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SHARUCHAN SHANA

TM



THE GIRL WITH **FIRE** IN HER EYES
By **Yashichiro Takahashi** Illustrations by **Noizi Ito**



SHAKUGAN NO SHANA
THE GIRL WITH FIRE IN HER EYES





"WHY CAN'T YOU BE
A LITTLE NICER?"

"SHUT UP. WHY
SHOULD I?"

THE MYSTERIOUS GIRL — SHANA.

**"RIGHT. YOU'RE JUST
A THING NOW."**



THE AVERAGE HIGH SCHOOL FRESHMAN —
YUJI SAKAI.

**"YOU'RE TELLING ME I'M
LONG DEAD?!"**





THE FAMILIAR SPIRIT OF FRIAGNE —
AND SERVANT, MARIANNE.

"MY MASTER... OH, MY MASTER."

DEVOURER OF THE EXISTENCE OF
HUMANS — FRIAGNE, THE HUNTER.

*"I WONDER WHAT'S INSIDE...
HAHA, I'D BE INTERESTED TO KNOW."*



CLASSMATE — KAZUMI YOSHIDA.

"...THEY GET ALONG REALLY WELL,
DON'T THEY?"



"...UM-MM."

"WHA, WHAA...UH, WHAT?"





SHAKUGAN SHANA™

THE GIRL WITH FIRE IN HER EYES

WRITTEN BY

Yashichiro Takahashi

ILLUSTRATED BY

Noizi Ito

VIZ Media
San Francisco

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PROLOGUE



THAT DAY.

That particular day began like any other, and Yuji Sakai took for granted it would end the same too.

April was almost over, and Yuji was getting used to being a freshman in high school. Some part of his brain knew another exam was coming up, but it seemed like the distant future, and he wasn't too worried. He was a pretty easygoing guy in general.

He was an only child from a middle-class family. His father, Kantaro, had been transferred overseas, leaving Yuji alone with his doting mother. A gentle soul, Chigusa maintained their small home with pride. And every morning Yuji made the twenty-minute walk to school.

Yuji wasn't the greatest student in the world. His grades had gone up and down since junior high, depending on how much effort he decided to put in. He more or less coasted through school, but once in a while he worried he was getting too lazy and gave a little extra attention to his schoolwork. Hayate Ike, a friend since junior high, often described Yuji

as being a pretty mellow guy.

Yuji didn't have a girlfriend and, in fact, wasn't in a particular hurry to get one. Though he sometimes talked to Yukari Hirai, who sat next to him in class, he was more interested in her lecture notes.

On that particular day, what occupied his mind more than anything else was how he should spend his money during the upcoming Golden Week holidays. He could go somewhere with his friends, but he also had his eye on some games and comic books.

After school that day, Yuji headed across the large iron bridge that connected his neighborhood to downtown. His plan was to cruise all his favorite game shops and bookstores and, out of all the cool things he wanted, make up his mind what to buy.

On that day, until that moment...

Yuji thought his life would go on, just as it always had, forever.

He was totally and blissfully unaware that anything in his life would, or could, change.

But on that day, at that moment...

In the light of a blood-red sunset, Yuji's normal life was burned away. His world had caught fire.

Chapter

1

THE DEVIANT WORLD

YUJI SAKAI was about to be devoured by a monster.

It happened just five minutes away from his ordinary life.

Suddenly, flame filled his vision.

The crimson tint of the sunset wavered and intensified, coloring the entire busy street lined with restaurants and nightclubs, the rush of traffic and people, a clear, deep red.

In that first instant, Yuji could only gape in wonder at the extraordinary spectacle.

Like a wall, flame surrounded the area. Everything else beyond it was distorted and blurred by the haze of heat rising upward.

On the ground at Yuji's feet, a line of fire formed the characters of a strange sort of writing, linked together in the shape of a crest.

People all around him froze in place, suspended in the middle of taking a step or whatever else they'd been doing.

Yuji gazed at the scene, stunned.

For a second, Yuji thought that maybe it was all a bad dream. But then reality broke in.

“Wha...?!”

Something fell from the sky into the midst of the crowd. Two things, actually. And then he saw them.

They towered over the crowd.

What the heck?! Yuji thought.

He'd never seen anything like them, though there was no mistaking their familiar shapes. But how they had come to be there, gigantic, bloated, he couldn't imagine.

One of them was a doll that resembled a famous mayonnaise brand mascot. The other was a ball formed of mannequin heads, some with hair, some without. Each figure was twice as tall as a regular-sized human being.

What kind of joke is this? Yuji wondered. What he was looking at was ridiculous, absurd — horrifying. It was beyond a nightmare.

But it was real — horribly real. They stood in front of him, true monsters.

The mayonnaise mascot doll began to dance, swaying its huge body back and forth. Shrieking in hellish accompaniment, the mannequin-head ball split horizontally in a fiendish grin. The mouths of the mannequin heads gaped in unison.

Just then, the people frozen in place around Yuji were caught in a furious blaze. To his amazement, he was untouched by the fire and heat, but he had to shield his eyes from the unnatural intensity of the glare.

Yuji stood rigid, just watching. What else could he do?

The flames drew each person high into the air, then plummeted them down toward the gaping mouths of both monsters. As the creatures sucked in the tendrils of fire, the contours of every figure in the wavering flames began to blur and fade. And soon, the flames themselves were shrinking, diminishing.

What had started as a blazing bonfire was reduced to a campfire, then down to the flicker of a candle. Sure enough, it was fading away...

Yuji gazed at the flames being sucked in. In the afterglow, Yuji stood alone as though stranded.

Then, at last, both monsters noticed his presence.

The mascot doll tilted its head toward Yuji.

"Hmm? What is this?"

It took several seconds for Yuji to realize its childish voice was referring to him.

"Aaah..." Yuji uttered a strangled cry.

The huge eyes of the doll glared at him.

By then, the mannequin-head creature had turned entirely toward him. It opened its gaping mouth in the center of its body and spoke in a woman's voice.

"I have no idea. He isn't the honorable Denizen, I don't think."

"But he's moving inside the Seal."

"Mistes...and an incredible anomaly at that. It's been a while since we found such a lovely gift. Our master will be mightily pleased."

"Yay! We could score some extra points!"

The doll stepped forward, putting one large, crudely made

foot in front of the other. Swaying its huge body and smiling its leering grin, the creature was both grotesque and cute. It was a fearful sight.

“Then, shall we...?”

The gigantic doll lumbered toward Yuji, each step shaking the ground. It extended an arm almost as large as a sewer pipe.

“Uh, uh...?”

The thing in front of Yuji was so incredible, so extraordinary and overwhelming, he didn’t even think to panic or struggle. All he could do was step back.

But he wasn’t given the time.

The doll’s groping hand grasped Yuji roughly around the midsection. The hand was so big he couldn’t see over the top of it. Tremors of fear surged throughout the boy’s body.

“Ugh! Agh...”

It was too late to do anything. Yuji realized he was being lifted toward the doll’s cavernous mouth. The monster was about to swallow him in one gulp.

He couldn’t even scream.

With his eyes wide open and every inch of skin breaking out in a cold sweat, Yuji was ensnared and could not escape. He was about to be devoured.

“Thank you for the treat!”

All this happened just five minutes away from his ordinary life.

And it was only the beginning of a long journey.



Someone small with tremendous speed and determination descended from above.

The toes of this being, pointed firmly downward, drove straight into the uppermost curve of the mannequin-head ball creature.

“Gaah?!”

All the various mouths of the ball—the mouths of the mannequin heads and the large mouth in the center—screamed out in unison. The impact of the attack was so great that the bulk of the monster was jammed into the cracked surface of the road.

The petite young girl who had made this extraordinary dive flexed her slim, strong legs and catapulted back into the air for another assault. This time, her weapon was a shiny, sharp sword.

The doll prepared to throw Yuji into its mouth. But its teeth clashed and bit nothing but air.

The doll looked up to see its prey, Yuji, rotating in mid-air.

The monster’s arm was severed cleanly below the elbow.

“Gaaaaaaaah!!”

When it realized it had lost an arm, the doll wailed and staggered back and forth. Instead of blood, faint white sparks flew from the cross-sectional surface of the arm that was left.

As the hair-raising scream went on and on, Yuji slammed onto the ground.

“Ugh!”

Even though the fall was cushioned by the huge severed hand that grasped him, Yuji lay stunned, the wind knocked out of him. Before his dazed eyes, the severed arm dissipated into faint white sparks and disappeared.

After the light and his dizziness had faded, he looked for the girl who had saved him.

Who...?

She stood between him and the doll, her back to him. She was small, but her stance spoke boldness and strength.

Her hair, blazing red with the sheen of burnished steel, flowed down to her hips. On her shoulders hung a weathered black cloak still fluttering in the wind from her recent attack. The long, graceful fingers of her right hand grasped the hilt of a large sword that shone with an otherworldly beauty. Red sparks trailed her every movement and scattered behind her on the wind.

Yuji gazed upon her in amazement, forgetting for a moment the situation he was in.

The girl stood tall amid the dancing fire sparks. Her presence was overwhelming.

The monstrous, shrieking doll still loomed behind the girl, but it was reduced to a mere backdrop in her presence.

"What do you think, Alastor?" the girl suddenly said, her back still to Yuji. Her voice held dignity as well as a lingering childishness.

Another voice came out of nowhere. It was a male voice, deep and heavy like distant thunder.

"They are not Denizens. Both are just Servants."

"Waah! How dare you cut off my arm!"

As though to interrupt their conversation, the doll released an ear-splitting scream. It raised its remaining arm up in the air, the hand clenched in a fist.

The girl looked up casually. At the same time she swung her right arm at her side so her sword tipped sharply down and back. The end of the blade stopped just shy of Yuji's temple.

Yuji was careful to hold his breath steady. With her body twisted to the side, her left hand clasped the end of the hilt. She was ready to attack.

The doll's huge fist came down fast. "Get squashed!" yelled the doll.

Before the clenched fist had even traveled half of its intended course, the girl had moved to a spot directly below the doll's knee.

The sword flashed through the air faster than the eye could see.

Following the momentum, the girl turned her body ninety degrees and leapt to the side of the doll.

The doll's fist wavered in midair. The giant arm swayed dramatically and threw the doll off-balance. It spun and staggered, its own weight finally causing it to crash face-first onto the road. The monster had no idea what hit it.

"Gah-huh?"

Shaking from the impact, the doll opened wide its large, painted eyes in astonishment. It saw its own leg standing alone and upright on the ground.

The girl had severed the leg with incredible speed.

Like the arm earlier, the leg turned into faint white sparks

and dissipated into the air.

Through the sparks, the girl looked down at Yuji still slumped on the ground.

Her eyes burned with fire, and her gleaming hair rippled and danced with the flying sparks on the wind.

“F-flaming hair and blazing eyes...!”

The doll’s voice trembled with amazement, as though it recognized an enemy more powerful than itself.

With her right hand only, the girl casually brandished her sword. As long as the girl was tall, the sword was undoubtedly heavy, but she wielded it seemingly without effort. Sparks of fire scattered at her every step as she made her way toward the fallen doll.

Yuji, mesmerized by the savage beauty of the scene, didn’t move an inch.

The end came all too quickly.

“Ugh! Waaah!!”

As the doll struggled to speak, the girl split its head in half with ease.

A few seconds later, after the doll had disappeared in a burst of white sparks, the girl glanced back at Yuji. Her sword in her right hand, she walked toward him slowly.

The situation was so incredibly strange and her presence so powerful, that Yuji hadn’t noticed until now how short the girl was. She was only about four-and-a-half feet tall. If he was standing, she would probably only come up to his chest. She couldn’t have been more than eleven or twelve years old.

Her finely drawn features held no trace of childishness, however. Her expression was blank, yet full of resolve and strength of will beyond the ordinary.

For the first time in his life Yuji felt that he looked upon a face he could only describe as gallant. And her clothes—the black leather jumpsuit, the dark weathered cloak—not to mention the mighty sword she wielded, all seemed to suit her perfectly.

But by far her most impressive features were her eyes and hair, that both blazed red with the gleam of molten steel.

She stood before Yuji, and he might have thought her enchanting if she weren't so intense.

"Um, uh... thanks," he stammered.

His response seemed lame after what she'd done for him, but he wasn't in any condition to act cool.

Ignoring Yuji's sputtering, the girl said, "Hmm, so this is Mistes?"

Before Yuji could ask what she meant, the male voice he had heard before emanated from somewhere near the girl.

"Right."

Yuji noticed a pendant resting against the girl's chest.

Linked to a silver chain that hung around her neck, the dull black sphere was encircled and crisscrossed by two golden rings. Delicate and intricately worked, it appeared to be both a fine piece of jewelry and a sophisticated machine.

How it functioned was not clear, but the man's voice seemed to come directly from inside the pendant.

"To be able to move within the Seal, he must be storing something unique within..."

Suddenly, a thunderous roar came from behind Yuji.

The mannequin-head ball the girl had pounded into the ground was hurtling toward them like a cannonball.

The girl kicked, almost grazing Yuji's nose.

The ball of heads took the blow full force and careened off at a sharp angle, smashing into a nearby ramen restaurant. Once again it sunk into the ground.

The girl began walking calmly toward the restaurant, which was partially obscured by a cloud of dust.

Yuji was nervous. Fearful of being left alone, he grabbed the hem of the girl's cloak, but she shook him off and continued walking.

Just then a human figure came flying from the opposite direction at Yuji, its hand outstretched toward Yuji's back. The girl turned in the nick of time and swung her sword as she did, barely missing the top of Yuji's head.

Everything went black, but in a nanosecond Yuji came to his senses. He heard someone screaming.

"Nyaah!"

Someone fell to the ground behind him.

Yuji turned to find a severed arm lying on the ground.

"Wha...? Again?!"

Yuji pulled back, and the arm turned into faint white sparks and vanished.

A woman squatted nearby, clutching the stump of her arm. Behind the hanging curtain of her blonde hair, the woman's beautiful face was distorted in pain. Despite her human appearance, there was something oddly inorganic about her.

The girl stepped to Yuji's side and pointed her sword directly at the woman. Her lip curled in contempt.

"Hmph! I know what you're doing. Running away, and trying to take the Mistes with you! Tsk! I'm rather disappointed to be able to defeat you so easily."

The beautiful woman opened her elegant mouth and spoke in a voice of loathing. "Flaming hair and blazing eyes... So, you're the Flame Haze of Alastor?"

"That's right. So what?"

"My master won't pass this over in silence..."

The girl responded with a snort. The tired threats didn't faze her.

"Hmph. That could be. He may be screaming in a fit of agony and death very soon."

Laughing, the girl swung her sword high above her head.

"But for now, let me hear *yours* first."

It took a moment for Yuji to realize what was happening. Clearly, the two females were enemies, and now the girl was going to kill the woman.

Yuji didn't know enough about the situation to think logically. He just reacted. It was his natural disposition to interfere.

"Wait!"

He leapt between the swinging sword and the beautiful woman.

The girl pulled back in surprise, and the woman started to laugh. No one, including Yuji, had expected such a thing.

Yuji got another shock when out of nowhere he felt a strange pressure in his back. Unseen by him, the woman he

had tried to protect had thrust her hand into his back and was digging deep inside him.

What's this? he thought.

His own existence, the core of his being, was about to be destroyed.

Inside of me...reaching for that something, that something...!

He felt it and was terrified.

Stop...!!

"Gaaah!"

The strange and terrifying sensation he felt lasted just a second, interrupted by the beautiful woman's scream.

The girl cut the woman down—and Yuji, who was standing between them. With her sword gripped tightly with both hands, she slashed the blade downward from the upper left shoulder to the abdomen without a second's hesitation.

Yuji lurched and fell backward, and saw the beautiful woman slashed just as he was. A little doll sprung out of the woman amid a shower of sparks.

"Tsk!"

The little rag doll, crudely made with hair of brown yarn, button eyes and a mouth stitched with red thread, clucked its tongue in surprise. Its legs made of flesh-colored felt kicked up gravel as it spun backward in retreat.

The girl started to chase after the doll when a cry came from the pendant on her chest.

"Behind you!"

The mannequin-head ball had shot out of the ruins of the ramen restaurant and was hurtling toward the girl like

some demonic cannonball.

In a split second of unwasted motion, the girl spun her body around, slid Yuji, still groaning from the cut, to safety with her foot, and shoved her sword deep into the oncoming monster.

The head-ball was split in perfect halves and immediately exploded in a burst of glittering sparks. Finally, it disappeared completely.

In the meantime, the doll had escaped.

An uneasy silence fell over the street. Tiny embers left by the people who'd been engulfed in flames littered the area. The scars of destruction were everywhere.

Not surprisingly, it was the girl who broke the silence. "Judging from the way that Servant spoke, a rather big force could be behind her."

The pendant responded. "It's been a while since we've had the chance to employ the Toumetsu."

"Yeah. At any rate—"

"Ughhh. Urgh...I've been cut!"

The girl glanced down at Yuji rolling around in pain.

"Huh," she said. "I completely forgot that this thing could move."

"Ughh..."

I've been slashed from the shoulder down, moaned Yuji to himself.

"That's right. It reminded me of Tenmoku Ikko for a moment, and made me nervous."

"Ughh."

I'm dying, thought Yuji.

“Well, back then, I was attacked without warning, right at the start—”

“Ugh!”

Is this death?!

The girl now seemed quite irritated with Yuji’s moaning and groaning and gave him a swift kick. “Argh! Shut up, shut up, shut up! Why all the fuss over being cut?”

The pendant spoke.

“It reveals your character in your past life, you idiot. If you were a human being, you’d have died the instant you received that wound.”

“That’s what you say, but I’ve been cut! Huh?”

Realization dawned on Yuji.

He’d clearly felt the sensation of being cut—he could remember the cold blade slicing through him. But could it be true that he wasn’t really in pain? Or dead for that matter? He’d been groaning in the assumption that naturally he’d be in terrible pain, but...

It...doesn't hurt?

Even a mortal wound might have a moment of numbness before the pain set in, but Yuji doubted he’d still be able to think so clearly. One question above all resounded in his head: *What the heck is going on??*

Bewildered by it all, Yuji raised his head and a shocking sight immediately met his eyes. His body was nearly cut in half!

He’d been split diagonally from his left shoulder to his middle, and the left side of him seemed a little too far away from the right side, to which his head was still attached.

Not being completely severed in half was probably just a stroke of good luck; but even so, as the pendant had said, any normal person would be dead by now. Yuji vaguely remembered the pendant saying something else, but he couldn't recall exactly what. Nobody could blame him, he told himself, for being a little preoccupied.

For some reason, no blood gushed from his wound, and he felt no pain, though he could look down and see for himself his own insides exposed. Oddly enough, a faint light seemed to emanate from them.

"What's going o—" Yuji began, but stopped short when the girl climbed on top of him.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

She brought her face close to his, close enough for their cheeks to touch. Yuji felt the warmth of her flame-like hair, and the blaze of her eyes seared into his. He breathed in her delicate scent, along with the smell of fire.

Yuji was smitten.

Her slender, graceful fingers softly touched his shoulder...

And then, the girl grasped both halves of Yuji's body and roughly shoved them back together.

The sensation of his body coming together was indescribably strange. After a second, Yuji felt his senses return to normal. The girl broke her hold on him.

Puckering her small lips, she breathed a sharp breath on Yuji. His whole body burst into flames.

"Whoa!!"

Yuji jerked upright. The fact that he could sit up made

him realize that his body was back in one piece, just the way it used to be.

The flames burned out.

He cautiously inspected his body. Not only was there no trace of his wound, but his clothes were restored as well. As he gazed down at his chest, he could see a light within.

What is that?

A small, lone light was burning.

His body was clearly not transparent, and yet the light was there inside him. He could see it as though he was feeling it—or was he feeling it as though he could see it? Many bizarre things had happened, but the light in his chest bothered him more than any of them.

Something about this light made him feel anxious.

Yes, it was this, this light, that the woman had touched earlier.

He was certain. The beautiful woman who had dug her hand into him had been after this light.

He asked the girl, “Wh-what did you do to me?”

Once again she ignored Yuji’s question. She stood up without looking at him and placed her sword inside her coat, right by her left hip. Though she pushed the sword with enough force for it to pierce through the back of her coat, it didn’t—it didn’t even protrude out past her hip. Like magic, the sword had simply vanished from view.

Now empty-handed, the girl looked around at the wreckage and shrugged her shoulders. “Did you see what happened?” she said. “That Servant shrewdly took all of what the subordinates had gathered.”

As the little doll escaped, it had grabbed two large, crystal-like lights and carried them away. They were a particular power source the monster had collected.

The voice from the pendant replied with a sigh of frustration. "Yes, it was shrewd . . . But the contents of this Mistes is a bigger threat. I'd say it's an accomplishment that we prevented this one from being taken."

The girl nodded in agreement and raised her right index finger toward the sky.

A burst of light surrounded the area. Yuji's body went stiff.

Like a sort of magic illusion, the small lights scattered across the surface of the road—remnants of those who had burned—swiftly regained their human forms.

Relief swept over Yuji, but only for a moment. He noticed something odd. All the people around him had lights flickering within their chests—just like him! Yuji felt his anxious feeling creep back.

The lights appeared similar to the flames that he saw when he was first attacked by the two giant monsters.

Earlier, the flames were big enough to engulf their whole bodies. Now they're so small. It seems like they shrank as soon as the monster sucked them out . . .

A chill ran through Yuji's body.

What is it?

He felt like his mind had just touched the edge of something dangerous, even catastrophic.

Ignoring Yuji, the girl continued her conversation with the pendant. "I'm done with the Torches. I'm going to use

a few of them to fix things up.”

“All right,” the pendant replied. “At any rate, they sure have a hearty appetite.”

As she spoke, several people’s lights drifted through the air like dying fireflies and condensed into one mass, gathering on the girl’s extended fingertip.

In the next instant, the lights burst all at once into an infinite number of sparks. The fire sparks spread over the area, hovering over the destruction, softening and permeating the broken buildings and torn up road.

“Ah...”

Before Yuji’s eyes, each ruined object was restored to its original condition, slowly and silently, like a film being shown in reverse.

Pavement stones were reassembled, their cracks sealed; smashed store windows were pieced back together; the broken, tumbled walls of the shops and restaurants were built up once more; and the bent street lamps were straightened out. Even the fire-blackened remains and the last trails of stagnate smoke disappeared.

The soft lights were gone from the restored area, and the landscape had almost returned to normal.

Except for the lights that still burned brightly in the chests of the people around him.

The restoration process only took about ten seconds.

The girl eventually spoke. “Done.”

The earth shook in a brief eruption of light.

“Whoa!”

Then Yuji was surrounded once again by the hustle and

bustle of the crowd, hurrying on just as before. Yuji blinked and shook his head. He saw and heard it all, the busy downtown streets and noisy traffic and people, all tinted by the blood-red sunset.

The wall of flame, the haze of heat, the crest of fire at his feet...all had disappeared without a trace. Was everything truly just as it had been? Yuji wondered.

No, it wasn't...

Yuji could sense the difference.

The people who'd been enclosed with him still had lights glowing in their chests. And the people who had turned to fire sparks on the girl's fingertip were missing.

And, above all, he could see the light inside of him.

But nobody seemed to care, or even to notice. No one said a word, but acted like it was completely normal.

No, they aren't aware of it...what happened earlier, or what I'm seeing right now.

Within a few moments, the people with lights in their chests had gone their separate ways into the crowd, each walking a little slower than they had before.

Yuji watched them scatter. The girl stood alert nearby, observing the situation with a watchful readiness.

At some point the girl's hair had changed from fiery red to shiny black, like cooling steel. She looked composed beyond her years, but otherwise she now appeared almost ordinary.

It occurred to Yuji, gazing up at the girl, that he was the one drawing attention to himself. He was still slumped on the ground, and people were looking at him curiously.

Scrambling to his feet, Yuji saw in full view the crowd filling the busy streets of downtown. Among them were several people who had lights glowing in their chests. The size or distance of the light didn't matter. He could simply sense them.

One of them, a man in a business suit with thinning hair, walked by with a heavy tread.

He wasn't one of the people attacked earlier, but he has the light inside of him, and he seems to be unaware of it... What's going on?

Yuji's confusion increased. All around him appeared signs and anomalies telling him that the world had not returned to normal. The girl, who probably had all the answers to his questions, stood right there in front of him.

But she wasn't talking...

"U-um, about earlier, I mean, what happened? And what's going on now..."

Yuji felt his awkwardness level rise, though the girl in front of him came up only to his chest.

As had happened before, she ignored him.

Yuji reached out to put a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, you..."

But his hand never made it. In an instant the girl's thin, delicate fingers had encircled his wrist in a viselike grip so that he couldn't even move.

The girl finally looked at Yuji. "You are really annoying."

The look she gave him chilled him to the bone. It was as though she didn't even acknowledge his existence. He was

a mere speck to her, not a person.

"Should I erase him?"

"Wha...?!"

Yuji didn't get the full meaning of her words, but he could tell she was serious. A strange new fear grew inside him. But...

"Wait."

The voice from the pendant stopped her from whatever it was she was about to do. "You shouldn't open up Mistes carelessly. Have you forgotten about the disorder caused by Tenmoku Ikko?"

The girl snorted and released Yuji's hand.

"Of course I do, but this thing has been bugging me," she said.

"Let it know the truth. That should quiet this thing down."

"Y-you guys, stop calling me 'this thing'! I'm human!" Yuji cried out. He rubbed the finger marks the girl had left on his wrist.

"You're not human," the girl said "Just a thing."

"What...?"

"Listen carefully," the girl said. "The 'real' you—the one who was human—is long gone. Your original existence was devoured by the Crimson Denizens. You are what's called a Torch, a replacement used to buffer the shock caused by the disappearance of your existence."

Yuji was stunned. "What are you saying?" The words barely penetrated his comprehension.

Slowly, somewhere at the back of his mind, Yuji absorbed the meaning of those words. They tumbled around in his

head until an eerie realization dawned on him.

Crimson Denizens, the monsters. The disappearance... of what? The existence... of what? The real one... who is? The replacement... me...?

This time, the pendant spoke.

“Now, since the restoration was done under our protection, you should be able to see the Power of Existence that shapes the replacement body in the form of a light in your chest. That is definite proof that you are no longer human, but merely a remnant of your former existence.”

The pendant was right.

He could see it—the light flickering in his chest.

The light... the Power... of Existence?

He felt something cold surging in the pit of his stomach.

He slowly began to understand what they were talking about. The words connected with each other and took on meaning.

I... disappeared... a while ago... devoured by a monster... and I'm a remnant... a replacement... a thing...?

It was horrific, absurd. But it was true. He couldn't deny it any longer.

What he had just experienced was too real to question. And the words of the girl and the pendant were all too persuasive.

The girl continued: “You can see them walking all around you, right? They are also remnants. That's what they become once they've been devoured—all of them. One of the Crimson Denizens must be in this area to gather and devour

the Power of Existence. And that means the 'real you' was a victim too. Believe me, it's not uncommon, and it's happening all over the world on a regular basis."

With that, the girl turned and began to walk away.

Yuji vaguely understood what she was trying to tell him. But he wanted to know more.

"W-wait!" He scampered after her like a child left behind. "But I've never heard of any monster called Crimson or whatever going on rampages!"

Yuji was in a panic. He had to practically jog to keep up with the girl's long strides.

"Of course not," the girl said. "If you were able to move inside, you must have seen the enclosure we call the Seal."

"Oh... You mean that wall of flame?"

"To be precise, it's the space inside that wall. It forces a slippage in the world where things disconnect. Consequently, no one knows what's happening inside. And, ultimately, it devours the thing you think of as existence. That's why every human being who is devoured is treated like a thing that never existed. No traces are left behind."

"That can't be..."

The girl stopped at a taiyaki stand. She must have been hungry because she ordered all the cakes on the hot griddle. While she waited for the cashier to bag them up, she continued her explanation.

"But if a Denizen eats everything in sight, a distortion will occur in the empty spaces where existence used to be. Replacements of devoured humans—called Torches—are

put in their places. This helps cushion the impact of the spaces collapsing.”

She paid for the bag of taiyaki and nodded her thanks.

“You see the Torches walking around here? The light you see temporarily maintains the connection to the people and the world around them, in place of the real person who was devoured. In time, they’ll lose their existence. By the time the light burns out, they’ll be completely forgotten by everyone. Oh, look. Good timing.”

“Huh?”

“You should be able to see that Torch walking toward us.”

An unimpressive middle-aged man walked feebly among the crowd. A small light shone in his chest.

“Oh, that man with the weak light.”

Suddenly, the light flickered out.

The man disappeared. No one noticed, and nobody cared. Yuji too probably wouldn’t have paid attention if he hadn’t been told about it. The man’s presence had been nothing more than vague, his disappearance unremarkable.

A single disappearance in the bustling crowd.

“Is that what you meant by burning out?”

“Uh-huh.”

The girl took a taiyaki out of the bag and started walking again.

Yuji ran to catch up. He kept his eyes on the crowd, looking for more people who were now Torches.

To his dismay, he could spot them carrying their weak

lights within. Perhaps one out of thirty, give or take...

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of another light burning out.

The person disappeared. All the same, the crowd moved on.

Was this the world he had lived in his whole life? Was this the reality going on right under his nose?

A world Yuji hadn't known existed, yet had lived in, allowed this to be—allowed the remnants of devoured people to roam around in some kind of limbo of non-existence, only to eventually completely disappear, unnoticed and unlamented.

And the crowd moved on.

Yuji held his head in his hands. A new concept of reality was closing in on him. Never before had he felt the weight and burden of such an oppressive truth.

"So you're saying all these people, every one of them, have been devoured? By monsters like the ones I saw? That's awful!"

The girl was busy stuffing her face with taiyaki, so the pendant answered.

"It's not all so terrible," it said. "There are many of us in the Crimson World who are concerned about the adverse effects on our world if this world were to lose its balance by the excessive devouring of existences."

"Us"? Are you telling me you're one of those Crimson-something...monsters?"

Yuji finally sensed that the pendant itself was actually talking.

"The one you've met is actually a mere servant to us, but yes, we're something like that."

Between bites, the girl added, "So anyway, we're called the Flame Haze. We're on a mission to prevent a disaster by hunting down and destroying those who prey excessively. Get it?"

She popped another taiyaki into her mouth. Her expression softened into something like a pleased child's. Must've been good taiyaki.

Yuji tried to make himself believe that he understood what the pendant and the girl had said. Some of it made sense, but it was all so preposterous...

He decided to cut to the heart of the matter.

"Y-you called me... Mistes, right?" he said. The cold sensation in his stomach surged again.

The girl looked impressed by his memory.

"That's the Torch in which Crimson Denizens store the precious tools and swords they've created in this world."

The Torch...?

Yuji felt a sense of coming doom.

"When that Torch, the Mistes, burns out, the contents are moved to another host. You could call it a 'traveling treasure box.' Unfortunately, you've been discovered. That's why you're in trouble. They'll be after you."

A Torch.

How did she explain it?

Yuji's heart beat faster.

You're not human anymore. Just a thing.

Everything began to snap into place. His situation, his

position, and his existence were starting to take shape under this new order.

The 'real' you—the one who was human—is long gone. Your original existence was devoured by the Crimson Denizens.

He was hurting inside.

I'm a replacement called a Torch, placed to buffer the shock that's caused by the disappearance of my existence.

He felt a lump in his throat.

A Torch temporarily maintains the connection to the people and the world around them, in place of the real person who was devoured. In time, they'll lose their existence. By the time the light burns out, they'll be completely forgotten by everyone.

"Then, uh... then, I'm..." Yuji's voice quivered. He was frozen in place.

The girl stopped walking, an annoyed expression on her face. She turned toward Yuji. "Don't make me say it again. You're just a remnant of your real self. You exist only to burn out."

The fear and loneliness Yuji felt were beyond words. He was devastated. A feeling of discord shook him to the core, as though he had fallen off the edge of the world.

"When you burn out, the precious Tools move on to the next Torch. All the memories others have of you, what you've been doing, what you were involved in—everything—will be gone. Because your existence will be gone."

The very foundation of his existence had just collapsed. The truth was a death sentence—worse, a complete annihilation.

Yuji choked on the words in his throat. He didn't know

what to say at all. He looked around him as though to find an escape from this reality that was pressing in on him, but there was none.

The sun had already set.

He realized they were standing on the large iron bridge that connected the busy downtown area to the residential district on the opposite shore. Even with the two of them standing there, the sidewalk was wide enough to let others pass.

“But...”

The Torches were among them.

They were the replacements with glowing lights in their chests. Men, women, elderly people, children. There were many.

When he turned his head and looked out into the night, he could see many more lights, moving among the lights of the city, small but surprisingly clear. Those lights, like his own, would eventually burn out.

“No!”

Being told that I'm dead! That a person called Yuji Sakai is already dead! There's no way for me to accept that!

It wasn't that he couldn't accept it—he refused to accept it.

That was all.

Just looking at the girl's surprised expression told Yuji his rebellion was meaningless. But he couldn't help it.

“My body was injured earlier!”

“Yeah, and if you were really still human, you'd be dead. It was a fatal injury,” the girl replied.

"But I have memories! They're real! And they're mine."

"Of course you do. You're the remnant of your own self."

Yuji racked his brain for something that would prove his identity—something that would convince her that he was indeed the living Yuji Sakai. What could he say? What could he do?

The girl waited.

She waited for him to prove it.

Or, rather, she waited for him to understand that there was no way for him to prove it.

None.

He couldn't prove a thing. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't do it.

A Torch passed by with a solemn expression.

A sense of helplessness engulfed Yuji's whole body. He asked once again, "Yuji Sakai is already long dead?"

"That's right."

"Burn out and disappear? Me?"

"That's right."

"It's not a dream?"

The girl shook her head. "It's just reality," she said.

"However, since your light is still bright, your consciousness and presence will probably be the same as other ordinary humans for a while."

Yuji felt nothing at her words. What was the point? Yuji Sakai was already dead. Nothing else mattered.

What am I supposed to do now?

Yuji leaned weakly against the rail of the bridge.

The lights of the Torches shone into the night, as did the one in his chest.

"So you're telling me this is the reality?"

Reality was a world where monsters lurked and humans were devoured, but no one was aware of it. His own existence would accomplish nothing, would be remembered by no one. He was just biding time until he disappeared.

"That's just too awful."

"Too bad," the girl replied. "That's just the way it is."

The next day, Yuji awoke to a morning sun so bright that it seemed almost ironic.

The first thing he did after sitting up was to look down at his own body. He was wearing his usual sweat-suit pajamas.

Please let it be a dream...

Praying, Yuji closed his eyes, and then opened them again. He timidly glanced down at his chest.

He saw a light, glowing deep inside. He observed the way it flickered.

"Aah..."

He heaved a deep sigh. He couldn't see the light now. In the back of his mind, he recalled the voice of the girl from yesterday. He clearly remembered her saying, "That's just the way it is."

"The reality..."

He came to his senses with his own voice.

That's right, this was the reality.

Yuji thought back on how yesterday ended. The girl had disappeared while Yuji stood in a daze. Loneliness and fear drove Yuji to run all the way home. He'd panicked when he couldn't see the light in his chest.

It was kind of strange for me to panic.

Not being able to see the light was good, wasn't it? Because it was evidence that he was only the remnant of himself. If he couldn't see it, perhaps it had all been a dream—the monsters, the sword-wielding girl with fire in her eyes. Maybe it had never really happened.

Who was he kidding? It was no dream. He squinted his eyes and concentrated. Sure enough, there was a light burning within him.

Yuji knew for certain then. The light burned inside him all the time. Unless he concentrated really hard, he wouldn't see it. That was the way it worked.

Oh, that's right. That's how I saw it yesterday, thought Yuji. He'd figured it out last night before falling asleep.

The girl had told him he was already long dead. If he accepted that, was the reality so hopeless as to be beyond grief, beyond despair? Could he mourn his own death while living as a remnant? One day, he knew, his light would burn out. Or would it? Should he fear that day as inevitable?

He had thought so yesterday, but now...

His mind was hazy, his senses benumbed. He wondered if sleep had dulled his feelings. Perhaps he'd pushed all those startling events into a far corner of his brain, so that on waking, they seemed more distant to Yuji, and less real.

Or maybe he had given up. Maybe he realized there was

nothing he could do about it. Was this because of his usual laid-back attitude that Hayato was always referring to?

Wait a minute...

He realized something else that made him uneasy.

I've been suffering as the real Yuji Sakai both yesterday and today.

If he was the "real" Yuji Sakai, then it was only natural to feel despair about being dead, and fear the disappearance of his existence.

Then what about the present me? How should I feel if I'm only a remnant of myself?

Yuji started to hate himself.

"I give up."

He didn't think he was strong enough to live positively under such circumstances. But he'd never had the bad habit of self-loathing, so what was the point of starting now? There was nothing he could do. The best thing to do was go on doing things the way he'd always done. Yep, that's what he wanted to do.

As if on cue, his mother called him from downstairs. "Yu-chan, it's time to wake up!"

Yuji looked at the clock. It was ten minutes later than his usual time to be down in the living room.

"Ugh, look at the time!"

Yuji ran downstairs in a hurry.

Yuji had a precise morning schedule to follow in his head—it started with the moment he lingered in bed for a few extra seconds of sleep and ended when he was sitting in his first class at school. In between he needed time to wolf

down his breakfast, hit the convenience store, and wait for traffic lights to change. Even a small delay in the schedule would cause him to be tardy.

He glanced at the television in the living room and noticed that the sports program he watched while eating breakfast was already over. He was really cutting it close.

On the dining table waited a simple breakfast for two: rice and miso soup, seaweed and eggs. The Sakai family was actually made up of three people, but his father had recently left home to work overseas. As a result, his mother took care of the house and Yuji.

Yuji slid into his seat at the table and attacked his breakfast. His mother came in with the morning paper and milk.

"What's wrong, Yu-chan? It's so unusual for you to oversleep."

"Yeah, I guess."

Yuji stole a glance at his mother. She had a gentle face and a compassionate smile. He concentrated...

She wasn't a Torch.

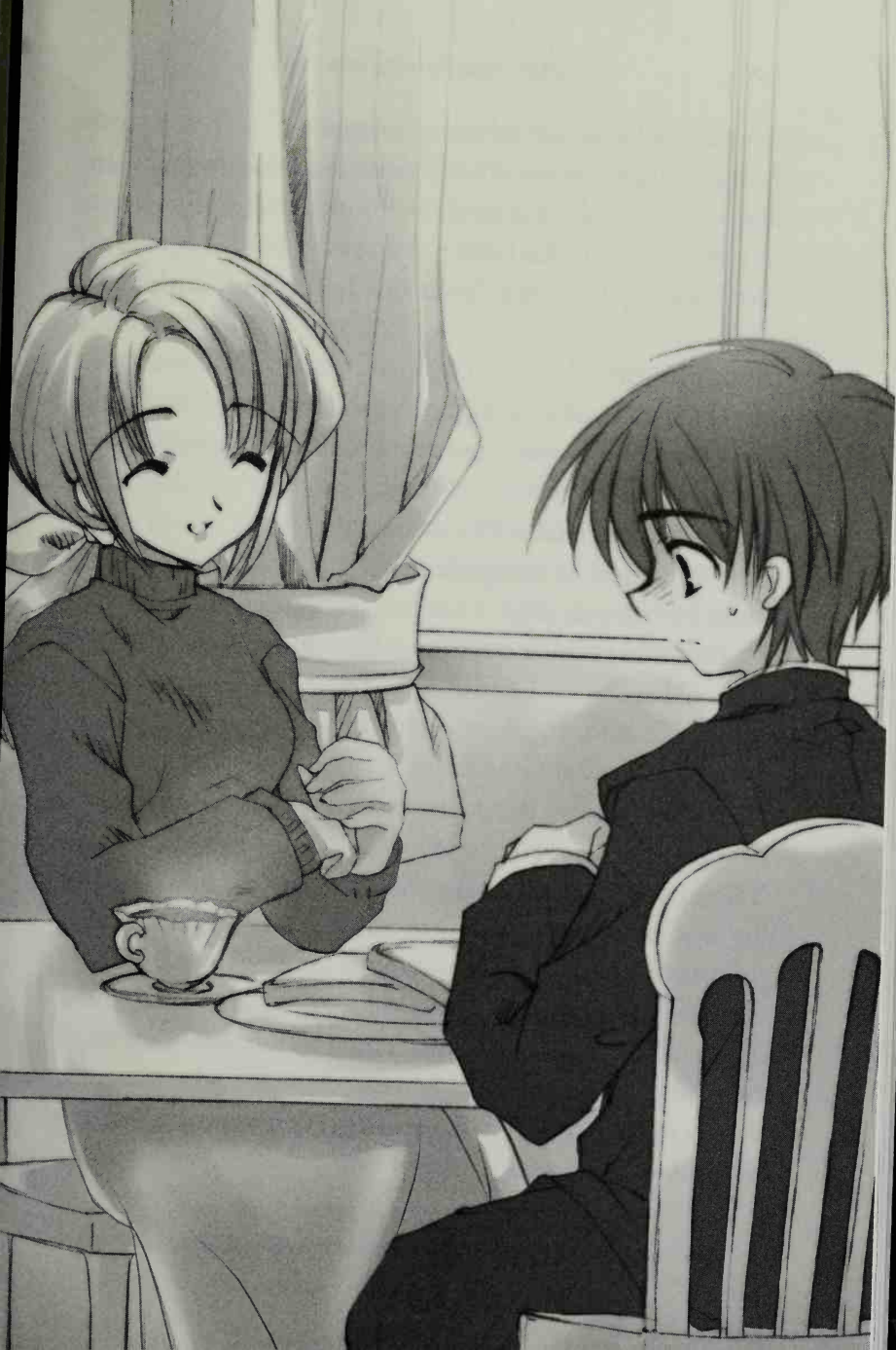
His mother was human.

Whew!

He felt relieved, but at the same time loneliness tightened his chest. It was the same feeling he had yesterday.

What would his parents do if he suddenly ceased to exist? Would they become childless? Would they have wasted the fifteen long years they'd spent raising him? The thought filled him with sadness.

But perhaps disappearing was better than dying. Death meant grieving, but Yuji would be the only one to feel sad



about simply being wiped from existence.

Fortunately, his parents had married as students and were still young. If he disappeared, his mother would be free to start a new life with his father overseas.

"Are you daydreaming, Yu-chan? Isn't it time for you to go?"

"Huh? Yikes!"

His mother's voice brought Yuji out of the bleak future and back to the present. Just as she said, there was no time left to dawdle.

"Thanks for breakfast!"

He wasn't close to being done, but Yuji left the rest behind and ran up the stairs.

He threw on his high-collared school uniform and grabbed his school bag. In his head he adjusted his schedule. He had time to pick up a snack at the quickie mart, but that was it.

"I'm going!"

"Be safe!"

Their exchange was casual, but it made his heart clench. Why was he sad over such a small thing, something so insignificant?

Yuji had a reputation for being mellow, and sometimes he worried about his own passivity. He felt now that he'd proved himself otherwise, and was relieved.

It was an empty relief. He already knew that.

He knew it, but still.

Misaki City, where Yuji lived, was a fairly big city with a

distinct layout. Through the center of the city, dividing it in half, ran the Mana River. To the east lay the urban concentration of the city. To the west lay the residential area. The large Misaki Bridge connected the two districts.

Misaki City High School, which Yuji attended, was located in the residential district. It was about twenty minutes on foot from Yuji's house. Because the neighborhoods around the school were over-developed, the school grounds were small, and bicycles were prohibited.

To Yuji, his path to school looked different today. But really, it was Yuji who had changed, not the road.

Each of the Torches, those destined to burn out and be forgotten, just like him, carried a light in their chest and continued on with their day, one step at a time. Yuji watched them carefully as he walked to school.

Some lights were bright and some were dim. But overall, every Torch he saw seemed meek and unobtrusive.

And sure enough, an especially quiet person with a flame of faint, diminishing color would suddenly go unnoticed and disappear—gone and forgotten.

Just as he had seen yesterday.

Four grade school students were walking in front of Yuji. They were loudly discussing a superhero they'd seen on television.

"...then he made so many mistakes trying to transform and got into trouble, right?"

"Yeah, using a mask and a fish."

"Yeah."

"The enemy was cool too."

One boy among them was a Torch with a weakly glowing light. He didn't participate in the conversation, but only nodded in agreement.

The other boys barely acknowledged his presence.

Then...

The flame burned out.

The boy vanished quietly.

The other boys continued their conversation. Neither the people passing on the street nor his companions noticed he was gone.

Even Yuji, who saw it all and knew the child was a Torch, barely registered the boy's disappearance. It had happened so quietly.

So, this was what it was like to lose one's existence gradually. The world kept on spinning. Life went on.

Had people been disappearing quietly, just like that, his whole life? Would he disappear like that too? The thought sent something cold turning through Yuji's stomach.

But still...

Yesterday the girl had said those monsters were devouring lots of people in this city. For whatever reason, she ended up letting one escape. That monster and its master—the Lord of monsters—would continue to devour humans; if not here, somewhere else. It was such an awful thought.

Something occurred to Yuji.

Both the night before and this morning, he was relieved to discover that his mother was safe. But he realized that there was no guarantee that she would be safe in the future. The

same went for his friends. There was no way of knowing when they might be attacked and turned into a Torch like him.

Danger seemed all around him, but there was nothing he could do. After all, he was just an ordinary person who happened to get some extraordinary knowledge. He didn't have supernatural powers like that girl yesterday.

I seem to be a target for the monsters too, but it's not like I can do anything... I can't even protect myself.

He recalled the events of the previous evening. They were not an enemy to be faced with mere wisdom or courage.

I can't protect, I guess... All I can do is pray that the girl with the sword can kill them quickly...

It was quite pathetic, but it was just like the girl had said: "That's just the way it is."

Come to think of it, I wonder if that girl is still fighting somewhere?

He glanced around as he walked, but all he could see was the usual crowd of commuters going to school and work.

The difference was, he could tell that Torches walked among them.

Every day during his walk to school, Yuji liked to compare travel agency posters he saw posted along the roadside. They always gave him a lot to think about. *Where should I travel during Golden Week? Oh, that reminds me, there's an exam coming up. Ah, that's right, I wanted to get that new Orange Range album. I wonder if my mother will bake cupcakes this weekend?*

Yuji let himself get lost in the random thoughts coursing

through his mind. It was an escape from reality, however brief. For a moment, his life seemed ordinary again.

But his moment of peace was shattered in a second when he noticed a light in the chest of a woman walking past one of the travel posters.

“Uh...!”

Yuji stood frozen on the spot, stunned by the sudden reminder of the new world he had entered.

“What...what am I supposed to do?”

Chapter

2

THE SUNSET, THE RAINY NIGHT, AND THE MORNING

YUJI WAS FEELING DEPRESSED as he entered his classroom at Misaki High School. The room, though hectic and noisy, was bright with sunshine and the cheerful sound of friends greeting each other.

It was like this every morning of every school day.

Yuji looked around the classroom for his friend Hayato Ike, a smart kid whom everyone called “Four Eyes” because of the eyeglasses he wore. Unfortunately, he was nowhere to be seen.

This was, of course, Yuji’s usual morning routine. He looked for Hayato every day simply out of habit. He knew that his friend could never understand the mind-bending events he’d experienced.

If someone—anyone!—could just tell me that everything I’m seeing and feeling is a delusion, and I’m the one who’s crazy, then I could stop worrying and my mind would be at ease.

With a dark cloud hanging over him, Yuji shuffled to his seat near the center of the classroom.

Oh yeah, there’s a quiz today on Japanese history. I wonder

which topics it'll cover?

He tried to stay in the moment and focus his mind on school. He wasn't ready to give up his normal life. He turned to Yukari, who sat next to him, in the hope she could clue him in about the quiz.

That's when he made a discovery.

"Wha...?!"

A complete proof of his sanity.

The destroyer of his everyday life.

She was seated where Yukari Hirai was supposed to be sitting.

"You're late."

The Flame Haze girl!

There she was, with her determined, noble features, her long, shiny hair, her head held high. She was even wearing the sailor-style school uniform. The girl who called herself the Flame Haze!

"How come *you're* here?!"

"I've discussed it with Alastor. We agree that I should stick close to you in order to capture those who target you. And besides, I don't visit this kind of place very often, so let's just say I'd like to squeeze in a little sightseeing at the same time."

She sat with her legs crossed as though it was the most natural thing in the world for her to be at school. There, in the seat where a girl named Yukari Hirai had sat just the day before.

"What happened to Yukari?"

"If you're talking about the Torch who used to be here,



it's gone now. Anyway, it was convenient to be able to sit next to you."

"What? A Torch? Are you saying that Yukari was...?"

His worst fears were coming true already.

His everyday life was collapsing. No, as he'd been told, it had already collapsed.

The girl continued. "Yeah, she was already long-dead. So I became 'Yukari Hirai' by forcing my existence into her remnants."

"Y-your face is completely different from hers!"

Yuji had unintentionally raised his voice, and several of his classmates turned to look at him. He spoke more quietly.

"Why isn't anybody noticing?"

"Taking over someone's existence is not about trying to imitate the original being. I'm merely replacing Yukari Hirai with my own existence. You can see the difference because we've influenced you. Don't worry."

"Of course I'm worried! What happened to Yukari?"

The girl scratched her head in frustration. "I've been trying to tell you, I am Yukari Hirai."

Just as the girl said, no one had noticed the switch. To them, the girl sitting there now was the same Yukari Hirai who had sat there the day before and all the days before that.

"That's not what I'm saying! I want to know what happened to the *real* Yukari Hirai, the one who was sitting here yesterday!"

His classmates looked up again. Yuji realized he was making a scene.

"I explained it to you yesterday," the girl said. "The *real* Yukari Hirai you're talking about wasn't even sitting here yesterday... that's just the way it is. Her flame was dim and about to burn out. You would have forgotten about her along with everyone else. There's no need to trouble yourself about it."

Yuji wasn't especially close to Yukari. She was just a classmate who happened to sit next to him for a short time. He had to admit he couldn't remember much about her, except that she was quiet and kept to herself.

But she was here. Yukari Hirai was definitely here.

He didn't know if she wanted to be remembered. Just like other Torches, she'd simply disappeared, leaving no trace, given no time to think it over.

Still, Yuji wanted to remember her.

The girl that was sitting in Yukari's seat—that wasn't her. He knew that.

That was likely the only proof Yukari had existed in this world.

"What's your name?"

"My name?"

"'Flame Haze' is the name for all of you who kill monsters, right? But what's your personal name?"

"Uh..."

She probably hadn't anticipated this question. Her determined expression melted slightly and a hint of loneliness crept into her eyes. She whispered her reply as she toyed with the pendant that hung around her neck.

"I'm the Flame Haze contracted by Alastor," she said with

a nod to her pendant. "And that's all. I don't have any other name."

The loneliness vanished from her face, along with any other human emotion. Her face was void of all expression.

"To differentiate me from other Flame Haze, I am called *Nietono no Shana*."

"NIETONONOSHA...?"

"Nietono no Shana. It's the name of the long sword I carry."

"I see. I guess I'll call you Shana, then."

She was definitely not the same person as Yukari Hirai, so she needed a different name. It would make things a lot easier.

This might have been an important moment for Yuji, but apparently it meant nothing to the girl now called Shana. She tilted her head and replied casually.

"Do what you like. I don't care for nicknames, and I'm just here to play my part."

"You mean your part is to protect me?"

"Protect you...?" Shana looked skeptical. "Well, as long as there's someone trying to eat you, I guess that's what I'm going to do."

Yuji was getting used to her blunt way of talking. In fact, deep down, he felt awash with relief at her words.

"By the way, Shana, are you going to be okay with being a high school student? I mean, there's tests and homework and all that."

Shana looked a little pissed off.

“First you pick some random name, then you drop the honorific? Oh, whatever . . . Anyway, how hard can these classes be?!”

She took a textbook from her bag and waved it back and forth.

Yuji watched her suspiciously. Could this girl who looked no older than a middle-schooler be wise enough to make a fool out of him?

The school bell rang to signal the start of class, and the sound echoed in his ears with a sinister tone.

The fourth-period English class was coming to an end. The classroom was silent and filled with tension. All the students but one hid their faces behind textbooks propped up on their desks. The English teacher, who had begun his lesson in the usual way, was now scribbling madly on the chalkboard.

The small girl creating all this tension—Shana—sat quietly in the center of the classroom, her textbook closed in front of her. She said nothing and hadn’t moved all period. She simply stared at the teacher with her arms folded over her chest.

This behavior made the teacher extremely nervous. Shana looked at him as if she were observing an animal in a cage. It was clear she had no respect for him. She’d maintained the same attitude and the same posture since morning, creating the same atmosphere of tension through the previous three periods.

The teacher could easily have ignored Shana. She wasn’t

jumping up or down or talking on her cell phone or filing her nails. But teachers are generally spoiled creatures that enjoy their positions of power. They like to command respect and blind obeisance, and loathe being judged on an individual basis.

Finally, just like the teachers of the previous three classes, the English teacher couldn't take it anymore.

When he was done writing on the blackboard, the English teacher spun around and glared at Shana. He was a middle-aged man and an unpopular teacher who doled out excessive amounts of homework. His mouth opened and shut a couple times before he finally got out what he wanted to say.

"Yukari, you're being inattentive today. I advise you to start taking notes."

Yukari Hirai—the girl Yuji had newly christened Shana—didn't reply. She simply said, "You."

That single word, said with such abruptness and authority by this childlike girl, froze the teacher to the floor.

"Do you even know what you're doing? You've placed the blanks in those fill-in-the-blank questions totally at random. This is not a guessing game, you know. They should be placed so that we can extrapolate the missing words from the surrounding text."

Shana didn't even unfold her arms.

"Er...?!"

"The correct answer is, 'That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet,' but if you don't have the original line memorized, there's no way for anyone to figure that out."

Her pronunciation was perfect. She went on confidently, "And if you checked the original Shakespeare, you'd see that you missed two complete lines. It happened because you're only copying from that manual you have in your hand, page by page."

The English teacher retreated a step. Shana's comments left no room for objection. No one doubted that what she said was absolutely correct.

Normally a teacher could bounce back from the ordinary backtalk dished out by students. But in the face of such knowledge, delivered with such authority, the English teacher was mute.

The dignity of the strong always exposes to the weak his own incompetence. And Shana was strong.

"As a teacher, you have no academic skills," she said. "You don't go beyond the manual. Your explanations are inferior and you ramble on with pointless lectures. Do you really consider yourself competent in this subject?"

The English teacher's face sagged.

"If you intend to teach me, come back tomorrow after you've done *your* homework. Otherwise, don't waste my time."

Shana had chalked up her fourth victim of the day.

After four successive bouts between Shana and their teachers, with Shana emerging the victor each time, the students, stunned, left the classroom one by one when the lunch break rolled around. Her last conquest had been so complete, they almost felt a bit of compassion for the poor English teacher.

They needed some fresh air to sort it all out, leaving Yuji to have his lunch alone with Shana.

Yuji's own experience with having his identity destroyed and his very existence put at risk made him consider the teacher's situation a little more sympathetically than he might have in the past.

Teachers these days were losing their grip on authority and trust (mostly through their own actions, it must be said). In the past, respect came hand in hand with the job title, but nowadays... Yuji took a big bite from the rice ball he'd bought at the convenience store. He thought he was quite the social critic.

Yuji glanced at the girl next to him, the instigator of all this, who sat quietly chomping some melon bread. Now more than ever, she looked her age—she was even kind of cute.

“Hey.”

“What?”

It was noisy outside, but the two were alone in the quiet classroom. It was a slightly awkward situation.

“You didn't have to go that far, did you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

Shana shrugged and bit into her melon bread.

Yuji felt his argumentative mood fade. Seeing her almost happy made the image of her ruthlessly chopping up those monsters yesterday seem all the more unreal.

“You were eating taiyaki yesterday... do you get hungry often?”

“Uh-huh. Of course,” she said over a mouthful of bread.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity, Yuji asked something that had bothered him since yesterday. “That talking pendant of yours . . . is that some sort of communicator?”

“Sort of, but not exactly.”

The pendant, silent all morning, finally spoke up. “I, as a Crimson Denizen, am stored within her, and this is the God Vessel called *Cocytus*. It manifests my will to this world.”

“... ‘Stored within’? ‘Manifests’?”

Shana glared at him out of the corner of her eye. She sighed and continued the explanation.

“Alastor himself is actually inside me. He is known as the contractor. This pendant is the device that enables him to verbalize his will.”

Hub?

Yuji had given up trying to make sense of all this. He simply accepted it and asked about whatever he needed explained.

“A contractor, huh? Oh yeah, you said this morning that you made an agreement with him to become the Flame Haze. Does that mean you used to be a human being?”

“That’s right,” Shana replied.

“So why’d you want to be a Flame Haze?”

“It’s none of your business.”

Her reply sounded final.

“Well, then . . .”

He looked around the classroom. Since nobody else was around, it seemed like a good opportunity to pull Alastor into the conversation.

"May I ask a question?" said Yuji, hoping for the best.

"I think," said Shana, "that you've been asking questions for a while already. So, what is it?"

"First of all, what is the Crimson World?"

Oh, that? Shana's expression seemed to say. She tossed the last bit of melon bread into her mouth.

"Hmm, let's see. The Crimson World... it's the Deep Red World. It's next door to this one, but you can't go there on foot. A long time ago, some poet dubbed it the 'swirling cathedral.' And we call its inhabitants the Crimson Denizens."

"You mean, like people from another dimension?"

This time, Alastor answered. "As expressed in the terms of this world, essentially, yes. The ones who attacked you were no Denizens, however. They were servants called Rinne, and they were created on this side of the world."

"Are they invaders coming to conquer us?"

"I wouldn't know. Each of them has its own purpose. It all depends. All I can say is that we, the Crimson Denizens, manifest by freely controlling the Power of Existence in this world. By transforming this power, we are able to manipulate the natural phenomena. Because of this, Denizens are constantly crossing over into this world."

"What did you say?" Yuji had a hard time wrapping his head around Alastor's complex explanation.

Shana sighed. "In this world, there is a fundamental energy called the Power of Existence. All things exist because of it. By borrowing this power, the Denizens, who come from

the Crimson World as nonexistent, are able to exist in this world. Do you get it now?"

"Umm... kinda."

Shana nodded. Yuji massaged his temples, hoping to stimulate his brain.

"For them to stay in this world," Shana continued, "they need to keep using the Power of Existence. That's why they're desperate to collect that power from humans."

"Collecting the Power of Existence? You're talking about that, uh, incident from yesterday?" Yuji saw again in his mind the grotesque monsters devouring the people turned to flame. The feelings of shock and terror came back too.

Shana nodded.

"Yup. So, anyway, for their own selfish purposes, they use that power freely to create servants and unusual phenomena."

Alastor then spoke up. "Deviations from the natural laws of this world, a phenomenon that shouldn't occur, an existence that shouldn't exist, and more than anything else, the overzealous hunting of the power to make these happen, could throw off the balance of existence between this world and the Crimson World. It could indeed be called a game for fools."

In spite of Alastor's gloomy predictions, Shana had moved on to the next item in her lunch—a sweet dumpling called *mitarashi dango*. She looked pleased with it.

"So, to maintain the balance, the Flame Haze goes around fighting those monsters who tenaciously hunt the Power..."

Yuji popped another rice ball into his mouth. He was finally starting to understand. With a mouthful of rice, he said, "Does the Power of Existence have to come from humans?"

Alastor didn't seem to mind Yuji's bad manners. Anyway, he didn't say anything about it, but answered in the same heavy, deep voice.

"Of course. Because their existence is very similar to ours, their power is exponentially stronger to us. Swallowing an indiscriminate mass only dilutes the power."

"Wait a minute! Crimson Denizens are human beings, just like us?"

"It's hard to explain. You have such a fixed conception of what is human. I would have to rely on poetry, rather than logic, to explain."

Yuji sighed as he popped the tab on his can of soda. "I see... but from what I've seen between yesterday and today, it won't be too long before everything is swallowed up."

"Not really," said Shana. "They've been crossing over into this world since ancient times, but the number of humans has been increasing. That's the way this world works, right? There won't be much change in the grand scheme of things. Then there's us, the Flame Haze, to keep things from going too out of control."

"I wonder if I can count on that..."

Yuji cast Shana a sidelong glance. She was done with her dumplings and was licking her fingers. "Umm, that's what I was telling you. I'll be protecting you until the treasure box,

Mistes, burns out, or until I exterminate all the Denizens coming after you.”

Yuji was getting used to her matter-of-fact attitude. She was always frank with him, and he was starting to appreciate that. He smiled wryly.

“Such encouraging words...so will you stay by my side around the clock?”

“For now, I’m keeping guard in the evening.”

As they explained to him, the isolation space—the Seal—temporarily severs the area from the surrounding world. Normally, these are created during the transitional periods of either dawn or dusk, which serve as borders between the daytime, when people are clearly aware of their own existence, and the nighttime, when people instinctively awaken to their true selves, and act as such.

Crimson Denizens tend to choose the most direct method of attack, and those times provide the best opportunities.

“The Seal...I asked about it yesterday. Is it like the spiritual barrier you see in video games and movies?”

Yuji was close to understanding everything when something horrifying occurred to him. “Wait—did you say dusk? Today classes run late! If things go wrong, they could show up here at school!”

Shana, resting her chin on her hand, rolled her eyes. “Well, of course! Why do you think I’m here?”

For a moment, he felt relieved. Then another question came to mind.

“Will you protect *everyone*?”

"What are you talking about?"

Yuji stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom!"

Yuji left the classroom, thinking about Shana. *What other human stuff does she do, besides eat?* he wondered. Someone called out to him from near the restroom.

"Hey, Sakai!" Three of his classmates were waving him over.

He had been so preoccupied with Shana that he forgot all about talking to his friends. Yuji ran over to them.

"Were you guys at the cafeteria today?" he asked them

Hayato Ike shook his head. "Never mind about that. How come you're eating lunch with that girl? She's a real troublemaker!"

Next to Hayato was Keisaku Sato, a handsome but somewhat superficial guy. "You've got guts," he said. "If things get bad, you could attract the attention of those teachers too."

"I didn't know you two were that close," said Eita Tanaka, a big guy with a cheerful face. "Don't be getting ahead of us!"

Yuji could only say something vague. "No, it's not like that."

Yuji surreptitiously checked his friends for lights in their chests. Even if this scene was so like regular life, even if he'd already checked that morning... Yuji was getting fed up with himself.

Nothing had changed with his friends. It was he who had changed.

“Eating lunch and talking, just the two of you. That’s enough to call it ‘close.’”

“Yukari is cute, I guess. But I didn’t know she was your type. You’re full of surprises, Yuji.”

Now his blood pressure was rising.

“Look...” Yuji searched for a smart answer, but none came.

At dusk, the Crimson Denizens would attack.

Perhaps he should leave school early, he thought. Then at least his school wouldn’t turn into a battlefield.

His brief pause gave his friends the wrong impression.

“You do have a bad conscience after all, huh?” Hayato persisted good-naturedly, his glasses sparkling in the sun.

“I’ve got a favor to ask you,” said Keisaku. “If Yukari has any cute, single friends, put in a good word for me, okay?”

This was Yuji and his friends joking around together. Meaningless, innocent exchanges. The usual scene. Everyday life—those things he didn’t want to lose and didn’t want to change.

The monsters attacked just yesterday. Would they really come back today?

Yuji clung to a feeling of optimism.

That’s right. I could be worrying needlessly. It doesn’t mean they’ll come today.

Even though he knew the monsters would return, he

stubbornly clung to his hope that they would never appear again.

"Hey, you with the innocent face! We didn't know you were such a player. What kind of moves did you put on that poor girl to trick her into being your friend? Tell us!"

Yuji punched Eita in the arm to get him to stop.

And then, the enemy came, after all.

The sun setting beyond the fragments of cloud turned everything a desolate red.

The students about to leave the classroom were tinted red as well.

That red, coming at them like a flood.

"Agh...!"

Yuji was caught completely off guard. He thought class would end without any disturbance. But he was wrong.

A wall of flame enclosed the area, including part of the hallway outside. A line of fire ran across the floor, forming a strange string of characters in the shape of a crest.

The students froze in place.

Yuji knew what this meant.

The Seal... the world is going to change...

Yuji shivered, feeling a strange resonance that signaled a change in the flow of the world course through his body. As before, he didn't freeze like the others—because of what was stored inside him.

Shana stood up next to him. "Here they come." The edges of her lips curled upward.

"R-really? Here, now?" The feeling of hope he'd had

earlier was gone. Fear and remorse filled Yuji's heart.

"Yes, they're really here, now," she said. "It has started."

Shana leapt gracefully on top of the desk between the window and Yuji. Her shiny black hair fluttered and began to glow in a blazing light, showering sparks of fire.

In a flash, the Flame Haze stood before Yuji. Clad in her familiar worn black cloak, she gripped Nietono no Shana—the long sword of awe-inspiring beauty—in her right hand. To Yuji, she was beautiful.

"Everyone's still here! Can't you do this somewhere else?"

Hayato was one of the students caught in the Seal. He was frozen in the act of placing a notebook into his satchel.

"The enemy set the Seal," said Shana curtly. "Why don't you tell them?"

"Argh!"

Yuji had to do something. Without thinking, he began dragging students away from the area he thought Shana might do battle.

Fortunately, there were only about four people left in the classroom besides themselves. Next to the window where Shana stood was a girl named Erika Nakamura, frozen in the middle of putting on makeup.

Yuji grabbed her by the waist. "E-excuse me," he said.

He was afraid her feet might be stuck to the floor, but he was able to move her. He struggled to lift and carry her. He was just an average guy with average strength, after all.

"Ugh, you're so heavy!"

Yuji dragged her into the hallway and went back into the classroom. Shana still stood on the desk. She held her long sword in both hands and didn't move. A few sparks swirled about the ends of her hair.

In the silence of anticipation, Yuji stood and watched. Something small was taking form outside the window—a thin, rectangular shape with sharp, shining edges. Reflecting the red light of the burning heat haze, it spun itself around, revealing a picture of the ace of spades.

A card?

The single, thin card floating in midair was soon joined by a second card. Then a third and a fourth, then more, soaring one after the other through the clear red light.

At first they flew about in random clusters, but eventually joined together in one mass that entirely covered the view outside the window.

Then, without warning, the cards turned and aimed themselves in a single direction. They were coming for Yuji.

The swarm of cards burst into the classroom, crashing through the windows, busting apart the windowsills and panes, even blasting through the walls.

Before Yuji's scream even reached his throat, they came at him—

But were blocked by a wall of weathered black fabric.

Shana swept her left arm in a wide gesture, spreading and extending the hem of her cloak like a shield. The cards that touched it burned instantly to a crisp. They could not penetrate it at all.

Shana's left hand was already back on the hilt of her sword. She pulled in the pommel to her left side and thrust her right shoulder a little forward. She was ready for battle.

Her blazing eyes quickly detected the source of power behind the cards. In that instant—

Shana jumped from the desk with enough force to send it crashing, splintered in pieces, to the floor. The tip of her sword pierced the remaining mass of cards.

“Gr...raaah!!”

A scream rose from the cards, and their flow became jerky and uneven.

When she felt the resistance and the sense of having hit home, Shana twisted her sword and drew it out. She raised it sharply and without pausing, brought it straight down.

A flame raced along the path of the blade and ignited the cards all at once. The explosion shook the classroom with its impact. Shana withstood the blast without flinching.

The flame flowed around the barrier her coat made. Yuji jumped.

“Whoa!”

When the flames had subsided, Shana swept away the barrier. Yuji was able to get a full view of the classroom. The floor was scorched and half of it was ripped away, exposing the concrete foundation underneath. The windows and panes were blown out, and broken pieces of desks and chairs were scattered everywhere.

This place was familiar to Yuji, and he felt the shock intensely.

In the corner of the room stood Shana. The explosion hadn't injured her at all, and she stood poised, ready for any action.

Something, or someone, was hooked on the tip of her sword. Yuji took a closer look and immediately recognized that it was the very same crudely stitched doll that had escaped from Shana yesterday.

Isn't that a servant of a Crimson Denizen called a Rinne?

The doll was impaled on the tip of the sword, slashed from shoulder to chest. Faint white sparks sputtered from a large hole in its abdomen. Yuji could see the exposed cotton filling.

"Gah, ugh..."

The red-stitched mouth somehow managed to groan in pain.

Shana seemed about to say something to the doll, when she suddenly looked around. The white sparks from the doll's wound began bouncing off the ground and surrounding her. As they bounced they increased in volume and began to spin wildly.

"Ugh, ha, haha...!"

The doll's groan turned into a snicker, and a shower of sparks sprayed from its wound. Each spark, in turn, transformed itself into a doll's head and attached itself to the doll's body. Within seconds they formed a gigantic and distorted body with the doll at its very center. The other sparks bouncing around her also transformed into dolls' heads and began to chuckle. The eerie siege closed in around Shana.

Yuji shifted his gaze from the bizarre spectacle. He pressed

himself against the wall and discovered that his classmates had been thrown to the edge of the room.

Three boys had been blown by the blast to a distant corner. Their bodies, burnt in several places and bruised by flying pieces of desk or chair, were covered with shards of broken glass and debris.

Yuji was shocked at the sight. He knew how much he needed Shana's protection, and how helpless he was in the face of this onslaught.

It's me. I've been careless... It's all my fault.

Feelings of regret and guilt tore at him.

"Hayato!" He ran to his friend.

"Heh, heh, tee-hee."

The unsettling laugh came from the giant figure, now completely comprised of doll heads. The thing's thick arms had the blade of Shana's sword securely in its grasp.

"You're mine now, Flame Haze!"

The floating doll heads gathered and morphed together into a giant arm that came speeding at Yuji, who clung fast to Hayato.

"So what?" said Shana calmly. Her blazing eyes drew a trail of light, and her hair scattered sparks of fire.

Twisting her body completely around, she propelled herself into the air with a force that spread waves of impact through the room and sent flames shooting across the exposed concrete floor.

"Huh?"

Shana leapt with the gigantic doll before her on the blade of her sword.

“Rraaah!”

Shana smashed the giant arm that was reaching for Yuji with the doll’s distorted body, destroying both in one blow.

“Wha... Huh?!”

The rush of wind created by the explosion slammed into Yuji’s back, knocking him and Hayato into a heap of tangled arms and legs.

Yuji waited for the numbness and pain to fade. His vision gradually cleared, and in a moment he saw the doll, nothing but a charred rag now, hanging from the end of Shana’s sword.

“Whoa!!”

The doll’s brown yarn hair was burned to the roots, and one of its button eyes had been torn off. The cotton stuffing had been ripped away along with its clothes, and only its flesh-colored limbs of felt were left hanging lifelessly.

“Th-that’s terrible...” said Yuji.

“I saved your pathetic life and that’s all you have to say?” Shana threw down the ragged doll with a twitch of her sword.

She directed her scorn at the doll.

“What is the name of your master?” she said coldly.

With its mouth of red thread torn and frayed, the doll answered in a voice like a scratchy vinyl record. “Do... y...ou... thi...nk... I would... t...ell you... Fl...ame... Haze?”

“Nope, just checking. Oh well, judging by the way he’s

tricking out his useless pawns, I'd say he's gotta be pretty dim."

"...Urgh, ugh."

The doll choked in anger.

Just then...

A voice with an odd cadence spoke. "Hahaha...clever. But I prefer the term 'tactical surveillance of power.'"

Shana turned in the direction of the voice, and Yuji followed her with his eyes. Looking out through the gaping hole in the wall, they both saw a tall man hovering upright in the air.

Clothed in a suit of purest white and a long white robe, the man was untinted by the red of the heat haze and gave the impression of a ghost in a bed sheet. He appeared to Yuji like a visitor from an illusory world, in striking contrast to the powerful reality of Shana's presence.

"Hello, little one. How appropriate for us to meet during this hour of the demons."

He was a delicate, beautiful man, whose image looked as though it could be blurred if touched. His voice was like the croon of a badly tuned violin.

Yuji knew: *This man is the Crimson Denizen.*

He felt displacement caused by the man's presence, a sense that he shouldn't exist here.

Shana replied in her usual direct manner—quite unlike the man floating before her. "Are you the doll's master?"

"Yes. I am called Friagne."

Alastor spoke then, his voice deep and full of power.

“Friagne...? I see, you’re the Flame Haze killer, the one known as The Hunter.”

The man called Friagne curled his lips into something resembling a smile. “Yes, I am The Hunter. But I resent your accusation that I’m a killer. In truth, I am called The Hunter because I collect the treasures of Crimson Denizens scattered throughout this world.”

His gaze rested on the pendant Cocytus hanging around Shana’s neck.

“And you, sir, are Alastor, Flame of Heavens. Great fame follows you in our Crimson World. I believe this is our first meeting in person. I’d heard rumors you came to this world, but I did not expect... This is my first meeting with your Flame Haze as well.”

He took a long look at Shana.

“Hmm... so this is your contractor, eh? The one with the flaming hair and blazing eyes. She is indeed as beautiful as I’ve heard. But her radiance is a bit overdone, no?”

While Friagne continued his self-absorbed patter, Alastor quietly whispered a warning to Shana. “Don’t be deceived by his delicate looks and affected demeanor. He is a powerful Lord that has murdered many Flame Haze by controlling treasure tools. He is not to be trifled with.”

Shana shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Yeah, I feel it.”

“Haha, there is no need for you to scowl so much,” said Friagne, who only just then noticed the discarded doll on the floor.

“Marianne!!”



Friagne's expression darkened with grief. He cried in a discordant voice, "Oh, I am sorry, my Marianne! To think I made you fight such a terrible girl."

Between the fingers of his white-gloved hand was a card, which he waved with a theatrical motion. With a quick flick of his fingers, the card fluttered in the air.

"Hmm?"

"Whoa!"

All at once, a mass of charred cards danced in the air around Shana and Yuji. The cards gathered in a whirlwind and flew to join the lone card floating at Friagne's fingertips. Once united, they formed a single, though incomplete, card.

"Hmm..." said Friagne with a hint of admiration in his voice. "You've almost destroyed Regular Sharp—my specialty—with your physical strength alone."

He took the damaged card between his fingers, and, like a highly trained magician, slipped it through his cuff in a smooth sleight-of-hand maneuver.

Before anyone knew what was happening, Marianne, the ragged doll, was being cradled in Friagne's arms. Tears came to his eyes as he examined his beloved doll. "Oh, Marianne," he sighed. "Flame Haze always do such dreadful things indeed."

Marianne wriggled her frayed mouth to answer. "I'm s...o...sor...ry...my...Master."

"Please don't apologize, Marianne. It was also my fault for making you go. I would never have imagined anyone

could inflict such damage with just a piddling little sword like that.”

Friagne smiled and blew a gentle breath upon Marianne.

Just as when Shana had healed Yuji yesterday, Marianne burned within a white radiance for a moment, then reappeared, restored to her former pristine appearance.

“There, precious, you’re back to your former self. I’m so sorry I made you carry an unfamiliar treasure tool.”

His coaxing tone grated on the ear. He lifted Marianne to his face and rubbed his cheek against the doll.

When his cheek touched her, Marianne responded in a slightly teary voice. “Your kind words are more than I deserve, my Master... But, for now...”

Nodding lovingly to Marianne, Friagne looked up and glanced in Shana’s direction. He didn’t alter his smiling expression.

“Haha... I’ve learned a valuable lesson from our battles yesterday and today. You’re a Flame Haze but you have very limited powers. Honestly, kitten, your fighting technique is a little—how should I say this?—underdeveloped?”

Shana’s eyebrow twitched.

“What did you say?”

“You are the contractor of the famed Flame of Heavens. Thus I took precautions, not knowing what power you might possess. But I see that you’re barely capable of summoning the inner flame through the power of that unusually sharp sword. Am I wrong? I actually take pride in being a pretty

good judge of the treasure tools.”

Friagne’s smile deepened when he saw Shana’s silent confirmation.

Alastor replied in his deep voice. “I see. You sent the Servant first to assess the level of our ability. As rumored, you are a cunning hunter, Friagne.”

“Well, after hearing the full account of yesterday’s battle, it’s true I didn’t think much of the danger. I staged a rematch today just to confirm my assessment. And, I might add, it was what my dear Marianne wanted as well.”

“I tried to get my revenge for yesterday, my Master,” said Marianne, her head drooping. “I am very sorry to end up in such an unsightly state.”

“Don’t fret, sweet. Haven’t I told you that it’s all right?” He placed a gentle kiss on the doll’s hair.

“I honestly didn’t expect she could do this much damage with just her sword,” Friagne continued. “But that’s all there is, correct? Tsk! I imagine it’s restricting enough to be inside a human, but for a contractor to be so limited too! The phrase ‘an unused treasure is a wasted treasure’ would quite aptly sum up your lordly power, would it not? Ha, hahaha!”

The light in Shana’s eyes blazed brighter. She took a fighting stance. “I’ll show you how ‘limited’ I am!”

Friagne shook his head and sighed as though dealing with a spoiled child.

“Trying to provoke me, are you? What a rude little girl. I’ve seen it before, you know. Many a Flame Haze has let her anger get the better of her, and it’s not a pretty sight!

Letting their powers go out of control, and ending up dead in the explosion.” Friagne’s expression darkened.

“Heed me well. If you do something foolish and that Mistes over there with its contents is destroyed, I swear by my true name, ‘The Hunter,’ I will be very upset.”

His smile returning, he shifted his gaze to Yuji.

“I’m in no hurry. I will arrange to visit you again under more desirable conditions.”

Yuji felt the chill of Friagne’s intense scrutiny that seemed to penetrate his very being to whatever it was he held within himself.

“I wonder what’s inside?” asked The Hunter, his voice and figure wavering and fading into the surrounding heat haze. “Haha! I’d be interested to know.”

Yuji, his vision blurred by the haze, realized that Friagne was gone.

“So it wasn’t any ordinary Denizen after all, but a Lord, and Friagne ‘The Hunter’ at that.”

“Hmph,” snorted Shana in reply.

Yuji hefted Hayato, covered in cuts and burns, into his arms.

“So he’s a Denizen, then?”

“Right,” confirmed Alastor. “He is one of the Lords, those who possess a power that is especially great among the Crimson Denizens. Unlike myself, he hasn’t enclosed himself inside a human. Therefore he continues to devour the Power of Existence in this world. He is the enemy of every Flame Haze.”

“A Lord, eh? And he’s the boss of those monsters? I would

think he'd be more horrifying than that."

"Don't judge him by his physical appearance. He can exist in any form he wishes... as can we all."

"Sorry to butt in," said Shana, "but I'm going to tidy up around here. I'll use him."

"Huh?"

Shana gestured with her chin at the battered Hayato lying crumpled in Yuji's arms.

"Use? What do you mean by that?"

"I'm going to fix the damaged area inside the Seal by using his Power of Existence."

Yuji remembered that yesterday Shana had repaired the buildings and road within the Seal by transforming the Torches of several people into fire sparks. Those people were gone from the world once the Seal was dissolved, as though they had never existed at all.

Yuji held his friend closer to him. "A-are you going to use Hayato like those people yesterday? Use him up until he's gone?"

"That's right," said Shana. "There aren't any leftover Torches like yesterday. But a human who is close to death, who's not yet a Torch, has enough power to fix everything. While I'm at it, I'll heal the wounds of all the other humans here. Then I'll turn the remnants of your friend into a Torch and replace him with it. Sound all right?"

"Of course not! I don't want him to die like me. I wouldn't wish this on anybody!"

"Fires don't burn without firewood. I can't fix anything or heal anyone if there's no power to begin with."

Yuji was speechless.

“Isn’t that clear? If you don’t want me to use him, I can choose someone else.”

“Th-that’s not the point!”

“Then what do you want me to do? Do you want me to dissolve the Seal in this broken down state? Let me tell you, if I were to do that, all your classmates would die for sure.”

Yuji knew she was right. Even to his untrained eyes, Hayato was seriously injured. If the world began to move, he wouldn’t last long in this condition, and would probably die.

But it was impossible for Yuji to choose which of his classmates Shana should use and turn into a Torch. It was he, after all, who had gotten them all involved in the first place.

Shana was right—this he knew. But making such a choice was something he simply couldn’t do.

Yuji struggled in silence until Shana finally lost her patience. “Well, then. Would you like to choose yourself?”

“What’s that?”

“If I strip some of your burning embers, I can fix objects and humans both. Of course, your Power of Existence—the time remaining before you burn out—will be shortened by that much.”

Yuji understood what she was saying, but his mind was made up in an instant. “Okay. That’s fine.”

Shana was surprised and, oddly, angry. “You seem to have made up your mind pretty easily.”

"It wasn't easy."

"Then why are you abandoning your remaining existence?"

"All this happened because of me...and..."

Shana was surprised to see Yuji smiling.

"I'm not abandoning my existence—I'm making use of it."

That night.

It was after midnight, and clouds were gathered low in the sky. A curtain of rain hung over the city and blurred the scattered streetlights.

In a corner of the city, a large black umbrella blossomed on the rooftop of an ordinary house. The nameplate on the front door read *Sakai*.

An outraged voice cried out from beneath the umbrella, "What is it, what is it, what is it with that Mistes?!"

The cry came from Shana, of course. She was the figure under the umbrella, hazy in the dim glow of the streetlight. She sat on the roof in her school uniform, her legs crossed in front of her. The rain beat down steadily around her. But getting wet was not what upset her.

"What a smart-ass for being just a remnant!"

The restoration of the area inside the Seal had been done just as Yuji wanted. Shana had patched up the classroom and the students as best she could with a minimum of power stripped from Yuji's own store, leaving just what damage might not be noticed and a bruise or two here and there on the students.

When he saw the results, Yuji smiled.

The memory of that smile was irritating Shana at that very moment.

What a strange guy, thought Shana. “No, detestable!” she said aloud. “That’s what he is—detestable!”

Shana had followed Yuji home, but they hadn’t spoken. Yuji tried once or twice to start a conversation, but each time she glared at him, so he eventually gave up. When he bid her goodbye at his front door, it was Alastor who responded with a “goodnight” of his own.

Shana had been on the roof ever since, on the lookout for Friagne and his minions. An attack wasn’t likely, but there was nothing else for her to do.

And once on the roof, there was nothing else to do but grumble on and on to Alastor about their current situation. Amused by her endless complaints, Alastor finally spoke up.

“In other words, he’s the first human—human boy—you’ve had direct contact with in a long time.”

Shana was stunned for a moment by Alastor’s words. To hide her embarrassment, she spoke with deliberate coldness. “*That* is not a human. *That* is a Mistes. Merely a remnant of himself.”

“Yes, but I don’t believe that distinction means much to him, or to humans in general. He retains his sense of self.”

“But it’s a remnant, nonetheless. No matter how or what it thinks, there’s no way that anything can be done about it. That’s right, nothing can be done...”

Alastor noticed the edge of bitterness in her voice. "That is correct," he said. "But there are many facets to any reality. Exceptions, accidents, incidents occur that one could never imagine."

Shana was silent.

"That said, the remnant is doing fine because it still has the remaining strength from its Power of Existence. In time, its ability to think, its will, and its presence will fade, then burn out."

Alastor's words struck Shana as a blow. But in a moment she had recovered.

"Hmph, I hope it will at least stick around until I destroy that pretentious prig, Friagne."

At that moment the clang of metal on metal rang out.

Shana looked over and saw the ends of a ladder sticking up over the edge of the roof. After a moment Yuji's face popped up under an umbrella.

"You're here, just as I thought."

Shana did not hide her bad mood. "Is that a problem?"

Yuji smiled at her bluntness.

"Not really. It just makes me feel kind of awkward to think you're up here."

"Hmph! It's none of your business what I do. Hey, how did you know we were here?"

Yuji thought a moment.

"Well, how should I say this? I felt a kind of flow—like the Seal from today, only smaller. That's what I felt."

"I see," said Alastor. "That's very possible. It's not surprising for one to develop a sense or understanding of these

things after witnessing such a manifestation of power.”

Alastor refrained from saying that normally, the Power of Existence has burned out long before this sort of understanding is reached.

Yuji nodded. “Anyway,” he said. “Aren’t you being Yukari Hirai? Don’t you think her parents might find it strange that their daughter is sitting on my roof in the rain?”

Shana snorted.

“I don’t care about that. I’m only Yukari Hirai for convenience. Besides, her whole family has already been devoured. They’re all Torches.”

Poke a bush and a snake comes out, thought Yuji. He should’ve kept his mouth shut.

“By the way,” said Shana. “We’re busy. If you’re done here, why don’t you go away.”

“Busy? But you’re just sitting there!” Yuji directed his next question to Alastor. “Are you really?”

Despite his illustrious-sounding title Flame of Heavens, this Lord of the Crimson World was pretty easygoing, and Yuji felt comfortable talking to him.

“That’s a difficult question,” Alastor replied.

Yuji was really starting to like Alastor. He decided to rephrase the question.

“So, you’re going to stay on guard in this rain?”

“That’s right,” blurted Shana. “They’re coming after you.”

“I get it, but why do you need to be... whoa... wow.”

Yuji clambered onto the roof. With a knapsack on his back and his umbrella in one hand, he crawled carefully across

the wet roof tiles to Shana and sat down in front of her. He didn't seem to mind getting wet.

Shana brought her knees together and readjusted her skirt.

Alastor spoke again. "It's none of your concern."

Yuji nodded. "I know. I was just curious. And I wanted to ask you a question." Yuji slid the knapsack off and pulled a thermos from it.

Shana watched him in silence.

Yuji removed the lid that served as a cup and poured hot coffee into it. Cream had already been added.

"Here."

Yuji held out the steaming cup. There was no real reason to refuse. Shana took the cup. It was warm.

It was not just a cup of coffee. It was the exchange of warmth between hands, the kind of personal interaction that Shana hadn't experienced in a long time.

Shana brought the cup to her chest and lowered the umbrella to hide her face. She spoke from behind it. "So, what's your question? I could at least answer it in exchange for this."

No word of appreciation, but Yuji wasn't expecting any. It occurred to him that perhaps he was being a bit pushy.

"Um, okay."

Yuji listened to the rain falling on the two umbrellas. The rhythm of the rain seemed to match the quick beat of his heart. He took a deep breath to calm himself.

"You told me that when I disappear, others would forget all about me, right?"

“That’s right.”

Yuji was beginning to understand why he found Shana’s frankness pleasant. She didn’t offer empty comforts or disguise the truth with unnecessary embellishments. Whatever it was he needed to know, she would tell him straight up. He liked that.

I guess that means I’m not looking for kindness.

Yuji was learning, a strange thing to admit, something new about himself. He wasn’t the type of person to wallow in his own sorrows. Of course, Shana didn’t know that. She simply didn’t see the relevance of kindness.

Yuji smiled. “Well, Shana, Alastor, what about you guys? Will you forget about me too?”

Shana could have answered this question with ease, like all the others. But she hesitated.

Alastor spoke instead. “No. We are cognitive of your true self, and the entire process of disappearance. Our existence deviates from the flow of this world, and we can detect the amplitude of the Power of Existence and the occurrence itself.”

“I see.”

Shana spoke from behind her umbrella. “That’s right. But in the end, just like ordinary memories, it’d get buried under everything else.”

“I guess it’s enough you’re watching out for me.”

Shana didn’t look into Yuji’s face, but she could sense that he was smiling for some reason. The idea made her uncomfortable, and she brought the cup of coffee to her lips. It was warm. But...

"This needs sugar!"

"It's already in there."

Yuji laughed out loud and waved a handful of sugar packets that he'd brought just in case. "By the way, are you going to be here all night?"

Shana snatched three packets and emptied them all into her coffee.

"That's right. I'm used to sleeping sitting up, and if anything happens Alastor will wake me up. Got a spoon?"

"Ah." He'd forgotten to pack one. He might have been a smooth operator, but he wasn't perfect. For a moment, he thought of going back down to get one, but that seemed silly.

"Come to think of it, why do you need to camp out on the roof? It's not like you need to hide from me."

"Are you asking me to come inside?"

Shana raised her umbrella and glared at Yuji. She wasn't used to such friendly treatment.

"Frankly, I won't be able to get a good night's sleep knowing you're up here in the rain."

"That's not my problem. Alastor, what do you think?"

"Hmm. We've never been in a position to protect something before."

"I wish," said Yuji, "that you would say protect 'someone,' not 'something.'"

"It doesn't matter."

"Right, it doesn't matter."

"By the way," Shana said. "I don't mind going inside."

"Huh?"

Her sharp eyes caught his from under the shadow of her umbrella. "But if you try anything weird, I'll knock your block off."

"Don't worry about me, you're not my type. Hey, watch it!" Yuji almost tumbled off the roof in twisting to avoid the thermos cap Shana threw at him.

Yuji was about to leave his bedroom to go sleep in his father's study when Shana and Alastor stopped him. Or rather, ordered him to stop.

"Wait a minute!"

"I told you to come inside," Yuji said in a stern whisper, "but I never said that we're sleeping in the same room!"

"We came inside to protect you, so what's the point of staying in separate rooms?" said Shana, bouncing up and down on his bed.

"Just give up and sleep here." It was an order from Alastor.

Shana removed the pendant from around her neck and tucked it under a pillow.

"What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm going to change my clothes, so I put him in a place he can't see me."

A muffled voice came from beneath the pillow. "It's our rule. Now that you know, you'd better find a place to hide in a hurry."

Yuji looked around and stepped into his open closet.

"Shouldn't the one who came barging in have to be in here?" he grumbled.

Shana said threateningly, "You're toast if you peek."

Yuji sighed. The closet's lower shelf was filled with old comic books and a futon mattress, so he climbed onto the upper shelf. It too was crowded with old toys and such, and he had to draw his knees close to his chest to fit into the small space. The dust stung his eyes and nose.

An old plastic robot was jammed in next to him, and he could feel the parts of a half-assembled model airplane crushed beneath him.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and close the door."

"Don't rush me! I can barely fit in here. Anyway, you're no supermodel, you know!"

This time, an alarm clock hit him squarely in the back of the head. He was glad, at least, it was made of plastic. He quickly closed the closet door.

Through the door, he could hear Shana moving around his bedroom. Judging from the rustling noise, she must have been removing her clothes.

Even though he'd teased her, it was an awkward situation. He forced a cough. "Do you, uh, have pajamas or something?"

Something hard was thrown against the door. "I told you not to peek!"

"I didn't! Can't you tell by the closed door?"

He wondered why he had to put up with this, and why he was the one compelled to feel apologetic. It was a no-win situation for any guy. In the darkness of the closet, his was a lonely, lonely world.

"I'm just asking if you have something to sleep in."

"No, I don't. All I have is my underwear. Alastor purifies any grime from my body, so I just change clothes if I happen to feel like it."

"I see. That's convenient...ah, I almost forgot. There's a sweat suit in my dresser. You can wear that if you want."

If she were to sleep in just her underwear, it would only mean unforeseeable dangers for Yuji...

"Come to think of it, do you have any baggage with you?"

"Most of my necessities are inside."

"Inside what?"

He heard a loud rustling, like that of cloth being spread out.

"Inside the black cloak that Flame Haze of Alastor wears."

Now Yuji remembered. The sound was the same he'd heard earlier that day, when Shana had used her coat to protect him from the cards. A great wall of black.

"Oh, right, your coat. Now that you mention it, you stored your sword in it too."

In Yuji's mind Shana's coat was some kind of entrance to a parallel-dimension storage space, like in a science fiction story.

He could hear more rustling.

Spare...under...wear? Yuji swallowed hard. His imagination spun out images of what might be happening in his bedroom. He was overcome with guilt. He decided to ask a question to distract himself.

"By the way, how long do I have to stay in here?"

"All through the night, of course."

"You must be kidding." Yuji felt weak and defeated.

Just then, he rested his weight on an unsteady pile of model kit boxes. A broken wing from a fighter plane poked him in the butt.

"Yeow!"

He jumped in surprise.

"Uh-oh."

When he realized what was happening, it was already too late. He tipped off the shelf, hit the door with a bang, and came tumbling headfirst out of the closet.

Now on his back, Yuji looked up at Shana, upside down and in an advanced state of undress. She stood there holding a small, strangely shaped piece of fabric in her hands that Yuji couldn't identify.

Shana looked with wide-eyed surprise at Yuji lying on the floor.

Framed by her shiny black hair, Shana's immaculate body stood out like white porcelain, her youthful figure delineated by elegant arcs. Yuji couldn't take his eyes off her. For a moment he forgot the danger he was in.

"Beauti—"

Yuji, who, he had to admit, was lucky to get away with a mere beating, woke up in the middle of the night from the pain.

Faint light from the streetlamps filtered through the curtains. In the darkness he shifted his gaze toward the bed. He could see a small bulge wrapped in a blanket.

He could also see the long sword, Nietono no Shana, thrust into the floor at the end of the bed. The message was loud and clear.

"She probably won't heal me the next time she cuts me down," he whispered out loud.

"That's a given," said Alastor from somewhere in the darkness.

The skies were clear and sunny the following morning.

Alastor was on guard under the pillow in case there was an attack at dawn, but as it turned out, nothing happened and nobody came, so Shana's deep sleep went undisturbed. Yuji, too, after falling back to sleep, had slept soundly, wrapped in a blanket on the floor.

The alarm clock went off next to the pillow made of rumpled cotton blanket. Yuji hit the off button without raising his head.

"...Uh..."

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was a metal baseball bat. He didn't usually bring such things to bed. It was just a precaution, perhaps a meaningless one.

Yuji sat up slowly. He stretched, his joints stiff and aching.

"Ah...ow, ow..."

It was probably from sleeping on the hardwood floor. Strangely, though, the places he'd been beaten by Shana didn't hurt anymore. He wondered if she'd gone easy on him, or if it was simply due to his youthful resilience. Most likely the latter.

Yuji glanced at the small bulge on the bed. Shana didn't show any sign of waking, and a faint, rhythmic breathing could be heard. If there hadn't been a long, menacing sword thrust into the floor at the foot of the bed, it might have passed as a peaceful scene.

Yuji looked down at his chest. The light was still there.

"Huh."

He sighed. The desperation and fear of the past two days had faded to the point he could hardly feel them anymore.

They say human beings are creatures that can acclimate, he thought. But it's pretty amazing that it could happen under these circumstances. Or is this just an indication of how much I want my life to go on as it was before?

He stood quietly so as not to wake Shana. He opened the glass door to the balcony and stepped outside, filling his lungs with the cool morning air.

Down on the street in front of the house, bicyclists commuting to work and school whizzed by. The sky was spacious and blue. All in all, a beautiful morning.

Nothing has changed except me... but I'm here, now... This is real.

Everything he felt at that moment—the ache in his joints, the chill air on his skin—made the idea of his death, the fading of his existence, seem nothing more than a fabrication of words.

A murmur sounded from inside the room. Yuji could hear the source of his pain, the girl of the flaming hair, moving

restlessly in the bed behind him. Looking down, he saw the ladder he had used to climb to the roof folded and laid neatly against the house.

He recalled the conversation he'd had with Shana and Alastor the night before. Mixed in with that memory were some images he should probably forget...but...he was a teenager after all.

We just talked a little, laughed a little, fussed at each other a little...

Through those little things, could he forget his fear? The fact of his diminishing existence?

Forget.

A strange word. He couldn't quite get his head around it.

I suppose the answer isn't so easy.

Yuji was surprised to realize that he was smiling.

He turned toward the room and called out in a somewhat timid voice. "Hey, Shana. It's time to get up and get ready for, uh, school."

Shana tossed the covers aside as she sat up.

Remembering last night, Yuji looked down in a hurry, but not before he noticed that Shana was wearing his sweat suit. He was glad she had taken his advice. The clothes almost consumed her and hung in folds on her small frame.

Shana looked at Yuji, who raised his head with relief and met her gaze. Her sleepy face was adorable, her long hair pulled back into a ponytail. For once she looked her age.

"I know, I know, you don't need to tell me..."

Shana's eyes widened as she looked at Yuji.

“Wh-what? What is it?” Yuji quickly looked down at his body, but everything seemed the same, including the light.

Shana climbed back into bed.

He waited, but she showed no sign of coming out. She didn’t seem angry, so what was going on?

“I’ll just get myself ready then, okay? Try to leave without anyone seeing you.” Yuji glanced once more in her direction and left the room.

Under the covers, Shana wore a puzzled expression.

“Hey, Alastor. What does that mean?”

Alastor replied from under the pillow, “You noticed?”

“What’s going on? I don’t get it.”

“It must be the power of the treasure tool inside him.”

Yuji Sakai, the Mistes that could move within the Seal. Alastor had sensed something special about him. And now, his current condition . . . It brought to mind just one thing—the most precious of the hidden treasures of the Crimson Denizen: the Reiji Maigo.

If that was indeed what Yuji held within him, they couldn’t let Friagne have it at any cost.

Shana felt as though she was seeing Yuji in a new light. She couldn’t seem to get him out of her mind. Uncertainty flitted through her brain. But then she would recall that little bit of warmth, the warmth they’d exchanged when he handed her the coffee last night on the roof.

Chapter

3

SHANA

SHANA continued her reign of terror in the classroom on her second day of school. Teachers would challenge her and she would punish them with her sharp retorts, to the other students' shock. This pattern continued through three periods, but then things took an unexpected turn.

The fourth period was physical education, and the teacher had heard the rumors about a troublemaking student named Yukari Hirai.

The teacher was single, male, and thirty-three years old; and though he'd only been teaching a month, he already had a reputation for arrogance, not to mention for his creepy habit of leering at the female students. He also would not tolerate any kind of backtalk from his students, and came up with a plan to humiliate Yukari.

He told the entire class to start running. And since Yukari's record showed she wasn't exactly the greatest athlete in school, he figured she would give up after a few laps around the track. The students took to the track with inward groans, while their teacher indulged his sadistic fantasy. He would

push Yukari Hirai beyond the point of exhaustion.

But contrary to his expectations, while the other students panted and grunted through the seemingly endless run, Yukari remained cool and calm. Small and petite in her oversized gym outfit, she ran at the same steady pace—even after the period was half over.

The teacher grew impatient, but he couldn't stop the running exercise until Yukari gave up in exhaustion. The whole point, after all, was to bully her into submission. Everybody else, Yuji included, was being punished consequently. There was no way any of them could compete with the stamina of a Flame Haze.

Before long, a female student who was particularly fragile slumped onto the track.

Irritated, the teacher shouted, "Hey, Yoshida! No slacking!"

"Yoshida!"

The entire class had soon gathered around the girl, Kazumi Yoshida, who had fallen to her knees and was clutching her chest and gasping for air.

The teacher ignored the accusing glares from the other students, who all thought he should have known this would happen because of Kazumi's chronic anemia.

"What are you crowding around for? I didn't say to stop!"

"Please, sir. You have to let Kazumi take a break."

The girl who spoke bent to stroke Kazumi's back. But the teacher was unmoved. He was further irritated by the fact that of all the students, Yukari was the only one still running.

“Shut up! If I let you slack off like this every time, you’ll never get any stronger. Stand up!”

“But why are we running a marathon in the first place?” someone blurted out.

An incompetent and petty man was easily riled when prodded in his most vulnerable spot. The teacher grabbed Kazumi’s hand and pulled her up.

“Everyone stopped running because of you!” he said. “Stand up!”

Kazumi, whose breathing had grown increasingly shallow, cried out in pain. While the other students tried to help her, Yuji had an instant to try to block the foot that was heading right toward—

He was too late.

The teacher literally got his ass kicked. He was knocked into a heap on the ground. The stunned students couldn’t believe their eyes. Yukari Hirai stood there, her foot in its small running shoe just recoiling from the attack. Her breathing was steady, and her lean, firm body had only the finest glow of sweat. Her long, shiny black hair, pulled back into a ponytail, swayed gently with the lingering momentum of the kick.

Oh, no, she did it! Yuji held his head in his hands.

The main reason Shana had kicked the teacher was that he blocked her running path. Even so, she grasped Kazumi’s arm and steadied her on her feet. Kazumi leaned against her shoulder, wheezing. Shana frowned.

“What kind of class is this? All we’ve been doing is running.”

Yuji knew exactly what she was thinking. It wasn't so much pity for Kazumi that prompted Shana to speak out. She probably just thought that the exercise was inefficient and a waste of time.

"This training is stupid," she said. "There's no point to it. It's just going to tire us out."

"Y-you...!" The teacher stood up and brushed the dirt from his face. He was flushed with anger.

Shana wasn't affected in the slightest. In the same calm voice she said, "Please explain the reason for this class."

Oh, great. Here we go.

"Shana . . ." Yuji called out in a small voice.

In response, Shana merely shifted Kazumi over to him. He held the weak girl and looked into her pale face.

"Are you all right?" he asked. Kazumi managed to nod, so he handed her over to the other girls' care.

Behind him, the teacher let loose. "Do you know what you've done?" he shouted. "You've assaulted me!"

He closed in on Shana, using his last weapon—his authority—which the other teachers had warned him would be of no use with Yukari Hirai.

"You're a troublemaker! A delinquent! How dare you use violence against your teacher! I'll have you suspended, no, expelled!"

Shana, a petite figure next to the large, bellowing teacher, didn't flinch. "You can't even properly explain, can you?"

"Don't you understand? You're in trouble, here! Your behavior is a major problem!"

It was clear there would be no truce between the two. The

teacher was too absorbed in his own outrage to engage in conversation, and Shana was not backing down.

The students' sympathies lay with Kazumi and Yukari, naturally. They were disgusted by the teacher's outburst.

He's asking for it.

Shana's eyebrow twitched. Yuji sensed she was steeling herself for battle. Just in time, he shouted, "Kick!"

Had he shouted "Stop!," she would have ignored his request and probably smashed her fist into the teacher's face. Instead, she complied with Yuji's request and kicked the teacher—again—with pleasure.

Her foot smacked into his chest, and he went flying like a dummy in a slapstick comedy. After making a neat arc in the air, he slammed to the ground and let out a strange cry.

"Oh, boy..."

Yuji sighed at the absurd power of her kick. His classmates watching, he scratched his head and took a deep breath. Deliberately raising his voice, he said, "Sir, don't you know it's dangerous to come onto the track unexpectedly?"

Shana looked at Yuji in disbelief. But Hayato understood immediately. "Yeah! You can't complain about getting kicked!"

Keisaku grinned and waved his hands to incite the other students. "That's right! You have to be careful. Kazumi's a fast runner!"

Eita chimed in. "Yeah! There's no way she could make a sudden stop!"

Finally catching on to the ruse, all the other kids began raising their voices as well.

"I saw him rush out in front of Yukari!"

"I did too!"

"Ha ha! Geez, teach, I feel sorry for you!"

"It was like a traffic accident, wasn't it?"

The teacher knew he'd been beaten. All he could do was mutter, "Y-you punks..."

Stepping back from the commotion, Yuji leaned close to Shana and asked quietly, "Can you make, you know, threats?"

Alastor, concealed under Shana's gym clothes, answered in a whisper. "Let's see. How about the method we always use to get money?"

"That sounds good. Let's try it."

Yuji had to wonder a moment what their usual lifestyle was like.

Shana walked toward the teacher and everyone fell silent. The sound of her footsteps was all that could be heard.

"Look at you, right here on the racetrack," she said. "How convenient."

"Eeyah..."

The teacher tried to scramble away, but Shana stomped her foot down right in front of him, and he froze. The impact shook the ground. Shana lifted her foot, and there, in front of the teacher, was the impression of her shoe in the hard-packed surface of the racetrack, almost an inch in depth. The teacher opened his eyes wide in fear.

"If you aren't careful, Sir," said Yuji, "it could be dangerous for you."

"Do you get what we're saying?" said Shana with a wicked grin on her face. The teacher nodded vigorously.

"We can be dismissed now, right?" Yuji added with a smirk.

The teacher nodded again. "W-w-work on your own for the rest of class!" he said. Then he was up and running, stumbling as he went.

The students let out a deafening cheer.

Yuji noticed Shana about to take off after him and grabbed her. "Whoa! You don't need to go after him now!"

"Why not? I should crush the enemy while I have the chance!"

Just then Yuji and Shana were surrounded by their classmates. Everyone was overjoyed to have won the battle with the P.E. teacher. They huddled together, laughing and hugging each other. Yuji was surprised and pleased, but worried how Shana might react to the backslaps and hugs. She looked stunned by the boisterous cheering and trapped by the close contact of the excited students.

Hayato gave Yuji a hearty slap on the back, then slipped out of the crowd. "Hey, Eita! Could you carry Kazumi?"

"Sure thing."

Eita made his way out of the crowd to where Kazumi was resting with her head in another girl's lap. He lifted her in his strong arms and carried her away toward the nurse's office. Keisaku looked on with mild jealousy.

After all the commotion had died down, Yuji and the others spent the rest of the period clustered together, chatting

and daydreaming, on the cool spring grass.

The P.E. incident brought Shana, aka Yukari Hirai, an unexpected popularity among the students.

The girls took turns combing her long hair once they were back in the locker room to change. Shana may not have cared, but the other girls couldn't bear her to be seen walking around school with blades of grass in her hair. Yuji was disappointed that he missed this bonding moment, but he was thankful that Shana permitted the girls' attentions without any fuss.

Shana didn't immediately become best friends with everyone. She still held herself a little apart, though now she was known as a master bodyguard rather than the classroom outlaw.

That day at lunch, unlike the day before when the classroom had emptied in a hurry, almost half the class stayed behind.

Yuji wasn't sure how to feel about her new popularity. He didn't know if it made sense for her to get too familiar with people.

One thing he knew, however, was that he had gained a lot of confidence over the past couple days. After almost being eaten by a giant mayonnaise mascot, confronting a ball of mannequin heads, and dodging a storm of playing cards, he wasn't at all intimidated by a measly P.E. teacher.

But it wouldn't do to get over-confident. *I can't be negligent now*, he thought. *I haven't got much time left. I need to use the time I have in a meaningful way...*

Yuji looked around the classroom where they were eating lunch. What did it matter how he spent his last days if everyone were to forget him anyway? He didn't know the answer.

At least it's better than being left behind alone, I guess.

He put his thoughts aside and decided to accept the present situation as it was.

He took a big bite out of the rice ball he'd bought on the way to school that morning. Yuji stopped at the convenience store every day out of simple vanity. It just wasn't cool having your mother pack your lunch.

"So, are we sticking around campus again tonight?" Yuji said, dried seaweed squeaking in his teeth. "I don't have any late classes. We should get out of here as soon as possible."

"Yeah," said Shana, chewing melon bread. "That's a good idea. Let's leave right when school's over. Our opponent's quite substantial. We need to fight him in a more favorable location."

Yuji glanced at Shana and at the full grocery bag at her side. Where did she pack away all that food? He looked at her narrow waist that he could almost have grabbed with one hand.

"What are you looking at?"

She glared at him, and he quickly looked away.

"Uh, nothing. So, um, is there a favorable location?"

"Wherever we go, it needs to be a place without any humans around. If I leave you on your own, you tend to do

stupid things and get in my way.”

“Hmm. I see. Thanks.”

“Shut up. I’m just saying that I’m doing things my way.”

Shana stuffed the last piece of melon bread in her mouth and grabbed a carton of sweetened coffee-flavored milk from the grocery bag. She fiddled with the carton spout. “If only we could find out what’s inside of you.”

“Is it something unusual inside of me?” Yuji had almost forgotten about the Crimson World, being both a Torch and the Mistes treasure box. Or maybe he’d merely been hoping it would all go away. But Shana was there to remind him.

“Yup,” she said. “It seems to be something problematic. Right, Alastor?”

There was a long pause before Alastor spoke.

“Right. We need to find a way to extinguish the Torch in order to confirm what’s inside.”

Shana was still struggling with the carton spout. “But if we open it without knowing the nature of the treasure tool, there’s no way of telling what might happen. We had a bad experience with that before.”

“Oh. So that’s why my safety is important to you?”

“Yep. That’s it.”

Yuji had learned to meet her intentional frankness with calm.

“I see.”

“You’re not whining about life and death anymore.”

“Hmm? No. I’m still scared about burning out eventually.

But there's no use talking about it."

Yuji's unusual calm somehow got on Shana's nerves. Mistes was a tool. How and what it thought shouldn't matter. So why did it bug her so much? What was she expecting?

She felt anger at herself churn inside her. Without meaning to, she raised her voice in an accusatory tone. "Have you given up?"

"I don't know," said Yuji. "I'm not sure of anything. But I'm really grateful that you and Alastor are here with me. That I know."

Shana looked at him as though he were a foreign object. There was a calm smile on his face.

"Having someone who understands it all is support enough itself."

"Are you calling me your support?" Shana said with a smirk. There was something going on between them, unspoken, that she didn't yet understand. Some kind of expectation had been raised that went beyond their prescribed roles. She felt like pushing him away.

"Are you saying you're seeking support from those who brought your end upon you?"

"You just showed me the truth," said Yuji. "It's not like you killed me."

"Hmph. Isn't it basically the same thing?"

"No, it's not."

"Yeah, it is."

"It's not."

"Yep, the same."

“No.”

As they quarreled, their faces got closer and closer, glaring at each other.

Someone approached them hesitantly. “Um, excuse me,” said a shy-looking girl, with her face down, blushing. It was their classmate, Kazumi. She was back from the nurse’s office.

“Kazumi?” Yuji was surprised to see her again so soon.

Shana looked at her and a flash of memory from Yukari’s remnant came to her. The two girls were friends—though not that close.

“Uh, Yukari,” stammered Kazumi. “Earlier, I mean, in gym class... I wanted to say, uh, th-thank you.” She spoke so low it was difficult to follow what she was saying.

“What do you want?” barked Shana. She was still fuming from her interrupted conversation with Yuji.

“Idiot! She’s thanking you,” said Yuji. “At least you can say you’re welcome.”

“What did you just call me?” Shana shot back. She was getting more annoyed with Yuji every second. Why was he showing so much consideration for Kazumi? She deliberately spoke in a strong, clear voice. “I just got rid of the guy that was in my way.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but...” Kazumi cowered before Shana’s cold manner.

Yuji thought Shana’s speech was even more harsh than usual. He felt sorry for Kazumi, who had tripped innocently into their confrontation. He wondered how to help her. Then he noticed a pint-sized lunch box in her hands.

“Oh, is that your lunch?” he said. “Would you like to join us?”

“Y-yes!” Kazumi’s face brightened. Her smile was like a small flower caught in a ray of sunlight.

Yuji felt relieved. *She’s different from Shana*, he thought. When Shana smiled as the Flame Haze, it was like a flame itself, its own power radiating from her.

Hey, why am I comparing them?

Embarrassed for no good reason, Yuji turned away and pulled over an empty chair for Kazumi.

“I’m sure Sha—er—I mean, Yukari, doesn’t mind, right? We can all eat together and talk.”

In truth, Yuji had rarely spoken to Kazumi. Though they’d been in the same class for a month, they had only exchanged a few passing words up until that day. She usually sat at her desk quietly reading a book.

It didn’t seem like such a bad idea to get to know a girl. *Kazumi is actually pretty cute*. Yuji’s expression relaxed into a casual grin.

Shana’s thoughts took a different direction. *I wonder, she thought, if the incident earlier made her want to be closer to Yukari Hirai again, whose Power of Existence, after all, is fading...*

Her reply came like an afterthought. “Do what you want,” she said.

She could have said it a little nicer, Yuji muttered to himself. In a barely audible voice, Kazumi said, “Th-thank you.”

Right then, a familiar voice called out. “Hey!”

It was Hayato, followed by Keisaku and Eita. The three seemed to have been carefully watching the situation. Yuji grinned and waved them over. The trio joined them and moved the desks in closer together.

As soon they sat down, Eita began the conversation, Keisaku made comical remarks, Hayato wrapped up each topic, and Yuji provided insights. Kazumi picked at her lunch and smiled occasionally, but didn't join in.

Not paying them any mind, Shana dug into her sack and pulled out *anman*, *manju*, chocolates, and other treats and ate in silence. After a while, she tugged on Yuji's sleeve and moved closer to him. "It's difficult to talk to Alastor," she complained in a low voice.

"Is that a problem?" he asked. "Why don't you try talking to ordinary people for a change?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"C'mon, they're not so bad. You didn't mind hanging out with everyone in P.E."

"I was just confused, that's all."

"It'd be good for you to hang with regular folks. Might smooth out your rough edges."

"Rough edges? What are you talking about?"

Kazumi, who'd been watching the two of them whispering with their faces close together, finally spoke. "You two are getting along great, aren't you?"

Yuji waved his hands emphatically. "No, no, no. Not at all!"

But Hayato and the others agreed with Kazumi. "Yeah, that's great. You're really hitting it off."



"Right, that's cool."

"Yeah, cool."

School finished earlier than the day before, and Yuji and Shana left campus as quickly as possible. They didn't get away unnoticed, however. Hayato and his crew saw them scamper away. Eita and Keisaku exchanged looks of amazement.

"Geez, can you believe how fast they ran off together?" said Eita. "Could they be going on a date? That's unforgivable!"

"That's beside the point," Keisaku replied. "But Yuji and Yukari, together? Who could have predicted that?"

Hayato noticed Kazumi looking inquiringly around the classroom.

"Kazumi, if you're looking for Yukari, she already left with Yuji."

"Oh... with Yuji?"

Seeing the look on her face, Hayato decided to give her a little advice. "You know what, Kazumi..."

Yuji and Shana headed up the main street leading to the large Misaki Bridge. The sun was still high in the sky, and there was some time left till dusk.

"Well," said Yuji, who was trailing a little behind Shana. "Hayato and the guys will definitely have the wrong idea about us now."

He picked up his pace to match Shana's long strides.

"About what?"

“Uh, forget it. I’m just talking to myself.”

Though she’d said she wanted to go to a deserted location, they were heading toward the downtown district on the other side of the bridge. They began to make their way across, and just like that first evening, Yuji looked for the presence of Torches. On the wide sidewalks running along both sides of the large iron bridge, many Torches came and went, lights glowing in their chests. He now saw the flames with ease. Even though they were small, he could recognize them as Torches even at a distance—probably because his senses had been sharpened.

“By the way,” he said. “I wanted to ask you one thing.”

“What?”

“The ones that are devouring the Power of Existence are the thugs who don’t give a damn about the distortion in the worlds, right? So why would they meticulously transform their leftovers into Torches?”

A teenage girl walked by them. The light in her chest was weak—nearly gone.

“So,” Yuji continued, “the Torches buffer the shock from the spaces closing up in this world, right? Can’t the monsters just gorge themselves in one big feast and store up the power? That way they wouldn’t have to wander around so much or worry about the Flame Haze.”

Shana shook her head. “We, the Flame Haze, chase the Denizens by sensing the distortion in the world or the power being used freely. If anyone starts eating excessively to throw off the balance of the two worlds, Flame Haze from all over will swarm in to hunt them down.”

Alastor then spoke up. "A Lord of Friagne's caliber would naturally possess more power than most Denizens. And all the Denizens that provide power to the Flame Haze are Lords. If we fight, no one comes out unscathed. Some cannot be judged solely by the force of their power."

Shana continued. "Those who hunt excessively do their best to avoid fighting the Flame Haze as much as possible, 'cause it's a bother and not worth the trouble. For that, I'm sure they don't mind making the effort to create Torches."

"Ah, I see," said Yuji. "So, now that we're getting rid of Friagne, how are we going to find him? If he's so well known, why don't you exchange information with other Flame Haze and figure out his intentions and targets?"

"Oh, that's impossible," Shana said dismissively. She leapt onto the handrail of the bridge.

"Whoa! That's dangerous," said Yuji. "Wait, what did you say?"

Followed by many sets of curious eyes, Shana stretched out her arm to the side, her book bag dangling from her hand, and began to walk as nimbly as an acrobat down the length of the metal bar.

"I said it was impossible. With the exception of chance meetings, we never keep in contact with one another."

"Huh?"

Her every step had the dynamic grace of a dancer. Amused by Yuji's nervous cringing, she leapt higher on purpose.

"We're really not suited to work as a team. All the Flame Haze fight for their own reasons, and many of them depend

solely on their own power.”

“That I understand very well,” said Yuji.

“Did you say something?”

“Never mind.”

“At any rate, just by roaming around this world I can easily spot the Torches—the leftovers of the Denizens. And I can tell whether they’re new or old by the intensity of the light, so all I have to do is stand guard in that area.”

“I’m surprised it’s so arbitrary. Isn’t there something more you can do to get an advantage?”

“I can tell by the feel when he’s around. When he gets close or sets a Seal, I can pinpoint the specific location. It was like that when I found you. It made me laugh to rush in and find a Torch with such a silly look on its face. And blubbering too.”

Yuji shot back without thinking, “Your underwear’s showing, you know.”

Shana’s leg shot out from under the skirt that fluttered at Yuji’s eye level, and her foot caught him in the head. He blacked out for a second, and by the time he came to his senses, she was back down on the ground standing beside him.

“If they set a Seal in order to eat, I’ll break into it. If they come biting at me, I’ll knock them back. It’s that simple.”

“So that means the Flame Haze fight solo. Seems pretty random.”

“That’s how it is. By the logic of the Crimson Denizens, if it’s free for them to infiltrate this world to eat, then it’s free for us to chase and destroy them.”

“Don’t say that so casually,” said Alastor. “I have crossed over into this world to destroy fellow Denizens because I serve the great cause of maintaining the balance between both worlds.”

“Yeah, yeah, I understand,” said Shana with a breezy smile. “But I’ve been thinking since I got here . . . this city is strange.”

She gazed up at the towering skyscrapers ahead of them. Trains rumbled over several connecting lines that converged at the sprawling Misaki City station, which served the buses roaring around every corner as well. City hall, department stores, shops, and office buildings lined the bustling streets within their view.

Yuji looked around. “What’s so strange?” To him, it was a fairly ordinary city. But Shana’s words put everything in a new light. Beyond that thin veil of ordinariness, was there really another world lying alongside this one, stretching as far and as wide as infinity?

“There are far too many Torches here to be the result of an average feasting by Friagne alone.”

Shana hoped that Yuji might offer some insight, from an outsider’s point of view.

“See the varying intensities of their lights?” she went on. “Some are brand-new that seem to have been eaten just yesterday. But there are a lot of older Torches too—weaker ones, and some about to burn out. Frankly, there are too many of them. This shouldn’t be happening to this extent, unless Friagne has settled into this city.”

“And so?”

Shana was disappointed by his pathetic response. "You are so clueless," she said. She was annoyed with herself for having expected something from him. Annoyed, as well, that she seemed all of a sudden to be caring what someone else thought. It was unlike her. She couldn't keep the irritation out of her voice.

"If he just wants to eat and play around with the power, all he has to do is bop around from one place to another. Generally, that's what Denizens like to do. If this many Torches disappear from one place, even gradually, the distortion in the world is huge. Friagne is deliberately taking risks to attract a Flame Haze. That means there's either something special about this city, or he's just trying to do something unusual here."

"What would that something be?"

Shana wondered why Yuji couldn't say something more meaningful. She answered curtly, "How should I know? I've heard Friagne is in possession of many treasure tools, so it's probably related to that."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"We'll roam around here until dusk and then wait for him at your house, that's what."

"Oh, so you're just going to wait until he makes his next move."

Yuji's comment was unintentionally harsh. Shana didn't say anything.

"Even as we speak, someone somewhere could be getting devoured, or disappearing and being forgotten," Yuji said.

"That's right," said Shana briskly. "It's happening all over

the world, and all the time. That's the truth. You know it now. Are you afraid?"

Another woman with a faint flicker walked past them. She was a beautiful woman in her early twenties, wearing a striking red suit. She looked like a person in the midst of a vibrant, interesting life, with an even brighter future ahead. But, of course, she had no future at all. She would be gone soon. That was *her* truth.

That was Yuji's truth as well.

"I told you—of course I'm scared." Yuji's voice was calm. "But for some reason, I somehow feel at peace."

Shana looked into Yuji's face. He noticed her gaze and smiled a little, a relaxed, natural smile.

Shana quickly shifted her eyes away and began walking in powerful strides. "Let's go!"

"Where to?"

"How should I know?"

Yuji couldn't understand her at all.

"Are you mad about something?"

"I'm not mad!" There was no way she could tell him what she was feeling; for instance, that she had been drawn to his face just then. All she could do was glare at him.

"See, you are angry. You're acting pretty strange."

"I'm telling you I'm not angry, so I'm not angry!"

"Okay, okay..."

Shana strode briskly ahead. She and Yuji cut in and out of the surging crowd as they made their way toward the city center. Unseen by either of them, hidden behind a column

at the foot of the bridge, three boys and a girl observed the couple.

“Look, they finally started walking again.”

The leader was none other than Hayato, his glasses sparkling like a target scope. Kazumi was behind him, peeking over his shoulder with an apprehensive look.

“B-but, do you think it’s all right for us to follow them?”

Keisaku laughed good-naturedly. He wasn’t hiding at all. “Don’t worry, Kazumi. We’re not breaking any laws.”

“Uh, yes...”

“It looks like they’re having fun. No harm in it for anyone. Everything is a-okay.”

Eita, looming behind Keisaku and Kazumi, spoke out boldly, “That’s right! We’re just here to pick up the particulars of this heartwarming encounter! For future reference, of course. Let’s go, Kazumi!”

“Okay...”

“Hey, don’t make so much noise,” said Hayato. “Yuji won’t be a problem, but if Yukari catches us, hoo-boy! Just remember how she was in gym class today.”

Just as he finished, he bumped his shoulder against the young woman in the red suit. “Oops! Excuse me.”

Or he thought he had...

“Huh? What happened, Hayato?” asked Keisaku.

Hayato looked around. He could have sworn he bumped against... what?

He shook his head. “Nothing, I guess.”

Kazumi said in small voice, “Um, they’re going...”

“Oh, get a move on! We might miss the best part!”

“And just what are you expecting, Eita?” said Hayato as they all resumed walking. No one paid any attention to the Torch who had just disappeared. No one gave a thought to that aborted existence. The world turned as usual.

From high above the city on the ledge of skyscraper, a faint white figure looked down upon the world. It was Friagne—infamously known in the Crimson World as The Hunter. A troubled look passed over his refined features.

“Oh my,” he said. “The first Mistes in such a long time, walking side by side with a Flame Haze! A rare sight indeed! How tangled are the threads of fate. It seems I must fight once again.”

Marianne, the little rag doll, hovered about her master’s feet, the wind ruffling her yarn hair. “My Master,” she said. “Please be careful. That Flame Haze is the contractor of the Flame of Heavens. She may have latent powers that will catch you unawares.”

Friagne replied gently in his off-pitch voice. “Don’t worry, Marianne. I will never lose in a fight against a Flame Haze.”

“Yes, of course. But now that the long-awaited Mistes is within our reach, it would be best to have it in our possession before actually confronting her.” Just like her master, Marianne had a strong fixation on the treasure tools.

Friagne’s expression clouded with a touch of melancholy.

“You are right,” he said. “We still have a bit of time. They

can't take any action until we make the first move. Let's prepare for the hunt."

He extended his arm gracefully. "I won't let them halt our plan now. I'm going to create you, your existence, my Marianne."

"My Master..." Marianne floated in the air and took his hand, as if at the beginning of a waltz, a gesture that had been repeated countless times. Friagne brought her to him in a loving embrace.

"I've decided to give you a real existence—one that can live in this world. You will no longer be merely a tool called 'Servant.'"

"Thank you, Master. But you've already blessed me with a purpose in life. Do you think this is not enough?" This exchange had also been repeated countless times in the past.

"Yes, it is not enough," said Friagne, his voice fluttering with emotion. "At this moment your existence as a Servant is too unstable. You're capable of collecting the Power of Existence, yet you are unable to apply it to yourself. If we do not supply the power, you won't even survive three days and you will disappear from this world. Your existence is far too ephemeral."

"I believe that is the source of the inseparable bond I have with you, Master."

"I am pleased, Marianne. And this I vow: I will do everything I can for you. That is the reason I exist in this world at this moment." He pressed her closer.

"I think our opportunity has come. I foresee enough power to fulfill my goals. I won't let them stop me. Let's hunt them, just as we did with the other Flame Haze. Let's hunt them down!"

A big smile appeared on his face, but it was soon replaced with a look of affected worry. "That's what we should be doing, right?" he asked.

"Yes, you're right, my Master" was Marianne's sincere reply.

His face brightened like a child's. "Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Let's prepare for the welcome. Let us gather a riot of pretty girls and entertain them magnificently!"

"Yes, my Master!"

Friagne waved his free arm in a wide arc. He and his loving doll dissipated in a swirl of faint white sparks.

The uneventful afternoon had stretched on, and now it was late, just before dusk. Yuji and Shana were finally on their way home.

"I'm tired," complained Yuji, dragging his feet. "I can't believe you made us walk all this way."

Their original goal had been to lure their opponent into the open, but they'd had no success. Not a surprising outcome.

"Shut up!" said Shana. "We did just as we'd planned. So don't complain about it now!"

"All right, all right. It's just been a long day. At least we can take a break when we get home."

Shana quickly crushed Yuji's hope for a peaceful evening.

“What makes you think we can just sit back and relax? There might be another battle at dusk. We can’t let our guard down.”

“Okay, okay...huh?”

They paused at a traffic light, and Yuji noticed five Torches in the crowd on the other side of the street.

“What?”

“Well...about what you told me this afternoon. Some Torches are new and some are old. So while I was walking today, I tried to pay more attention. I noticed that if I really look at them, I can tell the difference pretty easily.”

Yuji examined the Torches on the opposite corner. He could clearly discern the difference in the color and brightness of their lights. The old man holding a cane had a bright new light, while the boy holding his father’s hand had a faint light and wouldn’t last much longer. It was, thought Yuji, an unreasonable world full of absurdity.

Shana laughed it off. “Oh, that.”

Yuji tried to match her lighthearted tone. “Yeah, that... It’s not the greatest feeling, though. It feels weird seeing the lights pulsing like that in each person. It’s like seeing their heart beating.”

“Pulsing? What are you talking about?” Shana turned a suspicious gaze on him.

“You know, how the lights kind of swell or waver. The old ones move slowly and new ones move fast. Can’t you see it?”

“No, I can’t. Alastor, how about you?”

“I can’t see it either.”

Shana scrutinized Yuji. "You really are a strange Mistes. What are you holding in there to have such power?"

"That's what I'd like to know. I can't help but see what I see."

The signal changed to green and the people began to move across the intersection. Yuji and Shan stepped into the crosswalk.

"But even Alastor can't see it...are you telling the truth?"

Yuji felt a bit stung. "Of course. I see it clearly. See, in that new Torch in front of us, it's beating fast."

"And I'm telling you I can't see it. I can tell it's new, though."

Alastor broke in. "Are you saying you can see the pulse in every Torch?" This Crimson Lord had a presence that commanded a thoughtful response.

Yuji looked around once more to double check. He could see about twenty to thirty Torches on the sidewalk along the main street. They looked vigorous or weak, depending on the strength of the lights within them. He also checked his own flame, but it was neither fast nor slow. Instead, it had a regular beat, pulsating deeply and quietly.

"Yes," replied Yuji to Alastor's question. "They're all pulsating."

"I wonder if it's related to the number of Torches?"

There was no response.

"Alastor?"

There was still no answer.

Shana and Yuji walked on in silence, waiting for his answer.

Just before the next corner, Alastor finally spoke. "Quite some time ago, in the western end, there was a Lord who caused an outrageous distortion in the world by installing a particular mechanism in a Torch."

The two were confused by this sudden storytelling.

"The Lord, who went by the name of Weaver of Coffin, caused the incident that, in turn, gave us the impetus to create the Flame Haze."

"What was the incident?" Shana asked.

"Devourer of the City."

Yuji flinched at the ominous-sounding words.

The traffic light turned red.

While waiting for the light to change, Shana decided to dash into a nearby grocery store and pick up a snack for later. They were on their way home anyway.

Inside the supermarket, Shana whisked right by the fresh produce and headed straight for the sweets section at the center of the store.

Huh?

Yuji trailed behind her at a sluggish pace.

Alastor kept right on with his story, despite the sudden detour.

"This Weaver of Coffin put a device called the Thread of Key into the Torch that replaced a human he had recently devoured. It was meant to dissolve the replacement by destroying its skeletal framework and have it return to its original Power of Existence through his will alone."

“What good did that do?” said Shana, a shopping basket slung over one arm. Her search for sweets didn’t keep her from listening intently to Alastor’s story.

“After he devoured ten percent of the city’s population, he started up the Thread of Key device. The Torches lost their function as replacements and returned to their original form of power. When the city suddenly lost large quantities of its forged connections, a gigantic fluctuation occurred in the world, ensnaring people and objects alike.”

Shana looked at Yuji as she took a bag of candy from the shelf. “Are you following what he’s saying?”

“Well, I think so. The Torch allows the extermination of a person by diminishing its presence slowly so as not to cause disruptions, and...”

Yuji looked at Shana and she nodded in agreement.

“So, if many of them suddenly disappear all at once, then the world is thrown off balance and filled with distortion and disorder. Am I right?”

“Very good.” Shana nodded again and headed to the next shelf. “Alastor, please continue.”

“Right, the rest is simple. That gigantic fluctuation was triggered by the dissolution of the Torches, and like causing an avalanche, transformed the city into a massive and pure Power of Existence. Weaver of Coffin had worked out a way to make everything, including things unfit for consumption, into food.”

Shana picked out a sweetened coffee drink in the refrigerated section. “That’s the Devourer of the City,” she said. “But the Weaver of Coffin was destroyed, right?”

“After a long battle involving many Lords and Flame Haze, he was destroyed in the end,” confirmed Alastor. “Because he had devoured the power of an entire city and had the ability to control it freely, Weaver of Coffin became the most powerful—and excessive—Lord of all time.”

Yuji suddenly began to sense the impending crisis. “Are you saying that this secret method is being used right here and now?”

“It’s a strong possibility. The unusual number of Torches, the mysterious mechanism inside them—the situation bears resemblances to that time. I doubt Friagne could use the secret method of the Weaver of Coffin that easily, but we must be prepared for the worst. We must do whatever it takes to defeat him.”

“I see. Yeah, that seems right.”

Yuji had looked upon Friagne and his crew as mischievous phantom killers after only himself until he heard this story. He’d thought if he just kept to himself no one else would be hurt. He was confident Shana and Alastor would eventually defeat him.

But that was all an illusion.

If the enemy were really planning to deploy the Devourer of the City, every Torch would be completely annihilated and, ultimately, the entire city of Misaki. His mother, his friends—everyone—would be exterminated.

For the first time, Yuji felt true hatred toward Friagne. Not fear, but hatred.

“But as far as I can see, the number of Torches is still far from ten percent,” said Shana. “If I’m going to crush

Friagne, I should do it sooner rather than later. Too bad it's so difficult to find him."

"Is waiting for his next move really the only thing we can do?"

Shana looked surprised at Yuji's enthusiasm.

"Well... we do have bait."

"You, Mistes. He's The Hunter, after all. If he finds that his prized treasure is right under his nose, I doubt he'd allow it to be involved in the Devourer of the City."

"I see. Then I can be of some use."

Shana glanced at him with suspicion. He seemed strangely excited about being used as bait.

Shana's last stop before the checkout counter was the bread aisle. She lingered over the various brands of melon bread, looking happy. The recent topic of conversation appeared all but gone from her mind.

Yuji looked over her shoulder and pointed at the most expensive brand. "How about that one? It says it's made with real melon juice."

"No good."

"How come? The price doesn't matter to you, right?"

Shana put her hands on her hips. "It's called melon bread because of the way the top cracks when it bakes. Real melon bread shouldn't taste like melon—that's heresy!"

Other shoppers turned to look.

"O-okay," said Yuji. He wasn't going to argue with that.

It took another ten minutes for Shana to make her selection.

After leaving the supermarket, the two teenagers walked slowly, observing the pulse of every Torch they encountered. The sky had deepened to dusk by the time they arrived home. They stood in front of the house, each feeling the tension of knowing an attack could come at any time.

Yuji didn't go into the house. Instead, he went around through the side gate into their small yard and crouched in the bushes by the fence.

"What are you doing?" Shana asked.

"It'd be bad if something like yesterday happened while my mother was near. I'm going to hide here, at least until the sun goes down."

"Hmm. You care about your family."

"Isn't that how it normally is?"

Shana had told Yuji that she was human before becoming a Flame Haze. Now he wondered where she lived and what she was like back then. Did she have any family?

"I guess so," she answered with a blank expression. She crouched down next to Yuji and pulled a bag of candy from her grocery bag.

Yuji held out his hand. "I'll take one of those."

"No, these are mine," said Shana.

"Come on, you have more than enough. Just give me one. I need the energy boost."

"I don't care."

"Hey! Wasn't I useful today in figuring out that Devourer of the City stuff?"

"Forget it. Don't think you can boss me around just because you scored some points by chance."

Good grief! thought Yuji.

Neither of them noticed Alastor's sigh.

"Just one tiny piece."

"No."

"Come on!"

"No!"

"Gimme one!"

"NO."

"Stingy!" said Yuji, trying a new tactic.

"What did you say? I couldn't quite hear you."

"Mega-stingy!"

Shana looked a little pinched. "What was that? Mega-*what?*"

"You heard me. Hand over the candy, stingy!"

"Absolutely NOT!"

The two glared at each other.

"Did you say 'absolutely'?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"You just proved you're mega-stingy."

"You said it again?!"

"Yeah, I said it. So what?"

A voice called down to them. "Yu-chan, what are you doing down there?" It was Yuji's mother. They looked up at her gentle face in the window.

"You've been found, huh, Yu-chan? Ha, ha!" Shana burst out laughing and covered her mouth with her hand.

Yuji turned away from Shana. He needed to talk to someone a little more mature.

"Alastor."



"What is it, Yu-chan?"

Great, him too?

"Uh, I guess it's past now—dusk, I mean."

They realized all at once that night had indeed descended.

"How could this happen?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know either."

Shana was sitting at Yuji's family dinner table. After spotting her son and a girl in the bushes, Yuji's mother, Chigusa, had quickly shuffled them inside. She was beaming.

"This is the first time Yu-chan ever brought his girlfriend home."

Chigusa was in the kitchen preparing a feast of all her special dishes. Two were already on the table along with the salad and soup. From the kitchen came the sound of something frying.

Through downcast eyes, Shana glared at Yuji seated across the table. "Why would your mother invite a girl to dinner who was in the bushes arguing with her son?"

Her question floated in the air unanswered. The savory aroma of the split peas rolled in fried *yuba* drifted between them.

"I don't get it either," Yuji grumbled. "Why would she think you were my *girlfriend*?"

Yuji didn't even feel like picking up his favorite dish: yellowtail and daikon radish boiled in soy sauce.

"Considering yesterday's incident, I have to wonder

whether you even are interested in girls.” This was from Alastor.

“Hey!” shouted Yuji.

“Yu-chan, can you give me a hand with this?” Chigusa called from the kitchen.

“Ah, okay, okay.” He got up reluctantly and went to the kitchen.

“You made an omelet with rice too?” he said. “This is way too much food!”

“No, it’s fine! I’ve added a secret ingredient. It’ll be delicious. Besides, don’t you want to give Yukari a good impression?”

“Who cares about that?”

“You’re starting to sound like your father.”

“Oh, don’t bring up that story again.”

Shana listened to the conversation and closed her eyes. When she opened them, a mouth-watering meal was laid out in front of her, enough to feed a family. She turned and caught a warm smile from Chigusa as she ducked back into the kitchen.

Chigusa and Yuji eventually returned to the dining room, Yuji carrying a large plate piled with omelet and rice. More than enough for the three of them.

“Please help yourself,” Chigusa said with a smile. “Don’t be shy. Eat as much as you want. I prepared a dessert too.”

Shana couldn’t help but relax. It was the first time Yuji had seen her with such a natural smile.

After dinner Yuji had to pry Shana away from his mother, who started asking embarrassing questions about “their story.” *There is no “their story”!* Yuji wanted to scream. He and his mother escorted Shana to the door and bid her goodnight. Yuji knew she would walk around the block and return to his house via the neighbor’s roof.

When she was out of sight, Yuji’s mother scolded him. “You should have offered to walk her home. Don’t you know better? It’s after dark.”

Shana was probably already sitting atop their house. But Yuji shrugged and stepped out into the dark night. He killed some time at the convenience store, wondering, *She said she would protect me, but seriously, what if I’m attacked now?*

Shana was indeed sitting on his roof. Yuji had left the window unlocked, but Shana didn’t feel like going in at the moment.

Perched on the slope of the roof, she held her knees to her chest. To her left was the grocery bag. On her right was a bag of sweets Yuji’s mom had given her. Placing her small chin on her knees, she looked out into the night. There was not a cloud in the sky and the moon was big and bright.

“Hey, Alastor,” she said. Ever since she’d met Yuji, she found herself starting up conversations more and more often. In the past, whatever the situation, she had generally kept silent, as though it were her obligation to do so. But these days she felt like talking.

“I feel bad that I don’t live up to your true name,” she said. “But I don’t think I’m quite the type to burn with passion.”

“I know,” said Alastor from within Cocytus, the pendant. His voice, as usual, was heavy and serious like the sound of distant thunder. “The wording on your contract was a masterpiece in many ways.”

Despite his grand title, Alastor was a man of character and civility. Shana could always count on him to answer her. He probably would have in the past too—she was the one who didn’t talk. It was just because of that certain someone... Shana cut the thought short.

She smiled. “Ha, ha. Thanks.”

“You skipped the usual initiation period entirely,” Alastor continued. “Consequently, you never picked up a burning passion to call your own, as other Flame Haze do. Plus, you signed a contract at a very early age to become a hunter. You exist solely to destroy Denizens.”

“Maybe that’s the reason I can’t produce fire properly,” said Shana, a little depressed. “If I hadn’t taken Nietono no Shana from Tenmoku Ikko, then all I could’ve done was punch and kick. That would have been the only way I could fight.”

Alastor’s voice held the hint of a wry smile. “Are you bothered by what Friagne said? There is no need to worry. You have yet to face an opponent who draws out your true powers.”

“Yeah. I’ve fought with just what was needed to destroy Denizens as I was contracted to do. That’s all.”

“You’ve done a fine job. I’ve always been here to help, but you rarely call on me. You enjoy working alone.”

“I’ve never had any major problems, even without others’

help. I didn't need anyone else."

Shana felt that this was the truth. Alastor was truthful as well. "Right. Getting involved with others does often produce more problems. However..."

"What?" said Shana.

"It's not all that bad, is it?"

At Alastor's words, Yuji's face popped into her head. She saw her classmates gathered around her and Chigusa's friendly smile. She couldn't think of a response.

"... You think so?" she finally said.

Shana rested her cheek on her knees and closed her eyes.

I don't want him to come up here tonight, she thought to herself as she drifted off to sleep.

Down below on the street, Yuji was returning from his trip to the convenience store. He too was depleted of energy after the day's events, especially the nerve-wracking dinner. Back at home, he took a quick bath and fell straight into bed. He was asleep in seconds.

Alastor was alone, gazing up at the moon from within the Cocytus twisted around a small protective hand.

Chapter 4

YUJI

THE NEXT MORNING was again clear and sunny.

Yuji felt the sun on his face and fumbled around in the bed.

... The bat, the bat... Did I go to sleep holding it? Why am I sleeping in the bed? Oh, yeah. When I came home, Shana wasn't here. So it's okay. It's my bed anyway...

He found what he was looking for and drew the object closer to him. It was limp and soft and smelled nice.

What a strange bat. I guess that's okay. It feels good too...

"Zzz..."

He felt a warm breath on his cheek.

"Wha...?!"

He opened his eyes and there was Shana, close enough for him to feel her breathing. Or rather, there she was in his arms, sleeping soundly.

Yuji looked at her closely. In the morning light her peaceful face seemed only delicate and sweet—so different from its waking look. For several seconds he was struck with her intense purity.

“Huh?!” Yuji suddenly realized he was in a dangerous position. He scrambled to untangle himself as quickly as possible.

“Wh-whoa!”

Yuji succeeded in falling off the bed and slammed his head on the floor.

“Wha . . . what happened?”

Alastor’s voice, surly and terrible, rose from the pendant on Shana’s chest. “Humph! You’re finally awake.”

Yuji groaned and rubbed his head.

“Oh, man. Listen, this was just an accident, and I can assure you that nothing happened. At least, I *think* nothing happened!”

“Of course not. If something had, you would not have lived to see daylight.”

Yuji felt relief wash over him—for an instant.

“You came close just now, though.”

“Wh-why is she sleeping here anyway? And why is she—” he paused, remembering the image of her sleeping “—dressed only in her underwear??”

“She fell asleep on the roof, and I advised her to come down here,” Alastor said in his surly voice. “She was half-asleep at the time. She threw off her clothes and climbed under the covers. I did not intend such a thing, but I was reluctant to take any measures to wake her up.”

He neglected to mention that Shana had seemed as relaxed as she’d ever been when she crawled under the covers with Yuji. He hadn’t wanted to intrude on a sleep that seemed so peaceful . . .

"Mm...huh? Is it morning already?" Shana sat up and shook her head. Her hair fell across her bare shoulders.

"You're awake?"

"Morning, Alastor...mmm."

Shana rubbed her sleepy eyes and stretched her arms over her head. Her eyes widened and she looked around to confirm where she was. "Why was I sleeping in the bed?"

"I advised you to do so."

"Oh, did you?" Shana simultaneously noticed the way she was dressed and the fact that Yuji was sitting on the floor with his back turned to her. There was no sign of him having slept on the floor as on the previous night. This meant one thing.

They all fell silent, each for his or her own reasons. The air was thick with tension. Yuji felt as though he were waiting for the executioner's axe to fall. Finally he decided to break the silence, his back still turned. "Uh, Shana..."

It was as if Shana's bulging veins found a voice. "You did it yesterday...and you did it today..."

"N-no, no," Yuji said, trying to reel in the situation before it spun out of control. "This is a fortunate, I mean *unfortunate*, accident and I haven't done anything wrong. This is totally different from yesterday. I mean, uh, it felt good and everything, uh, but that's not the point! It just sort of happened and I realized I was happy, it was so unexpected. Wait, I didn't mean it that way, what I meant was..."

Yuji heard the snap of Shana's cloak being spread, and sweat trickled down his face. Before he realized what was happening, Alastor said, "The back of the sword."

The long sword struck him on the top of his head. Yuji flopped over and passed out on the floor.

It was truly a triumph of habit that Yuji was able to wake up—or rather, come to—at the usual time.

He lay on the floor, basking in the warm sunlight, feeling the giant lump on his head. His mind wandered. He was lucky to be alive, he thought. Lucky to see another day. Morning had come as usual, even for those who thought it might never come again. Tomorrow had become today.

Hmm. So I've come this far.

Yuji rubbed the top of his head. He waited, but the surge of fear and dread did not come. He definitely felt their presence, but only in the background.

Really, this is strange. I thought I'd be shivering every day of my life from the fear of impending extermination.

It was odd, considering the circumstances, but he felt strangely calm. He looked back at his initial fear with mild amusement. He'd grown since then, he thought.

Was it possible to feel this way simply by getting accustomed to the situation? Or maybe, like Shana had said, he'd given up. Or, could this feeling of composure be a symptom of the process of burning out?

It's not that either... I feel like I'm onto something... but what is it?

"Hey, are you listening?"

Shana spoke from the balcony, through the open glass door.

"Huh? Uh, yeah."

“Is something rattling around inside your brain?”

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re the one who knocked me out with...oh, never mind.” He avoided the steely glint in her eyes.

“So, what’s up?” he asked calmly.

She was already dressed in her sailor-style uniform and was sitting on the railing of the balcony like a small bird. She sighed, a frown on her face. She was obviously in a bad mood. “Alastor, are you really going to trust what this thing is saying?”

“For the time being.” Alastor’s voice still sounded like a gathering storm. “Friagne doesn’t yet have the number of Torches needed for the Devourer of the City, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be prepared. However, they haven’t been setting any Seals the past couple days, likely out of fear we might sense them.”

“So it’s a stalemate,” said Yuji.

“We’re thinking of roaming around, using you as bait to lure them out of hiding,” said Shana. “Torches are disappearing daily, so they’ll eventually get impatient and come out into the open.”

“No, that won’t do,” said Yuji with a calm expression.

“What do you mean by that?”

Yuji knew Shana was the kind of person who would accept a logical argument. “Don’t let them take the initiative.”

Yuji suddenly had a very clear idea of what they needed to do.

“If we wait, we’re allowing our opponents to prepare themselves. So we take action when they make a move,

right? That's like falling right into their trap."

"Then what are we going to do about it? We're having a hard time coming up with a plan when they won't show themselves."

"There's a way to lure them." Yuji was on a roll. "Even if they're not planning to use the Devourer of the City, they'll most likely take the bait."

"Go on," said Alastor. The surliness had gone from his voice.

"We know their intention, right? So we should interfere with it."

"Could you be more specific?"

Yuji nodded and continued. "I don't think we have the luxury of choosing our options any longer. If we wait, it'll work against us. We'll have to specifically protect those who are undamaged."

Shana understood his meaning, and her voice became gleeful.

"Did the switch turn on or something when I struck him?"

Alastor replied with amusement as well. "Maybe so. It's unusual, but perhaps very effective."

"Well, then..."

Shana was delighted. She smiled at Yuji, a bright, natural smile. She seemed for the first time to actually enjoy being with him.

"Yeah, game on. We're leaving school right after lunch. We're going to be busy."

“Oh, Yukari?”

Uh-oh.

It was his mother.

He'd been careless. The balcony of his room was located right above the entrance to their house. Chigusa, who had come out to retrieve the newspaper and milk, must have overheard the conversation going on above her head.

“Good morning!” she said in her friendly way, not appearing to find it odd that a teenage girl was perched on the balcony outside her son's bedroom so early in the morning.

“What brings you here so early?”

“Umm,” said Shana. “I just popped by to see Yuji on my way to school.”

“How nice. Why don't you stay for breakfast? I'll start cooking right away!”

The classes on Shana's third day at school were divided into three types.

The teachers who met Shana for the very first time had the expected meltdowns. This was no different from the two previous days.

The teachers who were already familiar with Shana took two completely opposite tacks. One group chose to ignore her completely. Let sleeping dogs lie, they figured.

The other group chose to confront her.

Motivated by a combination of vexation and enthusiasm, these teachers had conducted studies and researched their own topics in preparation for facing their challenger.

The students too were getting accustomed to Shana's blunt manner. By now everyone had heard about the incident in P.E., and they were beginning to relax enough to enjoy their classes.

The classes themselves had transformed into places where the kids could judge the adults on how they should teach, what should be taught, and what sort of people ought to be teachers. This was unfortunate for those who chose teaching simply as an occupation. But for those for whom teaching was a passion and education a mission, they rose to the challenge as if going into battle.

Shana remained unchanged. When asked, she would supply the facts with severity, with no room left for any objections. She was judge and jury.

The score for the day: one teacher destroyed, two ignored, and one confrontation.

At lunch hour, only those who had business left the room. Hayato and his crew, along with Kazumi, moved their desks in close around Yuji and Shana, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The students ate and chatted. It was pretty much back to how it was before Shana came along.

So it's all about getting used to something...

Yuji munched his usual rice ball from the convenience store, crackling the seaweed wrapping.

"By the way, Yukari..." Hayato casually opened his packaged lunch plate.

“What?” Shana said flatly.

Shana disliked sitting so close to other people. She couldn’t talk to Alastor openly and she couldn’t simply lose herself in stuffing her cheeks with food from her grocery bag.

Hayato didn’t seem to mind her curt reply. He pointed his chopsticks at Yuji. “So,” he said. “What exactly is it about him that you like?”

“Oof?!” Yuji choked on a mouthful of rice.

Keisaku and Eita leaned in with eager looks. Shana didn’t change her expression.

“Like about him? What do you mean?”

“Well, you guys went out on a long date yesterday after school, right?”

“‘Date’?”

“Were you following us?” Yuji glared at Hayato.

The answer came from an unexpected source. “I-I-I’m sorry. It’s because I asked him where you two had gone...”

“Kazumi?”

Yuji tried to recall the real Yukari Hirai and how close she was to Kazumi. He couldn’t remember much at all, but he wondered if there had been some kind of drama between the two girls.

Hayato covered for her. “We didn’t set out to follow you on your date. We just happened to catch up to you on Misaki Bridge, and we got a little curious.”

He was smart enough not to point at Shana with his chopsticks as he looked at her. “We thought about calling out to you once you stopped somewhere, but you never did.

You just kept walking and walking. Then Kazumi got tired, so we stopped for something to drink. After that we headed home. That's it."

"It was your first big date," said Keisaku. "Couldn't you think of something more exciting to do?"

"Yeah, Yuji, you loser!" laughed Eita. "There was nothing worth seeing! You gotta heat it up a little next time!"

"You guys were there too?" Yuji held his head in his hands.

Shana, who had no idea what the boys were talking about, turned to Kazumi with a cool face. "Was there something you needed from me?"

"N-no, it's not that..." Kazumi looked down with a blank expression on her face.

"Then," continued Shana, pointing at Yuji, "you needed something from this?"

Kazumi's face turned bright red. Her chopsticks froze in midair above her barely touched lunch.

Hayato looked at Kazumi and Yuji, and then glanced at Shana. He seemed to be assessing the situation. Keisaku looked curious and amused, while Eita held his breath and watched Kazumi. The three of them had a pretty clear idea of what was going on after spending time with Kazumi the day before.

Hmm? ... Could it be? Looking at Kazumi, Yuji suddenly had an unexpected thought. *No, it can't be.*

Laughing to himself, he tried to push away the thought that was fast becoming a fixed idea. It was better not to give in to embarrassing assumptions. Shana, in the meantime,

resumed stuffing melon bread into her mouth.

“Ah...” It took at least five seconds for Kazumi to squeeze out a sound. “Um, yesterday, uh...you acted really cool.”

She took a deep breath.

“Oh, I didn’t really do anything,” said Yuji. “It was all Yukari.”

Yuji felt a moment of dejection at his denial, but it was the truth, and that’s just the way it was.

“It wasn’t like that!” Kazumi lifted her crimson face. She wasn’t shouting, exactly, but her voice rang out loud and clear. Everyone in the classroom turned to look at her in surprise. “You were cool, really!”

Yuji was stunned by her outburst. He thought scenes like this only happened in movies and comic books. A measly fifteen years of life experience hadn’t prepared him for this moment.

“It was really cool the way you helped me and stood up to the teacher.”

“Yeah, umm... thanks.” Yuji was nearly speechless before Kazumi’s persistence. His face grew hot.

Kazumi was finished, however. She hadn’t quite got out the most important thing, but her courage was at its limit. She looked down again and fell silent.

Yuji didn’t know whether he wanted to bolt or stay. His thoughts raced. He felt he should say something, but he didn’t know what or how.

The classroom was silent.

Shana was the only one unaffected by the situation. She munched her melon bread, looking back and forth between

Yuji and Kazumi. They were both blushing, but she didn't quite understand why. And the talk about yesterday and being cool—what was in it to get everybody so agitated?

She watched Yuji more closely.

His face was deeply flushed. He looked like he was about to laugh and cry at the same time. Shana felt a flash of annoyance. Was she angry with him?

Shana had fought Denizens, been challenged by other Flame Haze, witnessed massive destruction, dealt with foolish humans, and been scolded by Alastor for eating too many sweets. But nothing of what she'd felt in those situations was anything like the feeling she had now.

The feeling was unreasonable and unaccountable. She suddenly didn't want to be there anymore.

She glared at Yuji. "Have you finished eating?"

"Er, uh..."

Shana took his stammerings as a yes and stood up.

"Then we're going."

Their plan was to leave at noon, and both were ready to go. Shana snatched up her schoolbag and her grocery sack and took Yuji by the hand. He was fumbling around with his stuff.

"C'mon," she said. "What's taking you so long?"

"Just wait a second."

"No way."

"What do you mean, 'no way'?" Yuji was confused at Shana's behavior. As he was being dragged away, he took a final look at Kazumi. He could see the surprise in her face at Shana's sudden shift in mood, and also a little fear. Her

face became a blur as he was whipped out the door.

About ten seconds after they left the classroom, Hayato broke the silence with a mutter. "This could be the real thing."

Kazumi, upset by the whole thing, stared in the direction the couple had gone. She could see Yuji and Shana racing down the hallway.

Shana had let go of his hand, but Yuji continued to follow her.

"What is it? What's going on all of a sudden?" Yuji didn't have the nerve to say that she may have spoiled a great opportunity for him, but he could hear the irritation in his voice.

"Shut up! We're acting according to the plan."

"Well, maybe so, but..."

Yuji could still picture Kazumi's face. He wished he'd been able to say something interesting.

Without warning, Shana suddenly kicked Yuji hard in the rear. He stumbled forward.

"Ow! What the hell are you doing?"

"Stay focused! We're about to start a battle. You have to be alert!"

"That doesn't mean you can go around kicking me anytime you feel like it!"

"I can kick you around whenever I want! Just try and stop me!"

Shana's face shone with intensity. Yuji shut his mouth and ran.

In the darkness that seemed infinite, dozens of faint white flames glowed and wandered.

One flame swelled and took on the shape of an elegantly dressed man wearing a long robe. He stepped delicately onto the black-mirrored floor that absorbed rather than reflected the light.

It was Friagne, The Hunter.

He tilted his head in confusion.

"Marianne, what is going on here?"

His trembling voice was even more off-pitch than usual.

In front of him, on the floor, an enormous miniature garden was laid out, lit up as though by a spotlight. It was constructed from a combination of toy blocks and plastic models, and was an elaborate reproduction of Misaki City. Tiny lights like fireflies were scattered throughout, moving between the blocks. These represented the Torches.

"M-Master!" exclaimed Marianne, her voice agitated. Her crude doll's body sat atop the box representing the tallest building in Misaki City.

"My Devourer of the City's foundation is falling apart!" Friagne exclaimed. He calmed himself and surveyed the miniature city.

"It's the Flame Haze!" cried the doll, pointing with her felt hand. "She's consuming Torches with a Seal... ah!"

In a corner of the miniature city, built to monitor the real one, a hemisphere of light arose, the sign of a Seal being set. When the Seal disappeared, so did a Torch light. Its energy had been consumed to set the Seal.

Friagne frowned. "What's going on?"

Under normal circumstances, a Flame Haze would only consume a Torch to repair damages done by Denizens. To burn out Torches for their own purposes was unheard of. It went against their primary purpose of maintaining the balance of this world.

Marianne flapped her short limbs. "Could it be that they're creating a distortion on purpose to summon the other Flame Haze to this area?"

"Astonishing!" said Friagne. His smile was as thin as a blade. "And yet, commendable. I see what that little one and the Lord are doing. They're trying to lure me out of hiding by creating a critical situation!"

"Lure?"

"That's right. Just as you said, those two are pretending to summon the other Flame Haze, and they're blatantly exterminating all the Torches—the foundation of my plan. Somehow they've guessed..."

Another Seal was set, and a Torch disappeared.

"I see they're using Torches now that are about to flicker out, but when those are gone, they'll turn to stronger ones for the next round. If I don't show up, the Torches will continue to be consumed, and my plan will be defeated. And as I wait, the other Flame Haze will gather, spelling my destruction."

"How can they..."

Friagne hid his face behind the fluttering sleeve of his robe. He soared above the miniature garden, gently scooping up Marianne from her perch. He smiled kindly.

"Please, my dear, don't look so frightened."

He cradled the doll to his chest. His smile was gentle, but his voice was sharp. "You don't need to be so serious. This is, in short, a challenge. They have laid down the gauntlet and I must respond. After all, they are the prey and I am The Hunter."

As they floated above the model city flickering with lights, they saw another Seal being activated. Friagne raised his eyebrows, and his mouth tightened. "Such arrogance! Do they think that the prey can outwit the hunter? We have only one course of action, is that not so, Marianne?"

Marianne exclaimed joyfully, "Oh, my Master!"

Friagne lifted the doll into the air as though playing with a child. Together they circled slowly through the darkness. As they turned, a ring of silver appeared on Friagne's left hand. On it, a chain of strange letters was engraved. One by one, the letters began to glow faintly. The glowing letters flowed out into darkness leaving a trail of light. Soon, the letters filled the darkness like the stars in the night sky.

"We're almost there," said Friagne, entranced, as he watched the letters gather into one gigantic sphere.

At the same time, a much smaller sphere of letters formed within Marianne's chest. What looked rather like the light of a Torch was actually a crystal of the Power of Existence. The Servant stored the power, which it was unable to devour.

"Soon I will obtain the enormous amount of Power of Existence I need, and we'll be able to start up the Unrestricted Method that is woven into you."

The chain of letters in the sphere was indeed the legacy of the Wind Harp of the Spiral. The genius Master of the Unrestricted Method had developed the Seal and succeeded in concealing the Crimson Denizens from the eyes of human beings.

The Unrestricted Method of Reincarnation rearranged the way power is processed and stored, allowing beings to exist in this world without having to depend on the Power of Existence of others.

“When the Unrestricted Method is activated, you will be reborn. Yours will be a truly independent existence, not dependent on others.”

To Friagne, the secret technique of Devourer of the City was nothing more than a method to supply the enormous amount of Power of Existence needed to perform this task.

This was Friagne’s primary goal. His greatest risk was the loss of balance between the two worlds and the challenge he faced as a result. The root of his problem was in the placement of the numerous Torches.

That’s all right. The preparations are almost complete. It cannot be stopped.

Once more, a gentle smile spread across his face. “Marianne, please stay here and keep an eye on the overall balance. We’ll start immediately, depending on the situation.”

“Yes, I understand . . . and you, Master?”

“I, of course, will carry out my work as The Hunter.”

Dozens of faint white flames floated upward and surrounded them as they danced in circles in the darkness.

Friagne's smile deepened, contorted by light and shadow into a grimace of doom.

In a lonely back alley in a corner of the city, a pair of eyes closed and then opened. The eyes blazed, and crimson flames rose upward from the ground in a large circle, lighting the alley and the sky above. Shana stood in the center, poised and calm.

The flames left behind a dome-shaped enclosure about one hundred feet in diameter. A strange crest was emblazoned on the surface of the road, and a wall of heat outlined the perimeter like a fiery waterfall. Those who were trapped inside the dome were frozen stiff, as though someone somewhere had pressed a pause button.

It was a Seal, an isolated space that temporarily severed the interior from the reality of the outside world.

I can't seem to get used to this, no matter how many times I experience it, Yuji thought, watching the scene with a feeling of dread.

Shana, the Flame Haze herself, was able to create Seals without borrowing the power of Evening Waver or Morning Dimness. The scene lacked the intense red glow of the Seal at sunset he had seen twice before, but the crest and wall of heat haze burned with the full color and force of flame.

Those caught inside the Seal were cut off from the flow of the world, unable to shift into the next moment—in other words, immobilized. But as a Mistes carrying a treasure tool within him, Yuji was somehow not affected—he could move around as usual.

Thanks to that... or rather, because of that?

He'd met Shana as a result of being attacked by monsters from another world. He was then informed of the facts—he was already dead.

The bad definitely appeared to outweigh the good. But Yuji clung to that feeling of calm. He wanted to know the meaning behind that feeling in the time he had before burning out. A modest hope, though perhaps difficult to fulfill.

I wonder how much longer I have?

He was now able to tell the difference between the new Torches and the old, but he couldn't tell how long each one had before flickering out for good. He might in time be able to tell, but there probably wasn't enough time left.

Inside the Seal was one lonely Torch. They had waited for it to move away from the crowds before setting the Seal, in case the attack began. This Torch was like any other—a replacement created from the embers of a human being devoured for its Power of Existence. It was merely a tool that allowed the loss of existence to occur gradually to prevent distortion in this world.

It was a Torch just like him. The only difference was that it carried no treasure tool from the Crimson World within. That was all.

The Torch was a young man holding a box of food, as though in the middle of a delivery. His light was so faint it could barely be seen.

I wonder if he works for that supermarket, thought Yuji. Is he a part-timer? Did he have plans? Dreams? Does he have a family, friends, a girlfriend...

But all this was meaningless. His Power of Existence was already gone.

"His existence is so faint," said Yuji out loud. "His day-to-day encounters with other people probably aren't even acknowledged."

The Torch's light rose and condensed into a point in midair, hovering. It floated through the air and alighted on the tip of Shana's forefinger, and she thrust it high toward the heavens.

"Hmph, that's right," Shana grunted. She twinkled her blazing eyes. She was not wearing her black coat and wasn't holding Nietono no Shana, and her hair wasn't the color of fire. She was capable of controlling the Seal with just her eyes ablaze.

"This Torch is just a remnant. It has no sense of self or ambitions. It just spends its remaining days to fulfill a purpose, waiting to be extinguished."

Yuji thought Shana's manner was even more blunt than usual. Normally it seemed simply calm and matter-of-fact. This afternoon she seemed quite the opposite. He wondered if it had anything to do with their recent conversation with Kazumi. They were both having a hard time looking each other in the face.

Eventually the Torch dissipated entirely. It was used up in maintaining the Seal's integrity.

"Another one just died," Yuji said.

"Well, you're the one who suggested this. Besides, he was already dead."

Yuji smiled a little bitterly at Shana, whose face was turned from him. "Yes, I know."

"I sure hope so... This makes it the forty-third."

Shana blinked and her eyes cooled and darkened. The Seal dissolved.

The world's flow was restored to normal. Because Shana isolated the Torch, there was no significant damage done to the dreary back alley they were in. This shadowy area of the city consisted of patched pavement stretching between an old building and a neglected construction fence. It was probably the most appropriate location for a person's existence to disappear quietly.

Yuji sighed. He thought too deeply about everything. He hoped Friagne would show up, so they could stop using up Torches.

"He should start hunting soon," said Shana.

"Yes," said Alastor. "He'll show up when he notices the reduction in the number of Torches."

That morning, Yuji had said, "Even if we don't know his motives, it'll be easy to trip him up just by knowing what he'll be using."

Shana and Alastor were both impressed, though they neglected to tell Yuji. He'd then gone to say, "And, Shana, Alastor, if you think you can use me, why don't you do that."

"Okay." Shana was surprised at herself when she responded without hesitation. Alastor was silent. Shana wondered if she had been too cold. *No*, she thought. *It's the opposite. This is*

what Yuji wants. Her acceptance was important to his plan. This made her happy for some reason.

Then, at lunch, when she saw Yuji laughing and getting nervous around Kazumi, that happiness was overturned—why, she wasn't sure. She didn't fully understand the way she felt. And she couldn't face Yuji when she felt that way—she didn't know what might come out of her mouth.

That was why she hoped that Friagne would appear soon. More than anything else, she wanted a battle that would blow away all those uncomfortable feelings.

"All right," she said. "We're moving on."

At that moment, Yuji felt a heavy tremor inside him.

The sensation spread through his body like a network of nerves. It wasn't pain or shock or anything like that. He could tell it was the reverberation or resonance of some tremendous presence. And he knew exactly what that meant.

"Shana!"

"Hey," she said, understanding immediately. "You're getting good."

She smiled, and the smile blazed in her eyes as well. She was beginning the transformation to Flame Haze.

"Here comes The Hunter."

A faint white flame hovered over the alley, and the surrounding area froze. Yuji saw the familiar crest ablaze on the ground and the surrounding heat haze. The flames gleamed a brilliant white, signifying that the Seal was set by Friagne.

Within the Seal, Shana's long black hair glowed with the color of flame and sprinkled sparks of fire. Her weathered

black cloak was wrapped around her, and she grasped Nietono no Shana in her right hand.

A voice came down from above. "Well, well. What a problem child. Can't you behave yourself, little girl?"

Yuji and Shana turned in the direction of the voice and saw a white flame glowing inside a nearby streetlight. The flame caused the streetlight's globe to burst and shatter into a thousand glittering shards. Amidst the shower of glass, the flame swelled and took a human shape. Dressed in a pure white robe draped over a pure white suit, Friagne wore a dreamy expression. He looked down with a slight frown.

"It seems the hunter has become the hunted," said Shana. "Wouldn't it suit your reputation better to have held out a bit longer?"

Shana shifted her hips and firmly gripped her sword.

Friagne responded with a wry smile. "Ha, ha. Though I'm known to be gentle, I'd be angered to find that the footprints of a rude little mouse have ruined the work of art I have so carefully prepared. It's just the worst feeling."

"So what are you going to do to this 'rude little mouse'?" asked Shana fearlessly.

Friagne's expression changed completely.

"I'm."

Shana set off a burst of flame beneath her feet and leapt high into the air.

"Killing."

Friagne dodged the flashing sword, his features composed.

“You.”

Like a swallow in flight, he swooped down and turned his body, holding out his gloved palm. A pure white flame shot out toward Shana.

Shana maneuvered so that the back of the flame sword slammed into her, and using the recoil to her advantage, she rolled her body in midair and blew away the flame with the wind of her swinging sword.

Friagne whistled a little in admiration of Shana’s highly skilled battle technique.

They both landed on the ground. Shana bent her knees and lowered herself into a battle-ready position, her sword extended in front of her. Friagne raised himself to his full stature and stood before her.

Yuji quickly scooted behind Shana. He knew she was his only hope for survival.

“You’re not playing with your dolls today?” shouted Shana in provocation.

Spreading his arms as though to announce the opening of a show, Friagne said calmly, “Of course, little mouse. They are ready.”

All around Yuji and Shana, dozens of white flames sprang up in the narrow alley. In a matter of seconds, the “dolls” made their appearance.

They all had large, rounded heads and smoothly contoured bodies that hid their awkward joints. These were Friagne’s action figure dolls. All of them were shaped like females.

“Hmm, I see,” said Shana with a snort of laughter.

Yuji recoiled at the sight. “They’re freaky!” he said.

The life-sized dolls swarming around them, dressed in crudely sewn garments, their faces painted in anime style, were indeed a frightening spectacle. Each combatant was outfitted in a different style, from gothic lolita to punk, maid, priestess, or schoolgirl. An otaku's daydream come true, these dolls with their painted smiles closed in with their creaking joints. They held no weapons, but in each of their palms a streak of white flame burned bright.

Friagne's proud voice filtered through the siege. "So, dear one, have I lived up to your expectations?"

"They're not much to look at, but let's see how they hold up in a fight," said Shana.

"Not what I was hoping for, but ah well. Right. Let's do it, then."

The battle began. Thirty figurines lunged forward all at once.

Shana flashed her sword and sliced the nurse figure in half. Her hair whipped in the wind and her eyes flashed fire, already looking for her next opponent.

The gothic lolita and another doll dressed in a blazer rushed at her from either side, forcing her into a corner of the enclosure.

Quicker than they, however, Shana stepped up and with a decisive blow slashed the lolita through its waist.

"Grrah!" she yelled.

Its upper torso went flying, the arms raised high. Turning quickly, she thrust her fire-tipped sword into the other figurine and the doll and its blazer blew into pieces.

"Whoa!" Yuji was caught between the blast and other

encroaching figures. Shana's voice hit his ears.

"Duck!"

Yuji threw himself to the cracked surface of the asphalt. Shana's foot landed in front of his eyes, spraying sparks. The wind from her sharply swinging blade swept across his face. Several earth-shattering explosions shook the ground on which he lay, and when he opened his eyes, Shana was gone.

Straight over Yuji's head, Shana was swinging her sword and racing toward her next target. The fact that she was outnumbered and had Yuji to protect didn't hinder the force of her power.

"Hah!"

With a diagonal cut, the China and lingerie dolls were both slashed, their bodies slamming against the side of a building.

Shana could see the faint white shadow of her main target beyond the pieces of exploding dolls. She swung the tip of her sword to her side, then slammed her foot against the road surface to propel herself forward. Her aim was to cut Friagne in an upward-diagonal slash.

"Ha ha!"

At that same moment, Friagne flicked his clenched thumb.

Ping!

A gold coin flipped through the air, ringing with a clear tone and flying higher and higher, leaving behind the after-image of itself with each turn.

Friagne snapped his wrist in timing with Shana's lunge, and the string of afterimages solidified into a long, flexible

gold chain that fell toward Shana.

Shana slashed upward at the falling chain, but she could not cut through it. It wound itself several times around her sword, and the coin at the end attached itself like a magnet to the flat part of the blade. Shana realized that this was a treasure tool designed to render weapons harmless.

"Heh, heh," laughed Friagne. "How do you like my Bubble Root? No matter how sharp your sword is, you won't be able to cut through it." He tugged at the end of the golden chain.

Then I shall cut the owner! thought Shana. She shifted her sword to a vertical position so she could tug at Friagne and pull taut the chain between them. With her eyes she measured the distance.

The action figure dolls inched closer around them, and a few slipped between the chained pair. Shana glanced behind her and noted that Yuji was safe—for the moment. When she turned back she observed Friagne take out another object that looked like a treasure tool from the cuff of his long robe. It was a simple but beautifully made hand bell. He held it daintily between his fingertips.

Before he could do anything else, Shana pulled harder on the chain, and Friagne returned her tug. Reeling in the momentum, she took a step and charged forward with an explosion at her heels.

The dolls between them were not a hindrance. Shana cut her way through with force and thrust her blade into Friagne.

Wha...? Yuji felt it. Resonance.

Friagne smiling—*smiling?*—and swinging the bell in his hand, a resonance of melody, the same resonance that came from the dolls...

"Back up!" shouted Yuji, his whole body shaking with the sense of impending crisis.

A look of astonishment crossed Friagne's face as he rang his little bell. "Wha...?!"

"Ah!"

Shana stopped her forward motion with a foot slammed into the ground. A small explosion thrust her in reverse. For some reason, the Bubble Root chain entwined on her blade loosened and fell. Several dolls suddenly condensed and exploded, and the many small explosions coalesced into one giant blast that tore up the surface of the road and ripped to pieces the old rusted fence.

"Urgh! Ah!" Shana was slammed into the ground by the blast. An unusual pain and shiver ran through her body.

If I had rushed forward and was caught up close...!

Friagne retracted the golden chain of Bubble Root and transformed it back into a coin. He came to a valuable realization.

It must be him!

There was no one who could instantly recognize resonance of the hand bell treasure tool known as Dance Party. The treasure tool inside the Mistes must also have detected what he had placed inside the Torches.

His collector's blood boiled with excitement.

"Ha, ha, hahaha!"

With uncontrolled giddiness, Friagne shook the Dance

Party once again. Shana was pelted with a barrage of flying dolls.

“Urgh!”

The blast shook the entire Seal. Shana rolled on the ground and sprang to her feet to cut down yet another figurine.

“Don’t you take me lightly...ow!”

She tried to run away, but the extreme pain that ran through her body brought her to her knees.

Friagne couldn’t contain his elation. “Ha ha, isn’t the power of my Dance Party magnificent? It’s a treasure tool that turns the Servants into walking explosives!”

He wasn’t known as The Hunter for nothing. Ordinary defense methods were ineffective against him, and worse, the attacks he delivered with the full power of the treasure tools were unpredictable.

Shana realized this as another figurine exploded directly behind her. “Urgh!” She understood as well Friagne’s intention when she noted where the doll had burst—right between her and Yuji.

On the opposite side of the explosion, Yuji was laying flat on the ground when it hit. He couldn’t help but be dragged through it, his cheek scraping the ground.

“...Ugh! Umph...”

The reverberations of the impact suddenly died away, and Yuji cautiously opened his eyes. The blast and resulting flames had somehow passed him by, as though a small, invisible dome shielded him.

The source of this phenomenon was in front of his eyes.

A pair of feet clad in pure white, aglow with a faint radiance, floated in the air before him. The warbling, dissonant voice connected to the feet reached him from above. "So here it is. I wonder what's inside?"

The Hunter flashed a jubilant grin.

A silver flash drew near from behind Yuji. Her blazing hair rippling on the wind and her burning eyes focused on her prey, Shana drove her sword forward to deliver a lethal blow.

In an instant, Friagne had Yuji by the neck and thrust him forward as a shield.

Something unbelievable occurred—Shana hesitated. Her sword froze in mid-thrust. A look of surprise and confusion crossed her face.

In that brief moment, Friagne took Yuji and flew skyward.

"Ha...haha, hahahahahaha!!"

Friagne's scornful laugh rained over the alley. He had only intended for her to cut the Mistes, so that he could retrieve the treasure tool within and carry it away. He would have been satisfied to exchange each other's secret techniques, risking the extermination of the Mistes and competing for the treasure tool within.

It was inconceivable that a Flame Haze would stop her blade! And extremely amusing. The Mistes seemed to have some practical value.

"Hahaha! Flame Haze of Alastor! If you still wish to fight, and if you find this Mistes valuable, come to the highest spot

in the city. I'll be waiting, with an excellent stage prepared just for you!"

Yuji dangled above the city, the grip on his neck like a noose. In the ascent he caught sight of Shana's face. It wore an expression of extreme regret, as well as anger and disappointment at herself. The image of her face was seared into his brain.

Yuji started screaming. He didn't even feel the pain in his neck anymore. He wasn't crying for help or in fear. In his mind, he called out for Shana, and all that came out of his mouth was a scream.

Friagne laughed at this display, and in an instant, he dissolved the Seal he had set.

"Haha! Here you go!" He shook his hand bell.

The world began to move again. Shana, growing smaller as Yuji and Friagne rose higher in the sky, was caught in the center of the remaining dolls as they all burst at once in a gigantic explosion. The alley was swallowed in the blaze, and the thunderous roar erased Yuji's scream. Eventually, his consciousness submerged into the darkness along with his fading breath.

Chapter

5

THE FLAME HAZE

I THOUGHT THIS.

The Flame Haze of Alastor had thought this.

I want him to be with me forever. I don't want to lose him.

I thought this, for the just briefest moment.

But I thought.

And the thought created fear.

Enough fear to stop my sword in its path.

But I am the Flame Haze of Alastor.

Because I wished for it, therefore I exist.

That's everything. And that's me.

I wished for it, so I will make a choice.

To fight.

But what will that Mistes say?

Will he ask for help?

What if that Mistes asked me to help him?

What will I do?

That's fine. I'll fight as a Flame Haze.

"And, Shana, Alastor, if you think you can use me, why don't you do that."

What a remark. But then, how did I respond?

Right.

"Okay."

That's how I responded.

Yes, that's how it was.

I wished for it, so I shall make a choice.

To fight.

That's how it should be.

But now I'm very scared.

Scared? Me, scared?

But then if I'm scared, I should be ready.

I should be ready to fight.

I'm the Flame Haze of Alastor.

Because I wished for it, therefore I exist.

...

I'm fighting.

What are you going to say?

I'm going to fight.

But my heart is in pain.

Yuji...

At the foot of Misaki Bridge stood a building that was taller than any other in the city. It was once a department store, but now the only part still in operation was a grocery store in its lower level, part of the underground shopping center. The recent economic downturn had driven the tenants away, and the rest of the building was completely vacant.

Vacant, that is, of human beings.

The upper floors of the building were filled with countless

toys and tools that Friagne and his party of Servants had collected. Usually the Servants could be seen wandering among or drifting above these objects, but every floor was now immersed in total darkness.

All had gathered at the top of the building in the deserted amusement park that stood on the roof. Torn tents, rusty rails, corroded carts and benches, and an icebox filled with rainwater were scattered about. Amid the ruins of past frivolity and fun stood an elevated platform once used as a stage.

Dented and scarred, the stage was situated on the edge of the rooftop, overlooking a panoramic view of the bustling urban district, the residential district where families went about their ordinary lives, the bridge spanning the two, and the Mana river. Connecting everything was an endless stream of automobile headlights snaking through the city.

A group of mannequins were lined up on the stage. They were, of course, Friagne's faithful Servants. All of them had flawed faces but well-proportioned bodies. They wore colorful wedding gowns in various styles; and against the backdrop of night, standing stiffly in the wind, they looked like models in a fashion runway nightmare.

So far, the night was calm.

Yuji was on that stage as well, sitting in a corner, where he'd been staring at the mannequins for hours. Friagne hadn't bothered to tie him up. He apparently felt no threat from a mere Mistes.

Earlier, when Yuji had come to his senses, he had fully expected his captor to immediately excavate the treasure

tool buried inside him and fling him from the roof to his death.

Instead, The Hunter had looked down on him and smiled. "I'm going to kill that girl right in front of your eyes," he said. "Or, perhaps the other way around—force her to watch you die? In any case, simply fighting her isn't enough of a challenge. I won't rest easy until I've made her suffer for interfering with my plan."

Friagne's rage flickered like a bonfire behind his smile.

Yuji, chilled to the bone by those words, had sat crouched on the stage ever since, the last image of Shana's face spinning around and around in his mind.

Shana should have cut him first and protected the treasure tool, then fixed him later, just as she had the day they met. He was just a Torch. Just an anomalous Mistes, storing a treasure tool. Right. That was all there was to it.

But the long sword stopped.

It had stopped.

He had changed her.

I made her react like that.

She was different now from how she was before she met Yuji. He was the cause of that change, and he felt it heavily. It was his problem that she had changed—he was responsible for the look on her face.

But the fact that she had stopped her sword, though it may have been a momentary lapse or a spasm of surprise, made Yuji happy. He felt a tenderness that made him want to put his arms around her.

But that's something else.

The look on her face. She was shocked to discover that her rock-solid foundation was starting to crumble, shocked and surprised at the changes in herself, fearful of what had caused them. Regret for what she'd done, anger at herself. And disappointment. Her look contained all these feelings.

What have I done?

It affected him more than any terrible thing he'd ever done or had done to him. Was there anything he could do for her, even after the fact? Was there anything he should be doing now?

Yes, there was.

Let her be herself.

Let her be the Flame Haze.

Let her do what she'd chosen to do, so she can continue to be strong.

He should at least let her know that he accepted her the way she was. Let her know it was all right.

Well, well.

Yuji suppressed a wry smile. *I'm acting too cool, aren't I...*

The old stage creaked in a gust of wind. Friagne, hovering above the railing that extended around the perimeter of the roof, looked out over the city at his feet and said, "Isn't she coming?"

The mannequin closest to him, dressed in a pure white gown, spoke. It was Marianne, Friagne's pet. "My Master. Could she have been killed in that explosion earlier?"

Friagne turned his excessively sweet face to her and said, "Don't underestimate her, Marianne. She is the Flame Haze of Alastor, and I'm quite sure she's alive. Of course, she may have simply run away out of fear...abandoning *this*." He looked pointedly at Yuji. "Heh heh."

Yuji didn't respond to Friagne's provocations. Friagne shrugged and looked bored. "How very discouraging," he said. "I was prepared to entertain my little mouse with a variety of treasure tools. What a shame."

His long robe flew out behind him as he swept down toward Yuji, landing in front of him. He bent close with a face like a mischievous child plotting a trick. Treasure tools appeared in his hands—a gun in his right hand, a ring in his left.

Friagne held his gloved left ring finger high, on which he wore the silver ring. "Do you know what these are?"

Like all collectors, he enjoyed flaunting his collector's items and talking about them. Yuji suspected that this was one of the reasons he was still alive.

"This is a ring that wards off flames, called Azure. It blocks explosions like the ones earlier. Most conveniently, it also blocks the flames of the Flame Haze. A handy trinket, though I don't expect to use it against her."

He thrust the muzzle of the gun between Yuji's eyes. It looked like an old-fashioned revolver, like something out of an old cowboy movie.

"This is my star performer. It's an awe-inspiring treasure

tool created about a hundred years ago. It's called Trigger Happy. It's my favorite gun."

Yuji could tell Trigger Happy had a long and terrible history.

"Voila, as you can see, there are no bullets inside."

He opened the cylinder as proof. Friagne's face could be seen through the six empty bullet chambers.

"But the form of this gun is just to represent the act of shooting. There is no need for bullets. If one with a will to shoot uses this, he could shoot any number of times. And the effect... what do you think it is?"

He snapped the cylinder back into place with a flick of his wrist.

"Actually," he said without a moment's pause. He was eager to brag about his little toy. "This gun is an anti-Flame Haze treasure tool... haha!"

Yuji suppressed the shock he felt. Then Friagne turned serious.

"The Flame Haze is created by the contractor who commits all past, present, and future existences of his or her own self to the Lord. In return, the Lord fills that empty container called the contractor with its own power."

Unexpectedly, this was an intriguing topic for Yuji.

"The contractor who receives the power of the Lord is then capable of wielding that power in this world through their unique talents. When the Lord inhabits the container, the Lord's existence enters a state of dormancy, just enough to fit in the restricted space. This Trigger Happy is able to

break that state of dormancy. Do you know what happens then?"

Friagne opened his left fist in front of Yuji's eyes. "The container bursts and the contractor dies in the explosion... Isn't that amusing?"

Friagne smirked and lifted the gun from between Yuji's eyes. He raised it high in the air. "As a result, the Lord is forced to appear in this world. However, their Power of Existence is not sufficient to continue to exist here. Afraid of losing the balance between the two worlds, they return immediately to the Crimson World, and my victory is complete!"

His face changed slightly. "But it's not good to do such things within the city. After all, it is that Alastor, Flame of Heavens, who is inside that little mouse. If I were to carelessly crack open the container within the city, an explosion huge enough to blow away most of the Torches I've created would probably occur. So I intentionally set the stage—ha ha—for our little duel up here. At this height, the damage to the city should be minimal."

He cupped Yuji's chin with his gloved hand and lifted his face.

"I brought you along as bait to lure her."

The midnight moon shone down on the man with the gun. He narrowed his eyes.

"Don't doubt for a moment that I will win. My victory will be complete and final—her flames won't even touch me."

His face became a pout, and he lowered his voice. "Con-

sidering her personality, I assumed your little Flame Haze would pounce on us immediately. I must confess I'm disappointed. She's been conspicuously quiet. I wonder what she has planned?"

Yuji, of course, would never reveal anything. Friagne didn't seem to expect an answer. He waved his hand dismissively and turned away from his captive.

Really, what's on her mind...?

Just then Yuji became aware of something.

A beat.

An intense beat that was about to burst his heart.

He had sensed it since he was first brought there, but now...it was very close.

He knew all too well to whom it belonged. He could now clearly tell.

It was she.

He wasn't sure of her intentions, but she seemed to be waiting patiently.

Don't be so nervous.

This time, he knew, she would give her all to the battle.

That's why she's so nervous.

If she were simply going to abandon him cold-heartedly, she wouldn't be so nervous. She was determined to let nothing hold her back, including him. Nothing else in a battle could affect her that way. Yuji was glad.

He suppressed a sudden surge of laughter.

Haha, I'm going a little crazy...

She was going to fight with all her power without regard

for him. That meant he would almost surely be caught in the crossfire and killed. She knew that, but would fight anyway. Even knowing that, he was happy.

Shana cared for him. He could actually feel it.

Whatever happened would be for the best.

That's right. I've changed her, and this is the responsibility I must accept.

He thought he felt something. Something important.

It was the beating of Shana's heart. It beat harder and faster.

Uh-oh!

Friagne also seemed to have felt the sign of a nearby presence. His eyebrows twitched.

All other thoughts were swept from Yuji's mind and buried in his heart. The battle was at hand.

"Haha," croaked Friagne. "I wonder what took you so long. But, no matter. She is finally here."

Friagne's long white robe fluttered and billowed on the breeze.

"Now, all of you," he said.

Friagne swept his left arm in a broad arc, his ring sparkling. Dozens of swords in a variety of shapes and styles shot out from under his robe and were thrust into the stage floor.

The mannequins in their wedding gowns moved in eerie procession as each grasped a sword. Only Marianne stood still and didn't move.

Friagne stepped close to her side. "Marianne, I can make you into an individual existence soon. You and I... let us live together forever and ever."

Marianne said only, "My Master."

Friagne embraced her. With Trigger Happy in one hand and his hand bell in the other, his preparation for battle was complete.

The mannequins lined up, their swords raised, flanking the tall white figure of The Hunter clutching his bride. "Let us hunt the little mouse with the flaming hair."

The battle was beginning.

Well, here it comes.

Despite the coming onslaught, Yuji wore a grin on his face. It was a smile of fevered anticipation and desire for the girl who was to appear in front of him.

Do it!!

That thought filled his mind.

Don't mind me. Give it all you've got!

He felt the thud of Shana's heartbeat grow faster as though in response.

And then...

She's here!!

She appeared at the edge of the stage, her back to the brilliant nightscape. An instant later she leapt high in the air, her blazing eyes trained on Friagne and his army of mannequins.

Her black cloak rippled in the wind, and her long sword flashed. Her flaming hair trailed dancing sparks of fire like the tail of a meteor.

It was the Flame Haze of Alastor.

"Shana! Don't get shot by the gun—ooph!"

Yuji's shout was cut off by a kick from a mannequin.

Shana laughed to hear that voice. It was strong enough to make one cry, and strong enough to make one burn.

"Hmm," said Alastor. "It's the treasure tool of the Flame Haze killer."

"I figured," Shana said as she landed on the rooftop. She didn't move to help Yuji. Her intentions were clear.

I wished for this, she thought. I will make the choice I must.

She felt Yuji's thoughts and intentions. His determination, his willingness, his gladness... and the one small feeling that triggered them all.

To fight!

What she ought to do was go after Friagne The Hunter, who had retreated behind his mannequin brides. That was all.

As soon as she saw the muzzle of Friagne's gun pointed at her, Shana leapt to the side.

The bullet whizzed past her shoulder. Shana launched herself into the air, the blade of her sword speeding toward Friagne. A mannequin blocked her path.

"You're in my way!"

Without the slightest pause, she drove forward and pierced the mannequin with her sword, slicing from side to side. With a graceful twist, she dodged Friagne's next bullet, and maintaining her horizontal swing, turned halfway and severed the head of another mannequin behind her.

Friagne put some distance between himself and the rampaging Flame Haze. He shook the bell in his hand and cried, "Burst!"

One of the mannequins closing in on Shana condensed



and exploded. She leapt forward to avoid it, and the blast accelerated her forward momentum.

"Oh!" Surprised, Friagne leapt behind another mannequin, which then stepped forward, swinging its sword in the same hand that held a wedding bouquet.

"Tsk!" Shana clucked her tongue, quickly cut through her attacker, and leapt to the side to avoid another bullet.

Yuji crouched at the edge of the stage, ignored by all parties. Friagne no longer seemed interested in the powerless Mistes, and Shana fought with a single-minded determination that nevertheless understood the risk he stood just being there.

"Whoa!"

An explosion caught Yuji off guard and he tumbled off the stage. He had to smile at his own clumsiness. He didn't feel much fear.

Haha... I look totally uncool.

Once again, Friagne rang the hand bell.

Wha...?

Yuji felt the sound of that bell. He felt it with the heightened senses of a Mistes that held something powerful within.

What's that?

There was something different about the sound of the bell.

Friagne rang it again. Another Servant exploded, and Yuji ducked away from the blast.

It's different. What's going on?

The tones of the bell held a new note. Yuji put all his senses on alert. *Ring it!*

It rang. A Servant exploded, and some flaming debris scorched Yuji's shoulder.

Urgh, who cares? Ring it!

It rang again, but this time nothing exploded. Instead, the bell's peal reverberated through the night air, deep and far.

It rang another time, and again no mannequins blew up.

A beat. Yuji felt it. And what he felt made his hair stand on end.

Is this...?!

Yuji knew. He could see it clearly: the lights glowing within the Torches, pulsing to a regular beat.

Friagne kept ringing the bell, and each time its clear tone echoed across the cityscape, carrying to every Torch within its reach. Every heartbeat of every Torch received the hand bell's call.

Yuji could tell the bell didn't influence his own heartbeat, but he couldn't worry about that. He had all of Misaki City to think of.

What does this mean?

The bell rang out once again.

And this time for sure, Yuji knew what it was.

Receiving the sound of the bell accelerated the heartbeats inside the Torches.

I-I get it now.

Yuji shivered. It was just like the exploding mannequins—the heartbeats would all speed up to one collapsing point.

It's a mechanism to make all the Torches in Misaki City explode all at once!

Yuji could almost hear Alastor's voice in his ear.

"This Weaver of Coffin put a device called the Thread of Key into the Torch that replaced a human he had recently devoured. It was meant to dissolve the replacement by destroying its skeletal framework and have it return to its original Power of Existence through his will alone."

They're not simply dissolving, they're going to explode.

"After he devoured ten percent of the city's population, he started up the Thread of Key device. The Torches lost their function as replacements and returned to their original form of power. When the city suddenly lost large quantities of its forged connections, a gigantic fluctuation occurred in the world, ensnaring people and objects alike."

I can feel its scale—even if he hasn't achieved the ten percent point, with this much power...

Alastor had concluded, "That gigantic fluctuation was triggered by the dissolution of the Torches, and like causing an avalanche, transformed the city into a massive and pure Power of Existence."

It's enough to start up the Devourer of the City!

It was that hand bell. It was Friagne's trump card.

Damn! That guy is sure sly!

For Shana, Friagne's bell was just a device to blow up the mannequins. But in fact that was a cover to disguise its true function. Hiding behind the seemingly self-destructive strategy, Friagne was steadily proceeding with the simultaneous

explosion of every Torch in the entire city—the realization of Devourer of the City.

For this sly Hunter, his every action was part of his preparation for this final battle.

Friagne was not waiting to fight Shana. If he were simply to start up Devourer of the City using the hand bell, Shana would have targeted it at once. At least, she would have continued consuming Torches as a preemptive action as Yuji had suggested.

Friagne wanted to stage the battle as a cover-up, to make everyone believe he was not yet finished with his preparations for Devourer of the City.

This was his fail-proof strategy. The Hunter predicted that the Flame Haze's fighting spirit would make the immediate battle her priority.

If it weren't for me being able to sense the heartbeats, we wouldn't have guessed what he was up to.

Shana and Alastor were concentrating on the battle in front of them. With Trigger Happy constantly trained on them, it was to be expected. Was this part of Friagne's plan as well? To distract Yuji from the truth?

But... a reversal is possible.

Yuji looked out at the city. He hadn't thought about it until now, but he was in a position to take actions neither Friagne nor Shana anticipated. First off was to stop the ringing of that bell.

In order to do it, he had to do one thing.

I need to let her know!

The second he opened his mouth to shout out, an explosion went off at extremely close range. Yuji was slammed hard against the concrete.

“... Ugh... urgh!”

He blacked out for a few seconds. His dazed mind and body struggled to gather strength. *All I need is enough breath for one word...*

Not a word to ask for help, but a word to help her.

Sha... na...

Because he had seen the look on her face. She had changed because of him. Yuji clung to that fact.

It was his fate to one day flicker out and disappear. But so what. If he didn't make a move, she might die. If he did, she might be helped. It didn't matter whether he were really alive. If he could take some action, he could change the situation. It was as simple as that.

Just as long as there was an opportunity...

To make use of it... why, I already knew about it.

He was slammed with another blast.

I can do it... Yes, I can.

He coughed from the smoke and bit down on grit and dust. He would have given up everything else for the strength to call out.

For him, and her, to live.

The number of mannequins had been reduced to four. Friagne was left with scant protection.

Actually, the Hunter-Servant team was not working at as

optimum a level as Yuji supposed. Friagne was faced with more of a challenge than he'd expected.

Throughout the self-destructive maneuver, all Friagne and crew could think about was their escape during Devourer of the City. Their goal was to launch the Unrestricted System of Reincarnation inside Marianne. The battle with the Flame Haze was only incidental.

But they had miscalculated their battle strategy. They were counting on Trigger Happy to hit its target. And in truth, if they had been fighting a more powerful Flame Haze, the battle would be over and the victory theirs.

But Shana was no ordinary Flame Haze. Her unpredictability threw a wrench into the works.

Other Flame Haze would use flame as their primary weapon, giving Friagne opportunity to use his flame-blocking ring, Azure, and allowing an opening for Trigger Happy to hit home.

But this girl, a Flame Haze who couldn't control flame, wielded only her sword. In fact, it was the only thing she could use. From the start, Friagne and his gang were at a disadvantage. Shana's skill with her blade was second to none.

Experience had cheated them into discounting Shana's strength as an opponent and overlooking what their supposed superiority was based on.

In the heat of battle, however, they realized their mistake. But it was too late to retreat. Now the activation of Devourer of the City and Friagne's life were both in danger. Their

complex plotting had done them in.

For her part, Shana's strategy was very simple. No matter how much they conspired, all she had to do was crush Friagne and everything would be over. That simplicity of direction had worked to her advantage.

"My Master..."

The bride in her pure white gown spoke to her master with a look of impatience.

"No, Marianne."

Another mannequin in a wedding dress blocked Shana's path.

"Move!!" Shana's smile was intense. Every one of these dolls was completely incompetent. None of them could swing a sword to save its life, and their role as a protective barrier for Friagne was laughable.

But if we let this go on, my master's life will be in danger. Even escape has become impossible.

Friagne shook his head as though he were throwing a tantrum. "No, Marianne!"

Shana crossed swords with the mannequin, pressing the doll's blade backward. With a heave, she rammed her shoulder against the doll, swung her sword a final time, and cut the mannequin in two.

"Hah!"

If my master is destroyed, I cannot live either...but if it were the other way around...

Friagne turned to his bride, to the dear rag doll inside.
“No, Marianne!”

Each of the mannequin’s swords had its own history and special effects, but these were void in the face of the Flame Haze’s Nietono no Shana, with its unique supernatural powers. As long as there was no weapon-killing treasure tool, there was nothing for Shana to be afraid of.

“Three more!”

Anyone with ordinary sword-wielding skill wouldn’t lose against these dolls. Tangled in their frilly gowns, they attacked blindly and wildly.

“Marianne, I can give up everything for you!”

Marianne’s white dress embodied their dream. Her left hand in its white silken glove touched Friagne’s tearful face, and her right hand was placed on the hand bell. The bell swung.

“Yes, my Master. I feel the same too...and I’m so happy I’m able to do this for you.”

The three remaining mannequins stood before Shana. Two of them condensed and exploded. But this tactic had lost its effectiveness.

“Mm!”

To prepare for the double explosions, Shana wrapped the

hem of her black cloak around herself several times. She stepped sideways to avoid Friagne's bullet. When struck with the impact, she rolled like a black cylinder but didn't suffer any wounds. In an instant she was standing, her balance recovered.

"My Master, with the original Unrestricted Method you won't have any problems. It is possible to fix me, for I was built with the same system."

Marianne wasn't at all sure of what she was saying, but the words poured out on their own.

"Marianne!"

A mannequin in a pure white gown suddenly came in a mad rush at Shana, straight through the dying flames of the explosions.

But...

Do it or die!

Shana steeled herself. This was the last doll standing between her and Friagne, and it held nothing in its hands. Even if it were meant to explode, she could cut it before that happened. The doll would dissipate in a flurry of white sparks. No explosion.

Please make sure to fix me. Promise me, my master... I want to be with you forever...

Marianne had made a vow to take whatever action was necessary to protect her master. The fulfillment of the vow was not important—that she acted was everything. And the

time had come to give everything.

“Marianne!!”

Shana’s long sword severed the bride in two. Now it wouldn’t explode, Shana thought.

“The one remaining is...!”

Just Friagne.

Shana stepped forward, passing between the severed pieces of the doll.

She was careless.

I wanted that...for my master!

A golden chain emerged from the doll’s broken body and entwined itself around Shana’s sword.

“Uh? Ugh...”

Through the fading white sparks a shabby little doll, the Servant Marianne, appeared. The weapon-killing treasure tool called Bubble Root extended from its hand.

Shana realized with horror that she had forgotten about the doll’s layered bodies.

“Damn!”

“Lord Friagne!”

“Marianne!”

The bell pealed.

This is not good!

Shana let go of the long sword that was being pulled toward the doll.

Marianne condensed and the explosion blew Shana away.

Smoke lingered in the air.

"Oh, ooh..."

All in tatters, Shana heard a sob from where she knelt at the edge of the rooftop, where even the wire fence was blown away.

"Ohh, ooh...my Marianne...my...Marianne!"

At the other end of the muzzle that was pointed between her brows, Friagne stood crying, white as a ghost.

"Yes, I can and I will, Marianne. If I have to use every power at my disposal, I will bring you back. And then..."

His right hand pressed Trigger Happy to Shana's forehead.

"I will make you an independent existence in this world!"

In his left hand he clenched the tiny bell, Dance Party, with the power to activate Devourer of the City.

"And let's live together forever and ever, you and I..."
Friagne's sorrow mingled with a wild joy.

The Flame Haze he hated was in front of him, tattered and on her knees. The secret technique Devourer of the City remained one or two beats away from completion.

Friagne would eliminate this nuisance and resurrect his beloved.

"So, you must die."

His anger, merged with his sadness and joy, spread over his face. He concentrated all his power to his finger on the trigger.

"The Flame Haze...you...tool of Destruction Attack!"

Shana clenched her teeth. Her entire body ached from

the effects of the explosion. She couldn't run or even stand. Her arm felt as though it might have the power for a final blow, but she was without Nietono no Shana. And a deadly weapon was pressed to her forehead.

There's nothing I can do?!

Frustration and anger surged through her. She felt utterly powerless.

Then...

Yuji, who had crawled from the rubble, cried out. "The Seal!"

"What?!"

Friagne was shocked to hear Yuji's voice, the voice of the one who saw through his scheme.

He glanced in Yuji's direction.

In that brief moment, Shana executed Yuji's instruction.

Her blazing eyes came alive with all the power she could muster.

Their view filled with roaring crimson flames. In an instant they were isolated from the flow of the world.

The pealing of Dance Party could no longer be heard outside the borders of the Seal.

What's his scheme? Shana's thoughts raced to figure it out. The Seal. Why is he still holding the bell? The heartbeat of the Torches... the explosion of the Servant... What's the target?!

Shana realized what she needed to do.

"Stop!" Friagne tightened his finger on the trigger.

In that moment...

"Hah!"

Shana grabbed a piece of glass from the ground.

Two things stood before her: a gun that would kill her for certain and a bell that would spell destruction for them all.

“Yes. I’m the Flame Haze.” Shana was proud of herself as she slashed away.

His left arm.

The hand bell.

The hand bell was cut in two, along with his fingers flying high into the air.

“Ah.”

Friagne looked up to see his fingers arc through the air along with the broken treasure tool.

Even if the Seal were released, he couldn’t activate Devourer of the City. Marianne wouldn’t return to him either. He had wanted to spend eternity with her. That was not going to happen. Everything had ended.

“Aaaaaaah!!” Friagne cried out and pulled the trigger.

Yuji smiled as he looked at Shana. She looked back at him, smiling.

They both understood the meaning of The Hunter’s cry, and the meaning of their actions. So they smiled.

Shana took the bullet in the center of her chest and tumbled over the edge of the roof.

The Seal she had created was released.

Her body fell, into the world that once again began to move, to the city that lost its resonance and the heartbeats speeding toward destruction, to the river Mana that flowed behind the department store—fell, scattering sparks of fire



from her flaming hair.

Friagne raised his voice in a mad scream. "Be destroyed! Explode! Burn! Everything! Everything!"

He did not care. He wanted to bear witness to the magnitude of the destruction brought upon the city and its people by the brief manifestation of Alastor, Flame of Heavens.

In that madness, he saw something unexpected on the river that ran below him through the center of the city.

Far below, red fire rippled across the surface of the water where she had fallen.

And then he saw it spread. It passed over the riverbed and rose above the embankment, swallowed the iron bridge and reached through the downtown area, covered the residential district and rushed through the streets. The waves of red spread farther and farther, and when they reached the horizon, flared up in a wall of flame, engulfing the area of Misaki City. The color of the flames was a familiar crimson red.

"A Seal...?"

Far into the distance, a dense heat haze arose, distorting the starry night sky. The strange crest drawn in flame ran across the ground, encompassing miles.

A gigantic Seal enclosed the entire area of Misaki City. And from the depths of the Mana river, something slowly reared its massive body.

It rose to a height higher than the building and gazed down upon the rooftop.

“Friagne, The Hunter,” rumbled a voice like distant thunder.

Friagne stood as though bound to the spot.

Yuji knew that voice. “A-Alas... tor?”

An enormous, glossy black mass arose from the center of the flames, wrapped in an incandescent cloak that might have been wings.

It was without doubt the manifestation of Alastor, Flame of Heavens.

“Such a foolish Lord. You have brought calamity upon yourself by toying with the treasure tools.”

The low, deep voice shook Yuji to the pit of his stomach.

“That treasure tool... So, it destroys the contractor’s container by my awakening. Should we now be laughing at being afraid and trying to avoid it? No!!”

Alastor pointed a mass of fire—his arm—at Friagne, who stood rooted to the rooftop. A wave of heat rushed forward when he moved.

“Do you understand what my manifestation means? Do you understand why I continue to manifest in this world even after my awakening? The cheap trick of that treasure tool might work on other Flame Haze, but not on her...”

Alastor’s voice boomed with pride in the girl who had contained him.

“She could have been anything in this world. An artist renowned for generations to come, a politician to move the nation, a courageous warrior in the battlefield, an infamous

criminal of wicked deeds...or even their mother. This child is the Great One, capable of containing me, the Flame of Heavens, an existence befitting the Lord, through that capacity that exists in dimensional space.”

Friagne no longer had enough composure to comprehend such an explanation. He looked up with a dazed expression as the heat wave slowly scorched him.

“Did you really think this Flame of Heavens wouldn’t choose my contractor with care?”

Blazing eyes glared at the foolish Lord. Alastor’s eminence wouldn’t allow him to show his emotions.

“You shall receive...the flames of retribution.”

A single breath. That was all it took for the entire rooftop to be sucked into a whirl of fire. Yuji thought he saw Friagne’s outline crumble, and the faint white flames in the shape of a bird being crushed and swept away by the crimson flames.

His last cry, faint and dying with him, might have been someone’s name, but no one heard.

After the restoration, Yuji was about to burn out. The contour of his weakening body was beginning to waver slightly in places as he lay on his back, holding his right hand over his chest.

Alastor was amazing...even though Friagne said he could block the fire of a Flame Haze.

“Just look at me,” he said aloud to no one in particular. It was as though he was trying to make sure he still existed.

In his right hand, Yuji clutched a token from the severed

finger of Friagne's hand. It was the ring called Azure that was left after the fingers had dissipated into faint white sparks.

Was it purely accident that it had fallen right in front of him? Or could it have been part of Shana's plan? Well, it didn't matter much either way.

Someone grabbed his wrist.

"Hey..."

Yuji looked over. Shana sat by his side, the collar of her black cloak buttoned tight up to her neck, her wounds apparently healed. Her long sword was back at her side.

She gazed at him with a peaceful expression and bent toward him. A few strands of her black hair fell on his cheek.

She's beautiful...

Through his haze, Yuji muttered faintly, "What do you think? Can you fix me?"

Shana shook her head slowly.

Alastor, who had returned to his pendant home around Shana's neck, responded, "You are barely an ember now. Just a heat haze about to disappear. The only reason you can still exchange your consciousness with us is our previous relationship."

"I see." Yuji felt strangely calm. His mind had been made up when he stepped into the final battle.

"Shana?"

"What?"

"I've finally figured something out. What mattered wasn't when I'd burn out, it was what I should be doing right now."

Shana waited quietly.

"Regardless of who I am, or what I am, what really mattered was for me just to do it..."

When she could tell he had finished, she said, "That's a stupid thing to worry about."

"You're probably right," he laughed. "I guess I'm not so cool after all."

"Yeah," said Shana, laughing with him. "You were pretty uncool."

Then she added, "But you smiled at me in that final moment. Thanks."

"Yeah, I heard the heartbeat..."

Shana nodded, smiling a little.

"Shana."

"What?"

"I have a little favor to ask you."

"What?"

"The name I gave you..."

"Yes..."

"Will you make it yours... for good?"

Shana didn't speak, but she nodded, smiling.

Yuji couldn't thank her. He didn't have the strength. All he could do was close his eyes...

So, this is death...

... Well, it's not a bad feeling...

Hub? Where am I?

Am I dead now?

*But I'm not Yuji Sakai.
I'm not a human being.
So if I'm dead, where do I go?
Wasn't I supposed to just disappear? I didn't expect anything
else.*

It feels strange.

But I can hear. What is it?

It's moving.

A heartbeat?

Ah, it's the sound I've been hearing.

Somewhere, for a long time.

No, it was deep inside me.

It's moving.

Regularly, never changing.

I wonder what it is?

It's moving.

A sound of laughter suppressed. But soon it erupted forth.
"Ahahahahahaha!!"

The bright, innocent laughter carried through the night
air.

He could hear it.

"Huh?"

Yuji opened his eyes. He could see.

"Haha. Ahahahahaha!"

"Ha, ha, ha." Even Alastor let out a stifled chuckle.

Still partially dazed, Yuji slowly sat up. He looked at his
hands. They were solid flesh, not diminished. The flame in

his chest had resumed its original brightness.

"Surprised? Why do you think we were waiting to attack?"

"Haha. We were just being on the safe side. But the timing worked out so perfectly. We couldn't help but laugh..."

"See, everything is completely restored!"

It was Shana. She seemed to have regained her usual strength, and slapped Yuji's back with all her might.

"Whoa? W-wh-what happened and how...?"

"Aren't you forgetting something important?"

"Huh?"

"About what's inside of you," Alastor said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, I remember. But what's that got to do with this?" Yuji stared at his body suspiciously. The light in his chest glowed as usual. But he could feel something else deep inside him.

Just then, he remembered the heartbeat he had sensed somewhere before.

"That's the power of Reiji Maigo. It was natural for you to be able to move within the Seal and to sense the heartbeat...it is the most special hidden treasure among all the treasures of the Crimson Denizens—the one that interferes with the phenomenon of time."

Reiji Maigo.

"Once there was a Lord that fell in love with a human being, and he created a device to make her the Immortal Lover.

“When this was embedded into a Torch, that Torch’s Power of Existence was bound to time based on the length of a single day in this world. Regardless of how much power is consumed during a twenty-four hour time period, the existence is restored just after midnight, with all the power fully recovered.

“That Lord went missing a long, long time ago. Since the Reiji Maigo was transferred to you, something must have happened to him and his Immortal Lover. Well, that really doesn’t matter right now.”

“That means you still have a future for us to see, Yuji.”
Something just happened . . . what had she said?

“...Ah...just now...”

Shana smiled like a mischievous child.

“If Crimson Denizens gain possession of what’s inside you, it would enable them to use their power without hardly worrying about the consumption of the Power of Existence.”

“Right,” agreed Alastor. “As Shana said, the Reiji Maigo is a coveted trophy for those who hunt excessively. It is an unnecessary item for the Flame Haze. But it is an item we can’t afford to have taken.”

Yuji finally understood what they were trying to say.

“...Ah, then...”

“Right. We have decided to remain with you for the time being, to keep watch.”

“That’s it. No complaints?”

“Nope.”

“Good.”

Shana stood up and extended her hand. Yuji grasped it firmly.

He noticed something about her appearance. For some time, Shana had been wearing her cloak wrapped tightly around her...and he realized she was also barefoot.

"Do you have a change of underwear?" he asked.

Shana struck Yuji with a stiff uppercut to the jaw. He crumpled to the ground.



EPILOGUE



THE SKIES were clear the following day.

It was lunchtime, and Shana's score for the day, if anyone was still keeping track, was three teachers ignored and one confronted.

Nobody left the classroom this day.

Due to the major incidents of yesterday—the attempted confession of Kazumi Yoshida and Yukari Hirai absconding with Yuji in tow, there was a subtle tension in the classroom all morning. Quiet conversations sparked up here and there, but the voices were muffled.

Yuji grabbed a rice ball from his schoolbag as usual.

The fact that Reiji Maigo was transferred inside of me was an accident.

Yuji hardly noticed the atmosphere in the classroom. He was naturally a bit preoccupied with the events of the previous night.

And the fact that it was transferred to me before I became too weak to maintain my personality is an accident too.

Hayato pushed the desks together and dragged chairs

over. He was intent on having lunch together as usual.

And for me to figure out Friagne's plot and help Shana and Alastor defeat him was also just an accident.

Shana, as usual, was happily stuffing melon bread into her mouth. Yuji wasn't sure if he was happy or sad that she treated him pretty much the same, except for the way she addressed him—as a human and not a thing.

But it doesn't mean much for me to say I appreciate that, or that I'm lucky to have it... It's enough for me to understand that I have the power to think of myself like this, at this very moment, and that I should be doing the things I can within my power... That's right. What I am ultimately doesn't matter.

Shana sensed Yuji's gaze and glared back at him.

After all, what I realized in that battle... really wasn't much.

To everyone else, Yuji and Shana must have looked like a couple in love, gazing at each other. When Hayato coughed as though to catch his attention, Yuji ignored him.

So, what I have right now is everything. It sounds pretty obvious when I express it in words, but then, maybe the truth is supposed to be like that.

Keisaku whistled in an odd off-key way, and Eita, across from him, poked him with his foot. Yuji did his best to ignore them as well.

But...

"...Uh, um... Yukari..."

The only voice he couldn't ignore brought Yuji back to the present.

It was Kazumi.

She stood, trembling, in front of Shana. Her lips were pursed tightly, as though she were summoning all her courage to glare at Shana.

Shana was unmoved. "What?"

"...I, I, I..."

"Well?"

She mumbled, but her last words were clear. "I won't lose against you."

The classroom stirred at this proclamation of war.

But Shana looked confused. "What's she talking about?" she asked Yuji.

Of all people, why are you asking me? Yuji almost said. But then he realized that he was probably the main culprit in all this. Of course, he had no experience to guide him.

While he fumbled for something to say, Kazumi sat down opposite Shana. Shana watched her suspiciously.

Yuji felt relieved. He was pathetic, he knew. *I can't help it. I've never had anything like this happen to me before.*

A small bundle pushed by slender fingers slid across the desk toward him. It was a lunch box, and the fingers were Kazumi's.

"Uh, um..."

Yuji looked up to see Kazumi looking at him. "Since you only have rice balls every day..."

"Th-thank you..." Yuji's voice cracked with embarrassment.

It was a small lunch box that matched Kazumi's and came with a cute container for chopsticks.

Yuji was touched by this simple token, but overwhelmed with guilt at the same time. He looked fearfully at Shana, who stared back at him.

"What does this mean, Yuji?"

"Ah."

Her words sent a murmur of apprehension through the classroom. Yuji broke out in a cold sweat.

Shana simply wanted an explanation. Yuji took this as a sign that she recognized him as an individual. No one else would take it that way, however.

Hayato said with a frown, "Yuji...so I see..."

"No, it's not what you think..."

As he tried to deny it, he suddenly wondered how he really felt about Shana during yesterday's battle, and at this very moment. He wasn't sure whether he had feelings for her or not. His feelings seemed to run deep and strong, and he couldn't find a name for them.

He struggled to find something to say, his cheeks growing hotter by the second. He couldn't help it. He knew his face was getting red.

"I see. Uh-huh, I was right. Well, you know, just go for it."

Keisaku slapped his shoulder, grinning.

"For you to do whatever to whomever, without letting us know...you sure have a lot of guts." Eita's cheeks twitched with anger.

"Well, did you hear that, ma'am?" (A boy.)

"Oh, how appalling." (Also a boy.)

A commotion erupted around them. No one looked

directly their way, but the room was abuzz. Faint whistles could be heard. Yuji and his group had become lunchtime entertainment.

Amid the disturbance, Kazumi declared once more, "I'm not going to lose." She looked squarely at Yuji. She seemed a little upset.

"Uh, o-okay," said Yuji sheepishly.

Something clicked in Shana's mind as she sat there observing. Yuji had that same expression on his face. That funny face that looked as though he was about to laugh, but thoroughly confused at the same time. His hand rested on the lunch box he had received.

For some reason, she didn't find the situation agreeable. She wanted to rush out, dragging Yuji with her like yesterday. But she didn't have any reason today. She thought for a second, then came up with what she thought was a great idea.

Shana took out a box of chocolate sticks from her grocery bag and tossed it on Yuji's desk.

"Huh?" Yuji was shocked.

"I'm giving it to you."

"Eh?"

Yuji looked at her, but she'd gone back to munching her melon bread. She looked a little pleased with herself. Then he noticed that Kazumi looked even more upset. He opened the lunch box in a hurry.

"Th-thank you for the meal."

He thought he could see Shana glaring at him in a sideways glance.

What am I supposed to do?

Yuji concentrated on eating the lunch Kazumi had brought him. It was delicious, with several tasty side dishes. He pretended to be unconcerned.

In time, his classmates resumed their own conversations, apparently bored with his drama. Lunch break went on as usual.

After all, even though I realize what the truth is or isn't, it doesn't mean I can take it easy from now on. I wonder if I'm just making excuses?

Yuji smiled a bit.

Shana looked at Yuji and smiled a little too.

The sky beyond the classroom window was clear and filled with sunlight. The world moved without a hitch, just the way it was supposed to.



AFTERWORD



TO THOSE I'm meeting for the first time, I'm pleased to meet you.

To those I haven't seen in a while, how have you been?

I'm Takahashi Yashichiro.

I'm glad you're here.

What you've just read is, in my estimation, a thrilling action novel. I've written these types of books before, and to those of you who say, "What? Not again?!", I can only shrug my shoulders and reply, "I'm very well aware of it, and I don't ever intend to change."

There is a lot of slashing, burning, and exploding in this book, and, quite honestly, that was my intention from the very beginning. It's a story about a girl who is awfully strong, both physically and mentally, and a boy placed in a difficult situation.

My original editor in Japan is a very serious person. Miki-san supported this particular novel in many different ways and offered many helpful suggestions.

The illustrator, Noizi Ito, is a great artist. Her rough

sketches inspired me while I was finishing up my final draft. I have a deep appreciation for her talent and I thank her (again) for her tremendous support.

And to M-bayashi-san in Kyoto, I want to thank you again for your tremendous encouragement. I doubt if I'll ever be able to live up to your expectations, and, due to current circumstances, I can't offer you anything much in return. But I want to take this opportunity to pass along my heartfelt thanks...

I guess I haven't learned my lesson, for it appears that I have run out of things to write about once again.

Recently, I've been spending my days watching movies like *War of the Worlds, Part II*, and reading old Japanese military books. My close friends have even heard me mumbling things like, "The Count is so cool, and the super-strong trio of girls are so cute." Who knows, maybe all these things will pop up in my next book. You never know.

So (finally) I think I have succeeded in filling up the space in my afterword.

For you, my faithful readers, I pass along my unwavering gratitude. I hope we meet again in the near future.

— YASHICHIRO TAKAHASHI

SHAKUGAN SHANA™

灼眼のシャナ

THE GIRL WITH **FIRE** IN HER EYES

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