# PITA-TEN 2

based on the works of
KOGE-DONBO

YUKARI OCHIAI

lightnovel

# PITA-TEN

2



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# Pita-Ten CHARACTERS



## Misha

DOB: **Unknown** Height: **164.4cm**
Blood Type: **Unknown** Weight: **51kg**

A perpetually bright and bubbly angel who one day quite suddenly, moved into the apartment next doo to Kotarou. She has a knack for appearing out o nowhere at the least expected times, more ofte than not right next to Kotarou, whom she promptl chases around wherever he may go.



# Shia

DOB: **September 3rd**
Blood Type: **Unknown**
Height: **151.0cm**
Weight: **41kg**

A young, quiet girl, she is never without her traveling companion, a black cat, also known as Nya. She excels at housework and has a kind and caring heart, which she uses to watch over those around her. Through a series of odd circumstances, she becomes Misha's roommate.

# Pita-Ten CHARACTERS

## Kotarou Higuchi

DOB: **Mar 26th** Height: **145.1cm**
Blood Type: **O** Weight: **36kg**

A cool and level-headed sixth grader who lives with his father. In addition to having to study for his upcoming middle school entry exam, he also has to contend with all the housework.

## Koboshi Uematsu

DOB: **April 27th**
Blood Type: **AB**
Height: **133.9cm**
Weight: **?kg**

Kotarou's childhood friend and classmate. She's had a crush on Kotarou for six years now, but he has yet to notice.



# Ten-Chan

**Ayanokoji Takashi**

DOB: **January 16th**
Blood Type: **B**
Height: **148.7cm**
Weight: **40kg**

Kotarou's best friend, also known as Ten-chan. Not only does he excel at all sports, but at his studies as well. Due to his unpretentious nature, he's quite popular with the ladies.

# Dai-Chan

**Hiroshi Mitarai**

DOB: **June 15th**
Blood Type: **O**
Height: **142.6cm**
Weight: **39kg**

First son of the House of Mitarai, heir to the distinguished Mitarai Zaibatsu. Nicknamed Poops!? Though he considers Takashi his greatest rival, Takashi does not return the sentiment.

# Pita-Ten CHARACTERS



## Aoi Ichinose

DOB: **Nov 7th**
Blood Type: **A**
Height: **151.4 cm**
Weight: **41 kg**

Hiroshi's childhood friend, she's a strong-willed seventh grader who hates to lose. Aoi is a staunch believer that one should never show any sign of weakness to another. Because of her parent's divorce, she is scheduled to leave soon and go overseas.



# Kasumi

DOB: **Unknown**
Blood Type: **Unknown**
Height: **131.5 cm**
Weight: **28 kg**

A young girl from the Demon World. She is visiting the Human World in order to train, in a sense. She is never without her traveling companion, a "ferret," Fiaa. Her staff is usually hidden from sight by magic.



# PITA-TEN

VOLUME 2

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## HOW TO PROTECT THOSE DEAR TO YOU


WRITTEN BY:
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Seven Seas
LOS ANGELES

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# PROLOGUE

The girl let out a long, defeated sigh as she gazed at the lake before her. She whispered softly. "This place hasn't changed one bit, and yet…"

*Chirp chirp chirp chirp*…Only the distant cry of small birds answered her murmurs. A gust of wind billowed through her long silky hair, making her chestnut colored locks flutter around her.

She wore a camisole adorned with two big flowers, and a denim miniskirt. Her legs were long and straight, summery leather sandals on her feet. Surrounded by the green of nature, the girl, dressed and accessorized in the latest fashions, stood out; a bright, radiant presence. She seemed just slightly out of place here. Her tightly pursed lips hinted at the strength of her will.

The small lake was located in the vicinity of a quiet resort area near Mt. Fuji. It wasn't one of those mega-luxurious, exclusive resort towns, where many dreamed of owning their own villas, but an out-of-

the-way place where the rich who had lost touch with the world and wanted to limit their contact with people came to get away. Here they built their secret hideaways and, undisturbed, quietly communed with nature.

The area did have its busy moments, however. During the summer, it was quite a popular destination. But now, in its off season, there was hardly anyone else around. As the autumn winds blew across the lake, the young girl was the only figure there.

Located right between Lake Kawaguchi, which sat nestled at the foot of Mt. Fuji, and Oshino Village, the resort was also quite close to the *Oshino Hakkai*[1], famous for its gushing spring waters. Within the surrounding mountains were a number of smaller springs here and there. It was a place with some of the clearest, cleanest, and most beautiful water in all Japan.

The girl stared into the lake, which was clear as well; so clear she could almost see to the very bottom of it. Like a mirror, the surface hardly wavered as it reflected the orange glow of a sun just beginning to set. Standing here, she felt as if she were being swallowed in the eddy of a different time. If only time would stand still like this.

*If only tomorrow never came*... Then maybe she

could just forget this sad, painful memory…

The agitation in her, the loneliness—things she could do nothing about surfaced and disappeared. In stark contrast to the peaceful lake before her, a hundred thoughts swirled restlessly inside the girl's head.

*Rustle rustle rustle*... The leaves on the tree shook slightly in the wind. The girl lifted her face and watched them. As if trying to change her mood, she slowly made her way towards the lake. She crouched beside it, brushed her fingertips on the surface of the water. It was surprisingly cold; a single touch was enough to jolt her back to her senses.

*This isn't me. It's so not like me to get all down and depressed like this. I'm forward looking and positive! I never say die! That's how I've been all my life. That's my policy, remember?*

Repeating the thoughts over and over, she slowly rose to her feet. She took a deep breath and let out a cheerful, energetic cry, as if casting her gloomy thoughts aside.

"The sun's gonna go down soon. I better get home soon. Don't want Grandmama worrying about me."

She turned away from the lake and walked towards a row of villas in the distance. The path was overgrown

and thick with trees that had grown here for months upon months and years upon years, and the green of the forest was a deep shade that gave the area a most mysterious mood.

*I wouldn't be surprised if a tengu[2] jumped out.*

The girl suddenly remembered visiting a place nearby, called "The Tengus' Garden" with her family.

*That's right*, she thought. *It was about a year and a half ago. We went to that nature park off the fifth station of Mt. Fuji together, didn't we?*

"This place is called the 'Tengus' Garden," her father had explained to her as he carried her in his arms. "A long time ago, the Tengus who used to live on Mt. Fuji brought a giant boulder here to use as a platform to climb to and from the heavens. The ancients called it the 'Tengus' Rock' and it's enshrined here to this day."

Her mother had stood at his side, watching the two of them, her eyes so kind. The sky that day was a beautiful blue.

"They say if you visit here, your family is granted happiness and harmony," he had told her.

*Liar. You lied to me. I hate you both, Mom...Dad....*

Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest as she thought about how happy she had been then.

*Whatever*, she thought. *I'll just do what I want to do from now on.*

The girl sealed her happy memories in the depths of her heart and stepped forth with abandon—

*Rustle rustle rustle rustle*... She felt the presence of something moving in the brush. The girl stopped and turned quickly in the direction of the sound.

*Tap tap tap*... Something white, with a long and narrow body, trotted past her. For a second she thought it might be a squirrel, but it was much bigger than any squirrel she had ever seen. She estimated it to be about 40 centimeters long.

"A…weasel? No, not a weasel but…I know, it's a ferret!" she exclaimed with a nod. She remembered watching a TV show two or three days ago that featured all sorts of pets.

*But I've only seen wild rabbits around here. I've never heard of ferrets living wild in the mountains... I wonder if it belongs to someone and just got lost.*

"Come here, you."

As if responding to her voice, the ferret stopped moving. It let out a little cry that sounded like "ku ku ku." It stared straight into the girl's face, then, cocking its head to one side, it hopped away and disappeared into the depths of the forest.

*Ku ku ku ku.* She heard an eerie noise from the direction the ferret had run off to.

*That ferret…what if it gets attacked by a bigger animal?!*

Worried for its safety, the girl chased after it.

"Hey you…it's dangerous over that way! Come back here." She jumped headlong into the thick overgrowth. There was no path here; just wet, soggy ground. It was easy to get lost in the maze of trees, and her father's words about never going anywhere without a path came rushing back to her. But she continued after the ferret as if compelled by some unseen force.

*That ferret had such sad eyes.* The image of the ferret looking right into her face burned into her mind. For some reason, she saw this ferret, all alone and lost in the middle of the mountains, as herself, and she couldn't bring herself to leave it alone. She looked around, but there was no sign of it anywhere.

"Aww, where'd you go? Come on out, you."

*Ring.* ♬

She heard a bell ring softly from somewhere nearby.

*What was that?* She stopped moving and strained to listen.

*Ring.* ♫

Again, the same noise.

*Over by that tree? Was the ferret wearing a collar? Maybe there was a bell on its collar or something?!*

The girl narrowed her eyes and trained them on the place where she'd heard the noise. She took one step forward, slowly, so as not to accidentally scare off the ferret.

*Crick.* With her first step, she felt something hard underneath her foot.

"Huh?"

She glanced down. Beneath her foot was what looked like an old key chain, in the shape of a staff. The shaft of the staff was silver and on the top was a large glass bead with a silver bell attached.

"How pretty…" She raised the glass bead to eye level. Though she hadn't been able to tell when it was laying on the ground, now she saw the glass bead was not clear but actually a hazy shade of pink. Smoky tendrils swirled inside, giving the pink a darker coloring.

"I think I'm gonna keep this…finders keepers, after all." With a smile, she clipped the key chain onto the bag she was carrying.

*Aww, it really is cute!* ❤

As she grasped the key holder, a satisfied look on her face, the bell rang once more. *Ring.* ♫

The moment the sound reached her ears, she suddenly felt faint. There was a shaking inside her head, like her head had been inside a large bell when it rang. Her heart beat louder in her chest. It felt a little like those anxious few moments before the onset of a fever.

"Ugh, what's wrong with me…getting dizzy all of a sudden." Try as she might, she could not force any strength into her legs and she crouched down.

It was as if something was forcing its way into her head, something she could not even begin to understand…there was a slimy, wet feeling in her mind, much like pushing a finger into a jelly mold.

"W…what…what is going on?" Her head began to spin and a sense of uneasiness flooded throughout her. She squeezed her eyes tight, and screamed in her mind, *Help~!*

The reeling, spinning sensation lasted two or three minutes. Then suddenly, like a receding tide, the awful feeling in her head was gone. It was as if the jelly that had thickened in her head had melted away.

"Awww, that was scary. Maybe I'm getting sick."

She turned her head slowly, making sure she could stand without staggering. *Phew.* She took a deep breath and finally calmed herself down. But the sense of uneasiness remained.

"Huh? What am I doing all the way in here?"

Back on her feet again, she didn't remember anything about the ferret or chasing it into the brush. Searching through her memories, she studied the area around her. Out here, far off the mountain path, it felt darker and creepier than before.

*Rustle rustle rustle*...The sound of the leaves rubbing against each other in the trees sounded terribly loud to her. It felt as if the noise was assaulting her and she quickly turned back to the path she had followed in.

"Thank goodness…"

Four or five minutes later, she found a part of the mountain path she recognized. She breathed a sigh of relief and with steady footing set out once more towards the villas.

*Rustle rustle rustle rustle*... As if waiting for the girl to leave, the ferret scurried from the shade of a tree. Not long after that, a young girl with short hair and a black, one-piece dress emerged beside the ferret, a staff over her shoulder. The staff was a full-sized replica of

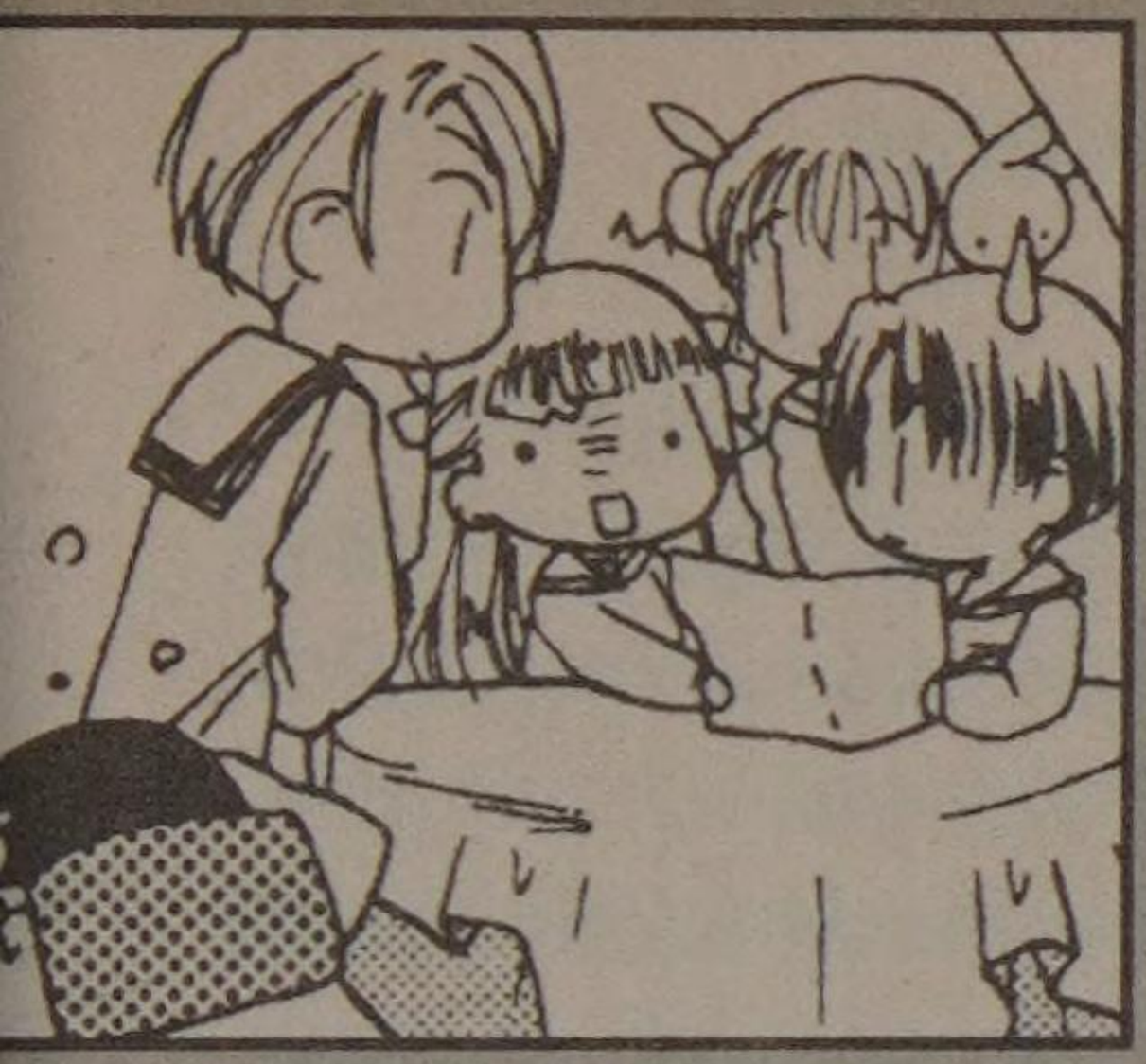
the key chain the other girl had picked up. This girl stood about 130 centimeters tall, her big eyes almost wet with tears, flecks of gold glinting in the light of the setting sun. With an adorable smile on her face, the small girl watched the taller girl walk off towards the resort area.

"Yes, we did it! She totally fell for it!"

Seeing the ferret about to make a dash for it, the girl grabbed it around its neck and scooped it onto her shoulder. As if following the other girl, she too began to walk towards the resort area.

"This is so exciting. I can't wait to see what unfolds. Don't you agree? Fiaa?"

In response to the girl's words, the ferret named Fiaa clicked out a happy little *Ku ku*.





*STORY 1*

# How to Spend One's Holiday

# 1

"Phew. I barely made it."

Somewhat out of breath, Kotarou Higuchi smiled at his classmates, Takashi Ayanokoji and Koboshi Uematsu.

Laying his first period textbooks and stationary on his desk, Takashi looked at Kotarou. "Yo yo, Kotarou. It's not like you to be late."

From behind Takashi's back, Koboshi's head poked out. "Don't be such a snot. Like you didn't just get here yourself, Ten-chan. Morning, Kotarou. When you didn't show up at your usual time, I was really worried about you."

Though she normally waited outside the school gates for Kotarou to show up, which he usually did at exactly 8:24AM, he had been so late today she had no choice but to go to the classroom ahead of him.

"Morning, Koboshi…did you wait for me again today?"

"Yeah…but don't worry about it, okay?"

Kotarou gave Koboshi an apologetic glance. "There was this part in last night's homework I didn't quite get so I stayed up late to figure it out."

With a big yawn, Kotarou placed his bag on his desk and sat down.

"Oh yeah? So you're working hard too, eh?" Takashi said and grinned.

Kotarou nodded, just a bit sheepishly.

"But you know, Kotarou, sometimes you work a little too hard, if you ask me. I mean, you do all the chores at your house, so I think it's okay if you forget to do your homework every so often," Koboshi insisted with utmost conviction as she wedged her way between the two boys.

"Gee, Uematsu. You sure are passionate when it comes to Kotarou, aren'tcha?" Takashi said with a teasing laugh.

Koboshi pouted her lips as color rushed to her cheeks.

The three were childhood friends, and currently sixth graders in the Elementary Division of Seiei Academy Misaki. Sometimes they fought, but they were good friends who could share anything and everything with one another.

Kotarou was a quiet boy and didn't like to talk a lot, if at all, about himself. Ever since he lost his mother in an accident, he had been helping his busy father by taking responsibility for all the housework. But with middle school entry examinations coming soon, his life had turned doubly hard as he tried to keep up with his studies.

Despite everything, Takashi and Koboshi were Kotarou's dear friends. Even when things were rough at home, he could just relax and be himself in front of them.

"You didn't have any problem with the homework, did you, Ten-chan?" Kotarou asked. Seeing the smile on Takashi's face, he knew right away it had been a silly question.

Takashi shrugged. "Of course not! It was no sweat! But you ought to worry about Uematsu instead of me."

"Why would you say that?!" Koboshi protested.

While Takashi laughed heartily through all of Koboshi's objections, a few of the class girls stared at him dreamily. His hair was shiny and his eyes calming and cool. He was easy going and able to talk with anyone, and always at the head of class when it came to studies. Not only did he excel in class but at sports

as well. He was the object of almost every girl's affection. Seeing the dreamy look in the eyes of the class girls, Koboshi let out a big sigh.

"How is it someone like you can be so popular, Ten-chan? I mean, you've got the sharpest tongue. I'm amazed no one else has noticed it yet."

"Me? Sharp tongued? That's rich coming from you." He nudged Koboshi in the ribs.

"Ugh. Why do you only say mean things like that to me! Pbbbhhhhttt!"

Without giving an inch, Koboshi went with her standby raspberry counterattack. Seeing the two carry on this way every single day, Kotarou was almost impressed by their mutual tenacity.

Koboshi, with her big, bright, dancing eyes and always full of life, had been Kotarou's number one fan since Kindergarten.

"I'm going to protect Kotarou!"

That was what Koboshi had sworn to herself after Kotarou's mother passed away.

Takashi understood how she felt and because of that, she knew she could rely on him when it counted, even though they fought once in a while. It was also the reason they were able to be completely honest with each other.

In the midst of their usual morning routine, an ominous black shadow dashed towards them.

"Uhhh, Ayanokoji. And just why are you in such high spirits today? Could it be that you're discussing yours truly?! *Fu fu fu.* Have you finally decided to yield to me?"

Hiroshi Mitarai, who seemed to be trapped in a bit of a time warp with his bowl haircut and round, coke bottle glasses, barged onto the scene. Unable to break the momentum of his dash in time, Hiroshi tripped and fell, right in front of Takashi.

"Grrrrr… How dare you, Ayanokoji!" Hiroshi shouted as he scrambled back onto his feet.

"Huh? I didn't do anything. Plus I wasn't talking about you at all. You're way too self-conscious, you know," Takashi snorted.

"No! I simply know these things. After all, I am none other than the future heir to the House of Mitarai. There's no way you couldn't be envious of me, Hiroshi Mitarai. How could you not be when I'm skilled in both battle and books! Though it's not such a terrible thing, I suppose. I mean, I completely understand your peasant urges to talk about me, even if it means making up little rumors. Ha ha ha." As if lording a victory over them, Hiroshi deftly leapt to the top of a desk. Pulling

himself to his full height, he placed his hands on his hips and began to cackle insanely.

"Gee, Dai-chan, it must be nice to be that positive all the time," Koboshi said sincerely as she watched Hiroshi standing there with his chest puffed out in full bravado.

For Hiroshi Mitarai, being first was all that mattered in life. But in each and every mock middle school entry examination he had taken, Takashi Ayanokoji always managed to outperform him. Hiroshi considered Takashi Ayanokoji his greatest rival and had even transferred to Seiei Academy in order to defeat him face to face. He was an active boy, often launching some sort of complaint against Kotarou and his friends.

But deep down, he was an honest, straight-forward type of person, and despite everything that had happened between them, he was a good friend who the three often played and studied with.

"Nothing wrong with that. It's Dai-chan's best trait, I think," Kotarou said casually in response to Koboshi's comment.

The door of the classroom opened with a loud rattle. "Mitarai!" their teacher shrieked. "What are you doing, standing on that desk? You better get off and take a seat this instant!"

"Ah, what have I done? To think I'd forget when class was starting! I shall live with this shame even into posterity. And, no doubt, my descendants will live with it as well!"

Hiroshi hurriedly jumped off the desk, only to lose his balance in the process. *Crash. Bamm. Boom!* He slammed against the floor with a loud thud. The entire class exploded with resounding laughter.

Kotarou and Koboshi exchanged glances and giggled. As for Takashi, he let out a huge guffaw as he clutched his belly.

"Way to go, Poops!"

"How many times do I have to tell you to never to call me that again! Grrrr… I swear I'll smite you one day…!" Grumbling, he hobbled to his desk, rubbing his bruised bottom.

After school that day, Hiroshi, who normally went straight home, instead approached Kotarou, Takashi, and Koboshi, who of course were gathered together.

"What's up, Dai-chan?" Koboshi asked. Hiroshi coming to talk to them and his somewhat sheepish expression were both out of character.

"Oh, I was just wondering what you all were doing over the upcoming break…" His words were marked with pretension.

"Probably the same stuff I usually do…that and I have cram school," Kotarou said.

"Ahh, Higuchi, what a mundane existence you live. How pitiful. How very, very pitiful."

"What the heck, man?" Takashi said. "Did you just come up here to pick a fight? If that's the case, I'm outta here."

He grabbed his bag from his desk and motioned to Kotarou and Koboshi to leave with him. As they approached the hallway, Hiroshi stepped directly in front of them, throwing his hands and legs out to block their passage. He stared at them briefly, the most arrogant smirk splashed across his face, then cleared his throat.

"Look, we're busy too, so if you've got something to say, hurry up and say it," Takashi said impatiently.

*Ahh, now that's my rival. How very astute of him to predict my announcement.* With that thought, Hiroshi crossed his arms over his chest self-importantly and began to speak.

"…Well, I was thinking of inviting you all to the Mitarai Villa over the break, you see. How would you like to embark upon an elegant two night, three day excursion, hmm?"

The invitation was so unexpected, the three couldn't help but stare at him, open-mouthed. Without

any concern over their surprise, Hiroshi continued.

"I mean, you're peasants after all. I doubt any of you have ever experienced a gorgeous holiday break in your lives. Yes, yes, you needn't tell me. I know, I know. You're not like me and you never will be."

"Whatever. Did you just want to brag about your villa? Well, why don't you go do that somewhere else?" Takashi snapped. He turned his head and attempted again to leave. And right on cue, Hiroshi stretched out his arms again, blocking his exit.

"Now, now, don't get all flustered. What I'm merely proposing is that we board together during the break. We have that science group project to do, after all…yes? So rather than study in the polluted clamor of the city, why not do it at the luxurious and comfortable Mitarai Villa? Besides, according to my calculations, working in the latter environment would make us twice as efficient as studying in the city."

Koboshi listened to Hiroshi's frantic argument without saying a single word. At the conclusion of his speech, a mischievous look flashed in her eyes.

"Fu fu fu, I get it now, Dai-chan. So what you're really saying is that you want to hang out with us during the break, is that it?!" Koboshi laughed.

Hiroshi found himself struggling for words.

"…N…no…it's not like that at all…I merely suggested it to aid in our studies…"

But Koboshi wasn't listening to his excuses. "Oh come on, Dai-chan, there's nothing wrong with that. You can be so difficult about things like that sometimes. So, a villa, huh? I've never ever been to a villa, much less a resort…And we'd all get to go together, right…? I think that would be loads of fun. ❤"

By this point, she was already in her own romantic world.

"Ehh? What are you all talking about~su?" A girl's voice asked from somewhere. "Is it something fun~su? Tell me, tell me too~su!"

The voice belonged to Misha, who had once again appeared out of nowhere. Misha was a girl who one day, quite out of the blue, had moved in next door to Kotarou. She also attended their school but was in the middle school division. She was a mysterious girl who had a knack for appearing out of thin air at the most unexpected moments, a talent that never ceased to amaze and astonish Kotarou and his friends. She had airy, medium-length hair and always wore her trademark bunny rabbit hair accessory.

She was bright and full of energy but at times pushed things just a little too far. For some reason,

she had taken quite a shine to Kotarou and, much to Koboshi's chagrin, always wanted to be beside him. Koboshi considered Misha to be her rival when it came to love.

*It's none of your business, Misha!* Koboshi wanted to say, but before she could utter the words, Hiroshi interrupted her.

"Misha! Oh my! You look more beautiful than ever today…and if…if you so desired, it would be my greatest pleasure to invite you also to the Mitarai Villa," he said bashfully, his cheeks dusted pink. On his first day at the Academy, in this very classroom, Hiroshi had fallen in love at first sight with Misha.

"Really~su? I'm so happy~su! A villa~su! A villa~su! I get to go to a villa with Kotarou~su! …So…what's a villa anyway~su?"

Misha's words caught everyone by surprise.

Takashi almost snorted with amusement. "Misha, a villa is like a…" he said and began a simple explanation.

"Ahhh, this is really something~! To think, I'll be blessed with the opportunity to vacation with Misha!" Hiroshi swooned, a pleased expression on his face. He was so pleased he promptly ignored the part where Misha had mentioned going to the villa "with Kotarou~su."

Seeing Hiroshi on cloud nine, Kotarou smiled a bittersweet smile. All the while, his thoughts were trained on the idea of spending time with Misha.

*Whenever I'm with Misha, I always end up in the middle of some sort of strange trouble...*

While Kotarou uneasily mulled over the idea, Misha bounced around the room happily, oblivious to his concerns.

"A villa, a villa! A villa with everyone~su! This is going to be sooo much fun~su! Teeheehee-heehee!"

"Wait a minute, I still haven't decided if I'm going yet..." Kotarou said. "I mean, I have cram school, remember...?"

Misha's shoulders and smile immediately slumped. "Ehh, why not~su? We're all going to sleep over~su...you should come play with us~su..."

"...She's right. Sometimes it's better to study in a different environment," Takashi said, coming to the crestfallen Misha's rescue. "And Poops is bowing down, begging us to go with him, so if we don't...you know... So come on, Kotarou. Let's go."

"A...Are you accusing me of bowing down and begging to the likes of you, Ayanokoji!? I've never...would never, ever think of doing something

like that! I've not fallen so far that I have to stoop to such depths to get you to visit my villa!"

Hiroshi poised himself to spring upon Takashi but Misha stepped in and held him back.

"No fighting~su, Dai-chan. We're all going to go to the villa and get along~su! Right~su?"

The sight of Misha's face was enough to subdue Hiroshi, and a goofy, limp smile crossed his lips. One by one, starting with Misha, everyone turned and looked at Kotarou. It was as if the words, "Say you'll go with us!" were written on each of their faces.

*Ahh, don't look at me like that...* With so much pressure, Kotarou couldn't help but nod.

"All right. I'll go."

"Hyahooo!! Hurray~su!! So it's decided~su!" Misha cheered.

"A villa, huh? I wonder what sort of clothes I should bring. Maybe I should pack a frilly one-piece dress ♥," Koboshi said slyly.

"Man, this'll be my first time at a villa too," Takashi added "I wonder if I'll be able to sneak some fishing in when we're there?"

Kotarou's acceptance was all it took for everyone to immerse themselves in a series of fantasies surrounding the gorgeous villa life. Though everyone

was quite ecstatic, probably the most thrilled of all was Hiroshi. Behind his smile, however, was the betraying smirk of someone up to no good and, in his eyes, the spark of a hidden agenda.

"Fu fu fu. The fool! He's walked right into my trap! Once at the villa, I'll show that peasant the full extent of my power! Yes, Ayanokoji! After you taste the exhausting might of the House of Mitarai's training and suffer at the hands of it, there is no doubt you'll be bowing down to me!!" Hiroshi murmured.

Wrapped in their excitement, not a single one of the group heard Hiroshi's nefarious whisperings…

With everyone's agreement to participate, the details came together smoothly.

"But I would feel so bad for Shia if she has to stay home~su." Thinking about her roommate Shia, Misha cast big, pleading eyes in Hiroshi's direction.

"I just don't like that woman," he began. "There's something not quite right about her. She will bring us nothing but misfortune, I'm telling you!"

As hard as Hiroshi argued against Shia's coming to the villa, he was no match for Misha's words.

"Don't say that~su! Shia is the kindest person ever~su!"

Just like Misha, Shia had suddenly appeared

before Kotarou one day. When Misha found out Shia was all alone and had nowhere to go, she immediately said, "Come live with me~su!" and stopped Shia from going off on her own.

In the beginning, Kotarou, just like Hiroshi, had not been very fond of Shia. Whenever he was near her, his head would begin to throb. Over time, his feelings changed and he was reassured by her kind smile.

The very first time they met, Shia had asked the untrusting Kotarou for his birth date. He told her, wary of the stranger, and she produced a flower for him out of nowhere, and laughed innocently.

"A primrose…in the language of flowers it means 'first love.' It's the birth flower of those born on March 26th."

She smiled, and in that smile, Kotarou felt a sort of salvation. Eventually the headaches that were common around Shia disappeared and she became someone who was always in Kotarou's heart. Shia was very good at cooking and always there to watch over and protect him when he was feeling down. There was a sort of maternal warmth to her, which he and Takashi both felt. Even though Kotarou still considered Misha and Shia an odd, mysterious pair, he could not help but open his heart to the both of them.

# 2

After the group decided they would visit the Mitarai Villa, the days flew by.

Spending two nights and three days with one another was a big deal to them. After hearing Koboshi and Takashi constantly, excitedly talk about the "villa this" and the "villa that," even Kotarou began to join their conversations.

Still, every day he took off from cram school meant he had to study extra hard to make up for lost time before the break. Although the plan was to study once they reached the villa, there was no guarantee they actually would. Anticipating the worst, Kotarou threw himself into an even more rigorous study schedule. It wasn't a painful thing to do because the exhilaration of going to the villa made even those tough study sessions fun.

Finally, the day of departure arrived.

Because Hiroshi's villa had almost every amenity

they needed, all Kotarou and his friends had to bring were a change of clothes, their books, and study tools. Kotarou also packed some reference books and study guides for the upcoming entrance exam.

"Well then, shall we head out?" Shia said and smiled. She and Misha were waiting for him in front of his entryway. Together they set off to the Shinjuku Train Station to meet up with the others.

"I brought oodles and oodles of candy and snacks~su! Think these'll be enough bananas~su?"

Misha looked as if she had packed for an entire week instead of just two days. As soon as they reached their meeting spot at the train station, she promptly began to rummage through the contents of her overflowing backpack. Kotarou stared at her blankly as she waved around a big bunch of bananas.

"Misha, please don't tell me you only packed sweets and snacks in that bag of yours," Kotarou asked slowly, apprehensive of her response.

"But of course~su, Kotarou! What would you like to try first~su?"

With a huge smile on her face, she plopped down where she stood and began to unpack the contents of her bag for Kotarou which, among other things, included a variety of sweets, chocolates, and crackers.

"I don't want to try anything, Misha! You can put that stuff away."

"Oh don't be like that~su. I've got plenty to go around so what would you like~su?"

Hoping to spend as much time as possible at the villa, the group had decided to meet at the train station at 6:30 AM. But while Kotarou was still shaking off the morning's grogginess, it seemed Misha was wide awake and raring to go.

Shia smiled as she peeked from behind Misha. "Misha's been preparing what to bring for the past two, three days now."

Nya, the cat curled at Shia's feet, was turned away from the gathered threesome, a bored look on his face.

Taking a deep breath, Kotarou looked at Misha. "I see you have a very nice collection of sweets, Misha, but why don't you put them away for now? We'll be leaving soon…"

Saying they could all share some later on, Misha sadly began to pack her sweets away. Kotarou helped her.

"Yo," Takashi said as he arrived. He laughed as he glimpsed Misha's belongings. "Whoa, holy cow, Misha, that's quite a pile of luggage you've got there."

Takashi was traveling light, a single day bag slung over his shoulder. A little while later, Koboshi arrived, slightly out of breath.

"Phew, I'm so glad I made it in time. I was so busy last night, picking out cute outfits for this trip, I totally overslept this morning." She was dressed in traveling style, which consisted of a pink peasant blouse draped over a lacy mini-skirt.

Takashi checked her out right away. "Look at you, all dressed up all spiff, Uematsu," he teased.

But Koboshi was in such a good mood, his insults bounced right off her. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Say what you want, but today I'm not gonna get mad at all. I'm totally okay with how I look today so I'm in a very good mood. ♥"

"…Koboshi, I think it looks very nice on you," Shia said in her usual soft tone.

Koboshi beamed a *Thank You!* at Shia.

"So, it seems we're all here!" Hiroshi, accompanied by his butler and his younger sister, Kaoru, arrived at their meeting place.

"You have my utmost assurance that I shall do everything in my power to make sure you're taken care of and safe these next few days," Hiroshi's butler announced, hand on his heart. In truth, part of the reason

the trip was happening at all was because Hiroshi's butler had personally visited each of the parents and guardians, assuring them of his presence during the trip, laying their worries to rest and procuring their permission.

"Well then, let us away!'

At Hiroshi's command, the group made their way to the train platform.

"Wow wee~su, hurry and lookit this~su. It says Dai-chan's name on it~su."

Having been the first one on the platform, Misha stood waving madly at the group to hurry over to her. Thinking that something was wrong, Kotarou and the others broke into a dash and ran to Misha. Once they reached the platform, one of the train cars immediately caught their attention.

"Wow." Eyes wide as saucers, Kotarou stared at the train car. A large banner, which read "Mitarai Party," had been hung on the side.

"Hiroshi is the House of Mitarai's precious heir. I cannot allow someone as special as he to ride alongside the masses, nor do I wish any of you to worry or want for anything in the upcoming two nights and three days. To facilitate this, we have rented out the car you will be riding in," Hiroshi's butler explained,

a satisfied smile on his face. Calmly, he produced a pocket watch and looked at it.

"Now then, everyone, let us board." He waved the children onto the train. Kotarou and the others hurried aboard only to see that Hiroshi's younger sister Kaoru had remained on the platform, tears shining in her eyes.

Kaoru respected her elder brother with all her heart and was often found stuck like glue to his side. She too attended Seiei Academy, but being a year younger was in the Fifth grade class. She made it her personal responsibility to take care of anyone who dared to get in her elder brother's way, a characteristic some would consider old-fashioned in this day and age. It was also a characteristic that drove her to sometimes go a little too far for the love of her elder brother, and there had been a number of instances in the past when she had chased Kotarou and Takashi around with her *naginata*[3], mistaking them for Hiroshi's rivals.

On her first day at Seiei, after transferring schools to be with her brother, she had fallen in love with Takashi and now focused more on winning his affections, while relegating Hiroshi to the sidelines.

# 先家

"Huh? Aren't you coming with us, Kaoru?" Takashi called out.

With her trademark measuring tape ribbons billowing in the wind, Kaoru stepped forward and stood in front of Takashi.

"…Though Kaoru understands that this is a wonderful opportunity to spend some time by your side, Ayanokoji-sama, unfortunately this is as far as she can accompany you, for she has a National Naginata Championship match she must attend. Know, however, that you shall be on Kaoru's mind and in her heart while you and she are apart. Do take care, Ayanokoji-sama."

"Oh, ah…yeah, sure thing…" Not quite sure what else to say in response to Kaoru's forward display, Takashi managed an ambiguous smile.

A frustrated expression crossed Hiroshi's face. "How dare you, Kaoru! Saying your farewells to Ayanokoji even before your own brother? What is the meaning of this!?"

Kaoru waved a hand at her brother, as if his fears were unimportant. "Onii-sama, the heir of the House of Mitarai must not concern himself with trivial matters such as this. And Kaoru shall have you know that it is most proper for her to make her compliments first

to those you have invited to the villa as guests. Now, please kindly remember Kaoru has the deepest respect for her honorable elder brother now and always. So good luck and please do your very best while training during this visit."

"…Eh? …Training?

*Beep beep beep beep.* ♬

At the same moment Kotarou spun his head towards Kaoru, the piercing wail of the platform bell rang across the platform.

Kaoru stepped away from the train and waved. "Well then, everyone, please take care…"

Leaving Kaoru waving on the platform, Kotarou and company's long-awaited trip finally began.Amid the excitement, Kotarou soon forgot Kaoru's words.

After placing their belongings onto the luggage racks, everyone picked out where they wanted to sit. Nya hopped up on the seat next to Shia and, within seconds, had curled up in a ball and was fast asleep. Hiroshi chose to patrol the back of the car, near his giant cluster of baggage.

Misha naturally chose a seat next to Kotarou and, as soon as she made herself comfortable, her chatter began.

"Kotarou, let's eat some sweets~su! Some sweets~su!"

"But Misha, Dai-chan already announced he had some breakfast prepared for us."

"I brought a ton~su. So we could eat them together~su, Kotarou…"

"I…I'm fine just looking at them for now, okay? Misha… So, what did you bring anyway?"

Hearing their exchange, Takashi and Koboshi came over, asking to see Misha's stash.

"Tee hee. Well, I brought almost everything along~su. Let's see…"

While Misha began to rummage through her pack excitedly, Hiroshi walked up to the group, his butler by his side.

"Wait a moment. Grr, you peasants are so impatient. Everyone knows that when you travel by train, you're supposed to eat a good ole' bento. All right, hand them out, my good man."

With a bow, the butler began to hand boxes, about 20 centimeters square, to each of the train's occupants. From the boxes, each individually wrapped in a kerchief, the scent of soy sauce wafted out.

Everyone began to unwrap their bundles, Misha first. "Fuheee! It smells so nyummy~su!"

"Wow!"

The group let out a synchronous cry as they feasted their eyes upon the gorgeous sight within.

It was a special House of Mitarai boxed lunch. Three beautifully lacquered boxes were stacked on top of one another, each brimming with food. In the first box were two styles of rice, a wild vegetable cooked rice and a chestnut one. On top of the rice were strips of seaweed cut into perfect triangles. In the other two boxes were a selection of the most expensive dishes cooked with the freshest, rarest of ingredients…a beef fillet steak, a lobster, resplendent with its head still attached, cured abalone steak, chicken teriyaki, red sea bream grilled in salt, fried eggs, and eggplants boiled in mirin.

"The Mitarai Villa is located at the foot of Japan's finest mountain, Mt. Fuji. Everything about me must be number one, and thus, my bentos must be Japan's finest as well! The triangular seaweed placed on rice represents Mt. Fuji. The beef is none other than the world famous Matsuzaka beef, and the chicken comes from Japan's finest breed of chicken, the Hinaidori of Akita. As for the vegetables, they are all organically grown by the diligent farmers of Mitarai owned farms and…"

Booing from the masses drowned out Hiroshi's pompous explanations.

"Dai-chan, I feel really really bad but I can't eat something like this so early in the morning. …It looks really delicious though," Koboshi mumbled as she held her chopsticks, in complete awe of the bento.

"It really looks awesome but you've really got to consider portions too," Takashi chimed in.

Floored by their unexpected reactions, Hiroshi began to push the others to eat, telling them that once they tasted it, they'd see just how good it really was. Yielding to him to take a bite, the group was struck at how delicious the food was but they simply could not urge their chopsticks to gorge themselves so early in the morning. Watching their forced feeding, Hiroshi choked back bitter tears of defeat.

"I feel like…like I'm being forced to stay after school and finish my lunch," Koboshi remarked as she continued to fight the uphill battle against her lunch box.

An hour after leaving Shinjuku, everyone but Koboshi had somehow managed to finish their boxed lunches. They lounged about the train car, nursing their distended bellies.

Misha cheered Koboshi on with a smile. "Koboshi,

you can do it~su. Don't leave any left overs~su."

Koboshi gave a small nod. At that moment, the entire train car shook with a loud rumbling. They had left Ootsuki Station only a few moments before.

"W…what the heck!?" Takashi exclaimed.

In response to his cry, Hiroshi glanced smugly at his rival. He said simply, "Don't you know? The car we're riding on has broken from the main train so we could head towards our destination more efficiently."

They watched as the main train continued away from Ootsuki Station and towards Matsumoto. Not long after, the car they sat in began to shake once more. Slowly, it began to move.

"Oh my gosh! I didn't know you could do that! How amazing!" Koboshi squealed as she began to put away the pieces of her bento. She had finally managed to stuff down the remaining contents.

"The House of Mitarai has numerous connections in both the political and financial world. Arranging something like this is nothing at all. Besides, this way we don't have to waste any time stopping at stations or changing trains. You see, the power of the House of Mitarai…"

Feeling Hiroshi's speech was going to be another

long, pointless one, Koboshi quickly made an excuse to change her seat. "Ah…urm…I need to clean this up."

"Say, Shia," she said, "you sure are taking in the view outside intently. Do you see something interesting out there?"

"It's just magnificent. The clouds are so white…"

Koboshi and Kotarou nodded in agreement as they stared into the sky alongside Shia.

"At first I wasn't too keen about going to stay at his villa but…ultimately, it's not a bad thing to visit a different place and have a change of environment," Takashi said excitedly as he sat down next to Shia.

"D…damn you all…right in the middle of my masterful narration…"

As Hiroshi stood off to the side, spewing a series of complaints under his breath, Misha walked over next to him and bowed her head.

"Thank you so much for the yummy food, Daichan~su. It was sooo delicious~su."

"M…Misha…that's all I wanted to hear…ahh, you've made me so happy. Thank you. Thank you so much."

In Hiroshi's eyes, Misha's smile was that of the benevolent bodhisattva Kannon herself.

With a few other happenings along the way, the train eventually arrived at its destination, Mt. Fuji's Yoshida Station.

"Oh my, the air here is simply delectable," Shia commented, taking a deep breath as soon as she disembarked from the train. At her feet, Nya sniffed haughtily and turned his noise up.

Shia studied the area all around her, a sense of familiarity tugging at her heart. *Something about this scenery here...I feel as if I've seen it all before...*

The mountains in the distance, the bright blue sky. The trees, lush and verdant. *Yes, it was in surroundings like this where...*

"Shia! Something the matter? They're gonna leave without 'cha!"

Takashi's voice snapped her out of her trance.

"I'm so sorry for falling behind. …But something about the scenery here…it reminded me of a place I used to know…"

"Oh yeah? Like where you grew up or something, Shia?"

"No…I…I'm sorry…I just don't remember."

Seeing the lost look on Shia's face, Takashi quickly apologized. "Ah, I'm sorry for saying that.

I really am. Don't worry about it, okay…? Let's go catch up with the others." He took her hand.

She still seemed to be slightly dazed, so he began to lead her in the direction his friends had disappeared.

"Huh? Where did those guys go?" he mumbled, not seeing any of his friends outside the station. He glanced around, scratching his head.

"What's taking you so long, Ayanokoji?"

"Ten-chan, Shia, this way~su!"

"Hurry!!"

Turning in the direction of the sound of his friends' voices, he saw a rather odd sight. It was a bright yellow, old fashioned, bonnet style bus. Because the front end of the bus protruded like an animal's nose, the headlights looked like the beast's two gleaming eyes. Even though it was a merely a bus, somehow its unique shape breathed a strange life into it.

Kotarou and the others were already on board.

"Whoa, check that out. I've only seen buses like that in old movies. That's a pretty sweet ride."

Hearing Takashi's awestruck observation, Hiroshi got off the bus and launched into another one of his proud discourses.

"This is one of those famous retro-buses, used

for sightseeing around the Lake Kawaguchi area. Normally, you'd see it carting peasants between various tourist sites, such as the Lake proper and the lake shore museum, but today we've chartered it especially for our personal use."

"Hmm, that's a pretty good idea coming from the likes of you," Takashi said. "Well, shall we, Shia?"

Under Hiroshi's direction, the first place they visited was the "North Entrance of the Main Shrine to Mt. Fuji's Sengen Shrine," a short distance from Yoshida Station. This particular shrine marked the beginning of the Yoshida trail, which led to Mt. Fuji's summit, and was also considered the central shrine of worship for religious pilgrims to Mt. Fuji.

"Why'd you bring us here, of all places, Dai-chan? That's something my grandpa would do," Koboshi teased.

Hiroshi shot a harsh glare at her. "The nerve of you, woman!! Watch and listen!!"

He pointed an unwavering finger towards Mt. Fuji, and began to lecture his captive audience.

"Since the beginning of time, this mountain has been revered by the populace as the holy mountain, the home of the gods. The people believed its towering summit to be the sacred dwelling of the gods and its

billowing volcanic smoke to be the image of the gods themselves. As for its eruptions, they were considered to be manifestations of the ire of the gods.

"In order to appease the gods and, in turn, calm the eruptions, the people built this place, Sengen Shrine, where they worshipped the Shinto goddess, *Konohana-no-sakuya-bime-no-mikoto*[4], among others. Around the end of the Heian Period[5], Buddhism spread through Japan. Influenced by the Buddhist worship of the mountains, the idea of mountain training and pilgrimage was born. As the belief spread that Buddha and other Buddhist deities made their home on the summit of the mountain, a cult of Fuji was formed which combined the original Shinto gods and Buddhist ones as single entities. Understand?"

Confronted with Hiroshi's passionate speech, all Kotarou and his friends could do was listen with their eyes and mouths open in awe.

"…People believed there were spirits living in all aspects of nature around the mountain: the boulders, waterfalls, trees, and animals. By worshipping these spirits and throwing themselves into grueling training, they were said to obtain great spiritual powers. Psychic powers. In order to become heir to the House of Mitarai, I must strive to be first in all that I do.

Whenever I am near Mt. Fuji, I come to this shrine, to pay my respects to those pilgrims who came here to train before me. It helps boost my spirits."

With a serious look on his face, Hiroshi concluded his speech and quickly made his way into the shrine.

"Wow, Dai-chan's pretty amazing. Kinda' surprising," Kotarou said with quiet admiration. He and the others followed Hiroshi into the shrine.

*Nyaahhh.* At the beginning of the path that led to the shrine, Nya abruptly stopped and plopped himself down as if to say, "You guys can go in if you want but you ain't taking me with."

"Hmm? Nya's not moving. I wonder if he tired himself out?"

Koboshi walked over to Nya to pick him up. But—

*Fugya!* Nya hissed at Koboshi, his fur all ruffled and puffed out. He deftly avoided her touch and began to walk away from the group, back towards the bus.

"Whoa. Boy, is he in a good mood."

"Ah, I'll go see what's the matter," Shia offered, running up towards him.

"*The gods?! Bah! Like I'd ever set foot in a damnable place like that. You ought to avoid it too if you know what's good for you, Shia!*"

"…But, I don't think I can do that… I'll go in with the others."

As Shia spoke, Nya turned his head away, his nose high in the air, and left the shrine.

In truth, Shia was—a demon, from the Demon World, who had come to the world of Humans in search of something. As for Nya, he was actually Shia's mentor and guardian in cat guise, traveling with Shia to aid her on her quest.

Shia returned to the others. "He's probably just tired from the train ride. He's never been on one before," she explained. "I think it best we just let him alone to do what he wants for a while. Please don't worry about it anymore… Now then, shall we continue on?"

"He didn't really get to walk around a lot on the train, so maybe he got stressed about that, huh?" Koboshi wondered out loud as she saw him off. As his tail disappeared from the path, she hurried after the others.

The path to the shrine was lined with dense, looming redwood trees and aged stone lanterns covered with moss. Just the simple act of walking up the path seemed to give the group a sense that they were surrounded by subtle tendrils of spiritual energy. At the end of the path stood the richly colored inner sanctu-

ary of the shrine, where Hiroshi stood with a faithful expression on his face, paying his respects. The others followed suit and paid their respects at the inner shrine. They did not often have the opportunity to visit places such as this, and for Kotarou and the group, it was a wondrous experience that rewarded their souls with a peace they had scarce felt before.

All of a sudden, Shia, who had been standing in the back row, doubled over, her face a sickly pallor.

"Are you okies~su, Shia?" Misha dashed over to Shia and supported her by the shoulders.

It took all the strength Shia could muster just to speak. "I'm all right. Just a little dizzy is all…"

"Say, Dai-chan, Shia isn't feeling that great, so let's head back to the bus, okay?" Koboshi said, also rushing to Shia to lend her a shoulder.

Hiroshi eyed Shia suspiciously. "Humph. Serves the foul creature right. But we have no choice. I suppose we can head to the villa now, seeing that I've completed my regards to Mt. Fuji."

When they returned to the bus, they found Nya curled up on one of the seats, asleep. He opened an eye as they boarded, letting out a cry when he saw the pallid Shia.

"*What did I tell you? …Our kind has little affinity*

*and tolerance for those things humans hold sacred and worship.*"

Shia hung her pale head down in shame. "…I'm sorry…"

After their detour to Sengen Shrine, the group continued to Lake Kawaguchi by bus.

Hiroshi's villa was in the mountains, located in the middle of Oshino, a tourist site famous for said lake and its clean water.

With a clunk here and a bang there, the bus traveled along a deserted stretch of road for almost an hour. Large mountains, then smaller ones drifted in and out of view, but not a single home.

"It doesn't seem like anyone lives around here~su. Hey, is anyone out there~su? If you are, then call back to me~su!" Misha shouted, leaning almost her entire body out the window.

"That's dangerous, Misha!" Kotarou scolded. Grabbing hold of her legs, he dragged her back inside and sat her down in her seat.

"Is your villa really out here?" Koboshi asked.

"Fu fu fu. That's why you're all peasants. The

area around here is the secret hideaway of resorts. Connoisseurs of luxury would never build their villas in a place where everyone and their dog gathered. …Look, we're almost there. Right about there is where the Mitarai land begins…"

In the direction Hiroshi pointed, a thick mist suddenly formed, obscuring the landscape beyond. About twenty minutes later, the bus arrived at Hiroshi's villa. It was a huge structure, two towering stories tall, built out of hundreds of logs, each approximately 50 centimeters in diameter. As the group approached the villa, the delightful scent of wood wafted over them. Though the villa was built simply, to be part of nature rather than overshadow it, the size of the structure was beyond all but Hiroshi's expectations. Kotarou suspected Seiei Academy's gymnasium could fit inside with room to spare.

"Yahoo! It looks like giant building blocks~su!" Misha exclaimed.

The assembled group took turns staring at the villa, agape, unable to completely comprehend its scale.

"Welcome. We hope your trip was a pleasant one."

Seven or eight members of the villa's staff emerged at once and bowed to the group in welcome.

"Ahh, thank you, thank you. We'll be in your care these next few days. Try not to offend my guests, will you?" Hiroshi directed at his help, his voice drenched in arrogance.

Kotarou and the others, on the other hand, made themselves small and bowed with gratitude.

"Well? What do you think?" Hiroshi asked, arms akimbo. "Like what you see? Now come in. I'll show you all around."

Like a seasoned host, Hiroshi invited the group inside. Stepping through a door that was three meters tall, Kotarou and crew found themselves in an open room as tall as the entire building. Above them, built into a ceiling that was easily seven or eight meters high, was a beautiful skylight, through which light rained down softly.

"Wow, how splendid," Koboshi said, and swooned. A dreamy look washed over her face.

Kotarou took in a deep breath. "I love the smell of the wood. Something about it is so…comforting."

"Well…the thing is, this villa was only built as a place to sleep during mountain training sessions. It's a bit basic, if you ask me. Then again, I suppose you really shouldn't be concerned with the luxuries of the outside world when you're training," Hiroshi cackled.

Since it had over a dozen rooms, none of them thought the villa could be called "basic," though none dared to admit it out loud. They quietly followed Hiroshi as he continued his tour.

"This room here is a gym you can use to train day or night, rain or shine."

The gym was located in the basement and was filled with a variety of training machines one might see at a professional gym, plus weights and other sports equipment. There was even a sauna in the back of the room.

"This is all so…overwhelming," Koboshi squeaked, her eyes big and wide.

Kotarou nodded his head. "I see. So that training you were talking about before…this is what you had in mind?"

"Wait a second—you're not planning to involve us in your training too, are you?"

"Oh stop that, Ten-chan. Don't be so suspicious," Koboshi said to Takashi in a low voice so Hiroshi wouldn't hear her. "We've got our group project to work on, so how could Dai-chan possibly expect us to train with him?" She gave him a long hard glare. Takashi merely scratched his head.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right. Maybe I'm being

overly cautious. But with that guy, you can't help but suspect he's up to no good most of the time."

Though Kotarou had the same apprehension as Takashi, his doubts were quickly forgotten during the remainder of their tour.

"This is our storeroom. Just in case something was to go wrong, we keep all our first aid and emergency supplies here."

They stood in front of a suspicious closet underneath the stairs, packed with a variety of odds and ends.

"This is also where we keep our survival gear. Lamps and flashlights, ice axes and emergency food reserves…no matter what, we'll be well prepared."

Closing the storage closet, Hiroshi led them to the living room and guest rooms, each with its own full bath and toilet. The floors of each room were heated, to stave off the mountain's morning chill. Behind the villa, in the garden, were two outdoor hot spring baths, separated by gender.

"It's so wide, so wide~su! So exciting~su!" Misha exclaimed happily as she ran around.

The others felt the same way, their hearts filled with the excitement of being at a resort.

After their tour of the premises, Hiroshi led

everyone to their respective rooms on the second floor.

"Higuchi and Ayanokoji…Misha and Uematsu, you'll be sharing rooms. As for the creature…I mean, Shia, or what not…you'll technically be on your own. Since the rest of us don't want to be bothered with your cat's crying all the time, you'll have to keep him with you in your room."

As if in reply to Hiroshi's rude words, Nya let out a cry. *Nyahh.*

"Will you be okies on your own~su? Shia? If you get lonely, just bring Nya and visit me and Koboshi, okies~su?" Misha said with a sad look.

Shia smiled. "I'll be all right."

"You'll have an hour of free time starting now. Meanwhile, as your host, I must away to plan out our schedule," Hiroshi decreed, with a glance at his wristwatch. "Just make sure you all gather in the living room at 11:30 AM precisely! Dismissed!"

He disappeared into his own quarters, beyond the living room.

"Let's go drop our things in our rooms, guys. You know…I kinda' feel bad having Dai-chan take care of everything for us," Koboshi said thoughtfully.

As she spoke, Hiroshi's butler approached, the

staccato of his steps echoing on the wooden floor.

"Please do not worry about the young master. It is his duty as host to ensure his guests enjoy their stay—the more the better! If he is unable to fulfill such a role, then how could he possibly expect to fill the role of the House of Mitarai's heir, after all."

Misha smiled happily. "Wow-wee. Go Dai-chan~su!"

Kotarou's feelings on the subject, on the other hand, were much more mixed. As he unpacked his belongings, he mulled over Hiroshi's situation. For his entire life, Hiroshi had been expected to be the first in everything he did. Never questioning the rhyme or reason for it, Hiroshi did all he could to attain this goal. Kotarou was almost certain Hiroshi was under a terrific pressure, always having to be first, along with the extraneous pressure of living all by himself. Perhaps he didn't even realize it…

*If I were in his shoes, I probably would have lost heart already. I mean, I can barely handle the stress of exams alone. I guess I'm still much too soft,* Kotarou thought.

"Hey, I was thinking of checking out that lake out back…what about you?" Takashi asked as he rummaged through the contents of his day bag.

Kotarou felt like wandering around on his own for a little. "I…I think I'm going to take a walk."

With a "See you later" to Takashi in the entryway, the two boys parted ways, and Kotarou descended the stairs, alone.

# 3

By now, the sun had taken its perch high in the sky. Still, the air around Kotarou was pleasantly cool, the average temperature two or three degrees lower than in the center of the city.

A little distance from Hiroshi's villa, the rich country landscape began to unfold.

*There's no one around here. Hmm, so this is a rich man's villa, huh?* He took in the view around him. He walked towards the mountains for another five minutes or so, when all of a sudden, something ran in front of Kotarou, like a flash of white.

"Huh?"

*Ku ku ku.* It was a small, quiet cry. Standing in front of him was a long, narrow creature.

"Whoa, you scared me. I thought you were a mouse for a second…but, wow, you're a ferret, aren't you?"

He remembered reading about ferrets when he

was looking through a reference book in the library for science class. According to the book, there were records of ferrets being domesticated animals as early as 3000 BCE. It was said the ancient Egyptians used these fast creatures in place of hunting dogs. Members of the weasel family, ferrets were social creatures that easily took to humans, and in the present were also quite popular as pets.

"Come here."

Responding to Kotarou's voice, the ferret timidly inched toward him. Its coat was shiny and looked soft. It cocked its head to one side before attacking Kotarou's sneaker with big chomps. Kotarou could tell it was quite used to being around humans.

"Hey, don't do that."

Remembering they were fun loving pranksters that loved to chew on things, Kotarou crouched down and picked up the ferret. Around its neck was a silver collar.

*So he's someone's pet after all*, he thought. He heard the hurried shuffle of feet closing in on him.

"Fiaa, come back!" called a girl's voice. A girl around his age ran into sight. Her hair was short and shaggy, and she wore a lacy, black, one-piece dress. On her head, she sported a hat decorated with

a huge ribbon.

"Does this guy belong to you?" Kotarou asked, dropping his gaze onto the ferret in his arms.

"That's right. Isn't he cute? Come here, Fiaa!"

The ferret craftily maneuvered its way out of Kotarou's hands and scurried towards the girl. "Say, do you live around here?" she asked.

Picking up the ferret and setting it on her shoulder, the girl gazed into Kotarou's face with lovely big eyes.

Kotarou glanced down at his feet, slightly embarrassed. "Nah. I'm just here visiting a friend out here."

"I see…then maybe I'll see you again."

"Eh?"

The girl started towards the mountain, laughing impishly.

"What about you…?" Kotarou called out to her.

The girl turned back to look at him. "See you later," she said with a grin. She winked at him.

Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through his head.

*Owww…what was that?*

*Ring.* ♬

He thought he heard a bell ring somewhere. The headache was gone as quickly as it came, and as he

searched his surroundings, so was the girl.

*What an odd girl.*

Curious about the ferret and the girl, he began to walk towards the mountain, following the route she had taken.

Moments after Kotarou stepped off the path, the way became almost impassable. There were dead leaves and weeds everywhere. The trees were packed together so tightly they darkened the ground, their thick roots laying traps for an unsuspecting traveler, and each step taken required Kotarou's utmost effort and concentration.

*Rustle rustle rustle. Chirp chirp chirp...* Once in the forest, the sounds of nature surrounded him—sounds he did not usually get to hear. It was such a strange feeling, for in spite of all of these noises, the forest was still a quiet place. Back in the city, there were noises much louder than this that he simply did not notice, but in the forest, even the small sound of the leaves rustling boomed like thunder.

It all felt terribly comforting to Kotarou. He felt as if the faint whispers of nature were exactly what were needed to heal his senses and calm his nerves, which had been paralyzed by city living.

He took in a deep breath, inhaling all the grassy

scent around him that he could. The sounds, scenes, and scents here were intoxicating, and before he noticed, he had gone quite deep into the mountains.

*Oh man. I don't see that girl anywhere. I wonder if I should head back now. Or should I keep going?*

He continued on, still debating what he should do. He pushed past one particularly broad tree and stepped forward. With that single step, the scenery in front of him suddenly opened up wide.

Before him was a small lake. Even from this distance, he could see just how blue and beautiful the water was. A deep blue, unlike anything he had ever seen in his life… It was the sort of landscape he had only seen in paintings.

"Wow!" He couldn't help but say it out loud as he feasted his eyes on the amazing sight.

*This area is hidden so far in the mountains that even the locals don't visit it,* he thought. He strained his eyes and looked around the lake. *The locals, much less anyone else—*

*Ah, wait a second. I think I see someone over there…*

What seemed to be a young girl, her back to him, entered his view. She stood at the lakeside, throwing

pebbles as hard as she could into the lake. He thought she might be muttering something to herself.

From the back, the girl seemed slightly taller than him, at least 150 or so centimeters in height, with long, silky hair that swayed softly each time she chucked a pebble into the lake.

A floral scent danced along on the breeze and tickled Kotarou's nose. *Is that her shampoo?* Her long, slender legs stretched from beneath her denim mini-skirt.

Kotarou walked up to her. The closer he got, the clearer the sound of her voice became.

"…I'm so tired. So tired of pretending in front of everyone that nothing's wrong. Papa…Mama…why don't they notice? Why don't they see me? …I hate them! I wish they'd all just disappear!"

Though her words were strong, her voice was rather soft.

Thinking this might not be the best time to approach her, Kotarou tried his best to leave the area without disturbing her…but…

*Ring.* ♬

He thought he heard the sound of a bell again. But from where?

Apparently finished saying what was on her mind,

the girl crouched beside the lake, pulling her knees towards her chest. For what seemed to Kotarou to be a long while, the girl sat there motionless, holding her head in her hands.

*What should I do? It doesn't seem like anyone lives around here. I can't just go back to the villa and leave this girl on her own...*

Not sure whether this was the right course of action, Kotarou nervously ran to the girl's side.

"Are you all right?"

The girl's shoulders trembled when she heard his voice, but she slowly lifted her head and gazed at Kotarou.

*Flicker.* For a moment he thought her eyes flashed gold. But when he looked again, she was staring at him, her eyes an unyielding brown. He flinched beneath her hard and unkind gaze.

"What? What do you want from me?"

Even her tone was brisk. Coupled with her gaze, Kotarou was forced to take another step back.

"N...nothing, I...you just looked like you weren't feeling well, so I was wondering if you were okay is all..."

"I'm fine. I'm completely fine. See? There's absolutely nothing wrong with me."

The girl stood and spun around for him to see, a sneer on her face. Any trace of pain had been tucked tidily away, replaced with a haughty, domineering attitude. It made Kotarou's blood boil.

"Well, if you're fine, then I suppose that's a good thing. I'll be going then…" Kotarou decided it was best if he left as soon as possible. But the moment he turned from her, the girl ran in front of him and blocked his path.

"Say, I haven't seen you around here before. Which villa are you from?"

"I…I'm just visiting at my friend's place," he answered, despite how much she infuriated him.

"Which villa?" the girl questioned once more.

Annoyed, Kotarou pointed down the mountain path. He didn't think she was the type who took no as an answer. "If you go all the way back down this path, you hit a bigger road. Keep following that big road and you end up by a small mountain. It's the place halfway up there."

A smirk crossed the girl's lips. "Hmm, I see… Which means Hiroshi's there with you, isn't he?"

"Eh? You know Dai-chan?" Kotarou asked, surprised.

The girl nodded, then beamed. When she smiled,

her expression was nothing at all like it had been before.

"Yup, I know him super duper well. So, he's here too, huh? Guess it's my lucky day today. …All right, I'm going with you!"

With that, the girl grabbed hold of Kotarou's hand and began to walk in the direction of Hiroshi's villa.

"H-hold up a second. What are you doing?" he asked as she dragged him alongside her. He had no idea what was going on, and even less of an idea regarding what to do about it.

*Who is this girl? And how does she know Dai-chan...?* A dozen questions swirled about in his head.

The girl was full of energy and very fast. It was all he could do to keep up as she walked down the path.

In about five minutes' time, Kotarou and the girl made it back to Hiroshi's villa. Once there, the girl finally let go of Kotarou's hand. Though she had been walking fast the whole time, she was not out of breath at all. While Kotarou leaned over to catch his breath, he watched her as she gazed fondly at Hiroshi's villa.

"This place hasn't changed one bit…"

Just as the girl stepped into the entryway of the villa, Koboshi rushed over to greet them.

"W…welcome back, Kotarou…"

Having caught sight of the two walking towards the villa from her upstairs window, hand in hand, Koboshi galloped down two flights and through the gigantic reception area to interrogate them.

"S-say, Kotarou…who…who's that…?" Koboshi asked, trying to nonchalantly uncover the specifics of their relationship.

But before Kotarou could answer, Takashi and Hiroshi emerged from the villa, surrounded by a flurry of words. Takashi was carelessly swinging a fishing rod, while Hiroshi held a brush in one hand and a memo pad with "Ye Olde Notebook of Hiroshi" handwritten in big letters across the front in the other.

"…I knew I shouldn't have let you out of my sight for an instant. Now listen up. The House of Mitarai's colored carp aren't for fishing—they're for admiring! I can't believe the nerve of you sometimes…really!"

With that, Hiroshi snatched the fishing rod from Takashi. It seemed Takashi had been caught red-handed in an attempt to catch some of Hiroshi's prize-winning carp from the giant lake behind the

villa. Luckily for Hiroshi and the carp, he stumbled upon Takashi and his fishing rod before anything too traumatic occurred.

"That lake of yours is as big as any fishing hole I've ever seen…so what's the big deal? Not like you can't buy more…cheapo."

"W-what was that?! Me? Cheap?! That's not the issue!! Besides, it's almost time to meet up with the others!"

Watching Hiroshi with her arms folded over her chest, the girl smiled even wider.

"Aren't you the big man, Hiroshi?. …But you look well."

Hiroshi finally became aware of the girl's presence. "A-Ao…? B-but…what are you doing here…?" he sputtered, color draining from his face.

The confident Hiroshi who had been so angry with Takashi was suddenly gone, replaced with a bumbling, flustered-looking one.

"It's been a while, hasn't it? A year and a half now? I just got here two days ago too. I'm so glad to see you again," the girl said, staring straight into Hiroshi's face.

Hiroshi's pale face turned bright red.

Koboshi placed her hand on her cheek. "That's not

the Dai-chan we know at all…is it?" she murmured.

Kotarou nodded. "Yeah. He's like…as meek as a kitten all of a sudden…"

Takashi elbowed Hiroshi in the ribs. "So…you two know each other?"

The girl straightened up as she looked at the curious faces around her. She bowed her head quickly and introduced herself.

"My name is Aoi Ichinose. I suppose you could say I'm one of Hiroshi's childhood friends. Nice to meet you."

"Oh? Is that so? Well, I'm Takashi Ayanokoji. Nice to meet you too," Takashi said. He tapped his forehead with his hand in a vague salute.

Kotarou turned to Aoi. "I'm Kotarou Higuchi…"

"And I'm Koboshi Uematsu. Good afternoon…so, you're one of Dai-chan's friends?" Koboshi said with a relieved look on her face. She was no longer worried about Aoi and Kotarou's relationship.

"…S-something like that. Perhaps a better assessment would be to call us villa acquaintances… From around the area," Hiroshi said quickly, before Aoi could answer.

Aoi looked at Hiroshi with amusement.

Hiroshi's butler came outside, following the sound of the commotion.

"Oohh! I was just wondering what you were all chatting about so excitedly, but now I see that it's because you're here, Aoi. …It's been quite a while now, hasn't it? Why, I just saw your Grandmama a short while ago. She mentioned you were quite busy…in fact, I wasn't quite sure you'd have time to stop by and visit us here…"

He glanced at Aoi. A frown flickered over Aoi's face, and she looked like she might break into tears. But she quickly pulled herself together and flashed another bright smile.

"So you saw my Grandmama, did you?" she said happily. "Well, she's right, I am busy. You see, I'm going off to New York with my papa soon. But before we leave, I wanted to come see this place again. And now…I'm so glad I did. Because I never imagined I might get to see you and Hiroshi again," she spit the last out quickly, almost as if she didn't want to take the chance of anyone interrupting her. But despite her smile, there was something sad in her eyes.

"A foreign nation? So when will you be leaving?" Hiroshi inquired, somewhat suspiciously.

"H-how…! How the heck should I know?!" Aoi

snapped at him.

Unsure of how to react to her sharp words, Hiroshi simply stared at her, a worried look on his face. Both Takashi and Koboshi stood in silence, dumbfounded at her unkind outburst.

Slightly pale, Aoi apologized to everyone around her. "Ah…I…I'm sorry. I just wanted to scare you a bit, Hiroshi…that's why I shouted. Heh heh heh."

"Are you feeling unwell?" Hiroshi asked.

Aoi shook her head. "Nahh, of course not! I've never been better!

"Hey, you guys are going out for lunch soon, I bet. Mind if I tag along?"

"N-no… Of course not," Hiroshi stammered. He flipped through his old-fashioned notebook to confirm the name of the place he had in mind.

"Let's see, the place I've decided upon for lunch… well, it's a *soba*[6] shop, but an absolutely superb one. They make their noodles from scratch, and the thing about soba is that…"

"Ehhh? What are you talking about?" Aoi said quickly, cutting Hiroshi off before he could launch into another of his speeches. "When you think lunch, you think *udon*[7], not soba! Besides, I had soba yesterday!"

"…I see…nnghhh…but the soba shop is…ahh well, then, udon it is!" Hiroshi relented, crumpling the sheet of paper with their midday plans on it behind his back.

Koboshi spoke up. "…But Dai-chan… already made plans for us." She was thinking of Hiroshi's feelings.

Hiroshi looked at Koboshi as if to say, "It's all right."

Kotarou and the others continued to be floored by the changes in Hiroshi's temperament around Aoi.

"Phew. Now that was a bath~su!"

"Yes, it certainly was…"

Misha and Shia were next to approach the lively group, their faces pink and refreshed from their dip in the hot springs. Behind them walked Nya, aloof as always.

"The hot springs are so nice~su! You should all give them a try~su. The water is so relaxing it makes you feel like you're floating on a cloud~su. Of course, all that floating and relaxing ends up making you hungry~su!"

The assembled group let out a sigh of relief as Misha's pleasant mood enveloped them.

Aoi directed her curiosity toward the newcomers.

"Hello there, my name's Aoi. I'm Hiroshi's childhood friend…well, a year older, but nonetheless."

"Oh, hiya, I'm Misha~su. Nice to meetcha~su. If you're Dai-chan's friend, then you're my friend too~su! Aoi…so Ao, right~su?"

"…Hiroshi calls me that too so that's fine, Misha."

"Tee hee hee hee. Since you're childhood friends, does that mean you know everything about Dai-chan~su?"

"Of course! We used to play together all the time, didn't we?" Aoi said, shooting a mischievous glance over at Hiroshi.

Though Aoi seemed genuinely amused, Hiroshi looked rather disconcerted.

"…Y…yes. You could say that."

"He was a real handful when he was little. Do you know he wet the bed until elementary school…?"

Sweat beading down his forehead, Hiroshi looked at Aoi with beseeching eyes, moist with tears. "A-Ao. Please don't say anything else incriminating," Hiroshi pleaded. "Please?"

"Fu fu fu. Well, I'll just have to fill the others in later then, when we have more time on our hands…" She turned her attention to Shia. "And who might you be?"

Shia, who normally had the kindest smile on her face, had been regarding Aoi with a hard and suspicious stare. Aoi's words seemed to bring her back, however, and all at once her face softened, the kindness returning.

"I'm Misha's roommate, Shia. It's very nice to meet you, Aoi."

Aoi was visibly taken back by Shia's manner of speaking, which was more refined and polite than the others.

"Nice to meet you, Shia. Well then, gang…how's about we meet just outside of here in fifteen minutes? I'll go get ready too."

Just as suddenly as she had appeared, she darted off and out of the villa. Immediately, everyone descended on Hiroshi and encircled him.

"I can't believe you know a babe like that. Not bad, Poops," Takashi said with a grin, giving Hiroshi a gentleman's jab in the ribs.

"I was watching you all the time, Dai-chan. Judging by the way you were acting…she was your first crush, wasn't she?" Koboshi teased sweetly.

"Hurray~su! Another friend to play with~su!" Misha exclaimed, hopping up and down with joy.

But in the midst of their excitement, Hiroshi wore

the gloomiest look.

"You mustn't allow yourselves to be fooled by…her looks. Because of her…because of that vixen…do you know how many times I've seen hell…? …She…she…she's a demon I tell you, a demon!!" Hiroshi cradled his head in his hands.

"What's wrong?" Takashi asked, wondering about Hiroshi's sudden outburst.

With that, Hiroshi, who had never been at a loss for words, began to tell his tale of woe.

Aoi, much like himself, was from a family that operated a large company. They first met each other here, at this resort area. She was terribly smart and capable, and Hiroshi, who was a year younger, had been forced to serve as her personal errand boy.

"She'd throw snakes at me even when I begged her not to, she pushed me into the mud…she simply didn't seem to have a limit when it came to doling out inhumane treatment. Nuugghhhh. Back then, I had yet to learn the ways of the warrior, so I could not fight back… Those days were probably the lowest point of my life. I didn't want you all to find out about them. But I'm not the same Hiroshi I was before. I won't lose to Ao again."

By the way he still referred to her as "Ao," it was

apparent to everyone he had already lost this battle. Still, Kotarou and the others chose not to say anything about it to Hiroshi. Judging from his attitude when he was around her, his words were empty war cries brought about by bravado.

The group merely nodded kindly as they listened. They knew just how small and unsettling it must be for their proud Hiroshi to have his weaknesses exposed like that for all to see.

"…But she's off to New York, isn't she? I suppose it's not a bad idea to further one's studies in a foreign country."

Hiroshi's butler crept over to the assembled group once more. It seemed he had been listening to their conversation with keen ears.

"Actually, Hiroshi…I was debating whether or not to bring this matter to you, but… During our meeting but hours ago, her Grandmama revealed to me that…" Hiroshi's butler quietly related what he learned.

Aoi's parents had decided to finalize their divorce sometime this month. As part of the separation process, it had been decided her father would take full custody of his only daughter. At first, Aoi vehemently opposed either of her parents having sole custody, saying she would rather live alone than without one or the other.

Despite the strength of her convictions and character, in the end she was only a middle school student. Ultimately she broke, and gave in to the situation.

The butler bowed his head deeply as he finished. "…Aoi loves both her father and her mother deeply, so I believe the separation has been a rather painful affair for her. I just wanted all of you to be aware of her situation…"

With his arms folded across his chest, Hiroshi was in deep thought, apparently mulling something over. "I see… So I wasn't just imagining the increase in her willfulness since the last time we met. She had this set of circumstances to deal with."

Facing the assembled group, he bowed his head down deeply. "It's quite possible Ao may say harsh things to you lot, out of desperation. I hope you can find it in you to forgive the rashness of her state and just put up with it during our stay. I'm begging you!"

Kotarou and the others stared at Hiroshi in utter surprise. Never had they seen Hiroshi bow his head to anyone.

"Okay, no problem," Kotarou said.

Koboshi and Takashi nodded their heads in agreement.

"We'll all be friendly to her so don't worry! …But

Dai-chan, right now you kinda remind me of a prince protecting his princess. ♥" Koboshi swooned, moved by Hiroshi's plea. Her eyes were misty with tears.

Takashi, on the other hand, reacted by smacking Hiroshi on the head.

"You ain't all that bad, are you, Poops?"

"Ayanokoji! Who gave you permission to touch my head!! Toryaahh!!" Hiroshi leaped into the air, and flew at Takashi with a flying kick.

"What the hell…?!"

Laughing, he smoothly dodged Hiroshi's kick. *I suppose I like you better this way*, Takashi thought.

*Ring.* ♫

The same bell Kotarou had heard at the lake rang softly in his ears. He quickly scanned his surroundings. By the gates of the villa, peering at them with big eyes, was the girl with the pet ferret. As her eyes met Kotarou's, she began to wave at him furiously.

Waving back to her, Kotarou glanced at his friends. "This girl I met on my walk is…huh?"

When he looked back at the gates, she had vanished.

"What's the matter, Kotarou?" Koboshi said. "Come on, we'll be heading out soon."

Warily, Kotarou looked once more at the gates of the villa. But there was no one there.

Shia and Nya also stared at the villa gates. They had also heard the soft ringing of that mysterious bell.

# 4

A little before noon, prepped up and ready to go, the crew assembled in front of the entryway.

"Ready set, udon noodles~su!!"

Using Misha's words as a signal, everyone began to board the chartered retro bus.

Shia sat in the same row as Aoi, in the seat opposite her. For a while, she merely stared at Aoi in silence. Suddenly, she spoke.

"Aoi, your key holder's very pretty…" She pointed at the key chain clipped on Aoi's bag. It was accented with a pink glass bead and a silver bell. Aoi turned and faced Shia, and smiled.

"Isn't it? I found it over by the lake. It was so irresistibly cute; I just had to have it!" She gave it a loving flick with her forefinger.

*Ring.* ♫

With the faint ring of the bell, Aoi clutched her head with her hands.

*Ow, oww. I'm getting headaches so often lately. Ever since I came back here...ever since I picked up this key holder. This is so not cool.*

"Are you all right?" Shia sat beside Aoi, a worried look on her face, and took the girl's hands in her own.

A few minutes later, after the headache passed, Aoi stared again at the glass bead adorning the top of her key holder.

"Huh?" she mumbled out loud, but to no one in particular. "…Why does the pink look darker than before? Nah, must be my imagination."

But it wasn't. The glass bead was definitely a different color than when she first picked it up two days ago. It had gone from a faint pink to a deep, dark one.

*Nyaah.* Winding up his back tightly, Nya jumped up from Shia's feet to sit on her lap. From his new perch, he began to lick Shia's ear.

"*That key holder…it smells like us…I get a bad feeling from it…but it's still too faint for me to be absolutely certain.*"

"I see…just as I suspected," Shia responded, a faraway look in her eyes.

There was something familiar about the key holder…something she knew about it… But as hard as she tried, she could not remember what that some-

thing was.

All Shia could do about it for now was take on the sole burden of this mysterious anxiety, which quickly began to take root within her heart.

Once the pain was gone, Aoi was quickly back to her old self.

"All right, crew, time to go get us some udon!" she exclaimed.



The retro bus made its way back to the town of Fuji Yoshida, which they had left only hours ago.

"Not a lot of folks know this, but apparently, Fuji Yoshida has tons and tons of udon shops. The town specialty is boiled cabbage. Like, they actually put cabbage on top of the udon," Koboshi said.

"Cabbage udon? I can't even begin to imagine what that's like," Takashi replied.

"Hold on a sec, okay, Ten-chan? There might be more info in this book here…" Koboshi began to flip through the pages of her guide book.

"What's this?" Aoi said in an offhand way. "Depending on a guidebook for information? You don't know much about this place, do you?"

The comment stung Koboshi slightly. "Maybe… but…I can't help that, can I? I mean, I've never been here before," she said in a low voice. She turned her face from Aoi and directed her gaze at the scenery outside the window.

Not only was Aoi quick-witted but she was quite knowledgeable about a variety of topics as well. They included a bunch of stories associated with Mt. Fuji…about how if one followed the lava carved cave found on the Asagiri Plateau to the very end, they'd end up in Enoshima, and about how Oda Nobunaga, a general during the age of civil war, took the passage through that cave to emerge on the Edo-Kyoto highway of old, and about how the best view of the rising sun from Mt. Fuji could be seen by climbing up the Lake Kawaguchi route from the East side.

She also talked about fun things like the latest fashions, or serious things like advice for their upcoming exams. She was very good at lively conversation.

Before they could even think of protesting, Kotarou and Takashi found themselves completely taken in by Aoi's charms. Though the way she talked was on the brusque side, it was more than obvious, through her kind and considerate actions, that she wanted the best for the group. Whenever the bus rocked a little

too hard, she'd make sure to ask if everyone was okay. She even opened up the window for Nya, saying that sometimes cats got car sick.

"Thank you very much, Aoi. Doesn't that feel better?" Shia asked the black cat.

Nya snorted derisively.

"She's probably just like Dai-chan when it comes to being polite. I bet she'd just get flustered if someone called her out for being nice," Kotarou said.

"Well, she's had a lot happen to her. Maybe she's trying her best to stay strong by putting on that tough exterior?"

While the boys discussed Aoi, the girls focused on another topic.

"Hmmm, so Fuji Yoshida's famous for its udon, is it?"

"Really~su? I can't wait~su!"

Looking through the guidebook together, the girls chatted ecstatically about food. As they talked about this and joked about that, the retro bus arrived at Fuji Yoshida Station.

"The udon here is really good," Aoi said.

And it certainly seemed like it, for the shop was packed to capacity by the time they reached it.

"Oh shoot, I should have made reservations, huh? I'm so sorry, guys. Where should we try now?" Aoi asked. She folded her arms across her chest as she stood in front of the train station.

"What about this place?" Koboshi suggested.

They visited every shop Koboshi looked up in the guidebook, but because they had arrived at the peak of the lunch hour, everywhere they went was equally busy. Not one place could accommodate their group of nine, which included Hiroshi's butler and the bus driver.

"I suppose we should just run around until we find a place," Aoi said. "Hiroshi, you go check that way…come on! Get a move on!"

Urged by Aoi, Hiroshi broke into a full run. Eventually, Takashi and Kotarou split up and joined Hiroshi on his quest to find every single udon shop in Fuji Yoshida.

"Why does it have to be udon?" Takashi snapped. He was at his wit's end.

Misha, on the other hand, ran around to each shop cheerfully, advising everyone of its status with a chipper, "This place is no good~su" before moving

onto the next.

"It's like we're exploring a city we've never been to before…and it's so exciting~su!"

Watching Misha, who was so optimistic in her search, Kotarou and the others renewed their efforts.

"Even when things aren't going their best, I feel like I can always borrow some extra energy from Misha," Koboshi said as she searched. "As for Shia, she's so calming… I'll bet it's because of those two that the rest of us stay so balanced."

Aoi, listening to Koboshi, suddenly stalked up to her.

"Oh stop with that 'happy-happy we're all friends' crap, you liar," she snapped, venom in her voice. "We all know when it comes down to it everyone looks out for number one…themselves!"

As soon as the words rolled off her tongue, she made a face that seemed to say, "Oh no, I shouldn't have said that".

Koboshi started to object but Kotarou, who was standing beside her, stopped her.

*Ring.* ♬

As Aoi's bag shook, the bell on her key holder rang. Immediately, she sank to her knees, holding her head in her hands.

"Are you okay?" Koboshi and Kotarou asked in unison as they rushed to Aoi's side. They peered into her pale face, their brows knotted with worry. A little distance from the main group, Shia and Nya watched the scene cautiously.

A few minutes later Aoi was back on her feet again, the sickly pallor completely gone from her face.

"Sorry for worrying you guys. I'm okay now. By the way…where's Hiroshi gotten to?"

Right on cue, Misha came running back to Kotarou and the others, eyes bright and beaming. Hot on her tail was an out of breath Hiroshi.

"He found one~su! Dai-chan found a place~su!"

"There's an open shop over there, Ao!" Hiroshi managed to get out through exhausted heaves and gasps for air.

"Ooh, nice work, Hiroshi."

Her words were few but Hiroshi responded with a giant smile, like he had received some sort of commendation.

*I've got to make some happy memories here for Ao to take with her!* Hiroshi thought whole-heartedly.

The place Hiroshi found did not resemble an udon shop in the slightest. With no sign hanging out front,

it looked more like someone's residence than a restaurant. The inside of the establishment was as plain as its façade. Customers stood in front of a galley to place their orders and then sat wherever they pleased.

"You take a seat, okay, Ao? I'll stand in line for you," Hiroshi said.

He ending up having to stand in line twice. Once for himself, and once for Aoi.

"How does it taste? Is it good, Ao? Oh, I forgot to get you some water."

Wanting to please Aoi, Hiroshi hadn't even looked at his own order. Instead he ran off happily to fetch a glass of water for Aoi as she looked on, smiling.

After watching the pair's heartwarming interaction for a moment or two, Kotarou decided to focus on the udon in front of him.

"Oh man, this is great!!" Takashi yelled out, beating Kotarou to the punch.

When they first laid eyes on the udon lunch sets, they all had to admit they were taken aback by their…uniqueness. But once they tried their noodles, they found that cabbage and udon, albeit strange looking, was a delectable match made in heaven. Everyone was quite satisfied with their choices, and the fact that a single bowl only cost 300 Y helped to boost their

satisfaction even higher.

"Phew. That was sooo nyummy, I thought I was gonna cry~su. I'm so full~su."

"Well, that's because you had two bowls, Misha," Kotarou said, casting a glance between Misha's face and the two empty bowls in front of her.

"Tee hee hee hee. Well, since we were here…I wanted to try both the warm and cold noodles~su. And now I'm super full and super duperly happy~su. ♥"

There's a saying that the fuller your stomach is, the fuller your heart is too…and that certainly was the case for the assembled group. As the warmth of the noodles washed through them, their strained feelings seemed to wash away as well. The awkwardness between them was forgotten, just like that. They were all such simple creatures…in a manner of speaking…

"So, where to now? What do you have planned for us, Dai-chan?" Koboshi asked, her guidebook in hand.

"Ahh, yes yes. I was thinking we should visit the Oshino Hakkai nearby. It's a wonderful place to purify one's…"

"Ehhh? How booooring," Aoi said, rolling her eyes. "Say, you guys? Since you're here to have a good time, why not do it at Mt. Fuji Park!"

At the mention of the amusement park, everyone but Hiroshi bellowed out a great big cheer, pumping their arms. Not one of them was opposed to Aoi's idea.

Except Hiroshi, of course. "Actually, we're here to train, so…"

No one listened to him. Going to an amusement park was more exciting than purifying one's soul.

The retro bus set off once again, this time to Mt. Fuji Park.

STORY 2

# How to Play with Your Friends

# 1

Mt. Fuji Amusement Park was located about thirty minutes by car from Fuji Yoshida.

Out of the thirty plus attractions, the amusement park's main draw was the INAZUMA Roller Coaster that was literally quick as lightning. When you stepped through the entrance and into the park, it was the first thing that burst into sight, its maze of rail and track sprawled high above. The rattling of its descent was enough to set hearts pumping and bodies shaking with adrenalin.

"Woooo! I feel faint just looking at it!" Koboshi squeaked. She trembled all over as a roller coaster car with a bright red lightning bolt painted on its side screamed overhead.

"This baby is 60 meters tall with a drop of 50 meters! Not only that, it moves at a top speed of 100 kilometers an hour," Takashi said, beaming as he looked over the park pamphlet.

Screams of exhilaration and terror tore over their heads.

"Hoheeeehh!! That looks really high~su! But I bet it feels really, really good going that fast~su. I can't wait to go on~su!"

Misha looked ready to sprint to the ride entrance any second.

"Hmm, it looks a little scary," Kotarou mumbled. But inside, he couldn't wait to ride it. Because of his father's work schedule, he rarely, if ever, had the chance to visit an amusement park. He couldn't remember the last time he had been on a roller coaster, so this was a real treat for him. The only one who didn't join the animated conversation was Hiroshi. Standing beside Kotarou, Hiroshi simply stared up at the "INAZUMA," a tight-lipped expression on his face and a constipated gurgle in his throat.

"Let's go on that together, Hiroshi," Aoi said. She gave Hiroshi a suggestive look and a knowing smirk.

"NnnngghHhhhh. But…urmmm…"

Hiroshi didn't know what to say. Seeing him squirm, Aoi leaned over to Kotarou and whispered into his ear. "Hiroshi hates roller coasters. You've heard of the "Double Mouse," haven't you? You know, that

kiddie coaster for two? Well, when we went on it back in the day, he starting crying like a little baby."

Kotarou glanced at Hiroshi worriedly. "Well then, maybe this one will be a little too much for him."

"Oh, he'll be fine. I mean, don't you want to see Hiroshi wailing like a banshee? Come on, it'll be funny." Her eyes flashed mischievously.

"Funny…? Don't you mean 'mean?' If he doesn't like coasters, he shouldn't have to ride them!"

Aoi jumped at the fire in Kotarou's retort, then hung her head meekly. "I'm sorry. I guess I got a bit carried away. It's just that…I really want him to conquer his fear of roller coasters. Hiroshi…he's not supposed to show weakness to anyone, because he's the House of Mitarai's heir, after all."

Kotarou couldn't help but be a little surprised by Aoi's sudden outpouring of words and emotion. At first he thought she had proposed the coaster simply to spite Hiroshi, but he was wrong. It had really been for Hiroshi's sake…

As if she could read Kotarou's mind, Aoi placed a finger on her lips and winked at him. "Ah, but please don't tell Hiroshi I told you. Okay?"

Takashi ran up to Kotarou. "Come on you two. Let's get in line already."

Behind him, Hiroshi plodded along gloomily.

"Say Dai-chan, if you want...wanna go on something else first?" Koboshi asked, sensitive to Hiroshi's anxiety.

After stealing a glance at Aoi, Hiroshi took a deep breath and puffed his chest out like a peacock.

"Fu fu. What are you implying, Uematsu? I'll have you know that I, Hiroshi Mitarai, am not afraid of any roller coaster! I'll ride this one and I'll ride them all! That's right! Bring it on! Ha ha ha hah!!"

It was an obvious act, for while Hiroshi's body was laughing, his eyes certainly were not.

"You really shouldn't do something you don't want to do, Dai-chan. Your face is all stiff," Koboshi continued, staring into his eyes.

"...Well, if you're that worried about me, I suppose I should help quell your anxieties and sit out this ride. After all, part of being a warrior is hearing and heeding a maiden's plea, is it not..."

He was actually quite relieved to go along with Koboshi's request... but he wasn't about to tarnish his illusion of courage.

"Well if he wants to go that badly, you really should let him, Koboshi," Aoi said. "Besides, you can't expect him to become a strong heir to the House

of Mitarai if he can't even ride something like this. Right, Hiroshi?"

"R…right. Of course…"

Backed into a corner, Hiroshi had no choice but to ride the dreaded "INAZUMA."

"I wonder if Dai-chan's really okay about this? I'm kinda' scared, but he looks way more scared than me," Koboshi remarked to Takashi as they walked towards the beginning of the line for the ride.

Takashi shrugged his shoulders. "What can we do? He's the one who said he wanted to go on. Sometimes, a man's just gotta dig in and take what's coming to him."

"He's gotta do what? But why? Why should he force himself to do something like that?"

"Hmmm. If you ask me, Dai-chan probably just wants to show Ao that he's gotten tougher," Kotarou said.

"I see…but that's so weird to me. This forcing and faking thing." Koboshi wasn't at all satisfied with Takashi or Kotarou's explanations.

*But they're childhood friends*, she thought. *You're supposed to be able to be yourself around them. They're the people in this world you're supposed to feel comfortable with. If it was me, and Kotarou or*

*Ten-chan suddenly started acting differently, I'd be offended. I'd feel like there was a wall between us.*

Try as she might, she simply could not understand the relationship between Hiroshi and Aoi.

As the number one attraction in the park, there was about a half an hour long line queued up to ride the "INAZUMA."

"Dai-chan, we're almost there~su. You can do it~su!"

"The weather sure is nice today. Ha ha ha ha!" Hiroshi said. He put on an eerily cheery façade, chit-chattering non-stop about this, that, and everything. He was a perfect example of how a human being laughed to forget his fears.

Next to him stood Misha, the perfect example of how a human being laughed when they were happy. Bubbling with anticipation for the coaster, she let out a "Tee hee hee hee" every few steps they took. The difference in their smiles was like night and day.

Eventually, through the fits of laughter, it became their turn to ride the "INAZUMA." Wanting to sit next to Kotarou, Koboshi began to maneuver her way next to him…only to have Aoi brazenly cut in front of her.

"I'm calling shotgun to Kotarou!"

As if that weren't enough, Aoi slipped her arm through Kotarou's and dragged him aboard the "INA-ZUMA". With a confused look, Kotarou followed her, his cheeks slightly red.

*Ah! H...how unfair. Ao...*

"Ahhh, but I wanted to ride next to Kotarou~su!" Misha chimed in.

But Aoi easily ignored Koboshi's thoughts and Misha's voice. *You snooze, you lose,* Aoi thought. *And they lost.* She hadn't done anything wrong. Kotarou remained outwardly calm, though he was thinking she might have gotten carried away again.

*Ring.* ♬

Once more, he thought he heard the faint ringing of a bell. He looked up. Sitting on a bench, about 50 meters away, he saw the petite figure of the girl with the ferret.

*It's her. The girl I met on the way to that lake.*

"Hey, you…"

"What? Aoi responded, thinking his words had been directed to her.

Kotarou shook his head. "Nothing." He turned his attention towards the other girl again, but the bench was empty, and he didn't see any sign of her among the crowds near the bench either.

Koboshi had a big old pout on her lips as she watched Aoi and Kotarou getting along so famously.

"'Sup, Uematsu? Just ignore Ao, okay? Look, how's about I sit next to you instead. We don't often sit together so it'll be something new. Call it 'fresh,' if you will," Takashi grinned.

He gave her big old V sign.

"Fine," Koboshi said with a sigh. "If you want to sit next to me that much, I guess I'll let you."

"Ouch! That hurt!"

Koboshi was bluffing, of course, trying not to disturb the already tenuous atmosphere Aoi had created. Despite her harsh tone, Takashi just smiled gently at her.

*Thank you, Ten-chan. I know you're just trying to cheer me up*, Koboshi thought, even though her words didn't reflect her gratitude. They boarded the roller coaster together.

"You're with me~su, Dai-chan," Misha said.

"O…oooHhh…"

The odd couple took their seats next to one another and Shia rode behind them, by herself. Nya, who didn't quite meet the height requirement, waited on the bus for their return.

Shia was always so quiet and conservative; no one

had honestly expected her to get on with them. But she seemed quite fine, sitting there as pleasant as ever.

"The first time I got on a swing, it was such a wondrous feeling. It was like…like I was free. I thought I might feel that way again if I ride on this…that I might feel that same wind on my face."

Kotarou turned to look at her before the "INAZUMA" took off. "Shia, have you ever ridden a roller coaster before?"

"No…"

"And you're not scared? Look how high it is," Hiroshi said, rather surprised at her decision to go on. He had to admit, she was much more daring than him.

"I wouldn't know if I was scared until I tried first," was her simple answer. She gazed up at the "INAZUMA." Maybe, all the way up there and high in the air, she would feel the memory of something come back to her, just like the first time she had been on a swing. That was what she was thinking—hoping—as she sat.

With each of them thinking their own thoughts and experiencing their own emotions, the "INAZUMA" took off.

Despite the screams and yelps from Kotarou, Aoi, Takashi, and Koboshi, they enjoyed every bit of their

ride. Shia, on the other hand, did not utter a single syllable, and with a quiet smile on her lips concentrated on simply taking in the full experience of her very first roller coaster ride.

As for Misha and Hiroshi…

"Tee hee hee hee…this is amazing~su! Woo hoo!! I feel like I might fly away~su!" Misha said, ecstatic.

Next to her, Hiroshi held onto the hand rail for dear life, not at all interested in the scenery. His eyes were clamped shut and he held his head down. Through his gritted teeth, he emitted a series of muffled moans, unheard amid all the screams.

Whoooshhh. Every time the coaster descended, Hiroshi felt like throwing up. He could not bear the nauseating feeling he got when his stomach lurched into the sky and stayed up while the rest of his body plummeted back to earth. Through all his discomfort, he somehow managed to catch a glimpse of Misha next to him with her hands off the bars and the biggest smile on her face.

*I don't get it! I don't understand how anyone could find enjoyment in something like this! But I mustn't give in. I can't lose! I'm stronger now and I have to make Ao see that. Besides, it's not like this'll go on forever.*

*As long as the track is, it can't possibly last longer than ten minutes. What's a couple of minutes, anyway?*

Hiroshi tried his very best to bear the unbearable. But a couple of minutes had never felt so long in his life. For a while he thought it would never end and his suffering would continue for all eternity…

"HaahhhhHHh, I thought I was gonna die."

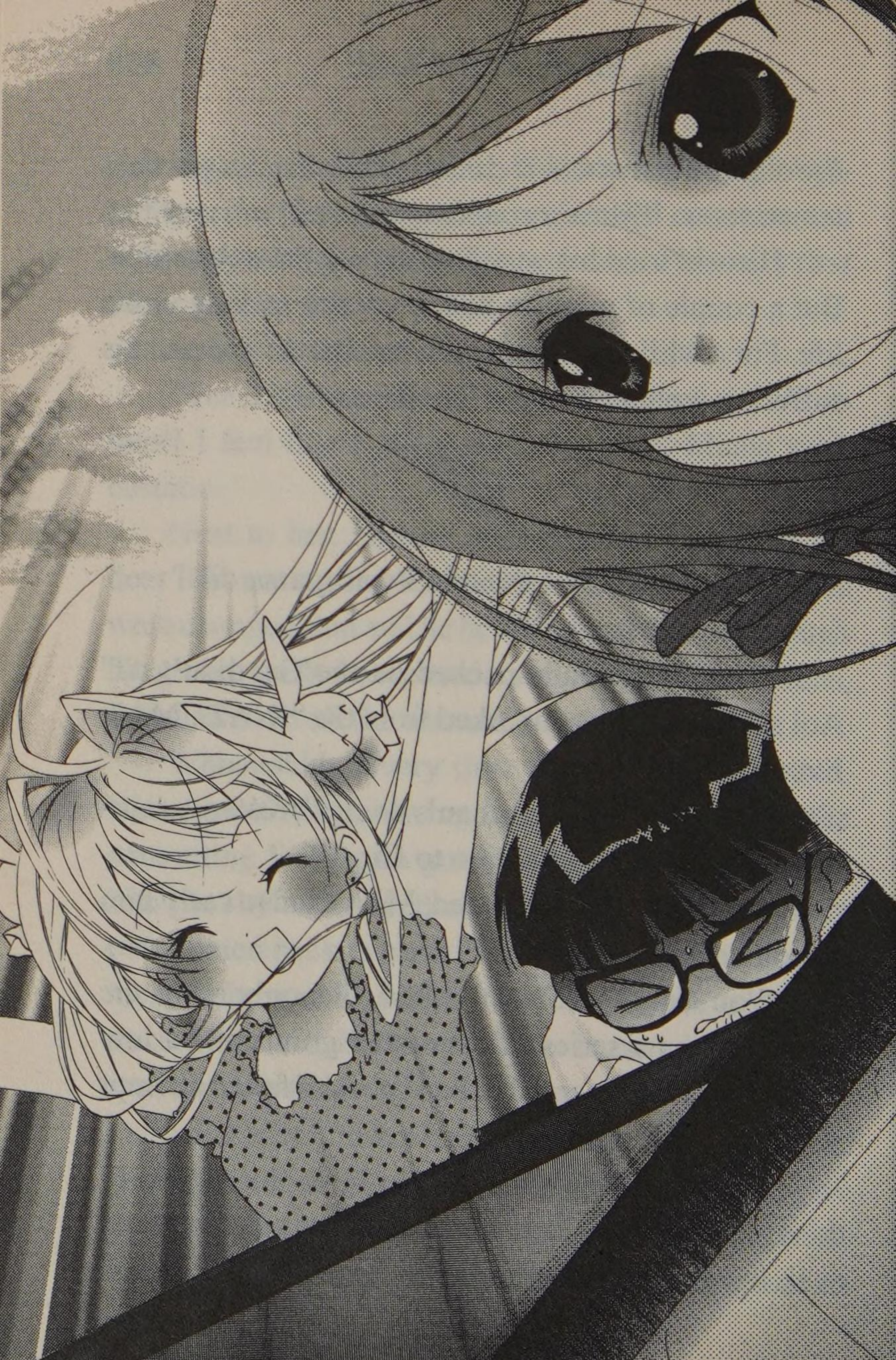
"That thing really packed on the Gs, didn't it?" Aoi said as they disembarked from the "INAZUMA". Everyone agreed.

"I wonder how Dai-chan's doing?" Kotarou murmured, turning his attention to Hiroshi.

Hiroshi was so weakened, Misha had to carry him out on her back.

"You okay?" Koboshi asked. The only reply she received was a series of disjointed grunts and a low *gu gu gu gu* that seemed to be Hiroshi's failed attempt at forming a sentence.

A young girl, who looked to be in the second or third grade, and an older man and woman who appeared to be her parents came into view opposite of Aoi.



"So, what should we go on next?" said the father.

"How about the Coffee Cups?" the mother suggested.

They were obviously deciding where to head to next in the park. Right as the three passed Aoi, a breeze, seemingly from out of nowhere, brushed against her bag and dinged the bell on her key holder with a crisp little *ring*. ♬

Anticipating the onset of another headache, Aoi's body went rigid as she braced herself against the pain. But the pain never came.

"You did well, Hiroshi," she said sympathetically.

The moment didn't last, and in the next moment she was tugging the group toward another roller coaster-like attraction.

"Let's go on that one next, guys! You're coming too, Hiroshi, so you might want to quit your moping."

With that, she quickened her pace towards the next ride. Aoi was ten times more forceful than when they first met at the villa. The group was dragged along by her enthusiasm, unable to resist. Forced on this ride and then that, Hiroshi continued to dry heave. He looked so feeble it was probably all he could do to walk. And yet Hiroshi ran around the Mt. Fuji Amusement Park,

succumbing to Aoi's ceaseless bidding.

"Hiroshi, don't you feel like eating something cold? Because I do."

"Hiroshi, would you check and see how long the wait is?"

"I'll go check for you," Kotarou offered at one point, unable to keep up his indifference any longer.

The moment he spoke up, Aoi's face hardened. "That's quite all right. All you and your friends need to do is wait right here without a care in the world…right, Hiroshi?"

"That's right. You needn't do a thing." Hiroshi insisted. Against his stubbornness, there was nothing anyone could do.

"This whole place lights up when it gets dark, you know. It's just beautiful," Aoi said as the group made its way towards the Ferris wheel.

Hiroshi trotted ahead, like he had ever since Aoi took over.

"Dai-chan looks like he's having oodles of fun~su!" Misha commented nonchalantly as she watched him running up ahead.

Kotarou let out a long, deep breath. "You think? I feel kinda bad for him, actually."

"Why would you feel that way~su? Just look at his face and you can see~su how happy he is to be with Ao~su!"

"It just doesn't seem that way to me," Kotarou said quietly.

Watching Hiroshi run whenever Aoi snapped her fingers, his face pale with desperation, Kotarou found it hard to see how Misha came to the conclusion Hiroshi was happy.

Out of curiosity he decided to follow a step behind Misha, and observe.

"Oh wow, oh my gosh!! What a gorgeous view of Mt. Fuji!" Koboshi gasped from atop the Ferris wheel.

"Yes, isn't it magnificent? This is why Mt. Fuji is the fount of the true blooded Japanese Male!"

As weak as he had been beforehand, Hiroshi's eyes now shone brilliantly. Mt. Fuji was Japan's tallest mountain. Hiroshi often used its magnificent image to fuel his aspirations to be number one.

Once more, Kotarou shared a private box with Aoi. Although she had been pretty excited when they

first boarded the Ferris wheel, squealing about this and that, the closer the sky neared, the quieter she became. Now at the highest point, she was completely silent, staring intently at the world below.

"Humans are so small," she said suddenly.

Kotarou thought he ought to say something in response, but at the same time, it didn't seem as if she had directed the comment to him at all.

"Hiroshi puts his all in everything he does. It's adorable, really…so adorable you can't help but tease him. Because he's the oldest son of the House of Mitarai, he's had to study a lot of different things since he was little…because of that, I always felt a little bad for him."

She rested her gaze upon Mt. Fuji as she spoke of their past. "Despite it all, he's never whined or complained about anything. I remember this one time, we got lost in the mountains. It was really scary and we were both complete messes. Even though he was smaller than me, even though his face was all scrunched up with tears, do you know what he said? 'I'll protect you Ao!' He's a good guy. Sure, he talks a lot of bravado but deep down he's kind and grounded. More than anyone else…I know so."

Absorbed in her memories, her face was radi-

ant, with a gentle, peaceful smile. Though outwardly willful, Aoi probably cared more about the feelings of others than anyone else.

After listening to her, Kotarou couldn't help but see Aoi in a different light.

"I'm sorry, Ao. I…I think that maybe…I was wrong about you…"

"Huh? Oh, don't worry about that, silly! But gee… Hiroshi's so lucky to have friends like you to hang around with… Ahhh, things were so much better back then. Whenever I'd visit the villa, there was crybaby Hiroshi waiting for me. We'd stomp around in the mud all day and explore the mountains until dark…then we'd come home, exhausted, and crash without having to think of tomorrow… But now, old Hiroshi's gone and made himself all these other friends."

Her words were tinged with envy. She hung her head. "Look at me. I've got nothing…I've got no one."

She lifted her head and turned her gaze back outside. Her eyes were glossy with tears. In the back of her mind, the happy, laughing faces of the family they had passed earlier flickered to life.

*…How dare they! Acting all happy just to stick it me!*

*Ring.* ♫

In the wind, the key chain's bell rang.

"…I wish…I wish right now would just go away!"

Aoi's face changed dramatically. It was so sudden it stunned Kotarou, leaving him speechless.

Seeing the look on his face, Aoi lashed out. "What are you looking at? If you've got something to say, be a man and say it!"

That peaceful expression she wore only seconds ago was gone.

*What's going on? What's wrong?* Those thoughts ran through Kotarou's head as the Ferris wheel reached the ground. Kotarou could only stare at Aoi, dumbfounded.

"Aww, man. I must be getting tired. Guess I'll go home."

She hopped out of box, landing with a stomp, and hurriedly made her way towards the park's exit.

"Ehh? But there's still a bunch of rides I want to go on!" Koboshi complained, looking down at the park pamphlet.

"So what? Just come back another time!" Aoi said.

Fed up with Aoi's attitude, Takashi finally

snapped. "Don't talk to her like that, Ao!"He couldn't—and wouldn't—stand for any form of injustice. He fought back fiercely, even if it meant standing up to a teacher.

"Eek! He's scaring me! Do something, Hiroshi!"

Just as Takashi was about to run at Aoi, Hiroshi stepped in front of him, blocking his path. Still weak with fear from his roller coaster experience, his legs wobbled unsteadily.

"Ayanokoji…everyone. I am sorry. I beg you to just let it go today. I promise to bring you back again. Please."

Seeing the desperation in Hiroshi's eyes, Takashi swallowed his words and backed off.

"Hey man, you don't hafta go all out with the speech, okay? It totally messes me up and all…ahhh, she wants to go home, right? Then fine, let's go home."

"…Yeah. It's not like I HAD to go on those rides anyhow so…I'll do as you ask…I'll go home too," Koboshi said quietly.

"Hiroshi, I want to get a gift for Grandmama…" Even while the friends were sorting out their differences, Aoi continued to order Hiroshi around.

"…Ah, yes. That's a good idea. What should we get her?" Hiroshi apologized to his friends with a hand held vertically in front of his face. Legs still wobbling, he started to run to Aoi.

Misha darted forward. She stopped right in front of Aoi, stuck her tongue out and gave Aoi a goofy old raspberry.

"Ugh, why are you doing that? More importantly, you're in my way, so move."

Aoi thrust her arms out, in an attempt to push Misha out of her way. But before she touched her, Misha grabbed ahold of Aoi's cheeks and tugged them outwards. Aoi's face stretched sideways, giving her a funny, oblong appearance. She looked so funny that in spite of their mood, Kotarou and the others couldn't help but giggle.

Aoi flailed about, trying to get Misha to let go. "Owwwowowowowowowwwww! How dare you laugh at me! Hey, lemme go!"

"No, no, no~su, Ao," Misha said, getting the struggling Aoi under control. "Your face is all scary~su. You're much cuter when you smile~su! Tee hee hee hee hee!!"

Misha proceeded to showcase a series of silly and amusing faces to Aoi, twisting her own face this way

and that as if it were made of rubber. For a moment, Kotarou and crew thought they felt a soft, wondrous aura of light surround Misha and Aoi.

*Huh? What was that?* They all wondered at once.

Aoi, whose eyebrows had been knitted up angrily, suddenly burst into laughter. Then her expression changed again, just like the screen on the TV when someone changed the channel. Her eyebrows dropped into a deep, sad furrow.

"Ah, I'm so sorry…I…I don't know what to do anymore. I didn't mean to…really, I'm so sorry! So, what do you all want to ride next?" she asked. Her words poured out. "I picked all the other rides, so how about you pick next, Koboshi!"

She turned to face the others, and as she did, she accidentally dropped her bag. It fell, and the bell on her key holder rang again with a loud *Ring* ♬ Immediately Aoi dropped to her knees, holding her head in pain.

"Are you okay, Ao?" Hiroshi asked, running up to her side.

She nodded and stood, a pained expression on her face. "Sorry guys. I guess I'm tired… I'm going to head back to the bus to rest, but why don't you guys stay a little longer, okay?" She began to sluggishly

walk towards the park exit.

"Ao, are you okay?" Hiroshi called after her. He looked at his friends. "Sorry all. I'm worried about her, so I'm going back to the bus too. Go on and ride what you wish, though."

He started right after her.

"Nah, it's okay," Takashi said. "Let's go home."

Everyone nodded, agreeing with Takashi, and began to walk towards the exit as well.

"Did I do something wrong~su? I hope Ao gets better soon~su."

"No, you didn't do anything, Misha. Not at all. Come on, let's go," Kotarou smiled, cheering up the crestfallen Misha as they walked.

*Ring.* ♬

From somewhere, he thought he heard the faint sound of a bell ringing and began to look around. Unable to find its source, he left the scene behind.

Shia, who had been bringing up the rear, heard the bell as well, and much like Kotarou, was unable to locate its origin.

The sun had begun its descent across the sky, staining Kotarou and his friends a gentle orange color. *Ku ku ku.* The high-pitched cry of a small animal echoed through the air. Perched atop one of

the pillars to the park gates was the shorthaired girl, the sleek white ferret resting on her shoulder. Though they were at least ten meters off the ground, not even a glimmer of fear showed on her face. And despite her odd choice of seating, not a single person noticed her presence.

The girl sat quietly, watching Kotarou and company from above.

"Hrrmmm. So even though they all don't like the situation, they refuse to say so, eh? How strange. Why do you think that is? Fiaa?"

She poked the ferret in the nose. The ferret began to make a threatening, hissing noise.

"That's why I like you. I know right away when you're angry. As for how they're feeling, I haven't the slightest. Maybe if I observe them a little longer, it'll start to make some sense…"

Nimbly, she hopped off the pillar, landing with a barely audible tapping sound. Once on the ground, she placed her hand on her cheek and thought for a while. Then she started after Kotarou and his friends, towards the park exit. Twisting its body deftly through the crowds, the ferret swiftly followed.

# 2

By the time the retro bus arrived back at the villa, the sky had begun to melt from deep orange to a pale, purple color as the sun set. It was just before 6:00 PM.

The first one out of the bus, Koboshi raised her hands above her head and stretched her back. "Phew. Boy oh boy, it felt like such a long day today. I feel like stretching out big time."

Following her lead, the others entered a series of stretches as soon as they hit solid ground.

"It feels like we've been here two days already because we were up so early," Takashi offered. His words were mingled with a few grunts as he tested the bounds of his elasticity.

"Well then, I suggest we all go off and relax for a bit while we wait for dinner. Make yourselves at home. Just remember to gather here at 7:00 PM sharp," Hiroshi commanded. Having finally recap-

tured the composure lost during his terrifying bout with the roller coaster, his familiar, curt tone made a triumphant return.

"Let's go take a dip in the hot springs after we put our stuff away, guys," Takashi suggested. "That way we'll be all freshened up for dinner."

"The hot springs~su, outdoors~su! They're fun, fun, fun, no matter how many times you take one~su!"

Chit-chattering, they began towards the entry-way.

"I'm really sorry about earlier, guys," Aoi said. "If it's okay with all of you, I'd really like to make it up somehow. So…if you don't mind sticking with me just a while longer, there's something I'd like to show you…You see, there's a great lake not far from here. Kotarou's already seen it but I don't think anyone else has yet. It's really magnificent at sunset…really, really beautiful."

The crew exchanged glances with one another. In all honesty, they were pooped, and inwardly counting the minutes—no, the seconds—before they could finally just sink into in their beds.

Kotarou turned around and looked at everyone's faces. "What do you think, guys?"

After the way Aoi had treated them all day, dragging them here, there, and everywhere, they all seemed rather torn about whether they should stay or go.

He looked at Aoi. Her eyes were limpid. From the very bottom of her heart she wanted nothing more than to show the others a very beautiful view. It was the same kind face she had showed him atop the Ferris wheel. Glad it was back, Kotarou smiled.

"You're right, it really is beautiful out there and it's only about five minutes away. I think it's definitely worth checking out."

"Yeah? Then let's go before the sun sets," Takashi said. Aoi began to lead them toward the lake.

"Shia's not feeling very well~su," Misha said. "So I'm gonna see her to her room and see if she needs anything~su. Then I can catch up with you all~su."

"Oh no…Misha, I'm fine. Please go with the others," Shia replied but her voice was shaky.

"It's okies-su. I'm worried about you-su, Shia. Kotarou, go ahead, okies~su?"

"How about we all go check it out tomorrow instead?" Kotaru offered. The idea of leaving Shia behind all alone just didn't feel right to anyone in the entryway.

"Don't worry-su. If you all stay back because of

her, it'll make Shia feel really, really bad~su," Misha said in a small voice. She asked Aoi for directions to the lake.

"All right, Misha," Kotarou said finally. "We'll be waiting for you at the lake. Shia, get a good rest, okay?"

They all filed out after Aoi.

"I'm so sorry about all of this, Misha. I'm sure I'll be better once I lay down a bit."

Once back in their room, Misha prepared a cold compress for Shia. "Is there anything else I can do for you~su?"

"Oh no, you've already done too much. You should hurry after Kotarou now, Misha."

"Roger~su!!" Misha directed her gazed to Nya. "Nya-san, please take care of Shia, okies~su?"

*Nyaahh*, mewed the black cat in response. A look of relief crossed Misha's face and she left the room.

The door closed with a click, and Nya spoke up. "*How pathetic. Tiring out from this little bit of spiritual energy.*"

Hiroshi had spoken to them about how the gods lived in the mountains, but to Shia the holy setting was a painful affair. She felt a sort of supernatural energy

and it was affecting her. While the strength of the energy was considerably weaker in manmade areas like Mt. Fuji Park, here, in the middle of the mountains, the energy was overwhelming, made stronger by nature's mysterious moods. It was felt very much like how staying out in the sun too long might result in heatstroke. But it was nothing a little rest couldn't fix.

"I'm sorry…but…" Shia swallowed the rest of her words. She had come to the Human World in search of something very dear to her and the time she could spend with Misha and the others was limited. Because of that, it made her cherish every second and every moment they shared with one another. So much that she didn't mind falling ill, if it meant being close to them.

"Excuse me, but…do you…feel something…out of sorts…about Aoi?" she asked Nya.

Nya quietly considered the question before answering.

*"That I do. But it's a slightly different feeling than you might sense from a denizen of the Demon World like us. It is quite similar, though. …Perhaps she's being called by one of us…? Right now, I cannot say with certainly who or what that girl is…but I'm sure the truth will be revealed in the near future."*

"I see," Shia whispered.

She closed her eyes, and tried to get some rest. But in her head, the *Ring*♬ of a bell chimed on and on…and on.

"It's just five minutes down this road," Aoi, who was walking alongside Hiroshi and ahead of the others, cheerfully called behind her.

Just looking at Hiroshi from behind, they could all tell how excited he was to be beside her.

"Gosh, I'm sooo tired. But, Kotarou…what made you decide to want to come here?" Koboshi asked. There was a bit of an accusatory tone in her voice. "I mean, what if Dai-chan gets used and abused again while we're there?"

"…Don't worry. See? Just look at them. They're getting along really, really well. Besides, the lake really is pretty. I wanted to show it to you … and everyone."

Hearts fluttered in Koboshi's eyes as she heard the words cross Kotarou's lips.

*Eh? He wanted to show me? Fu fu fu. Is that so?* ♥

Interpreting Kotarou's words in the manner most favorable to her, Koboshi began to tread a little

heavier, crushing the leaves beneath her feet with a loud rustle.

*Eh? For me? He wanted to see the lake with me? How romantic! ♥ Oh you, Kotarou!*

They say a woman in love is a simple creature. Drunk on the notion of seeing the lake with Kotarou, any trace of trepidation she harbored for Aoi disappeared.

Not one ever to pass up taking a pot shot at Koboshi in her dreamy heart-heart state, Takashi gave Koboshi a little dig. "Uematsu, I don't know what you're fantasizing about, but your nostrils are flared like a hippo's."

"Ten-chan, you meanie! They so are not flared!"

"Says you!"

Laughing and joking about silly things like that, the group continued along the sunset path to the lake.

*Rustle rustle rustle*... A strange noise, from between the rows of trees. Sensing something foul in the area, Hiroshi lowered his stance and readied himself to fight.

"Show yourself, knave! Nnngghhh. No, this feeling…a creature of some sort?!" He scooped up a pebble at his feet and chucked it into the overgrowth.

*Whoosh.* The pebble whizzed through the air between the trees. *Rap. Thunk.* They heard it fall onto the forest floor.

"NngghHhhh. Did he get away…?" Hiroshi squinted into the forest. "No, there you are!"

*Whooosh. Thud.* The dull sound of impact, followed by the hissing, plaintive cry of a wounded animal.

"All right! I got you this time!" Wiping the sweat from his brow, Hiroshi headed in the direction of the cry.

Kotarou and the others gathered around Hiroshi. "Dai-chan, that's dangerous. What if it's a scary animal?"

"Oh, stop making such a big deal out of it," Aoi said fearlessly. She stepped forward, alone. The hissing sound was still there, loud and clear, from somewhere nearby.

"Ao! Don't move!"

Stunned by Hiroshi's unexpected shout, Aoi stopped in her tracks.

*Rustle rustle rustle…* The blades of grass swelled like an ocean wave. As they watched, the swell came closer and closer.

"Wahh! It's coming this way!" Takashi yelled.

Afraid that something might jump out of the grass, he picked up a tree branch from the ground and waved it in front of him. Something white flickered in the grass.

Koboshi jumped back. "W-what the…? What was that?"

*Huh?* There was something very familiar to Kotarou about the movement. That long, white streak…it had to be the girl's white ferret.

While Kotarou was relieved, Takashi and Koboshi, who had no idea what was coming towards them, were frozen with terror.

"Don't worry guys, it's just a ferret. You know, the animal people keep as pets. They're not wild and they don't attack people," Kotarou said to calm his friends.

"Oh, I've seen him around here too," Aoi said. "It's okay, everyone."

"Is that so?" Hiroshi asked. He turned to Kotarou and Aoi, still low in his stance, fists at the ready.

"Yeah, two days ago around dusk. I was here at the lake when I met this girl and her pet ferret."

"So we don't have to run for our lives?" Koboshi asked, a little smile creeping back onto her lips.

"Ahhh, boy was that nerve-wracking," Aoi said with a snicker. "I mean all of a sudden you had the

scariest look on your face, Hiroshi…and then, when you jumped out to protect me, you looked like such a spaz!"

*You don't have to say it like that,* Kotarou thought. "…Hey, he tried to protect you, Ao. And that was really noble of him," he said, rather severely.

Takashi decided to offer his opinion as well."Why don't you just drop the attitude and tell him 'thank you.' It's not cool to act like that, Ao."

Aoi fell silent for a moment. "I'm sorry. You're both right. Sorry, I apologize. Hiroshi…thanks," Aoi said, remembering why she wanted to bring them all to the lake in the first place.

"It's okay. Don't worry yourself about it, Ao. Now then, shall we? I'd prefer we reach the lake before it becomes too dark," Hiroshi said, obviously ecstatic over Aoi's words.

He hurried the others along but hung back a bit, keeping himself ready, in fighting stance. His gaze was fixed intently upon the direction the ferret had disappeared.

*I know what I felt and it was most foul. I've climbed Mt. Fuji to train in the mystical arts of Shugendo[8] and Onmyodo[9] too many times to count and I'm more than confident in my ability to sense the sudden*

*manifestation of suspicious presences like this. A ferret, they say? Most certainly not. To think something so unearthly would dare threaten the sanctity of these mountains ...something wicked this way surely comes. And I must be prepared.*

Reinforcing his conviction that under no circumstance should he allow harm to befall Aoi before she set off for New York, Hiroshi let out a loud *kiai*[10]. "Haaahhh!"

With renewed spirit, he followed his friends towards the lake.

# 3

Koboshi shouted as they reached the lake, “Wow! What a fantastic sight!”

The scene that unfolded before them was a beautiful fantasy land, just as Aoi and Kotarou had said.

The sun had already fallen and through the trees they saw the moon against the dark blue sky. Stars blinked from above, and the opposite shoreline was so dark it was hard to tell where the lake ended and the sky began.

“The lake has different looks, depending on the time of day. But no matter when you visit, it’s still pretty.” Aoi beamed, her voice bursting with pride, as if speaking of her prized possession.

“Really?” Koboshi said, gushing. “Then maybe I should get up early tomorrow morning and come visit.”

Aoi continued. “Oh, and…there’s one more place

I want to show you…"

Talk of beautiful things was always able to bring the hearts of two girls together. Despite the earlier unsociable mood, Koboshi and Aoi now acted as if they had been best friends forever.

"Come on. Let's go over there and check it out, Koboshi. During the summer they have boats you can ride in…"

At Aoi's suggestion, Koboshi and Aoi began to walk towards the pier.

Kotarou watched the girls leave, then looked above him at the sky. "Say, Ten-chan, is that Venus up there?"

"Nah. Ah, wait, you're right. And that's the constellation Pegasus…"

Kotarou and Takashi cast their gaze to the skies, engaging in a bit of astronomical observation. The sky was still a faint purple but, unlike in the city, already a hundred stars shone above their heads. Looking at them made all their thoughts drain out of their heads and cleared their minds. Before they even knew it, the two boys were sitting in complete silence, just gazing at the sky.

Kotarou felt as if he might be swallowed by the vastness of the sky. *I'm sure that from somewhere up*

*there, my mother's watching over me.*

Nature had the ability to bring about such powerful emotions.

Even as Aoi and Koboshi sat on the pier, they continued whispering to one another about this and that.

"So, Koboshi, do you like Kotarou?"

Koboshi's heart fluttered uncontrollably as she considered Aoi's sudden, straightforward question.

"Like him...well, of course I like him. I mean, we've been friends since kindergarten after all.

"I don't mean 'like' like that but...oh please, as if you don't know what I'm talking about, you." Aoi peered into Koboshi's face impishly with a wide grin.

"Oh, that's enough about me, I think. What about you, Ao? How do you feel about Dai-chan?"

Aoi clapped her hands, giggling at the notion. "Hiroshi? Now he's definitely what you'd call a childhood friend. I wouldn't—couldn't—consider him anything more than that! How can I put this...well, he's not quite a little brother but...still really important to me. I guess like a kindred soul, you could say."

"A kindred soul?"

"Yeah. It's hard to explain but…neither Hiroshi nor I chose what we are. We never asked to be the heir or heiress of this or that family. But because of the environment we were raised in, there are things we're just expected to do. Kids at school say mean things about us without ever trying to get to know us… It might seem like we've got nothing to worry about, but we do. Hiroshi and I understand those things about each other. Nothing formal though—we don't have meetings to cheer each other on or anything, if that's what you're thinking. …I think that's why the moments we've shared here are extra special to us. …It's like this big feeling of relief washing over me whenever I'm here."

Aoi looked into the starry sky. Her eyes glimmered sadly in the soft starlight. Though there was a smile on her lips, Koboshi thought she looked like she was crying.

"You sure about that? Because according to Daichan, all you ever did was bully him back then."

"Is that what he told you? Well, I'll have to make sure to punish him for lying like that," Aoi said, pretending to get angry.

Seeing Aoi roll up her sleeves, Koboshi quickly

corrected herself. "D…don't get the wrong idea. I think Dai-chan really had fun with you, despite all that. I mean, whenever he talks about you, Ao, it's like…well, it's like his heart's racing a mile a minute."

"Eww, what are you trying to say?" In spite of her words, it looked like she was carefully thinking something over. "Actually, I was really surprised today. Hiroshi…well, years ago he was soooo timid. He was always cowering behind me, crying, you see. When I saw him today, I could hardly believe my eyes. He was so…manly, and I have to admit, I felt so awkward around him, especially just now."

"Why though? Why can't you just be honest and compliment him."

"Hrmmm, well…I was never really any good at that. I don't know…it's just really hard for me to…to show my true feelings…"

Perhaps it was because Koboshi was such a good listener, but Aoi offered up a rare glimpse of that hidden self and, little by little, began to talk about her school, her parents' divorce, and how lonely she sometimes felt.

"Ao, you really shouldn't keep everything bottled up inside yourself all the time. …And as for your parents' divorce…you haven't told them, have you?

About how you'd feel if they separated…and just how sad it would make you?"

Her heart jerked painfully. Koboshi was absolutely right.

*Please don't get divorced. Please don't do it—for me. If we were all apart…I'd be so lonely!*

That's what she had wanted to tell them so many times. But because she thought it wouldn't do any good, she had given up on doing so before ever trying. Suddenly Aoi felt more envious of Hiroshi than ever before.

Hiroshi had these friends who sat down and listened to him, who advised and comforted him, even getting mad at him when he needed it. Compared to that, what did she have…?

*Ring.* ♫

The sound of a bell came from somewhere in the mountains.

Kotarou spun around. This time Hiroshi heard the ringing as well, loud and clear. Hiroshi had been vigilantly walking the perimeter of the lake, rather than enjoying the scenery, and not the least bit aware he

was the center of the girls' conversation. The moment he heard the bell ring, he felt the unearthly presence reach its peak.

Thinking her headache might return, Aoi braced herself and touched her hand to her head. These past two or three days, she had been living in fear of that ringing sound. Each time she heard it a thick, muddy feeling crept into her head and caused the most unbearable pain.

Only Takashi and Koboshi did not hear its ring.

Seeing Aoi sitting in quiet reverie, Koboshi thought, *I bet Ao's been through so much pain. More than I could possibly imagine.*

She stood, immediately wanting to help lift Aoi's spirits somehow. "Ao, let's go back to the others. I bet it'll be more fun if we all sit and chat together."

"You're probably right."

It was only a few moments after the bell rang and Aoi's body was still rigid. An intense heat had begun to build up in the depths of her heart and, soon, she felt it palpitate violently within her chest.

*This is different from before...what's going on? I*

*can't breathe. Haah. Haah. Koboshi...help me.*

That's what she wanted to say but as the words reached her throat, they hardened and stopped. Something slippery moved in her head. She felt as if the slippery sensation spoke to her.

*("Just do it...")*

*Is that...my voice? Or Koboshi's? No...it's a girl's voice but I've never heard it before.*

*("Does it matter? You'll feel better if you do. It's so easy. Just...help me out...a little...")*

A thunderous shock ran through Aoi's head. She felt her body moving, guided by an unseen force. She was helpless to do anything about it. She had been clutching her chest with pain but now she slowly turned to face Koboshi.

"Ao? What's the matter? Let's go."

Koboshi hadn't noticed the change in Aoi at all. She did, however, recognize there was something not quite right about the situation. Head cocked to one side, she stared straight into Aoi's face. Because of the moonlight, the right half of Aoi's face was obscured in shadow. In the visible left half, lit by moonlight, her eye was narrowed, the pupil the smallest it could be. She didn't look like herself at all.

Koboshi was reminded of an owl's eyes and how

their pupils reacted to the light by growing larger or smaller in an almost dizzying manner. Owls had big eyes, like shiny glass beads; nothing ever seemed to reflect in them. That's what Aoi's eye looked like now.

"Koboshi. I think I saw a really cute fish in the water over there," Aoi said. She pointed at a ripple on the surface of the lake. Even though her voice sounded cheery, the visible side of her face had not lost any of its harshness.

*How weird. She looks like a doll,* Koboshi thought. *The left side of her face is all white in the moonlight.*

She remembered the words of a certain friend of hers who loved fortune telling.

"Did you know, Koboshi? It's said that each side of a person's face has a different personality. The right side is called the 'Angel Face' and the left side is the 'Devil Face.' The right side is the one that shows the 'good' face of a person…like if a student might act all goody-goody when kissing up to a teacher.

"On the other hand, the left side shows the person's true face. So, as handsome or pretty as a person's right face might be, if they're twisted and mean on the inside, the left side of their face will be just as twisted as their hearts. If you ever meet someone you can't read, just observe the left side of their face."

Ever since she heard that, Koboshi had been conscious of the way the left side of her face looked, worrying if it ever showed meanness to anyone else.

*I must have checked myself in the mirror a hundred times that first day. But, if half of Ao's face looks like a doll's, does that mean that she's really a doll?* Koboshi wondered. *Yeah right. It's just the moonlight playing tricks on me, making me think all these weird thoughts. I really need to think about something else,* Koboshi told herself.

"Are you even listening to what I'm saying?" Aoi asked gruffly, breaking Koboshi out of her reverie. Too busy with the thoughts in her head, Koboshi hadn't really been paying attention to Aoi's words.

"Ah, sorry about that. Of course I was listening. You were saying something about a fish, right?"

The night around them was darker now than when they first arrived. Koboshi could barely see much farther than the surface of the lake. She moved as close as she could to the edge of the pier and peered over in search of the fish.

"I don't see it anywhere. Where was it again?"

Although she did not hear Aoi's response, she felt her presence close behind her.

Koboshi felt the wind billow around her, next to

her back. As if being fanned forward by that gust, her feet lifted off the ground.

The push was soft. She was sure something brushed against her back.

*Hands?* ...It couldn't possibly be.

"Kya!" Koboshi let out a small scream and fell into the water with a splash.

Above her, Aoi stared blankly at the shore.

"Ahh, I'm so late~su. I hope Kotarou and the others are still there~su," Misha said to herself as she walked along the mountain path.

Because Hiroshi's butler had asked her to bring it along, she carried a flashlight. It was hardly enough, with no streetlights to help illuminate the path, and served only to coat her surroundings in a dim sort of haze. Still, Misha was not the least bit scared.

"The stars are so pretty~su. Everyone must be working really hard up there~su."

As if in response to Misha's words, the stars above blinked brightly, filling her head with memories of Heaven as she walked along.

Though Kotarou and the others did not know

it, Misha was an angel. She had descended from the heavens to the Human World so she could train. Right now, she was in the midst of studying on Earth so she could pass the Angel Advancement Exam that would make her a full-fledged angel.

In the skies, the angels were practicing the art of star shooting, an essential part of every angel's job. By shooting a star and making it shine, an angel helped bring peace to whoever gazed upon it. It was a dream for Misha to be able to shoot stars alongside her heavenly compatriots. She hadn't yet achieved the level required to learn that particular technique. That was why, whenever she looked into the night sky, Misha was reminded of her friends in the heavens. Under the twinkling sky, Misha felt them watching over her now, urging her to do her very best on Earth.

"That must be the lake up there~su."

Misha saw, between the trees, the glittering surface of the lake as it reflected the starry night sky. She broke into a run. When she reached the clearing by the lake, she heard a rustling noise and saw something moving up ahead.

"Hmm? What a loooong, narrow, funny-looking dog~su."

It was the ferret Kotarou and the others had seen

earlier. To Misha, it looked like a small dog. The ferret moved swiftly past Misha and disappeared somewhere into the darkness.

*Aww, poop~su. It was so fluffy~su. I bet it would have felt sooo soft if I petted it~su...*

She continued on and came out by the edge of the lake. That was when she saw it. The scene unfolded itself in slow motion—Koboshi peering into the water, Aoi at her side, and Koboshi falling in—no—pushed in by Aoi?

*N-no...it couldn't be~su...right? Ao...*

Aoi turned and faced Misha. In the second their eyes met, Misha felt Aoi's eyes narrow to a cold glare. Then she staggered and crumpled to her knees.

Misha shouted at the top of her lungs. "Oh no oh no oh no~su! This is terrible~su. Koboshi, Ao, I'm coming~su!" She bolted for the lake.



*Ring.* ♫

Kotarou blinked and glanced at the pier. A split second later, the dull splash of something falling into the water reverberated through the air. It was Koboshi and she was struggling to stay on top of the water's surface.

*Why?*

At first, he thought he was dreaming. After all, no one in their right mind would go swimming this late at night…

"H..help…!"

The sound of Koboshi's desperate plea knocked him back to reality. *I have to save Koboshi.*

Kotarou knew Koboshi could easily outswim him in a pool. Right now, however, perhaps because she was afraid, all she could do was to flail about, her arms striking futilely at the water. She was beginning to sink, and fast.

Kotarou yelled out to her. "Hang in there, Koboshi! I'm coming!" He ran as fast as he could to Koboshi's side.

"Uematsu, don't panic. Stop waving about like that!"

From the sounds of it, Takashi jumped into the lake around the very same time he had.

Hiroshi arrived on the scene as well. "How could I let this happen? I thought we were expecting a vile creature, not this. Could it be that my intuition is failing me? Now is not the time for such ruminations. It's time to reveal to you all the spectacular results of my daily swim training. I'm coming, Koboshi Uematsu!"

Hiroshi stripped off his clothes, leaving on nothing but a bright red loin cloth. Running to the lake's edge, he too launched himself into the water.

*Splash. Kaplash. Splish.*

Three very different noises boomed across the darkness of the lake. Each of them had the same destination, however, and accompanied by the splish-splashing of the water, each of the boys raced towards Koboshi. Aoi knelt above them on the pier, seeing neither the boys' rescue attempts nor Koboshi's desperate attempt to stay afloat. Another shadow soon appeared, vigorously running towards the end of the pier.

"Koboshi! Are you okies~su? Hang on~su!"

Misha's shout brought Aoi out of her trance. *Huh? I...what was I doing? Why...ah! Koboshi!*

Aoi jumped to her feet. Hiroshi reached Koboshi first and was swimming back towards the lakeshore with her securely in his arms. Without thinking, Aoi looked at her own hands. They were warm...warm with the memory of Koboshi's back.

*Ah...was it me? Did I do that?! But I didn't mean to, not at all...so why?*

She had been the one who pushed Koboshi off the pier. The cruel image suddenly played back in her mind. Her legs began to shake and it became unbearable to stand. She sank to her knees.

"Ao, what's wrong~su? You okies~su?"

Unable to stop herself from trembling, she felt herself being lifted by Misha and carried away from the pier.

Ku ku ku. The faint sound of a ferret's cry lingered in her ear.

"Phew. Everyone. …Thank you. Thank you so much."

"We're just happy that you're safe~su!" Misha exclaimed, almost bowling Koboshi over with a hug.

Koboshi sat safely on the shore, completely drenched. Beside her sat the ghostly white Aoi and the two soaked boys, Kotarou and Takashi. In the center of it all was Hiroshi, his chest puffed out and his red loin cloth billowing proudly in the wind.

While Kotarou and Takashi had had a bit of trouble making their way over to Koboshi, Hiroshi had, like a fish, swum smoothly and swiftly, and ultimately towed

her back to shore.

"I thought you were good at swimming, Uematsu. How'd you end up sinking like a fat rock?"

Takashi squeezed his wet shirt tight to wring out the lake water. "Yeah, really. …I'm not that good at swimming, but before I knew it, I'd already jumped in. Then my clothes got in the way and I thought I'd end up drowning before I got to save you, Koboshi."

Remembering how much water he had swallowed, Kotarou couldn't help but shiver. He had been in pain the moment water entered his lungs. But when he tried to float back up, he found his arms involuntarily flailing about, and his body sinking instead.

"Well of course they got in the way. Don't you know when you swim in your clothes, the resistance created by the water halves your swim speed? Not to mention, you and Ayanokoji both were using the crawl to get to her."

Hiroshi began to put his clothes back on. Koboshi glanced at him.

"What was wrong with using the crawl?" she asked.

"Well, when you raise your arms to swim, your body sinks from the weight of the clothes, you see." He paused. "All right, listen up and listen up good. Should

you ever fall into the water with your clothes on, the first and most important thing you have to think about is floating. So make sure to get some air into those clothes. Rather than try to stand in the water, try to get on your side and float like that. When you're upright, it's easier for the air to escape from your clothes. As for your shoes, they're literally dead weight, so make sure to get rid of them as soon as you can!"

"Wow wee~su, Dai-chan, you're amazing~su. You know everything~su!"

With Misha singing his praises, an ear to ear smile spread across Hiroshi's face.

"O-oh, really Misha, you flatter me…I mean…this is common knowledge after all. In all honesty, I'm more surprised you all didn't know."

"Nope, not a bit," Takashi snorted.

"I'm just glad it wasn't the middle of winter. The colder the water is, the more energy you'd expend. You all would have drowned, leaving me to save you," Hiroshi continued, a smug, triumphant look on his face.

"I really had no clue you were so good at swimming, Dai-chan," Kotarou said, praising Hiroshi whole-heartedly.

Hiroshi forced a humbled countenance. "Bah,

it's not that good, really. My continued training and discipline bore fruit, is all. That and the special form of Japanese swimming I learned to better understand the Japanese soul paid off."

"The what? I don't remember learning a Japanese swimming style at school," Koboshi mumbled.

"Ehem. The form I refer to is also known as the Ancient Swimming Style, a Japanese type of swimming practiced since the Edo Period[11]. Nowadays, the mainstream favors the faster, speed-focused swim forms from the West, but the Japanese Style is based on the idea of 'being as one soul with the water.' This is accomplished by moving through the water as you would on land, by becoming one with the water. It's a slower paced swimming style, where one moves forward by giving themselves up to the natural movement of the water. In other words, the Japanese way—the way of harmony[12]—is the best way."

*Dai-chan sure has trained in a lot of things*, Kotarou thought with admiration.

*Rattle rattle rattle.* Suddenly, the ground began to shake.

*An earthquake?* That was the first thing to come to Kotarou's mind but then he noticed that only the area to his right was shaking. He turned his attention

to the anomaly. Aoi sat with her head on her knees, trembling rather heavily. Only then did Kotarou realize she was still there. He had invested so much in rescuing Koboshi, he had forgotten all about her.

After everyone else climbed back to shore, Aoi sat quietly next to Kotarou. She tucked her head against her knees, balled herself up, and stared at the ground in complete silence, trying to hide herself from everyone as much as possible.

"Ao, are you cold too? Do you have a fever?" Kotarou asked.

She simply shook her head, trembling all the while.

Suddenly, Kotarou shivered too. With the stress of their ordeal, he didn't notice just how much warmth had been robbed from his body. Whether they felt it or not, the night air was surely not the best companion for those in wet clothes.

"Dai-chan, let's get back to the villa. I don't want everyone catching a cold sitting out here."

"A-ahh, yes. You're right…"

Hiroshi cut his speech short. He was watching Aoi, her condition worsening by the second.

"Let's away, shall we? It's gotten quite late."

Kotarou and company quickly followed the

path and returned to the villa. Aoi did not once stop trembling the entire way. Genuinely worried, Hiroshi hovered close by to her, asking her every few steps if she was okay.

"I wonder if Ao's okay," Koboshi wondered out loud, watching Aoi. She let out a little sneeze.

"Shouldn't you be worrying about yourself instead of Ao, Koboshi? Here you go. You're cold, aren't you?" Gently, Kotarou placed his shirt—the single article of clothing he owned which wasn't wet—over Koboshi's shoulders.

"Thank you…Kotarou…I…urm…"

For a second, Koboshi thought to tell Kotarou about what happened on the pier. About the soft sensation she felt…of being pushed forward by hands…

"What is it?" Kotarou asked.

In spite of Kotarou's prompting her to continue, Koboshi found she could not.

*I don't have any evidence that Ao pushed me into the lake… Besides, why would she do something like that?*

Koboshi forced the thought out of her head.

*I mustn't do that. I shouldn't just accuse someone like that. I'm sure it was all my imagination…*

Feeling better, Koboshi smiled at Kotarou. "Oh,

nothing. I was just thinking how hungry I was."

"Me too. Let's get going!"

As they made their way along the mountain path, not one of them noticed they were being watched.

"Aww, shucks. We almost had her there, didn't we, Fiaa. By the way, are you all right?"

*Ki ki ki.* The ferret squeaked out an angry complaint.

"I see. Still hurts, huh? Sorry I couldn't stop that from happening."

She gently stroked the tip of the ferret's tail. It was red and puffed out. The pebble Hiroshi threw had hit Fiaa squarely on the tip of its tail.

"I won't let my guard down again."

After Kotarou and the others left, the short-haired girl walked out of the shadows to stand by the edge of the lake.

*But what is up with that stupid, happy-go-lucky girl! Showing up out of nowhere like that. If she hadn't been there, it would have been loads more entertaining for sure! I don't know how she does it but she always manages to bring that Aoi girl back to her senses. Hrrrm. How curious, how very curious. But no matter…I'm still regaining my powers, after all…oh, well,*

*I suppose...*

The girl smirked as she swung her staff into view.

"Ooh, I can't wait to go home. I bet we'll be promoted a bunch of ranks. Don't you agree, Fiaa?"

*Ku ku ku.* The ferret clicked in agreement.

"Well then, let's play with her a bit more, shall we?" she said and skipped down the mountain path.

# 4

Just as the sky became so full of stars they looked like they might spill over at any moment, the group arrived at Hiroshi's villa.

"Oh goodness gracious, what on earth have you all been up to?" Hiroshi's butler remarked, running to his dripping wards. "Please, all of you, go take a hot bath right this instant. I should have dinner just about ready by the time you warm up."

"Yes sir," they called out in sheepish unison.

"How's Shia doing~su?" Misha inquired of Hiroshi's butler.

As if anticipating Misha's question, Shia appeared in the entryway, Nya at her feet.

"Welcome back, everyone. I'm so very sorry for worrying you all but I'm feeling much better now." She bowed her head deeply and then looked at everyone's half dried hair. She furrowed her brow. "Did something happen out there?"

"Yeah…I was a big klutz and fell into the lake," Koboshi said quietly. She proceeded to tell Shia everything that transpired at the lake.

"Oh my, that must have been just awful. You'll all catch colds standing out there, so hurry on in."

With Shia's urging, they filed into the entryway one by one.

*Nyaahh.* Suddenly Nya let out a startled cry. *Fugyaah.*

A moment later, he began to hiss loudly, his fur standing up like sharp needles. Without further warning, he dashed out of the entryway, headed for the villa gates. Everyone spun around, taken aback by his uncharacteristic outburst.

Shia ran after Nya in utter bewilderment. "What's the matter? Please come back…" She had never seen him so agitated before.

"Where did Nya run off to~su? Nya-san! It's almost din din~su!" Misha cried. She too raced out of the entryway in pursuit of the normally composed cat.

*Fuggyaaahhhh.*
*Ki ki kiihhh.*

The sound of Nya fighting with another animal carried through the darkness and back to the villa. Kotarou and the others scrambled out of the entryway.

"Hey, quit that! Can't you see you're scaring him?" said a voice familiar to Kotarou.

"Huh? You're…" He peered into the face of the girl who defiantly stared down Nya, Shia and Misha.

"Evenin'," the girl said. "Heheheh…I knew we'd see each other again."

There stood the girl he had seen here and there throughout the day. She was cradling the frightened ferret in her arms and glaring at Nya, who continued to hiss and snarl at it. Meeting Kotarou's gaze, she let her hardened face soften.

"Say, would you mind doing something about him? That cat?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. You mustn't do that," Shia admonished. She picked up Nya. Even held tightly in Shia's arms, Nya continued to hiss and flail his paws about.

"I wonder what's wrong with him. He never acts like this…I'm so sorry. I'll take him back to my room," she said. She petted Nya, trying to calm him as she walked into the villa.

"Oh, thank goodness. Guess that cat got all riled up, seeing my little guy, huh?"

"His name is Nya~su," Misha said with a light-hearted giggle.

The girl made a face as if to say, 'I see'. She placed the white ferret on her shoulder. The ferret settled there, and clicked out a satisfied *Ku ku ku.*

*He must really like riding on her shoulder,* Kotarou thought.

Koboshi and Takashi came over to see what was going on.

"Kotarou…this is…?" Koboshi glanced at Kotarou with an inquisitive look.

"Yo!" Takashi said in his usual cheerful way.

"Ah, urmm…ah, to tell the truth, I don't know her name. I just met her once, over by the lake," Kotarou mumbled, scratching his head.

Takashi stood a step forward."I see, well, in that case…I'm Takashi Ayanokoji. Nice to meet you. This here is Kotarou Higuchi and this chica here is Koboshi Uematsu…we're all classmates."

With Takashi's crisp introduction, both Kotarou and Koboshi bowed politely in greeting.

"My name is Misha~su. Let's be friends~su!" Misha exclaimed before grabbing onto the girl and giving her a big bear hug.

"I…I'm Kasumi. Nice to meet you too…so, Mi-

sha…are you…one of their classmates too?"

"Well, of course she is," Koboshi said. "She's also Kotarou's next door neighbor."

"Nice to meet you~su!" Misha beamed. With unbridled curiosity, she began to observe Kasumi, peering into her face and poking the ferret a few times.

"I saw this doggie a little while ago~su. But what kind of doggie is this~su? I've never seen one so long and skinny~su."

After a moment of silence, everyone burst into laughter.

Kotarou corrected her with a laugh. "That's not a dog, Misha. It's a ferret, a member of the weasel family. Lots of people have them as pets nowadays."

"So Mr. Ferret~su? I'm Misha~su, nice to meet you~su. You're so cute~su. What's your name~su?"

Though Misha had addressed her query to the ferret, Kasumi answered.

"It's Fiaa," she said curtly.

"Wow, how cute! Is that English? What does it mean?" Koboshi asked as she petted Fiaa on the head.

"Fu fu fu. That's a S-E-C-R-E-T!"

*They'd probably get all freaked out if they knew the truth,* Kasumi thought with a grin.

"Oh…and the person with Nya…that was Shia," Takashi explained. "She's Misha's roommate. That guy standing all the way over there by the entryway is the owner of this villa, Hiroshi Mitarai. Weird name, huh? You spell it like 'O-te-a-ra-i'…like toilet…and guess what his nickname is…"

"Ayanokoji! That's quite enough! You don't have to tell her that!" Hiroshi grumbled. He walked in front of Kasumi and with a, "Good to meet you," he gave her a look up and down.

Giggling, the girl again introduced herself as Kasumi.

"Look here, you lot. Don't you think that's enough socializing?" he lectured to the assembled group, arms folded across his chest. "I suggest you take a bath and quick…else you'll be late for dinner."

"Oooh, I've got an idea~su!"

Misha darted up to Hiroshi. "Dai-chan, I think Kasumi should stay for dinner too~su. Is that okies~su?"

"Eh?"

Hiroshi and Kasumi voiced their surprise simultaneously. Hiroshi narrowed his eyes and rested a suspicious gaze upon Kasumi.

*There's something about this one I just don't*

*like*...But of course, he was no match for Misha's special *please, please, please~su* attack.

"Oh, very well. It starts in 20 minutes sharp and she's welcome to join us…so long as she makes it in time that is…"

"Oh, that'll be easy peasy~su, right? Kasumi~su!"

Kasumi thought for a little bit. "Urm, yeah, I think so…I'll just go ask, urm…what do you call them…my parents? …Ah, yeah, my dad. I'll just go ask my dad first, okay?"

Attributing her odd response to her surprise at Misha's out-of-the-blue request, the others ignored her strange behavior.

"So everything's A-okies a-go-go~su. I'm so happy I get to see Fiaa again~su!"

Misha swirled her fingers around Fiaa's face lovingly. Fiaa didn't seem to share her sentiments at all, however, and hissed threateningly at Misha.

"'Kay, see you later," Kotarou and the others chimed as they waved to Kasumi before heading to the baths.

The hot springs at the villa were an awe-inspiring affair, built of specially selected boulders piled on top of one another. It was split into two sides, one for men

and one for women, and almost gorgeous enough to pass as the bath of a hot springs resort or inn. Misha, Koboshi, and Shia relaxed on the women's side, while Kotarou, Hiroshi, and Takashi were on the men's. Regardless of what side they were on, they all washed the day's fatigue away as they gazed up into the heavens and bathed in the light of the stars.

"Tee hee hee hee. This really warms you up, doesn't it? And the stars are sooo pretty~su."

In the midst of their stargazing, Misha kicked up her legs, sending water flying everywhere. Koboshi quietly made her way to Shia. Shia faced her, a concerned look in her eyes.

"Koboshi…are you all right?"

"Yup, I'm all better now. These waters totally recharged my spirit! What about you, Shia? Are you feeling better too?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry for worrying you all earlier."

Misha's voice broke into the middle of Koboshi and Shia's heart-warming conversation.

"Tee hee hee hee. I'm all warmed up and ready to go~su! And my tum tum's ready to go too~su!!"

*Grumble grumble.* Koboshi's stomach growled in response to Misha's cheerful shout.

"Ohmigosh! How embarrassing!"

Shia smiled. "Well then, shall we?"

"UuuNnnnNn, this is really nice," Kotarou said.

*Splish splash*. As Kotarou and Takashi soaked in the warmth of the hot springs, Hiroshi began to swim.

"Hey, you're not a kid anymore, so quit swimming in the springs already," Takashi grumbled, cheeks puffed up in annoyance.

"Quiet! Do you know how ridiculous that sounds coming from a chump who lost at swimming to me but ten minutes ago? It's precisely because I train every chance I get that I'm able to save lives when it counts."

Kotarou stepped out of the bath to cool down his replenished body. "Ah, by the way, where did Ao go? I haven't seen her at all since Kasumi dropped by," he asked Hiroshi.

"She said she was feeling cold, so I have her lying down in one of the guest rooms. She'll be eating dinner with us though…I've already informed her Grandmama," Hiroshi said before launching into a lap of the breaststroke.

"Hrrmm, I see. I hope she didn't catch cold. She suddenly started trembling so badly, she really scared me back there."

Kotarou slowly distanced himself from Hiroshi, who swam more passionately by the minute. As the movements of his arms and legs became more and more animated, it wasn't long before a kick landed on Takashi, who was still lounging about in the water.

"Oww, what the heck, Poops. Kicking people now…?"

"Stop calling me that! Besides, it's your fault for being too slow to dodge."

"What? You're blaming me when you're the one swimming in the hot springs like a moron?"

Kotarou spoke up quickly, in order to prevent the eruption of another one of their heated arguments. "Oh, hey guys, it's time to eat. Let's go, you two…"

"Oh yeah!"

Takashi got out of the water immediately but Hiroshi continued to swim. The two boys agreed to go on ahead, and rinsed themselves off.

*Splash.* The hot rinse water hit Hiroshi square in the face.

"Buwaah!! Patooey." Hiroshi spit out the water. "Look what you did! You made me swallow all that

hot water, you vagrants!"

"Oh come on, what's a little water on a fine looking fop like you?"

"Ten-chan, that's a really old-fashioned saying... fine looking fop?" Kotarou said.

"Nah, not really. It's Poops, after all. You can't get any more old-fashioned than him."

"How dare you! Me? Old-fashioned? How so? Sure, I admire and prefer the traditional values of old Japan but how is that…h-huh? Wait! I'm not done talking yet!"

Not waiting to hear the end of Hiroshi's speech, the two boys exited the bath area.

After taking a hot shower in the guest room, Aoi sat on the bed. It had taken quite some time but her heart rate and nerves were finally beginning to settle down.

She recalled the events at the lake. She had always lived her life in what some would call a stuck-up way—aloof and never showing weakness to anyone. Had it existed, she was sure that her school mates would have nominated her for the "most likely to be

fine all by herself" award. But in her heart of hearts, she sought the acceptance of others as much—if not more—than anyone else. To Aoi, the idea of being hated was utterly unbearable…hated by anyone.

And today…getting to see Hiroshi again, before having to leave for New York, made her so happy.

She swore to take as many memories with her as possible so she would never have to be sad, even when she was alone. That was why she had asked to visit all those places, places she loved so much, before leaving. The villa had been her very last stop. It was where her fondest memories gathered.

*That's why… How could I do something like that…how could I make such horrible memories before leaving…?* She just didn't understand what had possessed her to do such a thing to Hiroshi's friends.

Ever since she came back to the villa, she noticed that whenever desperation or feelings of abandonment crept into her heart, she would get a headache. Once it was over, it was as if a piece of her disappeared with the pain, while a separate, wholly foreign fragment of another person was deposited in its place. She felt as if, slowly but surely, she was becoming someone else…

A suffocating melancholy, tinged with anxiety,

filled Aoi's chest.

She thought about the bell on the key holder, still clipped to her bag. How did it continue to produce that distinctive ringing noise, even when there was no wind in the area?

Aoi glanced at the key holder. It seemed as if the color of the glass bead had changed yet again, this time from dark pink to a light shade of crimson.

Aoi stared into the depths of the bead. *What's going on with this thing? Why does the color keep changing?*

*Ring.* ♬

The doors and windows were closed. Not even the slightest puff of wind was present and yet the bell on the key holder rang once more. She felt that slippery, jelly-like substance ooze into her body again. *Shift.* She suddenly felt faint.

"I hate how Hiroshi's surrounded by all those good friends…while I have to be all alone. It's just not fair."

A strange feeling bubbled up inside of her. "Well, I wish them the worst!" she said with a scowl. It made her feel better to say the words out loud.

*I'm not afraid of anything in this world…and it's dumb…just stupid of me to get depressed about be-*

*ing sad or being alone. I won't forgive them. I can't forgive those liars, pretending to be all friendly and nice to one another.*

*("They don't care about you. When it comes down to it, all they care about is themselves. Let's ruin their deceitful lives, shall we?")*

*Eh?*

Someone's voice was in her head again. She had almost nodded in agreement at what it was saying but she heard her own voice as well, yelling, *No! You mustn't do that.*

*("Now, now, don't hold back, my dear…just listen to me and give in…")*

*W-who are you?*

She blinked. Was she questioning herself? The thought of it scared her terribly.

*("Fu fu fu. I'm here to take care of everything for you…all those things you hate…and all those people you hate too…")*

Before she knew it, she was screaming at the top of her lungs. "Stop! Just stop!"

*("How much longer can you keep this up, I wonder…? Oh Aoi…your soul will be mine soon enough…")*

With that parting shot echoing in her mind, Aoi felt

the something in her head slip away and disappear.

She sighed deeply, then sat in dazed silence.

*What if I hear that voice again? What's going to happen to me?*

Aoi was terrified. She couldn't tell anyone what was going on. How could she? Who in their right mind would believe she felt like someone or something was trying to take over her body?

*Knock knock.* There was a light rapping on the door.

"Ao, you okies in there~su? Dinner's ready~su. Let's go eat~su!"

Aoi slowly stood and walked to the door. She drew in a deep long breath before she opened the door.

"Tee hee hee hee. Hurray~su, you're all better~su!" Misha cheered the moment Aoi opened the door. There was a colossal smile on Misha's face.

Aoi wasn't quite sure what to say, faced with a smile like that. "…Urm…I…" But she was relieved to see it. As if backlit, Misha's innocent smile seemed more radiant than before.

"What's the matter~su?"

"…Oh, nothing."

But as she said the words, tears began to pour from

her eyes, warping Aoi's vision. She hadn't meant to cry, but the tears simply would not stop and tumbled down her face in torrents. Misha gently pulled Aoi to her and stroked her hair softly.

"Did something sad happen~su? There, there, Ao. You're a good girl, a good girl~su."

A warm breeze wrapped itself around her shoulders. As Aoi stood there with Misha stroking her hair and tears streaming down her cheeks, she felt that stuck-up heart of hers suddenly crumble and melt away.

Even though she didn't have the courage to do it now, she swore to apologize to everyone later. For her selfishness…and for pushing Koboshi…

She swore she would, with all of her heart.

"Thank you so much for inviting me to dinner today."

A disappointed look flickered in Hiroshi's eyes as Kasumi showed up, right on time. Ever the consummate host, despite how uncomfortable she made him feel, he advised her to make herself at home and offered her some juice. After getting everyone's at-

tention with a booming, "Listen up!" he began his announcement of the night's festivities.

"As we all know, when the dinner party is comprised of large numbers, dining is oft moved outdoors, and when it comes to outdoor fare, there is only one appropriate culinary experience: the barbeque! But this is no ordinary barbeque! The House of Mitarai has come up with a careful selection of the finest treasures from both sea and land. For our 'surf" selection, we have gone all the way to Shizuoka to procure…"

"Yo, Poops! We promise to listen to all yer jibber-jabber later, so just feed us already!" Takashi whined. "We're hungry, man…you don't want us to starve to death, do you?"

He held his chopsticks with his right hand and his growling stomach with his left.

There was an outburst of support for Takashi's plea.

"Yeah, we want to eat!" Koboshi said.

"My tum tum's going growly-wowly~su!" Misha cried.

"I say, you peasants are the greediest things…really!" Hiroshi grumbled.

"Oh shush!"

"Hurry up and feed us!!"

Hiroshi's audience was possessed with the spirit of hunger and he knew it was useless (and dangerous) to say any more.

"Oh, very well. But allow me to say at least this—as common human courtesy," Hiroshi said. He put both hands together in front of his face.

"Itadakimasu[13]!"

"ITADAKIMASUUUUU!"

The starting pistol sounded, and Kotarou and crew charged toward the large barbeque grill set up in the villa garden. An array of delectable surf and turf selections—shrimp, scallops, squid, mackerel, beef, and chicken—were lined up on the grill. There were also some freshly picked garden vegetables grilling, though they were not at all as popular as the meats.

The sound of sizzling meat and fish, coupled with its mouth-watering aroma, jumpstarted the already empty bellies of the group that had been going since daybreak, creating a cacophony of slurping and growling.

"Oh hey, Ao, you weren't around when she dropped by, but this is Kasumi," Koboshi said, pulling the two over to meet one another.

Kasumi thrust her hand out to Aoi. "Hello there… Ao, is it? …May I call you that too? I'm Kasumi. And this is my pet ferret, Fiaa. It's so nice to meet you."

"I'm Ichinose Aoi. A pleasure."

Having cried her heart out to Misha, Aoi felt completely refreshed, renewed, and invigorated. She introduced herself to Kasumi in the typical 'holier-than-thou' manner young ladies from wealth were taught, took Kasumi's proffered hand and shook it firmly.

*What?!* Aoi withdrew her hand swiftly.

Seeing Aoi's reaction, a gleeful smile turned the corners of Kasumi's lips.

Not sure what was transpiring between Aoi and Kasumi, Koboshi inched closer, all the while eyeing the two of them suspiciously.

"Something wrong? Ao?"

What felt like a jolt of electricity had run through Aoi's fingertips and throughout her body the moment she had shaken Kasumi's hand.

*...This girl...frightens me.*

But the last thing Aoi wanted to show anyone was fear and she did all she could to preserve the tranquility of her countenance.

"Oh, it's nothing. Nothing at all. ...I'm going to make sure the fish isn't burning. See you later, Kasumi."

"Yeah, sure, see you later. Can't wait to spend

some more time talking with you." Kasumi's face wore a smirk, her words laced with hidden meaning.

She stared intently into Aoi's eyes as she smiled. "Yes, me too…," Aoi said in a scarcely audible whisper.

Over by the grill, Aoi was flustered. She felt Kasumi's eyes studying her closely. It gave her the shivers. As scared as she was, she withstood Kasumi's ocular interrogation for a few moments longer before turning around to study the girl herself. Engaged in a conversation with Koboshi, Kasumi seemed to be genuinely enjoying herself, tittering cheerfully as she petted her snow white ferret.

For Aoi though, just the thought of her pointed gaze was enough to bring on another bout of shivers.

*Isn't Koboshi afraid of that girl too? Or am I being too sensitive?*

She shook her head and dispelled the thoughts.

"Woo hoo~su! This meat is sooo nyummy~su!"

"My butler's preparing some paella over there, so eat to your heart's desire," Hiroshi heralded.

Misha immediately two-fisted the kabobs she had in her hands and, looking like a big bouncy chipmunk, bounded off in the direction of the paella.

Takashi watched her, then snorted and burst out with laughter.

"Here you go, Aoi. For you."

Shia brought a plate of paella for the pale-looking Aoi. Seeing the smile on Shia's face, Aoi couldn't help but feel a sense of relief throughout her whole body.

*Ahh, it makes sense now, what Koboshi said this afternoon about Shia being a calming presence.*

With much improved spirits, Aoi dug into some broiled scallops. They melted in her mouth and Aoi thought they might be the most delicious things she had ever tasted in her life. Meanwhile, Nya partook of some fish Shia set aside for him, a dull, bored look on his face.

"Wowwee, this corn is sooo good, Kasumi!"

"Oh my gosh, it sure is, Koboshi! Ooh, try this shrimp. It's cooked really, really well!"

There was nothing more perfect than a starlit barbeque shared by friends. For a little while, entranced by their food, not one of them spoke a word. Even Kasumi, who they had just met, fit right in, laughing happily and offering the occasional "Ohmigosh" as she watched them frantically stuff their faces.

Once their stomachs were full and settled, Hiro-

shi announced the commencement of the Barbeque Games.

"Sumo is the best way to better understand the Japanese soul!"

But the sumo Hiroshi prepared for them was none other than paper sumo. On Hiroshi's word, his butler carried in a table, set with a large paper sumo ring, about 30 centimeters in diameter.

"What's this~su?" Misha asked, picking up a sumo wrestler made out of paper. She looked closely at it, completely baffled.

"You take that and put it right here on the sumo ring…then you hit the table like this…to make the wrestlers move," Kotarou explained.

As soon as she finished her explanation of the rules, Misha began to wildly bang her hands against the table.

"This is so fun~su! Tee hee hee hee!"

Shia gazed upon the paper wrestler with amazement. "Oh my, how cute. This little sumo wrestler…"

"All right! This is a knockout competition! For those that lose...this shall be your punishment!!"

On the snap of his fingers, his butler reverently produced a calligraphy brush and tray of black ink.

"Ehhh? So if we lose…we get something drawn on our face?" Koboshi asked.

Hiroshi nodded.

"Geez, no one does lame punishment games like this anymore," Takashi wise-cracked.

"How dare you! This is the way Japanese children have been punished since the most ancient of times! You really don't understand the way of Harmony, do you, you fool!"

Called a "fool" by Hiroshi, Takashi glared at him. "I ain't losing to you, Poops," he growled.

The first match-up was between Misha and Kasumi. Misha had been pounding on the table ever since Kotarou had explained the rules to her, while Kasumi just grinned confidently. She rolled up her sleeves and readied herself. "I'm gonna win!"

"Good luck to both of you!" Koboshi called out, cheering them on.

Kotarou and the other onlookers used their plates and chopsticks from the barbeque as makeshift drums and tapped them with a 'Chan, Chan, Chan!' to cheer on the competitors.

"OK, I'm all set," Kasumi said. "Ready, Misha?"

"Tee hee. I'm gonna try my bestest~su!"

"Very well, then…ready…and…go!"

On Hiroshi's yell, the two began to bang on the table with all their might.

It was entertaining enough just watching Misha put her entire body in it as she hopped up and down, subconsciously mimicking her paper wrestler's movements in the ring. She employed an all-out technique of random pounding, while Kasumi pursued victory in an entirely different manner, choosing to use smaller, quicker taps to counter Misha's larger, slower ones.

Shia was completely absorbed by the battle of the paper wrestlers. "They sure are holding on…"

"Yeah…ah, Kasumi! If you keep moving right, you'll step out of the ring!" Koboshi cheered passionately, as if she were the one fighting.

"Misha! A little bit more to the left!"

Kotarou and others clapped their hands, shouted encouragements, and laughed as they watched the two girls duke it out. As for Misha and Kasumi, they looked like they were having a ball. Aoi was the only one not participating. She sat quietly, and though her eyes were on the action, they were blank, staring through rather than at the ongoing bout.

"What's the matter, Ao?" Kotarou asked, noticing her lack of enthusiasm.

"…Eh? What? …Oh, urm, it's nothing. Come on, you can do it! Misha!"

Kotarou didn't buy her act. However, with the heat of competition, he soon forgot his concern.

"Take that!"

"Tee hee hee!"

"We have a winner!! Kasumi…Kasumi-yama[14]~!"

At the end, Kasumi's paper wrestler had managed to knock its opponent down with a flying body attack.

"Kyaah! That was soooo much fun. Phewwww. I'm sweatin' all over!" Kasumi exclaimed, wiping the perspiration from her brow. She stood by Kotarou.

"You looked pretty impressive out there, Kasumi."

"Thanks. But, paper sumo, eh? Who would have thunk? I've never played it before so I had no idea you could get so into it like that. I feel so…refreshed all a sudden!" She seemed genuinely pleased.

"Uhaa, I lost~su."

"Okay, time for your punishment, then, Misha. Ready?"

Kasumi dipped the brush in ink and proceeded to draw a big circle around both of Misha's eyes.

"Ohmigosh! She looks like a panda!!" Koboshi

guffawed. She held her sides, in complete stitches.

Albeit on the receiving end of the punishment, Misha couldn't help but be happy too. In fact, she was so ecstatic she let out a cheerful "Tee hee hee." She took the brush from Kasumi's hands and painted a black nose on herself. Everyone laughed.

"Lookit, I look just like Fiaa now~su."

*Ki ki ki*. Fiaa squeaked out a distraught rebuttal which Misha was only too happy to misunderstand.

"Are you happy~su? Me too~su!"

"Okies, now it's all your turns~su! Come on guys~su. You too, Ao! Take that~su!"

Misha ran to Aoi, who had been watching the entire affair with a blank expression.

"Stop that!" she yelled as Misha drew a star on her face. She snatched the brush out of Misha's hands. Everyone fell silent, hearing the threatening tone in Aoi's voice.

Misha's shoulders dropped immediately. "… Sorry~su. I didn't think you'd mind~su."

"Here you go, Aoi. You can use this to clean off your face."

Shia got a moist towel and casually handed it to Aoi. Sensing the strained atmosphere, Aoi whispered a "Thank you."

"All right, Ayanokoji! I'll be your opponent next!" Hiroshi bellowed, hoping to smooth over the prickly atmosphere.

"Bring it on, Poops!"

The lost mood slowly recharged itself, and Kotarou breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing he wanted was for everyone to be fighting. With a little help from Shia, Aoi was smiling once more.

*I'm so glad Shia came*, Kotarou thought, watching them.

"I want a real fight!"

With Hiroshi's strong urging, Takashi and he were not going to battle with paper wrestlers but with themselves, in a real sumo bout. They each took a towel and tied it around and over their trousers, in place of a real wrestler's loincloth.

"Oh man, I look so uncool," Takashi remarked, taking a closer look at himself.

"A true Japanese male should not obsess so much over his looks! *En guard!*"

They drew a large ring in the garden and asked Hiroshi's butler to preside over the bout.

"Ready and…go!"

Their battle began. Kotarou and the other bystanders shouted encouragement, their cries turning into a

deafening roar. Hiroshi and Takashi locked grips with one another, neither of them giving an inch.

"Do you guys always get along so well?" Kasumi asked Kotarou.

"Hmm. Well, since you mention it, I suppose so. Why do you ask?"

Kasumi set her gaze on the battle-locked Takashi and Hiroshi. "Well, it's just that those two…from what little I've seen, it always seems like they're arguing about something."

"Well, of course they do. But that doesn't mean they don't get along. If they really didn't like each other, they wouldn't be able to say what they really wanted to say to one another."

"Oh yeah? Hmm, humans are a lot more complicated than I thought…"

Kotarou cocked his head to one side and looked into Kasumi's face. "Humans…?"

"Urm, I mean…nothing…ahhh, look. I guess Ten-chan won," she said quickly, in an attempt to play down her words. She rushed to Takashi and offered her hand in congratulations.

*Kasumi sure says grown up things,* Kotarou thought. He walked up Takashi to give him a ""Gratz," and a smile.



"Dammit. Ahhh, who cares anyway! Fire! Set this whole place on fire!" Hiroshi yelled hysterically. He hadn't taken his loss to Takashi very well and his face was awash with bitterness…and copious amounts of ink from the huge "X" Takashi drew on his face.

"Are you sure we can light all these up, Dai-chan?" Koboshi asked. She carried a large assortment of fireworks.

"Yes, yes. I'll allow it."

With Hiroshi's permission, the assembled group broke into a loud "Woo hoo!" as they lit up the hand-held fireworks Hiroshi's butler prepared for them. A rainbow of sparks cascaded from their fingertips like a waterfall.

"How pretty…" Kasumi said.

Night was darker in the mountains, far away from the lights of the city, and the fireworks shone brightly.

"I never knew something so pretty existed… How neat," Kasumi cooed excitedly.

"Oh, guess what, we're going to fire up a sky-rocket next," Koboshi said with a smile.

In addition to his many other certifications and accreditations, Hiroshi's butler was also a licensed pyrotechnician. "Ready, everyone?"

*Boom. Crackle crackle crackle...* A beautiful flower with large petals bloomed in the night sky.

"Wow…"

Though they had played with the smaller fireworks before, Kotarou and the others had never been so close to a large one. The new sights and sounds associated with the experience were mind blowing. Kasumi seemed especially taken in by the display.

"Oh my gosh! Oh wow!" she repeated over and over throughout the night. Kotarou thought that she might be the most excited one there.

"Wow wee. That flower up there…it looks like it might blow all the way to the Heavens~su," Misha shouted loudly. "Hey, everyone up there! It's fireworks~su! Are you watching too~su?"

While everyone else was enjoying the fireworks, Aoi was quiet. Although she had been sitting by Shia, holding some sparklers, she hadn't tried to initiate conversation.

"I wonder if Ao's really okay. She just looks so down," Koboshi said quietly. She looked at her fireworks and, every so often, stole a worried glance

at Aoi.

"Who cares if she's quiet? It's better off this way. Otherwise, she'd be ordering Poops around again like earlier," Takashi said, and shot Hiroshi a look.

"Ohh, what's this, Ten-chan? Could it be…that you're actually concerned about Dai-chan?" Koboshi teased. "Fu fu fu," she laughed.

"What's with that creepy laugh of yours? No way. It's not like that. Just that he did save you, after all, so I just don't think that physically, he'd…"

"Yeah yeah yeah, whatever. Hey, I'm gonna go grab the biggest fireworks I can for you, Ten-chan."

"No, that's okay, Uematsu. I'm all fireworked out. For real…"

In spite of his protest, Koboshi ran to fetch some more fireworks from Hiroshi's butler, a mischievous smirk on her face.

"Hey, I said…ugh, what? …Why are you smirking like that too?" Takashi scowled at Kotarou.

"I'm not smirking, silly. I was just thinking that you're a good guy, Ten-chan. Me and Koboshi both."

Kotarou nodded at Takashi. "Aww, quit that," Takashi mumbled. Then, as if to hide his embarrass-ment, he ran off after Koboshi.

When the fireworks began to run low, Hiroshi addressed his crowd once more.

"We shall be meeting in the living room at 6:30 AM sharp tomorrow morning. I shall reveal our schedule then! Understood?"

"Ehh? Are you serious?"

Their cries of dissent did little to change the determined Hiroshi's mind.

Kasumi spoke up. "Urm, would it be all right if I participated as well? My father's working late again tomorrow night and it's so boring and lonely hanging out at the villa by myself. I really would appreciate if you'd let me tag along."

"Of course it's all right, silly. The more, the merrier, right? And I'd love to play with Fiaa again," Koboshi said, in support of Kasumi's request.

The others added in agreement.

Hiroshi sighed. "Very well, but don't be late or we'll leave without you."

"Okay, thanks!" Kasumi beamed at them.

Half an hour later, they decided to turn in for the night. Given that they had another early morning ahead of them, they all thought it best to get a good rest.

They walked Kasumi to the villa gates. "Want us to walk you home?" Takashi asked.

"Oh, I'll be okay. I just talked to my dad on the phone and he said he'd wait for me by the crossroad up there."

"Oh, all right. See ya tomorrow, then."

"Yup. I can't wait."

Waving goodbye, Kasumi ran into the night. *She sure is cheery*, Kotarou thought, watching her go. Suddenly she was gone.

"Huh?"

Takashi turned to look at him from inside the entryway. "What's the matter, Kotarou?"

*I'm just imagining things,* Kotarou told himself. "Oh, nothing… Gosh, it's really getting cold. The weather in the mountains changes so quickly, doesn't it? Let's get to bed."

Pulling his shoulders close, Kotarou followed Takashi into the villa.

# 5

It was 10 o'clock at night.

Attributing it to the change in pillows, Kotarou was unable to fall asleep. He slipped out of his bed softly, so he didn't wake Takashi, who was sleeping soundly in the next bed. Once he was up, he felt the need to look at the stars and opened the guest room window. He saw a white animal galloping towards him outside the window.

*...Fiaa?*

Still in his pajamas, Kotarou hurried from the room, down the stairs and out of the villa.

"Hey, you. Did you run away again? Come here, you," Kotarou said, coaxing the animal.

He tried to pick the ferret up, just to have it slip through his hands at the very last moment.

"Hey, where are you going?" He was just about to chase after Fiaa when the area in front of him suddenly flashed. Kotarou narrowed his eyes.

"Ah, huh? …Kotarou?"

"Oh hey, you scared me. …Kasumi?"

"Evening," Kasumi greeted. She bowed her head deeply.

"What are you doing out here so late? It's dangerous…"

"I'm fine." Kasumi smiled suggestively. "What about you, Kotarou…isn't it dangerous for you too?"

"I'm a boy though, so it's different…"

*Throb*. A sharp pain shot through his head, forcing him onto his knees. Fiaa was at his feet.

Kasumi placed her hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

*Throb*. Another pain, this one sharper than the first.

"Oww. ….I'm fine. I get headaches sometimes, that's all," Kotarou said, not wanting to worry Kasumi.

"Are you sure? Don't act tough for my sake."

Her eyes flickered gold but because he was looking at Fiaa, Kotarou didn't notice.

"I had so much fun today. It's been a while since I've done something like that."

"Really?" Kotarou asked, clutching his head in pain.

"Yup. …Oh yeah, there was something I wanted to ask you but didn't get the chance earlier. …When Koboshi fell into the lake, even though you ran the risk of drowning, why'd you jump in after her? …Weren't you afraid of drowning too?"

She had the strangest, most inquisitive look on her face. The first thing that came to his mind was *how could she know such a thing?* Then he remembered running into Fiaa along the mountain path.

"Were you there too, Kasumi?"

"Yeah. Fiaa went missing again, so I was looking for him and I was in the area."

Kotarou wasn't sure how to answer Kasumi's question. "Well, I guess because we're friends. Friends don't ignore each other when something's wrong or one of them is in trouble."

"So, you're saying that you'd do anything for a friend? Even die for them?"

"It's not exactly like that. It's just…all I know is I wasn't thinking about myself at all when it happened. And I think the same goes for Ten-chan, Dai-chan, and Misha. …I think everyone was thinking about helping Koboshi, more than they were about themselves. There weren't any consequences because they simply didn't come to mind."

Kotarou answered her question by trying his best to put all the feelings he remembered from the incident into words.

Kasumi cocked her head. "Hrrrm, I just don't get it. About how you all felt. I mean, if you think about it, it's really Koboshi's fault she fell in the water. It would still be her fault, even if someone pushed her in."

"P-pushed in? …what are you saying? Of course she wasn't pushed in. No one else was there except us."

Much to Kasumi's surprise, Kotarou gave her a harsh look.

Kasumi quickly backpedalled. "I…I wasn't saying she was. So, if Koboshi did something bad to you, you'd still save her?"

"Of course I would. Even if she did something not so nice, the thing about being friends is…you take the good with the bad. After all, if you didn't care for them or trust them with all of your heart, you wouldn't call them friends in the first place…would you?"

"Hrrm. Is that how it works?"

For a few moments, the two were silent.

With Kasumi's questions fresh in his mind, Kotarou began to mull over his own idea of friendship.

*It's not like Koboshi, Ten-chan, and I are stuck to*

*each other like glue and have to go and do everything together. It's not even like I have to constantly explain to them how I'm feeling all the time. It's just that for some reason when I'm with them, I feel comfortable…I feel at ease. When something good happens, they're the first ones I want to tell*, Kotarou thought.

*Most importantly, when I'm feeling down or just taking my frustrations out on something or someone else, they're not afraid to say the words I don't want to hear, like, 'You're acting like a fool!' Or, 'Toughen up!'*

*Everything they say, I know they say for my sake—I don't know how many times their friendship's saved me.*

*I don't want friends in great numbers. All I need is two or three people that I can be myself with when things are at their worst,* Kotarou told himself.

Though Kasumi asked Kotarou what it was to "truly care for your friends," his answer only confused her even more.

*Is it possible humans are capable of caring for someone other than themselves so selflessly? No, no. It couldn't be.* She was certain that deep down inside every human's heart, an evil force existed that never failed to put the "me" in front of everyone else.

*I wonder what would happen if these so-called friends suddenly started to fight among one another?*

As the idea crossed her mind, Kasumi smirked smugly.

Breaking out of his reverie, Kotarou looked at his wristwatch and panicked a little. "I better get going. We've got an early morning tomorrow, remember?"

Quite a bit of time had passed since he left the villa. *Oh no. If Ten-chan wakes up and sees me gone, he might worry and start looking for me.*

"I'll walk you home, Kasumi."

"I'm fine, silly. My dad's coming to pick me up, so it's no biggie." She gave him a big V sign.

"Okay then…see you tomorrow."

A little way on the path leading back to Hiroshi's villa, Kotarou waved goodbye to Kasumi and hurried away.

"Yup, this is so exciting. I can't wait for tomorrow. Fu fu fu."

*Ku ku ku.*

Kasumi's laugh and Fiaa's clicking cry echoed through the night.

STORY 3

# How to Laugh When You're Feeling Sad

# 1

It was dark all around.

No matter how hard she strained her eyes, she couldn't see anyone or anything. She didn't know where she was, or even how big this place was.

There was only one thing she knew…she was alone.

"Ha ha hahaha."

"Fu fu fu fu fu…"

The sound of laughter from somewhere off in the distance.

With only her intuition to guide her, Aoi stepped forward in the direction of the laughter. *Thud!* She immediately ran into something hard. As if the sound were some sort of signal, the area around her lit up.

"Where am I? What is this place?"

Aoi was in a room, about three meters square, with walls made entirely of glass. There were no doors or any signs of an exit. It seemed apparent that for

whatever reason, she had been imprisoned here, in this cage of glass. As the light from outside reflected on the walls of her cage, each became like a mirror. In each mirror she saw herself, trembling and scared.

"Kya ha ha ha!"

"Aww, you're so cute, Ao."

"It's so much fun being around you~su."

Though she couldn't see who they belonged to, the sound of voices engaged in lively conversation came from beyond the mirrors. Aoi knocked on the mirror in front of her, trying to get the attention of the voices' owners. The mirrors faded into opalescent glass, which in turn became completely transparent glass once again. She could see clearly now.

"Hiroshi? Kotarou? Everyone?"

As if a giant spotlight shone down on them, an image of Hiroshi and everyone else suddenly appeared before her, floating in the darkness.

"Hiroshi! Get me out of here!" she screamed, pounding on the glass.

But he did not hear her or even glance in her direction.

"Let me out of here!"

She heard them, though, clearly.

"It almost doesn't seem fair that we get Ao all

to ourselves."

"Let's be friends forever and ever."

*Eh? I'm out there too?*

Aoi rubbed her eyes in surprise, thinking she was seeing things. She wasn't. There she was, surrounded by Hiroshi and his friends, laughing and smiling.

*Flash.* Another eerie, bright light bathed the area and forced her to shut her eyes. When she opened them, she saw herself, an evil smile painted on her lips.

*That's me...but, it's not? Who...who are you?!*

The Aoi that was not her, but looked just like her, stood in front of her, beyond the glass. Their eyes met, and the double moved straight towards Aoi. She stopped before the glass wall. Face to face with Aoi, it began to speak, enunciating each word, each syllable in a slow, exaggerated manner.

"You•aren't•need•ed•an•y•more."

*Eh? W-what? What is it saying...?* For a split second, she thought she saw gleaming white fangs bared at her.

"You•ought•to•be•a•lone•for•ev•er."

*H-h-how dare you! Why would you say something so cruel?!* She tried to yell those words at her double, but they never made it past her lips.

"What are you doing over there all by yourself,

Ao? Get back over here."

"Okay!"

The Aoi that was not Aoi slowly made her way back towards Koboshi and the others. The glass became a mirror once more.

"Okay? Okay?! Who the heck are you?! Everyone! Ichinose Aoi is right here! Please! Can you hear me?"

*What did she mean about me not being needed anymore? And how I ought to be alone...but I don't want to be alone!*

A shiver ran down Aoi's spine as she remembered her double's words.

"Stop this, please! Take me back where I belong!"

She sat down where she was, raised her fists as high as they would go and pounded them against the mirror. She screamed at the top of her lungs, hoping someone would hear.

But the only thing she could see was her own desperate reflection. With her brow knitted, her mouth open so wide she could see all the way down her throat, and the corners of her eyes lifted, the face she was used to seeing was no longer there, replaced with the visage of a *Hannya's*[15] mask she had once seen at a museum.

The image did not last long. It soon became limp and collapsed, as if melting away. Within moments the face reformed and become someone else's.

"Your soul…is mine now…"

*Eh? Ah…y-you're…Kasumi?*

"Because I'm here, you don't need to be. You're no longer needed." She started to laugh, an infuriating chortle drenched with belittlement. "Kya ha ha ha."

Aoi was dumbfounded. *Why are you…?*

But Kasumi's face was gone before she could complete her thought, leaving only her own, saddened countenance behind.

"Why are you doing this?! Please, guys. Please look this way! Please look at the real me! Don't leave me alone!"

No matter how hard she cried or screamed, no one came to her aid.

*Blink.* She awoke.

She cautiously sat up. She was in bed. She let her eyes drift to the left and right, taking in her surroundings. Stunned, it took her a few seconds to confirm she was indeed in her own room at her villa.

Covered in sweat, she walked over to the dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a new set of pajamas. As she changed, she glanced out her bedroom

window. It was still slightly dark outside. Day had yet to break.

Though she felt much better after changing, she had no desire to go back to sleep. It was a scary dream. The thought of not being noticed and the terror of being left alone soaked deep into her core.

*…Why did I see Kasumi's face in my dream?*

Aoi recalled the details of her first meeting with Kasumi just the night before.

She remembered when they first shook hands, how she felt a jolt of electricity shoot right through her body. She remembered Kasumi's gaze, the look of a hunter who was eyeing her prey. She had hated having to talk to that girl.

Kasumi frightened her.

Thinking about how she would have to spend the entire day with Kasumi, a sense of gloom came over her.

# 2

"Morning~su!"

"Morning, Kotarou, Ten-chan!"

Misha and Koboshi greeted the two boys cheerfully as Kotarou and Takashi yawned their way down the stairs.

"Good morning," Kotarou said sleepily. "You're energetic as always, aren't you, Misha? Meanwhile, I'm still half asleep…"

"Mornin'," Takashi chimed in. "And Uematsu too—you sure are chipper."

"Heh heh heh…sure am!"

Ten minutes before the proposed meeting time, the four sat on the big sofa in the living room.

"Weird. Poops isn't here yet?"

"His butler said he was in the middle of preparing something."

"Hrrmm," Takashi said, glancing up at the second floor.

Kotarou followed his example. "Shia…wasn't feeling that well yesterday. I wonder if she's better today?" he mumbled.

Hearing her name, Shia peeked out of the kitchen.

"Oh, good morning everyone." She held a large bundle of something wrapped in a large, old-fashioned handkerchief.

"Ah, are those…boxed lunches?!" Takashi exclaimed, his eyes shining brightly as he imagined the contents of the bag. His nose sniffed the air wildly, like a dog.

"Yes. I heard they were making some breakfast bentos, so I asked to help."

With that, she set the bundle in the entryway, and returned to the kitchen. The savory scent of deep fried food and soy sauce from stew wafted from the bundle. Koboshi's stomach started to growl.

"Oh my gosh! I can't believe I did that…"

"My tum tum's all growly too~su. I'm hungry~su. I wanna eat~su."

"Well, that's 'cos Shia's the best cook ever!" Takashi exclaimed.

"I can't wait to eat."

The four hearts beat as one to the rhythm of Shia's

boxed breakfasts.

"…Morning…."

Aoi's soft voice drifted towards them from the open entryway, followed gingerly by its owner.

She walked towards them, leaning on the walls and staring forward, dazed. Koboshi motioned for her to join them on the sofa.

"Oh, it's okay. I'm fine. My head's still asleep, I think." She pretended to stifle a yawn. As she did, another voice rang through the living room, this one belonging to Kasumi. She bounced in, Fiaa the ferret perched on her shoulder.

"Yahoo! Mornin'! The weather looks great today! Isn't that wonderful!" she said, full of cheer. She was like day to Aoi's night.

Shortly after, Hiroshi and his butler made their appearance as well. Hiroshi carried a large scroll in his arms. With perfect timing, Shia walked into the room as well.

Hiroshi looked into everyone's faces, as if to verify their attendance, and nodded.

"Looks like everyone's here. My good man, if you would…"

Hiroshi's butler wheeled a giant drum into the living room and beat on it, creating a resonating boom.

Hiroshi snapped the scroll open. As it rolled out, words written in skillful calligraphy appeared at the top. They said, "Training Schedule."

"This is today's schedule. First, we shall take a bus to our destination. Once there, we will do a few stretches to loosen our muscles in preparation for the day's activities. Next, for our group research project, we shall embark on a nature walk…"

Hiking durations, the time it would take to cook rice, strength training sessions at the special athletic facilities, and the estimated completion of their group project…everything had been calculated down to the minute, and then carefully detailed upon the scroll.

"Ehhh? But there's no time to play in there," Koboshi complained. "Why not? I really want to go see the Animal Park."

Her sentiments were quickly echoed by the others, and just as quickly squashed by Hiroshi's growl.

"Quiet down, enough! If I recall correctly, the reason we came here in the first place was to study, was it not? Besides, didn't we play all day yesterday?"

"...W-well, yeah, but…"

Kotarou, Koboshi and Takashi, weakened by guilt, couldn't find it in themselves to argue. They all had middle school entrance exams coming up and knew

full well what they should have been doing with their time at the villa.

"If that's the case, why do we need this strength training?" Takashi questioned, tapping the scroll on the spot that read, "Athletics."

"You fool! Everyone knows that a healthy physique is vital in overcoming the hurdles of exam preparations! If you can't lift your head to read, how can you study? So just quit your nonsensical gibberish and zip it. On that note, my good man, our gear!"

"As you wish."

Hiroshi's butler reached into his jacket and pulled out a cowbell. He rang it, and three younger employees appeared. Each carried a cardboard box, which they placed with a heavy thud before the assembled group. The employees left and Hiroshi looked over the group once more.

"In these boxes you'll find all the gear you'll need for our hiking excursion/nature observation. You'll be expected to use it throughout the day's events. Everything should be sized accordingly…and labeled with your names, so try not to grab someone else's kit."

A variety of survival gear, much of which one might find in an actual mountain climber's pack, had been piled in each box.

Among the equipment were specially crafted trek shoes with low, comfortable soles to prevent foot injury caused by exhaustion, and professional quality, waterproof windbreakers. There were also heavy-duty backpacks—the type with an additional strap for around the waist—and other assorted survival goods including thin fleeces, flashlights, first aid kits, and emergency blankets.

"We're really going to take all this stuff with us? You're not going to have us climb Mt. Fuji, are you?" Kotarou asked as he nervously eyed the gear.

"Fool! You can't climb Mt. Fuji with this equipment! We're simply walking a little further than you are accustomed."

"These provisions were made with your well-being in mind, sirs and ladies," Hiroshi's butler interjected. "It's better to be safe than sorry, I always say. At any rate, I shall be accompanying you on your walk today, so let's give it our best!"

Seeing how much work had gone into preparation, they couldn't bring themselves to refuse. So they began to equip themselves with subdued resignation.

"All right then, let us away and venture forth to train both our bodies and minds!"

With Hiroshi's high spirited call, the day's programming began.

"Hurray~su, we're twinsies~su, Kotarou! Wowwee, and Koboshi…you're the same as Ten-chan~su!"

As soon as the bus began to move, Misha was on her feet and walking up and down the aisles, her heavy pack hoisted onto her back. The windbreaker she wore matched Kotarou's.

"Everyone…it'll be just a little longer, okay?"

Shia unwrapped the large bundle she'd carried onto the bus, in preparation for breakfast.

Following Misha and Shia with their eyes, Koboshi and Takashi started to explore the contents of their pack.

The equipment Hiroshi had prepared for them was, in a word, lame. Everything was practical, sure, but it was all a somber brown color and seemed to fuse together, with no individual sense of style or purpose.

Takashi grinned. "Well, what did you expect from a guy named Poops?"

"How many times have I told you to quit calling

me that ridiculous nickname?"

Although Takashi had said the words quietly, Hiroshi, who was sitting in the very front row of the bus immediately turned around to snap at Takashi, a most irritated look on his face. Kasumi listened in on their conversation from two rows back. She harkened back to the moment Takashi introduced Hiroshi to her. Hiroshi had interrupted Takashi exactly as his nickname was about to be revealed… Kasumi jumped when she realized…

"Wait a second…are you telling me Dai-chan's nickname is…Poo…"

"Complete that thought and I'll throw you off the bus, woman!" Hiroshi yelled. He stood on his seat, a finger firmly pointed at Kasumi.

"You're pretty bright, ain't cha, Kasumi! Oh, come on, Poops, don't get all bent out of shape!"

Kasumi burst out laughing. Fiaa watched her, a look of wonder on his face. He had never seen her laugh in such a carefree manner. Shaking his head, he hopped off his seat and headed towards the back of the bus.

"Fiaa…what's wrong?" Kasumi asked, running after him.

She caught up with him just as he pulled himself

onto the very last row of seats. Aoi was in the window seat next to him, staring out at the scenery absent-mindedly. She looked quite miserable.

Kasumi placed Fiaa on her shoulder and sat next to Aoi.

"Morning, Ao. You seem a bit out of it…didn't you sleep well?"

Perhaps Kasumi's sudden inquiry had surprised her, because Aoi had to take a deep breath in order to keep calm.

"Ur…urm, yeah, you could say that."

Feeling out of breath, Aoi scanned the area for any sort of opportunity that would allow her to escape from Kasumi's presence. She caught sight of Shia, busily working on their breakfasts up front.

"Ah, Shia…she looks pretty busy. I should go help her out. …Sorry, but could you let me through?"

Nope!" Kasumi said coldly. She smirked as she stuck her arms out to impede Aoi's path. "You know, you really don't have to be so blunt about avoiding me."

It wasn't the cheerful voice she used around Takashi and the others. It was cold and callous. Something about this Kasumi was different.

"I…it's not like that…I wasn't trying to avoid

you…" She couldn't look at Kasumi's face as she said it.

Yesterday's handshake and pointed gaze, now today's sharp tone… And there was the nightmare, which featured the flickering image of Kasumi's face. All the fear she had for Kasumi suddenly assailed Aoi again.

Aoi cast her gaze forward. Misha and Koboshi were laughing happily and squealing to one another as Shia watched over them with a kind, protective gaze. Hiroshi complained about something or other to Kotarou and Takashi, though genuine enjoyment was hidden behind his agitated façade.

*It was always like this. At home and outside. I was always alone…God is so unfair.*

Enveloped in loneliness, Aoi squeezed the key holder tight.

"Say, Ao, what's that in your hands? Let me see!"

Aoi almost let out a cry as Kasumi pried her unwilling hands open with a strength she would never have imagined.

*No!*

Kasumi's actions only served to reinforce Aoi's fear of her. All around, Hiroshi and the others went

about with their lively routines, not even once looking at her…ignoring her, just like they had in her nightmare.

They didn't care about her. They didn't even see her. The more she mulled over their apathy for her, the more depressed she felt.

"Oh, a key holder…" Kasumi said. "What a pretty color it is. It's a dirty red, a little bit like rusty blood… but…I like it. It gives me strength."

With that, she lunged forward and forcefully plucked the key chain out of Aoi's hands. She shook it, letting the bell ring over and over again.

*Ring.* ♬ *Ring.* ♬ *Ring.* ♬

As she held the key holder in her hands, she leaned over Aoi and whispered in her ear.

"Your soul is mine…"

The harmony of Kasumi's voice, like the ringing of the bell, resounded heavily inside Aoi's heart.

*Ku ku ku ku.* Fiaa laughed at her with a high pitched click.

*Ring.* ♬

Then, as if manipulated on strings, Aoi began to ring the bell herself. Her head felt faint.

*Slip.* She felt something foreign creep into her head. The terror of her nightmare and fear of Kasumi

were suddenly gone. Left in their place was a sense of irritation. It infuriated her to see them laughing and smiling all around her as if nothing was wrong. She felt as if they left her out of everything. They excluded her and she hated them for it.

The rage and jealousy she kept bottled inside rose up furiously. The darkness swelled like a balloon, growing bigger and bigger until she thought she might burst. Once more, the voice in her head whispered to her.

*("Let's show them all a world of pain.")*

*Let's! Why should I be the only one made to suffer? Why shouldn't they feel the same way I do!*

Aoi's expression changed. Her face hardened, and her eyes flashed gold.

*("Fu fu fu. That's right, just like that. Keep listening to me and I promise to give you all the happiness you desire.")*

The voice echoed in her mind. She nodded her head in silent acceptance.

The whispers in the dark—Kasumi's voice—had finally succeeded in capturing Aoi's soul, its claws digging in deep.

"Things are going exactly as planned. It's about to get a lot more fun now." Kasumi laughed content-

edly, petting Fiaa. As if nothing had happened, she returned to her seat.

But her actions had not gone entirely unobserved. Shia and Nya heard the tail end of her exchange with Aoi.

"Ehhh?! But if we get lost, we'll never make it home alive!"

As Aoi and Kasumi were sealing their contract, Kotarou and the others were busy questioning Hiroshi about their destination for the day. Through their interrogation, they learned they were heading to an area very close to the infamous Aokigahara Sea of Trees. Located at the very foot of Mt. Fuji, Aokigahara was considered a hot spot for suicides, and its tangles of trees and brush managed to fatally disorient a number of hikers and tourists yearly.

"There's absolutely nothing to worry about. It's all land owned by the House of Mitarai anyway, so it's safe," Hiroshi offered, in hopes of quelling their fears.

"By 'owning it' you mean…your family bought the land and made a hiking course out of it, Dai-chan?"

Koboshi asked incredulously.

"But of course," came Hiroshi's nonchalant response. Seeing the dubious looks on everyone's faces, Hiroshi laughed heartily and said, "Building a hiking course is nothing compared to the power the House of Mitarai truly wields!"

Hiroshi's momentary pontification came to an end, and Shia spoke up.

"Shall we have breakfast then? I made a lot so please eat up, everyone."

"It looks delicious~su! Thank you for our food~su!" Misha got there first, grabbed a rice ball, and swallowed it whole.

Koboshi started her meal by tasting some side dishes. "It's sooo good. And so cute too…here you go, Kasumi." She passed Kasumi, who stood beside her, a wiener, cut and cooked to resemble an octopus.

"Oh wow! It's even got eight legs!" Kasumi exclaimed innocently as she gulped the sausage down, Misha style.

Misha continued to throw this, that, and some more of this into her mouth. Not wanting to lose out on Shia's delicacies, Kotarou and the others joined in, gorging themselves on rice balls, rolled eggs, octopus wieners, stew, fried chicken, and pickled vegetables.

The contents of the nest of lacquered boxes quickly began to empty.

"Ahh! Everything's soooo nyummy~su! Shia-chan, you really are the best cook ever~su!"

As everyone chomped down on their meal like termites to wood, Aoi, who had been sitting behind them and eating in silence, spoke.

"Shia, don't you think this egg's a bit too sweet? I mean, who in their right mind would ever eat sugary eggs…it's just unthinkable."

"…I'm so sorry it didn't agree with your palette."

"Ehh?" Koboshi said, defending Shia from her seat. "I think they taste great. They're sweet with just the right touch of soy sauce to balance things out."

Aoi completely ignored her. "And these rice balls…there's not enough salt in them. They're awful…just utterly inedible."

"I'm so sorry…"

As Shia apologized, Misha came and sat down next to Aoi.

"Tee hee hee hee hee. Well, if you're not going to eat them, Ao, I will~su…oooh, so nyummy~su! Munch munch…"

Misha stuffed Aoi's leftover rice balls into her

mouth, leaving sticky grains of rice all over her cheeks.

"Aww. I wish I could eat something better. This breakfast totally blows. You've ruined my entire day, Shia."

Hiroshi watched the entire exchange without a word. In spite of his own pleas from the day before, enough was enough. Unable to stomach anymore of Aoi's behavior, he stalked to Aoi.

"…Ao…don't you think you're going a bit too far?" he said in attempt to mediate the prickly mood on the bus. Despite his words, worry was painted all over his face.

"How so? What's so wrong about telling the truth?" she shouted, lashing out at him. She glared at him, eyes full of venom, rendering him speechless.

Kotarou and Takashi exchanged dumbfounded looks, and Aoi turned on them

"And you two. If you've got something to say, say it already!" she snarled, bristling with ire.

She glared at Kotarou.

"We didn't say anything about you, Ao. But maybe you shouldn't say things to make folks feel bad about themselves," Takashi said firmly, driving his point across.

Shia interrupted them, her voice quiet. "Excuse me…I'm sorry. This is really all my fault. So everyone, I'm just very, very sorry." She bowed her head deeply to Aoi.

"Oh please. Give the goodie-goodie act a rest, would you? God, you guys are so annoying."

With that, she turned away, sulking, and stared at the scenery outside.

In one fell swoop, Aoi had successfully brought an end to the positive mood within the bus.

"What the heck's up with her? What does she have against us anyhow? I wish she'd just quit with her stupid attitude," Takashi grumbled.

Misha walked up to him. "Ten-chan, don't look so angry~su. Ooh, I know. Let's play a game~su! If you laugh, you lose, okies~su? Ready? Go~su!"

Misha pulled on her cheeks, stretching out her mouth, manipulating her face as if it were putty.

"…Gya ha ha hah. Stop it, Misha. You win, okay! Ha ha ha ha," Takashi conceded, bursting into laughter when he was no longer able to keep a straight face.

"That's much better~su! A mad face really doesn't suit you~su, Ten-chan. Now to work on Ao~su."

She headed to Aoi's seat and began to put on another hilarious display with her elastic face.



"Come on, Ao. You shouldn't scowl like that~su. It's better to laugh~su."

But Aoi didn't laugh.

"HoheehHahaha. You're good~su. Then I've got no choice~su. I've got to use my super-duper, last resort tactics~su!" Misha exclaimed as she pounced on Aoi and launched a comprehensive tickle attack.

"M…M…Misha. That's…that's cheating! Kya ha ha ha ha ha! That tickles!" Aoi started to laugh out loud.

Thanks to Misha, the upbeat mood of the bus quickly returned. Aoi's laughter managed to dull the impact of her incident with Shia.

"H…huh? What…what have I been doing…up to now?"

"Kotarou~su! You've gotta laugh too~su!" Misha leapt onto Kotarou and began stretching his cheeks out.

"Please don't do that!"

Seeing Kotarou's face being pulled so unwillingly, Koboshi burst out laughing. Kotarou couldn't help but laugh too.

Before they knew it, their heartfelt laughter began to melt away the prickliness of the air around them.

Hiroshi swooned, hearts in his eyes as he gazed upon Misha, imagining himself in Kotarou's place with her hands all over his cheeks.

*Ahhh, Misha is such an incredible person. Look at her...working so hard to rescue me from this predicament. And rejoice! For soon, her nubile fingers will be on my cheeks...*

Misha stood in front of Hiroshi.

*Badump badump.* His heart danced in his chest and his nostrils flared with a mix of anticipation and excitement.

"Dai-chan…"

"Yes!"

As Misha called his name, he responded brightly and thrust his face out towards her.

"…You're…already smiling~su. So you're good to go~su!"

With a "Tee hee hee hee" and nary a brush against Hiroshi's face, Misha turned around and skipped back happily back to where the others were sitting.

Left with a goofy smile on his face, Hiroshi felt like such a fool.

*"W...why?! Why, Misha?! What about me!? Why am I the only one you didn't squish~~~?!"* Hiroshi sobbed, his head hanging as he watched his expecta-

tions skip away.

Meanwhile, Kasumi looked as if she had accidentally bitten into something most bitter. She glanced down and exchanged a look with Fiaa.

"Misha…who in the blazes is she…?"

Kasumi found Misha's existence—an existence capable of turning the worst of moods right with a smile—to be downright creepy.

*When she's around, everything goes wrong. I knew it…I have to do something about her…*

Kasumi glared at Misha warily. But Misha, oblivious to Kasumi's ire, continued playing with Kotarou and the others.

# 3

Suddenly, the bus driver stomped on the brakes. S*SsccccccRREeeeeeccch.*

"Kyaaahh!"

Screams of surprise erupted as Kotarou and his friends were either thrown against the back of their seats, or knocked down and forced to roll across the floor…panic and terror flew throughout the bus.

*Ring.* ♬ *Ring.* ♬ *Ring.* ♬

Aoi's bag fell on the floor and the bell on her key chain let out a set of loud shrieks. Aoi herself was thrust into the seat in front of her. In addition to the pain of her forehead impacting the seat, she also felt sick to her stomach as that slippery intruder forced its way into her head again.

"What on earth were you thinking?! Are you trying to get us all killed?" she found herself yelling at the bus driver.

"I'm so sorry. But an animal ran in front of us and…I just wasn't able to miss it in time…"

"What? What do you mean you weren't able to miss it in time? What a sorry excuse! Maybe you're not cut out to be a driver!"

The bus driver bowed apologetically before getting off the bus to survey the damage.

"You shouldn't get so mad, Ao~su. I got a bump on my head too, but I'm not complaining~su. You shouldn't either," Misha said quietly to Aoi.

Aoi mumbled something in response, then she mouthed, "Yes, I understand," and in the next moment fell silent.

*How annoying.* Aoi simply could not find it in herself to stand up to Misha. Her heart began to pound rapidly as an inexplicable anxiety engulfed it.

"It's okay to be truthful, Ao… Go ahead and show her what you really think," Kasumi whispered into her ear as she placed a gentle hand on Aoi's trembling shoulders.

Kasumi's words instantly soothed Aoi. *That's right. It's not like I'm afraid of Misha or anything. She better watch out next time. I'm gonna give her a piece of my mind.*

"Fu fu fu." Unaware of what she was doing, Aoi

began to laugh.

"My good man…are you all right?" Hiroshi called to his butler. The old man had not even attempted to stand up for one or two minutes now.

The old man had injured his lower back rather badly when the bus made its sudden stop. Unable to move, Hiroshi's butler remained in his seat, moaning painfully.

"Ughh…ughhh…"

"My good man?" Hiroshi ran to him fretfully.

"…Ugh, I am fine. It's nothing to worry about at all, young master. Just an old injury revived. I sprained my back a little while ago…it must have come back when I fell…Tcchhh."

The butler's face scrunched up with pain.

The bus driver, who had gotten off the bus to see whether or not he had run over the creature, returned, crying, "Oh no!"

"What's wrong?" Hiroshi asked, seeing his panic-stricken face.

"I went to see if there was any damage to the bus and…it seems we have a bit of an oil leak on our hands. If we continue to run, there's the possibility of it igniting…so it's simply too dangerous to continue on."

"What? Wasn't a thorough inspection performed

before we left? How could this have happened…?"

The bus driver could only shake his head. "When I inspected the bus this morning, there was absolutely nothing wrong… I'll call the garage and have someone come out as soon as possible, but…I'm afraid it'll still be at least an hour."

"Ehhhh? That long? I can't believe it. No way I'm waiting that long. Seriously," Aoi said, dampening the mood once more.

"I see…" Hiroshi thought for a bit. "I suppose we have no choice but to walk. Luckily, the Mitarai Hiking Course is but a fifteen-minute walk from here. It'll be the perfect warmup. As for you, my good man…"

He cast his gaze to his butler, who was still sitting in his seat, holding his back in pain. "You wait here for the bus to be repaired and then have yourself taken to the hospital!"

"How can you say that, Hiroshi? I am completely fine, young master. This old man is more than fit to accompany you…why, this pain is nothing…ugh…ow ow oww."

Hiroshi's butler let out a loud, pained yelp as he attempted to force himself to his feet.

"No, no, we'll be fine. Go home for now. You know what they say about growing old gracefully. No

good can come out of you forcing yourself to come with us… Just rest up and pick us up at the entrance to the hiking course in the evening. And don't worry about me getting lost here. You know full well I've been here a dozen times before…I'm more worried about your health than anything else."

"Hiroshi…such selfless words, almost wasted on one such as me. Please know, young master, I did not mean to hold you back like this. Very well then…I shall do as you ask of me…"

"If we're going to walk, we need to get going, Hiroshi," Aoi said. She gathered her things with not so much as a glance in the butler's direction.

"Y-yes, you're absolutely right. I must fulfill my duties as host after all. I appreciate your recommendation, Ao. All right, everyone, grab your things and regroup outside the bus." He paused, looked at the bus driver and added, "Take care of my good man, won't you?"

Hiroshi was first off the bus. Kotarou and the others followed behind him.

"All right, you lot," Hiroshi said. "Help me out by opening your packs and forming a single line."

He motioned to the bus driver to bring out a large cardboard box. After confirming and sorting the

contents of the box, Hiroshi began to evenly disperse various foodstuffs for lunch in addition to a few other important items into everyone's packs.

"Ehhh? You're making us carry more stuff?" Aoi said, angry. "No way, no how!"

Hiroshi began to stuff Aoi's share of the food into his own pack, which was already brimming. Filled with two persons' worth of gear, Hiroshi's pack was a bloated balloon, ready to pop any second.

"I can help you carry some too," Kotarou offered.

"I'm really strong~su!" Misha chimed in. "You can put a ton more in my pack too~su."

The two of them lined up in front of Hiroshi and opened up their packs once more, unable to allow Hiroshi to suffer the brunt of Aoi's behavior.

"I am truly sorry, everyone. I prepared a lot more items but…given the situation, I'm only able to provide you all with the most basic of items. Just bear with me, please."

Hiroshi crisply gave out a few more orders and sorted a few more items into everyone else's packs.

"Just keep going straight here, right~su?"

Extracting directions from Hiroshi, Misha

bounced ahead of the pack, a big smile on her lips. Kasumi walked behind her, humming happily to herself, Fiaa resting on her shoulder. Aoi was next, followed by Shia and Nya. Kotarou, Koboshi, and Takashi were at the back of the pack, walking along slowly, taking in and enjoying the scenery despite being hurried along by Hiroshi's occasional, "Step it up!" from ahead of them.

Koboshi took in a deep breath. "I feel like time's stopped here. There's no one else around so it feels like we've wandered into a completely different world."

It was still only eight o'clock in the morning, so the mountain air was cool, the greenery vivid, and the air so refreshing. Just a single breath was enough to revitalize everyone's spirits, so much so that they considered the bus breaking down a lucky thing. If it hadn't, they would never have been blessed with such an amazing array of sights and sounds.

Eventually the group came to a large sign, next to the beginning of a mountain path. The sign read, "House of Mitarai."

"All right everyone, listen up. In about ten minutes

or so, we'll reach a small mountain cabin. We can leave our bigger belongings there while we head out for our nature walk. However, I must warn you…although the lands around here belong to the House of Mitarai, they are still not one hundred percent safe. There is plenty of danger along the way, so make sure not to stray off the path."

"Yes sir!" the group chimed together in a loud voice.

Following Hiroshi, they entered the woods.

"I don't know why, but the trees here look a lot different from the ones we passed earlier," Kotarou mumbled. He craned his head and stared at the trees, growing tens of meters above his head. The area was quite close to the Aokigahara Sea of Trees, a primeval forest over 1000 years old that stretched, in gnarled tangles, as far as the eye could see in all directions. The same type of trees grew here too. Truly, it was a vast, expansive scene that more than deserved the name "sea of trees."

A dozen meters past the sign, standing at the entrance to the mountain path, they found themselves swallowed up by the woods, isolated, a mysterious mood in the air. They scanned the area—tall white cedars and boxwood sprouted from the cracks of

moss-ridden rocks melted by ancient eruptions. Perhaps because of this particular assortment of trees, a luscious, fragrant scent traveled to them on a pleasant breeze.

Takashi took in a deep breath. "Man, it feels so…good out here."

"Whenever they find themselves in the midst of nature like this, humans strive to reclaim their original state. Whatever instincts they possessed that have been repressed by artificial creation…all those instincts suddenly reawaken," Hiroshi said, his voice full of reverence. "That's why, in a place like this, you suddenly feel the being of trees or hear the whispers of the insects. You body returns to nature… And if you take all those feelings with you back to the city and apply it to your studies, your efficiency increases, you see."

As Hiroshi continued his discourse, the others took in the green all around them. Seeing their distraction, Kasumi lightly snapped her fingers.

Fiaa, who had been sitting so obediently on her shoulder, suddenly dove off in a flash of white and scampered off the mountain path and into the thick underbrush.

"Fiaa! Where are you going? Wait! Someone stop Fiaa! Please!"

But Fiaa ploughed ahead, ignoring Kasumi's cries.

"Fiaa, where are you going~su? There's no path over there~su. Wait up~su!"

Misha leapt off the path after the ferret, Kotarou rushing along right behind her.

"Wait, Misha, just a second. It's dangerous on your own. You'll get lost," he called.

"Hey, don't you go running off too, Higuchi! Quit that! Didn't I just get done telling you not to stray off the path…? Weren't you listening when I warned you how dangerous it was around here, not two seconds ago?!"

But Hiroshi's desperate pleas fell on deaf ears. Kotarou was much too focused on keeping Misha in his sights.

"Ahh, we've got to go after them. Those two aren't familiar with this area. I doubt they'd be able to make their way back to the main path on their own."

The area around them was a volcanic plain, created by the eruption of a parasitic volcano of Mt. Fuji. There was still much unexplored and uncharted terrain, with dozens and dozens of caves, veiled in moss and lichen.

"Misha looks like a survivor. I'm sure she'll be

fine," Aoi said, joking.

Hiroshi wasn't in the mood to go along with her jibes. "Ao, you of all people know just how dangerous the sea of trees can be!" he chided.

She stuck her tongue out to say, "Sorry," but in truth, she didn't feel that way in the slightest.

"All right, let's go. If we do this, I'm sure we can return here without getting lost," Hiroshi said. He took a long, thin yellow string out of his backpack and tied it tightly around the tree closest to the mountain path. He stepped into the wilderness and fastened the string around other eye-catching trees along the way, as a marker of the path they had taken.

"You're so smart, Dai-chan," Koboshi remarked.

"It's just common knowledge," Hiroshi mumbled from up ahead. The others followed after quickly, so as not to be left behind.

"Hmmm. He sure comes up with some good ideas, that Dai-chan..." Following a step behind, Kasumi pondered Hiroshi's actions as she spun around one of the trees he had marked. An idea crossed her mind—*I*

*know!*— and she smirked a most malicious smirk.

"Misha! Where are you?"

Kotarou called out to Misha as he slowly made his way along the pathless earth, damp with fallen leaves.

After walking for some time, he came upon the mouth of a cave tall enough that he could easily step inside without having to duck. A barking sound came from inside.

"Hyaaah! It's so dark~su. Fiaa, hide and seek time is over~su. Come on out~su." Misha's voice echoed, following the barking.

"H-huh? …Misha?"

Kotarou took a flashlight out of his pack, flicked it on, and walked into the cave.

"Oh man, is it cold in here." The temperature dropped tremendously once inside. Just like Aokigahara's famous "Fuji Wind Caves[16]," it was cold enough to make Kotarou shiver.

"I feel like I'm walking inside a refrigerator. I better hurry up and find Misha and Fiaa… If I say here too long, I'll end up a popsicle."

Drawing his shoulders up for heat, Kotarou stepped further inside, the small light from his flashlight his only ally.

Kotarou's flashlight projected his giant shadow against the cave walls. For every little step he took, the shadow on the wall squirmed forward colossally. It was a terribly disturbing sight.

*Wait, that's not my shadow. There's something else there? Something long and narrow like a snake... What on earth is it?!*

*Pounce!* Something wrapped itself around Kotarou's shoulders. He let out a cry and instinctively curled into a ball.

"I found you~su, Kotarou~su! Okies, that means you're it next, Kotarou~su!"

*Oh geez*...Kotarou's face twisted as feelings of surprise and relief clashed inside of him.

"Didn't you hear me shouting for you to wait for me? Why did you run into the woods all by yourself?"

"Because I felt bad Fiaa was all on his own~su..."

"Well, did you find him?"

"No, I lost sight of him~su. I thought he might have run into this cave~su, but I didn't see him deeper

inside~su."

"Well, in that case, why don't we get out of here! I saw a really strange shadow just now…"

Thinking about what he had seen, he shivered again, but not from the cold.

"Ah! That's right~su. You don't like dark places do you~su, Kotarou~su. Then I'll give you this~su."

With that, she handed Kotarou the cast-off skin of a large snake. But Kotarou was so surprised to see it, he stumbled back and fell right onto his bottom.

"I found it all the way in the back~su! It's for good luck~su!"

"M-M-Misha! Why do you have such a thing?! If you play any more pranks on me, I swear, I won't be your friend anymore! Seriously!" Kotarou scolded as he got back on his feet.

Misha fell silent in surprise. Kotarou had never threatened her like that before. Her shoulders slumped dejectedly.

"I wasn't playing a prank on you~su. I really read it in a book before~su…snake skins are supposed to be good…"

As she spoke, her voice became smaller and smaller. Seeing how he had made her feel, Kotarou

wanted to comfort her but the words got stuck in his throat.

*Why did I snap at her like that? Why was I so angry with her?*

"Kotarou, are you still mad at me~su… I'm really, really sorry~su."

"Please don't…apologize, Misha. You just surprised me, is all. I didn't mean to say those things and I'm really sorry. Now come on. Let's get out of here and find Fiaa together, okay?"

*Still*...Kotarou thought as he watched a smile creep back on to Misha's face. *I wonder why I told her I wouldn't be her friend anymore?*

"Oh, thank goodness. We were wondering where you two ran off to."

At the mouth of the cave, Misha and Kotarou found everyone else waiting for them. It seemed the weather had started to take a turn for the worse, and a thick haze draped itself over the forest. Kasumi stood before them, Fiaa sitting once more on her shoulder.

"Oh, Fiaa, there you are~su! I'm so happy~su. Where were you~su?"

Misha dashed over to Kasumi and excitedly began to pet Fiaa on the head. She was completely clueless to the fact, however, that the hisses Fiaa directed at her were not welcoming but threatening.

"Actually, it was pretty lucky," Takashi explained. "When we came out here, Fiaa was waiting for us in front of this cave, not moving. It was like he was telling us you guys were inside. With the haze, we never would have found you guys in that damp old forest without Fiaa's help."

Kasumi smirked. "I'm really so glad you're both safe. Misha, Kotarou…thank you so much for going after Fiaa."

"Oh, don't thank us. It's all thanks to Fiaa that we met up again, after all. I feel like we should be the ones saying thanks to him," Kotarou said, gently petting Fiaa on the head.

Misha bowed her head deeply. Hiroshi looked at her, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Misha, I really hope you don't go running off on your own anymore. Some of these caves are like mazes inside and once you wander in you simply don't come out. That goes for you too, Higuchi."

"Yes sir. I promise to listen to everything you say, Dai-chan~su," Misha replied without hesitation.

She smiled at Hiroshi. It was so pure a smile Hiroshi lost all his will to complain about her impulsive actions.

"You two are both nothing but bothers when you go off on your own like that." Aoi said the words just loud enough to be heard. She glared into Misha's face, and Misha's shoulders sagged once more.

"All right, we've been out here long enough. Let's get back to the path, shall we!" Hiroshi said, preempting another possible Aoi outburst. He ran to the front of the group and walked back into the forest.

Koboshi tapped Misha on the shoulder. "Don't worry about what she says," she whispered.

"But it really was my fault~su," Misha said with a "Tee hee hee." Aoi's words, combined with Kotarou's severe outburst earlier, had forced her into a deep state of reflection over her actions.

Koboshi continued talking, trying to cheer Misha up. "Oh, guess what! For lunch, we get to make our own meals. Doesn't that sound fun?"

"Really~su! I'm gonna do my bestest~su! We're all gonna cook together~su! Yippee~su!"

A big smile back on her face, Misha walked with a bounce in her step as she caught up to Hiroshi.

"Was it scary in that cave?"

Aoi's sudden query broke Kotarou out of his trance and brought him back to reality. He had been contemplating his rude behavior towards Misha inside the cave.

"…Hrrmm. Not really. I think because I was so busy looking for Misha, I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings."

"Do you ever feel like she's a burden? You're the one that ended up having to chase after her. I mean…I haven't known her very long but…Misha seems to be a really happy-go-lucky person who doesn't concern herself with consequences. She thinks her actions would never cause anyone any distress, but that's not the case, is it? I bet she gets you guys into all sorts of trouble because she personally doesn't think it *is* trouble."

"I…it's not like that," Kotarou replied. "Sure, Misha seems a bit carefree and careless on the outside but inside, she always puts the well-being of others before her own. I won't deny she goes a bit overboard sometimes but she's a very, very good person."

Kotarou spoke honestly to Aoi, admitting Misha's weaknesses, but more than that, emphasizing her strong points.

"Do you really mean that?" Aoi asked. She peered into Kotarou's face, disbelieving.

"Yes, of course I mean it. Why do you have to say things like that?"

Kotarou angrily sped up and walked away from Aoi. For quite a while afterward, agitation lingered heavily in his heart.

*Ring* ♬

The bell on Aoi's key holder jingled. Aoi smirked as she witnessed Kotarou's 180 degree change in disposition.

*That's right. Go ahead, get mad. It all goes to show just how brittle your petty games of friendship really are.*

Aoi, eyes gleaming maliciously, stepped up beside Koboshi next.

"Koboshi… I know you said you grew up with both Kotarou and Ten-chan but…to me, it looks like you're just weighing your options."

"Ehh? Why would you say something like that? You're so mean, Ao!"

Not wanting to spend another moment speaking

to Aoi, Koboshi ran off and caught up to Shia.

Aoi moved on to her next target. Pretending to tie her shoe lace, she waited for Takashi to catch up with her.

"Oh hey, Ten-chan. How's about we talk a bit while we walk… Say…"

"Fu fu fu fu. This is going so much better than expected, Fiaa. My my, what shall I do? I never expected to gain so much evil power from Aoi. I mean, at the rate she's going, I might go up two, no, maybe even three whole grades?!"

Watching Aoi and Takashi locked in argument ahead of her, Kasumi laughed under her breath.

Shia watched Kasumi from a short distance away. "I…I feel as if…I might remember something about her soon," she murmured to Nya. She felt as if she had met Kasumi before, a very long time ago. Somewhere…

"*I can't help but feel wary about her partner in crime, myself.*"

"Why is that?" Shia asked of Nya.

"*Its presence…it's definitely not an animal;*

*though, whatever it is, it's doing a superb job of masking itself. Not to mention its name, Shia. There's just something about the name...Fiaa.*"

"What about it?"

"*Fiaa is very close to the English word* FEAR. *It means terror, dread, and dismay. Why would any human name their darling pet such an evil name? After all, pets are like family to most human beings...*"

The fur on Nya's back stood up.

# 4

"How can this be?!"

"What's the matter?"

After about a five minute walk, Hiroshi suddenly stopped in his tracks. Sensing something definitely wrong, Koboshi glanced at him, worried.

"You all know I tied yellow string around the trunks of some of the trees as markers. But…"

Perhaps they were hidden by the mountain haze but there was no sign of yellow string anywhere.

"I think…I think we came from this way."

"No, we came from the left."

Takashi and Koboshi pointed in completely opposite directions.

Hiroshi listened to their suggestions. "Unnghhh. Perhaps it would be best if we sit still for a while and wait for the mist to clear."

"But we've got no markers and no road signs, right? So even if all this haze does let up, are we re-

ally gonna be able to get back on the path?" Takashi's words were stained with irritation.

Aoi crouched in the leaves. "Yeah, what are we gonna do, Hiroshi?" she said, sulking.

Following her example, the others sat down as well. They were all starving and, not used to walking through the mountains, their fatigue was all the more overwhelming. A hopeless expression registered on each face.

"It's possible that a bird plucked one or two of the strings from the trees, thinking they were a caterpillar or something but…for all of the strings to disappear is simply inconceivable…" Hiroshi sighed. "If only this mist would clear."

Kasumi spoke up light-hearted. "What if someone took them off on purpose?"

She was obviously fishing for a reaction and Kotarou was more than happy to oblige.

"Why would anyone do something like that? Why would you even say something like that to begin with?" His words poured out, full of bile.

"…Does anyone remember who was walking last in line?" Aoi said, unnerved by the strength of Kotarou's words.

She looked into each face. "I stopped to talk to

you along the way so I was last for a bit but…I'm innocent, I swear."

"Hrrrmm, wasn't that foul creature Shia and her cat Nya walking in the back the majority of the time?" Hiroshi said.

In a low whisper as if talking to themselves, proclamations of innocence and grumbles of accusation droned dully in the mist.

*Why are they doing this? What's wrong with everyone? Why can't they believe in their own friends?* Kotarou couldn't help but feel saddened as he watched his friends' mounting suspicions for one another.

"Oh no, we're all gonna' end up lost~su. I've got to do something~su."

While everyone else seemed to wallow in a depressive fog, Misha sought to remedy the situation. Unbeknown to the others, the tiny little wings on Misha's back began to flap of their own accord.

Something amazing began to happen. With each flap, little by little, the haze surrounding the group lifted.

"Ah! Look~su! There's a yellow string over there~su! Ooh, and over there too~su!"

With the haze clearing, they noticed the yellow strings Hiroshi tied on the tree trunks were sitting

here and there, upon the forest floor. Some were even caught in the tree branches.

Kasumi's face soured as she watched the scene unfold. "W-w-what…?! How did this happen? I personally untied all of those strings…?!"

Working together, Kotarou and the others searched for traces of the yellow string scattered along the path. Though it took more than twice the time of their trip out, eventually they made it safely back onto the hiking course.

Hiroshi let out a loud, triumphant cry to urge them forward. "All right! We should see the cabin in about five minutes. Just a little more, everyone!"

"Okay!" the others responded just as loudly.

Their spirits renewed, they had an extra bounce in their steps. Humming and laughing, they made their way towards the mountain cabin.

Kasumi followed behind, glaring bitterly at Misha, shaking her head and clicking her tongue.

*It was definitely her doing. She may very well be my true enemy. But I won't let her get in my way.*

"Phew, we made it to the cabin~su. Time to make

lunch~su!"

Because of the cave incident, by the time they finally arrived at the cabin it was 11:00 AM, a good hour behind schedule.

Right away, Misha began to assist Hiroshi with their lunch preparations.

Hiroshi had three courses in mind for their lunch menu, the responsibilities of which he had divvied up prior to leaving the villa. The group members lined up in front of him and he handed each of them a recipe card with a thorough list of ingredients and cooking procedure.

The first course they would attempt to make was a stuffed cabbage stew. They boiled a whole head of cabbage. Once the cabbage was soft enough, they removed the center. The cabbage leaves were arranged like a lotus flower, and the hollowed out center filled with a mixture of minced meat, onions, ginger, and salt, much like a stuffed pepper. A stock was made by dissolving an instant soup cube in water with black pepper. Herbs like bay leaves, plus carrots, bacon, and the stuffed cabbage itself—stuffed side up—were added to the stock and set to stew.

The next dish was *gohei mochi*[17]. Gohei mochi was made by mashing up ordinary cooked rice until it took

on the characteristics of actual mochi. Once it reached the consistency of a rice cake, the rice was spread flat on a small tree branch, and *miso*[18] paste brushed over it. Finally, the rice on a stick was cooked over a flame until it started to burn, just slightly.

The third and final dish was a stone-cooked hot pot. After collecting a number of natural rocks about the size of a fist, the rocks were thrown into a fire and heated. Miso paste, scallops, mackerel, and clams, among other varieties of seafood, were placed in an appropriately sized pot. Once the rocks were sufficiently hot, they would be thrown into the pot instantly, causing the water to boil and cook the rustic dish.

"Wow, Dai-chan. You're like the King of Camping, or something," Koboshi said, impressed. Thinking Hiroshi might possibly be better at cooking than she was, Koboshi couldn't help but fret a little.

Once they all started cooking, a sense of peace came over the group. Although there was a stove inside of the cabin, it was a tight fit for all the campers working at once, and so they decided to cook outdoors. Hiroshi gathered a bundle of rocks and proceeded to build a makeshift stove. As for Kotarou, Koboshi, and Takashi, they took on the task of gathering firewood.

"Remember, don't stray off the path," Hiroshi

called to Kotarou from behind them.

"Okay," they responded in unison and set off.

Though they walked side by side, for some reason the conversation between the three friends didn't spark like it usually did when they were together. The doubts they had for each other during the lost string marker incident, and the words Aoi said to each of them in the forest, festered in the back of their minds, causing their words to sputter.

As they gathered the firewood, an uneasy, uncomfortable mood settled over the three friends.

At first, Kotarou gritted his teeth and accepted it. Eventually, unable to bear it any longer, he spoke up.

"…Hey guys…there's something I've been dying to ask you all…"

His words instantly lightened the weighty mood.

"…To tell the truth…I do too!"

"Yeah, same goes for me."

The three blinked, looked into each others' faces, and laughed with relief. They were all glad to know they each had nagging questions they hadn't been able to bring up with one another. The conversation began to flow like water as they gathered firewood.

"Ao asked me if I ever felt like Misha was a bur-

den. I told her I didn't feel that way at all but right after I said the words, I felt so awful…because I thought maybe I was lying. Maybe I *had* considered the idea, even fleetingly, before. I've been really depressed ever since."

Once Kotarou revealed what had been worrying him, Takashi and Koboshi took turns voicing their opinions to cheer him up.

"Well, that's because Misha is…Misha. I think you might be thinking too much, Kotarou. If you really thought she was that huge of a bother, she'd sense it…and she'd stop coming up to you like, 'Kotarou! Kotarou!' all the time," Takashi said.

"I was told that I had the both of you on a scale and was weighing my options. That I'm pretty cruel, aren't I? I don't care what other people think about me, but I just didn't want you guys to feel that way, so I was pretty down myself too."

Takashi guffawed. "Looks like you've finally grown up, Uematsu. Do you really think we'd feel that way about you?" he added, eyes wide and round.

Kotarou nodded.

"She told me maybe you felt I was being too pushy and assertive, saying the right things all the time. So I started to think maybe I was," Takashi said.

"It's not like you at all to think about something like that," Kotarou and Koboshi said simultaneously.

"Well, maybe sometimes," Kotarou added with a playful grin.

Takashi bellowed with laughter. They were able have a serious and candid discussion about their worries with one another and able to be frank and honest with each other. All three of them felt so much better. Their fog of self-doubt lifted and their ability to say everything they were thinking but thought they could never say out loud returned.

The words Aoi threw at them caused more pain than they imagined. Once they began to doubt themselves—to feel as if the actions they thought were right were actually a nuisance to their friends— they became petrified with worry, afraid to speak freely with each other.

The sharp little thorns that had been sprinkled within Aoi's words—alone they were trivial, fragments of words. But over time, those fragments piled up and those trivial thorns arranged themselves in a poisonous bouquet which ran through their bodies, to ultimately pierce their hearts.

When that happens, even if a person knew their

friends would never say or do certain things, they would find they no longer had the courage to confront their friends face to face and confirm their beliefs. Disappointed by their own weakness and cowardice, they would begin to lose more and more of their confidence in themselves and others. Eventually, they wouldn't bother to look beyond their friends' faces, and would be led down a path strewn with suspicion and distrust.

Being overly considerate of another's feelings doesn't allow people to discover true friendship. Sharing the truth fortified the bond between the three friends, and their relationship was much stronger than before.



"I wonder if Ao…I wonder if she said all those mean things on purpose? To try and break up our friendship? If that's the case, I would be so sad," Koboshi said with a deep sigh.

"Yeah," Kotarou said. "She was probably jealous of our friendship or something."

"But Poop's friends are our friends too…why can't she get that through her skull?" Takashi won-

dered. His arms were folded across his chest and his head cocked.

"Ao probably never had friends like that before," Kotarou considered. "That's why she didn't know how to approach us, I bet. That, and she's from a super rich family, remember…"

"I'm sure the grown-ups around her are always telling her what to do and how to act…I doubt it's all fun and games for her…she's seen lots of hard times too," Koboshi said sincerely.

She set her firewood on the ground and sat beside it, drawing her knees into her chest. The two boys followed suit, sitting down on each side of her, Indian style. All three now felt sympathy for Aoi.

"I'm sure she has a ton of fears about going off to New York. Ones she hasn't gotten off her chest yet… I mean, she's gonna be separated from the mother she's lived with and loved all her life…you know…?" Takashi said.

"Say, I know. How about we put a little extra into cheering up Ao when we get back to camp? So she doesn't feel like she's all alone in the world!"

Koboshi jumped to her feet in a guts pose. Kotarou and Takashi rose as well and nodded enthusiastically.

Gathering the firewood in their arms, the three began to make their way back. But instead of the frowns and awkward silence that marred their outbound trip, only beaming faces and cheerful chatter marked their return.



While Kotarou and his group were off gathering firewood, the remaining members of the excursion stayed behind to prepare all the ingredients for lunch, cleaning, slicing, and chopping the ingredients.

The mountain cabin had been built as a place of temporary respite, so it was but fifteen tatami mats in size, including the kitchen and bathroom. It was much too small a place for them all to work in, so once they received the vegetables they were in charge of preparing, each of the chopping crew went outside, picked a spot and went to work.

"Owwwie, my eyes hurt~su!" Misha cried. Streams of tears ran down her face as she struggled to chop the onions.

In stark contrast to Misha, Shia had quickly and efficiently finished all the preparation work on her vegetables in no time at all. Knowing that it took quite

some time to boil the cabbage for the first course on Hiroshi's menu, she stoked the fire with the wood she had available in order to bring a pot full of water to a boil. Once the pot was bubbling rapidly, she placed the cabbage in.

"There, that should do it. It should take about ten minutes in water that hot."

She glanced at Nya. "Well, then, shall we?"

She spoke the words as if she had finally come to a terribly hard decision after even harder deliberation. She walked slowly toward the large tree where Kasumi and Aoi sat. Following on her heels was Nya.

"Aoi, Hiroshi was wondering if you'd be so kind as to bring him everything you've been working on," she quietly asked of Aoi.

Hearing Shia's words, the staccato of Aoi's knife immediately stopped.

"But why? I'm almost done. Can't he wait a little longer?"

"Well…it seems he intends to make the stuffed cabbage stew first. I've started on the preliminary boil, but since it has to be boiled again after it's stuffed, it takes quite a while to complete…so he'd like to start on the stuffing as soon as possible."

"Sheesh. If he really wanted to get a head start on

things, why didn't he just come over and pick up the items himself?"

It was Kasumi who replied to her annoyed tone. "Go ahead and take that stuff to him, Ao."

Aoi looked into Kasumi's face. *Ring*♬ The bell on her key holder rang. Aoi nodded silently and slowly walked to the stove, where Hiroshi was.

# 5

After seeing Aoi walk away, Shia stared straight into Kasumi's eyes.

"So, Kasumi…it was you manipulating Aoi all this time."

Without lowering her eyes even in the slightest, Kasumi returned Shia's gaze with a narrow, defiant glare. Condescension flashing in her eyes, she regarded Shia from head to toe.

"Hmm, so that's it, huh? Just as I suspected… you're from our world too…aren't you, Shia? Though, to be honest, I wasn't quite sure of it until now…after all, your presence was so puny I could hardly bring myself to acknowledge it…"

Shia simply continued to stare at Kasumi, not affected by her words at all.

"…The memory just came back to me, you see... very long ago…I saw you once in the Demon World, Kasumi—if I may call you that—over by the Third

Great Gate."

Looking down on Shia with mocking eyes, Kasumi laughed through her nose. "The Third Great Gate? Which means you're ranked way lower than I am, doesn't it? Fu…fu fu… Shia, should you really be addressing your superior in such a rude manner?"

*Nyahhh*. Nya let out a bitter cry in protest. Shia fell to her knees before Kasumi, bowing her head. "Yes, you're absolutely right. I'm so terribly sorry for my behavior," she mumbled.

After spending two days listening to the manner of Kasumi's speech and laughter, all of a sudden feelings she had long forgotten flooded back to her. Shia felt the sliver of her long lost past resurface, assaulting her like a flashback.

Just as it was in the Heavens, the Demon World was a hierarchy, with a series of ranks, levels, and classes. There was quite a definitive division between those who were strong in the art of darkness and those who were not. Normally, those of differing classes would never lay eyes upon one another, and unless something drastic occurred, those at the bottom could

never rise above their station.

The Third Great Gate Shia had mentioned was a great material representation of this hierarchy. It was a tall, purple door, the heights of which could not be seen no matter how far back a demon threw their head. Beyond the door, demons of the highest ranks held a nightly banquet where they put their powers of darkness on display, ceaselessly sending their evil powers to the Human or Heavenly World.

Those demons whose powers were lacking could not even touch the door. If they tried, they would be reduced to mist in a blink of an eye, disappearing for all eternity. Still, every day, absorbing the evil power of living beings and creatures as their own, thousands upon thousands of demons writhed before this door, hoping to fulfill their dreams of one day touching...and eventually opening these purple gates.

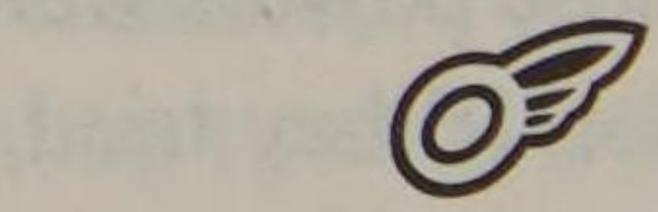
Close to the gate, the excited sounds of the banquet could be heard, which lulled many a lower-ranked demon into depressively dark dreams.

*When was it again?* Shia thought. *Oh, yes.*

It happened the day a very special banquet was held in the Demon World. She had been standing in front of the Third Great Gate. She remembered now that for that day only, the Gate was opened, making it

possible to view all the leaders and dignitaries of the Demon World. She had been standing there all day long, and as the festivities went into full swing, for some reason or another she looked up, just in time to hear that distinct *Fu fu fu,* and that belittling manner of speech. She got a glimpse through the gates that day and the vision came back to her in full glory.

It was Kasumi.



"So you know then, don't you?"

Kasumi's voice brought Shia out of her memories. "About what?"

"About what…durrhh, about what I intend to do, of course…"

"Were you…were you thinking of taking Aoi to the Demon World…?"

"That's right. When I first saw her at the lake, I felt something about her right away, almost like a static charge. Deep down, you see, that girl's nothing but a swirl of jealousy, lies, and resentment. And even though I only came to visit the Human World for a bit of fun, I couldn't turn down such a juicy opportunity

to rank up. The darkness in her soul is too strong to ignore."

"So that's why you gave her the key chain…"

"That's right!" Kasumi laughed. She pulled a magical staff, as tall as she was, out of thin air.

*She must have been hiding it out of sight all this time with some sort of magic,* Shia thought.

"That key holder she has is a miniature version of this staff. By getting her to carry it around with her everywhere she went, I was able to channel the darkness of her soul to me and devour it whenever I wished. And how delicious it is! All I had to do was tickle her mind a teeny bit and she'd put out at least ten times the amount of darkness of a normal human being. Thanks to her, when I return from my vacation, I'll have easily ranked up two levels. To a place that someone like you, Shia, couldn't even dream to reach. Fu fu fu."

Kasumi's voice was drenched with pride as she spoke, her eyes cold as ice as they bored into Shia's. They flashed with a demonic cruelty that Kotarou and the others had surely never witnessed before.

"…A girl like that is probably more suited to the Demon World than the Human World anyway. That's why I'm taking her with me. It's actually quite lucky

for the both of us, really. It just so happens that the doll I used to have met with an unfortunate accident not too long ago. Fu fu fu… Or maybe I'll make her into my pet," Kasumi tittered.

Shia met Kasumi's gaze for a moment before slowly lowering her head again.

"Please. Aoi is very important to Hiroshi… Please don't take her with you…I beg of you."

*Huh?* Kasumi's eyes became round. "What is wrong with you? Are you daft? How dare you speak against me! You should know full well that someone of your…pathetic standing must never raise their voice in dissension to me!"

She looked down her nose at Shia and laughed out loud. "Ha ha ha ha."

Shia received all of Kasumi's scathing words in silence.

"…But don't worry. I'll be leaving very soon. I've experimented more than enough with ways to deepen the darkness in a human being's heart. They're such pathetic creatures, really. A little prodding here and there and they're more than willing to turn on one another. They begin by loathing themselves and ultimately go on to hate others in the depths of their souls… Oh, I've learned so much about how they work. They're just so

stupid, don't you agree? Fu fu fu…"

Joy reflected in Kasumi's face. Shia stood, unaffected. She looked directly into Kasumi's eyes and spoke clearly in a firm, fearless tone.

"Kasumi…if you keep thinking humans are weak, you'll be sure to pay for it sooner or later. I've been here a lot longer than you, so I know a few things about them and about the depths of their souls… You really ought to be more careful…your negligence will be your downfall."

Bowing her head reverently at Kasumi, Shia headed towards where Hiroshi, Misha, and Aoi were. For a moment, Kasumi stood in stunned silence.

"…How dare she! How dare she say that to me! She's probably the lowest rung of demon there is and she dares lecture me?!" Kasumi snarled bitterly.

Shia's remarks riled her so much she couldn't help but call out one last insult to the taller girl's back before she walked out of earshot.

"Say, this black cat of yours is a demon too, isn't it? He seems to be a little higher pedigree than you. Even so, I bet it's all he can do to cross the Third Great Gate's threshold. In other words, the two of you, owner and pet, are both equally worthless! A



loser combination if you ask me!"

Nya, who had yet to walk away, let out a loud hiss and glared at Kasumi. "*How dare you insult me!*"

*Ku ku ku.* Fiaa clucked out a laugh at the sight of him, just as condescending as Kasumi.

*"Damn you. Not like you're any different from me!"* Nya cried.

Turning his nose away, as if Nya did not merit any more of his time, Fiaa directed another set of disdainful clicks at the cat. His pride wounded, Nya gritted his teeth and ran after Shia.

Misha looked worried the moment she saw the drained expression on Shia's face.

"You look so pale~su, Shia~su. Are you not feeling well again, like yesterday~su?"

Shia smiled. "I'm all right. Now then, shall we finish preparing for lunch?"

She walked to the makeshift stove Hiroshi had set up outside. Kotarou and his group returned with the firewood, and they worked hard to regulate the fire for cooking.

Shia shot a glance at Aoi, who was standing in front

of the pot with the boiling cabbage. Hiroshi and Aoi seemed to really be enjoying themselves cooking.

"No, stop. Don't put the salt in yet, silly."

Without Kasumi by her side, Aoi was able to return to her true self.

"What should I do?" Shia asked Nya.

"*Don't ask me. You're the one who decided to spout all those fighting words. Now I admit...there are a few things I don't know. What I do know is that according to the rules of the Demon World...a lesser demon must not go against the will of a greater demon...and that we will never be able to escape that place, no matter what...*" Nya spoke no further.

"Lunch is ready~su. Come eat~su!" Misha announced brightly.

Everyone gathered before the stove. On top of the table was a giant pot, next to which were placed a dozen or more red hot stones. Curious about how the dish would turn out or if it would turn out at all, everyone's eyes darted excitedly from the pot to the stones, the stones to the pot.

"All right, I'm putting them in~su!"

Using tongs, Misha picked up one of the stones and tossed it into the pot.

*WooooosshhHhhhHHh!* For a second, everyone's

faces were obscured by the steam that rushed out of the boiling hot water.

"Oh, wow!"

Everyone screamed ecstatically. After placing five stones into the water, the contents of the pot came to a perfect boil.

"All right, you lot…you can chow down now!" Hiroshi said. "Thank you for this meal!"

Armed with bowls of rice and chopsticks, Kotarou and the others tore into the hot pot with a vengeance.

"This is waaayyy good!" Koboshi exclaimed.

"Eating lunch together sure makes a meal that much better," Koboshi said. The group agreed as they munched on their food contently.

But Shia wasn't hungry. She simply watched as Kotarou and the others ate and laughed.

"What shall I do?" she murmured, glancing at Aoi. Her eyes met Kasumi's.

*Ring.* ♬

The sound of the key holder's bell again.

*STORY 4*

# How to Protect Those Dear to You

# 1

Half an hour after eating lunch, Kotarou and the gang prepared to set off.

"Say, Dai-chan, if you ask me, we've experienced more than enough of this magnificent nature, so how's about we go back to the villa and make for the Animal Park? I think it might be fun to have a chat or two with the animals there," Koboshi suggested as she patted her full belly.

"I totally second Uematsu!!" Takashi called out goofily, jumping up to his feet with both his arms raised high in the air.

"Silence! Quiet! We didn't come all the way to Mt. Fuji to visit the Animal Park!" Hiroshi thundered, drawing a rolled piece of Japanese vellum from his backpack.

He snapped it open to reveal a 1:2500 scale map of the surrounding forest. Clearly marked on the map were areas for log raft crossings, rock climbing, and

an athletic course.

"This area is the House of Mitarai's top secret training grounds. And since it's a training ground, we'll be training, all right!"

The assembled group broke into a disgruntled cacophony. It did little, however, to steer Hiroshi from his course.

"Enough talk! Follow me!" *Now I'll finally be able to show that pesky Ayanokoji my true greatness! Hahahahahaha!*

This was the first time since he arrived in the Fuji area that Hiroshi was finally able to genuinely brag.

Half-heartedly, but fully equipped, Kotarou and the group left the wooden cabin.

It was past 1:00 PM and they were terribly off schedule.

"All right, everyone! From here, we keep going straight!"

Guided along by Hiroshi's voice, the group grudgingly marched along. Kasumi, however, skipped at the head of the pack.

"We'll be coming to a sign directing us to the next

path very soon." Hiroshi called to her.

"Okay!"

Fiaa clicked out a cry. Nya hissed angrily at the ferret, all the while chasing him.

"Nya and Fiaa sure are getting along~su," Misha said, watching the two creatures interact.

The color drained from Shia's cheeks. "Yes, you're right. I'm sure he's excited since he doesn't often get to run around in a wide open area like this…" A strained expression crossed her face.

"Which way now?" Kasumi asked. She turned and faced Hiroshi.

The others picked their heads up, and following Kasumi's lead, saw that the path ahead forked in two directions. The first path followed the river, while the second continued into the mountains. However, the words on the sign denoting the direction of the Athletic Course were worn and faded and wholly illegible.

"UNngGGhh. Now which way was it again? I could have sworn the Athletic Course was over…that way…?"

Having not been here in some time, Hiroshi's memory was just as faded as the sign's lettering. He cocked his head, thinking. Seeing him struggle to remember the way, Aoi pointed right.

"I've been there before, so I sort of remember… and I'm pretty sure it was this way."

"My apologies. Y-yes. If you say it's to the right, then we go right, Ao."

The group wandered along the right fork of the path for 20 minutes or so.

"Dai-chan, are you sure it's this way?" Kotarou managed to say between gasps for air.

"…I'm positive it's located to the northeast of the sign but…"

A map in one hand and a compass in the other, Hiroshi scanned his surroundings, desperate for a familiar sight or sign.

*How odd. Could it be that…we're lost?*

Above his head, the sky was filled with big, wooly clouds. Despite their benign appearance, Hiroshi knew better and quickly assessed the group's best course of action.

*This is bad. Altocumulus clouds…we're in for heavy rains for sure. We need to find shelter before it's too late.* Part of his survival training involved a careful study of the mountain's climate, so he was quick to

sense the changing weather.

After taking a deep breath, he made his confession.

"It seems that we've managed to get ourselves… lost. My apologies. Once I find a good place to rest, it would be in our best interest to take refuge for the time being."

"We haven't really walked that far, so why don't we just turn around and go back the way we came?" Takashi said.

Hiroshi furrowed his brow. "You see those clouds that resemble our fluffy sheep friends? Well, they're telling me rain's near by. It would be safer to find shelter around here than go back the way we came. If we get rained on, it'll only serve to drain more energy and stamina than we can spare. I don't want to risk that. …I wonder how we managed to get lost?"

*Rumble rumble rumble.* On cue, thunder rumbled and rain began to pitter-patter down.

Koboshi placed her hands over her head in an attempt to shield herself from the rain. "Where should we go? Dai-chan?"

Hiroshi gave the area the once-over. *If I'm not mistaken, there's a spot around here… This place looks familiar.* He dredged through the waters of

long ago memories.

"This way!" He stepped off the path and into the thick of the mountain foliage with a rustle.

Takashi reached out and grabbed a hold of Hiroshi's arm from behind. "Wait a sec…didn't you just yell at us, just like, an hour ago, about how dangerous it was to stray off the path?"

"Don't worry. There's a large cave over this way that I used to play in quite a bit. If we run, it won't take longer than five minutes to get to it. And it'll keep us out of the rain. Everyone, put your windbreakers on."

The group took out the windbreakers they had stashed in their packs and put them on. Then they began towards the cave.

*Zaaahhh zaaaaaaaaahh. Rumble rumble rumble rumble…*

The rain poured onto their shoulders, stronger by the minute. The temperature had dropped quite a bit since the showers began and, in spite of their windbreakers, they started to shiver uncontrollably.

"Dai-chan, are you sure it's this way?" Kotarou

said. In his heart, he knew full well Hiroshi was in no way to blame for their situation. But because of the cold and his own fatigue, he couldn't help the accusation that saturated his words. The longer they remained in the rain, the more and more it washed away their will and stamina, and their already aching and heavy feet grew heavier still.

*Huff. Puff.* Their breathing echoed through the woods. Hiroshi took one final look at his map to confirm their location.

"It should definitely be this way but…I'm sorry, all. It's just a little farther, I'm sure…ah? Wait…oh no. The compass is broken."

Cold sweat mingled with rain and ran down his forehead. The needle of the compass spun around and round like a frenzied dervish.

Misha and Koboshi took their compasses out of their bags to help Hiroshi but it was to no avail. Their compasses spun just as uselessly.

"Tee hee hee hee hee! Mine's spinning around and round too~su!"

"Oh my gosh…mine too!"

"Eww, creepy," Taksashi added. "Look. Mine's spinning out of control too."

One by one, they all removed their compasses

from their packs. Each and every one of them registered the same frantic spinning.

"Oh no. This isn't any different than getting lost in the Aokigahara Sea of Trees…which means we'll never make it back home!" Koboshi said, upset. She looked as if she might burst into tears.

Hiroshi continued to study his map, "Hrmmm"-ing as he did. "How strange. The volcanic rock around here should be free from any geo-magnetism…"

*If the compasses won't work, then I've got to rely on my own intuition,* Hiroshi thought. He mustered all the confidence he had left.

"This way. Just a little further on. Hang in there, guys," he said firmly.

"Thank goodness!"

About ten minutes later, they stumbled wearily into Hiroshi's cave. They set their belongings down and gushed with relief, both to themselves and out loud.

Out of all of them, Hiroshi was probably the most relieved to see his old secret hideout. It had been at least three years since his last visit. Even though the

landscape had looked very familiar to him, in all truth, he had been highly skeptical of his abilities to ever find the cave again.

"It's kinda cold in here," Kasumi said, trembling. The temperature was even lower inside the cave than outside.

They all agreed to change first, taking towels out of their packs to wipe as much of the rain off as they could. Then they took their spare fleeces and cardigans and layered them on top of their dried clothes. Only then did they feel even slightly better in their dank surroundings.

Before they knew it, it was 4:00 in the afternoon.

"Do you think your butler will know we're hiding out in here?" Kotarou asked.

Hiroshi frowned. "I wonder… He knows we're still on Mitarai land somewhere, so I doubt he'll be too worried. This isn't the first time something like this happened…"

Old memories began to flicker in his mind. Afraid of his harsh training, there were quite a few times in the past when he had run away. Each time, he hid in this cave. Knowing his whereabouts and reasons, his butler had always waited until the next day to fetch his master.

"I'm sure that Hiroshi just wishes to be alone sometimes. Everyone does."

Whenever his father yelled at Hiroshi for running, those were the words his butler would say in his defense.

"So, does that mean we'll be spending the night in here?" Koboshi asked, worry all over her face.

"Weather this terrible is a rare occurrence around these parts. We shouldn't test our luck and push through it, so I suppose we have no option but to stay the night…"

"I see. That's not something we get to do every day. It might be kinda sweet," Takashi said. His beaming smile was in stark contrast to Koboshi, who seemed depressed by the notion. There was a "You've got to be kiddin' me!" look in her eyes.

*Flash!*

Lightning flashed, illuminating the inside of the cave. In that instant, Kotarou clearly made out expressions of anxiety and concern on everyone's faces…except Kasumi's. For some reason, she was laughing.

*Amazing,* he thought. *I wonder how Kasumi does it. I wonder how she can be so composed at a time like this.*

"It should be warmer if we go deeper inside, so let's make camp in there," Hiroshi said.

By the glow of their flashlights, the group proceeded about ten meters farther into the cave.

They came to a round clearing roughly the size of ten tatami mats. The floor was smooth and flat, and since the ceiling was five meters above them, it did not feel constricting at all. A little way past that was a narrow passage, wide enough for one person to fit through at a time, that snaked deeper and deeper into the cave. The walls were composed of giant and unruly rocks with lots of sharp edges. Kotarou and crew had no doubts that walking into them would hurt. On closer inspection of the wall, they found what appeared to be candle holders amidst the jagged protrusions.

"I used to light these candles whenever I'd hide out in here," Hiroshi admitted.

He rummaged through his pack and took out a few emergency candles he had brought along just in case. He lit them and placed them in the candle holders.

*Poof.* A warm orange glow bloomed throughout the cave, bringing not only light but a sense of relief

to the lost hikers. Light truly had the power to soften their fear.

Fortunately for all of them, the packs Hiroshi had prepared for them came equipped with various camping goods, rendering the idea of spending the night here not an entirely uncomfortable one.

Kotarou and the group began to prepare the area for their stay. First, they placed a leisure sheet on the floor. Their unused or extra fleeces were piled on top, to buffer the cold of the ground. It was actually quite a nice setup once they were done.

"Ahh, I'm pooped," Koboshi said.

Each person secured a spot to rest, and one by one they plopped down, thoroughly exhausted. Just as Hiroshi suspected, the rain had indeed sapped a good portion of their strength.

*Ring.* ♬

Every single move Aoi made caused her bell to ring and echo around the cave. Something about the high-pitched *ding* nibbled at Kotarou's nerves.

Aoi sat down on the most comfortable, most fleece-packed part of the leisure sheet. "I claim this spot right here! Since I'm tired and I doubt we'll be eating dinner, I'm going to bed."

Throwing her windbreaker over herself, she said

goodnight, lay down, and stretched out in the limited space.

"Wait a second, Ao. It's a small area and we ought to share the space better," Kotarou said.

"You can't just take the whole area for yourself," Koboshi said in frustration, a touch of anger in her voice.

Aoi did not respond, merely pretended to sleep.

"Hey, cut that out!" Takashi yelled at her. He had plenty more to say but Hiroshi stepped in.

"Now, now. Sorry all. Look, I don't need my space so…"

"We's gonna be packed tight are we~su? Then how about I make some space~su!" Misha exclaimed. She snuck into her sleeping bag and began to spin and roll around.

"M-Misha...sheesh!" Despite their protests, they couldn't help but laugh along with her.

Misha rolled over to where Aoi was sleeping. "Come on, Ao, let's roll around~su."

"W-what are you…?"

Before she could lash out, Misha launched a tickle attack that extorted a wealth of laughter from Aoi.

"Oh stop! Misha, really…"

Even though Aoi's actions had again threatened to

drive a wedge into the calm of the group, Misha had once again come to the rescue—in her own special Misha way—and turned the situation around. The mood in the cave lightened immediately.

"W-w-w-w…what is up with her?! That's it! I've had enough of this! Human trust shouldn't be that hard to break!" Kasumi grumbled under her breath as she chewed on her lower lip.

Looking into each other's faces, the group couldn't help but laugh out loud. All at once, their merry laughter dispelled whatever unpleasant mood lingered in the air.

Kasumi was completely overwhelmed by the power of Misha's smile. She couldn't understand why, but for some reason Misha, who didn't seem like she ever had a thought in her head, always managed to mend the rifts Kasumi carefully created and, much to her frustration, bring everyone back together.

*What in the world is she to wield such a holy power…unless…she's an angel?!*

Though Kasumi was highly ranked and highly knowledgeable in the Demon World, she knew little of any worlds beyond it and had yet to meet or even see a real angel. Up until now, she hadn't the slightest idea how Misha managed to snap Aoi out of her con-

trol, but it all made sense now. Her suspicions about Misha being an angel confirmed she was her natural and eternal enemy.

Kasumi's eyes bored into Misha. Oblivious, Misha continued to laugh and joke with the others.

"Tee hee hee hee hee."

*I wonder why... When I look into that happy-go-lucky face of hers, I feel so weak, as if my powers are being drained away. Is this the power the Holy Ones wield...?*

Although they met a whole day ago, only now did Kasumi consider Misha for the first time.

*How can this be?* Mystified by Misha, she decided to emulate the other girl's smile. What she ended up with was nothing at like the fake smile she had flashed to Kotarou and the others before.

Fiaa snorted as if to say, "Don't do anything stupid," before he trotted off. Kasumi didn't know why but, all of a sudden, she couldn't stop laughing. She was having the time of her life. In all her years, she had never laughed so hard and so genuinely before.

After finding a spot close by to Aoi, Hiroshi flopped over onto his back and drew in a long, deep sigh. *I wonder what's going on with her. She was always demanding but never to that extent.*

He remembered the days, when he was younger, that he spent as her little errand boy. But it wasn't a one sided affair. She used to teach him things, about dangerous bugs and scary places and about things only those from the wealthiest families needed to know—how to speak, act, and greet people… She taught him everything, from large scale to the minute.

"Hiroshi, it's not safe over there, so come back this way," she'd say if he was about to get in trouble.

Though her attitude was casual, there was no doubt she watched over him all the time. He remembered thanking her often for her concern and, each time, perhaps embarrassed, she'd pretend like it was nothing and say, "What are you talking about?" or change the topic. Her eyes were so kind back then. They were eyes of someone who cared for and protected him.

That was why he liked her so much. That was why he allowed her to order him around, and why he continued to play with her despite her demanding nature and all those pranks she pulled on him. On this mountain, at the lake… The one time he could escape from his grueling training, the one time he did not have to put on airs, was his playtime with Aoi.

He knew the idea of moving to New York was

rough on her. But the Aoi he knew wouldn't just cave in to her anxiety and let it affect her.

*She went through the same rigorous training I did... So what's happened to you? Ao?! Did something happen to change you, Ao?*

The Aoi he met two days ago was a complete stranger. And no matter how hard Hiroshi thought about things, he could neither see when, nor discern how it happened.

Aoi lay down with her back to the others, alone in her thoughts.

She could hear Misha's laughter in her head. For some reason, every time she heard Misha laugh, she felt awkward and troubled inside.

She continued to feel like she was on the periphery of the group, unwanted and left out. They all ignored her. While everyone else was laughing and having fun, she was on the outside looking in, and it made her terribly sad and worse, empty. At the same time, she knew it was all of her own doing…

Hiroshi was nearby. He had done his very best to look out for her and protect her. But things were not the same. He had his own friends now, dearer to him than she was.

*So it's true. I am alone after all. No, wait. I'm not.*

*I do have a friend. A friend named Kasumi.*

She remembered feeling faint the first time she gazed into Kasumi's big eyes. At first she had despised the way those eyes made her feel but now she could not bring herself to disobey them. Those eyes could peer right to the bottom of her soul, right into that dark place where she harbored all her jealousy towards others. They saw an Aoi even her own father and mother had never seen. She felt as if Kasumi was the only one who truly knew her.

*I'm so tired. Tired of pretending to be something I'm not. Of taking joy in being mean to other people...*

Aoi fell further and further to a state of devastating despair.

*Everybody hates me...I guess I'm just no good. Maybe it would be better if I didn't exist. I wish I were gone from this world...*

*Ring* ♫

The ding of the bell. *("Would you like to come with me?")*

She heard that voice in her head again. She had doubted the owner of the voice before but this time she knew exactly who whispered to her. Kasumi! The voice responsible for bringing her ugly heart to the

surface belonged to Kasumi, she was sure of it!

Only yesterday, that voice made her skin crawl… but now it was her only savior.

*("I can take you to another place. To a place where you can do whatever you want…a place where you can say anything you desire...")* the voice echoed in her mind.

"Take me there…" She spoke the words without even knowing she did.

Kasumi slipped into her head again. At the same moment, Aoi felt her soul split in half.

*Where…where am I?* Aoi had been swallowed by darkness the moment she accepted Kasumi's invitation. Something writhed beneath her feet. She screamed.

*Kyaahhhh! I don't want to go down there! Someone…help me!*

*("It's too late! You can't escape. You're coming with me…to the Demon World!")*

Terrified, Aoi fainted.

# 2

"Ao, what's wrong?" Hiroshi cried out to the girl next to him. He shook her sleeping shoulders gently.

Because they were so tired, Kotarou and the others chose to retire early, but they awoke instantly at the sound of Hiroshi's cry. Only Kasumi did not rise. She remained in a deep slumber, her chest rising and falling, evenly and undisturbed. As for the others, even in their drowsy state, they could see something was definitely wrong with Aoi.

Unlike Kasumi, Aoi was breathing erratically, almost panting as she slept.

Shia placed the back of her hand against Aoi's forehead. "She has a terrible temperature."

"I better go see if I can find anything to help cool her down," Koboshi said, running to the spot where they had piled all their belongings.

"Oww!"

In her hurry, she managed to catch her foot on an

uneven portion of the ground. Lurching forward, she threw her arm out to cushion her fall. Her hand scraped against the sharp rock and her blood soaked into the walls. But that was the least of her worries. Right now, she had to find something to cool Aoi down.

"Something cold, something cold," she repeated to herself as she made it to her pack. She picked it up and shook out the contents onto the floor.

"There!" she proclaimed triumphantly, finding just the right thing.

There was a fever reducing compress among her belongings. Koboshi rushed back and applied it to Aoi's forehead.

"That should do it…"

Aoi let out a sigh of relief.

"Koboshi," Shia said. "Your hand, it's bleeding. Let me take care of that."

"I got it when I fell just now. But I'm okay. It's just a scratch. It'll heal up in no time."

"But we wouldn't want it to get infected…" Shia reached into her pocket and pulled out a white lace handkerchief. As one would expect from Shia, it had been well ironed and looked immaculate.

"Oh no, it'll get dirty," Koboshi protested, drawing her arm away.

Shia took a firm hold of Koboshi's arm and wrapped the handkerchief around the injury with utmost efficiency. The faint scent of lavender rose from the white lace. After dressing the wound, Shia placed her hand over the handkerchief, closed her eyes and began what sounded like a prayer.

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm saying a prayer to stop the germs from getting in… There, all good to go now, Koboshi," Shia said with a smile.

"Thanks. That was kinda like what my mom used to do for me when I was little. Whenever I'd get hurt, she'd chant, 'Owwie owwies, fly away!'" Koboshi laughed. "Heh heh heh."

Thanks to everyone's care, Aoi's breathing eventually settled down, and she slept peacefully once more. But—

*Ring.* ♫

Although there was no wind, the bell on Aoi's key holder rang.

"Once the medicine kicks in, I'm sure her temperature will start to go down," Kotarou said, his brow furrowed.

Just then, a pained moan escaped from Aoi's lips. "Ugghhh. UugghhhHhh."

Koboshi drew back in surprise. "What's going on? What's wrong with her…with Ao…?"

Shivers ran down every back. Not knowing what was going on inside of Aoi, not knowing what more could be done, all they could do now was sit nearby and watch over the trembling girl.

Nya motioned to Shia to follow him to the back of the cave. "*It looks to me like that girl's starting the possession procedure on Aoi,*" he said quietly.

"Oh no…is there anything I can do to stop her…?" Shia stared intently at Aoi, who was moaning painfully in her sleep.

"H…help…I…I don't want to go…I…don't want to go there…no!"

Aoi seemed to be struggling with something or someone in the dark that was her dream.

"Ao's in pain~su." With tears in her eyes, Misha took Aoi's limp body into her arms and held her tightly.

"You're okies~su, Ao. Wake up~su! Get better~su!"

A brilliant flash, like lightning, poured into the clearing in the cave.

As the light bathed Aoi's face, Kotarou thought he saw a relieved smile dance across Aoi's lips.

Kasumi, who had been pretending to sleep all this time, slowly opened her eyes. *What is it with that Misha girl?! How am I supposed to take her with me now? Hrrmm. Fine! Guess I'll just have to take her with me directly instead.*

She stood up and approached Aoi. "Hey, you, move it. I think I know how to save Ao."

"Hoheh? Really~su? Please~su. Please help her~su, Kasumi."

Misha relaxed her grip on Aoi, relinquishing her care to Kasumi. The moment Kasumi touched Aoi, her eyes snapped wide open.

"Oh thank goodness~su. Wow wee, Kasumi. That was amazing~su!"

Misha clapped her hands. Not sure what else to do or say, the others clapped their hands for Kasumi as well.

Seeing their reactions, Kasumi grinned. Helping Aoi to her feet, she led her towards the dark and narrow path at the very back of the cave.

"Hey, wait a moment. Where are you taking Ao?" Hiroshi asked. "She just got over a really high temperature, and I don't think it's a good idea to have her walking around right away. Hey, stop. I said wait!"

Aoi did not respond to Hiroshi's continued shouts.

Staring ahead blankly, she allowed herself to be dragged along by Kasumi like a rag doll. Taken aback by the strange scene, the only thing the others could do was alternately call out Aoi's and Kasumi's names.

"Are you all better now, Ao?"

"Where are you going, Kasumi?" Kotarou shouted.

Hearing Kotarou's voice address her, Kasumi turned to face him with a smile.

"Goodbye, all of you. Most likely we'll never see each other again…"

"What are you saying? Don't joke like that, Kasumi." Takashi ran after them but as soon as he reached the entrance of the path, he was thrown down and onto his back by some unseen force.

*Bzzzttt.* A force like lightning shot through his body.

"Wow. What the…I can't get through."

"What? Let me try. Take that!" Hiroshi threw himself at the opening to the path but it was no use. Just like Takashi, he too ended up on his back. It felt like a thick, invisible wall had sprung up in front of them.

"*A spiritual barrier…those children won't be able to break through such a thing,*" Nya cried.

"Isn't there anything we can do…?" Shia directed

a sad gaze at the black cat.

"*Why ask when you already know the answer? This isn't something we can interfere with…however…*"

"However?"

Meekly, Nya met Shia's gaze. "*If, say…they decided to interfere, it wouldn't really involve us, would it…?*"

"A-are you saying that…that it would be acceptable for us to…to take Kotarou and his friends through the barrier…?"

"*How else are they going to get through? But we're only going to help them this once, understand? After all, I wouldn't mind seeing that Fiaa squirm when he gets what's coming to him. …At any rate, if that Misha girl goes with them, they should be fine. She's one of the pure ones after all.... But know this…while we can help them through…we cannot take any further responsibility… for whether or not they make it back after they're on the other side. That's entirely up to them.*"

Shia bowed her head reverently to Nya. "Thank you."

"*Well then, shall we begin?*"

"Yes…"

Shia extended her arms high above her head and twisted her wrists as if to grab something in the air.

When she did, the staff marking her as a member of the Demon World appeared in her hands.

Staff in hand, she quietly stood behind the others, who were rooted in place, unable to do anything but watch as Aoi walked farther and farther away, under Kasumi's control. Shia closed her eyes and began to swing her staff.

*Ding.* ♬

The refreshing ring of a different bell reverberated through the cave. A faint purple light blanketed the area. It assaulted the eyes of Kotarou and his friends. Suddenly a great wind, like they were standing in the path of a tornado, picked up and swirled around them.

The scenery undulated like water on a stormy sea. Everyone shouted in fear and confusion.

"What? What's going on?

"This isn't natural!"

"UwaaahhHhh!"

*Ding.* ♬ *Ding.* ♬ Shia continued to swing her staff. "Good luck, everyone. I will remain here, praying for all of you…"

*Nyaahhhh.* Pretending to wash his face with his paw, Nya watched.

# 3

A few moments later, the wind left as suddenly as it came, and Kotarou and his friends were finally able to look at their surroundings.

"Whoa. That scared the heck out of me!" Kotarou said.

Picking his bottom off the ground, Takashi patted the dirt and dust off of his pants. "What on earth was that wind…where did it come from…?"

Koboshi pointed to something. "Ah! It's Ao and Kasumi…they're over there!"

Turning their gazes where she directed, they saw the two girls, not far away.

"Ao, wait!" Hiroshi hollered, and took off after her.

Kotarou and the others followed. They couldn't allow Aoi to slip out of their sight.

Kasumi turned her head, not believing her ears. "Huh? How did those kids get in here?" She heard

Misha's voice next.

"Kasumi! Where are you going~su? Why are you leaving us behind~su?"

*Was it you, Misha? Ahh, no matter... It doesn't make a difference how you managed to get past my barrier. I'm going to take care of all of you, right here, right now!*

Kasumi spun herself and Aoi around fully in the direction the voices came from. She aimed her fingers, as if shooting a gun, at the advancing interlopers. Instead of bullets, a black, hazy smoke-like gas billowed from her fingertips. The smoke made its way slowly towards Kotarou and his friends.

"What do you think's going on with Kasumi? Why is she doing this?" Koboshi asked Takashi as they walked. They traversed over a meandering path strewn with jagged rocks and treacherous footing.

"No clue. But Ao's got a fever. She shouldn't be walking around. We've got to catch up with Kasumi and get her to stop all of this insanity."

They did not know where they were anymore. All they knew was that they could not turn back. They

had to catch Kasumi and bring Aoi back safely. It was this concern for Aoi that urged them on, blocking any apprehension for their surroundings and personal well-being.

"Did you guys see Shia anywhere?" Koboshi asked, scanning the area.

"I'm sure that wherever she is, she's fine…it's Shia, after all. Right now, we have to focus on finding Ao though." Takashi shone his flashlight at the ground so Koboshi would not stumble.

"Ao's really in pain~su. We have to help her~su," Misha said. Walking next to Kotarou, she took his hand and squeezed it in hers.

"I know. We all feel that way…"

"NngghhhHhhn. Something foul this way comes. Everyone, be on the ready!" Hiroshi shouted from the head of the pack.

Tendrils of thick black smoke suddenly engulfed them. It was the smoke Kasumi had unleashed against them.

Kotarou coughed. "Say, Dai-chan…this path doesn't go straight into a volcano, does it?"

"Of course not!" Hiroshi managed to say amid a series of hacks and coughs.

"Kyaahhh!" Koboshi's scream rang out through

the cave. "Kotarou…b…bats…!"

*Flap flap flap*... A legion of bats appeared within the smoke. Screeching, they dove at Kotarou and his friends.

"Quit that!"

They stripped off their windbreakers and waved them around furiously to stave off the bats. At first, their tactic seemed to work, but after a brief retreat, the bats reformed their ranks and swooped in for a second pass, and a third.

Misha stepped in front of Kotarou to protect him, swinging her arms around to drive the bats away. "Shoo! Don't come this way~su!"

"We're stronger than they are. All we have to do is show them who's boss and they're sure to disperse…" Hiroshi mulled over a strategy to combat the bats. An idea jumped into his head, and he leapt headlong into the darkness of the cave.

"Hey! What are you doing running off by yourself?!" Takashi scolded, desperately fending off the bats.

"Don't panic! I've got it! Just give me a moment!" Hiroshi yelled back.

Rummaging noises came from Hiroshi's direction, as if he was searching for something.

"Ewwwwww! No! Look down!" Koboshi screamed. "S…spiders!! Lots and lots of them! And they're coming this way! Ewww, grosssssss!"

She flailed about in horror. In addition to the aerial assault, on the ground marched an army of spiders, each of which was easily the size of her palm and looked like something fantastical. Disgusted, she lost the last of her cool, swinging her arms recklessly ahead of her.

*Skitter skitter skitter skitter.* For some reason, the sea of spiders receded like the tide and scattered fearfully away from her.

"Huh? They're afraid of me? Of my hands?"

Her gaze fell on her wrist. The handkerchief Shia had tied around her hand emitted a faint, pale glow.

*Could it be?*

She undid the knot and removed the handkerchief. Then she spread the handkerchief wide open and waved it at the spiders.

*Skitter skitter skitter skitter skitter.* The giant mass of spiders retreated once more.

"I think these spiders are afraid of this handkerchief. Are they sensitive to light? Do they just not like lavender? Or is it somehow Shia's doing…? Either way, Kotarou, Ten-chan, leave the spiders up to me, okay?"

*Ding*♬ They heard the sound of a bell, ringing in the distance. The handkerchief in Koboshi's hand glowed even brighter. She did her very best to wave the handkerchief around some more, turning back the spiders that dared close in on them.

"Stop flying at us~su!"

"Get away, dang it!"

With Koboshi taking care of the spiders, Misha, Takashi, and Kotarou were able to focus on repelling and dodging the bats. But there were simply too many to achieve more than a fleeting victory.

Hiroshi returned to the group and handed something to each of them. In the dark, however, they couldn't see what it was.

"What is this?" Takashi asked.

Hiroshi's face broke into a big grin. "It's a slingshot. This used to be my secret hideout, remember? When I played here back then, I hid a bunch of different weapons, just in case. I'd forgotten until now. Anyhow, if we can take out even one of those bats, their attack should weaken. Bats are cowardly by nature."

"Nice," Kotarou said. He picked up a few small pebbles from the ground and loaded them into his slingshot. Aiming at a large cluster of bats, he un-

leashed a barrage of shots.

*Smack.* The pebble met its mark, and the injured bat squeaked and flew away.

"Oooh! I want to try!"

After successfully turning the spiders away with her handkerchief, Koboshi loaded her slingshot and trained her sight upon the bats. She missed quite often at first, but the more she practiced, the more accurate her shots became.

"Not bad, Uematsu," Takashi said with a nod. He smirked at Koboshi as he watched her fire volleys of pebbles into the bats.

Koboshi gushed slightly at Takashi's compliment. "Heheheh. This is kinda fun. Like one of those shooting games at the arcade."

Misha looked closely at the article in her hands and compared it to the slingshot Koboshi was using. "Mine's different~su. Dai-chan, what do I do with this one~su?"

She held a lean, portable lighter, used while camping. Turning the dials adjusted the amount and size of the flame.

"Just squeeze right here and direct it at the bats." Hiroshi turned the dial on the lighter to the highest setting and flicked it on.

*BuuuoooooHhhhHhhh!* A large flame roared out of the tip of the lighter.

"Oh wow wee~su! How amazing~su! I feel like the Olympic Torch Runner~su! Tee hee hee hee! Come here, Mr. Batty~su! Let's play catch~su!"

Hoisting the portable lighter high in her hands, Misha ran around. Frightened by her light, the bats let out a *Chi chi chi chi* sound and retreated.

"Goodbye~su! It was fun~su! Let's play again~su!" Misha called after the fleeing bats, with a big smile and a wave.

*Ding.* ♫

That refreshing ring from far away sounded once more.



"Good luck, everyone."

Unable to step beyond the magical barrier, Shia could only cheer Kotarou and the others on. So long as Kasumi was their opponent, she could not stand beside those dearest to her. If anyone found out about her and Nya's involvement, their actions would be construed as treason, and both of them would be exiled from the

Demon World immediately.

*Ding.* ♬

So as she swung her staff, she prayed with her heart and all her might that Kasumi's evil beasts stayed away from Kotarou and his friends. It was all she could do right now…and she gave her all doing it.

"Hurray! Look, everyone! They're gone! They're all gone!"

Though relieved that they had successfully repelled the invading spider and bat assault, everyone was quite exhausted. But they knew there was no time to rest.

"Onward!" Hiroshi commanded.

"Okay!"

Kotarou and the others continued, dragging their feet.

"What is going on here?" Kasumi exclaimed through gritted teeth. "Where did they get slingshots from? And how did they make fire?! Ahhh, forget it! I don't have the time to deal with the likes of them!" A sour look crept over Kasumi's countenance as she bitterly watched her minions retreat from battle.

When they reached a large clearing, Kasumi ordered Aoi to sit. Then, holding both hands together in front of her chest, she focused her thoughts and power on opening a path to the Demon World.

While she did, Kotarou and the others scrambled into the clearing.

"Kasumi, what are you doing? Stop leading Aoi around. She's got a terrible fever," Koboshi pleaded.

Kasumi merely laughed. "Fu fu fu." Aoi stared ahead blankly, her eyes open but seemingly blind to the unfolding scene.

"Don't you guys get it yet?" Kasumi said. "Don't you see what I am…?"

"What are you talking about, 'what you are'?" Hiroshi said. "That's enough nonsense out of you! Now come on, Ao. Let's go."

He took a step towards Aoi but, just like when he had tried to penetrate the magical barrier, he found himself thrown back by an unseen force.

"Why can't I get any closer?!"

Kotarou and the others all tried several times each to get to Aoi but each time, they too found themselves repelled by the same force. Finally, drained from the cold, their fight with the bats and spiders, and the attempts to rescue Aoi, they fell to

their knees, utterly beat.

"I'm not sure why, but it's pretty apparent we're not meant to get to Ao," Kotarou said. "But…if we can't get to Ao, why don't we try to get Ao to come to us?"

Hiroshi was angered by Kotarou's suggestion. "We can't afford something so…so leisurely! As far as I can tell, Ao can't hear or even see us. B…but…I suppose we have no choice…but to try it…Ao!"

One by one, they called Aoi's name. Aoi did not even bat an eyelash.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Kasumi laughed evilly. "Scream all you want but it's not going to wake up your precious little Ao! Besides…she doesn't want to be over there with you lot in the first place."

"How would you know what she's thinking or feeling?" Kotarou said.

"I know better than you! Behold!" Kasumi pointed her finger at one of the cavern walls. An image flickered onto the rocky surface.

Koboshi gasped in surprise. "Ehh?! H-how is this possible?"

"Ah! Look!" Takashi said. "It's Ao and…could it be…? Is that Ao's house?"

Hiroshi nodded.

The image showed a western style house—more like a castle—roughly the same size as Hiroshi's estate. Aoi was inside with her parents, and they were laughing together, happy. In the next second, the image switched to another of Aoi, alone in her room, sobbing torrents of tears…

"This is…" Kotarou was speechless.

One after the other, every single painful episode in Aoi's life flashed before their eyes.

How she had to keep on laughing and smiling despite the pain of her parent's divorce. The dilemma of growing up an heiress with no one around who truly knew or even sought to really know her. The sadness of not having any friends she could drop her shields around and let in…

"I…don't…want…to…be…alone…any…more…"

As Kotarou watched the pain-filled slideshow, he thought he heard Aoi crying out.

He felt so melancholy, so hopeless and miserable. More than anyone else, he, who had lost his mother, knew the sort of suffering Aoi kept bottled up inside the depths of her heart.

*…I should have understood her better…I could have reached out to her…*

She must have been jealous even of how he and his friends argued with each other. She didn't have anyone to bounce her ideas off of or anyone to butt heads with. She didn't even have anyone to tell she was sad. Maybe that was why she purposely said all those mean, selfish things…so people would hate her.

In a sense, it was easier that way. If there was something a person wanted more than anything else but could never have, it was easier to think they didn't want it at all, rather than admit they did.

Aoi must have felt that way a lot; she must have put up layer after layer of shields upon her heart so she wouldn't be hurt. But perhaps, one day, she found she had put up so many shields she could no longer remove them herself. And rather than guard her, the shields weighed her heart down, crushing and constricting her heart and soul.

"Ao, please wake up. Come on over to us. We're all waiting for you," Kotarou said softly.

"Everyone here really really likes you, Ao. You don't have to be scared. You're not alone anymore. We're here for you. We're all your friends and we're

all really worried about you, Ao…but I think you knew that already, didn't you. But did you know, Dai-chan here, he's apologized on your behalf a bunch of times already…and he doesn't apologize to anyone for any reason."

Kotarou glanced at Hiroshi. He gave a huffy look and muttered, "You didn't need to include any of that extraneous information."

"Kotarou's right," Koboshi continued, her tone still slightly angry. "I mean, sure, we thought you were a bit selfish and demanding but we also had a lot of fun playing with you. And if I remember correctly, we're still in the middle of playing together, so don't you dare go off and disappear on us."

"There's still tons and tons of stuff we haven't done together. And I guarantee it's more fun than sleeping over there," Takashi yelled.

"My apologies, Ao. It brings me such shame I wasn't able to discern just how you were feeling inside, even though we grew up together. You've always been my strongest supporter, Ao…so come on…let's go home."

Hiroshi bowed his head, and Aoi's hand twitched slightly.

*Ding.* ♫

*Please come back to us*. Aoi heard Shia's voice in the refreshing sound of her bell.

"Help me…"

It was soft but it was definitely Aoi's voice. Misha slowly stepped forward. A few moments ago they had all been thrown back by an invisible force, but Misha was able to slip through unscathed.

She made her way safely to Aoi's side and placed her hands gently on Aoi's cheeks. "Let's go home~su, Ao."

"H…how did you get through my barrier?" Kasumi asked, stunned. She was rooted to the spot in surprise.

"You're not alone~su. Everyone here is your friend~su, Ao," Misha said, tears in her eyes. She scooped up Aoi, hugging her tight in her arms.

In the sea of darkness, Aoi struggled alone. She could feel the presence of Kotarou and the others, fighting and tackling obstacles selflessly to save her. Despite all the dangers, they did not turn back…they pushed forward…not for themselves but for her. It made her so happy inside. She heard their voices…she

heard Hiroshi, calling to her…

"Let's go home together…" It was a desperate, genuine voice.

*Ahh, I'd forgotten, all this time. I thought I was alone but I really wasn't. I've always had Hiroshi, Grandmama, Papa and Mama…and my friends at school too. They've always been there to help me when I needed it. I'd just forgotten…I'd closed my heart off to everybody. Despite everything I put them through, they were still so kind to me… Even though they wanted to get to know me and be my friend, I'm the one who chose to turn a blind eye to them. I…I have to apologize this time. I have to tell them how sorry I am. And this time, I have to be the one to say it…to say, let's be friends… Because if I don't, then I'll never make real friends… I understand now…I understand what I need to do. If I don't open up…if I only offer a façade, then it's only a façade of friendship I'll receive in return…*

Hiroshi's tear-choked voice reached her ears. "What will I do without you, Ao? How dreary my life would become…"

*—I want to go back! To where everyone is!*

Aoi wished as hard as she could. From the corner of her blank eye came one very large tear. It rolled down her cheek.

*Crack.*

Kasumi heard the sound of something shatter and an unpleasant sensation overcame her.

*Vhhp!* Kasumi raised her hands above her head. *Vyunn!* Another sound, like something cutting through the air. A full size version of the key chain Aoi kept on her bag appeared in Kasumi's outstretched hands.

"How can this be? Why is my staff starting to shatter? What is going on!?"

A dozen cracks ran through the glass ball on top of Kasumi's staff, with more and more forming every second.

*Ki ki ki!* Fiaa let out a high pitched screech that resembled a warning.

Kasumi's heart flared with anger. "All right, that's it! I've had enough of this! No matter what, you're coming with me, Aoi!"

Her pride would not allow her to accept any form of defeat from mere mortals. "As for the rest of you…it's nap time! An eternal nap, that is!!"

She thrust her staff at Kotarou and his friends.

*Shuwwaah shuwaah shuwaaah*. Black smoke

blustered from the tip of the staff. Kasumi watched in glee as it enveloped her assembled opposition.

"Cough, cough. …What…what is this smoke… I…I can't breathe…" Koboshi wheezed.

Clutching his chest, Kotarou made his way over to Koboshi's side. "Koboshi…cough…are you okay?"

"I…I feel faint…I can't…focus… Is it because of this smoke…?" Takashi's voice broke off.

"Listen up all…you mustn't close your eyes and fall asleep…if you fall asleep then…mumble mumble…" Even as he tried to warn the others, Hiroshi couldn't help but succumb to sleep. He closed his eyes.

One by one, Kotarou and his friends fell over, in a state of deep slumber.

Kasumi took Aoi's hand to pull her up to her feet. "Fu fu fu. Now that they're taken care of…Aoi…come with me…"

Misha's face emerged from beyond the dark swirls of smoke.

"You're not taking Ao anywhere~su. She's coming home with us and you too~su, Kasumi!"

Kasumi stepped back in astonishment. "Huh? Why aren't you sleeping like the others?"

*Ding ding.* ♬ *Ding.* ♬

For a second, Kasumi thought she heard the chime of Shia's bell. "T…that sound…?! No, it can't be. No way a pathetic lackey like her would have the guts to stand up to me!" Kasumi hissed. She shook her head at the ridiculous notion. But…

"*Kasumi…keep thinking humans are weak and you'll be sure to pay for it sooner or later…*"

The image of Shia's unrelenting stare flashed in her mind.

"…Ahhh…" Shia felt her knees give in but she fought with all she had to keep on her feet. If Kasumi ever found out what she was doing, all would be lost.

"*Are you all right?*" Nya asked.

"Yes… I'm so sorry…I wish I had been able to weaken the power of that magical barrier a little more…"

But Shia knew full well she could not expend any more of her strength for Kotarou and the others.

*Good luck, Misha. I know you can do it…*

With that final prayer, Shia slowly crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

*"See that? That's what you get for pushing yourself too hard. And for what? For humans of all things. ...I suppose the rest is up to them..."*

Letting out a single cry, Nya hopped on top of the unconscious Shia.

"What's wrong~su? Kasumi?"

Misha's query snapped Kasumi out of her thoughts and back to herself.

*That's right. I was just about to take care of that pesky girl.*

If there was one person she would not, and could not forgive, it was Misha. She always seemed to appear at the most inopportune moments to set Kasumi's well laid plans astray.

Kasumi swung her staff at Misha, but Misha dodged it lithely.

"Tee hee hee hee. What game are we playing now~su? It's a bit dangerous, phew! But it's fun~su. I'll dodge, okies~su?"

Misha bounced here and there, happily evading each one of Kasumi's blows like a butterfly.

Thinking Misha was poking fun at her, Kasumi

glowered at the angel. "Ugh! What is the matter with you?! Can't you see I'm mad at you?! If you want to play, then very well, let's play for real! But don't come to me puffing and pouting when you end up really hurt!"

She swung her staff at Misha with a *Ring♬ Ring♬ Ring♬*, and began to chant a spell of some sort. Fiaa, who had been sitting on her shoulder all this time, suddenly leapt onto the ground and, before Misha's eyes, began to grow bigger and bigger. Once he became about three meters long, Kasumi jumped onto Fiaa's back. Both rider and steed charged at Misha, in an attempt to crush her.

"Oh wow wee~su! Fiaa became a big bear~su! Can I take a ride too~su?"

Misha jumped and landed deftly on Fiaa, right behind Kasumi. Placing her hands around Kasumi's waist, Misha shook her body from side to side.

"Tee hee hee hee! This is like one of those electric animal rides they have at the amusement parks~su! Fiaa! Spin more~su! Go round and round~su!"

Misha grabbed ahold of Fiaa's tail and yanked on it, a dazzling smile on her face. Hurt by her careless tug, Fiaa whipped his head back to bite Misha's hand. In the end, however, his attempts at subsequent

bites served only to send him running in a circle, as if chasing his own tail.

"Wait, what are you doing?" Kasumi cried. "Stop that! I'm getting dizzy! Misha! Unhand me this second!"

Next to the highly irate Kasumi, Misha giggled uncontrollably. "Tee hee hee hee! It makes you dizzy but it's so much fun~su!"

"I've had just about enough of you. All right, Fiaa! Let's do it!!"

She snapped her fingers. Fiaa's giant body rose like a swollen wave, trying to throw Misha off, before breaking into a run. But if Fiaa was a bucking bronco, Misha was a cowboy of old breaking him in. She moved her body nimbly, to the front and back, then left and right, in response to every quick turn and jolt Fiaa could come up with. She clung tightly to Fiaa's back with no sign of surrendering her firm grip.

"Kasumi! It's such a nice feeling to spin round and round like this~su! Tee hee!"

Kasumi stared at Misha in disbelief. *How could she possibly still be playing with me when I'm expending so much darkness? Is it because she still believes I'm her friend? But how could she still think that after all I've done? Misha...how far do I have*

*to go to defeat...*

As she plotted against Misha, a certain scene played in her mind. The vision of Misha looking completely crestfallen the one time Kotarou had scolded her.

*That's it! Misha's weakness is...Kotarou!*

"Fiaa! Crush that boy!" Kasumi shouted.

On her command, Fiaa rushed towards Kotarou's sleeping body.

"No~su! Please don't step on Kotarou~su! Fiaa!"

Misha swiftly jumped from Fiaa's back and landed beside Kotarou. She draped herself over him, using her body as a shield, drawing him into her arms. Suddenly a blinding white light was released from Misha's body.

Fiaa and Kasumi both flinched and leapt back as they contacted the outmost arc of the light. "It's so bright...what is it?!"

Out of nowhere, they heard Nya's voice speak to them.

"*That's holy light. It is a force so pure that none of our kind is capable of withstanding or restraining it.*"

"W-w-what?! Holy light?"

Surrounded by such light, Misha and Kotarou's

bodies floated into the air. The light spread, surrounding the sleeping Takashi, Koboshi, Hiroshi, and Aoi as well.

Engulfed in the holy glow, Aoi's hand, which up until now had been stiff as mannequin's, twitched.

Kasumi saw it, and was flabbergasted. "This can't be happening…Her soul should have already come over here…"

Kasumi stood stock still, dumbfounded by the events transpiring before her. "Has she completely negated my powers…?"

Her shoulders slumped in defeat. Without her powers, she had nothing.

Aoi's eyes were on the verge of opening, and Kotarou and the others stirred…

*No. I can't let this happen.* Kasumi regained herself for one brief moment. Panicked, she reached for Aoi's arm, to pull her back. But in the light, she was powerless to take even a single step forward.

*Shatter!*

The glass orb that rested in the top of her staff shattered into pieces and with it, the darkness in Aoi's soul.

Only then did Kasumi concede her unqualified defeat. She shot a bitter glance at Misha.

Enveloped in that bright white light, Misha, Kotarou, and the others flew out of her magical barrier with a resounding *Whoosshhh.* They were gone, back to the land of reality, where their other precious friend and her black cat awaited them…

# 4

"Huh? Where are we?"

When Kotarou and his friends awoke, they were lying in the middle of the living room of Hiroshi's villa.

"Where's Ao?!" Hiroshi's first conscious thought was for Aoi. He scanned the room for her fretfully.

"Ao's all better now~su. Tee hee hee hee hee."

Misha's laughter made Hiroshi breathe a sigh of relief. Aoi lay right beside him, still asleep.

"Ah, thank goodness you're all awake. And all in such good health too. When I went to look for you, I found you all slumbering so soundly…but you worried me terribly," Hiroshi's butler said, thankful. He had put together an emergency rescue force and they carried everyone back to the villa while they slept.

For a moment, Kotarou and the others were overwhelmed with a sense of bewilderment. After hearing Hiroshi's butler's explanation, they slowly grasped

what had happened. It seemed they had been sleeping soundly in the cave all night and through to morning, when the rescue force located them.

"So…does that mean it was all a dream?" Kotarou said. "But it sure seemed real…" He couldn't help but shiver as he reminded himself of the creepy spiders and bats that assaulted him and his friends.

"Excuse me but…where's Kasumi?" Kotarou asked, noticing she was not among their ranks.

"…She was here earlier but she had to return to Tokyo with her father quite urgently, first thing this morning or some such," the butler explained. "She said she did not feel right disturbing you while you rested, so she asked I give you regards on her behalf."

"Fuuun. I see. If that's the case, then I guess that's too bad but…I wish we could've at least said goodbye to her…I feel kinda bad we didn't." Koboshi said. She sighed, thinking of the bright and bubbly Kasumi.

"Now then, since you're all up," the butler said, "if you don't mind getting your belongings together for our departure…"

The group quickly began to pack for the trip home. Because of what happened yesterday, their schedule had been thrown even further off course.

"So…I guess we didn't end up studying after all, eh?" Kotarou said.

"I think we all had a feeling that would happen somehow," Koboshi giggled.

In the middle of packing, Takashi stopped. "By the way…I had the weirdest dream yesterday. You were in it too, Kotarou."

"Really? I had a dream with you and Dai-chan in it, too."

"NnngghhhH. Even though I certainly didn't ask for it, you fellows appeared in my dreams as well. And that foul Kasumi girl who dared skip out without a proper goodbye…what a strange girl she was."

"Do you think …we had the same dream?" Kotarou asked.

"How strange that we did, but I suppose it makes for an interesting souvenir," Hiroshi said.

Their eyes drifted to Aoi, who was in the kitchen boiling some water. Feeling their eyes all on her back, Aoi turned around and glared at them as if to say, *What are you looking at?* At the same time, her face was fresh and bright, not at all the sullen countenance she had displayed all day yesterday. After drinking the tea she poured for them, Kotarou and his friends left Hiroshi's villa behind.

Sitting in the very top of one of the large trees that grew by the villa, Kasumi and Fiaa secretly watched over the children's departure.

"I guess we should be getting back to the Demon World ourselves, then."

She went over the events of the night before in her head. She was still trying to figure out why she had been unable to close the deal on Aoi's soul. Perhaps the most powerful force in this world was the heart of a human being who gave of themselves, selflessly, to others.

She thought back to Kotarou and the others, who had endangered their own lives to chase after her, and of Misha, who had protected Kotarou. She recalled these moments and thought hard.

She hadn't been able to take Aoi back with her. And the glass orb, with all of Aoi's darkness, had shattered.

Kasumi let out a deep sigh. *Guess I won't be leveling up now. It was pitiful...and even a bit infuriating...but...it sure was fun.*

The night of the barbeque with Kotarou and the

others. Arguing over silly little things, horsing around and laughing with one another…

*And that game…what was it again? Paper sumo? …That was absolutely hilarious.*

*A smile…maybe that's it. Maybe I lost to the power of that Misha girl's smile. Oh dear. I feel like I've become a bit human myself.*

*Kotarou and the others…they must really be good friends. Or how else could I possibly have failed…? But trust me, friendship like that can't last forever. The closer a group of people are, the more room there is for envy and jealousy… Mark my words, those things will eventually overflow and drown them.*

*I will continue to devour that which Aoi had…the darkness that resides in every living creature's soul. I'll become stronger and stronger. There's more than enough of that stuff lying around this world of theirs. Finding a pure soul among you lot is harder than finding a beautiful seashell on the shore.*

Telling herself these things, Kasumi forced the memory of the good times she had experienced with Kotarou and the others as far from her as possible.

"I'll give up on taking Aoi with me this time. But there's an endless supply of evil souls out there in this world, so one day, when I'm stronger, we'll meet

again…I'm sure of it," she murmured.

She jumped down from the tree. *Gust*. A strong wind blew past her as she landed.

*Ring*. ♫

Wth the dull sound of the bell, Kasumi disappeared into thin air.

Forgetting the events of yesterday, Kotarou and the others threw themselves into enjoying their final event before leaving Fuji-Yoshino.

After leaving Hiroshi's villa, they finally got the chance to thoroughly explore the Animal Park Koboshi had been most anxious to visit since they arrived. Aside from a chance to get up close to a real live tiger and lion, they played all day long, laughing and joking merrily with one another.

From there the retro bus headed straight to the Tokaido Bullet Train at Shinfuji station, where they would have to say goodbye to Aoi.

The mood in the bus was the most harmonious it had been the whole trip.

"I'm so sorry!"

Aoi apologized to everyone for her behavior dur-

ing their stay. Her apology was straight from the heart, and knowing how she felt, all the anxiety hovering over the group cleared immediately, allowing their conversation to flow freely. A casual observer would think they were all age-old friends.

"Hmm? Say, Ao, your key holder's broken." Koboshi said, with a glance at Aoi's bag.

"You're right. But how strange…I don't remember bumping into anything."

The staff was broken in two, and the head of the staff with the glass bead was nowhere to be found.

The glass bead was, in fact, a representation of the collected evil in a person. But the darkness in Aoi had been reduced to nothing, and without anything left to feed upon, the bead had broken off. At least, that was Shia's theory.

"I don't need it anymore, anyhow." Aoi removed the key holder from her bag.

"Excuse me but…if you have no need for it any longer…would you mind giving it to me?" Shia asked meekly.

"Eh? Of course not…"

Aoi passed the key holder, which she was about to put in her pocket, to Shia.

Shia wrapped it securely in her handkerchief for

safe keeping. Once back home, she would seal it away for good.

Aoi had never felt so refreshed and renewed in all her life. It certainly showed, and knowing it made Kotarou and the others smile. They all noticed how much Aoi's smile had softened today.

One by one, they shook hands with Aoi.

"Well then, Ao, take care." Kotarou said.

"You too, guys! Ten-chan, Kotarou, see you again. Sorry for getting you guys all riled up about things…"

"Nah, don't mention it. But it sure is weird hearing an apology from you, Ao," Takashi laughed.

"You meanie," Aoi said. She glared at him but then broke into laughter.

Seeing her smile, Kotarou thought how truly glad he was for her.

"Koboshi, come visit me in New York sometime, okay? I'll show you all the latest fashions."

"Okay, you better. I'm gonna hold you to that! And don't forget to write me, either."

"Shia, I'm so sorry I said those terrible things about your cooking. It really was delicious," Aoi mumbled sheepishly.

Shia squeezed Aoi's hand kindly. "Thank you very

much…Aoi. Please take care of yourself."

"Let's play together again~su. You're all better now, right~su? Ao?"

When it was time to say goodbye to Misha, Aoi threw her arms around her and gave her a big hug.

"I hope I can be just like you one day, Misha. I'll try my best to from now on. You really saved me, Misha. You and your smile…so thank you."

"Tee hee hee hee. Aww, don't say that~su. You're making me blush~su. You've got an amazing smile too~su, Ao!"

Finally, Aoi went to face Hiroshi.

"I gotta admit you've gotten a lot cooler, Hiroshi. I promise not to use you as my personal errand boy anymore. And the next time we meet, it'll be my turn to make you proud. I'll be a lot cooler. Thanks…for everything."

She hugged Hiroshi, and deposited a kiss on his cheek.

"W-w-w-what are you doing?" Hiroshi exclaimed. "And in public, of all places… Don't watch, you lot!"

"Take care." Aoi tapped Hiroshi lightly on his chest as he flailed about, excited about his first kiss. They said goodbye. Watching everyone board the

shinkansen, Aoi felt tears well in her eyes. As if to hide those tears, she stared into the sky.

From the time the train began to move until it was no more than a speck of dust on the horizon, she waved goodbye to her new friends.

Forever, and ever…

"They sure were strange girls. Ao and that Kasumi, who took off so suddenly," Takashi murmured pensively as he watched the scenery go by outside the window.

"Yeah, I thought so too," Koboshi agreed.

Kotarou nodded. "They reminded me of clouds, kinda…like there wasn't really anything solid to grab onto… But at the same time, unforgettable."

*I feel a bit lucky,* Kotarou thought. Meeting Aoi had blessed him with the opportunity to not only reflect upon but reaffirm his friendships with those dearest to him.

Koboshi giggled. "Hey look. Dai-chan's still in a daze."

With his mouth half-open, Hiroshi stared forward blankly. Though his body was seated right next to

them, his mind was clearly somewhere else.

"That kiss Ao planted on him must have really left an impression," Kotarou said.

"Oh please, enough already," Takashi said. He noticed something hanging out of Hiroshi's pocket. A string? "Yo, Poops, there's something hanging out of your pocket."

Hiroshi tugged the string out to reveal what it was, and screamed. "A-ahhh…u…uwaaahHhh!"

When Koboshi saw it, she screamed as well. "Kyaahhhh!"

Hiroshi threw the snake on the ground. Takashi promptly picked up and swung it around.

"Relax, guys, it's just a toy. I bet Ao stuck it in there when you were ga-ga."

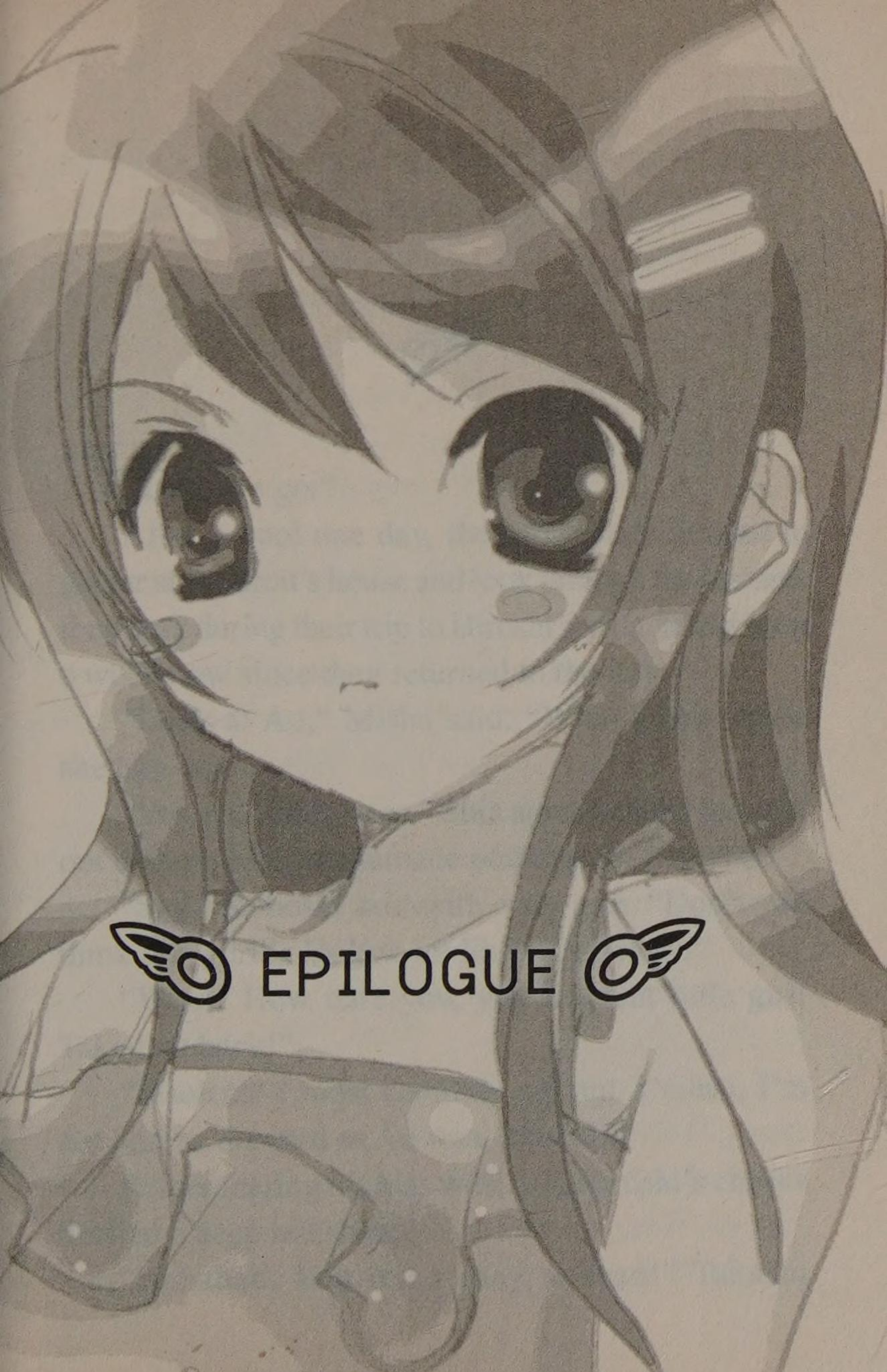
Hiroshi stamped his feet bitterly. "D-damn her! So she got me again, did she?! I knew it! She's a she-demon after all!"

Everyone burst out laughing.

"Way to go, Ao!"

The image of Aoi sticking her tongue out and laughing while giving Hiroshi the raspberry came to mind.

Filled with everyone's laughter, the train sped on.



# EPILOGUE

"Here you go."

After school one day, the group had decided to gather at Kotarou's house and look through the pictures they took during their trip to Hiroshi's villa. It had been a week now since they returned to the city.

"Look at Ao," Misha said. "What a cute smile she has~su."

"Yes, she really does," Shia agreed as she brought out dishes of her homemade pudding for everyone.

"Say," Koboshi said with a sly grin. "Don't you think this gorilla looks a lot like…Dai-chan?"

"What? How dare you, you insolent little girl! Take that back!"

"Insolent? I most certainly am not. I mean, I'm not half as forward as Ao was, after all."

Remembering his kiss with Aoi, Hiroshi's cheeks flushed a deep red shade.

"Hahahah. You're so easy to read!" Takashi

teased. "But you know…I bet Ao'll find herself a foreign boyfriend in New York in no time. She's hot, after all."

Hiroshi scrunched his face up and stared Takashi down. "Ao may look like a child of the present on the outside but inside, she's the finest example of good old Japanese values that I know! Like a strong Japanese woman would yield to a foreign cad so easily!"

"Hey, check this out, guys. Do you see that too?"

Koboshi pulled one picture from the rest. It was the one that they had taken on the train platform right before boarding the bullet train back home. Koboshi pointed to the area behind Aoi's smiling face.

Something that resembled a creepy glowing orb appeared behind Aoi. After examining the picture, all of them exchanged wide eyed looks.

"Do you think it's some sort of spirit?" Kotarou said timidly.

"Wait a second, isn't that that Kasumi girl over there?" Hiroshi said.

In the orb, they could make out the very faint outline of a face. Upon closer inspection, they had to agree that the face did indeed belong to Kasumi. As Kotarou



and his friends peered into the picture, Kasumi winked at them…or at least, they all thought she did.

Everyone fell back with surprise.

"Waaahhh!!"

"Kasumi winked at us~su. Ho heh."

*Nyaaahh.* Nya cried.

Kotarou heard the sound of a most familiar bell.

*Ring.* ♬

THE END

# Pita-Ten Vol. 2
# Translation Notes

[1] *Oshino Hakkai* – The Eight Seas of Oshino are actually eight lakes, famous for their spring waters, which are filtered underground and gush to the surface.

[2] The *Tengu* is a long-nosed or bird-beaked goblin from Japanese folklore. It's often considered a minor god rather than a monster and can be either mischievous or benevolent.

[3] A *Naginata* is a weapon used in feudal Japan consisting of an ovate wooden shaft measuring approximately 6-8 feet in length with a curved blade on the end of it. The blade measures between 1 and 3 feet, and is sharpened on one side.

[4] *Konohana-no-sakuya-bime-no-mikoto* means "Princess flowering like a blossom."

[5] The Heian Period lasted from 794 AD-1185 AD.

[6] *Soba* are thin buckwheat noodles.

[7] *Udon* are thick, white, wheat noodles.

[8] *Shugendo* – A religious training, where one trains in the mountains in hopes of developing spiritual experiences and powers. It is a mix of asceticism and shamanism and incorporates Shinto and Buddhist beliefs.

[9] *Onmyodo* – Training based on esoteric cosmology influenced by Chinese theories and practices. Practitioners were trained in divination and also methods of protection against evil spirits.

[10] *Kiai* is a vocal release of *ki* or *chi* (spirit).

[11] The Edo Period lasted from 1603 AD-1868 AD.

[12] The way of harmony, or literally "*wa no kokoro*." Interestingly enough, the character "*wa*" not only means peace and harmony, but is the second character of the ancient name of Japan—Yamato (大和の国), or Land of Great Peace.

[13] *Itadakimasu* literally means "I am gratefully accepting this." It is a common prayer said before meals.

[14] The honorific *-yama* is a common suffix attached to sumo names. It means mountain.

[15] The *hannya* is a vengeful and jealous woman turned demon. The mask is used in various Noh plays.

[16] The Fuji Wind Caves, also known as *Fugaku Fuketsu*, are a series of 200-meter long caves that were formed from Mt. Fuji's volcanic activity.

[17] *Gohei mochi* – Rice on a stick. Most likely named after the *gohei*, a ceremonial staff used by Shinto priests in various rituals, during some of which *gohei mochi* is used as an offering.

[18] *Miso* is a bean paste commonly made from soy beans, used to make soups and stocks.



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A trend-loving author, whose greatest joy in life is… watching TV?! Currently, her favorite variety show is late night's *Matthew's Best Hit TV*. Matthew's famous sayings, such as, "I don't want to lose, I haven't lost yet!" get to her all the time. From the *Pita-Ten* world, however, she's madly in love with Hiroshi.




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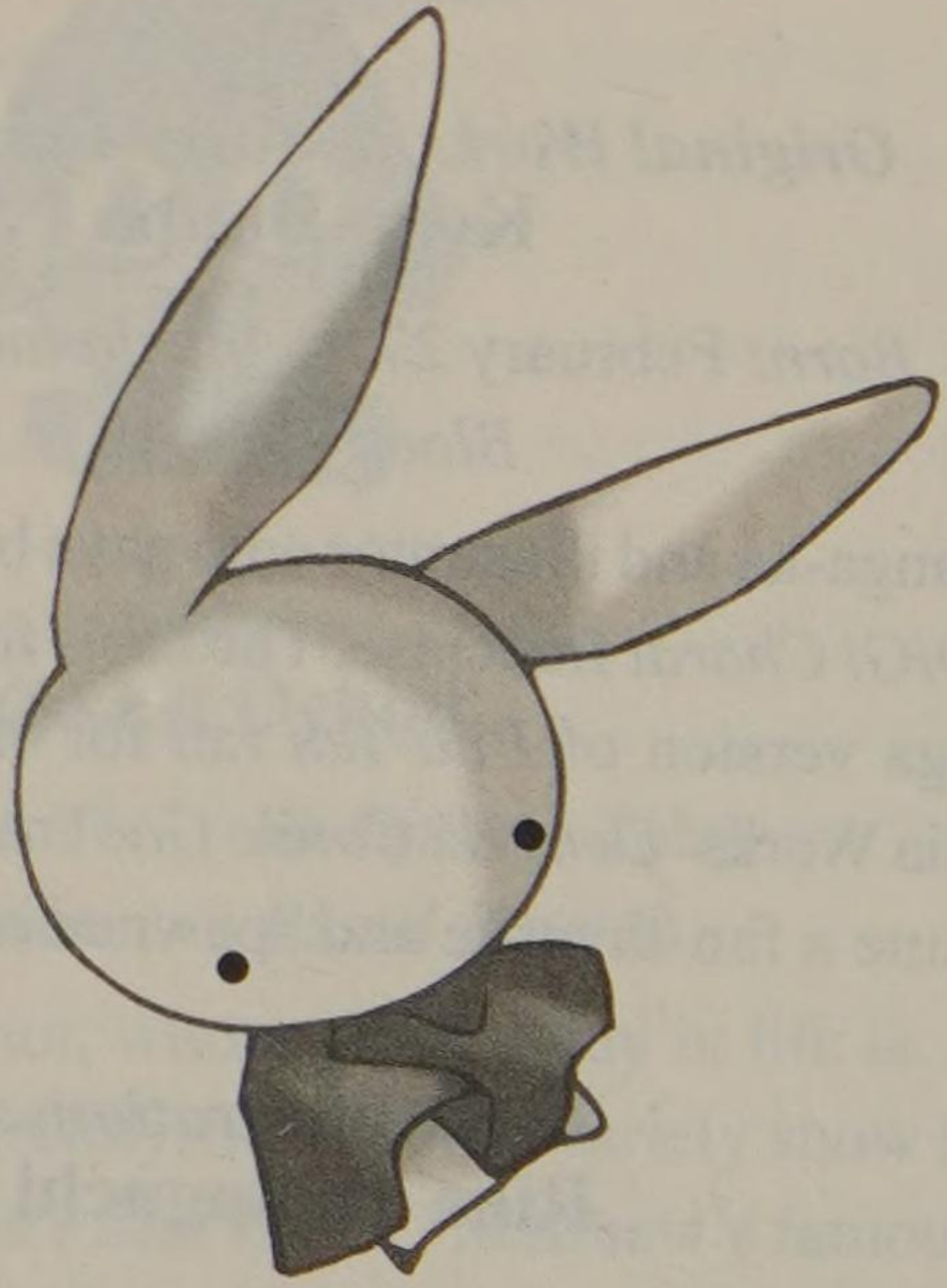
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A manga-ka and illustrator who gave birth to the popular *DiGi Charat* franchise. The basis for this novel, the manga version of *Pita-Ten* ran for eight volumes in Media Works' *Dengeki Comic Gao*! magazine where it became a fan-favorite and spawned an anime series.

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