

CLAMP SCHOOL
**PARANORMAL
INVESTIGATORS**



Story by **Tomiyuki Matsumoto**
Illustrated by **CLAMP**

2

CLAMP School Paranormal Investigators Vol. 2

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CLAMP School Paranormal Investigators takes place in the famous CLAMP Universe, a self-contained, self-sufficient fantasy world of endless possibility. At the Universe's center is CLAMP School—a collegiate utopia—where the Paranormal Investigators reside. From kindergarten through university level, CLAMP School serves as a haven for overachievers and a paradise for prodigies.

The campus—nearly as magical as the students themselves—is shaped like a large pentagram, with a clock tower as its centerpiece. Surrounded by grassy parks and rivers, the campus also houses a subway system, hospital, bank, art museum, and much more! It's no wonder that the members of the Supernatural Phenomenon Research Association (Takayuki, Mifuyu, Yuki, Rion, and Koji) never want to leave.

Another important thing to know about *CLAMP School Paranormal Investigators* is that the manner in which characters address one another is essential to the overall personality and charm of the series.

Sometimes characters will call each other by their first name, sometimes they will use their last name, and sometimes they'll use either of the above with suffixes called honorifics. It might seem a little unusual at first, but you'll get used to it in no time. You see, in Japan, the way people address one another says a lot about their relationship. And, to make sure your reading experience is as authentic as possible, we've kept these naming conventions intact.

Below is a list of some of the honorifics you'll see in *CLAMP School Paranormal Investigators*.

- kun:** Used as a familiar for someone of the same age or younger.
- chan:** Feminine version of -kun.
- senpai:** Used for upperclassmen and/or someone in an organization with more experience.
- san:** Used among peers who are not intimate; the American equivalent is Mr. and Mrs.

Well . . . that concludes our lesson. I hope you enjoy *CLAMP School Paranormal Investigators*, one of the first books from TOKYOPOP's new and unique line of manga novels. Make sure to check out *Slayers: Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* in bookstores now!

CLAMP SCHOOL
**PARANORMAL
INVESTIGATORS**

Character Introductions



Takayuki Usagiya

High School Division,
second year, Class B, age 16.
The master of Koizumi-
san. (She's a ghost and
Takayuki's former maid.)

Mifuyu Mizukagami

High School Division,
third year, Class Z, age 18.
Get past her innocent face
and airhead personality,
and you'll find a master
swordfighter who never
goes anywhere without
her ace blade, *Kotetsu*,
strapped to her back.



Yuki Ajiadou

High School Division, second year, Class A, age 16. Although a male in body, in heart s/he is a woman. Yuki, the Chairman of the Association, has teleportation powers and the hope of becoming a sensational actress.



Rion Ibuki

Middle School Division, second year, Class C, age 14. The daughter of a proper Shinto family, Rion was born in a shrine. The youngest in a long line of spiritual mediums, she is heir to a power that allows her to see spirits and read their thoughts.



Koji Takamura

Elementary School Division, sixth grade, Class A, age 11. A grade-school ninja born into one of Japan's most preeminent ninja clans, the Takamura family. Koji has an innate talent for the ninja arts; however, his physical stature has yet to catch up with his skills.



Prologue

Once upon a certain day in July . . .

Dear Diary:

I, Rion Ibuki, a member of Class C of the Junior High School Division, second year, have been commanded to compile accounts of all past activities of one of my favorite groups into a single, cohesive report. This Club is way more interesting than all the others at CLAMP School, because we don't do normal, boring school stuff. We're all aficionados of the weird events that happen in the shadows. That is, we try to explain the unexplained. We are the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association, and I've been assigned to write our history.

But first, let me explain how this became a project of extreme importance. . . .



"You're not going to believe this—I can hardly believe it myself—but since I became Chairman of our little organization we've solved seven cases! Isn't that just wild?!"

We were all sitting quietly, enjoying the snacks that Takayuki had brought, when Yuki Ajiadou-senpai burst out with this statement. As always, very little held him back.

Among his peers in the second-year Class A, High School Division, Yuki had the reputation of being a loose cannon. But with us, he was free to do as he pleased, and more often than not, he did. This, after all, was the guy who'd decided very early on that he would one day be a famous actress, and had spent his life since trying to be the most perfect girl he could be.

"It's impossible to deny," Yuki continued, "that there's a lot more going on at CLAMP School than the Student Body Executive Committee would like to admit. In fact, they are being even bigger jerks for ignoring us. What would it harm them to acknowledge our work? Pretending that the supernatural isn't at play on campus won't make it go away."

The habitual glint in his eyes became an impassioned fire.

"Even when we prove there's funky stuff going on around here, they deny our right to be a Club. What more do they want from us?!"

"Well, an impartial witness to our claims would help." Takayuki Usagiya removed his silver-rimmed glasses. He began to clean them, his face pinched with frustration. He didn't like having to correct the Chairman, and yet here he

was, doing it again, as usual. Takayuki was in Class B, but he and the Chairman were the same age and in the same division, which made his criticisms easier to stomach. If it were Mifuyu, it would be like the Chairman was being scolded by a big sister, while the rest of us are just kids.

"I mean, really, we haven't managed to provide any *solid* evidence," Takayuki went on. He began wiping the lenses of his glasses with a handkerchief. "If I hadn't seen this stuff with my own eyes, I don't think I'd have believed it either."

Koji Takamura-kun was sitting next to Takayuki. The youngest of us, a sixth grader in the Elementary School Division, chafed most against Takayuki's withering practicality. Arms folded, he scowled at Takayuki. "Gimme a break!" he exclaimed. "What about the Professor?"

Takayuki's face pinched again. "The Professor," he said, taking a deep breath, "is a great guy, but to the University Division, he's an outcast. His willingness to believe anything is possible makes him someone we can go to for help in figuring things out, but it kills his credibility with the rest of the faculty."

Mifuyu Mizukagami adjusted the samurai sword strapped to her back. She's a High School junior (Class Z), and never goes anywhere without her blade, Kotetsu. "Let's not act like we don't have *any* fans," she said. "We have supporters . . .," she trailed off.

"We're a measly Association!" Yuki was on his feet now, pacing like a squirrel on a power line. "If we ever want to become an official Club, our supporters have to be those stuck-up Student Body council members."

Seeing Yuki so animated, the sunlight from the windows streaming through his locks of golden hair, was undeniably thrilling. Even though I'm a girl—and he is practically one, too—I couldn't help but be mesmerized.

"Rion-chan!"

Hearing my own name was like a bomb going off. I had sat quietly for so long, I'd nearly forgotten I was there, making it all the more shocking to hear Senpai shouting at me.

"Y-yes?!" I asked, straightening up in my chair.

"Nobody knows about the work we do because we haven't put enough effort into getting the word out . . . wouldn't you agree?"

"Uh . . . I-I guess so."

"Then you guess right. What we need is official documentation. Rion-chan, I want you to gather all the data from our cases and prepare one big report. Then, we'll figure out the best way to publicize it."

Every eye in the room was on *me*. I'd never felt so conspicuous before, like I'd shown up to a funeral in a clown costume.

And then it dawned on me: I'd been duped.

Wasn't it just like Senpai to come up with a brilliant idea, and then foist the actual work onto someone else?

XOXO

So anyway, I'm writing this on a July day, and it's incredibly nice outside, and I guess I'm not really being entirely honest about our Chairman suddenly dropping a ton of work on me. Takayuki-senpai had actually anticipated Yuki's wish that our activities be recorded for posterity, and so we had already been keeping notes. Mifuyu-senpai and Koji-kun have excellent memories, though Takayuki was less impressed with them than I was. He said their notes weren't "official-sounding enough," and so I'm pretty much rewriting everything. That's kind of cool, though, when you stop to think about it: I get the last word.

Of course, I should have realized Yuki-senpai is never content with keeping anything simple.

"When you write up our history," he instructed, after assigning me the task, "make it as exciting as possible. You know, like those novels they sell at airports. When readers come to the end of a page, you've got to leave them wondering, 'What happens next? I have to know!' I want them to be gasping for more, and dying to meet us."

"Yes, sir."

I really was starting to wonder myself if I was writing these reports for the good of the Association, or to enhance Yuki's glamorous image.

Pen finally touched paper on the first day of summer. It seemed only logical that I start at the beginning, and so I opened with the very first mission that we undertook with Yuki-senpai as our leader.

Episode Zero: *The Case of the Cursed Ice Cream*

One month had passed since the very first Chairman of the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association, Karyuin Kyoko, graduated from CLAMP School University and began her employment in the world of international finance. We were celebrating the inauguration of our new Chairman, Yuki Ajiadou, who had been chosen personally by Karyuin-senpai.

Following his official swearing in, Yuki-senpai gave a short speech, and promptly proceeded to shock us. After acknowledging how honored he felt that Karyuin had recommended him for the job, he stated that the only way to properly thank her was to have the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association

certified as an official Club by the CLAMP School Student Body Executive Committee. Since the group was formed as a way for Karyuin to pursue some of her more unorthodox hobbies, it lacked the support that other extracurricular organizations received from the Student Body.

To raise our status, Yuki came up with a focus for our research activities: the Seven Wonders of CLAMP School.

The Seven Wonders were legendary at the school. Students started hearing whispers the day they set foot on campus, and Yuki was determined to uncover the truth about these phenomena.

Among the wonders waiting to be exposed were The Glowing Central Park Fountain, The Statue of Bleeding Tears, and The Deadly Kendo Dojo Japanese Sword That Incites Murderous Rage. Topping our list, though, was the most intriguing of all: The Ice Cream Not Found on Any Menu.

A handful of ice cream shops are scattered across the CLAMP School grounds, all of them run by the Student Body. One shop, called Hanstop, sells a flavor of ice cream that is not listed on its menu. According to Yuki-senpai, this

is because it is a cursed dessert, and if you order it, you will die within seven days. This flavor is called "Aloe Dynamite."

It took awhile to decide who would order the Aloe Dynamite. None of us was convinced you had to actually eat the ice cream for it to do you in. Rumors stated that all you had to do was ask for it.

It was Koji-kun who finally stepped up to the counter at the ice cream shop. He found it surprisingly easy to order the Aloe Dynamite. The server was chatty and gave no sign that anything was amiss. Even more surprising was how good the ice cream tasted, according to Koji.

Still, given the persistent belief that Hanstop was sending kids to their doom, we continued with our investigation. That very evening we set up a stakeout.

As the moon rose in the sky, we noticed an additional employee in the store, one we'd never seen enter. And when he left Hanstop, it was with an armload of supplies.

Come to think of it, it was right about then that Koji-kun started feeling weird. We couldn't help but worry the curse was taking effect.

But here it is, July, and he's still alive, so I guess that blows the suspense for you. Besides, there are investigations that are much worse, ones I'd sooner forget. So, if it's okay with you, I'd like to get them over with.

Episode 1: *The Case of the Mysterious O-Parts*

As we were heading to our meeting place in a corner of the schoolyard, we happened to see a boy all excited because the ground around him was sparkling.

The kid's name was Thomas Morooka, and he was an exchange student from overseas. He liked to indulge in the occasional magic trick, and that day had tried dowsing, an occult maneuver involving pendulums and wire rods that help locate objects. He'd uncovered a metal item that didn't look at all like anything you'd expect to see on a playground.

Then, the ground started to do more than sparkle—it started to shake. There was an ear-splitting rumble and, without warning, a gigantic dragon statue shot up from the earth.

Except it wasn't without warning for Morooka-san. The statue was what he'd wanted to find. As he explained it to us, the statue was

of an ancient deity believed to summon rain. It had been forged from a mysterious metal that scientists could not identify or analyze. He called the statue an O-Part.

Morooka-san explained that an O-Part was an object from the past that should not exist—that is, its construction doesn't fit with what we know about the materials and the skills available to people at the time it was produced. But yet, O-Parts do exist, even if we don't know how.

The Supernatural Phenomena Research Association had actually heard about this dragon statue. We'd also heard that a mysterious religious cult had infiltrated CLAMP School in order to retrieve it. We'd hoped to find the statue first, and then hide it away. Luckily, Morooka-san agreed it should be hidden. Ideally, that would be in a place where mystical energy concentrated, where the dragon could feed off the energy passing through the earth around it. It would be there at the heart of a supernatural network, and that network would be the dragon's pulse.

The only catch was that this nexus—

Gah! I really hate this part of the case. This is where I accidentally ran into one of the cult members on the

hunt for the statue—or, actually, he ran into me. He was in the middle of performing a rain dance, and with all the jumping around he was doing, failed to see me, then barreled right into me.

It hurt a lot—and it was humiliating, too.

Episode 2: The Case of the Messenger from the Ruins

One time, after she had graduated, Karyuin-senpai came back to visit us. She found us huddled in our stairwell, in the midst of a meeting.

Senpai was an expert at seeing into the future, and even while working at the bank she would practice her skills. Occasionally she'd even "check in" on us. It was through such a "check" that she discovered what she called "a black shadow not of this world moving in to cover you members of the Association." As soon as she had received this terrible message, she wasted no time in warning us, especially since the shadow was fated to fall over us that very day.

Priority number one became defeating this shadow. Yuki-senpai had a friend in a photography club who let us use one of their combination studio/darkrooms, where we

quickly established a training center. We borrowed equipment from the high school dojo where kung fu and other martial arts were taught, and proceeded to practice self-defense techniques.

All our efforts to prepare ourselves for battle were wasted when a thick fog rolled onto the campus. It was impossible to see beyond the tips of our noses.

Not coincidentally, a mysterious student had just arrived on campus. And right after, Karyuin-san was sent on a research mission and never returned. Then, the Gas People showed up, and the mysterious flying object appeared overhead.

It was one of those huge Easter Island heads. And it was hovering there in the sky above CLAMP School.

When Karyuin-san said she saw bad things ahead for us, she wasn't kidding. One at a time, these oddities would have been a piece of cake, but all at once—well, drastic measures had to be taken.

Jeez, that was a particularly awful mission. I must say I wasn't feeling at my best during it. The thing is, we in the

Association tend to go about our cases nonchalantly. Under no official mandate to solve these mysteries, we approach them as larks. The business with the shadow, though, was different. It was serious. For the first time in our investigative lives, we were in a true life-or-death situation.

In the end, I was the only one to bear any consequences from the experience. I'm surprised Grandma ever forgave me. . . .



August is here. It's still early in the month, but summer is unmistakably heading toward its conclusion.

I have training to do at my grandmother's shrine, so I'm taking a bit of a break from the Association reports. Grandma's lesson plan is hardcore: It's meant to get me more in tune with my spiritual powers and the mystical world around me. Performing ablutions, meditating, creating marks and signs, learning to focus my spiritual energy—it's exhausting.



The day after the session at my grandmother's shrine, I went back to the reports. Reading over what I'd written so far, I realized something. I haven't been carrying my weight on our missions.

The other members of the Association may say otherwise. They tell me things like “You were a big help today, Rion-chan.” But I think they’re just being nice.

The session at the shrine showed me I could stand to train harder. I want to be stronger, to be there for my friends.



August is a gorgeous month.

We’re just about to start orientation for the new school year. Kids and their parents are visiting the campus and checking out the school.

Acceptance to CLAMP School—which was built entirely with funds donated by Japan’s largest family, the Imonoyama *zaibatsu*—depends solely on the student’s showing talent and a thirst for knowledge; family standing is not factored in at all. When school starts again, more than ten thousand people, including students, faculty, and miscellaneous staff, will fill the campus. . . .

I need to hurry and get these reports done.

Episode 3: *The Case of the Dreaming Mummy*

There are all sorts of student body committees at CLAMP School. If you can think of an activity, there is a club for it.

The absolute worst, though, is the Lifestyle-Monitoring Committee. They keep watch on all the other clubs to make sure they don't get out of line.

A few days after that Easter Island statue did a flyby through CLAMP School airspace, for example, one of the members of the Lifestyle-Monitoring Committee—Taro Ryugasaki-san of the High School Division, second year—showed up at our stairwell with a declaration.

"If you cannot produce some Association activity results within one week," she said, "we will not allow you to hold meetings anywhere on campus."

The members of the Lifestyle-Monitoring Committee didn't particularly like us. Their methodical way of doing things clashed with our more-intuitive approach. But they did have the authority to close us down, so we did have to produce some tangible results quickly.

Our plan was to offer our services as a detective agency. We'd then have clients to whose aid we could come, demonstrating our productiveness.

Within a day of hanging out our shingle, we had our first client. He was the leader of the Spirit Club—a club for school spirit, not the

otherworldly kind. Otherwise, they'd have been able to deal with their problem on their own: One of the members of the club claimed to have seen a female ghost wandering around the clubhouse, and since then, everyone was too scared to meet there, so club activities had ground to a halt.

The first step in our investigation was to check out the allegedly haunted clubhouse. Being a spiritual medium, able to sense when something otherworldly is at work, I was the point person on the mission. However, I got no vibes from the place.

We did discover a mummy buried underneath the floor, though. (There will be more on that later.)

Step two was to talk to the Spirit Club member who had seen the specter. No sooner had we arrived at his dorm room than we encountered a beautiful ghost of seemingly noble bearing. She was dressed in clothes dating from the late Meiji era into the early Taisho era, that is, from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Takayuki-senpai and Mifuyu-senpai next went to the University Division to research their hunch about a connection between the ghost and the mummy, which turned out to be right.

The mummy had been a man who died nearly a century ago, and had left behind his fiancée, who most likely was the beautiful specter.

That case was really strange, and yet it was romantic, too. It's funny how our feelings about our cases can change. Some of the cases that seemed so traumatic at the time were actually kind of fun.

Finally, we'd gained some credibility. The sensei in charge of the dorm where the ghost had taken up residence spoke to the Student Body Executive Committee on our behalf.

Episode 4: *The Case of the Still Ghost*

Our newfound respectability made the choice of the Old Tree in the Central Natural Park as our follow-up case a crucial one. Various rumors circulated among the students about this tree, which had been donated to CLAMP School as part of the opening ceremonies for the campus.

One rumor was that a huge, snakelike creature slithered through its roots during the night.

Another was that a gigantic face appeared in the trunk, and alternatively scowled or smiled at passersby.

To launch the case, we met by the tree at sundown. And, as is to be expected in an investigation of the unexpected, someone we didn't expect made an appearance.

That person had been commissioned by our nemesis, the Lifestyle-Monitoring Committee, to look into the same odd occurrences we were probing. It was Ryugasaki-san, who had tried to shut us down prior to the mummy case.

We were in a bind. The Student Body Executive Committee had, in fact, declared this part of the Central Natural Park off-limits. Fortunately, Takayuki-senpai, who is amazingly quick-witted, talked his way out of that one. But then, as soon as Takayuki had gotten us out of that jam, the tree pulled up its roots and attacked us.

Okay, so that didn't go well for us at all. At the same time, it went well for the tree. It finally had its wish granted.

As for our Chairman's wish for our Association to advance to Club status, that still remained out of reach.

XOXO

I guess that about does it for the early missions. There's only the Case of the Subway Train Monster and Kojikun's Zetton Incident left to recount.

Fact is, most of our escapades were never made public, and that's probably for the best. The majority of students are likely better off not knowing the things we know. Yet, I know how it pains our Chairman, Yuki-senpai, for his efforts to come to nothing. He loves the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association and can't stand it being belittled.

Do you think there will ever be a day when we'll be vindicated and our discoveries recognized by the Student Body Executive Committee?

Whatever. I have more training to do at my grandmother's shrine. . . .

The Uninvited Guest

Dancing with the rain, the wind blew it sideways.

And every so often, lightning would illuminate the night sky so it was bright as day.

On a night like this, when most people wouldn't dare to venture outdoors, an elderly man dressed head-to-toe in white could be seen digging a hole in the ground.

He was digging at the center of the sprawling CLAMP School campus.

Suddenly, the digging stopped. Dropping his shovel, the man looked down at his feet. A tiny object rested against his right shoe. It had been carefully wrapped in several layers of oilcloth and meticulously tied with string.

The man crouched, then lowered his head to look at the package. "Keiko . . .," he muttered, "forgive me."

With that, the old man placed the object in the hole he'd dug.



At that very moment, across campus in a quiet, shadowy room, a girl sat by herself, bathed in the pale glow of machines. The silence in the room was in stark contrast to the weather raging outside.

Just as suddenly as the old man had stopped digging, this girl rose, sadness washing across her face.

But, let's leave her for now. There's nothing we can do to heal the deep wounds in her heart. . . .



*The first annual CLAMP School
Summer Vacation Treasure Hunt
sponsored by the School Director is
just around the corner. Who will be
the top treasure hunter on campus?
And what treasure will they find?
All of these questions and more
will be answered when the hunt
begins this August!*

The headline seemed unnecessarily grandiose—but then, Yuki Ajiadou often fostered a grandiose image himself. He was in his second year in the High School Division of CLAMP School, but more important, he was Chairman of the Supernatural Phenomena Research

Association, a position that required a show of pizzazz from time to time—such as now.

“Only two days left until the treasure hunt!” he squealed. “I can’t believe it’s finally here. We’re the top investigators on this campus, but we’re going to multiply our efforts to be sure to win.”

Takayuki Usagiya, another High School sophomore, was sitting in his usual spot across from the Chairman. We, who knew him well, recognized that the way he had just adjusted his glasses signaled his annoyance. “You can’t be serious?” Takayuki groaned. “You really expect us to spend our summer vacation running around campus in the sweltering heat to find some bogus treasure?”

“Don’t be a spoilsport!” Yuki exclaimed. “This is our big chance to get publicity for the Association. If we can produce results here, our dream of being granted Club status could become a reality. Think of it: a real clubhouse. No more meeting in a drafty stairwell.”

Yuki gestured around him. The stairwell was bare except for a few old chairs.

“But Senpai . . . ,” Koji Takamura spoke up. The youngest of the bunch, he was a sixth grader in the CLAMP School Elementary Division.

“You want us to find this treasure,” he continued, “but our only clue is this piece of paper.”

The paper made a flapping noise as Koji waved it

around. Supplied to every registered member of the hunt, it revealed the first clue in the hunt.

“We’ve started missions with less,” Yuki declared. “All we have to do is pair off and start hunting.”

A young girl sat quietly next to Koji-kun, listening intently to everything being said. Rion Ibuki was in her second year of Middle School. “Pair off . . .,” she mumbled, shaking her head. Her pigtails bobbed from side to side. “That could be a problem.”

“Why? What could go wrong with pairing up?” Mifuyu Mizukagami asked. She was the oldest, a junior in High School, and sometimes her tone was a bit sneering—like now. Adding to her show of impatience, she fidgeted with a wristband, turning it around and around with the opposite hand.

“Well,” Rion replied, “the contest rules specify that we hunt in pairs, but we’re used to working as a group. Being limited to pairs means we can’t count on the resources of all of us together.”

“Oh, yeah,” Mifuyu conceded, “that is a tough one.”

Yuki’s confidence, however, didn’t waver. “We’ll plan our pairs to maximize our chances,” he announced.

“That makes sense, since some of us are better at using our brains,” said Rion, glancing at Takayuki and Yuki, “and others of us are better at the physical stuff,” she said as she looked over at Mifuyu and Koji, “but what happens to the person who’s left over?”

“What if we paired that person up with Koizumi-san?” Yuki proposed. Koizumi was Takayuki’s family maid, now a ghost, who nevertheless faithfully continued to serve the Usagiya household. Very protective of her, Takayuki was far from thrilled with the idea of dragging her into Yuki’s latest scheme. Also, it was doubtful that ghosts were eligible to enter the contest. He jumped in with a solution of his own. “I’m almost certain I can talk the Professor into working with us on this.”

The Professor, who taught at the University level, had an eccentric curiosity that made him a fan of Yuki’s, so the Association was often able to enlist his help with their cases. His scientific mind proved invaluable for sifting through the conflicting facts in a paranormal investigation.

“The Professor enjoys the challenge of tracking down clues,” Takayuki continued, “and since he tends to be the odd man out in his department at the University, I doubt he has a partner for the treasure hunt. He and I can form a team.”

“Excellent idea!” Yuki exclaimed. “That solves everything.”

Rion had convinced herself that no one would want to hook up with her for the contest, so she was surprised when Mifuyu leaned over and asked her, “Rion-chan, will you be my partner?”

“Really?” Rion couldn’t believe it.

"Sure," Mifuyu-chan said, grinning from ear to ear. "You'd be a great partner. As a spirit medium you have a gift for getting in touch with the unknown, and what's more unknown than a treasure?!"

"B-b-but—" Rion-chan stammered.

"That's a fabulous idea! You girls *should* be a team," Yuki interrupted. "The combination of your special senses, Rion-chan, and Mifuyu-chan's superhuman strength will make you the team to beat."

A mischievous smile crept over Yuki's lips.

"Putting you gals together creates an awesome mix of animalistic force and instinct."

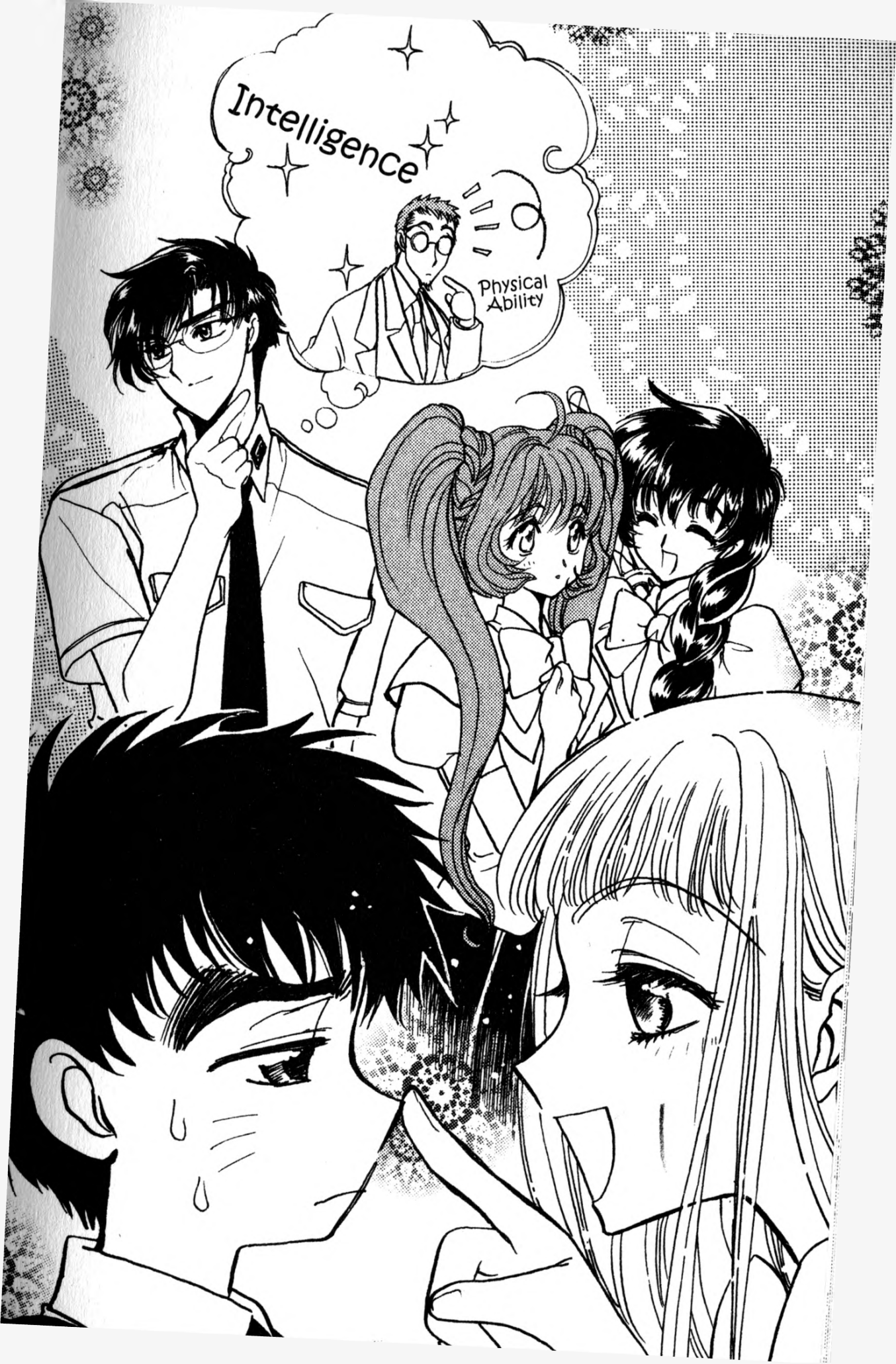
"Uh, uh—what?"

The triumphant expression on Yuki's face forbade any protest.

Koji raised his hand timidly. "Uh, sir . . . if Mifuyu-senpai and Ibuki-senpai pair up . . . that would leave you and I as partners . . . right?"

"You bet," Yuki said. "Your ninja skills will be the ideal complement to my common sense." Yuki brought his face so close to Koji's, their noses nearly touched. "Why aren't you saying anything? Do you think our pairing up is a bad idea?"

"Uh . . . n-no, of course not," Koji tried to look tough, but inside, the poor boy was probably quaking. Oh, no . . . *I have to be partners with our moody Chairman. I'm so screwed.*



“Huzzah!” Yuki declared. “That settles it. Our pairings are complete. From now until the start of the hunt—just two days from now—I want every one of us to be preparing for the event. Do it for a brighter future for the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association. Let’s go for it, okay?!”

As a duo, he and Koji were a study in contrasts—him swelling with confidence and Koji slumped over with doubt. Rion and Mifuyu appeared to be the female version of the same contrast. This was going to be interesting. . . .



The Supernatural Phenomena Research Association, a collective of CLAMP School students, was formed with the goal of investigating the various otherworldly events that occurred in and around the campus.

What qualified its members for the task? Well, for a start, Yuki Ajiadou, Chairman of the Association, could teleport himself from place to place. However, in order to activate this power, he had to jump from a height of at least twelve feet. He first stumbled upon this talent (so to speak) when he fell off the stage during the rehearsal of a play, preparing to become the great actress he was convinced he was destined to be.

In the Association, second only to the Chairman in standing was Takayuki Usagiya. Other than his extremely

high IQ, Takayuki had no other exceptional abilities. What he did have, however, was a maid named Koizumi, who was a ghost. When alive, she had so adored serving the Usagiya household that when she died, she could not leave them. In fact, the Takayuki family had employed her for several generations. Her only downfall as an investigator was her inability to adapt to new technology, but walls, after all, posed no barrier to her.

Next came the grade-schooler Koji Takamura, who was the youngest of the group. Koji descended from a proper Sengoku ninja family, known the world over for producing top-level bodyguards. Adept at both combat and weaponry, Koji particularly enjoyed *shuriken-do*, a form of blade throwing. Although still in the Elementary School Division, which meant he hadn't yet reached the level of strength and stamina of boys older than he was, he had proved himself indispensable to the Association, especially when it came to fieldwork.

Mifuyu Mizukagami's was also a skilled martial artist, and she and the young ninja made a deadly duo in battles against the Association's foes. Mifuyu's mastery of ancient sword-fighting made her the only current member of Class Z—a class reserved for the upper tier of students in each grade level—and when you consider that CLAMP School students were already exceptional, then *their* top tier was truly the best of the best. In addition, Mifuyu's sword, Kotetsu, was one of the finest

ever forged. There was never a time it wasn't strapped to her back. She could draw it instantly and slice just about anything in half—even something as small and swift as a housefly. Yet, as advanced as her swordsmanship was, her brain functioned several long steps behind.

Last but not least was Rion Ibuki, a Middle School student. The descendent of a long family line of spiritual mediums, she could see and hear spooks and specters, entities beyond the normal reaches of perception. Whenever a case involved the supernatural, Rion was put in charge. Yet despite her extrasensory powers, and the authority these gave her, she was terribly timid. Nevertheless, her grandmother was the high priestess of her family's shrine, and was assisting Rion in becoming the best medium she could be.

XOXO

"What should we do?" Mifuyu asked Rion, blankly. "Where should we start looking?"

"The sunlight was receding on the horizon. The crowd at CLAMP School's Forest Park was thinning as co-eds returned to their dorms to prepare for dinner and their evening studies. Going against the grain as usual, Mifuyu and Rion stood frozen in place.

Yuki had told them, "Listen, on your way home today, I want you to take a second look at every place on

the school grounds that might make you think, 'This is it! This is where the treasure is buried.' "

These parting instructions were frustratingly vague—particularly for someone like Mifuyu who was not used to esoteric thinking. Now, this vexation literally stopped her and her partner, Rion, in their tracks.

"Let's call this off before it gets any more ridiculous, Rion-chan. We're only going to tire ourselves out by wandering around aimlessly."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Rion nodded.

Mifuyu pointed to a white wood bench by the side of the road. "Why don't we take a breather over there?" she suggested. The bench happened to be in the shade of a big tree, where it looked wonderfully cool and pleasant.

Reaching the bench first, Mifuyu stretched out on it with the grace and power of a great cat. "Ah, this feels good. The sun's going down, and the breeze from the forest is so refreshing."

Now, with the mood more relaxed, Rion made up her mind to say what she had been waiting to say.

"Um . . . I wanted to thank you, Mifuyu-senpai."

"Huh?" Mifuyu looked more dumbstruck than usual.

"I . . . well, to tell the truth . . . with Takayuki-senpai and Yuki-chan both being so smart, and you and Kojikun so strong and agile, I . . . I was scared no one would want to be my partner."

Mifuyu smiled warmly. "That's so not true," she said. "In fact, I'm positive I have a better chance with you than with any of the others."

"Wow. Okay."

Inspired by the genuineness of her partner's smile, Rion allowed herself to smile, too.

"I've got an idea, Rion-chan. Why don't you stay over at my house tonight?"

"Really?" Rion was surprised by the sudden invitation. "Are you sure? But your house is—"

"I know, it's more of a *dojo*, but you'd be amazed how comfortable a sword-fighting school can be. Besides, my father and mother are away on a journey seeking enlightenment or whatever, so I'm all by myself."

Being home alone wasn't unusual for Mifuyu; her parents—both of them supremely skilled warriors—were forever off on some mission or quest.

"O-okay. I just need to clear it with Grandma and then I'll be right over!" Rion's home life wasn't any more ordinary than Mifuyu's. It was just her and her grandmother at the shrine.

"Awesome," Mifuyu said. "It's all set. I should be able to clean my room by the time you arrive."

A gust of wind twirled around them, leaving their words hovering in the air. Mifuyu reflexively turned to its source.

There, in the direction of her gaze, stood someone she had never seen before.

“Whaaa—?”

The boy appeared to be fifteen or sixteen. And he wasn't wearing a CLAMP School uniform.

Mifuyu squinted to get a better look at him. The sun was nearly gone, and his features were disappearing with the light.

Still, he projected a stillness and a steely determination unusual in someone his age.

Is he a transfer student? she wondered.

The boy returned Mifuyu's gaze before fading into the trees.

I wonder who he is?

Mifuyu shrugged it off and turned to face Rion . . .

. . . only Rion was no longer as Mifuyu had last seen her. She was standing completely still, a stunned look on her face. Her eyes were fixed on the space directly in front of Mifuyu.

“What is it?” Mifuyu asked, following the path of Rion's eyes. “Oh . . . !”

A woman dressed entirely in white was approaching them. She was so thin, she nearly looked transparent.

It took Mifuyu a second, but then she noticed something else. The woman had no feet.

“A ghost?!” Mifuyu exclaimed.

“What?” Rion was taken aback by Mifuyu's reaction. “You can see her, Senpai?”

“So . . . she is a ghost?” Mifuyu was thunderstruck.

Up until now, the only ghost that Mifuyu had ever really seen was Takayuki's maid, but Koizumi was special, since she was a spirit able to communicate freely with the living. In the Case of the Dreaming Mummy, Mifuyu did get a brief glimpse of the fiancée, probably because the mummy's passion for his beloved was powerful enough to draw her back to the tangible world.

But this was different. She'd become aware of a ghost on her own, before Rion, a bona fide spiritual medium, alerted her to its presence.

"Is this possible?" Rion cocked her head, puzzled. Something didn't feel right to her.

A spirit is a form of life energy left behind after a creature dies. In other words, it's the residue of a living being that fills a much smaller space than the being did when alive. Usually, the creature's will and the thoughts it had during its lifetime continue on as power waves within the shell encasing the spirit.

But there was something a little off about this woman. Rion was getting a strange reading from her. Any sign of mental activity or any evidence that the specter had a will of its own was missing. Any trace of the consciousness that would have spawned the ghost had somehow disappeared.

There was a flutter in the air. The lady in white was beginning to drift away, as if the ground beneath her had released her, the way a child would a balloon.



“Where is she going?” Mifuyu wondered.

“Oh, no!” Rion was shaking her head. “This isn’t good.”

“What’s wrong?”

Rion paused. “That’s no normal spirit. Spirits don’t move around that like,” she said finally.

“Sure, there are spirits who can drift from place to place, but even then their movements are limited. Ghosts usually stick to where they hung out when they were alive. The only thing I can compare this ghost’s activity to is Yuki-senpai’s teleporting.”

Just then, the lady in white slowed her movement, as if shifting into slow motion.

“What do you think she wants from us?” Mifuyu asked.

“Maybe she wants us to follow her,” Rion guessed.

There was a moment’s hesitation as the two girls looked to each other for confirmation they were doing the right thing. Then, they stepped toward the pale ghost.

The lady in white led them on a crooked path through the park, eventually stopping by a withered old tree located in the corner of CLAMP School Central Park. Rion felt her cheekbones tightening with the tension. Could it be that the spirit of a dying tree was calling to her, as in the Case of the Still Ghost?

“Hey!” Mifuyu shouted. “It’s vanishing!”

Sure enough, the woman was melting away, sinking into the mass of trees behind her. Why had the ghost led them this far only to disappear?

Where did she go? Rion wondered. *Usually, I can detect a residual consciousness from the spot where the spirit vanished . . . but I don't sense a thing.*

"What the—?!" Mifuyu jumped back.

Just as suddenly as the lady in white vanished, a figure emerged from the shadow of the ancient tree.

The boy had cold eyes.

And a tightly wound mouth.

"Hey, you're—"

"Leave."

After spitting out that single word, the mysterious boy, the one Mifuyu had seen back at the bench, turned on his heels and left.

"Senpai . . ." Rion instinctively huddled close to Mifuyu for protection.

The boy's eyes had showed no trace of human emotion. Several minutes passed as the two girls mulled over what had happened. They were jolted back to reality by the sharp cries of a cicada.

"Let's get out of here, Rion-chan."

Mifuyu's voice once again sounded reassuringly normal. Rion suddenly felt silly huddled against her. She stepped away.



"Mifuyu-senpai, where's the salt?"

"On the middle shelf of the spice rack. Oh, and while you're at it, could you get me the sugar jar, too?"

Mifuyu kept chopping green onions, without a pause, while giving these instructions. "Oh, and also the soup stock," she added.

Rion grabbed what she needed, then rushed back to tend to the pot she'd left on the stovetop. It was noisily starting to boil over.

Mifuyu dumped the last of her chopped vegetables into the stew pot. "Finally," she said. "We're done. Now we just have to wait for it to simmer."

She turned the gas down to low.

"I never knew you were such a good cook, Mifuyu-senpai! Skilled with the sword *and* the carving knife!"

Mifuyu was washing off the cutting board. "Given how often my parents are off on one mission or another," she said with a shrug, "I've had to learn to fend for myself. But I see you know your way around a kitchen, too, Rion-chan. She flashed Rion a smile.

"Grandma and I do the housework in shifts," Rion responded, "I actually dread when it's my turn to cook. My grandmother has such an innate sense for how much seasoning or spice should be used in a dish, I know she'll be able to taste where I went wrong."

"But, Rion-chan, things taste different to different people. You can really only cook according to your own taste. If it's good for you, then you were successful."

"Is that really the way it is?"

"Pretty much."

Rion was surprised by this, and not sure how to respond. Sensing the younger girl's self-doubt, Mifuyu put a reassuring hand on Rion's shoulder.

The inviting smell of stew on the stove spread through the Mizukagami house. The dojo was built and decorated in traditional Japanese style, and filled with the aroma of good cooking. It couldn't have felt more like home.

After the boy with the cold eyes fled from them, the two girls had decided to stick together. They went first to the Masaki Jinja, a spiritual shrine where Rion lived with her grandmother. There Rion packed a few things for sleeping over, once Grandma gave her permission.

Arriving at Mifuyu's home, they each took a shower, then prepared their dinner.

"Cooking is a lot easier now than it used to be, before we got gas," Mifuyu remarked, setting her stew dish down on the table, which was low to the ground in the traditional Japanese manner. "Before we got gas I had to fire up the stove every night the old-fashioned way, using wood. It was a pain in the butt, though food cooked over a real fire does taste better."

She brightened. "We still heat the bath with a wood fire, though. Hey, how about a nice, hot bath after we eat? There's nothing as relaxing as a good soak in a fire-fueled bath. What do you think, Rion-chan?"

"Ooooooh, that *would* be nice, Mifuyu-senpai."

"Okay, then, *itadakimasu*."

Rion smiled at hearing her companion use the traditional mealtime toast. "Itadakimasu! I will humbly partake of this wonderful feast," she replied.

Rion sat down. The girls then picked up their chopsticks and began to eat. After a couple of bites, Rion stopped. Putting down her chopsticks, she rested her elbows on the table and her chin on her hands. "It's really perplexing . . .," she mumbled.

"You talking about that ghost?" Mifuyu asked, her mouth full of food.

"Uh-huh. That boy, too. It's not like he's easy to forget . . . but it's the lady in white who really baffles me. Her behavior doesn't conform to the laws of the spirit world."

"Hmmm . . ." A bit of *ponzu* sauce dribbled down Mifuyu's chin. She licked it off as she replayed the day's events in her mind.

There was that strange ghost woman, who beckoned them to follow her to the old, dying tree.

But as soon as they got there, she took off, and then, barely a second later, that weird boy appeared out of nowhere.



Only to tell *them* to leave before leaving himself.

What's the deal with these spooks? Mifuyu asked herself.

Then she remembered: *There was that first time I saw the boy with the eyes of death. I didn't tell Rion, because as soon as I turned around, the lady in white was standing there.*

Then, when the boy hurried off, I felt an intensely evil life force. I scanned the area for its source, and that's when I saw the third person.

Forty yards in front of where the two girls stood, Mifuyu had spied a mysterious figure hidden within the tangled thickets.

And beyond that, just past the Central Park fountain, she spotted a fourth person. He was trying to hide in the shadow cast by the fountain's stone statue.

He wasn't the last, either. There was a fifth person.

And a sixth. And a seventh.

All wore identical black suits and dark sunglasses.

Nobody at CLAMP School dressed like that. They were obviously outsiders. They did not belong there, on school grounds.

"Let's get out of here, Rion-chan," she had said, saying nothing about what she'd seen. She hadn't wanted to panic her partner.

"Hmmm . . ." Mifuyu's review of the day's events only raised more questions.

Did those mysterious men have anything to do with the boy? Could they have followed us?

“Senpai?”

“Whuzza?”

Seeing Mifuyu look so distracted, Rion was studying her face worriedly.

“Heh. Sorry!” Mifuyu said. “I was just thinking.”

She hastily shoved a big ball of rice into her mouth to cover her own concern.

Rion breathed a sigh of relief. “By the way, Senpai,” she said, changing the subject, “may I visit your family altar before we go to bed?”

“Hmmm . . . ?” Mifuyu swallowed her rice. “You want to pay your respects to the *kami* of our property? I know you like to befriend the spirits around you.”

In Rion’s family, just as in any clan passing on the traditions of spiritual mediums, it was customary for its members to pay their respects to the *kami* of any territory the mediums entered. When the two girls had arrived at Mifuyu’s house, the first thing Rion had done was pay tribute at the family altar. Because the Mizukagamis were a sword-fighting family, the altar was kept in the central part of the dojo, where they practiced their sacred art.

“Yes, there is that,” Rion said meekly, “but I also need to do my daily *norito* training. Grandma said never to neglect my Shinto prayers.”

Norito were words of prayer to the gods. The spiritual mediums of the Ibuki family heightened their powers by concentrating their consciousness by means of *norito*.

"No problem," Mifuyu said. "The dojo is always open, so go whenever you need to."

"Thank you."

"Now, all this food isn't going to eat itself. Dig in!"



Outside, a loud crack shattered the midnight air.

It was the sound of someone stepping onto a tree branch and breaking it underfoot.



"Rion, never forget to concentrate."

Her grandmother's words were a sort of mantra for her.

"You're always so timid. It takes very little to break your focus. If you continue to allow that to happen, you'll never hear the things you are meant to hear, and you'll never see the things you are meant to see."

Rion sat silently on the wood floor of the dojo.

I wonder if the reason I couldn't see the whole of that spirit this afternoon was because I doubted myself?

The moonlight slowly receded from the window.

But that spirit, right up until it disappeared, was visible to Mifuyu-senpai, as well. She shouldn't have been able to see it. So, something was definitely wrong. . . .

Rion closed her eyes and clapped her hands.

The sound bounced off the dojo walls.

A voiceless prayer.

Ceasing to ponder the day, Rion pushed all thoughts aside and began concentrating. And just as she did . . .

“Agh . . . !”

A hand covered her mouth.

“Be quiet,” a voice whispered in her ear. Its owner’s breath was warm against her skin. It smelled of pickles. “I’m only going to ask you once, and I expect an answer. Quick. Where is ‘it’?”

Rion’s arms were trembling, even as her legs went numb.

“What did you talk about with *him*?” A different male voice, louder and more aggressive, leaped from the darkness. “What did he say to you? Why were you even there?”

Rion heard the words, but couldn’t make sense of them. Fear had taken control of her and was shutting down her body, and her mind.

A silent scream rose in her throat.

Surrendering so easily to fear was not something her grandmother would approve of. She had to force herself to struggle. Her life depended on it.

“Ngh—!”

Though Rion was a small girl, she would make the man work to keep her captive. A second hand gripped her, trying to hold her down.

"Aaaaaaghhhh!"

"What is it . . . ngh!"

A wind blew past Rion's cheek. Its force rent the air in two.

"Let Rion-chan go!"

"Senpai!"

Still dressed in her pajamas, Mifuyu had burst into the dojo, grabbed one of the wooden practice swords from the wall, and began striking at Rion's attackers.

The moonlight shifted and again trickled through the window. The light reflected off the men's sunglasses, revealing their positions.

"Damn," one of them cursed. *"Fall back."*

While giving the order, he fidgeted with a tiny switch on the side of his glasses.

Without another word, the other man stepped away from Rion. Pausing for the briefest moment, they then fled the dojo.

"Senpai! Senpai!"

Rion clutched at Mifuyu, her eyes filling with tears. She pressed her cheek against her defender's shoulder, staring intently at the moonlight misting through the darkness beyond the window. There was nothing there. . . .

XOXO



Toward the west, backed by the dark-blue sky, a pink remnant of sunrise lingered. Despite the tumult at the dojo the night before, CLAMP School was bathed in mellow morning light.

Two girls in school uniforms were walking toward an ancient tree in the corner of Central Park. Their jaws were set with determination, their eyes trained on their target.



“It’s a conspiracy! Some sort of covert operation!”

Yuki was on fire. After the girls informed him of the previous night’s goings on, it was like his blood had been set ablaze.

“You two have gotten involved in something dangerous,” he continued darkly. “Who knows to what length these men in black will go? You must be protected at all times.”

“I agree,” Takayuki said, remaining calm. “It’s too risky for you guys to stay at the Mizukagami dojo after last night. Both of you should take up residence at the campus facilities for a while. I’m sure our friend the Professor can expedite the arrangements.”

“Uh, okay . . .,” Mifuyu said, feeling defeated.

It didn’t help that the room secured for her and Rion-chan was a desolate place, devoid of warmth or comfort. Rion-chan tossed and turned on her narrow bed.

"Can't sleep?" Mifuyu asked. She looked in from the doorway, where she had taken up guard duty. Kotetsu rested in her hand, apparently a natural extension of her arm.

"Oh, gosh," Rion groaned. "I'm sorry to be worrying you."

Groaning again, she added, "And I'm sorry your home was invaded by those men, Mifuyu-senpai."

"Feh. It won't happen again. Yuki-chan and Kojikun are staking the place out and making sure nobody suspicious gets in."

Everything had happened so fast. Once it shifted into organizing mode, Yuki's brain traveled like a bullet train across Tokyo.

"Koji!" he'd exclaimed. "Starting today, you and I are going to set up watch outside Mifuyu's house. Forget about the treasure hunt. We must protect our own!"

"Roger that, Chairman!"

The police had been contacted, but given the lack of tangible evidence or clear motive, they failed to see the point of filing an official report. As a result, the group figured it was up to them to flush the enemy out.

"You really should put this all out of your mind, Rion-chan," Mifuyu continued. "It's the only way you're ever going to get to sleep."

"I suppose you're right."

Rion pulled the flimsy blanket over her body and resumed her tossing and turning—though at a less frenzied pace than before.

It didn't matter that she began to drowse. Even in her dreams, Rion couldn't escape all the questions.

I've had this feeling since we got back to campus. It's the same feeling as when that spirit showed in the park—

"Hey!"

Rion sat up straight in bed.

Mifuyu leaped from the doorway, Kotetsu at the ready. "What is it?!"

"Uh . . . uh . . ."

An unfamiliar voice—a woman's voice—reverberated through Rion's head. It hammered at her concentration, and she was having trouble forming the words to tell Mifuyu what was happening.

Please . . . please . . .

It didn't take a genius—and Mifuyu certainly wasn't one—to see Rion was in pain. Mifuyu lightly touched her friend's cheek. The skin was damp with sweat.

"Please, Rion, rest. You're going to be okay here."

Mifuyu slid Kotetsu back into its scabbard and headed for the door.

"S-senpai, where are you going?" Rion asked, weakly.

"I'm going back to that tree. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."



"No." Rion's voice rang with a renewed confidence. "I'm going, too," she said.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Mifuyu's brow furrowed with worry.

Rion stood. She meant it when she said, "Yes, I'm fine. Let's go bust some ghosts."



"Here. This is where that spirit led us to yesterday, before it disappeared," Rion whispered to Mifuyu.

They had wound their way through the park. It was late, but the stars were out and the moon tumbled through the leaves to help them find their way. Eventually, they came upon the ancient, knotty tree where all the strange things had happened. In the chilled night air, it looked like a wrinkled old man taking a nap.

"Do you think there's something here we missed?" Rion asked.

"Well, a tree's roots go deep. You never know what might be down there with them, so let's dig."

"B-but . . . we don't have any tools."

"Oh, don't we?"

"What?"

Mifuyu held up her right hand. In it she held a child's red plastic shovel.

"I found this in a garden we passed on the way over here. I snagged it because I had a hunch it would be useful."

Walking over to the spot where the lady in white had vanished the day before, Mifuyu raised her red shovel and began to dig.

A pile of dirt gradually rose beside the spot. Mifuyu was having a pretty easy time digging, as the soil was soft. After several minutes, she hit something. It made a clanking noise.

"Heyyyyyy," she said, jazzed.

"What? Did you find something?"

Mifuyu crouched to brush away loose clumps of dirt from the small metal object she'd unearthed. It was wrapped in an oilcloth that had turned brown from being underground so long.

"What do you think this is, Rion-chan?"

"I-I don't know. . . ."

They hauled the object out of the hole. Mifuyu began untying the string securing the oilcloth, and then removed the oilcloth itself.

What they discovered may have been more puzzling unwrapped than it was wrapped. It appeared to be some kind of control switch with a touch panel covered in tiny numbers and *kanji*. A thin screen ran across the top. After blowing away remnants of dirt from the panel, Mifuyu pointed to the Japanese lettering. "These kanji are

incomplete," she said. "There aren't enough characters here to make up the whole alphabet, plus a couple of them I don't recognize." She scrunched up her mouth. "This couldn't be the prize in the treasure hunt . . . could it?"

"Nuh-uh," Rion said. "It would be kind of a lame treasure if it was."

Suddenly, there was a sharp crack in the air, then a spark in the twilight and the twang of metal hitting metal.

Without Rion even seeing her move, Mifuyu had drawn Kotetsu and deflected a bullet before it struck her. Clearly, all those hours in the dojo had paid off.

"Damn!"

A man in dark sunglasses emerged from the bushes, cursing. He was loading another tranquilizer bullet into the chamber of his rifle.

Even after he'd fully emerged, the bushes kept rustling. Ten more men—all in black suits and flashy sunglasses—stepped up behind him.

"Hand it over," the first man said. He took another step forward, then stopped, locking the rifle back into place. "Don't make me use this again. I won't miss twice."

Without knowing she was doing it, Rion took a half step back.

"Agh!"

"Ergh!"

"Aaghhh!"

Each exclamation was accompanied by the sound of fabric tearing, and followed by a man in black dropping to the ground.

The leader of the pack spun around. "What the hell—?!"

In the midst of the three fallen bodies, a boy stood at the ready.

He was wearing a thin dark-blue blazer and looked completely relaxed. But his eyes were ice-cold.

"Sp-spread out!" the leader barked, but before he'd uttered the last syllable, the boy had taken action.

He was throwing something at the men with his right hand, while his left removed something from his pants pocket.

"Arghh!"

"Nghh!"

Two more men were knocked off their feet, as if hit by a heavy, fast-moving object.

It's a wire attack! Mifuyu thought. He was striking so fast that she could barely see it, but it seemed as if—a slender, glistening whip was assaulting the darkness. Attached to the wire was a small object, and the boy was alternately hurling it out, then pulling it back in—like a yo-yo—by manipulating the wire. *It's attached to his right sleeve*, Mifuyu noted. *There must be some kind of retractable device.*

"Dammit!" the leader cursed again. "R-retreat!"

He gritted his teeth. He wasn't one to give up easily.

After gathering up their fallen, the men who remained quickly withdrew into the darkness of the forest. Just as suddenly as the black-suited gang had arrived, they were gone. Their hurried departure left a momentary vacuum, an implosion of physical space that cloaked the mysterious boy's approach. He was now only six feet away from the two girls.

"So, we meet again," Mifuyu calmly said as she instinctively moved to position herself between the boy and the trembling Rion.

"I'd like you to return to me what is mine," the boy said. His eyes dropped down, indicating the object in her hand.

Mifuyu let that hand fall to her side as she lifted the opposite hand, which wielded her sword. "And if I refuse?"

"S-senpai!" Rion blurted out, alarmed. The rising tension between the two needled into her flesh, as if the air were full of flying porcupines.

The boy brushed his bangs out of his eyes. His thin lips twisted into a smirk. "All right, then," he said. "I guess you can hang on to it for a while."

With the studied grace of a ballet dancer, the boy turned his entire body in one fluid motion, and stepped toward the bushes.

"Wait!" Mifuyu said. "Who were those guys? And who are *you*?"



"If you still have what's mine the next time we meet, I'll tell you everything."

The shadows washed over him, concealing his face before he added, "Don't make the mistake of thinking that what those men and I really want is what's in your hand."

And then, once again, the boy with the cold eyes vanished.

Rion's face was as pale as the moon above their heads. She looked at Mifuyu, bewildered. "Senpai! Why didn't you give him that thing? As long as we have it, those men are going to keep trying to kill us!"

"Well," Mifuyu said, "the student handbook clearly instructs that if we find lost items on campus, we need to turn them in at the nearest CLAMP School Student Body Hall."

"Huh?" Rion thought maybe Mifuyu had lost her mind. "I know that's the rule, but what does it have to do with this switch thingamajig?"

Shhhh.

Mifuyu pressed her index finger to Rion's lips. Rion's eyes questioned her, asking, "What?"

But then Rion felt it, too, and wondered why Mifuyu had sensed it first.

All around them were the peculiar wavelengths that ghosts produce.

"... -san- ... san ..."

A girl's voice drifted past their ears.

They turned to look in the direction from where the voice came.

"Mifuyu-san . . . Rion-san . . ."

Another solitary figure stepped out of the darkness.

*(You have to wonder how
many people are hiding there
in the darkness, don't you?)*

Rion grabbed for Mifuyu's shirt. Mifuyu could feel the younger girl's nails digging into her back.

"Mifuyu-san . . . Rion-san . . . are you all right?"

The moonlight fell on the new visitor. It was a girl in braids, wearing an old-fashioned maid's uniform.

"Koizumi-san?" Mifuyu asked.

"Yes! Long time, no see!"

Mifuyu and Rion each breathed a sign of relief. Rion withdrew her fingernails from Mifuyu's back.

It was only Takayuki Usagiya-senpai's supernatural maid, the ghost who gave the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association a helpful hand from time to time.

"Usagiya-sama was worried about you two," she explained, "so he asked me to come and check up on you."

"Oh, tell him we're fine," Mifuyu answered matter-of-factly. "He should keep his mind on his research. Did he find out anything about the men who invaded my house?"

Takayuki had enlisted the Professor, and the two of them had set off in search of data pertaining to this new, mysterious enemy.

"No, nothing yet," Koizumi said, adjusting her glasses. She looked the girls up and down with a doubtful expression. "But he has made some progress figuring out who that lady ghost is. He said he found something curious."

"Something . . ."

". . . curious?"

The girls leaned forward in anticipation.



Boom!

Boom *boom!*

As the echoes of the explosion zigzagged across the CLAMP School campus, plumes of white smoke wafted up into the summer sky. Fireworks burst high above.

"And now," a voice bellowed over the school PA system, "the moment you've all been waiting for! The CLAMP School Summer Vacation Treasure Hunt!"

A loud cheer erupted from every corner of campus.

Students then poured from buildings and across school grounds, scattering to follow clues. There was treasure out there, and each kid believed he or she was going to be the one to find it.



“The solution to the six-number equation matches these coordinates exactly. That has to be the location of the next clue.”

“This refers to the back section of the Kindergarten dorms.”

“1, 2, 3, 4 . . . turn, jump back, hit yourself. . . .”

“You’re doing good! Only another thirty spins on the merry-go-round. Just don’t puke, or we’ll have to start over!”

“If we say this tongue twister fifteen times in front of this statue while touching our elbow to our knee, it’s supposed to lead us to our next clue. The only question is, which elbow and which knee?!”

“All right, *namamugi namagome namatamago*—raw meat, raw rice, raw egg?! This isn’t a clue, it’s a menu.”

All throughout the campus, voices burst out in excited gibberish.

It was still early morning, and the sun shone brightly.

“I heard someone say that there are 3,208 partners competing for the prize,” Rion announced.

“Wow!”

Mifuyu tried to imagine how big that number was by picturing all the people as gumballs inside a gumball machine, but it wasn’t working. She and Rion were walking along the path toward the Junior High School Division. The summer light made them squint.

Mifuyu rubbed her palm along the strap that held her sword to her back and sighed heavily.

Rion patted her breast pocket, where she kept her Grandma's good luck tablet.

They were both in battle-ready mode.

"Why do you think so many students go in for this treasure hunt thing, Rion-chan? Could they really all be so bored with their summer vacation?"

"I think they like it. I've heard that a lot of kids postpone leaving school to visit their families so they'll be here for it."

"You don't say?" Mifuyu responded with disbelief.

Although their conversation sounded nonchalant, it was really a cover for their tension. One look into their eyes would betray how panicked they felt inside. They were steeling their nerves for what could be awaiting them in the Junior High section.

XOXO

Pulling a notepad out of her apron pocket, Koizumi read Usagiya's message to the girls, which she had carefully recorded.

"It appears that a strange signal was detected on the southwest area of campus at about the same time the lady in white ran away. Usagiya-sama says its frequency isn't consistent with that of a normal life force."

"Frequency?" Mifuyu asked.

“Yes. Sadly, even though he recognizes the signal as irregular, he hasn’t yet been able to determine if it corresponds with that of a restless spirit. Apparently, the megahertz reading is off the charts.”

Folding her arms, Mifuyu started to chew on this new information.

“Senpai . . .” Rion hesitated to speak. She worried that her voice would divulge her fear. She pointed at the switch-like contraption Mifuyu still held on to. “Could it be that the lady in white isn’t so much a ghost as she is something mechanical, something that can be guided and directed by remote control? Like maybe by that weird object you now have in your hand?”

“The ghost of a machine? Is that even possible?”

“Well, it’s the only explanation I can come up with, and it’s not like we haven’t seen stranger things. I mean, once you’ve seen a subway train literally eat people. . . .”

Rion kept mulling over the fact that she hadn’t been able to sense a consciousness connected to the lady in white. Even a ghost had some kind of energy signature.

The girls handed the mysterious object over to Koizumi for safekeeping. Takayuki and the Professor would have a much better chance of figuring out what it was than they would. Then they left, before any of their attackers returned.



"If Takayuki-kun's analysis is correct, then the source of those energy waves is somewhere in the Junior High Division," Mifuyu reiterated.

She was glad to have Rion along. Being the one Junior High student in the Association, Rion knew this section of CLAMP school the best. Mifuyu attended classes on the opposite end of campus, in the High School Division, and since she'd advanced to that division three whole years ago, the part of the school she was now in had become unfamiliar.

Still, even narrowing it to the Junior High Division, the "southwest area of campus" wasn't exactly a specific coordinate. It covered a lot of ground, pretty much a full quarter of CLAMP School, containing not only academic buildings but also dorms, storage units, and power plants.

"If you guessed right, Rion-chan, that the ghost is either mechanical or controlled by some sort of mechanical device, then I'm betting that what Takayuki picked up is its central server. Don't you think?"

"Yeah . . . that would make sense."

But Rion wasn't so sure. *If it's true that someone here is controlling the ghost, then why would that person have her lead us to the control unit? Was he or she trying to tell us something, and the lady in white is the only means of communicating with us? Maybe whoever's pulling the strings isn't even at CLAMP School anymore.*

Mifuyu heard rustling around the side of a nearby building. She held out her arm and halted Rion in her tracks. A shadow then fell across the path, a shadow that took the shape of a person.

“Rion-chan . . . get ready to run.”

“Huh?”

Mifuyu’s only response was to tug at Rion’s arm before breaking into a sprint. Taking the hint, Rion hurried to keep up.

It’s following us . . . Mifuyu said to herself. Hearing the footsteps getting closer, she dropped her pace to let Rion catch up with her. This would put her in a position to shield the younger girl. From the corner of her eye, she could see the shadowy figure closing the gap between them.

They were running along the backstreet leading to the campus storage units. No one else was around.

(It wasn’t exactly a student hot spot.)

“Heh-heh-heh.”

The girls stopped dead in their tracks.

They had run directly into one of the men in black. Mifuyu scanned his sunglasses to see if in the lenses she could catch sight of the figure following them. But no, the lenses were empty.

“You two aren’t going to get away from me again,” the man chuckled. “You took me by surprise last night,

but I'm not going to be fooled by a couple of little girls a second time."

The man cracked his knuckles, producing an eerie pop.

The sun was directly overhead, and the heat nearly unbearable. Mifuyu found it odd that despite the man being dressed in a shirt and jacket, she didn't see a drop of sweat on him.

Keeping her eyes locked on the man's face, Mifuyu watched for any sign that he was about to attack or that he sensed what *she* was about to do.

Faster than the eye could follow, she reached back and brought Kotetsu into view. The metal blade vibrated, and the exquisite ringing sound inspired Mifuyu. Her instincts told her that if she didn't land the first blow, the confrontation would not go in her favor.

"*Deiyaaaahhhh!*"

Her father had taught her to use a battle cry for two distinct purposes: to unbalance her opponent, and to give focus to her intensity.

Mifuyu's feet left the ground. She launched herself into the air to attack.

"*Senpai!*" Rion gasped.

Metal hit metal. The scrape of it set Rion's teeth on edge.

Then, suddenly, both fighters froze.

Mifuyu looked dumbfounded. *What? I made a direct hit. . . .*

"Well," the man laughed, "I didn't expect you to jump right into it. And with a sword, no less."

The fabric on the shoulder of the man's jacket was sliced clean through.

But that's as deep as the blade went, it didn't penetrate his flesh. Instead, the cut exposed something that glinted in the sunlight.

"Oh!" Rion gasped again.

"You don't think I'd do this without protection, do you?"

With one quick jerk, the man tore off his jacket.

Now visible was his silver body armor. A tangle of wires and diodes poked out from the edges.

His gloves also came off, revealing more silver.

"Is that . . . mechanical armor?" Mifuyu asked.

"It's called a power suit," the man said. "It amplifies my fighting skills threefold."

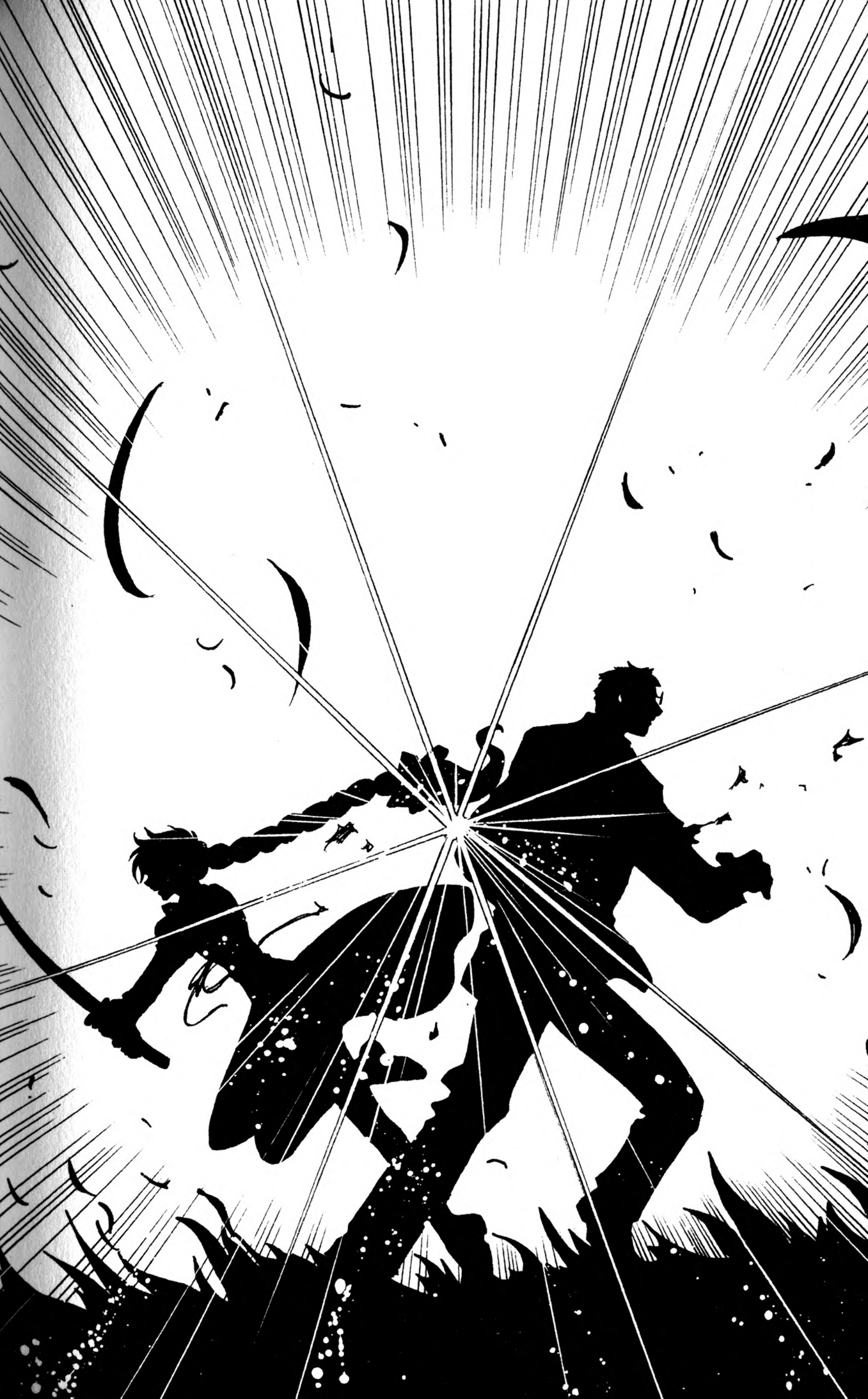
He smirked.

Mifuyu took a step backward.

"Now it's my turn," the man said, and made his move.

His speed was startling, but by a mere millisecond, Mifuyu managed to dodge his blow. She then dropped to the ground, tumbled out of harm's way, and sprang to her feet. She tried not to show how heavily she was breathing, how a fire burned in her lungs.

Again on her feet, Mifuyu glanced back to where she'd stood just seconds before. There was now a gaping



hole where the man's silver fist had landed. It's unbelievable. He had shattered the ground itself.

If he had hit me . . . it would have been all over.

Mifuyu tossed back her head, flinging her bangs away from her forehead and out of her eyes. She gripped her sword tightly. She hoped her enemy would not see the sweat forming between her fingers.

Slowly and deliberately, the man readjusted his neck and shoulders until the bones cracked.

"You'll have to admit, I got closer than you're used to," he said next, readjusting his glasses. "It'll require only a minor correction to ensure I hit the mark this time."

Before he'd even finished his boast, the man dashed forward.

"Gwaaaaah!" The man's fist grazed Mifuyu's side.

"Owwwwggh!"

But it wasn't Mifuyu who now screamed in pain.

Her attacker stumbled backward, clutching his forehead, his body shuddering in agony.

"Mifuyu!" Rion squealed. Her eyes were filled with anxious tears.

"Hurry up and get out of here!"

It was the boy with the cold eyes. Standing behind Rion, he was reeling in his wire.

"D-dammit!" the man bellowed. He righted himself, then without pausing, lunged once more at Mifuyu.

The air whistled. The wire weapon flew with precision toward the only part of the man's body without armor—his face.

"I told you, I don't make the same mistake twice!" The man snatched the wire from the air with his silver fingers and instantly snapped it.

"Ngh!" The shock ran back up the boy's arm as the wire recoiled and retreated up his sleeve.

Rion screamed, found the strength to move her trembling legs, and ran to the boy. The sudden jolt had forced him to his knees.

"Don't go anywhere," the man warned her, "because you're next!"

He turned back to face Mifuyu, but she was gone.

"What the—? Awww, damn, damn, damn. Where did she—"

"Hey, what's going on over there?"

Some treasure hunters happening upon the scene were alarmed by what they saw.

(Who would've thought that in the middle of a perfectly lovely treasure hunt they'd actually stumble across an altercation of such magnitude?)

"No," the man hissed. "I can't be seen here."

In an instant, he was gone, before anyone else could get a good look at him.

"Oh, Senpai," Rion sobbed, as Mifuyu put a protective arm around her. The older girl had swiftly circled around to get in between Rion and their assailant, in hopes of defending her.

The boy, still crouched on the ground, was clutching his arm. The place where the wire had snapped back on him burned as if dipped in acid.

Mifuyu's heart sank still further as she examined her beloved sword, Kotetsu.

In the attack, it had protected her well, but at a sacrifice. Kotetsu had suffered a small crack.



The rustling of cloth was the only sound that wasn't produced by the natural surroundings.

Rion had climbed to a rocky area of the Junior High Park where neither the sun nor prying eyes could reach her. She was dressed from head to toe in a white kimono, pulling bucket after bucket from an old well, then solemnly pouring the water over her body.

Despite the hot summer air, the water from the underground spring was freezing cold. But she did not hesitate when raising the bucket above her head and tipping it over. Since Rion was young, Grandma had been schooling her in this water ritual, one of the

“It’s important that you learn the ways of your family. Each ritual you practice will enable you to become a better medium.”



Back in the present, feeling at home with her eyes closed to the darkness, Rion realized something. It was as if the memory had unlocked a secret, the answer appearing without warning. CLAMP School’s spiritual landscape spread in front of her like a blueprint.



“All right, buddy boy. Time to deliver on your promise.”

Mifuyu was standing over the boy with the cold eyes. Whatever pain she was feeling would not be withheld from the mysterious boy. Rion may have been attending to the boy’s wounds, but Mifuyu would offer him no such pity.

“You swore you’d tell me everything,” she said. “Who are you? *What* are you?”

“I . . .” The boy winced. He clutched his arm where the wire had cut him. The blood felt wet against the palm of his hand. Regaining his composure, he began again.

“My name is Kei,” he said. “I am an agent for the Japanese government.”



"Come again?" Mifuyu cocked her head. Her brow furrowed. "Are you saying you're some kind of *spy*?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

Rion looked up at Mifuyu. The older girl's face showed no trace of emotion.

"Interesting," Mifuyu said. "Then who were those men?"

"That's not for you to know. Information pertaining to their organization is top secret, and it would be illegal for me to say more. All I can tell you is that we call them 'The Black' and that they're an international cabal determined to control the world."

Rion sucked in her breath. Mifuyu shot her a look that said: "Don't show this guy any more weakness than we already have."

"So why is this cabal lurking around CLAMP School? Are they looking for something? Is it that ghost lady?" Mifuyu persisted.

"Is she linked to that machine of yours?" Rion got in a question of her own.

"Do you know anything about phantom theory?" Kei asked. He averted his eyes but couldn't put out the fire in his voice. "About magnetically recorded images of ghosts? We've got reams of data on ghost sightings in old buildings, and when analyzed they indicate that in most instances, the witnesses have seen these apparitions at precise times,

“During World War II, in fact,” he went on, “a Japanese scientist devised a human experiment to prove this theory. Immediately after his wife gave birth to their child, he sat her in this contraption he’d built. He flipped the switch and powered it up . . . only for the experiment to fail. The resulting electrical explosion injured the scientist and killed his wife. The scientist was left in despair. His son was sent to live with relatives, and his lab fell into disarray. Finally overcome by grief, the scientist attempted to dismantle and destroy what remained of his experimental device, only to discover something strange. Even though the machine was no longer connected to a power source, he saw a vision of his deceased wife.

“Even more eerie, the apparition was evidently conscious and possessed a will of its own. The scientist was convinced it was the soul of his dead wife communicating to him from beyond the grave.”

Neither Rion nor Mifuyu could keep from shivering at the thought.

“After analyzing all the data he could from the occurrence, he determined that the powerful magnetic energy emitted by his machine had captured his wife’s soul and contained it. He was ecstatic. Now his wife could stay by his side forever.

Rion burst into tears. “That’s terrible!”

“Actually, that’s the conclusion the scientist came to, as well. He realized something awful.”

"What could be more awful than his disrespect for the dead?!" Rion cried.

"Well, exploitation for one thing. Think about it. If another scientist could build a similar machine, one that could separate a person's soul from his or her body, whether that person was a willing participant or not—well, the dirty deeds that could be perpetrated are endless. Assassinations, kidnappings—all kinds of high-tech criminal acts could be committed all over the world. Even worse . . . this army of artificial ghouls would be impossible to stop."

Mifuyu's face fell. Rion buried her head in her hands and sobbed.

"The machine could become as dangerous as any nuclear weapon," Kei continued. "The scientist realized this. Fearing what he'd invented and ashamed he hadn't foreseen its evil implications, he disappeared, taking all of his notes and plans and the machine itself with him. World War II was in full swing, so no one noticed one guy dropping out of society. It took years of research to pick up his trail, but we eventually did. And if *we* did, then someone else could, too. They'd know exactly where his machine ended up. . . ."

"At CLAMP School," the girls said in unison.



“Oh, there you are.”

Mifuyu had been drinking tea while waiting for Rion to return. Rion now stood at the entrance to the living room, drying her hair with a bath towel. She had changed back into her school uniform and was approaching the couch where Mifuyu and Kei were sitting.

“I figured it out!” Rion exclaimed. She pulled out a map of the campus and unfolded it before them. She then pointed to a building in the Junior High Division. “Here, in the basement—that’s where they keep a lot of old machines and stuff.”

“That’s the power plant,” Mifuyu said.

Kei took in Rion’s revelation calmly. “Good thinking,” he said. “It’s the primary source of power for the whole school. I could keep the scientist’s machine running for an eternity. No one would notice it among the other machines there, or catch it siphoning off electricity.”

Raising his eyes from the map, Kei looked intently at Rion.

“If we infiltrate the building, do you think you can act as a sort of divining rod, you know, to locate the machine?”

“Yes!” Rion answered with an uncommon certainty.

“Then let’s go,” he said.

Mifuyu gulped down the rest of her tea. Standing, she strapped on her sword. “Let’s!”

XOXO

The room was full of machines. Metal boxes containing gears and wires were stacked side by side, humming deep and low. The reverberations traveled through the concrete floor, up the feet of the three kids, and into their bellies.

Up from the floor, too, jutted a huge cement column. It was so wide; all three of them with hands joined and arms outstretched would not have been able to encircle it.

A maze of pipes extended throughout the room. Their intertwining seemed almost organic, like they were vines snaking through the darkness.

Little lights on the machines pulsed. Bursts of color popped and sizzled and lit up the kids' faces. It felt eerily like a science fiction movie: They were deep underground, where no one was likely to hear them scream.

"Wow, this is a big basement. . . ." Rion said, her voice trailing off into an echo through the vast space.

"Yeah, you'd never know so much was down here from just looking at the building on the outside," Kei said. "And above ground, there's not even a whisper of the racket made down here, either. Particularly with the clamor going on today."

The clamor Kei was referring to was the treasure hunt, which was still in full swing.

The three of them were so jittery that when any of the machines clicked in the shadows, they found themselves ducking for cover.

"So, do you have a reading on it yet?" wondered Kei.

"Uh, yeah, I think so."

Rion signaled for Kei and Mifuyu to stand back, to give her room to concentrate.

"Yes . . . I'm sure of it. It's really close, actually."

"Excellent."

Kei turned aside. With his back to the girls, he emanated a frostiness that rendered him unapproachable. But, Mifuyu had to ask what she'd been wondering since Kei first told the tale about the ghost in the machine.

"Uh . . . Kei . . . w-what happened to the scientist?"

"Eventually, he was found dead. His body turned up in the morgue at a city hospital."

"Until several years ago," Kei continued, "he served as a technical advisor to the CLAMP School science department. We're not exactly sure how he ended up here, but perhaps the reason he left the school suddenly was that he knew that he was about to die. And maybe he wanted to pass away quietly, without alerting anyone."

Rion's mouth felt dry. It was all a lot to take in, and some of it didn't make sense—well, maybe it just didn't make sense to her, so she was a little shy about bringing



it up. "But," she began, slowly, "why would he bury the control device for such a dangerous machine in the middle of the park? Why not just destroy it?"

Kei didn't answer. Was his silence because he didn't know or because he didn't want to say?

Mifuyu had her own theory. *I'll bet the guy was just being possessive*, she concluded, clutching Kotetsu, the thing that was most important to her in the world. *How else could he have allowed her to live on and yet hide the machine he'd trapped her spirit in, so that no one else could let her out? He selfishly wanted to keep her all to himself. Destroying the machine while he was still alive would have deprived him of her company—as long as he had it, he had her.*

"Why did you use a non-lethal blow back there?" Kei asked her suddenly, conveniently changing the subject.

"What?"

Mifuyu had gotten lost in her own thoughts, and Kei wrenched her out of them, as if waking her from a nap by sounding a gong. By "back there" he was referring to Mifuyu's locking fists with the man in black. But how had he noticed such a subtle distinction?

"Your sword got chipped," Kei continued. "That could happen only if you'd hesitated when you went in for the kill."

Rion turned to her. "Is that true, Senpai?"

Mifuyu said nothing. Nor did her expression indicate what she was thinking. She looked Kei right in the eye.

Finally she spoke. "It's not right to kill people." Her voice had a defiant tone, and her eyes narrowed, as if to add, "You want to make something of it?"

"I thought you were trained in the ancient art of death!" Kei snorted. "What's the point of knowing how to do something you think is wrong?"

"Knowing something and knowing how to use that knowledge are two different things. I know how to kill, but I also know not to. It's as simple as that."

"Even if the alternative is you getting mowed down by some gorilla that will eventually kill your friends?"

For all her struggles in school, Mifuyu readily grasped what her parents taught her. She paused for a moment, and weighed her words before responding—just as she might size up an opponent in a duel.

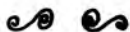
"I will always protect my friends," she said, plainly. "Always."

Kei nodded as if to say, "Fair enough." Out loud, though, he didn't say anything at all. He simply put his hands in his pockets and strode ahead.

Rion and Mifuyu jogged after him, hurrying to catch up.



High above the three of them, from a vantage point in one of the school buildings, men wearing dark sunglasses tracked their movements.



“So, this is it?”

“Yes.” Rion nodded.

Kei stood in front of the machine Rion had indicated. The control panel was expertly camouflaged. Nothing fancy, just an arrangement of pipes shielding it from the casual viewer.

Now that they were seeing it with their own eyes, they could scarcely believe what they were looking at.

“So, this is the machine that holds human spirits.” Mifuyu took a deep breath. “Doesn’t look like much, really.”

But she didn’t mean it. It looked like a whole lotta much, and then some.

The machine was gargantuan. Pressure valves and dials and windows with needles that moved spastically from side to side gave it an antiquated look. The needles, as well as a tiny lightbulb placed in a little wire cage above the control panel, appeared to be in sync with the clanking and whirring of the machines all around it.

“What do we do with this thing now that we’ve found it?” Mifuyu asked.

"We destroy it," Kei answered coldly. "This machine cannot exist any longer."

Kei reached into the pocket of his jacket and removed a silver case, which gleamed in the flickering light of the spirit machine.

"Please wait!" Rion demanded. She reached out a hand, lightly gripping his wrist. He grasped the box tighter.

"Before you do whatever you intend to do," she said, "let me help the spirit of the poor woman finally achieve nirvana."

A tinge of anger appeared in Kei's eyes. He exhaled loudly through his nose. "Fine," he said, yanking his hand away from Rion's grasp before distancing himself from the machine.

Rion hurriedly slapped a thin strip of paper with a magical code painted on it, known as a cipher, onto the machine. She closed her eyes and pressed her hands together.

There was a *whiff* sound, which was muted by the ringing of Kotetsu's blade as it was drawn from its scabbard. In an instant, Mifuyu had unleashed her sword and deflected a deadly dart, inches from Rion's head.

"Stop where you are!" a man's voice bellowed from behind them. "Hand over the device!"

Men in black were emerging from behind the pipes and the myriad machinery filling the room. Leading the pack was a man carrying a gun.

Kei's eyes became even colder.

The lead thug pulled the hammer of his pistol back with his thumb.

*(Had you been there, you would have
sworn it was the loudest sound you ever heard.
It seemed to silence all the machines in the room.)*

"Give up," the man said. "You know you haven't a chance against us. If you resist, you can bet you won't be walking out of here. Carried? Maybe. Walking? Definitely unlikely."

Kei wasn't impressed. He didn't move a muscle.

"Senpai," Rion whispered, afraid.

Mifuyu stepped closer to Rion, and positioned herself between the men and their sunglasses. Kotetsu still in her hands, she readied herself to fend off all comers.

"Ngh!"

One of the men screamed out in pain. Their ranks broke. Some were glancing around, trying to find out what was going on, while others started screaming themselves.

"Argh!"

"Gahhh!"

Mifuyu looked over her shoulder at Rion, who was returning her look. Neither girl had the faintest idea what just happened.

"Just because you disable a weapon from performing its primary function," Kei said, "doesn't render it useless."

Kei's wire extended from his sleeve. The end of it wound around the index finger of his opposite hand. A flick of the wire set it vibrating, like the string of a violin, and produced a sound unlike the mechanical noises filling the room. And each time the sound rang out, an agonized scream from one of the men in black followed.

Kei had planted booby traps throughout the room when they'd entered it. Using pieces of his broken wire, he had crafted a few spring-loaded devices that, when triggered by a certain frequency, would fire wire bits at the nearest enemy.

"C-curse you!" the lead thug hissed. He held up his armor-plated hand. "You wanna know the sound of one hand clapping?" he asked.

He closed his fist hard, striking his silver fingers against his palms. The deafening clang of metal produced sound waves that spun sections of wire off course toward Kei, who lifted his arms to shield his face—

"Watch out!"

An unfamiliar voice.

The wires halted in midair, hovered for an instant, then dropped to the floor.

When the anticipated blow didn't come, Kei lowered his arms.

There, between him and the men in black, appeared a woman in a white dress. Nearly transparent, she shimmered like water and hovered at least a meter off the ground.

"The lady ghost!" Rion cheered.

The lady smiled. She turned to Kei and extended her hand, brushing her palm across his cheek.

Kei was completely bewildered. He looked at the floor in front of her, where half-a-dozen slivers of wire lay.

"Did she . . .," Rion hesitated, "protect Kei-san?"

The lady looked past Kei and past Mifuyu to Rion peeking out from behind the older girl. Their eyes met, and the woman's form began to dissolve.

Rion then understood. The lady in white had created a pause in the action for Rion to safely cast a spell. She began to chant the norito, extending her right index finger straight at the man with the gun.

A huge blast of wind shot past Rion. Strands of their hair flapped in front of the girls' faces.

The gargantuan machine hummed. Portals opened in the metal casing, and arrowlike beams of ghostly light shot out them.

"Gwahhhh!"

The gun fell from the man's hand. It crashed to the floor, followed immediately by the man himself dropping with a dull thud.

Rion's battle norito had given her control of the ectoplasm released by the machine. She directed the

ghostly beams with just the use of her finger. One by one, after felling the lead thug, she struck down men in black by aiming ectoplasmic arrows at them.

No one was more surprised at the sight than Rion. *I never thought I could use spirits as weapons!*

“You’re going to let these three scrawny kids do this to you?”

A voice roared out of the darkness.

Uh-oh, I missed one! Rion thought, panicking. She whipped her finger in the direction of the voice, firing ghostly arrows at the enemy behind it.

The spirit weapons struck their target, but instead of returning to Rion’s control, they exploded in a display of fireworks. Beneath the crack and boom of the explosion was the sound of metal grinding and tearing, wires breaking, electricity crackling.

As the sound and light show died down, a hulking man covered entirely in metal armor emerged. He towered over them.

It was the man Mifuyu had tussled with the night before—but with upgrades.

“I can’t believe soldiers of mine would blunder into this pathetic ambush,” he said. His voice was deep, like the sound of trees falling in a forest. “Get out of my way, you morons! It’s time that I passed judgment on those who seek to block me from what is mine!”

Oh, no! Rion shrieked in her head. A spirit trapped by a machine is a useless weapon against another, entirely different machine. His armor is shielding him from attack.

Mifuyu slashed at the air with Kotetsu, staking out her ground. She said nothing, preferring to speak with her blade.

“Senpai!”

“Mifuyu!”

Kei and Rion both called out to their ally, afraid for her. This foe was three times her size.

Mifuyu gave them a reassuring smile. *Don't worry.*

“Heh-heh,” the armored man snickered. “That’s a mighty thin sword you have there. Seems hardly fair. You might as well try to topple a mountain with chopsticks. Either you’re an absolute idiot, or you’re blinded by overconfidence.”

As he spoke, the man flipped several switches on his wrist.

“I’m raising the power output on this suit to its maximum. You’ll soon see how far out of your league you are, little girl.”

Mifuyu wrapped her fingers tighter around Kotetsu’s handle. She was determined to hold her ground. One of her father’s lessons stood out from all the others in her memory.



"Father," she had asked him, "a sword was made for cutting people down, right? Then when I am in a swordfight, if I want to win, don't I need to strike at my opponent so he can't fight anymore?"

"Yes, I suppose," her father had replied.

He sat in front of his daughter, dressed in his practice gear. He spoke in even tones, carefully measuring his words. Little Mifuyu was gripping a wooden practice sword that was nearly as tall as she was.

"But doesn't it hurt when you get cut with a blade?" Mifuyu asked. To illustrate her point, she held up her hand. Her middle finger was heavily bandaged after being cut when helping her mother cook. "When I cut myself with a knife, it hurt and I bled. I didn't like it, and neither will my opponent when he's cut with my blade, will he?"

Mifuyu's father sensed the seriousness of the query, but could not help but chuckle to himself. "You'll be fine," he said, placing his hand tenderly on his daughter's shoulder. "When you become an expert swordfighter, you'll know how to defeat your opponent without killing him."

"Really? No lie?"

"No lie. He may be annoyed with you, but he'll be pleased he's still breathing."

Her father spoke with confidence and smiled warmly as he dropped his hand from her shoulder and rose to his feet.

“Devote yourself to your training,” he concluded.
“You have the ability to become a fine duelist.”

“I will be, Father! I will!”

From that day on, Mifuyu devoted herself completely to her practice.

She worked with her sword every single day.

Often, her training superseded her studies, as well as her playtime.

She trained with her whole heart, with the purity only a child could muster.

XOXO

Back in the present, Mifuyu turned Kotetsu a millimeter. Breathing in deeply, she felt the air fill her lungs, then she exhaled.

Mifuyu traced an arc toward the ceiling with the tip of her blade, pointing it high in the air.

“Senpai . . .,” Rion whispered again.

Mifuyu’s breathing mingled with the hum of the machines.

“You’re bluffing,” the armored man harrumphed.

Reaching his hand out, he closed his fingers into a fist, a warning to Mifuyu of what he intended to do to her. She wasn’t fazed.

The man spit. “If you’re not going to make your move,” he said, irritated, “then I’ll make mine.”

A thunderclap reverberated in the space between them as he stepped toward her.

Mifuyu still did not move.

"Senpai!" Rion screamed this time.

Mifuyu's feet left the floor.

"No, Sen—"

The room seemed to blink out for a second, as if it were shoved sideways out of time.

"—pai!"

Another second ticked away. Mifuyu and the armored behemoth passed each other, and then stopped. They now stood with their backs facing.

"Senpai!"

Mifuyu's bangs fluttered to the floor. They'd been sheered off just a couple of inches above the roots.

But the man who had moments before laughed at her and her sword suddenly collapsed to the floor in a massive heap.

"Impossible," he coughed. "How could . . . I didn't even see the blade . . . how could it penetrate my armor?" Then he fell silent.

Mifuyu breathed a sigh of relief.

Rion shrieked "Senpai!" one last time and ran to her friend.

Kei watched, his eyes as cold as before the fight began. He kicked at the heap on the floor, the armor clanging from the impact. Mifuyu had knocked the guy completely unconscious.

However, if there was a scratch anywhere on his body armor, it was invisible to the eye.

"Another nonlethal blow," Kei murmured, nodding with admiration.

He now understood Mifuyu's technique. The key was her breathing, focusing her *ki*, her body's organic energy, and sculpting it into a metaphysical blade that could inflict damage on her opponent without actually injuring his body. It was the purest example of winning, without a life being lost.

"R-r-r-retreat!" The man in black who had ordered the attack was panicking—first his men had been knocked around by Rion's ectoplasm barrage, and then the biggest guy in the squad was felled with scarcely a move from Mifuyu. He was now gathering the troops, scrambling to get away. "Move, people! M-move!"

"You're not getting away that easily!"

There was a bright flash.

Then two more, in rapid succession. *Pop! Pop!*

Blinding light engulfed the basement. The room suddenly went from dark and dank to bright as a midsummer day with the sun at its peak in the sky.

"You have been surrounded by the CLAMP School Security Committee!" a voice boomed. "Surrender quietly, otherwise you'll be facing all two hundred of our soldiers."

As the light faded, Rion and Mifuyu tried to refocus their eyes. Brightly colored spots were exploding like

fireworks before them. Then all they could make out was what looked like large, fast-moving inkblots spreading all around them.

The Security Committee, in their black uniforms, had spilled into the room. A familiar voice rang out from behind the crowd of student guards: "Rion-chan! Mifuyu-senpai! Are you guys all right?!"

"Takayuki-kun!" Mifuyu exclaimed.

"Usagiya-senpai!" Rion squealed.

Takayuki ran his fingers through his hair. "My goodness," he said, "I'm glad I made it here in time."

The Professor was with him, right at his heels. He was chuckling in an all-too-familiar high-pitched way, which usually indicated he was about to share a vital piece of information that would crack a case wide open.

"After studying the machine that Koizumi brought to us," the Professor said, "I was able to identify and carefully analyze an electric signal similar to the one we'd detected in the southwest area of the campus. We then put a track on the signal, and as soon as it zeroed in on this spot, we hurried right over."

"Sensei . . ." Rion sighed, relieved.

It was like an invisible hand gripping her tensely had let go, and she fainted.

"Huh?" Mifuyu rushed to her, grabbing her before she hit the floor. "What happened, Rion-chan?"

Rion's eyelids fluttered. "I-I just felt . . . weak all of a sudden. . . ."

"You've showed so much strength over the last couple of days, I think you've earned it."

The two girls smiled knowingly at each other.



Two days later, on what may have been the warmest and sunniest day of the summer, the Summer Vacation CLAMP School Treasure Hunt came to a close, its fanfare unprecedented. The CLAMP School Chairman was conducting an elaborate awards ceremony over the intercampus PA system. The winning hunters from each class were given prizes like overseas vacations and coupons for the top restaurants in the CLAMP School community.

After the ceremony, the Chairman retired to his office. Seated at his desk, he glanced over the files that had been dropped off for him on his desk. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Looks like the control panel was found safe and sound, he thought as he sent the files through the paper shredder. Smiling in self-satisfaction, he closed his eyes as the shredder turned the reports to confetti.

Finally, the scientist and his wife will get the peace they deserve. And I can rest easy, too, knowing the treasure hunt

was a good idea. Those kids . . . they did a fine job, even if they are a little weird.



Kei had taken possession of the control panel once the men in black were sent packing. Dismantling it, he disposed of each and every piece in a separate waste facility on campus.

Now that his mission was over, it was time for Kei to leave the school grounds. Before he did, he took one last walk through CLAMP Park. By coincidence, Mifuyu and Rion were also taking a stroll there that afternoon, and they ran into one another at the tree where the woman in white had revealed her secret.

"You've brought flowers," Kei noted. "I didn't expect to see you here, much less performing such a gesture."

Kei had actually brought a flower himself—a delicate white bud that he had chosen because it reminded him of the ghost of the scientist's wife.

Rion lowered her head. She said quietly, "We wanted to pray for her spirit to achieve nirvana, to finally get the rest she's been longing for."

Rion knelt at the edge of the hole where they'd dug up the control panel. She placed her hands together.

Mifuyu knelt next to her, and touched her hands together, too. Neither spoke.

Kei cleared his throat. "I owe you two my thanks. On behalf of the Japanese government, please accept my gratitude."

He bowed to them.

"Uh . . .," Rion said hesitantly, "Kei-san? Can I ask you . . . ? The first time we saw the ghost, it was like . . . well, like she was protecting you."

Rising to her feet, Mifuyu nodded in agreement. "Yeah, Kei-san . . . I was thinking that maybe you knew the lady."

"What was the connection, Kei-san?" Mifuyu persisted. "How did you know the dead woman?"

Kei looked away from the girls. "That spirit was . . . my . . ."

He stopped speaking, chewing slightly on his bottom lip.

"She was my mother."

Before the girls could think of anything to say, Kei had left the park.

More stunning than his revelation, though, was that as he walked away, Kei was genuinely smiling, the first time they'd seen him do so.



The Unforgiven Thing

"Listen up, because I'm only going to explain this once."

The teacher reached up to the blackboard with a nub of chalk poised between her fingers. She began to scratch out some numbers. Chalk dust billowed off the board, the smell of it filling the room.

"All you have to do is insert the form of the x equation, which I've already broken down for you, into the second equation. Once that's done, the answer to the original question stops bobbing and weaving and settles right down where you need it."

Takayuki sat bolt upright. He'd been following along, writing down in his notebook what was on the board, but the numbers seemed off. *Hmmm?* he thought. *That's not right.*

In fact, nothing had been right all morning. His suspicions grew with each math problem, but he hadn't yet figured out the x that was throwing everything out of whack.

It was the usual hour.

The usual classroom.

The usual teacher.

So what was different? Why did it feel wrong?

Takayuki looked around the room.

Is it just me? I feel like I've heard all this before. It's like math lecture déjà vu.

He turned to the computer touchpad that was built into his desk and hastily tapped at the directional key.

The most up-to-date technology was available to CLAMP School students. Each desk at the school came equipped with a miniature computer station. A teacher fed his or her lecture into a database that displayed it so the student could follow along during a presentation. Or the desktop could be programmed to display what the teacher was writing on the chalkboard. Students set their preferences for saving the information, highlighting what they deemed important, and the data could be downloaded and burned onto a disk—providing a portable summary of the day's lessons.

Takayuki scrolled past the beginning of today's lecture and moved on to the lecture from the day before. He preferred to take notes by hand during class lectures, to help him think things through, but the desktop system provided a backup if he needed it.

He paused, removed his glasses, and cleaned them on his shirt. Today's lecture, though familiar, was not a redo of yesterday's after all. *Am I just imagining things?*

Takayuki didn't think so. An overactive imagination wasn't something he was usually accused of having.

"...and so, as you can see by this example, there is a trick to solving complicated coalition equations, for instance ..."

For all intents and purposes, he was in a normal math class.

"...you should have already learned the basic formats for problem solving like the one shown here ..."

But then, the strangest things often appeared normal at first glance.

"...and using that solution to illustrate the equation in the form of a graph ..."

Each theorem was uncannily familiar. Like it had been whispered in his ear as he lay dreaming the night before.

Wait a minute! All this speculating is making me miss what's going on in class, Takayuki realized with alarm. In order to graduate, he needed to pass Math.

I've been working extra hard to catch up on my class work. All the weird stuff we've been doing in the Association has burgled my time.

That was probably it. All the late-night cramming had rendered him less than alert, and vulnerable to perceptual glitches like déjà vu.

Hell, even if it's not just my imagination, it won't hurt to listen to the same lecture over again. In fact, it'll likely help me remember more of it. Life is all in the way you look at it.

Takayuki scrolled back down until his monitor displayed the lecture in progress.



“Chairman!” Koji exclaimed. “Regarding yesterday’s case, the research on it has hit an unexpected snag. There are no reliable witnesses, no useable testimonials at all.”

What?! Takayuki was startled by Koji-kun’s statement. “Wait!” he said. “Isn’t that the same thing you reported to the Chairman *yesterday*?”

The members of the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association were gathered in their usual meeting place—the stairwell that served as the entrance to the roof of the High School building. Furnished only with metal chairs and a table, it wasn’t very fancy. And it always smelled of candy and Earl Grey tea.

Koji shrugged off the interruption. The older boy’s pointed interjections, welcome or not, had come to be expected by his fellow Association members.

“I swear,” Koji protested. “This is the first time I’ve ever spoken in a meeting about the case.”

“And it’s the first time I’ve heard him report on it,” Yuki, the Association Chairman, added.

“*Whaaaa—??*” Takayuki was clearly distressed. *What could this mean?*

Distressed himself, Koji scratched his cheek with his index finger—the sort of casual move that made the coeds squeal. You see, Koji had really adorable cheeks, and the girls went wild for them.

“Are you sure you didn’t tell us all of this stuff yesterday, and maybe you forgot or something?” Takyauki persisted.

“No, I don’t think so,” Koji replied. “I just got on the case yesterday.”

“It’s true,” Yuki confirmed.

Mifuyu leaned so far forward, the blade of the long samurai sword she wore, towered over her head.

“Koji-kun was pounding the pavement pretty hard. As soon as Yuki assigned him the mission, he began hunting down information. He must have questioned the entire Elementary School Division yesterday.”

“Are you sure *you* aren’t mistaken . . . ?” Rion asked cautiously.

I wonder . . . ? Takayuki thought for a moment.
Could it be . . . ?

Takayuki waved it off. “Okay, sorry,” he said, finally. “Please continue.”

But he couldn’t help feeling they were all looking at him quizzically out of the corner of their eye.

“Anyway, where was I?” Koji said. “Ah, yes . . . within my area of jurisdiction—the Elementary School Division—the information I was able to gather pertaining to the case.”

Even as he sat there, listening—or trying to—Takayuki couldn't shake the uneasiness that had dogged him the whole day. *Why is this happening to me?* he asked himself. *Have I really experienced déjà vu twice in one day?*

Usually Takayuki—a man of mathematics, a student of science—had no use for anything as fuzzy as feelings. Now, however, he couldn't just toss his feelings aside. He was strangely compelled to dwell on them.

Koji's voice sounded farther and farther away. The stairwell walls receded more and more into the distance. And Takayuki felt increasingly lonely and isolated.

"I think while we're at it," Koji continued, "we should expand our sampling base to include school faculty members and campus visitors, as well . . ."

Can sleep deprivation really affect the brain this much? Or maybe . . .

"... such tactics might require the Student Body to sign off on them, though. We don't want any trouble."

Takayuki put all his effort into focusing on what was being said at the meeting. He was going to beat these distractions!

"You do realize that it's going to be a real hassle to get their permission," Yuki said. "Given that we aren't recognized as an official Club."

"Sure, but that's nothing compared to the hassle we'll have to endure if we go ahead on our own and get caught."

"Too true!" Yuki laughed. "You think like a born leader, Koji, weighing the consequences before choosing a course."

"I've got an idea!" Koji interjected. His voice rose with excitement. "What if we all change into casual clothes and interview people outside the CLAMP School entrance, as they come and go? Technically, we won't be under the Student Body's jurisdiction."

"Or even better, why not wear signs that say 'Suspicious Characters'?" Yuki joked.

"Well, I don't hear any other solutions," Koji pouted. "We're not going to ever solve this case if we don't figure out how we're going to do the research."

It was no good. Takayuki couldn't shake it.

No, no, no.

In his head, he replayed the entire exchange between Koji and Yuki.

It's impossible! I know everything they're going to say the instant before they say it. They're covering the same ground they did in the last meeting!

Yesterday's meeting.

The same conversation.

Next, Koji is going to say, "Agh! This is such a pain in the butt! If only people hadn't witnessed the phenomenon, we'd be in the clear."

"Agh! This is such a pain in the butt! If only people hadn't witnessed the phenomenon, we'd be in the clear," Koji said.

And now Yuki's going to say, "There's no use complaining. We just have to find another way."

"There's no use complaining. We just have to find another way," Yuki said.

"The information Koji dug up yesterday may not be a lot," Rion is about to add, "but shouldn't we be trying to get as much out of it as possible?"

"The information Koji dug up yesterday may not be a lot," Rion added, "but shouldn't we be trying to get as much out of it as possible?"

It was like Takayuki was forced to watch a movie where he knew how everything was going to turn out. No suspense, no plot twists, no surprise ending!

"I know!" Koji blurted out. He slapped his thigh. "It's going to be a lot of work, but why don't we examine the evidence from a different perspective. In other words—"

"In other words," Takayuki interjected under his breath, cutting Koji off, "you want to conduct a controlled experiment . . . correct?"

This time, Koji was startled by the interruption, but even more startled that Takayuki had it exactly right.

"Wow, it's like you knew what I was thinking, Senpai! That's totally what I was going to say. Don't you think it's our best option?"

Caught up in Koji's enthusiasm, the other members completely missed the point of what had just happened.

It was like they'd been blinded by how brightly Koji's eyes shone as he spoke.

"I was thinking we could test whether the same phenomenon would occur if analogous circumstances were provided?"

"Sure, sure," Takayuki chuckled. "You're thinking that if the experiment works, we can use the results to help determine where the phenomenon might manifest next, and then once we do, try to duplicate the results? It could work."

"Hmmm," Koji pondered. The energy pulsing through the room was revving him up, yet at the same time, he felt a little vulnerable. "You're as sharp as ever, Senpai," he mumbled. "You're always one step ahead of me. It's like you can read my mind, and you know what I'm going to say before even I do."

I wasn't exactly reading your mind, Takayuki thought, but I did know what you were going to say.

He couldn't deny it any longer.

These were no mere coincidences. No simple perceptual glitches.

He was now certain of it: He was reliving a memory of the past that was taking form in the present.

And despite all the strange things he and the others had experienced together, Takayuki kept what he had discovered to himself—lest the others think he was stark, raving bonkers.

XOXO

*What's going on? Am I the target of some massive practical joke?
Or am I going crazy?*

Takayuki was returning to his room in the boys' dormitory. Tormenting thoughts besieged him.

*Are all my memories suddenly coming straight out of
"yesterday." Or is my mind a day ahead of everyone else's? Whatever
is going on, I hope it's just a dream and that I'll wake up really soon.*

Angered, Takayuki slammed his fist into a nearby tree. The bark split under his knuckles; the trunk shivered and branches shook.

A cicada sitting on a branch, possibly taking a nap, was suddenly jostled to life. It gave a short cry, flapped its wings, and flew off.

It was already September, with autumn just around the corner, but for now, the air was still heavy with humidity. The very atmosphere was weighing on him. Takayuki cast his gaze downward, ashamed by his outburst of anger. A moist wind grazed his cheek.

He removed his glasses, and then put them on again, adjusting them so they sat on the bridge of his nose just right. He took a deep breath.

I couldn't think of a worse time . . .

Maybe my problem is, I'm taking this way too seriously.
Takayuki chuckled to himself.

If only Koizumi could look into this for me.

Koizumi had been the Usagiya family's maid for several generations and was so devoted to them, she continued to serve their household even though she died quite some time ago. It was an absurd situation, when Takayuki stopped to think about it, but one he'd come to accept as normal. So, why was he freaking out at having one more absurd situation in his life? The absurdity of having a ghost maid would have been the perfect antidote to this current absurd development, but she wasn't at CLAMP School that day.

In fact, he hadn't seen Koizumi for two whole days. He'd been struggling to get through his homework earlier in the week when Koizumi appeared in his dorm room, her hair done up in braids.

"Takayumi-sama . . . ?" she said.

"Hmmm, what?" he replied, looking up from his papers.

Koizumi averted her gaze. "Um . . . well, I'm afraid I have a favor to ask you. I don't know how to put it delicately, so I'll just ask: May I have some time off starting tomorrow? Just three or four days?"

Takayumi couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Koizumi do anything but smile, so seeing her now so upset tore at his heart.

"This is sort of sudden. . . . Has anything happened?"

“No, not really. I just was hoping I could take some time to cross over to the spirit world to visit my ancestors.”

Even though Koizumi had outlasted several of Takayumi's relatives, in ghost years, she was still pretty young. A ghost is believed to be a concentrated form of life energy, the conscious remains of a person who died but for whatever reason was unable to achieve nirvana. So the person remains tethered to earth, a pale replica of the consciousness that spawned him or her. Because they are mere apparitions, lacking an independent consciousness or will, ghosts can only repeat actions dictated by their circumstances.

Koizumi was different. She had stayed on earth by her own choice and could do as she pleased, like converse with the living. She was a rare ghost that could think, make decisions, and act entirely on her own. Takayuki often wondered if she were really a ghost at all, or perhaps something much different.

“Your ancestors? I guess I never thought about you having ancestors, Koizumi, considering how many of mine you've worked for!”

“Oh, but I do! I wasn't the only one of my clan to serve the Usagiya family. I'm actually the third generation to work for your *zaibatsu*.”

“Third? I had no idea the relationship between our families was so long-standing.”

"It's true. I've been in service to the Usagiyas since your mother's father was the head of the household. Before then, my father was the butler . . . though they called him at the time their principle retainer."

"Fascinating!" Takayuki exclaimed. "But is there a special reason you want to see your ancestors? I don't think you've ever mentioned them before today. So, why now?"

"There's a special place in the afterlife for the spirits of servants, set aside just for them."

"Wow. A servant heaven!"

"Most of the spirits who gather there continue their services. Having taken pleasure in their duties, they repeat them even after shuffling off this mortal coil."

Koizumi smiled just thinking about it.

"The higher-ranking spirits eventually achieve nirvana," Koizumi went on, "though once every forty-nine years, they gather at this special place in the hereafter to mentor the current crew of servant spirits. According to your earthly calendar, the next gathering is tomorrow."

"I see," Takayuki said.

He smiled at Koizumi. She was more than a servant to him, she was practically one of the Usagiya zaibatsu.

Koizumi is always so reserved and self-sacrificing, he thought. I can only imagine how hard it was for her to ask me for permission for a leave of absence.

"I hate to leave you alone, Takayuki-sama," she said. "I feel just awful! But this opportunity to benefit

from the guidance of my ancestors will allow me to serve you better."

"Don't worry," Takayuki said. His tone was reassuring. "I wouldn't dream of stopping you. I can manage on my own for a couple of days."

Koizumi's eyes lit up. "Thank you so much! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

She flew about the room, from one corner to another, like a child unable to contain her joy.

Takayuki remembered what it was like to be that excited about taking a trip. His family used to go on long summer vacations, and the night before they left, he'd be so full of anticipation, he couldn't sleep. He'd spend most of the night pacing his bedroom floor, willing the hands of the clock to move faster.

Had he been Koizumi, he actually could have bent time to his will. In the blink of an eye, she had prepared three days' worth of meals, straightened up his room, done his laundry, and set aside a three-day supply of linens for him. She then bowed deeply toward him, and carrying a mystical trunk full of all the otherworldly possessions she required for her visit, Koizumi departed, climbing high into the heavens.



If Koizumi were here, he thought, standing by the tree he'd just assaulted, she'd tell me that everything is going to be all right, that it will all sort itself out. She always knows how to cheer me up.

Takayuki peered up at the stars in the sky, imagining his maid's place among them. There was little comfort for him there, though. Missing Koizumi only stretched his defenses thinner, leaving him more at the mercy of the stresses preying on him. The reassuring smile he'd displayed for her benefit had collapsed into a frown.

At that moment, a gong-like sound rang out from the center of campus. It was the stone clock tower, standing tall just beyond the outer boundaries of Central Park.

A chill gripped Takayuki.

Don't tell me. . . . Yes, I remember. Yesterday, I was standing right about here when the clock signaled the same time. This has already happened, as well!

He closed his eyes and listened to the sound tumble over the campus grounds like thunder.

The clock . . . ? Takayuki's mind wandered. *Could it be that my memories of yesterday are in sync with today's events because we're cycling through them again? That we're somehow stuck in yesterday's time slot?*

Could that be the answer? The missing x factor?

If time itself were being repeated, then it would only be natural that everyone's conversations and actions from the time before would be repeating, too.

But . . . is that really what's happening? Is today merely a repeat of yesterday? Is now then, or was then now?

Takayuki needed a counter theory, if only to retain his sanity.

*(Let's face it, time-travel stories
are often rife with brainteasers that
can be nonsensical. And if you think
this is hard for you to figure out,
imagine what it's like for me, who
has to try to explain it!)*

If time really is being replayed, then why have I become aware of it? Why, of all the people on the campus, am I the only one who has any inkling of what's going on? I can't figure out if it's a blessing or a curse to be thinking about this stuff?

Stuff like, what if time (say, the day before) were in fact repeating, then how could anyone existing within that time be aware the repetition was happening? That is, how could Takayuki simultaneously be within time, experiencing it, and out of time, observing it?

Or, how could a character in a movie know if the movie was being projected again and again? How could he even be aware that his life was taking place in a movie? So, then, if what we believe to be real life is merely a replay of something recorded, how can any of us break out of the illusion to see it for what it is? The illusion

appears as a reality to those of us who are immersed in it, yet totally oblivious.

(I told you guys this stuff was going to tease your brain!)

"Today is *not* a repeat of yesterday."

Takayuki said it out loud. He believed it. It was the conclusion he had come to.

"There's no way time can repeat. Today is different from yesterday. Just by saying that, I make it different."

He felt foolish for even considering the alternative. But he couldn't totally shake his doubts, either. After all, he'd feel less like he was losing his mind if they turned out to be true.

"I know! There is a way to prove that today isn't just a repeat of yesterday. I just have to find something occurring today that didn't occur yesterday."

And so, with his head weighing heavily on his shoulders after so much pondering, Takayuki tried once again to get a grip on what was happening to him.



"Yo, Usagiya! Who's that?"

Takayuki had just finished another class. It again felt like he'd watched a video playback, so accurately could he predict what was about to take place. It was starting to

wear him out, and he walked through the hall slumped over. His classmate calling to him barely broke through his brooding.

"Hnn?" he muttered. "What?"

"That! Over there! There!"

He turned to look. A long corridor led in front of him to a block of classrooms that were home to the more creative electives, like music.

But something wasn't right.

Takayuki pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to clear his head.

Standing there was a person he had never seen before.

Her long black hair was trimmed with the precision seen on a Japanese doll.

The girl's clothes were oddly designed, and totally unique. Her top wasn't quite a blouse but not quite a shirt, either. It had long sleeves and a high collar, and appeared to be molded to her body rather than simply worn by her.

Her crisply ironed skirt was a light color that contrasted starkly with the dark hues of her top.

Takayuki hadn't noticed right away, but in her immaculately cut hair she wore a decoration of some kind. It was silver, and shaped like an elongated rectangle.

The girl's long bangs covered her eyebrows. The black eyes beneath them shone as if made from polished

metal, and conveyed so little emotion, it wouldn't have taken much to convince Takayuki they weren't real.

On her long, thin legs, the mysterious girl wore white knee-length boots, constructed of a fabric unfamiliar to Takayuki. The grace with which she balanced on her heels was the finishing touch of cool, accenting her severe beauty with strength and confidence. Standing with her back perfectly straight, she showed supreme poise.

She was roughly the same height as Takayuki, who at five feet nine inches was one of the tallest students in his class. But whereas Takayuki didn't leave much of an impression, muttering through life as your quintessential intellectual, this model of femininity was unforgettable. She looked like she'd stepped straight out of a fashion magazine from the not-so-distant future.

Seeing such a flawless construct of lithe figure and haute couture took Takayuki's breath away. A fantasy had come to life and brought its magic into a world grown dull from a lack of it.

"Wow! H-hey . . . is she new?" the classmate was now asking. "You'd think that if a girl that pretty was already a student here, we'd have noticed her by now."

"I-I don't know. I've never seen her before, either."

Takayuki's thoughts had reached gridlock, unable to get around this gorgeous sight now dominating his mental highway.

"We gotta find out who she is. But I got dibs on her, okay? Maybe she'll be in one of my classes, and I can make a move."

"Yeah," Takayuki answered absentmindedly. "Sure."

His classmate elbowed him in the ribs. "Wake up," he laughed. Takayuki reflexively looked down where he felt the sting in his side. When he whipped his head back around, back to the girl—she was gone.

The other boy was gone, too, presumably chasing after her.

She was definitely a beautiful girl . . . but . . . there are a lot of beautiful girls at CLAMP School. And it's not all that uncommon for someone you've never run into before to pop up out of nowhere.

Then it dawned on him. *That's it! That girl! I just saw her for the first time. Today was the first time. . . . It didn't happen yesterday.*

So there was a disruption in the flow of time after all!

Takayuki suddenly felt giddy. He was relieved, but at the same time, there was that rush of adrenaline twisting and turning through his veins.

I'm not imagining things—I've stumbled on a real phenomenon. Today is out of joint, but if the repetition is starting to give way to originality, then everything should be straightened out by tomorrow.

Smiling to himself, pleased that he had cracked the case, Takayuki started walking back to his dorm. He

even began to hum contentedly. Everything was in its rightful place.



By the time he went to bed, Takayuki's mind had grown restless again. He tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep.

Frustrated, he stopped and lay perfectly still, listening to the quiet.

But it was no good. The quiet was the loudest thing he'd ever heard, and it took more energy not to move than to flop around the bed like a fish out of water.

He'd covered up the crack under his door and blocked out the windows to remove any light from the room that might distract him from slumber. Only now he had to strain his eyes to see through the pitch-black space. Nothing was working the way it should.

Although CLAMP School was built on a landfill near the city, the founders had attempted to make the environment appear as natural as possible. Unnecessary lighting was avoided so the haze of electricity would not block out the splendor of the nighttime sky. On a moonless night like tonight, it approached near-complete darkness outside the boys' dorm.

As Takayuki's eyes grew accustomed to the blackness, he began to make out nearby shapes. There

was his desk—and the vague glow of the numbers on his digital clock pulsing through the fabric of the shirt he'd tossed on top of it to dim the glare so he could sleep. Or at least try to.

Propping himself up on one arm, he reached out with the other and wrenched the shirt off the clock. Even without his glasses, he could read the time: 11:58 p.m. Takayuki threw himself back down on the bed and proceeded to toss and turn some more.

I can't go to sleep . . . but I have to. Usually I can get to sleep easier than this.

Possibly the events of the day, the unraveling of the knots in time, had made him abnormally edgy. On a normal evening, he'd study until his brain turned to mush, and then he'd drift off to la-la land before his head even hit the pillow.

Come to think of it . . . I'd probably still be sitting at my desk right about now, finishing up an assignment or cramming for a test.

He imagined himself sitting at his desk, studying.

Extending his arms, he reached for the ceiling, his shoulder blades raising off the mattress a smidge. He gave a big yawn—a little forced, but it felt good, like toxins were departing his body.

The next thing he knew, he was at his desk with his notebook.

What?!

He checked his clock: 11:58 p.m.

I don't understand?

His room, which had just been as dark as the deepest hole on earth, was suddenly bright as the afternoon sky. The light had been turned on, the curtains opened. His low-intensity desk lamp was glistening off his glasses, revealing his name on his notebook stark and clear.

That's impossible! The lights were all turned off . . . but . . .

Takayuki realized for the first time that there was a mechanical pencil in his right hand. He stared at it dumbly.

Hadn't he just been in bed, vainly trying to fall asleep?

His pajamas had been transformed into his school uniform, and he recognized the thoughts racing through his head as the math equations he'd been reviewing for the next day's class—the ones his teacher had put on the board for the second first time that morning.

Is this a dream?

Panic struck him. Like any teenager, he reacted by turning on the TV.

A sound like an emergency signal bleeped over the speakers, and after a bit of static and flickering, an emotionless national broadcast announcer appeared on the plasma TV screen.

"The time is midnight on this September evening," he said. "The date is—"

The announcer's voice burrowed into Takayuki's head.

The date he'd just read off was the date of the nightmarish day he was beginning to live through twice now.

Oh, no. Time is repeating again. . . . Is that how I got from my pajamas to my school uniform, from my bed to my desk . . . ? I went from twenty-four hours from now to twenty-four hours ago?!

The clock had somehow turned back to the night before, to when Takayuki was staying up late to catch up on his studies.

I know that seemingly impossible things happen all the time, but how is it that I am aware this is happening to me? Has my consciousness jumped—or been pushed—outside the loop of time? Do I suddenly exist beyond the confines of the clock?

Takayuki, as you are well aware, was an extremely analytical person, and he could look at a problem from every conceivable angle. It was therefore all the more maddening for him that he couldn't see a solution to this particular conundrum. How long had this time reversal been going on? And how long had it taken him to become aware of it? Just imagine: He could have been caught in the loop forever, all his life being like one big optical illusion.

He shook off this disturbing thought. He needed to direct his mind to figuring out how he was going to wake up from this nightmare.

But he couldn't present this mystery to his colleagues in the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association. He

was considered the brains of the operation. It wouldn't be good to admit that something had him stumped.

XOXO

"Listen up, because I'm only going to explain this once. All you have to do is insert the form of the x equation, which I've already broken down for you, into the second equation. Once that's done, the answer to the original question stops bobbing and weaving and settles right down where you need it."

The math teacher's words landed on Takayuki's eardrums like birds that migrate to the same spot season after season. He shuddered. This was, after all, the third time through the same lecture.

Takayuki was faced with the wrenching dilemma of seeing something coming that he was powerless to stop.

The night before, he'd clung to the hope that if he went back to sleep, he would awaken in the morning to find his world returned to normal. At first, it seemed time was back on track—but then he arrived at school.

"Good morning, Takayuki. How did you do . . . ?" a classmate began.

"... on today's homework?" Takayuki finished.

"Good morning, Usagiya-kun . . ."

"... make sure I hand over the class diary to Suo-chan? I got it."

“Hey, Takayuki! Don’t you have only morning classes today? Then why don’t we plan on getting some . . .”

“... lunch to eat? I can’t imagine you’d consider treating me as thanks for helping you with your report the other day!”

It was all very irritating.

Dammit, what can I do? Nobody here—and I mean nobody—realizes the last twenty-four hours have been happening over and over. This could be taking place all over the world. . . . I have to get to the bottom of it! At the very least, I have to figure it out to maintain my own sanity—otherwise I might go mad!

When trying to calm himself and concentrate, Takayuki was known to compulsively clean his glasses. With as many times as he’d run a cloth over them already that day, it was a miracle he hadn’t worn the lenses all the way down.

And it wasn’t even lunchtime yet.



When the bell rang at the end of his next class, Takayuki was the first one out the door.

Because he already knew everything he was supposed to be learning that day, he was able to tune out, and instead, mull over details in search of clues.

He’d found one.

As he maneuvered through the throngs of students on their way to their next class, he thought, *the key . . . the one who could be the solution to this whole mess, is that girl!*

The girl, he was referring to, was the one in the white boots who he'd seen right after his class had ended (for the second time). Had she been there the first time around, he certainly would have remembered her. But, this girl was someone who was completely new, someone he needed to meet. Perhaps the girl and Takayuki had something in common that allowed them both to break out of the loop.

The Association meeting from "yesterday" was important, too. I acted differently than I had the first time, and yet it didn't change the flow of events at all. This would lead me to believe—

"Yo, Usagiya! Who's that?"

Suddenly—but as expected—Takayuki's classmate was there, pointing out the new girl.

Takayuki looked down the hall, at the spot where she would be.

And sure enough, there she was.

Her long black hair trimmed with the precision seen on a Japanese doll.

The top that wasn't quite a blouse but not what you'd call a shirt, either.

The silver ornament in her hair.

The eyebrows hidden beneath the long bangs.

The black eyes, like polished metal.

The long, thin legs.

The graceful poise, strength, and confidence.

It was her, exactly as he remembered her.

The girl in the white boots . . .

Reflexively, Takayuki adopted a defensive stance. He was prepared for anything.

"Wow! H-hey . . . is she new?" the classmate was now asking. "You'd think that if a girl that hot was already a student here, we'd have noticed her by now."

Yesterday, Takayuki had answered him; today, Takayuki did not. This failed to derail the classmate, however. He barreled on like a freight train.

"We gotta find out who she is. But I got dibs on her, okay? Maybe she'll be in one of my classes—"

Before the other boy had finished his sentence, Takayuki bolted through the crowd, rounding the corner after her.

"Wait!" Takayuki called out.

The girl stopped and stood absolutely still in the middle of the hallway, not saying a word.

Slowly she turned, rotating on her heel.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Her face was so beautiful, it was almost inhuman. Her features showed a perfection that couldn't possibly exist naturally. Takayuki was both attracted and repelled.

The girl looked him directly in the eye. She didn't blink, nor glance off to the side. She was locked in.



Takayuki hesitated. Her beauty made him nervous. He could not turn back now, however. He was too close to unlocking some door.

"You . . .," he fumbled. "Yesterday, you . . ."

He swallowed hard, steeling his resolve.

"You weren't here yesterday, were you?"

There was a pause.

The girl stood silently. She didn't disengage her stare, but she did arch an eyebrow.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," Takayuki said. "That was rude of me. I should have introduced myself."

He extended his hand to her.

"My name is Takayuki Usagiya. I'm a sophomore in the High School Division, Class B."

She took his hand. Her skin was cold.

"My name is Kashimi Yui," she replied, flatly.

"Pleased to meet you," he said. "And what I meant to say a second ago was, Are you new here?"

"Kind of. I've been on a list to transfer here . . . to this division."

She stopped abruptly. When it was clear she wasn't going to say anything more, Takayuki remarked, "I see. We're in the same year, then! That's cool!" He began to feel comfortable with her. Realizing his shoulders had been tensed the whole time, he tried to relax them. "I was afraid you might be a Senpai, since you look older. . . . Not old, more grown-up. Heh. Yeah."

She looked at him, showing no reaction at all.

"Anyway, Kashimi-san," he said, reasserting himself, "actually, that question . . . I *did* mean it. The one about yesterday. This is the first day you're here, right?"

Kashimi nodded.

"To be precise, today at 12:25 p.m., I saw you for the very first time, because that was the first time you were on this floor, in this hallway. Correct?"

Kashimi shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"Since you've been here on campus, have you felt time moving strangely? I mean, well . . . as if the flow of time had been disrupted? Perhaps something like *déjà vu*?"

He felt ridiculous as he started to talk about it, and he figured she must have been thinking he sounded pretty ridiculous, too.

It wasn't like he was really expecting an answer from her. It was more that he was hoping for a reaction. For a crack in the veneer.

"I don't know," she said, finally. "I don't feel much of anything, no."

I should have anticipated this, Takayuki said to himself. *If she were part of the flow of time, and that flow were recycling, what are the odds she would pick up on it? Still, she wasn't part of the same yesterday that I experienced the day before yesterday, so even if she isn't aware on a conscious level, there might be some part of her that is.*

Although Kashimi continued to show no real emotion, both her eyebrows were arched now. "Do you mind if I go to class?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure. I'm sorry to hold you up."

The girl swiveled around and headed back down the hall. If she had indeed known what he was talking about, he'd have to admire her resolve. She betrayed no shock or distress at all.

Takayuki made up his mind. *I have no other choice . . . though I really wish I did.*

And so, Takayuki began to follow Kashimi.



Several hours later, he was still a safe distance behind her.

He didn't feel good about it, either.

He was annoyed with himself for resorting to sneaking around and practically stalking the poor girl. It didn't matter how consequential the mystery or how honorable his intentions, he was still invading her privacy. It would serve him right if he was caught and branded a pervert!

His obvious lack of surveillance skills proved he was no professional. He lost sight of Kashimi more than once, and it was always a mad scramble to find her again.

It sure would be awesome to have Koizumi here, he thought. *I never realized how useless I am without her.*

Takayuki rolled up the sleeves of his jacket, revealing his sweat-drenched forearms. He hoped to cool off a bit by airing himself out.

He was sitting on a bench overlooking the athletic grounds of the Elementary School Division. From his vantage point he could see the track-and-field team practicing.

Takayuki made the most of his first chance to rest from his pursuit by choosing a spot in the shade of an accommodating tree. Checking his watch, he realized he was missing an Association meeting. But since he'd already gone to the same meeting twice, he didn't feel too bad about skipping out on it.

Plus, any promise or commitment I break today I can always rectify when it's today again tomorrow.

Okay, now he did feel bad. His grim little joke wasn't all that funny, he realized. His heart felt heavy, and he wasn't sure if what was dragging it down was resignation, or weariness brought on by continued defiance in the face of absurdity.

A life full of repetition isn't very interesting, is it? Boredom begets boredom.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief, which was looking a little worse for wear with all the sweat it had absorbed on this mission. It was exhausting keeping up with Kashimi's inexplicable tour around the campus.

First, she stopped at the library, speedily flipped through some books, and just as suddenly as she popped in, she popped out. Then she headed to the campus garden for a stroll.

Once she'd seen enough of the garden, she returned to the class buildings, wandering up and down the hallways before going back outside to end up on the terrace of the student café. She sat for a bit, glanced at the menu, but left without ordering.

Kashimi's movements had no discernible pattern. She didn't appear to have anywhere to go, but she wasn't particularly taking in the sights, either. Most people's faces would have given a hint of what they were thinking, but not Kashimi's. If she had any motives or emotions, she kept them well hidden.

The leafy shade of the tree felt cool on his face. Now that he had stopped moving aimlessly, he could think straight—and thinking straight raised more than a few doubts.

It's possible she's roaming the campus just to check it out, since she's a transfer student. But how did pawing through books at the library fit into a get-acquainted tour? She wasn't just casually perusing those books. She seemed intent on absorbing information from them, with no time to waste.

Takayuki cracked his neck, knotted from all the tension. He closed his eyes and continued to ponder.

And she showed no appreciation for the garden whatsoever. She touched a lot of the flowers, but she did so almost clinically, as if studying them. She didn't appear to be moved by their beauty or scent. In fact, throughout her wanderings, she appeared to be cataloging details, memorizing everything.

Just as Takayuki replayed Kashimi's actions, she reappeared, joining him on the athletic field. He continued to watch her movements, intent on finding some meaning behind them.

The way she's watching track practice . . . it may look like she's simply weighing her extracurricular options—but somehow, her behavior is . . .

Takayuki jumped up, startled, roused from sleep.

It was evening, the sun was setting, and only a few people were left milling about.

Oh, no!

He shook the grogginess from his head. He looked all around the grounds, but Kashimi wasn't there. There was no trace of her.

His fatigue had gotten the better of him. He'd fallen asleep.

A couple of young girls walked by. "Hey," he asked them, "have you seen a girl with long black hair and white boots?"

They hadn't, and neither had the next three people he asked. In a panic, he spent the next hour looking

under every shrub, checking behind every tree, for any sign of the girl he'd lost.

How could I be so careless? he asked himself as he trudged up the path toward his dorm room. It was 8:30 p.m., and the curfew for dorm students was imminent.

Oh, well, I'll have to let the investigation drop until tomorrow. If I go back to the track-and-field practice at the same time tomorrow, I can pick up her trail.

Now that he was winding down, Takayuki realized he was just as tired mentally as he was physically. Weariness washed over him like a tidal wave.

The broadcast center's electrical tower loomed ahead, signaling he was just about to enter the High School Division. It was a pleasant sight. Home was just around the corner.

I hope I can chill out tonight. My heart aches knowing that in a few hours, the day will start over again. I need to recharge to have enough energy for another round.

Something glistened in the glow of the street lamp.
What?

The brightness of her hair ornament cut straight through the darkness.

Oh, my! It's her! What is she doing here?!

Takayuki broke into a run, heading straight for her.



Showing no sign of fatigue, despite having traversed nearly the entire CLAMP School campus, Kashimi walked briskly toward the electrical tower. Once she reached the entrance to the substation (where high-voltage electricity was converted to more-manageable wattage), she opened the door with little effort and slipped inside.

By then, Takayuki was catching up to her. He slowed down, being careful to stay in the shadows and to not make any noise that would alert her.

How did she get that door open? It's supposed to be protected by a sophisticated electronic lock.

Like a lot of CLAMP School facilities, the substation was mostly underground. A long, steep staircase appeared just inside the main entrance. Kashimi seemed to know exactly where she was going, and without hesitation started to descend the stairs. She reached back and removed the silver ornament from her hair, shaking her long black locks loose with jogs of her head.

At the bottom of the stairs, standing in front of the control console for the conversion machine, Kashimi held up the ornament. It made a barely audible humming sound, and from it sprang a long, thin wire that embedded itself in the machine.

Voooo-ooooom.

The ornament began to glow, framing Kashimi in a white light.

Takayuki watched from a distance, on the highest stair from which he could still see her. At first, the light hurt his eyes, but then, once they adjusted, Takayuki was surprised by what he saw.

The silhouettes of several people were appearing on the substation wall, shadows cast somehow by Kashimi's hair ornament.

The ornament itself began to hum louder and to vibrate. Takayuki thought he heard several explosions sound outside the building. Or was it thunder? And did the noise have anything to do with Kashimi and her device?

The images on the wall began to speak.

"The world is getting more and more unpredictable. Prices are rising, while the value of the yen is declining. It's hard to be a businessman. You have to be a gambler, as well."

"Sure, but trading stocks is easier than ever these days. With the ever-increasing popularity of computers, you can manipulate the market from any location with an Internet connection. You can walk into a café anywhere in the world and manage your portfolio."

"There are security issues, though."

Takayuki felt his eyelids grow heavy and his limbs start to sag. He was getting sleepier by the second, and he had the distinct sensation that all the energy was draining from his body. He couldn't let that happen, though. He couldn't let himself give in to exhaustion. He had to stay alert, to pay attention.

I-is this a business report?

Evidently Kashimi was tuning in a television station on her ornament and projecting it onto the wall. It appeared to be the nightly stock updates.

Kashimi watched it all passively. Her attention was fixed, but her face showed no reaction to what she was viewing.

She fiddled with the ornament and switched to a comedy show. Again she watched intently, but gave no hint of finding anything funny. She didn't laugh once. When she apparently had enough, she switched to another program, and then another, her gaze as she watched the most intense Takayuki had ever seen on anyone.

Don't tell me she went through all this trouble just to watch TV?

Takayuki found the idea ridiculous, but then, much of what had been happening to him was a lot more unbelievable. Skepticism was losing its appeal lately.

He lost track of time there on the staircase, but eventually Kashimi turned her TV off. She'd remained standing the entire time she'd watched the projections on the wall. Now she reached over, removed the wire from the console, retracted it into the silver ornament, and returned the ornament to her hair.

She then turned around and began walking back to the staircase.

Uh-oh . . .

Takayuki took the stairs two at a time. If Kashimi saw him, then the whole day's efforts would have been lost. Plus, he still didn't know who—or, let's face it, *what*—she was. If she trapped him in the substation, there was no telling what she might do to him.

And if he hung back and didn't get through the door before she locked it again, he could end up trapped inside.

He made it! Concealing himself in the shrubbery that lined the entrance path, Takayuki watched Kashimi emerge, then lock the door behind her. Again, he had no clue how she was managing to bypass a complicated security system. She then walked down the hill, heading in the direction of Takayuki's dormitory.

What now?

It was past 11:30 p.m. They were approaching the reset moment.

He followed her down the hill, but not too closely.

CLAMP School was well into night mode. The streets were empty, and only the main road was illuminated by anything but natural lighting. Students were all safely in their rooms.

Only the Security Committee was supposed to be out at this hour. If you broke curfew and were caught by one of them, there would be an investigation. Of course, if Takayuki or Kashimi were caught now, it wasn't really

a concern because both would be back to the previous night before any punitive action could be taken.

Just half an hour, Takayuki thought, looking at the campus clock, which was sufficiently illuminated so that it could be seen by anyone anywhere on campus. I'm no closer to stopping this thing. Not really. I have no idea what she might be up to this late at night.

Truly, the more he was finding out, the less he understood.

How is she able to navigate the campus so easily if this is only her first day here? And could whatever she was doing at the substation really be worth incurring the wrath of the CLAMP School Security Committee?

They were in a small open space at the center of the thick forest that bordered the High School dorms. She stopped right in the center of the space.

And as soon as she did, she became completely still.

Fearful of detection, Takayuki hadn't moved either. He stayed crouched in the bushes, totally silent. He even tried to breathe more quietly.

A new moon partly shielded by clouds cast a dim light. Bathed in the pale glow, Kashimi was fully visible, almost as if she were on display. Indeed, she didn't look all that different from an expensive doll in a glass case.

It can't end here, with her standing there in the moonlight, and me suddenly back in my dorm preparing for math class, Something has to happen before the clock strikes twelve o'clock.

Ironically, Takayuki was so worried nothing would happen, he was failing to notice something actually was.

The night cries of the cicadas had ceased, and the area immediately surrounding Kashimi was beginning to warp.

It was only when a spot of light suddenly materialized seven feet in front of Kashimi that Takayuki snapped back to reality.

What's going on?

Blinding-white rays extended from the spot, blooming like a flower and growing rapidly.

Whoa!

The rays had spread to Takayuki's hiding place. Fearing exposure, he crouched lower, then lay flat on his stomach in the dirt and peered out through the bushes' latticework of twigs and leaves.

The light was now taking shape, building itself into a wall. Hovering off the ground, it expanded to a height of nine feet and a width measuring about three feet.

It's not a wall! he realized. It's a door. A door made of light?!

Kashimi moved now, taking the silver ornament from her hair once again. She then extended her arm, holding the ornament to the door of light.

As the silver touched the light, a small crack in the middle of the door formed and spread sideways.

It was one of the most amazing things Takayuki had ever seen.

Behind the opening was still more light, a radiant corridor extending farther than his eyes could see, leading perhaps to another door like the one now in view.

There was no way to know exactly what was on the other side of that second door of light, but Takayuki had a pretty good idea.

A world exactly like this one.

What he was seeing, he presumed, was a gateway through time.

Kashimi began to step into the doorway.

There was no time to lose. Takayuki leaped to his feet, stumbled over the shrubbery, and exclaimed, "Hey! Wait!"

Only, in the next instant . . .

XOXO

Takayuki was seated at his desk. His was closing his notebook. A mechanical pencil was in his right hand.

This is . . .

He looked around his room. Nothing had changed, everything was as he knew it would be.

I'm back in time again.

Takayuki exhaled loudly. He imagined his breath forming in the air, like a cartoon puff of smoke. He leaned back in his chair, took off his glasses, and began to clean them.

His shirt was a bit rank and dotted with sweat stains. He was exhausted, just as he had been at this same time “yesterday.”

I suppose the girl—the girl I followed yesterday when it was today—is gone now, too.

The digital clock in front of him flashed, and the number on it changed. It was now 11:59 p.m.

He pushed the math notebook away. There was no room in his brain for equations, for archaic symbols and the missing x factor. He had to solve one problem and one problem only. And in order to do that, he'd have to gather all the data he'd collected on the previous version of the day and sort through it.

The clock flashed again.

It now read 12:00 a.m.

Takayuki pinched the bridge of his nose. He had an idea.

Putting his glasses back on, he stood up. Opening his desk drawer, he reached inside and brought out a flashlight.

He then burst out his door into the hallway and dashed down the corridor, moving as soundlessly as possible so as not to awaken the other students. He took the emergency stairwell, avoiding the security checkpoint he'd have to pass if he went through the main lobby. He didn't have much chance of coming up with a reasonable excuse for breaking curfew. He doubted the security watchdogs would accept, “Technically, I've already

honored this curfew twice, and so I think you guys owe me a little time."

Once he was outside, Takayuki began to run. His legs felt wobbly, depleted of strength—could it be that his body wasn't resetting with the time, that performing all the actions of this endless day, without rest, was running it down? But he pushed past his exhaustion. He needed to get where he was going, fast.



Kashimi stood in the moonlight, bathing in its rays. She looked around at the thick forest of CLAMP School.

"Arrival at present destination confirmed," she said, to no one visible. "As planned, there are no witnesses."

She took a step forward.

"Kashimi-san!"

The girl froze.

A light clicked on, then beamed out from the trees and landed on her.

"You're here! I was right!"

It was Takayuki. He now stood on the outskirts of the clearing, flashlight in hand. This was the clearing where he'd seen Kashimi depart through the door of light—for him, that was only minutes before; for her, it was twenty-four hours away. He'd guessed that she'd arrive at the same clearing. And because

this never-ending day was her first at CLAMP School, she had to arrive after it began.

Kashimi looked shocked to see him there. It was the first time he had seen any expression on her face.

"Oh . . . I nearly forgot. I've met you, but you haven't met me yet. You won't for another twelve hours or so. My name is Takayuki Usagiya. I'm a student in the High School Division, second year, class B. You're Kashimi Yui-san . . . right?"

Her eyes widened. The distortion made the artificiality of her beauty all the more obvious.

"I guess since you've only just arrived," Takayuki said, heedless of how he was distressing the girl, "you may not be fully aware of what's going on here. Twenty-four hours from now—or, more precisely twenty-three hours and fifty-three minutes from now, I'll again witness you opening a door in time for the third time. And when you do, you'll introduce a glitch into the space-time continuum of this world, setting time itself back a full day and starting it over."

Kashimi's gaze narrowed.

"At first, I couldn't figure out how time kept reversing itself. I was particularly confused by the fact that I was the only one who seemed to notice. I knew you had something to do with it . . . but I didn't know to what extent until just twenty minutes ago when I saw you open the door. Or should I say, when I see you open the door tonight.

"My guess is that the door connects to another world," he continued. "It could be a parallel earth to this one. . . . It doesn't make much difference. But what is certain is that ever since you first arrived on this earth, the fabric of space and time has warped.

"When you connected our two worlds with your door, when you linked your time to my time, I believe that became a point in the universe where the two dimensions blended—as if the dam gates separating two bodies of water had opened and the waters flowed into a single pool where it's impossible to tell which waters came from where. The gates to the dam, the door to the worlds, have been wedged open, although you may have assumed you'd closed them. The space-time continuum has been disrupted, and the fourth dimension of time is no longer operating properly. I suspect it was an accident, but the door you opened has created a loop in my world, cycling from the time you open the door to return to your world to the time you open it to enter this one.

"Imagine a broken CD player. The laser that reads the data on the disc has become locked in position, so the same segment of music keeps playing over and over again."

Kashimi still hadn't spoken.

"Since we humans exist within time and space simultaneously, the average person isn't aware that we've been repeating the same timeline for the past seventy-two hours," Takayuki went on. "And therefore there's no

way for anyone to fix it, since to fix a problem you first have to know it exists. This loop could go on forever, a Möbius strip consisting of our lives.

“Unfortunately for you, you’re stuck on this merry-go-round you created, along with the rest of us. I suppose it’s only fair. It wouldn’t be right for you to avoid the fate you’ve doomed us to, even if you didn’t mean to. As long as you’re part of our existence, you’re here forever.

“I don’t know if you understand at all what I’m talking about, or whether you think I’m bonkers. I also realize that as far as you’re concerned, we’ve only just met, and this is a lot to have dumped on you. I’ve had three days to think about it, and it still makes my head hurt! You’ve got to trust me, though. I need your help. If you don’t help me, neither of us will ever know a tomorrow.”

Takayuki ended intentionally with this final proclamation. He wanted to see how Kashmi would react.

She didn’t right away. But when she did finally open her mouth to speak, she didn’t say anything at first, as if making sure of what she was going to say before saying it.

“I have to acknowledge two things,” she said at last. Her voice lacked any modulation or emotion. “You know my name, and you know about the door.”

Kashimi stepped toward him. “I should tell you, though, that I cannot open the door myself. It has to be opened for me, from the other side. And that action can

only be initiated by Casimi-1, the computer that controls my world.”

“Casimi-1?”

“Yes. Casimi-1 is an artificial brain that was created by Professor Kashimi, the top scientist of my reality.”

“Wait! Kashimi is *your* name!”

“On our earth,” the girl continued, ignoring Takayuki’s confusion, “99.82 percent of the surface area has been developed, therefore hardly any land is available for further development. Unfortunately, our population has not stopped growing, and we’ve been working for more than a century to find a solution to our housing problem. We’ve been experimenting with terraforming, creating habitable regions on other planets. It’s a complicated process, though, and our people are multiplying faster than we can establish extra-planetary homes for them. To make matters worse, our natural resources are almost entirely depleted, making it difficult to fuel the transport of colonists once extra-planetary homes do become available.

“Professor Kashimi more than anyone has been concerned with the plight of humankind,” the girl continued. For the first time, the tone of her voice changed. In it, Takayuki could detect pride. “He’s spent countless years focused on a single task: to develop a comprehensive solution for overpopulation, the shortage of natural resources, and other dilemmas threatening our

existence. He calls it his Parallel Universe Exploratory Emigration Project, and it's based on his Theory of Multiple Structural Universes.

"Imagine there's a delicious-looking bean-jam bun on a plate in front of you. You eat the bun, and it's scrumptious. Once you've taken the last bite of it, you've created a history where you've eaten the bun and enjoyed it.

"Now, let's suppose you are on a diet and don't eat the bun. You have now created a history where the bean-jam bun remains uneaten.

"In our daily lives, we're constantly making decisions, and the choices we settle on and the choices we pass over create their own separate histories.

"The choices we pass over produce an alternative world where time moves forward, just as it does in the world produced by the choices we've settled on. It just moves in a different direction. This alternative world exists on a plane running alongside the one we know. It's a parallel world.

"As we have an infinite number of choices available to us in our world, so there are infinite choices available in the parallel world. These create more alternative histories, more parallel worlds, endlessly diverging. The divergences can be as trivial as your parallel self wearing different socks than the ones you've selected that day. Or they can be as fundamental as your parallel self being a famous Hollywood star.

“Or, even more fundamental, a parallel world may be a primitive environment, where the steam engine hasn’t been invented and people burn wood and candles rather than use electric lights. Your parents never met, and you were never born. The Cold War didn’t end, and the United States and Russia detonated their nuclear bombs and wiped humankind from the face of the planet.

“It’s my job to travel these alternative worlds, looking for parallel earths suitable for resettlement. Professor Kashimi’s plan was an ambitious one. If only . . .”

“If only what?” Takayuki asked, breathless from the onslaught of information.

“When he proposed the plan initially, he hadn’t yet devised a method for transporting emigrants from our world to another. Ridiculed by the academic community, even though his research eventually bore fruit, his standing among his peers was so damaged, and his discoveries were never given their proper due. He died of a broken heart.

“He’d sunk his entire life’s savings into finding a way to traverse the dimensions, and along with the help of a fellow scientist who remained his friend, he developed and built Casimi-1. It was the key to putting his theories into practice. After Professor Kashimi died, all of his data was entered into Casimi-1, and following several experiments and trials, a prototype of the Parallel Universe Metastasizer was completed. I was chosen as the first pioneer to other worlds.”

"I see . . ." Takayuki imagined the full weight of her task. He could only begin to ponder the enormity of it. The girl's bravery was impressive.

He also began to understand her actions on campus the day before. During the limited time she had on this particular parallel earth, she was doing her best to study the terrain, humans, and other life-forms inhabiting it.

That was why she had borrowed electricity from the substation to watch TV. She wanted to be able to see beyond the walls of CLAMP School.

"This time loop you speak of is a problem, though," Kashimi said. "It's not my intention to disrupt any of the worlds I visit. Plus, as you say, unless we devise a solution to the problem, I am stuck here and cannot continue with my mission. If I fail, I will be unable to fulfill Professor Kashimi's hopes for our world. He'd have died in vain."

Takayuki nodded in agreement.

"Is there any way for you to contact Casimi-1?" he asked.

"Only during those moments the door is open and our two worlds are connected." Kashimi reached back and removed her hair ornament. She held the silver object up for him to see. "This instrument records and plays back the data and images I gather. I've recorded our conversation, and so if I can send the file via radio waves through the corridor, Casimi-1 can download it, analyze the data, and devise a solution.

"The only thing is, I think the effort will be wasted."

"Why?" Takayuki asked, surprised.

"If time is moving forward normally in my world, then this data would arrive in the future there."

"Oh . . . that's right."

As soon as she said it, the dilemma was obvious to Takayuki.

"We'd revert back to the past as soon as you sent it," he said, "and for us, it would never be the day after, when Casini-1 would have the solution worked out. Of course, that assumes they aren't constantly starting over in your world, as well."

"Exactly correct," Kashimi said. Takayuki now heard anger in her voice. "As long as their present is future to this earth's present, Casimi-1 will be unable to communicate with me here. Even with our advanced technology, the construction of a time machine is still a fantasy in my world. Any travel backward in time I've done, as you noted, was purely by accident.

"It's entirely possible, too," Kashimi went on, "that once Casimi-1 determines this mission is a failure, it will declare this world off-limits and not even attempt to reestablish contact."

Takayuki rubbed his nose. *In order to save this planet, we need to be able to send a message to the past of an alternative universe . . . but how is that even possible?! Dammit!*

And then . . .



“Takayuki-sama, I have returned!”

No sooner had he heard these words than a young woman in a maid's uniform floated down to earth from the sky above.

“*Koizumi!*”

“Oh! I didn't realize you had a guest . . . and at such a late hour!”

Koizumi set her suitcase down.

“I'm so sorry I wasn't here . . . you poor thing!” she said to Kashimi. “I hope Takayuki-sama was not rude. Let me make you both some tea.”

Koizumi popped the locks on her suitcase and after opening it, produced a pot and two teacups, plus a portable hotplate.

Kashimi looked completely dumbstruck.

Takayuki realized he was going to have to explain his ghost-maid to Kashimi.

Except . . . hmmm, wait a minute!

“Koizumi, how were you able to return here?”

The afterlife, from which Koizumi had just returned, must have avoided the time glitch, otherwise Koizumi would still be there reliving the first day of her visit ad infinitum. So, after her visit was over, shouldn't she have returned to the so-called future?



"What do you mean? The spirits use maps just like you living folks do."

Koizumi spread a large tablecloth, which she also produced from her suitcase, out on the ground. She clearly didn't understand Takayuki's question.

"In order for me, a denizen of the spirit world, to continue on this plane of existence, I must have some sort of connection to something here. In my case, that something is my master's soul. Simply put, my soul and yours, Takayuki, are eternally linked, and no matter how far apart we may be, this connection can never be broken. So, when I returned to earth from my visit, I only needed to follow the link, like a string tied around your heart. As long as it's there, it's impossible for me to ever lose you."

"Ah-ha!" Takayuki exclaimed. "So, that's it!"

He understood everything now.

"The reason I'm aware of the repetition of time is that part of my soul existed outside this world. So, even though my body was being forced back in time with each reversal, my consciousness kept moving forward. I wasn't sucked completely back into the past because I wasn't entirely in the earthly present!"

Takayuki had a huge grin on his face. He clasped Koizumi's shoulders.

"Koizumi," he laughed, "you are a lifesaver! But . . . I have to ask, when you returned to earth, did you sense anything out of sorts?"

"Out of sorts? What do you mean, sir?" Koizumi pursed her lips, bewildered.

"Oh, I don't know . . . like you were changing time zones or something. Did the border between this world and the next seem any different?"

"Come to think of it . . .," she said, placing the teacups down on the tablecloth, "I noticed a passageway of some sort between this world and another."

Takayuki excitedly shot Kashimi a look. Naturally, she was confused by the conversation. Since Takayuki forgot his manners and still hadn't explained to our otherworldly adventurer who Koizumi was.

"The strange thing was," Koizumi continued, setting the teapot on the portable hotplate and flipping the switch, "that a minute or two after I first saw it, the passageway disappeared. And then a couple of minutes later, it reappeared, and the worlds were again connected. That happened several times. So, I guess now that you mention it, there was something out of sorts."

"Wait . . . you say you saw this happen more than once?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's it!" Takayuki shouted.

The sudden outburst almost made Koizumi drop the teapot, which would have been very unlike her.

"The corridor connects, and then disconnects . . . meaning the Parallel Universe Metastasiser is opening

and closing the door, repeating those actions over and over. In other words—”

Kashimi’s eyes widened as she understood. “The door is running on a cycle. Correct?”

“Yes. Your world is stuck in the same time loop we are! So if we can get a message through when the door is open, we will be able to transmit that message into the past.

“Thus instructing your previous self to consult with Casimi-1 about making adjustments to the Mestastasizer *before* you begin your mission, possibly restoring the space-time continuum to proper working order.”

I wonder if . . .

“Oh, Koizumi!” Takayuki cried out.

“Huh? Y-yes, sir?” This time Takayuki’s outburst so startled her that she dropped the tea leaves she was about to place in the pot.

“Are you able to carry something corporeal from this world into the incorporeal one?”

“Uh, no . . . I’m sorry, sir, it doesn’t work that way. I don’t have the power to take an object from this world into another. Only *my* special things.”

“Don’t worry about it, then. Instead, take a memo of what I’m about to say.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Koizumi reached into her apron pocket and brought out a pencil and paper.



Koizumi's personal belongings were all "spirit articles"—objects that were treasured by her in her previous life and thus imbued with her soul, giving them the ability to travel with her between the spirit world and earth.

After Takayuki finished dictating his memo, Koizumi traveled back to where she had seen Kashimi's corridor connecting the parallel worlds. Her orders were to enter the corridor immediately after a connection was made, so she could interface with the Kashimi prior to the launch of the mission and convey the contents of the memo to her.



"I hope this works."

Takayuki was impatient for Koizumi's return.

"Casimi-1 possesses a flexible intelligence routine program," Kashimi said. "If your maid is as capable as you say, then we should grant her our trust and simply wait."

"You're right," Takayuki said, though he couldn't stop from sighing. He was anxious for this day to finally end—for real.

Just then, a white spot materialized in the clearing. The spot of light began to expand.

Once it reached the height and width Takayuki recalled from the night before, when he'd watched

Kashimi depart, the light stilled. It then began to part, starting at its center.

"Arrival completed," a familiar voice said. "Coordinate variable error of 0.00032 percent. Result: experiment successful."

"*Hey!*" Takayuki exclaimed.

From out of the light, a girl identical to Kashimi emerged.

"You're . . ."

"Problem solved. Executing repair program."

This Kashimi ignored Takayuki and addressed her predecessor directly.

"Following your report, I have recalculated the Metastasizer's coordinates and run 97,215 patterns of simulations based on the Metastasization objective coordinates in relation to the action plan of the time-gate connection. Based on those results, I have reconstructed the optimum time-space path. The results of this experiment appear to be most favorable."

"So, then, the time loop . . .?" the first Kashimi asked.

"It has been straightened out," the second Kashimi said firmly.

"We did it!" Takayuki cheered. "The time-space continuum has been restored to normal!"

Continuing to ignore him, the second Kashimi droned on in her robotic voice. "In addition, I have new orders from Casimi-1 to relay to you." She raised her

right hand, palm facing out. "You are to terminate your existence, effective immediately. That is all."

Vawoommmmm.

From somewhere beyond physical space, a low-frequency vibration buzzed.

The two Kashimis faced each other, neither betraying any emotion.

The second Kashimi's hand, still raised, started to shake as the air around it heated to a fiery intensity.

Pop.

Takayuki's glasses snapped in two and fell to the ground. He thought he'd seen something coming straight at him just before it happened, but he didn't know what.

The suddenness of the explosion was like a wake-up call. He had to stop her! Blurry-eyed, Takayuki pushed through the blazing heat and grabbed the second Kashimi's arm. He caught her by the wrist, just as she was about to swing her arm downward. The heat nearly unbearable, Takayuki broke out in a sweat.

"It is useless," she said, her voice chilly. "A human's muscular power is insufficient to prevent my enhanced body movements."

The first Kashimi stood perfectly still, not moving even the tiniest muscle.

Takayuki glanced back at his glasses, the two halves lying there on the ground. Despite the sweltering heat, he

shivered. *She must have some kind of oscillating scalpel built into her hand! Was she trying to kill me?!*

"If you try to impair my mission," the second Kashimi said to him, "I will be forced to terminate you, as well."

"Agh!"

She tossed Takayuki aside with a mere flick of the wrist he'd grabbed onto. The impact of landing on the hard ground sent shocks of pain through his chest and back. His attacker then turned on him, once more readying her right arm to strike.

"Takayuki-sama! Watch out!"

Koizumi was plummeting through the atmosphere at a tremendous speed. She hurtled her body at the second Kashimi.

The girl's body shifted only slightly, and she refocused her attack.

"What are you?" the second Kashimi asked Koizumi. "Some kind of three-dimensional hologram?"

There was a sudden flash. It was silver and alive with electricity.

Koizumi's body split cleanly in half.

Takayuki screamed her name. "Nooo!" he cried.

"I-I'm all right!" Koizumi declared. Slowly, her body mass was reconstituting, as water pouring down opposite sides of a sink eventually pools together. "My form can't be destroyed by any worldly weapon! You need bigger stuff than what this kid's got!"

*(If Koizumi wasn't going
to let this get her down,
then why should he?!)*

The second Kashimi looked stunned. Takayuki seized the moment to act. Rushing toward the first Kashimi, he shouted "Yui-san!" He'd used her last name to distinguish her from what he considered to be an imposter. "You need to get out of here! Make a run for it!"

"Why?" Kashimi asked. She moved at last, turning her head to face her would-be protector.

"What do you mean 'Why?' This girl is going to *kill* you if you stick around."

"But those are Casimi-1's orders, and it's my duty to obey."

"You have to be kidding me," Takayuki stopped in his tracks.

"This Kashimi agent was sent here after me in order to conduct the experiments in my place. The decision to terminate me—and by default, you, since your awareness of our actions could jeopardize our mission—is entirely logical. Casimi-1 must consider all possible outcomes and be prepared to alter its plans with the goal of saving the people of my world."

Kashimi explained this to Takayuki as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world.

Takayuki exploded in rage and frustration. "Why do you always follow Casimi-1's orders?! Can't you think for *yourself*?"

No response.

"This can't be the only solution to the problem. Where do the rights of the individual come into play? What about saving *you*?" Takayuki persisted.

"I serve Casimi-1," the first Kashimi replied. "Carrying out his orders is reason for my existence. Professor Kashimi gave me more than a name, he gave me a purpose. I would have no joy without his guidance, no reason to be apart from the commands of his creation."

"W-what are you, a robot? People aren't—"

Takayuki resisted finishing his sentence. He even tried swallowing the words. He couldn't bear for them to be true.

Oh, no . . .

Her flawless face with its lack of emotion.

Her movements always precise, with no effort wasted.

Her limbs, so exquisite, sculpted like a doll's.

"You are, you're a . . ."

"I am an independently functional android with an above-average capacity for artificial intelligence," Kashimi said flatly.

"You're a robot."

"To be precise, my correct title is Kashimi-Type Artificial Neuro-Terminal Model Yui Number 2."

Takayuki's knees buckled and his legs weakened.

Then he thought of Koizumi, pulling herself back together after such a vicious attack, and he resisted his urge to collapse.

"Listen to me," Takayuki said, coolly. "According to what you've said, your creator, Professor Kashimi, was a brilliant humanitarian. Do you believe such a man would want the people of another world destroyed for the sake of his own? Would he want even one person to die?"

No response.

"You said Casimi-1 was built entirely for the purpose of carrying out the Professor's ideas, but don't you see how it's subverting his noble intentions? It's dangerously out of control. Logic is fine, but without being tempered by human feeling, it can turn lethal. You can't allow this to go on. Please! Don't allow yourself to be terminated. Help me. Help me save my world!"

Something stirred within the first Kashimi. "Please," she said, "allow me to upload the data regarding your planet that you have available. With this data, I can make a case to Casimi-1 that migration to this world would be counterproductive."

Takayuki was overcome. "Th-thanks!" he blurted out.

Then, remembering his manners, he bowed his head. "Thank you."

"Takayuki-sama! She's powering up!"

Takayuki spun around. What was Koizumi shouting about?

The imposter Kashimi was raising herself to full height. Her arms were swiveling, moving like a snake lowering itself from a tree branch. Takayuki was shocked by how similar a machine's revving was to an animal waking from its slumber, appetite aroused and ready to pounce.

"W-we need to get out of here!" Takayuki grabbed the first Kashimi's arm and pulled her along as he ran.

The two of them broke for the forest, heading toward the Broadcasting Club's radio tower. As soon as it was in sight, they stopped. Takayuki bent over, resting his hands on his knees, and tried to steady his breathing.

"Koizumi . . . ?" he asked, suddenly realizing the maid's absence. "Where is she?"

"She's on her way," Kashimi said. "I can see her in the distance."

"G-good . . ."

Takayuki was still catching his breath. He rubbed his nose, massaging the area beneath his glasses, just under his forehead.

Or, at least, where his glasses should have been. His silver-rimmed spectacles still lay broken on the ground back in the clearing.

"Uh, Kashimi . . . do you . . . I mean, does she, the Kashimi-Type Neuro Terminal Model, have any weaknesses?"

"No. At least none that comes to mind."

Kashimi showed no fatigue. The sprint across the High School campus hadn't affected her at all.

"Still," she continued, "we are machines and subject to certain functional discrepancies. I believe if you apply some measure of electrical shock to our artificial brains, we will become overloaded and our functions will likely shut down."

"Some measure of shock, eh?"

Takayuki immediately thought of the electrical substation. The electrical tower was right next to the radio tower, which he could see out of the corner of his eye. Kashimi had gone to watch TV there, so she could get them inside without any problem.

A plan was formulating in Takayuki's mind. . . .



TARGETS FOR TERMINATION:
KASHIMI YUI PREDECESSOR,
TAKAYUKI USABUYA, THE UNIDENTIFIED
HOLOGRAPHIC ORGANISM.

The imposter Kashimi was advancing through the forest. Her movements were like those of an action figure come to life. There was no trace of humanity in her, not even the tiny amount the first Kashimi now and then showed.

Any function that remotely simulated emotion had apparently been shut down. Only functions that served in the execution of orders remained.

Suddenly, a young woman in a black outfit materialized in Killer Kashimi's path.

It was Koizumi. She quickly turned and dashed into the trees.

Killer Kashimi leaped after her, covering in an instant Koizumi's sixteen-foot lead.

"Kyaaaaa!"

Killer Kashimi struck out at the ghost-maid. Koizumi barely escaped her reach in time.

The air snapped.

There was a loud *thud*.

A scream.

A tree, its trunk about three feet in diameter, had been sliced cleanly in half. With an earsplitting sound, it fell to the ground.

Its fate had been intended for Koizumi.

Koizumi launched herself into the air and made her getaway.

Killer Kashimi was immediately after her, rushing through the forest like the wind, careening around trees.

Racing for the door of the electrical substation, the ghost-maid managed to stay ahead of the android. She slipped inside the door that someone had unlocked.

Right on her heels, Killer Kashimi followed her through the door.

A dark stairwell appeared just inside. The android assassin took to the stairs, scanning the area vigilantly as she descended. Reaching the very last step, she looked across the room to see Koizumi huddling in a corner with Takayuki.

If a robot could smile smugly, Killer Kashimi would have been doing just that. Her right arm swung upward as she lurched forward.

Vwooom.

From out of nowhere, a long, thin wire flashed into view. Grazing Killer Kashimi across her upper lip, it extended beyond her.

Ka-chunk.

The wire embedded itself into the electrical switchboard to Killer Kashimi's left. Then a second wire sprang out of the shadows and stabbed the assassin in her head.

She had walked right into their trap.

Sparks danced along the wire all the way to where it lodged in Killer Kashimi's metallic skull. Her entire body lit up and began to shake violently. Her face froze, remaining emotionless, as her form went limp. As she slumped to the floor, she no longer resembled an action figure, but rather a rag doll.

"Phew!" Takayuki wiped the nervous sweat from his brow.

The first Kashimi stepped out from the shadowy space across the room. She was holding the silver ornament in her hand. *Zip!* The wires retracted into it.

"It's over," Takayuki said softly.



"Chairman!" Koji exclaimed. "Regarding that case from yesterday, the research has hit an unexpected snag. There are no reliable witnesses, no useable testimonials at all."

The CLAMP School Supernatural Phenomena Research Association had gathered in their usual place for their usual meeting.

Takayuki sat in his chair, his face dour. Yuki and the other Association members were engaging in an all-too-familiar debate.

"... such tactics might require the Student Body to sign off on them, though. We don't want any trouble."

"You do realize that it's going to be a real hassle to get their permission," Yuki said. "Given that we aren't recognized as an official Club ..."

"Sure," Koji agreed, "but that's nothing compared to the hassle we'll have to endure if we go ahead on our own and get caught."

"Too true," Yuki laughed. "You think like a born leader, Koji, weighing the consequences before choosing a course."

Takayuki was only half-listening. He'd heard it all before. Plus, the events of the previous night still weighed on his mind.



“Kashimi-san . . .”

The crisis over, Takayuki stood with his robotic ally before the door of light that led back to her world.

“Have you ever considered moving to our world—just you, on your own? I think you’d get along fine on our planet without anyone ever catching on that you aren’t human. And here at CLAMP School, you’d find plenty of resources for any maintenance you might need to continue functioning properly.”

Though her expression remained unchanged, Kashimi looked straight into Takayuki’s eyes. She shook her head.

“If I do not return, Casimi-1 will send another android here to find me,” she said. “With the data you have provided me, I can easily persuade Casimi-1 to remove your world from consideration for immigration. You will never be troubled by another Kashimi A.I.”

She glanced at Koizumi, who was standing patiently behind her employer.

“We’ve already caused you enough trouble,” Kashimi concluded.

"I see," Takayuki replied, lowering his head.

Koizumi reached out to him, but stopped short of actually touching him. "Are you all right, Takayuki-sama?" she asked, hesitantly.

Takayuki laughed weakly. "Another girl, another planet . . . it's the same old story. No big deal." He raised his head, gazing at his departing friend. "Well, take care, Kashimi-san."

"I am obliged for your assistance."

Kashimi bowed to him, turned, and stepped into the light.

As the door was closing, the robot stopped and turned to face Takayuki. Once more, she looked into his eyes.

"I mean it," she said. "Thank you, Takayuki-san. Good-bye."

Takayuki could have sworn he saw a gentle smile on her lips, the most human expression he'd seen on her face since meeting her in the hallway the day before.

XOXO

"I've got an idea!" Koji interjected. His voice rose with excitement. "What if we all change out of our uniforms and interview people outside the CLAMP School entrance, as they come and go? Technically, we won't be under the Student Body's jurisdiction."

"Or even better, why not wear signs that say 'Suspicious Characters'?" Yuki joked.

"Well, I don't hear any other solutions," Koji pouted. "We're not going to ever solve this case if we don't figure out how we're going to do the research. What do you think, Takayuki-senpai?"

"Hmmm? Uh, yeah . . ."

Koji's quizzical tone brought Takayuki back into the present. He hoped it was the last time he was going to have to listen to this. With Kashimi gone, everything should be back to normal . . . well, as far as the advancement of time, anyway.

Takayuki fished for an all-purpose answer. "S-sure," he said. "If we choose a methodology, we should follow it. How about this . . .?"

Once he got through his response, the meeting carried on. Takayuki spoke up occasionally, just enough to make it seem he was involved. Really, though, his mind was elsewhere.

I guess this world is for me after all, he concluded.

A smile played on Takayuki's lips. He lifted his hand to his face to conceal the smile from the other members of the Association. This was one joke he wanted to keep to himself.

A Word from the Author

And so ends *CLAMP School Paranormal Investigators, Vol. 2*.

Although Takayuki Usagiya did not get to do much in *Vol. 1*, thanks to CLAMP sensei's magnificent rendition of him in the manga at the back of that novel, he has enjoyed surprisingly widespread popularity. It just goes to show that a picture *is* worth a thousand words.

In this volume, as promised, Rion, Mifuyu, and Takayuki got to strut their stuff and show off their talents. Still, I believe that Takayuki's story is the more exceptional. Takayuki—according to Okawa Nanase-san, who demonstrated all this through role-playing—possesses a superior intelligence, but isn't a particularly good athlete. Making up for this deficiency is the presence of his maid, Koizumi-san (who, let's face it, "haunts" him). With their peculiar relationship as a starting point, I set out to craft a story that would show off Takayuki's skills to their best

advantage. I hope I succeeded, and I hope you all enjoyed what I like to call Takayuki's dashing bumbling.

As for Mifuyu and Rion's story, I wanted to write a lot of action scenes—and you see the result for yourself.

When I think about it, it may have been possible to devise separate stories featuring Mifuyu and Rion, but then again, there haven't been too many missions where they've worked together, and it seemed like such a natural pairing. I guess you could say their combined story grew out of a personal whim.

Anyway, several mysterious characters make their appearance in this novel, as well. We might even bring them back in the future. (Really? You think so?)



Now then, next up in *Vol. 3* there's a very big event that will draw the final episode of Part 1 of the Supernatural Phenomena Research Association's adventures to a dramatic, rousing close.

How will the boys and girls of the Association deal with the devastating extinction-level crisis about to descend upon CLAMP School?

Now that I've presented stories dealing with the individual members of the Association, we shall resume

with a tale reuniting all the characters for a life-or-death struggle and a thrilling voyage of adventure!

The concluding chapter, featuring angels, spirits, and vampires (maybe), is coming soon . . . so all you faithful readers sit tight!

On a certain day in November, 1999.

CLAMP School TRPG Club: Supervising Advisor “The Professor,” Tomoyuki Matsumoto.

CLAMP SCHOOL PARANORMAL INVESTIGATORS

This is CLAMP School Supernatural Phenomena Research Association

* Illustrations from the comic CLAMP (pp. 189-196)



I'M SO
EXCITED
TODAY
IS MY
BIRTHDAY!

I HOPE
LOTS OF
GOOD STUFF
HAPPENS
TO ME.

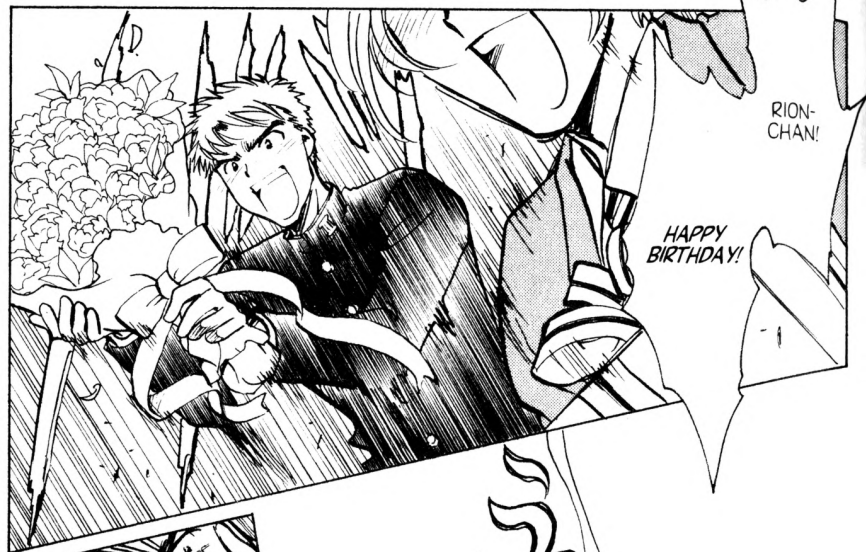
I'M
HEADING
OUT!

LET'S
GO!

DID YOU
KNOW IT'S
RION-CHAN'S
BIRTHDAY
TODAY?!

I PICKED
THIS PRESENT
TO SHOW HER
HOW I FEEL
ABOUT HER.





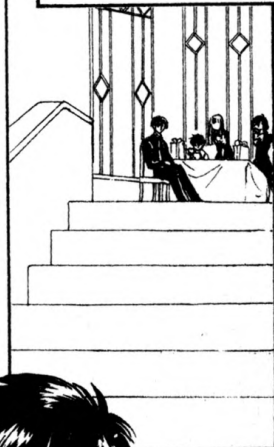






GOOD
MORNING
ALL!

CLAMP School
Supernatural
Phenomena
Research Association
Meeting Room
(Stairwell)



TOP
O' THE
MORNIN'
TO YA!

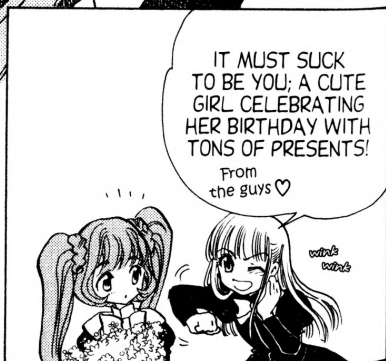
HEY
THERE!

GOOD
MORNING!

HAPPY
BIRTHDAY!

RION-CHAN!

ぽんぽんぽんぽん
Ta-da!





OH?

?

NO SPOOK
IS GOING
TO KICK
MY BUTT!

RION-
CHAAAAAAN!!

STOP
ITTTTTTT!

U
G
Y
T
E

THE
E N D