was only a slight breeze today, but the pouring rain had made the temperature plummet so low that even the breeze felt like icy murder. She'd have to come up with some way to fend it off if she ever had any chance of getting warm again.

Technically, it was possible for her to create a simple barrier out of any available materials. But building anything like that could potentially be a huge drain on her energy, so she had to go about it as efficiently as possible. There was also the risk that if she created anything too substantial, she might attract the attention of those blasted police. So she also had to make sure whatever she made had a low profile... Wait, was there even a need to build her own shelter in this day and age?

Fortunately, she had already gathered a grand supply of cardboard boxes to sleep on. If she turned those into a wall, she could just make do by filling the gaps. But the cardboard boxes had been gathered from all over the place, so they varied considerably in size and shape. She'd have to join them together cleverly or she'd just end up with a glorified paper bag for a shelter.

“Let's see.. The first thing to do is...”

If she was going to use the bridge as the roof of her construction, she would have to build the cardboard walls up to that. L then inventoried her boxes and calculated what the remaining dimensions of her temporary lodging would be based upon that.

“Ugh...”

It was very narrow. Even with her small figure, it would be a tight squeeze if she wanted to stretch her legs out as she slept. And her precious cardboard boxes had other valuable uses, too. She could use them as mats to lie on, or even as blankets in an emergency. She couldn't afford to use them all up on walls.

It seemed she'd have to give up on using the bridge as a roof then and make the entire structure out of cardboard, but if the wind got any stronger and started blowing rain under the bridge, there would undoubtedly be leaks. If she had a tarp or something, that would make the perfect roof... But unfortunately, she hadn't been lucky enough to get her hands on one.

"I guess I have no choice... I'll use all the cardboard to build for now, then gather more materials tomorrow."

With a sigh, L set to building.

"Kyaaah!"

Or at least that was her plan. She slipped in a puddle and fell before she had a single box in place... Her clumsiness continued to draw out her construction project, but things went smoothly for the most part otherwise.

"All right."

About an hour later, her temporary lodgings were complete. She should be able to escape the wind and rain for a while now. She entered through the door she'd made to resemble a noren, took off her geta sandals, and carefully stepped onto the floor of double-layered cardboard.

"Hahh, now I can finally relax."

She unwittingly let out a sigh of relief. This was the first time she'd ever toiled so hard to make something herself.

Despite being one generation older than R, L was still an advanced life-form. If she didn't have to worry about her energy, she could've constructed something a thousand times better—stealth cover included—and it would have only taken her mere minutes.

"When I think about it like that, I guess I feel pretty proud of this thing."

She wouldn't want to live in it forever, but she would treasure it while she did. And just as she was thinking that, water suddenly started creeping under her door.

"Hwah?!"

She tucked her feet in reflexively, but the cardboard floor rapidly began soaking up water from all directions.

"Whaaat?!"

She poked her head outside to see what was going on, and was met with the terrifying sight of water rushing up to her doorstep. It seemed the heavy rain had flooded the river to the point it was creeping up to new heights on the bank.

"Th-This can't be happening..."

But unfortunately, it was. L dragged her listless body through the water, splashing her way up the sloped embankment to retreat from the flood.

"What should I do...?"

She was still underneath the bridge, so she was protected from the rain overhead, but if the river kept flooding like this, it was the water coming up from below that she had to worry about. If it weren't for her low battery, withstanding these conditions would be nothing for L... But if she splurged her last bit of energy, then her mission would be much more difficult to accomplish, and she didn't want that.

L felt like her mission was all she had left. After betraying her creator, the doctor, and betraying the agency, the only calling she had in life was ending Rekka Namidare. That was the only way she—a man-made life-form—could prove there was meaning to her existence.

"Ah, it's cold!"

Apparently, the wind was picking up along with the rising water level. The rain didn't seem like it would be letting up anytime soon, either. That meant the water would only continue to climb. It would eventually reach her again. She would only be waiting for the worst if she stayed here... She could see the

water would be upon her any minute, yet she had nowhere else to go.

To be honest, she wanted to cry. But just then..

“What are you doing over there?”

A girl’s voice could be heard coming from behind teary-eyed L’s head.

Chapter 4: Fairy x BBQ

When Sunday finally rolled around, there wasn't a single cloud in the clear blue sky. It was perfect weather for a barbecue!

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

Yet for some reason, rather than there being any celebration about the weather, there was a silent staredown going on in front of my house.

First there was the home team. Or rather, Satsuki and Harissa, who'd just come out of my house. I was with them, of course. Satsuki had actually just come by to get us since it was just about time to leave for the barbecue.

Then there was the visiting team. Or rather, Iris and Rosalind, who'd been lying in wait for us outside. Suzuran, Corona, and Ulaula were there too, but had taken a clear backseat in the standoff.

Wait, did this mean they'd showed up because they wanted to come along, too? Why was the air so tense...?

“What are *you* doing here?” asked Satsuki.

“I just knew you guys would be sooo lonely without us on a fun trip like this! Right, Rosalind?” chirped Iris.

“Mind how you address me, mortal. But she's right! It was foolish of you to think that you could host a meat banquet with Rekka without inviting me,” lashed Rosalind.

“Mistress, this is a barbecue, not a meat banquet. It sounds a little indecent when you put it that way.”

“Ugh, silence! You stay quiet, Suzuran.”

“Ugggh, this barbecue set is heavy...” griped Uaula.

“Don’t drop it,” instructed Corona. “Hey, just because it’s in a bag doesn’t mean you can just leave it on the ground.”

It seemed like Iris and Rosalind had masterminded this alliance, while the maid squad behind them was just there for support. They were still taking a backseat in the ongoing dispute.

“We even went to the trouble of bringing along some tasty treats to share with everyone. So it won’t be a problem if we come too, right? You said the barbecue would be by the river, so there should be plenty of space for all of us,” Iris said, indicating everything Suzuran and the other girls were carrying.

This must have been what she and Rosalind ran off to take care of after school the other day...

“There is too a problem! There’s no way this many people will fit into my dad’s car!”

Iris was totally trying to bowl Satsuki over, but she did her best to hold her ground. And she had a point. It was totally true that all of us wouldn’t fit into her dad’s car, which would hold eight people at most. We had eight people standing here alone, and Satsuki’s parents would make ten of us. And then there was the matter of the coolers and other equipment that needed to be packed...

“That’s not a problem at all. Just tell me where we’re going, and I’ll take my spaceship.”

Iris offered a simple solution, leaving Satsuki grinding her teeth.

“Hey, Satsukins, we’ll be leaving soon! Oh? Who might these young ladies be?”

Uncle Itsuki—Satsuki’s father—was in for a bit of a shock when he came out of the Otomo house next door, and he stood there wide-eyed for a moment before inquiring about the small crowd that had gathered.

“Dad, um, these people are...”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir! I’m Iris. This here is Rosalind and Suzuran and

Corona and Uaula. We're friends of Rekka and Satsuki's."

"You don't say! Well, any friend of my daughter's is a friend of mine. It's nice to meet you all."

"You're too kind. I know it's short notice, but the truth is we were actually planning on having a barbecue today and just so happened to hear that you guys were having one, too. We thought it would be lots of fun to all go together, so we thought we'd stop by and ask if you'd be interested."

"Is that so? Hmm, we'd honestly love to have you, but I don't think we'll be able to fit all of us in the car this way."

"Oh, don't worry! I wouldn't dream of imposing. We were planning on going anyway, so we've already arranged a ride."

"My, what a considerate young lady you are."

It was easy to forget, but Iris was a princess. It was kind of something to watch her work her magic... She'd won Uncle Itsuki over in the blink of an eye, and with his approval, Satsuki couldn't argue anymore.

"All right, Satsukins. Let's make it a special barbecue this year and have some fun with your friends."

"Y-You bet, Dad..." Satsuki replied with a strained smile on her face.

She was holding her hand behind her back, balled so tightly into a fist that I swear I could hear her fingers creaking... but I just pretended I didn't notice.

"Wow, thank you sooo much, Mr. Otomo!"

Iris gleefully thanked Uncle Itsuki and got the address from him. She then said that her driver was waiting around the corner, and walked off with the rest of the visiting team. I was guessing it was just a white lie to keep Satsuki's parents from seeing her spaceship, but the whole "my driver is waiting" line was pretty convincing considering she had a gaggle of maids in tow.

"Well, uh, que sera sera, right? The more the merrier, don't you think?"

"Yeah, you would think so, wouldn't you, Rekka?"

Satsuki's slumped shoulders told me how much the disappointment was

weighing on her. I tried consoling her, but that only seemed to make it worse. Even Harissa gave a small sigh.

“All right, time for us to get a move on, too!” Uncle Itsuki waved to us as he put the last of the bags in the car.

“Uncle Itsuki’s right. At this rate, Iris and the others will get there first.”

“Yeah, yeah. Come on, Harissa. Let’s go.”

Satsuki nodded her head repeatedly like she was trying to snap herself out of her bad mood before taking Harissa’s hand and dragging her off to the car.

“Huh? Come to think of it, where’s Auntie Sanae?”

“Mom? Oh, she’s probably taking her time getting that girl ready.”

“That girl?”

Satsuki was an only child, so who the heck was she talking about? I cocked my head quizzically to the side, and just as I was about to ask for more details, the front door of the Otomo residence opened once again. Auntie Sanae stepped out with a girl who had long, auburn hair tied partially up on the left side of her head—someone I, much less R, certainly hadn’t expected to see.

“Wha—L?!” My confusion made my voice squeak at a higher pitch than intended.

“L...” Even R was staring at her with round eyes, unable to hide her surprise.

“...” Meanwhile, L took one glance at us before abruptly turning away with a huff, refusing to make any further eye contact.

Just what was L doing at Satsuki’s house? And where the heck was this day going? We’d already had two unexpected developments before we’d even left for the barbecue...



“Under a bridge...?”

“Yeah.”

In the car on the way there, Satsuki gave me the short version of how L had ended up in the Otomo family’s care. Apparently, on a particularly rainy day

earlier in the week, Satsuki had spotted her under a bridge. She'd tried to run away at first, but Satsuki caught up to her when she slipped and fell in a puddle. It took some convincing, but she eventually agreed to follow Satsuki back to her place. L had been stubbornly silent about her circumstances, but Satsuki's kind parents had agreed to take care of her for a while, which brings us to the strange situation we found ourselves in today.

Out of consideration for L, Satsuki whispered all this to me, but I'm quite sure L could still hear every word of it with her superhuman ears. Satsuki just had no idea that L was actually a super advanced life-form from the future. And as for the Kiklim in question...

R was taking advantage (?) of the fact that no one but me and L could see her. She was right in L's face, relentlessly staring her down and making her sweat profusely. They were practically so close that it looked like they might kiss. L tried to avoid making eye contact with her, but...

Whip... Whoosh!

Whip... Whoosh!

Whip... Whoosh!

Every time she turned away, R would immediately follow and just keep staring at her. It was actually pretty amusing to watch. Perhaps it was a matter of pride, but L stubbornly continued to turn away just as stubbornly as R followed her.

"Hm? Is something the matter, L?"

"What? No, nothing!"

Satsuki noticed her strange behavior, but L panicked a little when she asked about it. Since other people could see her, she didn't have the luxury of behaving oddly like R, who seemed to have a tremendous advantage in this situation.

But in spite of that, R still hadn't said a word to L. Was it possible she was trying to be considerate of the older sister she'd been separated from? No one could see or hear R, so if she tried having a conversation with L, it would just seem like she was talking to herself... Not that R ever showed that kind of consideration for me. Well, anyway, I figured I could leave the siblings from the

future be for now. Since I was L's target, I probably wouldn't make a very good mediator. The most I could do would be to get a conversation going about something else...

"Come to think of it, have you ever had a barbecue before, Harissa?"

"Um, that means we're going to be eating food outside, right? We do that quite often in Aburaamu, like when you came to visit. The whole village gathers around for a feast, usually of grilled bowpig freshly caught from the forest."

"What's a bowpig?"

"An animal, rather like a boar with five legs."

"Five legs is kind of hard to picture..."

Just how did that work anatomically? Anyway, Satsuki, Harissa, and I continued to chat as R continued to silently mess with L until we eventually pulled over at our destination.

"Rekka, could you grab what's in the trunk there?"

"Yes, sir."

I helped Uncle Itsuki carry the barbecue supplies from the parking lot to our favorite riverside spot. It was a bit of a hike down a mountain path to get there, so it wasn't like we could drive all the way to it.

"Hm? Are those bikes?" I asked Satsuki, who was walking with me.

There were several bicycles parked alongside the stairs that led from the path down to the riverside.

"They look kinda small. Maybe some kids have come to play?"

"Maybe," I said with a shrug as we made our way down the stairs.

While it wasn't really something we did anymore, Satsuki and I used to play over by the abandoned factories a bunch when we were kids. Actually, that was right next to where Rosalind lives now. We were in the mountains here, but it wasn't like we were in remote territory. It was totally possible that some neighborhood kids had come up here to goof off. And sure enough, once we reached the bottom of the stairs, we spotted a group of them playing at the

water's edge.

"Hey, it went that way!"

"Quick, gimme the net!"

"Corner it, corner it!"

"Don't trip over yourself!"

"You can do it!"

There were three boys and two girls, a pair of which seemed to be brother and sister. They all looked to be elementary school age or thereabouts. The boys were trying to catch fish or something, splashing water into the air as they ran through the river—although they had a bug net and not a fishing net—while the two girls cheered them on from the shore.

"Ah!"

One of the boys suddenly noticed our arrival and the other kids all looked up in turn. But they quickly lost interest in us and got back to chasing fish.

"Oooh, Rekka! Over here, over here!" I heard Iris call.

"Hey, Iris. Guess you got here first after all," I said as I turned to see her waving.

If she and the others were already here, that was probably why the kids were so unfazed to see more people show up. Anyhoo, we started to make our way over to where Iris and the other girls were camped out. The river shore was mostly sand and pebbles, making it a little tricky to walk on.

"Ooh... Aah... Eep!"

Harissa seemed to be in danger of tripping any minute, so I loaned her a hand as we made it the rest of the way to the barbecue site.

"All right, Satsuki darling, your dad and I will finish setting up things here, so go play with your friends for a little while."

"Huh? But I can help, too."

"It's fine, dear. Now run along, and make sure you take L with you."

Auntie Sanae opened a pack of meat for grilling as she smiled and nodded her head towards L, who seemed somewhat bored.



“O-Okay... All right, then. Come on, L.”

“R-Right...”

Persuaded by her mother’s words, Satsuki dragged a fidgeting L towards the river. Harissa and I followed close behind.

“It’s wet over here, so you have to be careful.”

“Okay...”

Huh... If you ignored how dissimilar they looked, Satsuki and L seemed a lot like siblings. Satsuki’s always been good at looking after people and just sort of naturally gives off that older sister vibe. And L, standing next to Satsuki in her hand-me-downs rather than the red kimono she usually wore, only contributed to that impression... even though she was supposed to be a big sister, too.

“...”

Meanwhile, the real little sister here was floating next to me, cheeks puffed out in a pout. This might be the first time I’d ever seen R so demonstrably unhappy.

“Rekka! If you’re going to play, let me join you!”

“Playing in the water...? Well, as long as there are no waves, I suppose it’ll be tolerable.”

After leaving the barbecue prep to Suzuran and the other maids, Iris and Rosalind joined up with us, and the six of us (seven including R) went off to play until things were ready. The sun was already pretty high overhead, and it was gradually getting hotter, so I took my shoes off to wade in the shallows barefoot.

“Eek, it’s cold!”

“It feels so nice! Take that!”

“Wah! How dare you splash water at me, Iris?!”

Iris kicked up a splash, and a complaining Rosalind defended herself with her parasol. Harissa was contentedly listening to the babbling of the river as she waded through it with her skirt hem carefully lifted so it wouldn’t get wet. I was

enjoying it too as watched Satsuki and L.

“Here, leave your shoes and socks here so they don’t get wet. Just watch where you’re going and take your time so you don’t trip.”

“I can handle this much. Don’t treat me like a child.”

With that utterly childish reply, L defiantly stood up... and immediately stepped on a round pebble in the riverbed. She nearly fell face-first into the water first thing.

“...!”

R reflexively reacted nearly instantaneously, but Satsuki was much closer and caught L first.

“See? That’s why I told you not to rush.”

“O-Okay...”

“All right, try holding on to my shirt.”

L must have been as light as she looked, because not even the feeble Satsuki had any trouble supporting her as she got back on her feet. The genuine and tender display between the two of them was honestly kind of touching, but...

“Grrrrr...”

There was a two-year-old next to me who was grinding her teeth over the very sight of it.

“Urk!”

L, when she noticed the look R was giving her, flinched and froze up.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” asked Satsuki.

“Um, er... A bug! There was a bug!”

“A bug?!”

Of course, Satsuki couldn’t see R, so she had no idea what had freaked L out. Luckily for L, she’d given just the right answer to throw Satsuki off.



It was an interesting position to be in, really. Satsuki meant well, but if she continued to spend time with L, it would be harder for R to ever talk to her. She'd probably just continue to get more and more frustrated... I scratched my head, somewhat lost as to how to handle this.

"What's up, Rekka? Why the long face?"

"Er, it's nothing... Actually, Iris, what did you bring for the barbecue? We have chicken wings and beef."

"Some purple MorrowMorrow horn meat and SwillSalmon fillets and stuff."

"...Space animals, huh?"

To be fair, I didn't know the name of every animal on Earth, but those did *not* sound like anything from this planet. I mean... they were animals, right?

"Wait, can you even eat horn meat?"

"There's a tiny bit in the horns of the purple MorrowMorrow. It's considered a delicacy."

"Then I guess this SwillSalmon something or other is really out of this world, too, huh?"

"Heehee, just wait until you try it," Iris said with a teasing smile.

I couldn't help wondering what kind of meat it actually was... But while I was curious about what it tasted like, I was hoping it didn't look too strange so it wouldn't freak out Uncle Itsuki and Auntie Sanae too much.

"So, Rosalind... Did you, like, just shove all the work onto Suzuran and the others?"

"That's an ugly way of putting it. They're maids, meaning it is their duty to serve me. I didn't 'shove' anything onto anyone. Suzuran and Corona are helping of their own accord, though I'm sure Ulaula is trying to slack off as we speak..."

"Is that how it works?"

I mean, I guess it technically was their job, so that kind of made sense. As I was pondering that, Rosalind's parasol caught my eye.

"This is a rare sight, too. I don't recall seeing you with a parasol before. Aren't you fine in the sun, Rosalind?"

"It's not like I'm worried about turning into dust or some such. Even you humans use these on days the sun is strong. They're also quite fashionable."

I couldn't deny that sun was shining like it was summer out today. I could understand why she might want a parasol. As for the fashionable part, hers had a delicate floral pattern embroidered on it. It looked like she'd chosen an outfit to match, too. She was in a frilly jacket and a pair of culottes that hung down like flower petals.

"What's this? Why are you scrutinizing me so closely, Rekka? Could it be that my charms have captivated you?"

"Oh, sorry for staring..."

"Never mind that. In fact, you should pay more attention to me on a regular basis. If it's you, I don't mind the staring, Rekka."

"R-Really?"

"That said, I wouldn't mind hearing what you're thinking when you do. So go ahead. What have you got to say?" Rosalind urged me on, her eyes full of expectation.

"Er, um, I was... I was just thinking you kind of look like a flower. It's really c
—"

"Cute" is what I was going to say, but someone's hand reached around from behind Rosalind. I hadn't seen whoever it was walk up behind her because her parasol was blocking my view, but it was one of the little boys that I'd seen playing in the river earlier. He grabbed the hem of her culottes and threw it upward, but...

"Ha!"

"Eek!"

"Ahaha—wait, huh? Isn't this a skirt? I can't see anything!"

While her culottes looked like a skirt at first glance, they were more like a pair of shorts underneath. And thank god for that... If that kid had actually flipped

her skirt while she was standing right in front of me, I would've had a front-row seat.

“Why, you... What do you think you’re doing, you petulant bug of a brat?!”

“Oh, crap! Run away!”

“Ahaha!”

“Hurry! Hide in the woods!”

Rosalind hurled her parasol at them in anger, but the kid and his friends took off into the forest giggling and screaming.

“Whoa there! Calm down, Rosalind!”

“Unhand me! I need to teach those whelps a lesson!”

“It’s all right! I didn’t see anything!”

“Silence, mortal! That’s not the problem! He yanked on it so hard it *hurt*! As recompense, I shall show those miserable little maggots why vampires have been feared for centuries!”

I could understand how she felt, but going all out on children was taking things a little too far.

“Iris! Help me hold Rosalind back for a moment!”

“Ahaha! Sucks for you, Rosalind!”

Iris was holding her stomach and wheezing with laughter, but managed to contain herself enough to help me keep Rosalind from going into full-on rampaging vampire mode. This would ordinarily be where the peanut gallery had some snide comment for me, but today R wasn’t paying any attention to me.

“...”

She was just floating there silently... L must be really, really bothering her.

Hmm, I’d like to give them the chance to talk alone. Well, since R couldn’t leave my side, it would inevitably end up being the three of us. But still, how was I going to manage that today? I’d have to calm Rosalind down before I even had the chance to think seriously about it.

"There, there... Everything's okay, right? Those boys were probably just picking on you because they thought you were so cute."

"Um... D-Do you also find me cute, Rekka?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. So don't stay too mad at them, okay? It's a shame for that cute face of yours to be scowling."

"H-Hmph... I suppose I'll try," Rosalind said in a strangely girly voice for her, her cheeks blooming the slightest bit of rosy red.

She was probably getting hot without her parasol, so I went to fetch it and returned it to her.

"Grrr... Hey, Rekka! What about me? What do you think about me? Am I cute, too?"

"Y-Yes, and me! What about me, Sir Rekka?!"

"Wh-What?"

Iris and Harissa, who had been watching our exchange, started to shout at the same time like they were trying to out-compete each other with their questions. What was happening? I just finished consoling one person, and now I had to deal with two more?

"Um, yeah... The both of you are cute."

"How? What do you think is cute about me?"

"I did something different today. Have you noticed what it is?"

I desperately tried to think of a way to answer their excited questions, but Uncle Itsuki saved me.

"Hey, Rekka," he called as he came walking over. "Do you have a moment?"

"Oh, sure. What's up?"

"Well, it seems like the mai—er, your friends over there didn't bring enough coal for their fire."

I heard him stop himself in the middle of that sentence. Was he embarrassed to say "maid" or something?

“Well, it’s the first time they’re having a barbecue, so mistakes like that are easy to make. It’s just that we didn’t bring any spare coal, so we’re a little short on fuel now. I’m sorry to ask, but would you mind going and gathering some sticks to use as firewood?”

“Oh, sure. No problem.”

“We can use what coal we do have, so you don’t need to gather a ton, but any bit will help.”

After explaining the situation, Uncle Itsuki went back to the barbecue preparations.

“Okay, guys, I guess I’m off to gather some wood.”

“Oh, I’ll go, too!” piped up Satsuki.

“If Rekka’s going, then I’m going!” shouted Iris.

“I-I can help, too!” volunteered Harissa.

“Well, I suppose I shall go along as well,” added Rosalind.

As soon as I said I was going, everyone offered to go with me. The help was much appreciated, honestly. I was the only one that held back.

“I’ll just wait here...”

She let go of Satsuki’s sleeve, which she’d been clinging to all this time, and got out of the river first. I was hoping I could facilitate an opportunity for R and I to talk while we were in the woods, but there goes that idea... Oh, well.

“All right, let’s get going.”

I got out of the river too, dried off my feet, and put my shoes and socks back on before heading into the forest.



“Okay, let’s split up to look for wood.”

“Whaaat? But I wanted to be with you, Rekka!”

“But splitting up would be more efficient, right? Everyone’s waiting for us to eat, so we should get back as quickly as possible.”

“Hmph...”

After I convinced a somewhat pouting Iris, we all agreed to head off in different directions and gather an armful of firewood each. I set off by myself, except that I was never really alone. R was floating by my side as always as I picked up snapped twigs and branches.

“Hey, R.”

Once we’d gotten some distance from everyone else, I was brave enough to try talking to her.

“What is it, Rekka?”

“What are you gonna do about L?”

“That’s a good question.” R seemed to have predicted exactly what I was going to ask, as she closed her eyes in thought and replied perfectly calmly. “I had predicted we would make contact again someday, but I wasn’t quite expecting it to be like this. Although it was only for a few days, she was living in the house right next door.”

“Yeah, that was a surprise, wasn’t it? So... what do we do? I could give you two a chance to talk alone if I pull her aside. If I said I wanted to talk to her alone, I’m sure...”

“The issue is whether or not L would actually agree to that. There’s also the matter of how Satsuki will react when you say that...”

“Ugh...”

True, Satsuki wasn’t aware of the relationship between me, R, and L. She’d probably think it was strange if I suddenly asked to talk to L privately... In the worst-case scenario, I’d be accused of being a lolicon. I kept gathering suitable-looking firewood at my feet as I pondered what I should do, when all of a sudden I felt something fly past my head.

“Wha?!”

When I looked up in a fluster to see what it was, I found a kunai stabbed into the trunk of a tree I was standing next to... A kunai of very familiar design, in fact. L had called it an electromagnetic voltspear, which meant...

“Tch! The devil’s luck...”

Clicking her tongue hatefully, L emerged from the shadows looking perturbed. She’d apparently lied about wanting to hang back so she could wait for her chance to come after me while I was separated from Satsuki and the others.

“Heya, R... Wouldn’t you say that was a little too close for comfort just now?”

“Rest assured you were properly defended from its direct trajectory,” R answered nonchalantly before turning to L.

Now that an opportunity for the two of them to talk had popped up unexpectedly, I wasn’t actually sure how R was planning on handling this.

“I’m glad you seem well, L. Not that I really needed to worry about a fellow Kiklim.”

“Hmph! I never asked for your concern in the first place!” L stamped a foot in irritation.

R’s brow furrowed ever so slightly at those words. Honestly, it looked like she was sad.

“Judging by this little incident, it seems like you still haven’t given up on assassinating Rekka.”

“Obviously! I don’t give up so easily.”

“So I guess that means you won’t reconsider...” R adjusted her hat with a small sigh. “If you’re worried about the consequences of betraying the agency, then don’t be. The doctor isn’t angry, so as long as you give us information on the people who manipulated you, you’ll simply be given a slap on the wrist, and you can go back to your normal life.”

“Shut up! I don’t want my ‘normal’ life! I only want one thing, and that’s to prove I’m not useless!” L shouted, continuing to stamp her feet as she glared at me and R.

Hmm... R was trying to hold a calm and collected conversation, but L clearly wasn’t willing to even listen. At this rate, we were just going to end up with a repeat of last time...

“Hey, can I say something?”

I spoke up to try and diffuse the increasingly tense atmosphere, but...

“Silence, you! You’re the root of the problem!”

Those vicious words cut me down to size and put me in my place tout de suite. Now I was really feeling the tension, too... Talk about unapproachable.

“Arrrgh!”

L was blowing steam out of her ears and looked like she was ready to pounce any second now, but R stood in her way. Without any plan to get around her defenses, L just stood there nearly growling in frustration.

“Rrrgh...”

I’d been through situations in the past where I had to fight a heroine in order to resolve her story, but I was never really sure what to do in situations like this where my life was clearly in danger. Thanks to the Namidare bloodline, I knew that if I got caught up in a story, I had a fair chance of resolving things peacefully... But it sure didn’t feel like it right now.

And so our little stalemate continued for some time... right up until Satsuki showed up, carrying an armful of firewood.

“?!”

L and I both flinched in surprise at her unexpected entrance. L tried to hide her kunai and accidentally dropped it in the bushes in a panicked fluster.

“Huh? Rekka... and L? What are you two doing?” Satsuki asked in a concerned voice.

It seemed she’d picked up on the static in the air between us.

“Oh, nothing. We were, um... Th-That’s right! L secretly followed me to play a little prank on me!”

“Huh? Were you trying to scare him, L? You had a rather scary look on your face just now...”

“I... er, um...”

L glared at me for lying about her playing a prank, but it was the only thing I could think of to explain the obvious tension. It wasn’t like I meant anything by

it! That made it okay, right? Right?!

“I-It’s because... It’s Rekka’s fault! He’s always flirting with all these different girls like some womanizer! So I wanted to teach him a lesson for your sake, Big Sis Satsuki, and, and...”

A w-womanizer? Surely she just said that to go along with my lie and diffuse the situation, but it felt like an awfully brutal counterattack. L really hated my guts, so I guess it figures she wouldn’t pull any punches, but still... That hurt my feelings.

“For my sake...? Wh-What are you saying, L?!”

Anyway, hearing L’s explanation seemed to put Satsuki in a strange panic.

“Huh? I just—”

“No, never mind! You don’t have to say it!”

I didn’t really get it, but Satsuki’s fit was escalating into a bona fide freak-out party. At least it seemed like it had put any further questions out of her mind?

“L, you sat through the lectures about how we, as people from the future, mustn’t say anything unnecessary to the people of past too, no?”

“Sh-Shut up...”

Even R felt prompted to give L a warning. L didn’t seem too pleased about it, and she spat back at her quietly so Satsuki couldn’t hear. As for Satsuki... Now that she was here, any further conversation between the sisters would have to wait.

After that, we—me and R, now with Satsuki and L—continued to gather firewood and eventually ran into Iris. Harissa and Rosalind weren’t too far off, either.

“We’ve managed to gather quite a bit of firewood between the six of us. Surely this should be enough.”

“Okay, then let’s head on back.”

The girls all nodded, and we began the trek back towards the riverside where Uncle Itsuki and Suzuran were setting things up. Along the way, Harissa

suddenly came to a stop, her gaze fixed somewhere in the distance.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Harissa?”

“Nothing... I just felt a mysterious presence over there.”

“Mysterious?”

“Yes, but it’s kind of weak... It’s somewhere over there.” Harissa indicated, pointing deeper into the forest.

I was curious what she meant by “weak,” and I agreed to go investigate with her.

“You guys can go on back ahead of us,” I said to the other girls.

“What? But I wanna go, too!” Iris demanded.

“But someone has to deliver the firewood.”

“Then let’s decide by rock, paper, scissors who goes and who stays,” volunteered the diplomatic Satsuki.

“Fine by me,” agreed Rosalind.

Everyone else seemed okay with Satsuki’s suggestion too, and thus began a big round of rock, paper, scissors. When it was all said and done, Iris was the one who got stuck with the job of carrying the firewood back.

“Whaaat?!”

“Sorry, Iris. Can you carry all that by yourself?”

“That part’s not the problem! Grr, how annoying...”

She seemed to be particularly vexed about getting the short end of the stick. I could hear a flapping noise coming from under her skirt, probably her normally-hidden tail swishing about in frustration.

“Why don’t you go back with Iris, L?”

“I’m going, too!”

Huh? L wanted to follow us, too? Even though she acted like a child, she was still an advanced life-form from the future. Maybe she had something up her sleeve...

It wasn't like I was at liberty to ask her about it in front of everyone, so I quietly accepted her company as we headed deeper into the forest with Harissa as our guide. Then, after walking for a while, we found it. Or rather, her.

"Huh? Don't tell me... Is that a fairy?"

She was about the size of a doll, and she looked like one, too. She also had a set of transparent butterfly-like wings sprouting from her back, making her look exactly like the fairies I'd seen in picture books as a kid. I was pretty surprised to find out she was the source of the mysterious presence Harissa had felt. I actually doubted what I was seeing was even real for a minute. I thought it was just a doll at first, but she was very clearly breathing... So, yeah, this was definitely the real deal.

"Why is there a fairy outside of the spirit world?"

"Fairies exist out of the spirit world too, although their numbers have decreased dramatically in recent years... This one seems to be injured," said Satsuki as she helped Harissa examine her.

"How is she?" I asked.

"This looks easy enough to patch up with either my or Satsuki's healing magic, but..." Harissa answered, nervously glancing over at L.

As far as Harissa knew, L was just a normal girl. She was probably worried about using magic in front of her.

"W-Wow, it's a fairy..." L suddenly said in a completely deadpan voice.

After noticing repeated glances in her direction, she walked over to us and the unconscious fairy.

"A-Amazing. Fairies really exist. Oh, no, but this one's hurt... Big Sis Harissa, can you heal her?"

"Huh? Y-Yes, I can."

Harissa nodded reflexively at such an innocent question, then looked to me.

"Well, I'm sure it'll be fine. L is just a child, so she won't make a big fuss about it or anything," I said, trying to let her know it would be okay.

She and Satsuki then both readied their spells.

“Then... Cure Curiona!”

“Winds of healing...”

The tip of Harissa’s staff began glowing, and a warm breeze stirred around Satsuki.

“W-Wow, both of you are amazing...!”

Continuing her unconvincing wonder-struck child act, L kicked me in the shin when no one else was looking. Was she mad that I’d said she was just a little girl? Whatever. I didn’t have much time to pay her any attention, because it was only a few moments before the fairy awoke thanks to Satsuki and Harissa’s magic.

“Ow... H-Humans?! Eek!”

“Hey, wait! It’s all right! There’s nothing to be scared of, so please don’t cry!”

“Hyaah! Please don’t eat me!”

“No, no way. We would never do that.”

The poor little fairy was trembling just at the sight of us, so I tried to calm her down. I explained what had happened and how we’d found her.

“So you’re the ones who healed me?”

She sounded a little suspicious, but after she looked at herself and realized that her wounds had indeed been healed, she seemed convinced.

“Thank you very much. My name is Poppy.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s no big deal.”

Harissa and Satsuki both smiled at Poppy’s words of gratitude.

“So, Poppy, how did you get hurt in the first place?” I asked.

Considering her size, she might’ve just been attacked by a bird or something. But nevertheless, I wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help.

“The truth is...”

Though hesitant, Poppy told us her story. This forest where she lived with the other fairies was quiet and peaceful. They mostly lived without human interference, but apparently children would wander into the woods every now and then and chase them around for fun. That was how Poppy had been discovered, and she'd accidentally flown into a tree while trying to escape.

"There were children in the forest?"

"Maybe it was those little kids from before?"

"Those damned brats, huh?"

They'd run off into the woods after messing with Rosalind, so all signs pointed to them. If they weren't familiar with the area, they probably would've gotten on their bikes and fled the other way. They probably played up here in the mountains often.

So Poppy had gotten hurt because of some kids... It was probably idle curiosity, and they probably didn't mean any harm, but Poppy couldn't afford to be caught, and now she was hurt thanks to them. It was bad enough as it was, but what if they'd found her first and taken her into town? We had to do something to make sure that didn't happen.

"All right, everyone, lend me your ears."

I collected my thoughts and immediately shared my plan with everyone.



"Hey, did you find it?"

"It's not over here!"

"We're gonna catch it for sure today!"

"Oh, yeah? You think you can?"

We arrived at our target location, careful to stay out of view, and spotted the five kids that had been playing at the river earlier.

"Think? Ha! I know I can!"

"You always say that..."

The leader of their little squad appeared to be a boy with spiky hair. He raised

his arm triumphantly into the air and another boy with a scornful look in his eyes—the older brother of the sibling pair—shook his head with a sigh.

“Big Brother, can you really catch the fairy?” his little sister—who had scornful eyes just like him—asked as she tugged on his hand.

“Hmm, let’s see... Hey, maybe we should go back for the bug net after all?” he answered.

“What are you saying?! What if we break its wings! That’d be horrible!” a precocious-looking girl with brown hair argued.

“That’s right! It’d be cheating if we used tools, anyway! We should fight fair and square!” Apparently, the leader of the group considered their chase with Poppy some kind of battle.

“Hahh...”

And just as the scornful-eyed brother sighed, the third boy—who was chubbier than the rest—consoled him with a laugh.

“Hahaha! Don’t give up now!”

The chubby boy had an insect cage slung over his shoulder. It was probably something they’d prepared to put Poppy in once they caught her, but it was already occupied with butterflies and other bugs. Perhaps they weren’t too picky about what they caught?

After getting a better sense of these children and their personalities, I could tell that they weren’t bad kids. Really, they were all just goofing around on the weekend and having fun.

However, even if they didn’t mean any harm, they’d still ended up hurting Poppy, albeit indirectly. They had no idea how much they were scaring and disturbing the fairies. They didn’t feel safe in their own forest now... I felt a little bad for the kids, but we had to proceed as planned for the fairies’ sake.

“Satsuki,” I covered my mouth and whispered into the phone.

“I’m on it,” she whispered from the other end.

A short moment later, a gust of wind suddenly blew through the forest, eerily rustling the trees. It was Satsuki’s magic at work.

“Hm?”

The spiky-haired boy froze mid-step at the sudden movement of the forest. And once their leader stopped, so did the rest of the group as they observed the mysterious phenomenon. The little sister fearfully clung to her brother.

“What is that?” the chubby boy asked.

“Nothing. It’s just the wind! My dad told me the weather changes easily in the mountains, so it’s no big deal! Let’s keep going!”

It seemed the spiky-haired boy was either reckless or just plain difficult to faze. He ignored the others’ concern and marched ahead, but then...

“Kyaaah!” The brown-haired girl suddenly let out a high-pitched scream.

“What’s wrong?!” the spiky-haired boy asked, turning around in a hurry.

“My hand! Someone grabbed my hand just now!”

“I-It wasn’t me.”

“Me, neither!”

The brown-haired girl waved her hand around, half in tears, but both the boys behind her denied any wrongdoing. The little sister holding her brother’s hand with both of hers also shook her head furiously from side to side.

“Nice one, Harissa.”

For the record, Harissa had used her invisibility magic just now to sneak up on the girl and grab her hand. The plan I’d come up with was to scare the children badly enough that they never wanted to go too deep into the woods again. I wasn’t winning any points for originality here, but that wasn’t my main concern. I just needed a simple, effective tactic to use on elementary schoolers.

“Skree, skree, skree!”

“U-Uwaaah! Bats!”

Next, Rosalind transformed into a teeming swarm of bats and descended on the children like a black cloud. Of course, she was scaring them rather than hurting them.

“Kyaaah!”

“Big Brother!”

Even if they played up here in the mountain woods frequently, they never would've experienced anything like this. (I even checked with Poppy to make sure that bats didn't live around here.) I figured it would be a good way to scare the pants off of them. The girls had already burst into tears, and I could see the boys shaking in their boots, too.

“Ugh... Come on, let's run! They won't follow us forever!”

But as expected of their leader, the spiky-haired boy rallied his friends. He rebuked them for being scared and gave them the courage to keep going. It would have been easiest for everyone if they'd run home here... but it looked like we'd have to take things to the next step.

“Your turn, Poppy.”

“Okay... here I go.”

She sounded nervous, but set out to do her job. She slowly approached the children... dressed as a ghost.

“Yikes!”

The frightful little sister noticed her first, and she yelped at the sight. That got the attention of the other kids, who all flinched when they saw a ghost floating through the air towards them. For the record, Poppy's ghost costume was really just Harissa's scarf, the “something different” about her outfit today. It was small, sure, but it made a perfect sheet ghost when we draped it over Poppy. It was kind of obvious, actually, but it was working just fine against the already frightened children. And the real moment of truth was almost upon us...

“Oooh... Leave this place at oounce...”

Poppy tried as hard as she could to hold back her high-pitched fairy voice and sound as hair-raisingly spooky as possible. It wasn't exactly convincing on its own, but with the help of Satsuki's magic making the trees rustle as she spoke, it was plenty terrifying.

“Wh-Who are you?!”

“Yooou children... have angered the spirits of the foorest...”

“S-Spirits of the forest...?”

Uh-oh, was that beyond their reading comprehension level? I figured if they knew what fairies were, then they had to know what spirits were... Should I have asked her to use something simpler?

“The spirits serve... the king of the foorest!”

Fortunately, Poppy was able to fill in the gaps. Surely they would understand making a king angry.

“The king will nooot foorgive thooose whooo seek to expooose the secrets of the foorest!”

“The secrets of the forest...? You mean the fairies?” the brown-haired girl asked, trembling.

Poppy responded by shaking the white cloth of Harissa’s scarf up and down affirmatively.

“What should we do?” the little sister asked worriedly.

The next moment, an even stronger wind blew through the forest, rustling the trees more violently than before. The bats let out a high-pitched screech and an invisible Harissa snuck up on each of the children in turn to scare them. Their fright had just about hit a fever pitch.

“Never cooome into the foorest again... If you break this prooomise...”

“Wh-What happens if we break it?”

Ghost Poppy didn’t waste any time replying, “THE BATS OF THE FOREST WILL COME SUCK YOUR BLOOD DRY!”

“SKREEEEE!”

The bats all screeched loudly as she raised her voice, and the children all took off at a dead sprint, convinced they were running for their lives.

We watched them flee from our position in the bushes, and once they were long gone, we all came out from hiding—magical or otherwise.

“I guess threatening to suck their blood is pretty effective on kids. I remember being scared of vampires when I was little, too.”

"What? In that case, I should have just confronted them myself instead of using the bats."

"No, I don't think you would have scared them as much, Rosalind."

At first glance, she just looked like an ordinary girl. It would have been a different story if she'd put her full vampire powers on display, but we couldn't risk actually hurting the children. We were only trying to scare them, after all.



“Oooh, Rekkaaa...”

“Poppy? Why are you still talking like a ghost? Also, you can take off the scarf now.”

“Huh? Ah!”

Poppy squealed in embarrassment and hurriedly removed the scarf from her head.

“Thank you very much for your help, Miss Harissa.”

“No, it was my pleasure.” Harissa grinned happily as she accepted the scarf back.

Poppy then turned back to the rest of us and bowed.

“Thank you as well, Rekka. It looks like we’ll be able to get some peace and quiet around here again.”

“Nah, I’m just glad I could help.”

“I’m truly, truly grateful.” Poppy bowed again. “I’d like to thank you properly someday, so please come by again. We fairies would happily welcome you all.”

“Sure. We’ll come visit sometime.”

Poppy waved as she saw us off. We then headed back to the riverside, collecting some more firewood along the way.



“You’re late! What were you kids doing?” Auntie Sanae asked, clearly worried.

“Erm, we had to take a little detour because of... stuff,” I fumbled.

“It wasn’t very gentlemanly to make a girl carry the firewood back all by herself,” scolded Uncle Itsuki.

“I’m sorry...”

I apologized to Iris and brought over the rest of the wood we’d picked up. We’d been gone long enough that the barbecue had been ready for a while now.

“Well, now that everyone’s back, shall we get grilling?”

“Yay!”

“Yes, let’s!”

“Woo-hoo!”

Several people cheered at Uncle Itsuki’s suggestion, which was quickly followed by the magical sound of sizzling meat on the grill. Ooh, I could smell it already... Every second waiting for it was tantalizing.

“Come to think of it, Rekka...” Satsuki’s mother called out to me.

“What is it, Auntie Sanae?” I asked, turning around.

“Some children came running out of the forest crying earlier. Do you know if anything happened? Look, those kids over there.”

“Huh?”

I was startled for a moment there, but I turned to look in the direction she was pointing. And sure enough, there were five children sitting on the rocks by the river. It seemed they’d hit their limit somewhere between pure terror and the exhaustion of running, and they had simply collapsed once they thought they’d made it to safety. They all looked like they were crying, and a couple of them were still trembling in fear.

“Waah, waah!” The little sister was bawling the loudest. She had her face buried in her brother’s shirt as her knocking knees gave out underneath her.

“There, there. They won’t chase us anymore. It’s all right now...” Her brother was desperately trying to console her, but he didn’t seem too convinced himself.

“I... I wasn’t scared at all! I’ll protect you guys and fight them if they come after us!” The only one still standing on their trembling legs was the spiky-haired leader of the group, who was trying his best to cheer his friends up by putting on a brave face.

“H-Huh...”

Although we’d done it for Poppy’s sake, maybe we had gone a little too far... I couldn’t help feeling sorry for them. And so I approached Uncle Itsuki and Auntie Sanae hesitantly with a suggestion.

“Um, maybe we could invite them to join us for our barbecue?”



That night.

After the barbecue, we all promised to see each other at school the next day—as well as stop by Rosalind’s mansion sometime to see Suzuran and the others—before going our separate ways.

For the record, that purple morrowmorrow Iris brought was indeed delicious. The meat was soft and fatty, very clearly the rare delicacy she had said it was. The children had all stopped crying when they got a taste of it, and their moods only improved from there. The spiky-haired and chubby boys ate a lot more than the others, enough that the food the Otomos brought probably wouldn’t have been enough on its own. So really, it turned out to be a good thing that Iris and the others had invited themselves along. All’s well that ends well, and even the kids were smiling when we waved and parted ways.

“You look pretty full, Rekka.”

“Yeah... This must be true happiness,” I answered R sluggishly from where I lay on my bed. “Too bad you can’t eat, R.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” R answered curtly before something suddenly seemed to come to mind. “However... we can call it even if you accompany me on a binge marathon of that foreign soap I’ve been wanting to watch for a while now.”

Oh, that was underhanded. For the record, the soap opera she was talking about was twelve DVDs long, each with three episodes on it. We were easily talking over 24 hours of content. To marathon that all at once was physically, sleep-deprivedly, and wallet-bustingly impossible.

“H-How about we compromise? Let’s say... three movies of your choosing?”

“Really? Is that all your sympathy for me adds up to? Boo-hoo.”

“Ugh...”

She kinda had me there... I felt bad, at least until that comically fake crying stunt at the end.

“All right, five movies then.”

“So you’re willing to negotiate, huh?” Nonchalantly returning to her typical deadpan expression, R flipped in the air out of what I was guessing was boredom.

“I’ve been wondering for a while now, but why do you sometimes somersault in the air like that?”

“There’s no meaning to it.”

“If you say so.”

I’d figured as much. Anyway, I decided it was about time to get ready for bed, when...

“Hmph. How carefree of you,” said L, who seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“Wha—L?!”

I looked over at the door in surprise. It was still closed, and there was no sign of her having coming in.

“Calm down, Rekka. Did you forget L had a particle relocator on her?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right...”

Come to think of it, R had explained this before. L apparently had some device from the future that could disintegrate her and transport the particles of her body elsewhere before reforming her. And yes, I had completely forgotten about it.

“So, what do you want? And how long have you been there?”

“I’ve been here for a while.”

“Yeah, she’s been here for a while.”

“Wait, so you knew she was here, R?”

“Of course.”

L clicked her tongue upon hearing that. “How aggravating... I listened to a fair bit of your conversation, but all of it was pointless blabber. Are you really the man who’s going to bring about the war to end all worlds?”

“Um, the fate of the future aside, I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t read so

much into my everyday conversations..."

Somewhat exasperated, I scratched my cheek. As always, opinions of me in the future were extremely polarized.

"Oh, and you, R..."

"Yes, L?"

L suddenly turned to R, pointing an emphatic finger at her little sister floating in the air.

"That purple morrowmorrow was FREAKING DELICIOUS! Too bad you couldn't have any, huh? HAHAHA!" she proclaimed, placing her hands against her hips and letting out a loud laugh.

Thinking back on it, L had gobbled down meat this afternoon as fast as any of the other kids. She kept taking what was in front of me, so I thought she was trying to give me a hard time, but I guess she just really thought it was good.

"..."

As for R, she was as expressionless as always... Or so it seemed, but when I took a closer look, her lip was quivering faintly. Complex emotions were probably swirling in that tiny body of hers. That's what it looked like from the outside. Meanwhile, L smirked in self-satisfied celebration before turning to me.

"More importantly, Rekka Namidare, what was the meaning of that today?"

"Of what today?"

What was she talking about?

"Did I do something to you, L?"

"Not me. You saved that fairy."

"Uh, yeah?" I still didn't follow, so I reflexively cocked my head to the side.
"Was there a problem with me saving Poppy?"

"You don't even get it...?" The look in L's eyes turned stern. "If you continue to save heroines willy-nilly like that, you're going to cause the War of All! How could you save her when you know that's the cost!?"

"Oh, do you have a function that allows you to tell who's a heroine, too, L?"

Wait, no, hold on a second—Poppy was a heroine?!”

Didn’t the Namidare bloodline only kick in when a heroine was in absolute peril? Poppy may have been in trouble, but I had no idea it was that serious...

“Rekka, what L is really talking about is my story.”

“Huh?”

I cocked my head to the other side when I heard R say that. But, come to think of it, I’d been involved in her story—her mission was to help me settle on one of the heroines to prevent the War of All and save the future—from the very beginning.

“Omitting the finer details as to why, my story has a special feature. The girls who appear in it have a high chance of becoming heroines.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of this...”

“That’s because there’s never been a need to explain it to you. The heroines of my story appear in my story as potential brides for you, Rekka, but don’t have their own stories like Satsuki or Iris did, for example. At most, they’ll be troubled by something or have some special circumstances surrounding them, nothing more.”

Then... had I come across Tokiwa and President Momone as part of R’s story?

“But it’s not like anyone’s being forced into my story just to find a bride for you. It merely means that you’ll have a higher chance of running into girls who fit the bill. That’s all.” R paused there for a moment as if to suggest there was more to it than that. “On a technicality, however, they’re still heroines. That’s why L is so mad about it.”

“I see now...”

It finally made sense. R and L were both here to try and prevent the War of All; they’d just taken two different angles on it. R wanted me to save heroines until I found one I could settle down with, thus eliminating the cause of the war. L, on the other hand, wanted to eliminate *me* to keep the war from ever coming about. That meant every heroine I saved was a step forward in R’s book, but one step closer to destruction in L’s.

So, yeah, from her perspective, I could understand why she was mad about me saving a heroine that didn't really need saving. The reason why L had chosen to stick with us in the forest when Harissa noticed Poppy's presence was probably because she wanted to observe how I would act in front of a real heroine. And I chose to save Poppy without hesitation, buying L's displeasure as a result.

"How could you do such a thing?"

"Honestly..."

I knew why she was angry. She had more than enough reason to be. But that didn't change my answer.

"If there's someone in front of me who needs help, I refuse to stand idly by and simply let them suffer."

"...!"

L's expression stiffened for a moment, her eyes shooting wide open. But that had been my answer all along, and it would continue to be my answer in the future. Even knowing that saving people was potentially pushing the world closer to a little apocalypse, I couldn't just do nothing. I couldn't just watch tragedy unfold before me. If I could do something, I would. I knew it wasn't logical or rational considering what the cost might be one day, but that was my answer. And I looked at L unflinchingly when I said it.

"Because you..." After several moments of silence, L's expression relaxed by a fraction as she spat her next words: "Because you're like this, Big Sis Satsuki is..."

"Huh...?"

What about Satsuki? I was confused as to what my childhood friend had to do with any of this, but before I could ask L anything, her body began to vanish from her feet up.

"Hmph! I have nothing more to say to you!"

L sniffled one last time before disappearing from my room altogether via her particle relocator.

“What happened with Satsuki..?”

“Who knows?” R shrugged her shoulders in feigned ignorance.

I had a sneaking suspicion she actually knew, but I knew better. She wouldn't tell me even if I asked. Anyway, with L gone, I stretched out my arms as I felt the pent-up tension in my body melt away.

“Still, it doesn't seem like L has any intention of giving up on the whole assassination thing... What should we do?”

“Right...” R replied to my mumbles with a sigh. “Well, I do think what happened today was a step towards solving the problem.”

“Huh? Really?”

It felt like all I had done was further incite L's rage...

“Yes. The answer you gave L just now was exactly what the doctor would have said. Did you see how surprised she was when those words came out of her mouth?”

Yeah, she did look pretty surprised, actually. I had no idea how my answer had resounded in L's heart, but if it was a step in the right direction like R said, then good.

—Fin—

Afterword

We're now into the double digits on this roller coaster of carnage that's only picking up speed. Welcome to volume 11 of this weird little (apocalyptic) romcom! To everyone who's picking up from volume 10, long time no see. To everyone who bought all 11 volumes at once, it's nice to meet you.

Those of you who are keeping up with me already know, but I moved again! I'm now living alone and can put all my figures, posters, manga, and light novels wherever I want. I no longer have anything to fear, not even the judgmental glances of my parents. I'll never have to worry about anyone opening my packages again. There's nothing to fear—nothing!

Also, the *I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse* manga that was being serialized in Comic Dangan has now finished its run after two years. Although there were some shortcomings when adapting the story from text to picture form, I think it was a really wonderful work. Seeing the battle scenes come to life, seeing all the fan service shots that got added, and seeing R constantly floating around in the background (which is very difficult to depict in the books) all made me very happy as the original creator. To Mr. Koji Hasegawa, the man in charge of the manga, I can't imagine how much of a hassle it must have been! Thank you so very much for all the wonderful work you put into it.

And now for the usual acknowledgments!

First, to Nao Watanuki. There were only two new heroines this time, so I thought there wouldn't be as many characters to design... but then there were Satsuki's parents, Itsuki and Sanae (when you put their names together, you get Satsuki), as well as the group of five children. It all kind of added up before I knew it, so I'm very grateful for all your work! Thank you very much.

Next is my editor, Mr. Nanbu. With the start of my new series overlapping with me moving houses, I'm sure I've caused even more panic for you than usual (/nervous sweating). A-At any rate, I'll make sure my books get done no

matter what, so please continue to look after me.

And now to the editing and sales departments at HJ Bunko, the bookstores who stock their shelves with this series, the readers who picked up this book, and everyone associated with *Little Apocalypse*, you all have my utmost gratitude! Please continue to work with me in the future.

My next release will be volume 3 of *Ore to Kanojo ga Geboku de Dorei Shuji Keiyaki*, while the next volume of *Little Apocalypse* is planned for the summer. I will work my hardest to make sure both series are enjoyable and reach everyone without delay.

Let's meet again sometime!

This is the illustrator Nao Watanuki. Hello!

Your rough for volume 11 is Sister Yulia, who has a rather simple design. In contrast to her, Poppy turned out super frilly. On a completely unrelated side note, a leotard-style outfit was also suggested. I personally always think of female fairies as wearing leotards. Maybe I'm old...

Also, Satsuki's parents make their debut this time, and show off their generosity as a family. I actually remembered rather belatedly that they're amazing people too. Satsuki's father is a master mage and everything. (I really like that title!) I hope I was able to portray him in a way that conveyed that.

[Bubble] To Mr. Namekojirushi and all the editors, thank you for this volume too! To Mr. Hasegawa who was in charge of the manga, congratulations on completing the last volume! And to all the readers who read all the way to this afterword, thank you very much!

See you in the next volume, no matter the snow or pollen!

Nao Watanuki [Small text next to Lea] ←In the middle of shedding



挿絵担当・和狸ナオです。よろしくどうぞ!

11巻ラフ案はシスター・ユリア、シンプルなデザインです。
その分ポピーはフリルいっぱいになりましたが、
これとは別に レオタード風の衣装案もあたります。

私の中では妖精(女子)=レオタードの
イメージが根強いようです。古いんだろうか…

大友家も新たに住人が増えなんと
寛容な一家かと感心しましたが、
お父さんからして『部長を法使い』

↑この肩書きがお気に入り。

というすごい家だったのを今更思い出しました。
この肩書きに見合う頼もしさが挿絵でも
出せていれば幸いです。

なめこ印先生、編集様方、今巻もお世話になりました！
また、コミックス版を手掛け下さいました長谷川先生、
最終巻まで大変お疲れ様でした。

この場を借りて御礼申し上げます。

そしてあとがきまでお読み下さる読者様、
いつもありがとうございます！また次巻、雪にも花粉にも
めげず無事にお会いしたいと思います。

和狸ナオ 拝

◀脱皮中

おまかせ

Bonus Glossary

Characters

Yulia: A nun from Europe who's come to take care of a small church in Rekka's hometown. She also moonlights as an exorcist, which is something of a tall order in a town that's got yokai, Demon Kings, vampires, and all sorts of other supernatural beings hanging around. This causes a bit of an issue for Rekka, since he happens to be friends with most of them. Yulia's in for a rude awakening when she finds out her new best friend, Suzuran, used to be a homunculus. This presents quite a dilemma for her: does she do what the church tells her to and kill in the name of good, or does she listen to her heart and do what she thinks is right? Good thing Rachelle's there to give her a talking-to on God's behalf, and Yulia is able to mend her ways in the name of love.

Poppy: A fairy who lives in the mountains outside of town. She's extremely petite—only about the size of a doll—and has transparent, butterfly-like wings. She and the other fairies live deep enough in the mountain woods that they're rarely ever bothered by humans, but every now and then some intrepid children find their way to fairy civilization and enjoy chasing them around for fun. This likely won't be an issue in the future, however. (See "The King of the Forest.")

The King of the Forest: A white lie (and quick thinking on Poppy's part). A white-ish lie, anyway. Those kids are probably going to be scared of the supposed king of the forest for the rest of their lives.

Itsuki and Sanae: Satsuki's parents. They're close with the Namidare family, and after growing up with them as neighbors and family friends, Rekka calls them "Uncle Itsuki" and "Auntie Sanae." They're generous and kind (as evidenced by their willingness to take in L despite the strangeness of her circumstances), which makes it easy to forget that they're also both very powerful mages. They're where Satsuki got her magic, after all!

Demonslaying Ogre Killer: Momone's grandfather. He has quite a reputation for his past feats and his incredible powers, some of which Momone has inherited.

Vice President of the Student Council: Momone's right-hand man when it comes to student council affairs. She may have gotten the wrong idea about Rekka based on what she's heard from Momone, but she also has a bad habit of catching him at the wrong times. One more incident, however, and she may really send the disciplinary committee after him.

R (Heroine): Although it's never really dawned on Rekka before now, R is a heroine in her own right. She comes from a future on the brink of destruction that only Rekka has the power to save. She has the special ability of attracting non-story heroines into Rekka's life, the hope being that he'll eventually find one he likes and settle down. The ending to this story, however, has yet to be written.

Places, Things

Exorcists: Agents of the church who work to purge the planet of supernatural existences they believe to be a threat to mankind. It's worth noting, however, that it's an important distinction that they do their work in the name of the church rather than in the name of God—though some of them may have difficulty accepting that.

Holy Water, Weapons, etc.: As it turns out, a marketing scheme. Rather than there being one ubiquitous, all-powerful "holy" attribute, exorcists have to brew potions and craft weapons that are specifically effective against each threat they face: vampires, werewolves, demons, et cetera.

Purple Morrowmorrow, Swillsalmon: Tasty, albeit strange, creatures from space. The horn meat of the purple Morrowmorrow in particular is especially good, and considered a delicacy far and wide. Its soft and fatty, melt-in-your-mouth goodness is truly out of this world.

Japanese Teacups: Specifically, yunomi. Unlike Western-style teacups, they're more cylindrical in shape and don't have handles. Commonly made of ceramic. (Some say that Japanese tea really does taste better out of them, but you'll

have be the judge of that yourself. Rekka would like you to give it a try if you haven't.)

Porridge: In this case, a dish called "kayu." It can be dressed up in all kinds of tasty ways, but it's a simple dish that can be made with just rice and water. It's bland and easy on the stomach, which makes it ideal food for the sick. It's also relatively easy to make. (Special note to Tsumiki Nozomuno if you happen to be reading this: Stop. Just stop. Don't get the wrong idea. Put whatever you have in your hands down immediately and go back to the basics. Rice. Water. That's it. Seriously. Then just a pinch of salt— and you're done. Done! Do you hear me?)

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Hologram Gem: A special tool of L's from the future. A small, diamond-shaped crystal that will float over the head of its user and project a hologram over them for a flawless disguise. (As long as there aren't any gremlins in the area, anyway, because this definitely counts as delicate tech.) Was undoubtedly given to L to help with her mission, but is currently being used to help her try and get by in present-day Japan.

Tabi: Traditional Japanese socks identifiable by the distinct separation between the big toe and other toes, making them easy to wear with thonged footwear like zori and geta (as in L's case).

Noren: Traditional fabric dividers hung between rooms or at entryways in lieu of or in addition to a door. Probably not the best choice for cardboard, but there's no telling L anything... Can also be used on windows, or used to decorate walls.



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I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse: Volume 11

by Namekojirushi

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