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MISSING™

LETTER OF MISFORTUNE

GAKUTO CODA

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MISSING™

Letter of Misfortune

Book 2

Story by
Gakuto Coda

POP FICTION

A TOKYOPOP® Prose Novel

TOKYOPOP Inc.
5900 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 2000
Los Angeles, CA 90036
www.TOKYOPOP.com

Story	Gakuto Coda
Translation	Andrew Cunningham
Layout	Michael Paolilli
Cover & Interior Design	Jose Macasocol, Jr.
Senior Editor	Jenna Winterberg
Pre-Press Supervisor	Erika Terriquez
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Art Director	Al-Insan Lashley
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Publisher	Mike Kiley
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The First Day

Purification

Those casting a spell must have nothing unclean in their astral body. Using the Quabbalistic cross, the magician burns out all spiritual impurity, filling his body with light. Begin by facing the direction of the sunrise, and visualize a ball of light above your head while holding a dagger in your hand. Slice a cross in the air with the point of the dagger, chant the magical phrase, and remove all impurity from your body.

The Second Day

Consecration

Before you begin summoning a demon, prepare a magic circle. This pattern is merely a symbol of a circle you are drawing in the spiritual plane. Begin the ritual with a dagger in hand. Facing east, slice a pentagram, chanting the holy name. Repeat to the south, west, and north. Request protection from the guardian of each direction. This circle will be the site of your spell, and it will protect you.

The Third Day

Invocation

Summon the demon inside the mystic triangle. The triangle should have holy names written around it, and a magical mirror should be placed inside. (A black mirror or black bowl of water will serve as a magical mirror.) Facing east, stare into the magical mirror, and visualize the demon's form. Trace the pentagram of invocation, chant the spell, and trace the demon's crest. The demon will show itself to you.

The Fourth Day

Command

Now that the demon has appeared before you, command it to act upon your desire. Focus your will, for you must not show hesitation. To keep the demon from escaping, your will must be like iron. If your will falters, you will fall to the demon's fangs. Command it in the name of the tetragrammaton. Continue to do so until it accepts your command.

The Fifth Day

Banishing

Banish the demon to chaos. If the demon is banished to the labyrinths of chaos, you will be safe—but an unbanished demon is extremely dangerous. Chant the spell, and draw a pentagram of banishment with your dagger. Visualize the demon retreating back into the magic mirror. If it does not, repeat until it does. Do not stop until the demon has been completely banished.

The Sixth Day

Closing

Close the magic circle. Do not leave any trace of the spell. Facing east, draw the pentagram of banishment, chanting the holy names. Repeat to the south, west, and north, again drawing the pentagram, just as you did when drawing the circle in the first place. Be sure to send the guardians away and destroy the barriers on the spiritual plane. Visualize the ritual ground you made vanishing.

The Seventh Day

Purification

After you have closed the magic circle and ended the ritual, repeat the purification with the Quabbalistic cross. The stain of the spell remains in your astral body, and it is very dangerous to return to your everyday life with this uncleansed. Starting a ritual with impurities puts at risk not only the success of the ritual but the magician himself. The reverse is also true: Ending a ritual with impurities may damage your soul.

"Curses survive to the present day.

Everyone scoffs at them, dismisses them as unscientific—but inside, we fear them. After all, we can deny their effectiveness but can't deny that there is someone out there who hates us enough to curse us. The knowledge that you have been cursed allows the curse to infect you. The instant you find out, you become infected. The curse is transmitted by the power of suggestion.

Once, all diseases were supernatural. Sickness was the result of malicious 'spirits.' If curses are spirits and diseases are spirits, then curses are diseases and curses are contagious.

When I realized this, the first thing that sprang to mind was the so-called 'Letter of Misfortune.' Unlike disease, it does not kill people, but the way it uses the fear of death to spread itself is remarkably like a disease. It begins with one person's ill wishes, or perhaps only in mischief. But that creates fear and malice—and in a remarkably short time, it spreads explosively across the entire country.

This is a modern version of those malicious spirits. The Letter of Misfortune may be a very special kind of curse, born from the malice and repression of the young."

— *Eiichirou Oosako*, Occult

"This is a story I collected in the Kanto area:
The cursed fax comes at two in the morning.
If you receive the first one, it will come for seven nights.
If you receive the final fax . . .
Then, starting the next day, at the same time,
You must fax it to someone else, in the same order.
If you do not, or you get the order wrong . . .
The curse will take effect, and you will die."
— *Eiichirou Oosako,* Modern Urban Legends

Prologue:

The Witch Warns of a Beginning

Spring turned to summer, June gave way to July, and the school buzzed with anticipation as summer vacation approached.

Our story begins on a day like that, after school. . . .

○ ○ ○

"We meet at last, Glass Monster."

These were the words of the witch, who had appeared abruptly in front of them.

Aki Kidono found herself at a loss for words.

The witch, Yomiko Togano, gave her a horribly innocent smile in response to her silence. "Kidono, right? I knew it was you. Your soul is such a fascinating shape—exactly like he said," she giggled.

Aki's glare quickly turned hostile. She had been headed to the club room for a meeting when Yomiko had stepped out, as if she had been waiting for her. And then, the witch had begun babbling nonsense.

"Um," ventured Aki's companion, Ryoko Kusakabe, afraid the conversation was about to take an ugly turn.

Aki glanced at Ryoko's anxious expression and, with an effort, managed to quietly ask, "What do you want, Togano?"

"Oh, you know me?" Yomiko said, oddly pleased.

"Of course. Everyone knows the witch," Aki said grimly. "And you helped out our guys before."

"Yeah," Yomiko said, as if it had been no great matter. Sarcasm was lost on her, apparently.

Aki was a junior here at Seisou University's High School, and Yomiko was a senior.

There was no one in the school who even came close to Yomiko's level of fame. Everyone on campus had heard stories

about her outlandish behavior. She was eccentric, she was weird, she was mysterious—everyone knew who she was.

She called herself a witch, and everything she did, everything she said, was so surreal, so uncanny, that everyone who met her instantly put her down as something *other.*

But a small group of people looked beyond that, believing that Yomiko genuinely had some sort of power.

In other words, Yomiko Togano was psychic.

Yomiko's eyes could see a different world, one that no one else could see.

But Aki didn't give a damn.

"Is that all?" she said coldly. "If you're quite finished, we're in a hurry."

Honestly, Aki would have preferred to avoid her altogether.

"Mm . . . the Glass Monster is beautiful, hard, and sharp, but a little too cautious. That hurts it sometimes," Yomiko said, looking up at Aki as if peering inside her.

Aki took a step back, despite herself.

The tiny witch grinned.

Their eyes met.

Her expression was that of any ordinary, happy girl—but for a second, Yomiko's total lack of malice made Aki's skin crawl. From Aki's point of view, Yomiko clearly appeared to be lacking something fundamental, and that horrible absence gave her chills.

"Let us talk, Glass Monster."

Aki gulped, but she nodded. She did think of the witch as something *other,* but not for the same reasons as everyone else, not because of her words or her actions. What could possibly be more unnatural, for a human, than an absence of malice?

Aki shoved her reluctance aside and glared down at Yomiko. "What does that mean? That . . . 'Glass Monster'?" she said, not letting her glare waver. She felt as if not glaring would mean she had lost.

"The Glass Monster is the shape of your soul," Yomiko said, not at all put off. "That girl is an ordinary human, but your shape is quite unusual. No, don't be angry. It takes incredible strength of will and aptitude for a human to stop being human. It is something amazing."

Ryoko didn't seem to know how to feel about being called an ordinary human. The conversation obviously had left her behind.

Aki said nothing. Her eyes narrowed.

Despite the force of Aki's glare, Yomiko's gentle smile never wavered.

This witch might look human from the outside, but the thing beneath her skin was formed from something else entirely—something Aki simply could not relate to. It was summer, and the evening sun was beating down, but Aki was so cold that she had goose bumps.

"Your true nature is so clear—and hard, supple, proud, and sharp," Yomiko said. "You are strong and beautiful, so sharp you cut anything that approaches . . . yet fragile, so easy to shatter. That is the shape of your soul. That's the shape of you.

"So, your true form is the Glass Monster. Pretty, with beautiful sharp claws and fangs that tear through anything . . . but at the same time, those glass claws and fangs are hurting you.

"Even so, you don't stop attacking, because you are a very proud monster, because that is the monster's purpose. Your instincts always are searching for the enemy, and you must attack with everything you have, even knowing that the result will hurt you."

"I've heard quite enough of that," Aki interrupted, unable to bear it any longer.

There was nothing she hated more than being analyzed, especially by people she didn't know, who had no right to talk that way.

Yomiko simply grinned. "See?"

Blood rushed to Aki's head. A second later, her automatic defenses came alive, and powerful self-control put out the fires raging through her skull. She was calm instantly. Her emotions flattened out so fast that she felt dizzy, but she managed to avoid appearing upset.

"Your point being?" Aki growled.

"I think it's wonderful—such a proud, wonderful way to live."

"Your point? If this gibberish is all you've got, I'm leaving."

"Okay," Yomiko said, shaking her head at Aki's ferocity. Her manner shifted, becoming serious, and she voiced Aki's name again. "Kidono . . ."

"Wh-what?"

"I came to give you a warning, a witch's warning." Her expression had transformed completely. It was less serious than it was utterly devoid of expression.

"Uh . . ."

"It is your choice whether to believe it, but the witch never says what she does not see. She might see things she can't say or not tell everything she sees, but the witch never says what she does not see. So, you need to listen closely."

The witch's eyes rolled upward, her face masklike, immobile.

"Wh-what . . . ?"

"Beware of dogs."

"Huh?"

"I can see dogs in you. Your body will be eaten by a great number of dogs. Watch out for dogs."

It made no sense.

"The dogs will tear apart and eat your body, your heart, your soul—dogs that no one can see. Nothing can prevent it. So, beware of dogs."

"Um . . ."

"Beware of dogs you cannot see," Yomiko said, flashing her smile once again before turning to leave.

"Wait!"

Ignoring Aki's cry, Yomiko vanished into the grove of trees on the school grounds.

For a long time, Aki didn't move.

The heat of the sun returned. They'd been bathing in it for some time now, but Aki's bare arms were cold, as if the cold were emanating from within her skin.

Ryoko was staring absently in the direction Yomiko had gone. "Ah ha ha . . . what was that all about?" she asked nervously.

Aki shrugged. "How can we mortals possibly understand the famous? Witches, Princes of Darkness . . ."

"Yeah," Ryoko said, not quite accepting this response. "But . . ."

"Ryoko, it doesn't even bear thinking about," Aki said sternly.

"But . . ."

"Forget about it. If we start fussing over everything they said, we'd never survive." And with that, she turned and entered the club building.

"Ah, wait for me! Aki!" Ryoko said, hustling after her. "I said, 'wait'!"

Aki didn't answer. Stalking forward, she forced the conversation out of her mind.

It had upset her. A horribly unsettled feeling was trapped inside the cage of her chest.

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Everything started with that.

The events of Kidono Aki's curse all started with the witch's warning.

Once again, a story begins . . .

Chapter 1:

Night of Black Magic

One

The earth was bathed in sunlight—so bright that it seemed the air itself was generating light, creating high-contrast shadows on the ground.

No season is as bright as summer.

Light and heat, the blessings of the sun, filled the air, turning leaves a bright, living green here at Seisou University High School, in the academic city of Hazama, on the Bousou Peninsula.

The streets of town preserved the old Western stonework, and the school building had been built of brick and tile to match. This beautiful building was in the mountains, surrounded by the bounty of nature, so summer here was especially impressive.

Takemi Kondou was sitting on a bench on the school grounds.

Takemi liked summer. Takemi liked strange people best, but after that—maybe coming in fourth on his list, actually—he liked summer.

But he hated being hot. Running around with the sun beating down on you was out of the question . . . which was not to say he had any fondness for swimming. Takemi liked the shade.

In that natural sanctuary, away from the heat, he watched the summer scenes go by, out in the sun. This was his only way of enjoying summer. As long as he was merely observing, summer was fantastic.

Takemi liked summer.

"Hey!"

"Yikes!" Someone suddenly had pressed a cold coffee can against his neck, heralding the end of Takemi's blissful interlude.

It was lunch break on a Monday. Takemi had been sitting on a bench in the shade, appreciating summer in his way, when someone had intruded heartlessly. Takemi leapt to his feet, yanked bodily from his languid frame of mind.

Clutching his neck, he spun around. "How could you?" he grumbled.

The intruder was Ryoko, who chuckled, "You were turning into an old man right in front of me, all the youth draining out of your face."

"Yeah," he said, taking the coffee from her and sitting down again. Ryoko pounced onto the bench next to him.

Moving in unison, they pulled the tabs on their cans and began drinking. For a while, neither said anything.

"The breeze is nice. I guess I know how you feel," Ryoko admitted, stretching comfortably.

"Ha!" Takemi said, triumphant. Out of the shade, the hellish heat shimmered, but it was nice and cool here.

Takemi gravitated to this spot only during summer. All summer long, he spent as much time here as possible.

Normally, he spent his lunch in the club room, but this time of year, almost all the club members preferred to be outside—for the simple reason that the club room was not air-conditioned.

Direct sunlight would fade the spines of the books, so they opened the windows only when they absolutely had to, which left the room feeling like a steam bath. They could, of course, apply to have their books held at the library, but they preferred to keep them on hand—so, the result was that the people fled instead.

If they could just open the windows, it would be perfectly comfortable, so there was little chance of getting air-conditioning installed. So, the Literature Club members alone became exiles

each summer. Books were more important than people, all members agreed.

Not minding this in the least, Takemi let his gaze drift again to the summer scene he had been regarding before Ryoko arrived.

"What are you looking at?" Ryoko asked.

"Mm . . ." he said, pointing. "The Dark Prince."

"Oh . . ." Ryoko said, nodding.

Across the path from them, a boy and a girl were sitting on a bench. Takemi had spent the bulk of lunch staring at them. The boy was Kyoichi Utsume. And the girl was called Ayame.

Both of them were sixteen, the same age as Takemi and Ryoko. Actually, Takemi was born in April, so he was technically a year older, but Utsume's features made him look more adult, whereas Ayame's made her look two or three years younger.

The Dark Prince, Utsume, dressed head to foot in his customary black despite the summer heat, was rifling through a manga magazine Takemi had lent him, acting as if it were the most tedious thing he had ever encountered. He had a beautiful face, but absolutely no trace of charm. Ayame was seated awkwardly next to him, doing nothing in particular, just being by his side.

With the brick school building behind them, they looked like something not of this world.

Seated quietly beneath the green trees, his cold good looks and her astonishing beauty looked like an extremely well-composed painting.

"Mm . . . hate to say it, but definitely worth looking at," Ryoko said reluctantly.

"Yeah . . ."

"They do look good together. Wish they were actually a couple."

"I know what you mean."

Both sounded rather despondent. As Utsume's number one and number two fans, they agreed completely.

It was still hard to believe, but Ayame was not actually human.

It had been three months since Utsume first found her and had taken her with him.

She originally had been human, but she'd been drawn into another world and had become a *kami-kakushi*. Demonstrating just why people called him the Dark Prince, Kyoichi Utsume had pulled her back into the world of men.

She was a kami-kakushi that had been captured by a human. Now, she no longer had the power to capture anyone.

"I have less than half my power, I think . . ." she had said, half sad, half relieved.

Once, her powers had been so strong that anyone she came in contact with would've been captured, becoming hidden in the other world. But now, she had been given a new fate, not part of that world or this one.

Ever since, Ayame had been by Utsume's side.

They would suddenly realize she was there—and just as suddenly, she would be gone again.

She was still supernatural, and if she felt like it, she could hide herself so that no humans could tell she was there. But she had lost the ability to return to the other world, the world she had belonged to. She could *go* there, probably . . . but it was no longer a place for her to *return* to.

Utsume was now Ayame's only anchor. That was why she was always with him. That was the only reason.

"Say I were to pick up a stray cat and bring it home. It would be extremely irresponsible of me to then abandon it. At the least, I would be leaving things unfinished," Utsume had said when Ryoko had teased him, pointing out that they looked for all the world like a couple.

Clear and focused . . . tragically lacking in humility.

Utsume had absolutely no intention of ever treating Ayame like an ordinary girl; he was keeping her around purely as a kami-kakushi.

Ayame simply gave her usual sad smile.

"Such a shame . . ."

"Yeah . . ."

Gazing at their odd little pocket of strangeness, Takemi and Ryoko sighed in unison.

At first, they had seemed terribly unbalanced, but the more Takemi and Ryoko saw them together, the more they began to feel Utsume and Ayame matched each other perfectly. Neither seemed at all alive—each more like a being out of a story.

Like pieces of the same puzzle, there was a resemblance in the way they carried themselves. If they actually had been lovers, then, in a sense, they would have been the ideal couple.

Suddenly, Ayame glanced toward them. She tilted her head, puzzled, wondering why the two were watching her so closely.

They smiled back awkwardly.

Ayame grinned in response, a clear, beautiful smile that could charm anyone.

Takemi and Ryoko both grew slightly embarrassed.

Then, Utsume stood up.

Takemi's smile stiffened. He could only assume that Utsume had figured out what Takemi was thinking.

Utsume came striding directly toward him.

Ryoko anxiously clutched Takemi's arm.

Utsume stopped in front of them, expressionless, gazing down at them without a trace of emotion.

Takemi's mind filled with fear.

Observing this, Utsume's eyes narrowed.

"S-sorry, your majesty!" Takemi said, almost dropping to his knees.

"What are you talking about?" Utsume said, puzzled. "I'm returning this. I don't know why that should demand an apology." He held out the magazine Takemi had loaned him.

"Oh, is that all?" Takemi said, sighing. "I thought you were out to get me." He regretted it the moment the words left his mouth.

"It appears I will need to ascertain exactly what mental image of me you have lurking inside your head."

"Ah . . . no, um . . ." Takemi honestly had meant what he'd said, but it obviously was not something he should have said aloud.

Ryoko quickly changed the subject: "How was it?"

"What?"

"That," she said, pointing at the magazine. "Any good?"

"Oh . . ." Utsume said. As always, his voice was very flat, devoid of all intonation. "I suppose. There's nothing much to comment on beyond the technical aspects, the art, the design, and the plotting."

"Yeah? I thought it was pretty good," Ryoko said, deliberately naming the titles of several romantic stories within.

Takemi stifled a grin. Ryoko clearly was trying to set off Utsume.

Utsume snorted. "Good point. A very interesting subject."

"Eh?"

"All the stories you mentioned, Kusakabe, dealt with the theme of romance. I found several very similar themes among the other stories, all of them worthy of attention."

Never for a moment expecting Utsume to agree with Ryoko, Takemi was astonished. He had expected the Dark Prince to dismiss her with a word.

"Similar themes?"

"Yes," Utsume nodded.

"Like what?" Ryoko questioned expectantly.

"For example," Utsume replied, "greed, fanaticism, and drug addiction."

Ryoko slumped visibly.

"Falling in love at first sight based solely on physical appearance differs little from making an impulse purchase. It is the height of absurdity for humans to embrace such simplistic emotions.

"Additionally, the excessive trust and expectations they place on their partners are exactly like faith. No human ever has lived up to the expectations people have created for him. That goes for gods, people, and impulse purchases," Utsume said, dispassionately elaborating on his theory.

He was speaking a little faster than the complexity really allowed, and it was difficult for them to grasp if he had a point or was forcing things. They barely could follow him.

"Elevation of an unstable psychological state like romantic feelings to a position of supremacy is an extremely religious conception. It replaces the actual value of emotions," Utsume said, forging onward, regardless. "Religious organizations often take

advantage of this kind of sleight of hand to capture their believers' minds. Linking the believers through feelings that all humans possess, and leading them into the religion by giving those emotions value—despite the fact that emotions have no relative value whatsoever. It seems people are comforted by the thought that their natural biological reactions are a beautiful thing.

"Now, for what reason does the media try so persistently to preserve this legitimization of affection?"

Takemi's mind already had shut down. The train of logic had left him in the dust. There was no way he could possibly answer.

"Also of interest is how the characters in certain romantic stories resemble drug addicts."

"D-drug . . . ?"

"I understand that romantic feelings are an excited state that brings feelings of happiness, but this emotion seems to chemically alter the consciousness. The dejection after a breakup is just one side effect—a very similar feeling to the side effects of withdrawal experienced when heroin or cocaine begin to wear off. And the anxiety felt when partners are absent is remarkably similar. The brain might well produce some sort of addictive chemical."

"Um . . ."

"At the least, 'I always want to be together' is clearly the result of habitual behavior, and once the systems adjust to it, they need to increase the amount—again, much like a drug. The yearning for stimulation, for something different, and eventually the inability to function without that is, again, like a drug. I doubt 'love is a drug' will ever become a commonly used expression, but—"

At this point, Utsume suddenly stopped talking. He looked at the dazed Takemi and the dejected Ryoko.

Neither responded.

For a moment, he monitored the unresponsive pair. Then, he asked, puzzled, "What?"

"Never mind."

"Okay," Utsume said, dropping it.

They had never dreamed that romantic manga would give him ideas like that. Utsume was, indeed, very strange.

Without them noticing her, Ayame had joined Utsume, standing next to him.

"Ayame," Ryoko said, sitting up and addressing her.

There was a long pause before Ayame responded, as if it had never entered her head that anyone would speak to her. "Eh? . . . Oh . . . yes?" she stammered.

They had known each other for several months, but this communication issue showed no signs of improving.

"Um . . . you don't need to panic, you know."

"Er, um . . . ah . . . s-sorry . . ."

Ryoko sighed.

When Ayame stood in silence, she looked like a beautiful doll, and the disconnect between that and her complete panic now made Ryoko's head hurt. Normally, she was so perfect that she seemed almost unreal, but now she was more than a little laughable.

"So, I wanted to ask," Ryoko began.

"Y-yes?" Ayame said, snapping to attention. "Ah! Eek!"

Before Ryoko could get the question out, Ayame managed to overbalance, tripping over her own feet and toppling slowly forward.

For no reason at all.

"Yikes!" Takemi said, reaching out to catch her; but she grabbed Utsume's sleeve and somehow stopped herself from falling.

All three froze, balanced precariously like an abandoned building.

"A-are you okay?"

"Ah . . . ah, yes! I'm fine. S-sorry. Really," Ayame said, still frozen awkwardly, half fallen. Her face was bright red. Utsume supported her, irritation and weary resignation mingling on his face.

At first, Ryoko was stunned, but this soon gave way to giggles.

"Don't laugh! Help!"

"Oh, sorry!"

Between the three of them, they managed to get Ayame upright again, as if she were a small child. She continued to apologize. "S-sorry . . ."

"Augh! I forgot what I was gonna ask!"

"Sorry!"

Ryoko lost it, and she burst out laughing.

Takemi joined her.

Utsume merely sighed.

Red-faced, Ayame hid behind him.

Students began filing back into the building.

The mid-day break was almost over.

Two

That day, Aki arrived at school at the beginning of fifth period.

When he saw her coming into the lunch room with a sports bag on her shoulder, Takemi called out, "Ah, Kidono! Over here!"

"Hi," she said, her voice so deep it seemed to rumble upward from hell. She clearly was in a foul mood.

All the Literature Club juniors were gathered in the cafeteria, eating lunch.

Long tables, painted white, stood in rows. During the mid-day break, the clean yet drab cafeteria was crammed with students. And more than one student quickly grew frustrated with jamming themselves into this crowd. A number of them began seeking alternatives—spending the money and time to head into town to eat or bringing their own lunches. Once they became juniors, students' schedules were more flexible, and people began to shift their lunchtime.

Seisou was a prep school run on the credit system, so weekday classes ran seven periods. An incredible number of classes were offered. Freshmen were locked into a number of required classes; after that, it was easy enough for students to leave fourth or fifth period open, freeing up time to eat while the cafeteria was almost empty.

The Literature Club juniors all had coordinated their schedules, leaving the fifth period as open as possible. This way, they could meet up during break or fifth period and eat together—as they had done today.

"Aki, I heard you were hurt?" Ryoko called out worriedly as Aki approached.

"Nah, I'm fine," she said, putting down her heavy, textbook-laden bag.

Ryoko had told them all earlier that Aki had hurt herself the night before and had gone to the hospital first thing in the morning.

It wasn't anything serious, apparently, but her injury had started to hurt in the morning, so Aki figured she was better off safe than sorry. She had phoned Ryoko that morning to explain why she would be late.

The bandage around her left hand was proof of her injury.

"How did you hurt yourself?"

"Paper cut."

"Paper?"

"Yep. It was a deeper cut than it first appeared to be. Started to hurt when I woke up—'festering,' they said."

"Huh," Takemi interjected, oddly impressed. He'd never heard of a paper cut becoming so serious before. "Is it okay?"

"I already said it was. It's not my writing hand, anyway."

"Good! We already have Murakami hurt. If you were, too, it might start a trend."

"Thanks," Toshiya replied sarcastically, scowling.

These things always came in threes. Toshiya Murakami had broken his leg in April. It was no longer in a cast, but he was still on crutches. Having too much energy, Toshiya had gone to town with them, and they'd had to reset the break at least once.

"Forget my injury," Aki said grumpily. It appeared something else was the source of her bad mood. "You know Yanagawa, from Classic Lit? He really pisses me off."

"Oh." That would explain everything. Yanagawa was a widely despised teacher.

Aki made a snarling noise.

She'd missed morning classes and so had visited each of her teachers to explain why and to get copies of any handouts. The teacher for her fourth period class, Yanagawa, had been remarkably spiteful.

A gaunt man who always wore silver-rimmed glasses, Yanagawa was an ordinary teacher to students who blended in. But once a student caught his attention, he became astonishingly mean, and he never let up. Most of his students hated him. And the fact that it was impossible to get out of taking his Classical Literature course just made things worse.

Takemi didn't care for him, either. He'd fallen asleep in Yanagawa's class once. "'Of course, you understand something this basic, don't you, sleepy Kondou?' It's Yanagawa's favorite phrase. Augh. I'm getting worked up by the memory alone. I'm sure he still remembers it!"

"He keeps that up all day."

"He still says something when I run into him in the hall!"

"Augh."

Ryoko and Takemi sighed in unison. Neither had enjoyed his classes.

"And now you, too?" Ryoko said sympathetically.

"But his majesty and Murakami never had any problems with him, right?" Takemi asked.

Both refuted that statement quickly.

"Not true," Utsume said. "He thought I had a bad attitude, hated me for ignoring him."

"He got me while I was on crutches."

"Too many ways to count."

"Yep."

It seemed as if he had it in for all five of them.

"Well, at least we're all equal?" Ryoko murmured.

Utsume snorted. He was skeptical of concepts such as equality or impartiality. Ryoko could remember him saying that he didn't believe equality was either realistic or just.

"S-so that's just the way he is. May as well ignore him!" Ryoko said with fruitless cheer. "The only one of us he isn't after is Ayame!"

"Well, yeah," Takemi said. Ayame never went to class, and she wasn't even a student, so how was a teacher supposed to know about her or go after her?

When her name was mentioned, Ayame jumped nervously.

Aki pressed her fingers to her temples. "Right," she said, as if acknowledging her doomed state. "Even if Yanagawa had been an asshole to every single person alive, that has nothing to do with me. He could insult every living thing if he wants to, but it wouldn't clear him of the sins he committed against me today. Does any of this talk change the fact that your classmates call you 'sleepy' now?"

"Eh? Um . . . no, not really."

"Then, don't pretend it does," Aki snapped. "Besides, I hardly would be this pissed off just because a cretin like Yanagawa had been a little rude."

Takemi didn't believe that for a second, but he decided to keep that retort to himself because he had no idea how Aki might respond to it. Instead, he asked, "Was there something else?"

"Yeah," Aki said, opening her bag.

She slapped a pile of paper down on the table. It was curled up, so Takemi reached out to press it flat.

"Fax paper?"

"Yep," she said. It was, indeed, laser-printer paper: thin paper with a little gloss on the surface, letter size, and about ten pages long by appearance. It was nothing out of the ordinary, merely typical fax paper. However . . .

"What is this?"

One look at it was enough to identify it as odd.

Every page was covered in a sinister scrawl. Letters of the alphabet were scribbled tightly together, one after the other, vowels and consonants not forming anything like words.

It went on and on—and on. It was as if the pages were covered in insects. The very sight made Takemi's skin crawl.

A A h a a A a u r r u a a a a a a a A A A a A A A A A A A A e r /
T t e e i e e e e e e e r e h i i e r r r E E E e e r e e e e e i e e e e e e e e e e e e r e e e / /
M M a a a A h h h h a a a a A A a a u u a a a a a a a a a a a
R R r u u U U U u o u u u u u u u v v v v v v v v v v u /
K K K h u u u u o u R u u u u u o u R u u u u i u r r a a a v r u u u u u u u u U U U t / /
V e e / g e e a H a a E E e E e e e e e e r u u a e E E E E j j e e e e e e e e e e E y y /
B v u u u u u r R R R U u u v v v v v v b b u u
V u u u u u a a a h a a a A a a a A a a a a a a a a a a a a a a h h / /
V e e / G e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e h e /
B d r y u u u U u u u R L u u h a a A A A A a a a h a r e a r
R R r r r u a a a A A A A A A A H H A A A A A A E a / R U y U U /
u O O O O O O O O O O o u u r u u u u u u u u u a a a a a y a a a h h h h a
A A A A A a r r r R M M M M M M U U U U o u u u u u u u u u u u a M u u / e A a a a a a a
a a a a a a a a a a a h M e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e e M m n n n n n n n
n n n n n n n n n N n . . .

The sheer weirdness of it silenced them all.

The air-conditioning was not the only reason they felt cold.

Even Murakami was frowning. Utsume calmly picked up the pages and looked over them, but this probably was because he was fundamentally different from everyone else, psychologically speaking.

"What is it?" Ryoko said, obviously creeped out.

"It was faxed to me last night," Aki said.

Her machine had whirred to life suddenly in the middle of the night, at two o'clock in the morning.

Aki lived alone, in an apartment, making getting something like this particularly nasty.

Students who weren't born locally were not at all unusual here; but the school had perfectly nice dormitories, so most students lived there. To live alone like Aki did was extremely rare, but she had her reasons.

Whatever those reasons were, this still was a malicious sort of prank. After all, Aki was a girl, living alone. Takemi wasn't either one—even so, he was sure he'd be in for a bout of sleeplessness if he received something like this in the middle of the night.

There were thirteen pages covered in hundreds or perhaps thousands of letters. The rows of roughly written, tightly packed letters were daunting enough; but more frightening was the existence of the kind of mind it took to do something like this, the sheer passion it must've taken to fill thirteen pages of letter-sized paper this way. The rows of letters broke off here and there; each time, there was a big cross scribbled onto the page. Above each big cross was another, smaller cross.

It was terrifying.

Imagining a madman writing furiously in a dark room, Takemi allowed himself a shiver of revulsion.

"The sender's number is 'unknown,'" Murakami remarked, lighting onto something practical. "Some kind of stalker?"

"How would I know?" Aki said, disgusted. "I brought it along—but mostly, I just wanted to gripe. Truth be told, I almost threw out the whole thing, but then I thought it might be evidence."

She already was prepared to take this to the police.

"Probably a good idea," Toshiya said. "And you also can call the phone company to stop receiving faxes from unidentified numbers."

"Mm? Oh, yeah. But . . ." Aki said, suddenly reluctant to speak.

For no real reason, this bothered Takemi.

There was a long silence. The bustle of the fifth-period cafeteria carried on around them.

"Oh, wait!" Ryoko said.

"Mm? What?"

"I've heard about this. It's kind of like the Letter of Misfortune."

"Oh," Takemi said, remembering. He'd heard of it, too.

Everyone else looked blank. Only Takemi and Ryoko had heard the story.

"The cursed fax," Takemi whispered.

The cursed fax.

He couldn't remember who had told him about it.

The basic idea was similar to the Letter of Misfortune: One day, a mysterious fax would come to your house, and if you didn't send it to someone else . . . It was kind of cliché.

The story had spread among teenagers here in Hazama, and someone had sent a postcard to a radio show about it.

The bulk of the fad had happened about six months prior. Nobody had died in Hazama yet, but there were stories about someone who'd died in Tokyo after failing to send it on.

It was a stupid story, yet oddly believable. It sounded as if some people actually had received the fax, too.

The exact details were as follows:

The cursed fax comes at two in the morning.
If you receive the first one, it will come for seven nights.
If you receive the final fax . . .
Then, starting the next day, at the same time . . .
You must fax it to someone else, in the same order.
If you do not, or you get the order wrong . . .
The curse will take effect, and you will die.

"Ridiculous."

Aki's opinion was exactly what Takemi had expected.

"Anyone who believes crap like that ought to have his head examined. It's absurd! We're not children, for God's sake. We have better things to do!" she spat. Her eyes were hard like steel.

"You don't need to tell me," Takemi quailed.

Takemi was seated directly opposite Aki, and her fury was so palpable that he grew frightened, despite knowing she wasn't directing her rage at him specifically.

He was somewhat ashamed of his own weakness, but it was bad for his heart to see people really, genuinely angry. He would prefer to avoid contact with them. Yet here he was.

"I mean, they might not actually believe it," he said, trying to appease her.

"Then, it's just a prank? That's worse!"

Clearly, he'd dug himself deeper. Takemi decided to stop talking.

He glanced at the others for help, but they all were busy staring at the pages of the fax, thinking. None of them made eye contact.

"Heartless . . ." Takemi grimaced.

"Do these letters mean anything?" Ryoko asked.

Apparently, she had overcome her initial fear and was staring at a few of the pages.

"I can't read it at all. It doesn't look like English. Is it French?"

"Of course not," Aki snapped.

Despite this, Ryoko looked pleased with herself. For a second, Takemi was extremely jealous of her.

"Ah ha ha! I was kidding. These are impossible to pronounce, though. How do you even read them? Aahaaaauru-aaaaaaaaaaa—"

"Stop it. You're embarrassing yourself."

"The crosses are creepy, too—like they want you to die."

"Don't say things like that."

"Sorry. But what else could they mean? That's what the cross is."

Aki pulled her face into a sour expression, but she had to admit that Ryoko was right.

Takemi looked at Ryoko, and she winked at him.

Oh, he thought. She'd changed the subject to free him from Aki's rage.

He raised a hand, quietly thanking her. He felt sorry for Aki but was glad to have his friends there.

Ryoko grinned back. Then, she turned to the others. "Am I right or what?"

"Yeah," Takemi nodded, agreeing.

She may have been trying to change the subject, but she still had a point. It was the only meaning Takemi could come up with, too.

Just as everyone seemed to agree . . .

"No, that would incorrect." Utsume broke his silence, dismissing her theory.

"Eh?"

"There is a tendency to connect the cross to gravestones and view it as a symbol of death, but that actually is not true—that usage is secondary to the original meaning," he said flatly.

Everyone looked interested.

"There's a field of anthropology called 'symbolic anthropology,'" Utsume said, closing his eyes as he always did when remembering something. "All patterns occurring in the world contain hidden cultural meaning. Have you all forgotten? The cross is a Christian symbol. It normally serves as a symbol of the son of God, who was crucified upon it. As a symbol of that religion, it has come to symbolize faith and the church—but it originally meant 'atonement,' which of course, goes hand in hand with 'salvation.' That's why it's also used to symbolize hospitals. Stretching it still further, it symbolizes anything 'holy.' That's what it means in magic. Late-period magic is a product of Christian culture, so a lot of magicians use the cross in that sense. Additionally, just from the shape alone, it can be used to symbolize a person."

"Huh."

"Of course, it also means 'death.' But burial beneath a gravestone means 'death under faith'—in other words, ascension to heaven. It wasn't originally a negative meaning at all; but because death itself is repellent, I wouldn't call it a positive meaning, either. This is Japan, though, and Christian thought is not exactly the basis of our society, so it's only natural to take it to mean 'death.' Except . . ."

And here, Utsume took a breath.

". . . in this case, it's more likely 'purification with a Quabbalistic cross.'"

They hadn't ever heard the terms he concluded with.

Not understanding, Takemi echoed, "Kaba . . . listic? What?"

"'Purification with a Quabbalistic cross.' It's a magical ritual," Utsume explained, not showing any particular interest.

"Magic?"

"Yes. It's a type of magical ritual, a cleansing ritual performed before and after other rituals. Magicians use it to remove spiritual impurities and fill themselves with spiritual power. Considering that it's performed before and after any magical ritual, it can be found in many books aimed at the neophyte magician. It's the most basic magic ritual, and it must be learned by anyone beginning to experiment with magic."

"This is . . . ?" Takemi said, frowning at the fax. He couldn't connect Utsume's perfunctory explanation with the terrifying thing in front of them.

"Yes," Utsume nodded. "The words on this fax are all broken apart—then, there's the spacing of the letters, rows, even the use of upper and lower case letters. At first glance, it appears to be completely random. But look here: The groups of letters between the crosses all begin with A and end with N. The pattern of letters within each is identical. You can't pronounce it spelled like this, but . . . chances are, these are the Hebrew holy words chanted during the ritual."

"H-hebrew?"

"Ateh malkuth ve-geburah ve-gedulah le-olam, amen," Utsume said. "When chanting, people often stretch out the vowels and the final sounds, so it would end up being pronounced just like it's written here. It means: Thou art the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. When performing the ritual, a magician chants this while tracing a cross in the air, holding a real dagger or his fingers in the sign of the sword, like this—" He held

up his hand, with only the index and middle fingers extended: the sign of the sword.

"They trace a cross with each recitation of the holy words. That suggests the big crosses mean tracing the cross, whereas the smaller crosses above them are the sword itself. During the purification, the sword begins in the same location, above the head. The magician begins by imagining the sun above his head and next, touching it with the sword."

As he spoke, Utsume raised his hand above his head. He still was holding it in the sign of the sword.

"They say the magic words: Ateh . . ." His fingers touched his forehead.

"Malkuth . . ." His chest.

"Ve-geburah . . ." His right shoulder.

"Ve-gedulah . . ." His left shoulder.

"Le-olam, amen." He finished with both hands clasped before his chest.

"It's a very simple ritual, so that concludes it. If the magician combines this with proper breathing and visualization, it will cleanse him spiritually. This is just conjecture on my part, but I imagine 'spiritual impurity' has much the same meaning, in practice, as idle thoughts."

"Huh."

"Magic in actual practice is very different from the popular image of it. Modern magicians neither fly nor throw fire. The main goal of magic actually is to alter the magician's own consciousness. The most famous magicians of the modern age—people like Mathers, Crowley, Fortune—all of them considered this discipline to be the basis of magic. These magicians believed their wills could influence reality; but unless they could control their own minds, it

was meaningless. The rituals all were designed with this in mind. Even the 'demons' were simply a symbol used for that purpose."

So, magic meant the use of ritual to transform the practitioner's consciousness. And the elevation of the mind was the same thing as the practice of magic, Utsume explained.

Takemi was surprised to hear this, considering he'd always connected magic with bloody sacrifices, horrible demons, and sinister, bubbling cauldrons.

But the magic Utsume described seemed much more refined—more like an ascetic monk, and nothing dangerous about it at all.

"So, this fax isn't bad?" Takemi asked.

Utsume shook his head. "I never said it was good or bad, only that magic was a technique for altering one's own consciousness."

It seemed the question confused him.

"Eh? But if magic means elevating yourself, then it has nothing to do with, say, curses."

"Clearly, your thoughts are unable to get past the term 'magic.'" Utsume sighed. His gaze wavered, searching for words. "Then, let's switch the terminology to *budo*. The way of the warrior also is designed to better yourself—but if used with the intention to hurt people, those same techniques become extremely dangerous, right?"

"Right . . ."

"Magic is the same. If your intentions and will are evil, and you perform magic—then, naturally it can be incredibly dangerous."

"Mm . . ."

"You see? Magic can be both beneficial and destructive. To use an awful phrase, there is both 'white' and 'black' magic.

Both are magic, and both use the same techniques, but those are merely tools to be used at the magician's discretion. Magic itself has no inherent moral bias. If you immediately assume sinister intentions when you hear the term 'magic,' you stand to make a terrible mistake."

"Wow. Okay."

"You linked the word 'magic' to evil. When I dismissed that, you instantly leapt to good. This merely proves that you are overly influenced by the image of magic planted in your mind by Christianity: an extreme dualism. The first thing we must do here is stop attempting to decide if things are good or evil. Those concepts are poorly defined to begin with."

"All right."

He had leapt to conclusions, clearly. Magic depended on who was using it, clearly.

Takemi picked up the fax.

"So which is this?" That was all he wanted to know. Was this fax dangerous? Not dangerous? That was the the whole point.

When Takemi asked, Utsume looked pleased, as if he'd finally heard the right question. "Dangerous."

"Thought so."

"The purification ritual itself is merely a preparation, something done before beginning the actual spell. The problem lies in the caster's intentions. The exact same ritual performed with different intentions will have the opposite effect. From the sinister nature of this writing style alone, it obviously is intended to cause harm," Utsume said firmly.

Ryoko spoke up, suddenly worried. "Is Aki really okay? Did anything strange happen?"

"Nothing."

"Really . . . ?"

"Yeah," Aki snapped, annoyed.

Ryoko wasn't ready to let it drop. "Is she gonna be okay, Dark Prince?"

Utsume shrugged.

"We presently have no idea what the sender was trying to do, so I can't say. I *can* say that the contents of the fax resemble a magical ritual, but I don't deny that this might be a coincidence. Even if it is the purification of the Quabbalistic cross, we have no way of knowing if the sender is a magician or just a stalker who happens to have read a book or two on magic. If it's a stalker, we also can't tell if it will remain just a prank or escalate into something more dangerous."

"But that's—"

"And it might've been faxed to the wrong number. The degree of danger is currently completely unknown. Still . . ." Utsume said, glancing at the fax again. "The sender of this fax does seem to wish harm to the recipient—or at least harbors some kind of twisted feelings for her. Even if it has nothing to do with magic, that much is obvious," he said, dismissing his own exposition.

Without magic, it was just as it appeared to be, like they all had known from the very beginning.

"Your highness . . ."

"That's more than enough, isn't it? Make sure to lock your doors and windows," Utsume said practically.

"But . . ."

"What? If it is magic, it's pointless to do anything."

This puzzled Takemi. "Why?"

"Why?" Utsume echoed, frowning. "I never once said magic actually was effective."

"Huh?" Takemi gaped at him.

"I possess a certain degree of knowledge about magic, but I've never tried to use it, and I don't believe that it actually works. Any attempts to counter it would be absurd."

Takemi had nothing else to say. Feeling as if every assumption he'd been making had been overturned, he became almost dizzy.

Of course, once he thought about, Utsume was right. Utsume had been giving only his analysis of the fax's contents, which had nothing to do with whether curses and magic were actually real. The idea that Aki was being cursed was entirely a product of Takemi's mind.

At some point, he'd gotten carried away in the sheer atmosphere of Utsume's lecture.

"Out of all of us, you'd be the easiest to curse, Kondou," Utsume announced.

"W-why?"

"Curses have a lot in common with hypnotism. In primitive societies, when a well-known wizard put a curse on someone, he'd always go and tell that person. Then, he'd put on a performance to suggest the casting of the curse. But that was not a ritual, not a prayer, nothing of the kind. It was simply this: With that knowledge, the cursed man becomes nervous. After all, a man everyone knows is a powerful wizard has just cursed him, and this fact is a powerful suggestion. The cursed believes the spell will kill him. Then, it's a placebo effect. Even without the existence of an actual curse, through the sheer power of suggestion, the cursed man often would die."

"Urr."

"See, Kondou? That's how curses work. I don't mind that you're simple-minded—but if you believe anything people

tell you, without any skepticism, you'll end up being killed by something that *doesn't even exist.*"

It sounded like a threat.

Takemi gulped.

Aki burst out laughing. "Ah ha ha. Simple-minded? You got that right."

"What?" Takemi said.

"Ha ha! Sorry." Aki stood up. "Sorry. I'm just a little wound up. I know the fax is just a prank. Forget about it. It's nothing."

She flipped her bag onto her shoulders. The others looked at the clock and realized fifth period was almost over.

"Kidono," Toshiya said grimly.

"Mm?"

"Be careful."

"I know."

"Especially if it's a stalker. Humans are far more dangerous than any curse. A violent thug will cause much more damage than anything occult. After all, it wasn't Ayame who broke my leg. It was another human." Toshiya tapped his leg, still not fully recovered.

Ayame bowed apologetically.

Aki chuckled. "I agree."

The bell rang, signaling the end of fifth period.

"So . . ."

"Yeah."

And with that, Aki walked away.

With fifteen minutes left until sixth period began, everyone began preparing to leave.

Takemi stood up but noticed that Utsume had a strange expression on his face.

"Something wrong, your majesty?"

"No," Utsume said. He frowned, and then he took a long, slow breath through his nose. He closed his eyes, thinking, as if something wasn't falling into place. Takemi began to get nervous.

"Can you smell something?"

Utsume didn't answer.

Utsume had a very unusual ability—he could smell things that were not of this world. As a child, he'd been captured by a kami-kakushi, and this extraordinary experience left him with this ability. It had led him to Ayame, which in turn led to a very dangerous sequence of events.

According to him, he could not distinguish the smells from real scents at all. They weren't that different from ordinary odors; so, unless the smell was jarringly out of place, he rarely noticed. But occasionally, he would catch a whiff of something that clearly didn't belong. At those times, a being from the other world was nearby.

His ability was absolutely real, and if he smelled something strange, there always was *something there*.

Given what they'd just been talking about, Takemi was right to be worried.

After a long pause, Utsume spoke. "Rot."

"Eh?"

"It's very faint, but I smell rotting meat."

Very unsettling.

"And an animal—some kind of dog, I think. No . . . ?" he cocked his head.

Takemi shuddered. "I-is it . . . *other?*"

"I don't know. Too faint."

"But there's no rotting meat or dogs in the cafeteria."

"Not necessarily," Utsume said. He sniffed again. "No good, it's gone."

Then, he picked up his things and headed off to class.

"Eh? Wait!" Takemi said, hurrying after him.

And for the moment, the matter rested. At that time, they still had no idea what was going on.

Chapter 2:

Night of Invisible Things

One

Aki wondered: What was this fax?

Aki thought: What was the fun in sending something like this?

Aki raged: Who the hell was doing it?

Aki remembered: How frightened had she been when it arrived?

Aki remembered *perfectly*.

When that fax whirred to life at two in the morning, Aki had shivered, feeling a sudden chill much too powerful to be dismissed as her imagination.

If this had been her first time getting a fax at night . . . but she never had been this creeped out by a mere fax before. She didn't know why. But once the initial shock had passed, she was sure the temperature in the room was dropping and that the cold air on her skin was absolutely real.

The air in the room was cold.

The light seemed to be fading.

The quiet night grew quieter.

The noise of the fax machine hurt her ears.

The entire time the fax was printing, Aki was unable to move a muscle. She simply stood there, watching the faxed curse pile up on the floor.

Only when the machine spat out the last page was Aki able to move again.

There was nothing she could do. Her body would not respond. If she had been able to move, she would have yanked the phone cord out of the wall.

It was horrible—very, very horrible.

The cut on her finger was caused by the fax, as well. The last page had drifted across the room and landed at her feet. When she had picked it up, the paper jerked away.

A cold, malicious, unpleasant pain had spread across her finger.

She jumped, yanking her hand back.

On the tip of her left index finger, there was a line of blood along the cut, which soon swelled into a large round drop. The drop kept swelling until it burst, and blood ran down her finger.

The cut throbbed with a dull pain, and it took ages to stop bleeding. Still, at that time, it was nothing more than a cut.

In the morning, however, the wound had festered . . . the cut was surrounded by gangrene, black as the fax's ink.

And now, Aki was in her room again.

It was almost two. She was standing in front of the phone, waiting for the fax to come.

If someone had asked why she was doing this, she was not sure she could have answered. To ask "why" was to ask for her goals and reasons—neither of which she really understood. She didn't understand herself. But she was driven by anger, anxiety—and, at the same time, a horribly clear will. One thing she could say was that she was completely calm—even if that was only on the surface, even if it was merely the calm before the storm.

"Is something wrong with me?" she wondered aloud. Aki wasn't about to start believing in a sad urban legend like the cursed fax; even so, she had a feeling it would come. At any rate, waiting for the fax was not a waste of time.

She had to be sure. She had to face it down.

But she was also well aware that neither of these qualified as a goal or a reason. Aki's mind was just as unforgiving of her own deceptions as it was of other people's.

She was waiting for no reason. This was the most accurate description of her behavior.

Without knowing why, Aki was waiting for the fax to come, like she was being unconsciously controlled by something else.

She stared at the phone, waiting in front of it. Only a few minutes until two. She could feel the tension building up inside her, under the surface of her calm. Something was squeezing her heart and stomach. It hurt to breathe deeply.

She didn't want to admit it, but she could feel herself trembling.

1:59.

Tick, tick. The digital display carved away the seconds.

Tick, tick.

2:00.

Instantly, the phone began to ring shrilly.

Although she had expected it, all her resolve vanished instantly, and she jumped. She clasped her hands to her chest, forcing herself to calm down. She didn't succeed completely, but she managed to recover herself somewhat.

It was here—the second night's fax.

Her breathing seemed very loud.

Annoyed by her own shaking hand, she pushed the "receive" button.

The machine took forever to start. Just as the day before, it took a long time to stockpile data, proving that there was a lot of information being transferred. What would come out this time?

What would happen this time?

. . . *vv* . . . . . .

The machine moved.

Instantly, Aki grimaced. The moment the machine started, her cut had split open, with a hot pain as if something were sucking at her wound.

Blood was rapidly turning her bandage red. The lights were quickly growing dim. In response, the fax began letting out a low, grating noise.

. . . . . vv-vvv . . . vvv-v—vvv-vvvv . . . . . .

The machine shook faintly, the deep sound echoing in the silent room.

It was only the sound of the pages being printed, but Aki felt as if she'd never heard such a horrible noise before—it was like creaking, or like the sound of insect wings.

The first page began to emerge.

The paper's gloss made it seem almost alive. Shuddering, the fax machine seemed to be giving birth to some awful child: First came the head, a big pentagram. It was upside-down, with a small cross drawn in the center.

This diagram was on the right side of the page; the remaining space was filled with letters, scribbled letters—a scribbled, unreadable mass of letters.

The machine began spitting out a series of pentagrams, each surrounded by that spell-like scribbling.

"Yyeoddl/Heeh/Vuavvf/Heeh/"

The first page hit the floor.

"uAaaaaa/Dooooo/Naaaaa/Yiiiiiii/"

The second joined it.

"EyieeE/Heeh/Yiiiii/Yyyei"

A third.

"AAAAAa/Gyu/ra . . . . . ."

. . . . . vv-vvv . . . . . .

As Aki stood listening to the horrible noise, watching the fax machine vomit out the pages, she could feel the air in the room shifting.

Each page of the fax sent a tremble through the air—and it was as if that vibration were tearing the molecules apart, changing them into something else.

The air in the room felt different. All feelings of life faded, and an empty peace—like the inside of a shrine—spread outward.

Her room was swiftly becoming something that wasn't hers.

Without Aki having moved at all, by the time the fax finished, it was no longer Aki's room. It looked the same, but there was no trace of Aki's smell to it. All that was left was a horrible fatigue . . . and, oddly, the faint smell of animals.

Two

In the hall, Ryoko passed several teachers. They seemed in an awful hurry. Come to think of it, there had been teachers outside, as well. Everyone seemed to be in such a rush today.

She let out a sigh.

Ryoko was heading for the audio-visual room, and sighing even before class had begun—not for any childish reason like the cloudy sky, either; she sighed for the much more practical reason that her first bell class was English Conversation.

Ryoko was earth-shatteringly bad at math, so she had been forced to choose the humanities course. Although she was glad

she'd managed to eliminate math, English was her second-worst subject—and it was compulsory. She dreaded starting her day with a foreign teacher's class.

They were not allowed to use anything but English during class. Certainly, this helped them get used to speaking, but it also was so stressful that it caused Ryoko physical pain.

Ryoko secretly dreamed that English would one day be dropped from the syllabus. As far as she was concerned, English syntax was identical to the formulas used in math and science classes.

"Morning, Ryoko!" a friend from class called out, just as she started up the stairs.

"Ah, Tomo. Morning."

Tomo Akagi was a very tall girl whom Ryoko had first met in music class. They had the same first period class today.

"It's in the language lab today, right?"

"Yeah . . ."

They began climbing together. The audio-visual facilities were on the fourth floor.

Still feeling a little sleepy, they walked in silence. Neither one of them was a morning person.

"Say, Tomo . . ." Ryoko ventured, searching for something to talk about.

"Mm?"

"The teachers were all flustered this morning."

"Yeah . . . something about wild dogs."

"Makes sense."

"It *is* summer."

Seisou High's campus was surrounded by mountains and forests, and it was not unusual for wild dogs to wander onto the

grounds. Usually, they were harmless—but about once a year, somebody got bit. Judging from the teachers' reactivity, this might have happened again. Or maybe there had been more than one dog.

"Somebody get bit?" Ryoko asked.

"Apparently . . ." Tomo said, suddenly perking up. "It was Yanagawa, from Classic Lit."

"Eh? Really?"

"Swear to God! Serves the asshole right!"

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah, it's nothing serious. Hope he at least has to take a few days off, though . . ."

Ryoko grimaced at Tomo's evident satisfaction. She didn't exactly share the feeling, but she had to admit that she would be glad to be free of his class for a few days. Her course load was tough enough.

"Mm . . . I guess I feel the same," she admitted.

Tomo grinned. "Damn skippy."

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When she entered the language lab, Ryoko received a terrible shock. Aki was already there, which was no surprise—but her appearance shook Ryoko so much that she had to say something.

"Aki, are you okay?"

She obviously had tried to hide them with a little makeup, but the lines under Aki's eyes were far too deep to disguise—at least if you were looking for them, and Ryoko was.

"You noticed?" Aki said, grimacing.

"Yeah," Ryoko nodded. "You did a pretty good job, but . . . I mean, I don't think the boys would notice, but any girl would figure it out soon enough."

"Yeah," Aki said, pulling out a mirror and studying her face gloomily. The gesture seemed so lifeless that it caused Ryoko greater concern.

"You got another one?"

"Mm? Oh, yeah," Aki admitted, oddly reluctant.

"Something happen?"

"No, it's fine. It's nothing."

"Don't try to deny it."

She'd known Aki long enough. Aki might be smooth, but Ryoko could tell when she was hiding something.

"Aki . . ."

"I'm fine. I was just too angry to get much sleep."

"Is that really all?"

"That's all." She paused. "I brought the new fax. Want to see?"

Ryoko nodded. She didn't believe a word of Aki's explanation, but if she pushed her for an answer, Aki would just strike back. Over the last year, Ryoko had come to realize that getting upset with Aki would only set her off.

There was nothing Ryoko could do about it. Her best bet was to wait for Utsume or Toshiya to arrive. However, when Ryoko saw the fax Aki produced, she completely forgot about all of that.

"Yikes!" she yelped the moment she laid eyes on it: an upside-down pentagram with a cross inside, and row after row of cryptic letters scrawled next to it.

The sheer chaotic creepiness of the first night's fax had diminished somewhat in this version—but considering it had

been replaced with what could only be taken as occult symbols, Ryoko's nerves tingled anyway. The information Utsume had provided the day before might have put the thought in her mind, but the extremely magical looking inscriptions horrified her.

She was absolutely sure this thing was designed to cause Aki harm.

"Aki . . . you really should get the phone company to block these."

"Mm? Yeah, I guess," Aki answered evasively. She avoided Ryoko's gaze.

Ryoko felt like something was terribly wrong. "Aki!" she cried, getting upset despite her own advice. No sooner had the word left her mouth than a hand tapped her left shoulder firmly.

"Eh?"

She turned to look, and someone grabbed the fax pages from her right.

"Eh? Huh?"

Confused, she looked from her shoulder to her empty hand.

Then, she spun around and found a figure in black standing behind her.

"Oh."

Utsume met Ryoko's eyes and nodded.

"Dark Prince . . ." It took her a moment to work out that he'd stopped her.

She had almost blown it. For a moment, she'd lost her head. She put her hands on her chest in relief; at the same time, the fact that he'd completely seen through her turned her face red.

"An upside-down pentagram?" Utsume murmured, looking over the fax.

"Morning, Kyo."

"Mm," he grunted in response. He frowned slightly.

Aki noticed. "Is there any significance to it being upside down?"

"It's said to be a symbol of black magic. Apparently, it's used as a symbol that means orienting oneself toward darkness. If he's doing this deliberately, he's done his homework," Utsume said in perfectly level tones. It was clear from his choice of words that Utsume was sure the sender knew what he was doing.

"Thirteen pages. Same number as the first night."

"Mm . . ."

"The handwriting looks similar as well. The lower case 'a' is distinctive."

This astonished Ryoko. It never would've occurred to her to check for something like that.

"What do you think, Dark Prince?" she asked.

Utsume didn't answer. He just stared at the fax.

"Dark Prince . . ." Ryoko said more insistently.

At last, he looked up.

He put the fax down on the desk. "It's still very general, but we have a sense of exactly what the cursed fax is doing now," he said quietly. "At this point, we probably can dismiss the idea that this is being sent by a stalker. If my theory is correct, there is little risk of the sender moving on to direct physical attacks for the time being."

"Huh?" Ryoko said, feeling very stupid.

He had jumped to a conclusion, and she had no idea what thoughts or deductions had led him to it.

"What do you mean?" Aki said, clearly not following him either.

Ryoko was relieved she had not been the only one left behind.

"Obviously, this fax was sent by someone with magical knowledge," Utsume replied.

His answer failed to make them understand.

Utsume looked slightly vexed. "In other words," he continued. "Whoever sent this clearly knows a lot about magic. And if he's following the magical principles this closely, no matter what he's trying to achieve, it's extremely unlikely that he believes the spell won't be effective."

"I see," Aki said, nodding.

Ryoko was still confused.

"First, let's assume this is the cursed fax you've heard stories about. You see how that could not be the work of some random lunatic, right?"

"Yeah . . ." Ryoko nodded.

"As long as it's a simple chain letter, there's very little chance that some stalker is using it. What worried me was that someone, or a group of people, was after Aki specifically. But the key question in that latter situation is how serious are they about magic?"

That's what Ryoko didn't understand.

"Let's first assume that we're not going to bother considering the idea that this might be nothing more than a prank. Thinking about that would be a complete waste of time. With me so far?"

"Yeah, I get that."

"So, what if the 'magic' were nonsense? This is the most dangerous scenario, as it seems most likely that someone is trying to make Kidono nervous, and the chances of him trying something else are very high. If he doesn't believe the curse really will work, then the only option he's left with is direct physical action."

"Okay . . ."

"But if this fax is genuine magic, then it's probable that the sender is expecting the spell itself to have some kind of effect. If he's going to all the effort to kill someone with a curse, then we can safely assume he won't take direct action. If he were to take action, it would happen only if the curse had obviously failed, so it wouldn't occur until the seven nights were finished."

"For these reasons, I'm ruling out a stalker. This fax is a prank, some kind of chain mail, or—more likely—some idiot actually is trying to curse you. Even if my theory is wrong, the chances that he'd do anything to you before the seven nights are finished are very slim."

He looked to see if Ryoko had followed this.

She was still a little confused, but she went ahead and nodded.

"That's all," he said, wrapping up, as if everything was settled.

But . . .

Utsume had not addressed Ryoko's fears at all. Actually, neither Utsume nor Aki had mentioned the possibility that was bothering Ryoko. She could hardly believe it.

"Um, Dark Prince . . ." she said.

"Mm?"

"Is there no chance that the cursed fax is a *real curse?*" This was what scared Ryoko.

If Utsume said so, she believed it wasn't a stalker or some other psycho. But Ryoko had never been worried about them in the first place.

Were the stories about the Letter of Misfortune really nonsense? Was there really no such thing as a curse?

Ryoko hadn't given any thought to the copycat criminals or stalkers Utsume had mentioned. She was afraid of what the faxed curse might do to Aki.

In response to Ryoko's question, Utsume looked toward the ceiling for a moment. After a few seconds of thought, he replied, "Unclear."

"Is this real magic? Is it possible it actually will have an effect? Is there anything we can do?"

"Nothing. There's nothing we can say for certain and nothing we can do," he said coldly.

Ryoko became just a little bit annoyed. "Why not?"

Utsume looked away. "Kidono," he said suddenly, "has anything strange happened since the first fax arrived?"

Ryoko's eyes widened.

"Nothing," Aki stated flatly.

"See? As long as nothing happens to her, we can't prove the effectiveness of the spell, and we can make no judgment, one way or the other. It would be a mistake to get upset."

"But—"

"I don't believe in anything that doesn't happen where I can see it. Try to distinguish between predictions and delusions. It would be the height of folly to be worried and frightened about something that doesn't even exist—the definition of a groundless fear."

Ryoko could say nothing else. She was sure Aki was hiding something, but she couldn't say that in front of her. So, she changed her question.

"Okay, so . . . so *if* something were to happen—can you tell from this fax what it might be?"

She was pretty proud of the question, but Utsume still shook his head.

"That's why I said it was unclear at this stage. I can tell you the outline of the curse, but it hasn't reached the critical stage yet. On the third night, we might be able to tell something; but at this stage, we can't tell anything about what the fax is trying to do."

"Outline?" Ryoko asked.

Utsume narrowed his eyes slightly. "This second fax appears to be the ritual of the pentagram, which is used to consecrate the ground. When magicians are casting a spell, they prepare by first purifying themselves, and then the location. The first night's Quabbalistic cross purified them spiritually, and this pentagram ritual purifies the place where the spell is performed. If you look closely, you can see that the fax divides into four-page segments, with the pentagram drawn near the top, bottom, left, and right. During the ritual of the pentagram, the magician would turn east, west, south, and north, in turn, and this seems to match that."

He picked up the fax, pointing as he spoke.

"On the first page, the star is on the right. This is east. The ritual begins facing east. The next page has it at the bottom, or south. Then the pentagram is drawn to the west, and finally to the north. Each of these pentagrams is drawn starting at the top right. Turn that right side up, and they're drawn from the bottom left. If you start drawing a pentagram there, it is a pentagram of invocation."

As he spoke, he traced a pentagram in the air, his fingers held in the sign of the sword.

"There are three groups of four, partly to bring the number of pages up to thirteen, and also because each set means something different. The first group is the incantation. The second group is the guardian angels, one for each direction. And the third group is the four elements—fire, air, earth, and water—each corresponding

to one of the four cardinal directions. During the ritual, you face east and imagine pentagrams burning in each direction while chanting as follows . . ."

Pointing to the pages of the fax, Utsume murmured, "*Before me, Raphael. Behind me, Gabriel. At my right hand, Michael. At my left hand, Auriel.*"

Instantly, Ryoko felt a chill run down her spine.

Utsume's low, low, inflectionless whisper quietly shook the air, sending a chilly vibration toward her, as if she were listening to an actual magician chanting. His faint but clear enunciation frightened her, even though she knew it was only a demonstration.

Utsume picked up the cursed fax.

"*About me flames the pentagrams . . .*" he chanted, placing the first twelve pages, the packs of four pentagrams, back on the desk. "*And in the column shines the six-rayed star . . .* Now, preparation for the ritual is complete."

He placed the last page on top of the others. There was a big hexagram drawn in the center of it."With this much information, we can speculate about what the next fax will contain. I imagine the next pages will summon a demon. The fourth night will command the demon. The fifth night will banish the demon, the sixth will close the ritual space, and the seventh will repeat the purification of the Quabbalistic cross. Seven nights, following the absolute basics of magic—that's what I meant by outline."

Utsume spoke as if he had dropped a pebble, but Ryoko shuddered anyway.

"So . . ." she looked at the fax, and then at Aki. "So, then this . . ." Her voice shook.

Utsume snorted, disinterested. "Yeah, it's perfectly researched magic—a magical ritual disguised as chain mail," he said, confirming Ryoko's fears.

"So, it is a real curse?" Ryoko wailed.

"It's well planned. Someone worked hard on this," Utsume said, sighing. It was hard to tell if he was impressed or disgusted.

The bell rang.

The day began just like it always did, despite Ryoko's anxiety.

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Three

He smelled rain.

As Takemi left the building after fourth bell, it had started to rain, exactly as the forecast had predicted. The sky had been filling with clouds all morning, so the sight of silver strings sheeting down was not worthy of much surprise. He could hear a few people wailing in horror, but this was because they'd forgotten their umbrellas, or really hated rain.

Neither condition applied to Takemi.

Takemi did not particularly dislike rain. Nor did he like being trapped in his room in the middle of the summer. The temperature dropped, but the humidity increased—and coupled with the inability to go outside, the merits and demerits basically canceled each other out.

The floors were getting dirty, and they were hard to clean, so he was extremely grateful he wasn't on cleaning duty today.

Summer and rain were both to be enjoyed as an observer. As he made his way along the covered walkway, Takemi joined in with the other wailers. "Augh, it did start raining."

Nobody responded. Then again, nobody disagreed with him, either. The rain was coming down hard, and puddles of water were standing on the flagstones.

The covered walkway stopped at the gym, some distance from the club building. They were going to have to walk all that way in the rain.

Toshiya was still on crutches, so the rain was especially difficult.

"Raincoats are as bad as umbrellas," he often said.

Caring not a whit for human convenience, the rain splattered cheerfully on the ground, making everything wet.

Out in that rain, Ayame was waiting for Utsume.

She stood quietly, wet green trees behind her, damp-darkened red umbrella above her.

Stunning.

She seemed so natural, and she matched the background so well, that as much as her beauty drew the eye, it seemed equally easy to overlook her if you weren't paying attention.

It was like the girl was part of the scenery. Every time Takemi saw her like this, he was reminded that she was something strange.

Ayame always waited for Utsume like this.

When class started, she would drift away, and when he came out of the building, she would be standing by the entrance like a faithful dog.

"If Utsume died in class, we'd have to put a statue outside the west entrance," Toshiya had once said, quite seriously. The way

Ayame came running over to hand Utsume her umbrella made it hard to think of that as a joke.

"A faithful dog . . ." Utsume had said, at the time. "Now that you mention it . . ."

If Utsume was serious, then it was no laughing matter.

There were dots of water under the covered walkway. On closer inspection, they looked like a dog's footprints.

"Here too?" Toshiya muttered.

Now that he was looking, Takemi saw several similar footprints across the concrete.

"Is it close?" he asked, looking around. There was no sign of any wild dogs. He relaxed.

They had all been warned to be on the lookout for wild dogs. The school counselors had come around to every class during first bell and told them all not to walk alone, if possible.

The dogs had been coming into the building, so they couldn't let their guard down indoors, either. The counselors had said "someone" was bitten, but it was already common knowledge that it had been Yanagawa.

"They're very dangerous, so if you see them, keep your distance," the counselor said.

Takemi had been annoyed—they weren't little children, after all. But he had to admit that high school kids could act dumb, as well—perhaps the teachers' innate distrust was well deserved.

Takemi suddenly realized that Utsume was staring dubiously down at the footprints.

"What it is, your highness?" Takemi asked.

"Smaller feet than I thought," Utsume said. "Can't be more than a puppy. I'd be surprised if one tried to bite you—and if it

did, it hardly would do any damage. So, why are they being so cautious?" He cocked his head.

"Now that you mention it . . ." Takemi said, tilting his head as well. The footprints really were tiny. Takemi's family had a dog, and he knew what its footprints looked like; the size and spacing of these were pretty far from a fully grown dog's. The canine couldn't be much larger than a cat. Still . . .

"But we're talking Yanagawa?" Takemi said. "I wouldn't be surprised if a puppy bit *him.*" It just felt right. Yanagawa was such a sad little man that even puppies would take an instant dislike to him. He could just picture Yanagawa screaming as a pissed-off puppy bit him.

Takemi chuckled. But his laugh faded when nobody else joined him.

He looked around him: Aki and Toshiya were giving him a pained sort of smile, so his joke hadn't fallen entirely on deaf ears. He had never expected Utsume and Ayame to react in the first place. Ryoko's complete lack of reaction, however, was very strange.

She wasn't talking.

She'd been kind of quiet all morning. And now . . . Ryoko was staring at the dog's footprints, as if in shock. She was leaning slightly backward, off balance, as if backing away.

Instantly, everyone else looked equally tense.

"Um . . ." Takemi said. At first, he thought he had said something awkward. He couldn't think of anything that would have provoked a reaction like this, though. Confused, he asked, "Ryoko, what is it?"

She met his gaze, almost bursting into tears, as if she'd been fighting something all day and had reached her limit.

Takemi grew more flustered.

In a very tremulous voice, Ryoko said, "Aki . . . this isn't good . . ."

Everyone looked at her, puzzled. Not understanding. Aki looked just as confused.

"Ryoko, what . . . ?"

"I just remembered: Togano, she mentioned dogs."

Aki's expression soured instantly. "Ryoko!" she said firmly, trying to stop her.

Ryoko didn't listen. "She did, Aki . . ."

"Shut up, Ryoko."

"She meant this, right?"

"Stop it. This is ridiculous."

"I'm sure of it! The cursed fax summoned the dogs!"

"Stop."

"I'm right, aren't I? Nothing else makes sense."

"I said, 'stop it,'" Aki growled. "If you say anything else, I'll get mad." She obviously meant it.

Yet Ryoko kept flailing: "I've heard stories . . ."

"About what?"

"A third-year student killed himself last month, because of the cursed fax."

"Ryoko!"

"That's not all. We heard a dog howling during class today. Tomo opened her locker, and it smelled like an animal had gotten in there . . . other people heard a dog breathing, or felt one run between their legs. Everyone's talking about it."

"Just their imagination."

"It's been weird all day. I've talked to all kinds of people, all day. Everyone knows the dogs are here. Everyone agrees, all kinds of people. But . . . but there's something *wrong* about

them. Everyone knows the dogs are here, there are signs of them everywhere . . . so why hasn't anybody *seen* one?"

A shiver ran down Takemi's spine.

Unable to hold them back any longer, tears began rolling down Ryoko's cheeks.

"I noticed it while I was talking to them, all the students, and the teachers . . . The teachers are running all over, looking for them, but nobody has actually seen them. Everyone *feels* like they're nearby, but nobody has laid eyes on one. It's impossible! And it's weird! Something really unnatural is going on here," she said, crying. "Something's very wrong."

She'd been freaked out ever since she noticed. The floodgates had burst, and her tears wouldn't stop.

People were starting to stare, so Utsume waved the group toward the club room.

Aki looked extremely vexed for a moment; then, she took Ryoko's hand and pulled her in the direction of the room.

When the girls had pulled away from them, Ayame timidly tugged at Utsume's sleeve. "Um . . ." she said.

"Yeah, I can smell them. Can you see?" Utsume asked, as if he knew exactly what was going on.

Ayame nodded. "Y-yes. They look like dogs, but they're something else—a smaller animal. Their fur is black."

"I see. You noticed, too, Murakami?"

"Yeah."

"Ignore them."

"I know."

All three of them were ignoring Takemi completely. He had no idea what they were talking about, so he asked, "What about dogs?"

All three clammed up.

Takemi was sure something like this had happened before. Something about his personality seemed to make all three of them hesitant to let him in on the secret.

Toshiya was particularly obvious about it; he clearly didn't trust Takemi at all.

"What do you think?"

"Go ahead. He deserves to know," Utsume said.

Toshiya turned toward Takemi, and he began with a warning, trying to prepare him: "Listen, Kondou. Be ready. No matter what you see, don't raise your voice. Swear you won't tell anyone what you see, especially Kidono and Kusakabe—we don't want them noticing. Try not to act suspicious. Act like everything is completely normal. Can you do that?"

Toshiya's sheer intensity left Takemi doubting himself, but he nodded anyway. "Y-yeah."

"Okay. Look at the bushes to your right, at the ground in front of them. Right near the sign that says '*osmanthus fragrans.*' Right, not at the roots, but at the puddle of water just below." Toshiya said, pointing.

The bushes were behind Aki and Ryoko, but a little bit ahead of the rest of them.

Takemi stared at the empty ground, following Toshiya's instructions. There was nothing there.

"Look carefully. Blink and you'll miss it."

He still couldn't see anything. There was a pool of water collecting there, and ripples spread across it from the falling rain.

Ripples . . .

"*There.*"

Something strange happened to the ripples.

More ripples appeared, too large to be caused by the rain.

There was nothing there, yet something was disturbing the water. A series of splashes ran across the surface of the puddle, clearly moving of its own free will.

Something was walking through it.

It was like an invisible animal was walking through the puddle.

"Eh!"

"I told you not to raise your voice," Toshiya said, slapping Takemi in the head.

"But . . . that's . . ."

"Yeah."

Where Takemi was pointing, *something* was moving in a circle around Aki and Ryoko.

"Yeah, that's it," Toshiya nodded.

The ripples turned toward the covered walkway.

Wet footprints appeared on the concrete as something moved quickly across it.

He couldn't see anything—just wet, gray footprints, appearing on their own in a line across the concrete—the same tiny prints that Takemi had been looking at a few minutes earlier.

He looked around him. Was it just his imagination, or were there a lot more footprints than there had been?

Takemi froze to the spot.

"Ignore them," Utsume said. "Remember it, but act as if nothing happened."

How could Utsume look so calm?

"Your highness . . . what . . . ?" Takemi whispered.

"I don't know. Forget about it," Utsume said, shrugging. "Let's go."

"Uh . . . but . . ."

"If we fall behind, Kidono will notice."

"Eh? Uh, oh!"

They stopped talking.

The other three started walking again, so Takemi trailed along after them. Ayame turned to look at him briefly, and then she trotted forward to catch up with Utsume.

Only now did Takemi know why Utsume had suggested the move inside: There were invisible dogs here. Here, and all over school. He had no way of telling how many. He had no idea where they had come from, but they were everywhere.

Shuddering, Takemi looked over his shoulder.

The grounds no longer looked familiar.

Four

Click click.

Click click click click.

The whole time the others were calming down Ryoko in the club room, Toshiya could hear toenails clicking in the hallway outside—small, four-legged, wet footsteps.

The others probably never noticed. It was a very faint sound. As long as nobody else noticed, Toshiya was not going to tell them.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

Ryoko's eyes were red, but she nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry."

"Nah," Toshiya said, awkwardly staring at the floor. He wasn't good with situations like this, yet he'd felt he should say something. He had no idea what to say to a crying girl.

The floor was covered in rainwater and mud, and he could see the patterns from the soles of their shoes. Toshiya found a small dog's footprint mixed in among them, and for a second, he flinched. But he quickly recovered, rubbing it out with his toe before anyone else noticed. The folding chair creaked beneath him. It seemed they weren't completely safe indoors, either. Toshiya wiped the sweat from his forehead; the heat was not the only reason he was perspiring.

The room was sealed up tightly and was a little steamy. It was neither remarkably large nor remarkably small, but the combined body heat from six people was enough to make it feel hot. When they'd first arrived, some underclassmen had been there; they were very surprised to see Ryoko crying, but Aki had driven them off quickly. Even without them present, the dehumidifier in the corner undoubtedly was working over time. It might easily have died of exhaustion at any moment.

Little toy fans spun nearby. These only made it tolerable on a day like today; on a sunny day, it would be next to impossible to stay inside.

Nothing attracted attention like a crying girl. The club room was one of the few places they could avoid drawing a crowd. In that sense, despite the inconvenience, they were grateful for the rain. And without the rain, Toshiya never would have noticed the dogs.

. . . *pat, pat* . . .

He could still hear them in the hall.

He shot Utsume a glance, and Utsume met it. He had noticed them, as well.

They had to do something. Toshiya attempted to convey this thought with his eyes alone.

Utsume nodded quietly.

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"There is one thing about the cursed fax that I couldn't work out." Once everyone had settled down, Utsume began talking. "If anyone was wondering why I suspected a stalker rather than a magician when I first heard about the fax, this will explain why: Namely, there is no reason for this story to have spread in Hazama City."

"Oh?"

An interesting notion. Good. If everyone focused on Utsume's explanation, they wouldn't notice the noise outside.

It would never do to let them get any more upset. If Ryoko began crying again, or if she panicked, they would have their hands full.

"There's all kinds of things I don't understand," Toshiya said. "So, it's hard for me to see what makes that point different. You never know what will be the next fad. Stories like that crop up everywhere, don't they?"

Partly, he was trying to keep the conversation going. Partly, he meant what he said.

Aki joined in. "I'd agree with that."

"True," Utsume nodded. "However, unless the right conditions exist, how can a trend begin? No matter how silly it looks, there must be a reason—or at least a foundation—for the stories. Stories can begin without a reason, with a foundation alone; without a foundation, though, they never take off.

"For example, an item nobody can acquire won't become the latest thing. Stories work the same way. This 'cursed fax' story is fatally lacking in the necessary foundation for it to become popular."

Utsume looked around expectantly.

"Is it?" Aki asked, puzzled.

"I don't even know what foundation it would need; you need something for a Letter of Misfortune?" Toshiya said, frowning.

Utsume shrugged. "Fax machines."

"Huh?"

"If nobody had a fax machine, nobody could receive a cursed fax."

"Well, yeah, but . . ." Toshiya said, scratching his head, "some people must have them, right?"

"Normally. Have you forgotten where you are, though? This is Hazama. This is Seisou University High School."

"So—" Toshiya was interrupted by a sudden yelp from Ryoko. "What?" he asked.

"Right! There are no fax machines!" she cried.

"Huh? Why not?"

"Dorms."

"Oh . . ."

"Most of our students live in dorms. None of them have their own fax machine."

Because Toshiya lived locally, this had been a blind spot for him. In a school where ninety percent of the students lived in dorms, only a select few would be able to send and receive faxes. It might be possible to send them from a public fax machine in a convenience store, but there would be no one to receive them.

"Oh. Good point."

"See what I mean?" Utsume said. "Chain mail like this spreads mainly among students—from elementary school to high school. But here in Hazama, most juniors and seniors live in dorms and don't have fax machines. If it was a cursed *letter,* I'd never have paid any attention; anyone can get a letter in a dorm. But a fax? Very few students would be able to get one."

"Less than ten percent."

"Yeah. That's why I thought it might be a stalker. There's no way a story about a cursed fax would take off here. Even if a few were exchanged among the small number of students who have fax machines, it hardly would amount to a fad. So, if a cursed fax were impossible, then it seemed far more likely to assume the fax always had been intended for Kidono alone."

"I see," Toshiya said, nodding. "But you were wrong?"

"Half wrong," Utsume said. "It seems like the stories about the cursed fax actually do exist—solely among students who live at home or in apartments, though. What is the point of having a fad that affects only such a small number of people—such a small number of people you can't even really call it a fad? It's being talked about like a fad, though . . . what does that mean? If something isn't a fad, why are people talking about it like it is? It seems most likely that the rumors themselves were created intentionally, as a form of propaganda."

"You mean that somebody started the rumors?"

"It's just a possibility."

"Why would they do that?" Toshiya said, frowning. He could understand starting negative rumors about someone, but he had no idea why someone would create rumors about something so pointless.

"Well, I can think of three reasons," Utsume said, staring at the ceiling. "First: The person wanted his postcard to be read on the radio, so he simply made up the story. Simply being read on the radio is enough to make a story spread explosively, even if it isn't true."

Ryoko shook her head. "Some people actually got one."

"Or so the stories say? Most stories like this claim that someone actually has fallen victim. And somebody simply might have claimed she received one once she'd heard the stories. There's always a chance that Kidono's case was a copycat crime. In either case, we can't say anything without knowing more details."

Ryoko wasn't satisfied, but she fell silent.

"Okay? So, second: The rumors about the cursed fax are meant to disguise the identity of the sender."

"Ah!" This made sense to Toshiya. He frowned. "You mean, in this case, whoever wrote the fax is deliberately attacking Kidono—and disguising his motive and true nature under the cursed fax phenomenon?"

"Right. This way, all kinds of other details confuse the issue, making it hard to profile the sender. Even if we did find out who sent the letter, if that person had a motive he didn't want to tell us, he could claim he'd received the same fax and was passing it on because he was scared of the curse himself. His motive might well be something that would be rejected by society—but with this excuse, nobody would ever know it."

"Sort of a sad way of thinking."

"Or an extremely good one."

Toshiya's head hurt.

"Third: All the rumors about the cursed fax are merely camouflage."

"What does that mean?"

"Camouflage. If these rumors spread around, and you happen to get a strange fax, you'd just assume it was the cursed fax, when in fact, the rumors are false, and the fax is not a curse at all, but something created for an entirely different reason. The rumors are spread to conceal the real purpose of the fax."

"The real purpose being?"

"No idea."

"Come on!"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be sitting here speculating."

Toshiya had to concede the point. "So, if we don't know who's doing this, we don't know anything."

"Right."

"Any guesses?"

"We can narrow it down—to people who actually would be able to find out Kidono's phone number."

Toshiya thought about this. "Not that many students would . . ."

"Right. We could start with Literature Club members, and then school faculty. Either group could get their hands on a list that had the number. And then there's the student council."

"So, we're admitting it could be someone we know?"

"Certainly. Lit Club and faculty members are the most likely candidates. If it's someone else, we basically have no way of finding the culprit. Even though Kidono is unlisted, there are all kinds of ways to find out someone's phone number. At the least, knowledge of her number wouldn't help narrow down things at all."

"So, chances are it's someone close to us," Toshiya sighed. He didn't want to think like that, but now he found it hard not to suspect his friends; there was also a chance that Aki was making

up the whole thing. He knew it was a logical thing to consider, but that didn't stop him from feeling guilty.

Toshiya asked, "Can we narrow it down any more?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll try. At the moment, we simply don't have enough information. The only options open to us are finding out who knew Kidono's number and analyzing the content of the fax—neither of which tells us much."

"Yeah . . ." He had expected this answer. Toshiya wasn't disappointed, but he was a little annoyed.

"So, we wait. Tonight, you probably will receive the 'summoning' fax. With that, we might have some idea what the sender is trying to do.

"This kind of spell hinges on what is summoned. Demon, angel, spirit—there are dozens, maybe hundreds of different types, and which one you summon depends on your goal. The summoning fax could tell us a lot; it should give us a general idea of what the spell is trying to do—obviously, only if you intend to accept any more faxes, Kidono."

"Not sure," Aki said vaguely.

"Use her as bait?" Toshiya said, not thinking. "Hope nothing happens . . ."

He instantly regretted it. Neither of the girls seemed to pick up on it, but his words implied that he thought something would. He scolded himself silently.

And Utsume made a point of it: "So, you think something will?"

"No," he sighed. The entire conversation was a fraud. If there were invisible dogs, then something obviously was going on.

He glanced at Takemi, who had said nothing all this time. Takemi looked pale. He said nothing precisely because he knew

the conversation was a lie. He couldn't calm down enough to contribute. Eventually, Aki and Ryoko were going to notice. They would deal with that hurdle when they came to it.

"You really think it's nothing?" Ryoko said weakly.

"Don't worry. Either way, nothing's going to happen soon," Utsume declared authoritatively. "Think about it. The goal of the cursed fax is to make you send it to someone else. On the seventh night, the fax ends, and the next day, it becomes your turn to send it on. Until then, nothing of any significance will happen to Kidono.

"Regardless of whether the curse is real, nothing will happen for the next four days. And in four days, we'll have figured out who is sending it. Then, we'll be able to take action against the curse—or make the sender stop. Not a problem at all. See?"

"I suppose," Ryoko said anxiously.

"You don't trust me?" Utsume asked.

This clinched it. A trace of Ryoko's usual cheer returned: "O-of course! Your majesty will take care of everything."

"Yeah."

Toshiya knew that was easier said than done, but it needed to be said. It gave them all the more reason to take care of things. What Utsume said next, however, was beyond Toshiya's comprehension.

"If you're still worried, Kusakabe, why don't you go check out Kidono's apartment?"

Was he crazy? *Why?* Why put her in that danger? He barely stopped himself from protesting.

"Oh, yeah, okay."

"You don't mind, do you, Kidono?" Utsume asked.

Suddenly, Toshiya got it. So, that was what Utsume was after.

Kidono hesitated.

"Okay," she said with thinly disguised reluctance. She nodded. "You can't stay the night, though."

"Aw," Ryoko protested.

"I have to study for Classic Lit. You'd get in the way."

"Let's do it together!"

"Studying together means neither one of us will learn a thing."

Ryoko hung her head. Aki was right.

Aki chuckled. "If it will calm you down, go ahead, check out my room. But I'll warn you in advance: There's nothing there. This whole thing is ridiculous.

"If you're calm, let's go. It's raining, so we can't hog the room all day—the freshmen will revolt." So saying, Aki rose to leave.

"Nothing's going to happen. You're overreacting, Ryoko. Pranks like this happen all the time. Whoever sent it isn't concerned with me. Not that I'd object to catching him, but . . ." She shook her head.

Something about this bugged Toshiya, so he asked, "What would you do if you caught him?"

"Nothing much. Didn't think about it, really. Dunno."

Her words were nonchalant, but Toshiya felt as if she were burying her anger behind those words, somewhere deep down inside.

Aki opened the door.

He doubted they'd reacted to her anger, but the noises in the hall had stopped.

"Let's go."

As the others filed out, Toshiya leaned toward Utsume and whispered, "What are you after? With Kusakabe?"

"Reconnaissance," Utsume said simply. "Kidono smells of rotting flesh—her left hand. And the animal smell is very strong. She's hiding something."

It was just as Toshiya had suspected: The more Aki insisted there was nothing, the less Utsume believed her. So, he had sent Ryoko to check out the apartment while things still were comparatively safe.

"Is it safe?" he asked, standing up.

"For the moment, probably," Utsume said, not very reassuringly.

"For the moment?"

"Next is the summoning. That's when things really start."

His voice was unemotional, but there was a sharpness to Utsume's eyes that didn't escape Toshiya. The situation was not good at all.

"Is it serious?"

"I think she'll last until the seventh night. We have to stop it before then."

Optimistic.

"And if we can't?" Toshiya couldn't stop himself from asking: "Is there anything we can do?"

"If it comes down to it, she can help," he said, glancing at Ayame, who stood behind him. "Our ultimate weapon."

"Really?" Toshiya asked dubiously.

The ultimate weapon looked back at him in alarm.

"If the worst happens, we'll have no choice but to use her."

"Seriously?"

"If that doesn't work, there's nothing we can do."

And with that, Utsume left the room. If they spoke longer, the others would notice.

Left behind, Ayame hurried after him. Her foot slipped momentarily on the wet floor.

Would she really be any help? She seemed so clumsy that Toshiya couldn't help but doubt their final option. They'd have to try and stop things before it came to that.

He glanced down at the floor—the wet floor. He saw something there that made him doubt his eyes. In the dark hallway, concentrated around the door to the Literature Club, the floor quite literally was *covered in tiny dog prints*—hundreds upon thousands of them.

Toshiya shuddered.

"You've gotta be kidding . . ."

It was noon, so the lights were off—but with the rain, there was very little sunlight, and he almost hadn't noticed. Now that he'd turned around, though, he saw footprints everywhere the dim light illuminated . . . countless footprints, all made from water tracked across the floor, as if a pack of animals, dozens of them, had been milling about in front of the door, covering the floor. They had been in the room only for about thirty minutes, but the dogs had come and gone.

Toshiya stood still for a minute, horrified at the prospect. Then, resolving not to tell anyone, he began lurching forward on his crutches.

Chapter 3:

Creaks in the Night

One

Ryoko went directly to Aki's house as soon as school was over.

It was nearly six o'clock—but this was normal, as they'd stayed through all seven periods. Aki lived comparatively close to school, and they had not gone to any club meetings, so Ryoko would be able to get back to the girl's dorm before the seven o'clock curfew.

Precisely because it was so close, Ryoko often came here to hang out. It was an easy walk from the girl's dorm where Ryoko lived to Aki's apartment, which was in a building called the Charme Miyako, fifteen minutes into the residential area behind the girl's dorm.

The apartment building followed the unwritten rule: The fancier the name, the more ordinary the structure. There were two apartments on each of the two floors, bringing the grand total to four possible occupants. The brick facade matched the general look of the town, but the construction had clearly cut as many corners as possible. Each apartment was about eight tatami mats—or twelve feet square—and everything else within the small apartment was in proportion except for the large kitchen, which made up for the rest.

Aki's room was on the second floor. Her room consisted almost entirely of books, and it didn't feel like a girl's room at all. Of course, she was living alone, so that might explain it. It was clean and—while a little drab—was laid out well. More important, if felt like the kind of room Aki would have, so Ryoko liked it.

But . . .

"Come in."

The moment Ryoko followed Aki through the door, she thought she smelled animals. Was it her imagination? She looked around her nervously, but the smell was already fading.

Ryoko stood frozen in the doorway.

It was Aki's room, just like it always was. For a moment, however, the room had seemed very remote, as if she were entering it for the first time. Was her mind playing tricks on her? Something here felt wrong.

She knew this room very well—so why did it make her feel so uncomfortable? Still, she didn't say anything. She knew Aki instantly would dismiss the notion. She possibly might even get mad.

Naturally, Ryoko clammed up, taking a seat on the floor by the table in silence. Unable to settle down, she wound up looking around her nervously.

"Tea, okay?" Aki asked, heading for the kitchen.

"Sure," Ryoko said. It hadn't really been a question. Even if she'd said "no," Aki was a tea person, and that was the only beverage in the place.

"Don't have any snacks, I'm afraid; didn't know you were coming. I thought I had some cookies, but I can't find them—vanished into thin air."

"That's okay. Never mind."

"You sure?"

"Yeah . . ." Ryoko answered absently. She couldn't keep her mind on the conversation. Ryoko was looking around so much, she had only half-heard Aki.

Eyes.

That was it. The tingle on the back of her neck was like someone was watching her.

Ryoko and Aki were the only people in the room; yet from the moment they'd entered, Ryoko had felt like something was watching her. That's why she couldn't relax.

Watching her.

Through the cracks in the curtains.

Staring at her.

Ryoko looked in that direction, and the feeling vanished . . . from that direction. She was still being watched, though. The more she thought about it, the stronger the feeling became.

Something was watching her.

From underneath the bed.

She looked, and there was nothing there.

But she definitely was being watched.

Ryoko stood up, grabbed a plush dog that was sitting on a nearby cabinet, and turned it away from her. It was the only feminine item in the room, but its eyes . . . she felt like its eyes had met her own, and it creeped her out.

"You look that way," Ryoko said, turning it to face the wall and thumping it on the head.

Instantly: *Tap tap.*

A chill ran through Ryoko, and she froze to the spot.

From the bottom cabinet, from inside its doors, she had heard what sounded like knocking.

The doors were closed. The rapping sound had been very faint. Something was inside that cabinet . . . but that space was too small for any living thing, certainly anything that might be expected to knock.

Slowly, she looked down.

The doors were tightly closed.

And silent.

She could hear nothing but her own breathing, her own heart beating.

The doors were shut.

There was no sound.

Yet she could sense it. There was something in there.

It made no noise. She couldn't even hear it breathing. There was no sound, just an unnatural silence. An unnatural silence and . . . a *presence* behind those wooden doors.

She could feel it.

Quickly, holding her breath, she knelt down. She was sure there was something there, something in that cabinet.

She reached out her hand.

Slowly, nervously, she reached toward the door.

She had to see. She had to know what was inside.

Her breathing and heartbeat were growing wild. Her hand was trembling.

She gripped the small metal handle.

It was cold.

She hesitated.

She hesitated, but her grip on the handle tightened. She poured her strength into her trembling hand. The tighter she gripped, the more her hand shook.

She swallowed and made up her mind—made up her mind, and pulled the handle.

Screeeee . . .

The door creaked open—wide open.

"Nothing there, right?"

"Augh!" Ryoko shrieked at the unexpected sound of speech.

She spun around to see Aki standing behind her, a cup in each hand. Aki's face was coldly calm, frowning slightly.

"Try not to shout. You almost made me spill."

Aki placed the cups of tea down on the table. Judging from her movements, she hadn't been rattled in the slightest.

"Ah . . . sorry," Ryoko said, flustered.

"Forget it. Nothing in the cabinet, right?"

"R-right . . ."

Inside the open doors was a pile of neatly folded towels . . . nothing else. And the feeling she'd had vanished completely.

"I thought I heard something knock."

"Yeah. The bottom shelf holds towels, but the upper shelves all hold books; top-heavy shelves tend to creak," Aki said, as if everything was normal.

Ryoko frowned. "Really? I didn't think it sounded like that . . ."

"Creaking wood makes all kinds of sounds."

"I dunno . . ."

"You were raised in the city, weren't you?" Aki said, a smile playing around the edges of her lips—a very insincere smile. "My mother's family lived in the country, so I know what I'm talking about. That house was old, and it was almost all wood—nothing like modern homes. All year long, it made the most incredible noises. Scared the crap out of me as a kid."

"Huh," Ryoko nodded. "I guess so." She half-believed it.

"That's the way it is," Aki said firmly. "That house was torn down when my grandmother died, before I even started elementary school," she added, with a trace of wistfulness. "It was such a nice house, too."

"Hm . . ." If it had been that nice, it seemed a shame it had been torn down. The idea mystified Ryoko. "Why'd they tear it down?" she asked, even though she knew Aki was using this to change the subject.

Aki took a sip of tea. "Didn't need it anymore. Last thing I remember about it is watching it get knocked down."

"Poor thing," Ryoko said.

"Yeah. We sold the land and cut off all ties to that place, like we lost our homeland, nowhere else for us to go."

"You should have left it there."

"I dunno. An empty house goes to seed pretty fast, and the taxes would have been huge," Aki said. It was clearly in the past for her.

"Of course, now everyone loves the country," Ryoko said absently.

Aki looked skeptical. "I guess it's okay for some people."

"Mm?"

"I don't know a lot about it, but country life can be pretty tough. My mother doesn't seem to have a lot of positive memories, and she was born and raised there."

Aki's expression suggested that she didn't really understand what she was talking about. Her mother probably had avoided saying anything specific; she had just given off that impression.

"Really?" Ryoko said, baffled by this notion. "I always wanted to live in the country. I mean, everyone always says that you end up as close to your neighbors as you do your family, which we never do in the city."

"Wouldn't that suck?"

"Would it? I always heard the country was great."

"Yeah, but you end up with no privacy. And there's all these old lingering conventions that get you in trouble if you don't know and follow them—at least, according to my mother."

"Oh? I don't think that happens anymore. I've never heard stories like that."

"Not to sound like Kyo, but that might just be country propaganda."

"Huh. I guess . . ." Ryoko pondered this.

Aki fell silent as well.

With neither of them talking, the unnatural stillness in the room began sinking into Ryoko's skin. That strange sense of foreboding, which this room had never given her in the past, came drifting back.

She could feel eyes on her again.

Ryoko swallowed nervously. There was no way she could think in a place like this. If they stopped talking for a moment, she would start to freak out again, so she asked, "Aki, aren't you cold?"

"Mm? The AC isn't on."

"Oh, er . . ." This was true. It was mid-summer, and the air-conditioner wasn't running, so why did Ryoko feel so cold? She shivered, as if the air-conditioning was on full blast. The chill was strong enough that she was on the verge of goose bumps. She wrapped her hands around her shoulders and the thin fabric covering them. She had completely forgotten it was summer.

"I'm sorry, this is weird," Ryoko said.

"Yeah, well . . . this place doesn't get much sunlight," Aki said, but her explanation obviously was nothing more than an excuse.

Now that Ryoko thought about it, Aki's behavior since they'd arrived here had been consistently disjointed.

Something was off.

A nagging sense of wrongness.

Those eyes.

That feeling.

This chill.

Then, Ryoko heard the sound.

Scratch, scratch . . . . . scratch . . . . . scratch . . . . . .

A very faint sound.

Both girls' expressions stiffened instantly. The sound was coming from behind the curtains to the south, from the glass doors leading to the veranda. It was a hard sound, like something pawing at the window.

Scratch, scratch, scratch . . . . . .

Like nails tapping on the glass—faint but sure, clearly a sound with a mind behind it.

"What? Is something there?" Ryoko asked.

Aki didn't answer. Instead, she stared silently at the window. She seemed out of it, not like Aki at all, more like her mind wasn't there.

"Aki . . ." Ryoko called.

Aki still didn't respond. Then, Ryoko noticed something even weirder: Aki was gripping the bandage on her left hand and shaking.

As if she could see something.

As if she was holding out against something.

Her forehead was covered in sweat.

Ryoko realized that Aki was much farther into the corner than she had suspected previously.

Something obviously had happened to her. No matter how hard she tried to pretend she was fine, deep inside, Aki was badly frightened.

Ryoko made up her mind. She was the only person who could help.

She went over to the window and grabbed the curtain.

She had to see.

She had to know.

No matter what unnatural thing was out there, she had to know. Otherwise, she would have lost.

Scratch, scratch . . .

She pulled back the curtains.

There was nothing there.

The sound did not come again.

Ryoko stood there, stunned.

"Ryoko."

At her name, she turned around. Aki was on her feet. Her face was white and expressionless, like a Noh mask. She stood there like a ghost.

"A-aki . . ."

"About time you were leaving, isn't it?" Aki said steadily.

Ryoko groaned. There was no way this situation was normal.

"I'm fine. You go home. You have to beat curfew."

"B-but . . ."

"I'm fine."

She wasn't fine. But her tone, while soft, brooked no argument. No matter what Ryoko said, Aki was not about to listen to her.

Ryoko tried anyway: "Aki—"

"I'm fine," Aki said, cutting her off.

They stared at each other in silence.

After a minute, Ryoko noticed something odd: Aki's arms hung limply by her sides. The bandage that had been around the index finger of her left hand had come off. In her right hand, Aki was holding the bandage; it was stained so red that it could no longer be called a bandage.

It was stained red with blood—so much blood that it had saturated the bandage and was dripping off it.

Drip, drip—little drops of blood fell from it.

Aki was gripping the blood-drenched bandage tightly, so she must have pulled it right off her finger. The problem was, where had all that blood had come from?

Aki's wound obviously had opened again.

"Ah!" Ryoko's eyes glued themselves to Aki's hand.

"I'm fine," Aki said again, without expression.

Ryoko could say nothing. At first she had not realized that was she was looking at was a finger. The color was that bizarre.

Gangrene.

It had been hidden beneath the bandage all this time, but the entire finger, from the nail to where it joined the hand, was black with gangrene, like it had been dipped in ink. It looked like some horrible, over-ripened fruit. And at the tip, the cut gaped, as if the fruit had split, revealing the flesh beneath. The blood oozed out of it, like rotting fruit juice.

"A-aki . . . y-your . . ." Ryoko gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

"I'm fine," Aki repeated. "I went to the hospital and everything. It's nothing. Go home, Ryoko. It's late."

"But . . . b-but . . ." Ryoko stammered.

"Go ahead," Aki insisted. "Go home, Ryoko," she said again firmly.

. . . . . *scratch* . . . . . .

Then, everything changed.

The room suddenly was filled with the stench of animals.

Ryoko had to stop herself from throwing up.

She staggered across the room. It wasn't the smell itself that got to her—it was like something had rattled her brain directly.

She was dizzy and nauseous, like she had motion sickness.

Aki called after her: "You forgot your bag."

She picked up Ryoko's bag and followed her to the door.

"Ah . . ."

Powerless to resist, Ryoko found herself pushed gently toward the door.

"Here. Your bag." A pause. "You don't look so good. Better hurry home."

Ryoko could say nothing else.

Aki opened the door. Fresh air poured in from outside—wet air, smelling of rain.

"Bye."

A hollow, masklike smile appeared on Aki's masklike face.

"See you tomorrow."

Smiling her imitation smile, Aki waved goodbye.

This was not the person Ryoko knew. She didn't look human anymore. She looked like something else—some *thing* shaped like a human.

Yip, yip, yip, yip.

Ryoko could almost hear the sound of dogs barking shrilly echoing inside her head.

Racked by a powerful fear, she ran away from the door.

To get away from that place all the faster, she didn't bother putting up her umbrella. People gave her strange looks as she ran, getting soaked through—but Ryoko didn't notice. Between the nausea and the fear, she couldn't think. She didn't know why, but all her instincts were screaming at her to get away from *them*.

She didn't know what it was she was running from, though, and she had no idea how far she needed to run.

She reached the dorm door, raced to her room, and dove under the covers—yet her fear still did not vanish.

Her fear was so overwhelming that she was unable to respond when her roommate became worried. She simply lay there and shivered.

Fear had taken up residence in her mind, and it was sending out waves through her.

It was a pure, unbridled fear.

After a long time, the fear faded away. But it was several hours before Ryoko was able to call Takemi and cry across the phone line.

Two

Ring ring ring . . .

A click indicated that she picked up the receiver.

A beep indicated the transmission.

She pressed the "receive" button.

. . . . . *beep*

. . . . . .

. . . . . *vvv . . . vvvvvvv* . . . . . .

After a pause for data collection, the third night's fax showed its face.

The room was weirdly dark, with the stillness of a church, profaned by the stench of rotting flesh.

The machine trembled, as if it were convulsing in pain.

And slowly, the cursed child emerged.

Aki stared down at it—remaining very, very quiet. That was all. She thought nothing, she felt nothing. No trace of emotion ever crossed her face—no fear, no anger, not even curiosity.

It had occurred to her that her actions could have been under someone's control. But she was sure she was doing this of her own free will. Her mind was working perfectly. It was her emotions that had withered away.

It felt very much like when she was killing her own emotions, this heavy kind of stability, the lack of reality, that hazy kind of feeling.

Aki believed that humans understood their surroundings through their emotions. Sight, sound, touch—all these were colored by one's emotions. The true world was bland, without flavor, but emotions seasoned it. All feelings were sensations. So, if you killed your emotions, you obtained stability, but your senses grew hazy.

For people without emotion, the world was a quiet place. Presently, Aki found herself in that bleak world.

Emotionless was a holy place to be, like a graveyard. It robbed everything of value—but in return, it provided absolute stability. There was no anger, no sadness, no pain, no fear—also no joy, no pleasure.

Aki had once been this way.

And it seemed appropriate to return, at a time like this, when she was facing down something.

Once, she had faced off against everything around her, and she had been like this all the time.

Silently, Aki stood there.

Silently, she stared at the cursed fax.

Although it was a passive resistance, Aki was here to face down this fax.

Utsume didn't even have a sure way to handle the situation.

Though she had feigned lack of interest, Aki actually had been listening very closely to her friends as they talked. She had heard Utsume and Toshiya whispering about sending Ryoko to check out her place. She had known something was wrong from the very beginning.

And it was Aki herself who had to fight it.

She knew nothing about her enemy. But realistically, there was no one she could rely on. Given the circumstance, she should be alone. As long as her chances of winning were unknown, she didn't need anyone getting underfoot—especially someone like Ryoko. That's why she'd driven her away.

Alone, she could do anything necessary to defend herself. She could use others to shield herself. She had done it before. There had been no one on her side. But with Ryoko . . . ?

Aki knew battle, and she knew herself. She didn't hate Ryoko, which was exactly why her friend shouldn't be there. Aki would have protected her. That's why she didn't need her here. That's why she had sent Ryoko home as soon as things went strange.

Aki worried that she had been too cold.

Ryoko had left looking scared, and that tugged at Aki's heartstrings. She'd pushed her out; that was nothing to be so frightened about, she thought. Ryoko had been much too frightened. And in retrospect, this bothered Aki.

But that didn't matter now.

Now, she was standing here, alone.

The fax kept printing.

. . . . . *vvvvvv . . . vvvvvvvvvv* . . . . . .

The paper spewed out steadily.

She could see that the surface was covered in tightly packed letters again—scribbled, meaningless letters . . . horrible, passionate scribblings, written in a fit of madness.

According to Utsume, tonight was the summoning, calling forth some demon to carry out the sender's purpose.

She could smell something rotten coming off the pages.

It was dark around them.

Why?

What was it calling forth?

What would happen when it arrived?

What was it for? Who was doing it?

Aki glared fiercely at the fax, directing her thoughts across the phone line, at the sender . . . at her *enemy.*

From the window, from the cabinet, from the ceiling, from under the bed, from every shadow in the room, she began to hear a sound. There was something there.

. . . . . *scratch, scratch, scratch . . .*

. . . . . *click, click, click, click* . . . . . .

The smell of animals filled the room.

She could feel them moving, feel them breathing, all over the room.

The can of tea in the kitchen began dancing, clattering loudly, as if something were struggling inside it. Then, it leapt in the air and fell with a clank to the floor. The lid came off, and tea leaves spilled onto the floor. Then, the pile of leaves themselves scattered, as if some invisible thing had come crashing into it.

Something ran across the floor, unseen.

Her futon bounced.

The stench of rot grew stronger.

The finger of her left hand had long since lost all sensation, but Aki knew that while the smell of rotting flesh grew stronger, the black, rotten part was creeping upward. With each letter the fax vomited out, the black gangrene spread, invading Aki's body.

. . . . . *vvvvvvvvvvvv* . . . . . *vvvvvvvvvvvvv* . . . . . .

Like the buzzing of flies . . . the sound of the pages printing had become the buzzing of flies, echoing through the room.

Her rotting finger began to itch, began to hurt.

As if reacting to the buzzing, the gangrene began to throb.

Then, a pattern poured steadily out of the fax machine, marching in time to the buzzing of the flies.

The pattern was surrounded by two circles and looked like geoglyphs, a crest like a symbolic representation of a bull.

In that moment, animal howls echoed from the darkness, throughout the room. It happened so suddenly that Aki screamed.

Instantly, the florescent light shattered. The flies' buzzing grew higher and louder, and a gust of rot whirled across the closed room. The animal smell came with it.

Everything on the shelves flew off, as if an arm had swept across them.

Books flew, the table danced in the air.

The sheer force of the wind knocked down Aki.

And their eyes met.

Right in front of her, in the darkness under the bed, animal eyes were gleaming.

Aki shrieked, and the lights vanished.

When they did, the violence in the room increased in power. Right in front of her, the carpet was lifting off the floor. The

shelves split in half, the ceiling light fell, cover and all, and unseen claws dug gouges in the wallpaper, on the ceiling, on the door, and in the furniture.

The buzzing and crashing were deafening.

Things she could not see were rampaging through her room—scratching everything in the room, breaking it, sending fragments and chunks through the air.

All the things she owned were flung against the wall, until they were no longer her things.

The fax kept on moving, kept on puking out the pages engraved with the curse. The pages were snatched up and flung into the air, dancing wildly, flashing the spell around.

The glass in the windows shattered.

The buzzing wings sped out the window, spilling forth.

And then, the wind died down.

In the darkness, in the shadows, the glittering eyes vanished, one by one.

Silence returned to the room.

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Some time later, Aki sat up. How long had she been lying there?

She opened the broken window and went out onto the veranda. Her body ached with fatigue. Her bare feet were trodding over broken glass, but she felt no pain. The rain made her wet, but she paid no heed.

She stood staring absently at the sky.

Night in Hazama was dark. With the heavy clouds overhead, tonight was even darker. It was a thick, pure kind of darkness.

The darkened town spread out before her.

She stood, watching the rain.

Then, she noticed something.

There was one color that stood out in the darkened street below: white—a white umbrella. It was a cheap plastic umbrella, gleaming with a strange kind of vividness in the dim light of the infrequent streetlights. It was a glistening white, like *shirako,* glistening in the rain.

And with the umbrella . . . a man.

She could just make out the shape of a man standing there, holding the umbrella.

He was staring up at the veranda where Aki was standing.

His left hand was pressed firmly against his face, gripping it, and he was peering between his fingers at Aki.

Their eyes met.

And the man vanished.

His umbrella fell to the ground beneath the streetlight. She could hear footsteps splashing away.

Under the dim light, the white umbrella glistened moistly.

There was no wind, but the umbrella began rolling anyway.

Some unseen claw tore a long slit in it.

The slit stared up at Aki as though it were an empty eye socket.

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Three

Early the next morning, the door to the classroom opened.

Aki entered to find Takemi and the others staring at her.

Nobody said anything.

Unmoved by their silent reception, Aki headed toward them.

The air felt strange—because the situation was strange.

Aside from Takemi, Ryoko, Utsume, Toshiya, and now Aki, there was nobody in the room. The enormous classroom was empty. In the center of it, the five of them sat, staring at one another in silence.

There was no sound.

But that was natural enough, as it was just past seven. This early, only the athletic teams were at school, there for morning practice. There was yet a full hour until eight, when classes began. Normally, people began arriving about thirty minutes before then. In fact, the classrooms were locked until then, and the only way to get in early was to go to the staff room and borrow the key.

But Aki had arrived that early. And everyone had been waiting for her already.

When she saw that, Aki said nothing. She expressed neither surprise nor puzzlement.

"The key wasn't in the staff room, so I assumed someone was already here," she said flatly, with little intonation.

There were bandages on her face . . . and on her arms and legs—anywhere skin was exposed. Between them were ugly bruises. The bandage on her right hand had been wrapped around her finger the day before; today, it was wrapped around her palm, as well. She looked like she should be in the hospital. It hurt to look at her.

"You aren't usually here this early. What's going on?" Aki asked. It was hard to tell if she meant it or was playing dumb.

"You know why," Toshiya said. "We came to talk about you."

"Huh," Aki said, displaying no particular reaction.

She didn't seem to care about their reasons, goals, or the exact nature of their conversation. It was questionable if she even knew what was going on. Or she might just be *pretending* that this was the case.

Toshiya glared at her impassive face for a while in silence.

Ryoko had called Takemi's cell the night before.

It had been difficult to parse the meaning of the few words she'd managed between sobs. He managed to figure out that something about Aki was very *wrong*—but what, specifically, was wrong, Takemi never understood. Ryoko herself didn't really understand what she was trying to say.

So, he had settled for soothing her, and then calling Utsume and Toshiya.

Of course, Takemi wasn't able to explain what he couldn't understand, so all he could do was explain that things were weird.

"Can you make her calm down again?" he'd asked Utsume.

"Not over the phone," Utsume had replied.

Toshiya had proposed that they all meet up early. A good night's sleep would help calm Ryoko, and they could talk things over then. They needed to hear about Aki as fast as possible.

However, before they could get started, Aki herself had shown up.

"Aki, are you hurt?" Ryoko asked.

"Mm," Aki grunted, annoyed. She nodded. "It's nothing."

"It is not! What happened?" Ryoko wailed.

Listlessly, Aki muttered, "Nothing."

"*Nothing?*"

"The window broke. I cut myself on the fragments. That's all."

"That's all?"

"Yep." Aki said down. Listlessly, she put her chin on her hands. "Mind letting me sleep? I was up all night cleaning. . . ."

Indeed, she seemed ready to fall asleep right now.

"Wait. I have some questions first," Utsume said.

"Go ahead," she whispered.

"The third night's fax came?"

"Mm . . . yeah."

"Did you bring it with you?"

"I threw it away."

Utsume frowned.

"*What?*" Takemi declared, bowled over.

"It's all so stupid. Curses? Magic? Only an idiot would believe in that crap. It's not worth us all getting upset by, so I threw it out."

"How could you . . . ?"

"It's my problem, and I say it's nothing. You're the ones reading all kinds of stuff into it. Am I wrong?" she asked sleepily.

Takemi couldn't answer. He looked at Utsume.

Utsume sighed. "Sorry. No further questions."

"Mm," Aki nodded, and then she collapsed on her desk.

"Done already?" Takemi asked, surprised.

"We don't have the fax, and she doesn't want to tell us about it, so there's nothing else we can ask her," Utsume said. "It seems the situation is not quite what I'd expected. There are several things I don't understand, that I can't explain, but if Kidono doesn't want to talk . . ."

He looked slowly around at the others.

Then, he leaned forward. "Last night, Murakami got the cursed fax."

"What?"

Takemi and Ryoko looked at Toshiya in surprise. He nodded silently.

"He brought it with him. I think you'll find it surprising."

Toshiya pulled out some paper from his bag, handing it to Utsume, who spread it out on the desk. The strange spell words came into view.

Takemi leaned in to see.

"Um," he said, frowning. "This isn't . . ."

"Exactly," Utsume said, having anticipated this reaction.

"It's not . . . the same?"

It was . . . completely different. This fax bore no resemblance to the one Aki had shown them. It was something else entirely.

Takemi looked at the first page; it appeared to have been typed on a computer, and it read as follows:

"This is the cursed fax.

There will be six more.

Remember the time, order, and orientation of the pages without fail.

When you receive the final fax, you must begin sending it to someone else.

If you don't . . .

Or if you make a single mistake . . .

The curse will take effect, and you will die."

There were four pages in all. Takemi picked up one of them.

"Curse."

That single word was drawn in the middle of the page, big and black, like it had been drawn with charcoal.

The shape and style of the writing looked a lot like the bits of paper used in Japanese and Chinese occultism.

"Rather different from Kidono's, isn't it?" Toshiya said sardonically.

That much was obvious. Toshiya held up another page; this one had a pentagram drawn on it. There was a single Sanskrit character drawn inside. It was a design Takémi had seen somewhere before. On the four sides of the page, the characters for east, west, south, and north were drawn.

The fourth page was covered in text.

"It's the Heart Sutra," Utsume explained. "Someone must have copied it out of a pamphlet they grabbed from a temple somewhere. When they were making this, they simply cut out the words 'Heart Sutra' from the side, here—or maybe it faded over time, as the fax was sent again and again. Judging from the quality of the images, it's already been faxed a few dozen times. You can see the deterioration."

"Oh?" Takemi looked closely. Indeed, the edges of the letters were frayed. "Kidono's didn't show any deterioration, though."

"None," Utsume confirmed. He obviously had checked it closely.

Takemi was impressed again. "You checked that, too?"

"No, I didn't notice until I saw this one," Utsume said, shaking his head. "Never entered my head. But it makes perfect sense. The cursed fax is chain mail; it would be faxed over and over and over again. And with the seven-day system, there's plenty of time for the thermal fax paper to fade. The real cursed fax should've been noticeably deteriorated."

"Eh? So, wait . . ." Takemi said, trying to process all this. "So, that means . . . ?"

"The fax Kidono received might not be the same one all the stories are about."

Takemi had figured it out; still, having it put so clearly left him reeling.

"Both Kidono and Murakami have received cursed faxes. Which one is real? It seems appropriate to assume the older one is the original. Kidono's fax was either started by a copycat, or it splintered off from the original . . . It probably was intended only for her.

"Either way, the situation couldn't possibly be worse. Every way of fighting back we had considered before is now moot. There's no guarantee that Aki will be safe until the seventh night," Utsume said, shoulders slumping.

"Oh, no!" Ryoko moaned. She glanced toward Aki.

Aki appeared to be sound asleep. They could hear her breathing evenly.

"In other words . . . the only information we have is what Kusakabe experienced in Kidono's apartment last night," Utsume said.

"Eh?" Ryoko stammered nervously. She pointed at herself. "M-me?"

"Yes. Tell us everything," Utsume said, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair. "What happened? Kondou couldn't understand much of what you told him last night. We need you to give us the details."

"Yeah," Toshiya agreed.

"Oh, like it's my fault," Takemi grumbled.

Everyone ignored him.

"B-but I don't know what good it'd be? I was a little . . . I mean, I kept panicking," Ryoko explained, starting to panic even as she spoke.

Certainly, from what little Takemi had been able to make out the night before, nothing particularly serious had happened. At the time, he had felt that she was overreacting.

"I don't care," Utsume said. "If someone asked me which was more dangerously occult—Murakami's original or Kidono's fake—I wouldn't hesitate to pick the latter.

"The original is a random composite of *onmyou-dou* on top of a mantra, pasted onto the Letter of Misfortune. It looks nice and sinister, but there's no cohesion or knowledge behind it. The fake, however . . . this is a perfect replication of a magical ritual. It contains no unnecessary threats or digressions. It's either real, or extremely close to being real.

"We would know a lot more if we could see the fax itself, but . . . oh, well. Without help from Kidono, we'll just have to fix this from a distance. We need all the information we can get."

Ryoko nodded.

"What happened?"

"Ah, um . . . okay," Ryoko said, and she began to explain, faltering often.

Aki continued sleeping, breathing evenly.

Takemi glanced absently at the rain falling outside the windows.

They still had plenty of time before the other students arrived.

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Four

So sleepy.

Aki's mind and body were being worn away by a powerful urge to sleep.

Seventh period. Classic Lit.

All day long, her fatigue had never let up. She knew Ryoko and the others were up to something, but her mind was much too exhausted to care.

Aki wore her glasses in class and when reading. Today, the corrective lenses couldn't correct the blur brought on by sleepiness.

Sleep brought a mist across her eyes, across her consciousness, across her senses—slowly eating away at Aki's ego . . . gnawing at the boundary between darkness and her ego.

As her ego grew thin and fragile, it grew more difficult to hold it together.

It began to melt. Her consciousness began to evaporate.

Her soul began falling into that warm darkness.

The ego is given shape by tension, excitement, and waking consciousness. The more reality is monotonous, redundant, and lifeless, the more tension the ego loses—and as it sinks, alertness fades, and the mind plunges into the darkness of sleep.

Yanagawa's monotonous voice echoed through the room: "So . . . therefore . . ."

Aki's consciousness had faded too much to make out his words.

A boring class contained everything needed to make one fall asleep: Monotony, redundancy, lack of motion.

Neither Aki's body nor her mind could be described as fully functional.

In most cases, taking a class is not an action designed to satisfy one's thirst for knowledge. It's merely a mechanical routine, shored up by some arbitrary motive—unless the class itself is very

interesting or the teacher is very good. But Yanagawa, droning at the podium, was not what anyone would call a good teacher, despite his impressive credentials.

"Therefore this *ji* indicated negative speculation or mindset, and the phrase means 'we probably cannot live here.' You do remember the imperfect conjunctive form?"

His tone suggested he had absolutely no faith in the students' ability to retain any information. He proceeded to draw a line from the sentence on the blackboard, then writing out the usage and the meaning.

He paced restlessly back and forth, dragging behind him one leg, where the wild dog had bitten him.

Aki had described the class as being like an instruction book. They followed the textbook exactly. Anyone could teach that way. And yet, Yanagawa always taught with a trace of overwhelming pride. Aki could never figure out how he justified such arrogance.

Odds were Yanagawa always had been really good at Classic Lit, even before he became a teacher. He had found his home in that subject, understood it without having to study feverishly, received high marks, and become a teacher.

People like that had no business trying to teach. Because they'd learned the subject without any effort, they had absolutely no empathy when other people couldn't; they had no idea why people didn't understand. And because they didn't understand the why or how, they had no possible way of teaching the subject. Meanwhile, the students who did understand the subject didn't need a teacher in the first place.

People who had struggled to conquer their own shortcomings made the best teachers. After all, those teachers knew exactly why

people didn't understand the subject. Other teachers could only teach by the book, point by point—meaning their classes never would be useful.

Yanagawa was an archetypal straight-A student, just like Aki. Neither one of them were qualified to teach others.

"First you skip, and now you're sleeping. Who do you think you are, Kidono?"

Abruptly, something struck Aki's desk.

She jerked upright and awake, brightness returning to her surroundings. Her body began moving again, her temperature rose, and she experienced a brief respite from the heat.

Several people around her were stifling laughs: It appeared she had fallen asleep.

Yanagawa was standing next to her. He had a textbook in his hand, and he was glaring down at her. Obviously, he'd used the textbook to strike her desk. Her pencil box had been knocked onto the floor; the contents scattered around her. Yanagawa's jittery eyes peered at her through his silver framed spectacles, his cheeks pulled back in a phony smile.

"You must be confident," Yanagawa stated belligerently. "Go up to the front and translate this?" he asked, absolutely sure she couldn't.

Hostility rose up within her, and she glared back up at him.

His smile vanished. "You haven't taken any notes. Why did you bother coming?" Yanagawa said, striking the desk again. "If you haven't come to learn, then get out."

Aki remained silent.

"What's that look about? You have a problem? Spit it out," he snapped, growing increasingly irritated.

Aki said nothing. There was nothing she could say. She had been asleep, which meant she was clearly at fault. Although she was well aware of this, she had no intention of apologizing.

She regretted falling asleep; however, that was not her presiding emotion. Guilt, self-control, embarrassment—Yanagawa's attitude galled her enough to feel each of these in turn. Normally, she wouldn't have let the matter get to her; but today, she was much too exhausted.

Both of them were defined by warped pride. And just as opposites attract, similar minds repel each other.

Either way, the reason behind her reaction wasn't revealed to her at first, not until her mind had begun thinking. She was unhappy and dissatisfied, true, but she didn't really want to fight him . . . so to glare up at him in obedient silence, her eyes conveying her objections, this was her only option.

Naturally, Yanagawa took this response as a challenge to his authority.

"If you have something to say, let's hear it," he yelped, his voice rising in volume.

Aki glared silently.

"Speak!" He slammed down the textbook again, producing a crack that echoed through the room.

The faint buzz of conversation that had been running through the room died down instantly.

Aki stared down at her desk, mouth tightly closed. It wasn't out of fear . . . she was struggling to contain the explosion rising up within her. If she watched Yanagawa any longer, she would shout back at him. And she refused to give him enough credit to justify that reaction.

By this point, however, she could do nothing to please him.

His voice abruptly turned into a growl: "Why did you bother coming to school?" he said, this time hitting her head with the textbook. "If you're taking this class, you must be concentrating in humanities; if you can't handle Classic Lit, how can you hope to succeed?"

He hit her again, and then again.

Aki's glasses fell off. She made no attempt to put them on, remaining completely silent.

"You skipped because you were 'injured,' and now you're sleeping in class? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Still, Aki was silent.

"Don't think wearing that bandage is making anyone pity you!" Yanagawa gave her a particularly strong blow to drive home his point. Her glasses fell to the floor with a clatter.

She bit down hard, her back teeth aching.

The place where she bottled her emotions was filled with quiet loathing.

"There's nothing I hate more than people who want to be pitied!" Yanagawa continued.

Stop it, Yanagawa! Aki begged inside. Sweat was forming on her brow, and she struggled to keep control.

Aki was no longer trying to maintain control of her emotions alone; there was something else rising up inside her alongside the hatred, some *thing* she could not understand. It was like an impulse, but one that absolutely did not belong to her. A mass of emotions that were not hers were rising up from the depths of her heart.

Her pulse quickened, blood rushing through her body.

Her chest hurt. She could barely breathe.

What's happening? Aki wondered.

No answer came to her, but she knew one thing for certain: This was bad.

Somehow, she knew by instinct that if this mysterious impulse that was rising up from the depths of her blood were to get out, something horrible would happen. She had to keep it in. Just like Aki's emotions, it was something she must never allow out.

So, Aki fought against it. She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and tried desperately to shove it back down inside her.

However, putting her head down and saying nothing seemingly provoked Yanagawa all the more. His voice went higher and higher, and he continued hitting her with the textbook over and over, as if he'd forgotten there was any other action he could take. "You're in high school now! This attitude is unforgivable!"

Aki did not speak.

"You have exams coming up! Do you know how important those are? If you don't, then get out! You won't get to take them! After all, there's no point in going to college with an attitude like yours!"

She ground her teeth together. *Stop it, Yanagawa. Don't provoke me!*

"Get out!"

Don't provoke this thing inside me!

"People like you ruin it for the whole class! Get out!"

No!

"Are you listening?"

Ah . . . . . ah . . . . . !

Wham!

"Yanagawa . . ." she snarled, opening her mouth at last.

Yanagawa fell silent for a moment, not sure what she'd said to him. Then, his rage came flooding back, and he wailed, "How dare you take that tone with me!"

Now, she was silent again. Her head was still down; her hands were on her knees, tightened into fists.

This was her limit.

Her loathing had a mind of its own, and it was forcing its way out of her. She no longer had the power to stop it.

"How dare you talk to me like that? Say that again!" Yanagawa roared.

Aki's mouth opened. "Yanagawa . . . *shut up*."

She heard someone leap to his feet, knocking a chair over. It was Utsume.

"Get down!" he yelled, his voice echoing across the room.

And then . . . something burst outside the windows, filling the room with orange light. There was a deafening noise, and all the windows on the south side of the room exploded.

Lightning struck—but there was no time to realize that: As the students screamed or yelled, rain, wind, and shards of glass cascaded down on them. In an instant, the classroom had become a scene out of hell.

Everyone closed their eyes, covering their faces; those who didn't fell prey to the flying shards of glass.

The room filled with the smell of rain, blood, and—for some reason—animals. Groans, sobs, screams . . . the agony of the less fortunate students shook the air like a nightmare.

The lights went out, and rain pelted into the darkened room. The water pooling on the floor was stained crimson.

Everyone panicked. Only a few students were able to function rationally. Most simply stood there, in the rain, in their classroom. Others crouched down or fell over, screaming in pain.

"What . . . was that . . . ?" someone muttered.

Aki put down her head, grinding her teeth. Someone besides her had seen them—those black creatures, those shadowy black *things* that had come rushing into the classroom when the window broke.

Aki shuddered.

She had seen them.

The pack had flung themselves on Yanagawa, and then the shards of glass had rained down on them . . . and when she opened her eyes again, the creatures and Yanagawa were gone.

Yanagawa had vanished in the blink of an eye.

Aki had heard his last sound: He had just started to scream when the first of the creatures sank its teeth into his throat and crushed the sound.

And now . . . Aki could hear the wet sound of flesh tearing.

The sound was very faint, so faint that only Aki could hear it . . . and blood was gushing forth from where Yanagawa had been, mixing with the rain. The scene was like the floor of a slaughterhouse.

Aki knew exactly what had happened.

She staggered up, backing away, stumbling out into the hall.

She backed into someone.

When she turned to look, Ayame was peering into the room, shocked. The girl turned her pale face toward Aki, and then back to the classroom. . . . She covered her mouth with her hands, and then she took a step away.

She could see them.

Unable to remain there any longer, Aki turned around and fled, running down the hall and out of the building.

Other teachers had come running, and they called out to her, but she ignored them.

There was only one place for her to go.

Chapter 4:

Night of the Grimoire

One

"Find her?

"No, no sign of her," Ryoko replied, crossing paths with Takemi in the covered walkway.

Both of them were racing around, searching for Aki. Utsume and Toshiya were off looking for her in another part of the school. They'd been looking for an hour now, but no one had seen her.

"Where'd she go?" Takemi moaned.

Ryoko lowered her head, on the verge of tears.

Takemi couldn't think of anything to cheer her up.

Aki had vanished moments after the lightning strike.

All classes had been canceled, and the students had been told to head home.

The lightning had struck a cherry tree next to the brick walls of the main school building. It had been a large tree, but the school building was taller and fitted with lightning rods—so why the lightning had struck where it did was a mystery.

As a result, however, the nearest classroom, room 1101, had turned into a disaster area.

Takemi and the others all had been in that class together.

They'd escaped with superficial wounds, like many other students, yet they'd still almost been nabbed by the paramedics and police. The main building was off limits, and the entire school was seething with confusion.

The precise details were very fuzzy; rumor had it, though, that the man who'd been teaching, Yanagawa, was missing. The school public address system had called his name several times after the incident. There was still no sign of him, so the address

kept repeating every ten minutes or so. Even now that all the ambulances had left, they still kept calling.

And they couldn't find Aki.

"Kidono ran away. Find her." That was the first thing Utsume had said, moments after the lightning strike.

"She had something to do with the lightning. I'll explain later. But if we don't find her quickly, there's no telling what will happen."

Surrounded by rain and broken glass, even Utsume sounded urgent for a change.

Takemi had been surprised to see Ayame standing next to Utsume, there in the darkened classroom. He hadn't ever seen her in the school building before. Because of all the people there, she normally would never enter the building, much less the classroom.

Ayame looked pale, and she was wiping earnestly at Utsume's cheek with a handkerchief.

Utsume frowned slightly. The handkerchief was slowly turning red from the cut on Utsume's cheek, the result of a fragment of glass that had spun past his face.

Takemi was shaking shards of glass out of his hair and off his clothes, but he'd suffered no actual injuries. "What happened to Kidono?" he asked.

"She ran, like I said. I think she's still on the grounds. You help find her, Kondou," Utsume said, stopping Ayame with one hand. He looked around him. Toshiya and Ryoko were coming over to them, brushing glass off their clothes.

Ryoko spoke first: "She's still at school? You sure she didn't go home?"

"Yeah, I'm almost sure of it," Utsume said decisively. "I can still smell the creatures. I've been able to smell animals around her

for the last three days. As long as this smell is still at the school, Kidono is on the grounds or nearby," he explained. "I'm afraid that smell is not coming directly from her, though; it comes from something around her, but it's independent. We can't find her without looking."

Ryoko asked timidly, "You . . . knew about this, your highness?"

"Of course. How could I miss a smell that strong?"

"How long?"

"From the very beginning."

Ryoko lowered her head a little and glared at him.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"You didn't ask," Utsume said airily. "That's half the reason. The other half is that I didn't want Kidono to know. I ignored any questions when she was around; unless someone asked me directly, I wasn't going to say anything. If you'd changed the way you acted around her, Kusakabe, Kidono would have noticed."

"Still . . ."

"Kidono is very smart. And she was distancing herself from us. If she'd known everything, it could've been trouble. She might've tried to run, and then it would've been too late."

He turned to leave, clearly intending to leave all further questions until after the search.

"One more thing," Ryoko said.

"Yes?" Utsume replied, turning only his face.

"Why is Aki running from us?"

Utsume thought for a second. "Kusakabe, you have a tendency to underestimate yourself," he said. "As far as Kidono is concerned, you are someone valuable enough that she has decided she didn't want you to get mixed up in this. You should probably

be aware that Kidono is protecting you. She has allowed you to get that close to her. Did you not notice?"

At this, an indescribable expression appeared on Ryoko's face. Part tearful, part angry, but with all kinds of other emotions mixed in.

At last, she almost spat out, "B-but I never—"

Utsume cut in, "Asked for that?" He looked back at her coldly.

"That's the way people are. Feelings like this are often one-sided. That's why there will never be a lack of tragedy or comedy in the world: Humans are illogical beings."

For once, the Dark Prince sounded less philosophical than sad.

None of them could think of anything to say in return.

Utsume turned away again. "We're out of time," he said, and he began walking forward, glass crunching under his feet. Obviously, he had no intention of saying anything else.

Ayame hurried after him, as did Toshiya, who was making good progress despite his crutches.

"You two check over by the club building," Utsume called, and he was out the door.

People began gathering in the room to take care of the wounded.

Takemi and Ryoko simply stood there, Ryoko staring at the ground.

"Ryoko?" Takemi asked.

She looked up, taking a step forward.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Let's get out of here, Takemi," she said with forced cheer.

She strode quickly out of the room, and he hurried after her.

Ryoko's manner was so obviously unnatural that he didn't dare speak to her again.

They split up near the club building and began their hunt.

○ ○ ○

Takemi and Ryoko had come back to the main building. It was the only place in the school they hadn't searched. The building had been declared off limits; but now, with the ambulances gone, there was no one to stop them.

If Aki had been in there all along, it explained why they had been unable to find her.

She had to be here.

If she wasn't here, they were in trouble.

They went through the open doors and down the hall. The lights were still out, and the hall was very dark.

"Is it safe here?" Takemi whispered, looking around.

"Mm . . . I dunno," Ryoko said.

The staff room was in this building. If any of the teachers found them, they might get in big trouble, even be suspended—without getting anything to show for it.

Takemi explained this fear, but Ryoko merely said, "We'll deal with that if it happens."

Despite this, she looked pretty gloomy. It wasn't that she was bold; her emotions were paralyzed by anxiety and confusion. Takemi was calmer—or possibly just more insensitive.

The floor was covered in mud where the ambulance crew and students had been running in and out. As Ryoko and Takemi walked along it, their voices naturally lowered to a whisper.

"So, what do you think is going on with Kidono?" Takemi asked.

"How should I know?" Ryoko said, coming off a little more intense than really seemed necessary. Realizing this, she quickly corrected her tone. "She's just being selfish, running away because she doesn't want to get us mixed up in this, not thinking about how we feel at all."

"Yeah, I guess so," Takemi said, nodding, mostly because Ryoko's voice sounded so feeble. If what had happened in the classroom was caused by this curse, then he personally could understand wanting to run.

"It means you're important to her, though," he tried.

This did not appear to mollify Ryoko. "I don't want that," she said, biting her lip. "It means nothing more than she thinks I'd get in her way. I mean, I probably would—but at a time like this, I at least want her to talk to me . . . to all of us. And when we were looking for the Dark Prince, it was Aki who yelled at Murakami, wasn't it? 'We're all the Dark Prince's friends,' she said. Yet now, when something's happened to her, it's like she doesn't get it."

Ryoko's voice grew more and more upset. All the anger and sadness she felt toward Aki—and toward herself—came gushing out as she spoke.

Flustered, Takemi stuttered, "Um, but . . ." He knew he had to say something, but nothing else came.

Ryoko looked up, frowning. "What?"

"Oh . . . um, sorry, I can't think of anything," he admitted sheepishly.

Ryoko looked surprised, and then she started to giggle. "That's so sad!"

"Sorry."

"Nah. Thanks. At least you tried," she said, laughing.

"Don't laugh."

"S-sorry! You're just so . . ."

He seemed to have backed into success. At first, Takemi was a little aggravated by the way Ryoko couldn't stop laughing; but soon, he found himself laughing, too.

Their tension faded, and they began feeding off each other's laughter.

They stood there in the dark hallway, laughing at nothing.

"What are you doing?"

"*Yaah!*"

Both of them leapt a foot in the air at the sudden voice.

They had completely forgotten that they were not supposed to be here.

When they slowly turned around, though, they found not a teacher, but a petite girl standing behind them—a girl they both knew: Yomiko Togano.

Takemi was very relieved. Anyone was better than a teacher.

Yomiko smiled faintly, observing their reactions. At length, she asked again, "What are you doing here this late? It's past six."

"Ah, um," Takemi said, still a little flustered. He couldn't get his thoughts together. He knew he should make a simple excuse and then get out of there, but nothing came to mind. "Um, we forgot . . ."

"Kidono, right?" Yomiko grinned.

Takemi gulped. He and Ryoko exchanged a quick glance. "H-how . . . ?"

"I met the other two out there: the Shadow and the Schäferhund. They asked if I'd seen Kidono."

"Oh, okay." So there was a simple explanation. He should have known. He glanced at Ryoko, who looked confused. He'd

automatically translated the names Yomiko had used to mean the Dark Prince and Murakami.

"Tough luck," Yomiko chuckled. "Kidono already went home." Her shoulders slumped, expressing her regret.

Takemi and Ryoko both gasped. "What?"

"You just missed her. I saw her off not ten minutes ago," Yomiko said, giggling.

"And his majesty? Utsume and Murakami?" Takemi asked.

"They know. I told them. They're in there, I think," Yomiko said, pointing at room 1101.

"Th-thanks."

"Good luck," Yomiko said as Takemi started to hurry forward. "Now that I look closely, both of you have interesting shapes, as well."

He had no idea what this meant, so he let it pass. They had bigger fish to fry.

As she watched Takemi and Ryoko trot down the hall, Yomiko whispered: "May your stories be good ones."

Then, the witch smiled, and she walked quietly down the hallway, leaving nothing but the gray gloom behind.

Two

The classroom where the disaster had struck was now shrouded in darkness.

One little light danced in the middle of the room.

When Takemi and Ryoko entered, there were already three people inside.

Takemi stepped on some glass as he entered, and Toshiya and Ayame both turned around at the noise.

"What's going on?" Takemi asked.

"Looting," Toshiya responded

He was joking . . . probably. Toshiya always joked with such a straight face that Takemi never knew how to take it.

"Not going after Aki?" Ryoko asked.

"If we know she went home, we needn't hurry. And if she went somewhere else, it's not like we'd be able to find her, so we still don't need to hurry. Apparently," Toshiya stated, presumably repeating what Utsume had told him.

Plastic sheets had been stapled across the windows.

The room was very dark. There was only one source of light—the penlight Ayame was holding.

There was no other light to be seen. So, by this feeble light, Utsume was down on the floor, apparently looking for something. Maybe they weren't entirely joking about looting?

"You had a penlight?" Ryoko said.

"Utsume's," Toshiya replied, pointing. Utsume had a wet sports bag open, and he was rooting around inside, dumping dictionaries and textbooks onto a desk.

Takemi had seen them all before. It was clearly one of the bags that had abandoned in the classroom. Looting indeed.

"So, what are you really doing?"

"Takemi, that's Aki's bag," Ryoko said, tapping his arm.

He recognized it now. Utsume must be looking for something of hers. Given the circumstances, this piqued Takemi's interest. "Looking for something?"

"Just in case," Utsume said, opening the side pocket. Inside was her cell phone. Utsume clicked his tongue. "We can't contact her without this."

So, Utsume was not only searching for clues, he also was narrowing down their options, stopping them from wasting their time.

Finished with the one pocket, he turned his attention to the next. Ayame shone the light inside, and Utsume stopped moving momentarily. "I think we just got lucky," he said.

"How? What did you find?"

Utsume reached in and pulled out a mass of wet paper.

Takemi recognized it at once. It could only be the fax. "The third night?"

"Yeah, definitely. The writing's different. So, she did bring it. Hadn't quite made up her mind . . ." Utsume gingerly peeled apart the paper. He lined up the sheets on the desks, running the light over each page.

The tightly written letters looked to Takemi exactly like the first night, but the words they hid were apparently quite different. He had no idea how; for that matter, he had completely forgotten the words from the first night's spell.

"A . . . D . . . no, it's too blurry. I can't read it. I think it's the summoning . . ." Utsume turned to the next page.

In addition to the thousands of scribbled letters, there was the upside-down pentagram. One other page was different; it had a double triangle inside a circle.

"A magic triangle? The names of God and the angels around it, and the demon visualized in the center of the inner circle. The Ars Goetia?"

"Goetia?"

"Name of a grimoire. Also known as the Lesser Key of Solomon," Utsume said, working away. The next page he got open had a strange pattern surrounded by a circle. It resembled the geoglyphs at Nazca—like a pattern intended to represent a cow or something.

Utsume's eyes narrowed. "This is it."

"Eh? This is what?"

Instead of answering, Utsume carefully laid down the page, and then he pulled a book out of his own bag. He had Ayame hold the light so it illuminated both the book and the fax, and he began comparing them carefully.

"What book is that?"

"The Ars Goetia."

He said it so casually that it took Takemi a moment to realize what he'd said. Then, he shrieked: "*What?*"

"Nothing to be surprised about," Utsume said, irritated. "You can buy it in any bookshop."

"You can?"

"In the corner, with the books on the occult and fortune-telling. You could buy one yourself."

"Huh."

Now that he looked at it, he saw the book was written in Japanese.

Utsume read out the letters written between the two circles surrounding the pattern.

"S . . . A . . . B . . . Sabnock?" he muttered as he flipped through the pages of his grimoire. In a few seconds, he had the right page: The diagram on the page looked remarkably like the pattern on the soggy fax.

"What does it mean?" Takemi asked.

"It's the seal of one of the seventy-two demons recorded in the Ars Goetia," Utsume replied. "This seal belongs to the forty-third demon, Sabnock. The seals provide a means to summon, banish, and command them—which means, if we know what seal was used, then we know what demon was summoned."

In other words, this was the demon that had been used to curse Aki.

"So, that demon is Sabnock?"

"Yeah. Sabnock, Sabnac, or Sabnack—a marquis who commands fifty legions of demons. It has the head of a lion and often is drawn as a soldier astride a pale horse.

"He is known for building towers, castles, and cities. He has the ability to make wounds fill with insects and rot, tormenting his enemies. He also gives good familiars. So, someone summoning Sabnock would be looking to produce any one of these effects."

Utsume paused, puzzled. "Strange . . ."

"What?"

"Why dogs? That makes no sense. The gangrene fits, but for the animal smell to be so strong . . . why? This demon has nothing to do with that." He glared off into space, thinking.

"Your majesty?" Takemi asked, but Utsume didn't respond.

He simply frowned, putting his hand to his mouth and staying like that. Once he'd assumed this posture, it was as if he could hear nothing around him.

The others watched and waited. Nobody wanted to distract him. They all knew how fast his mind worked.

A few seconds later: "Oh," Utsume whispered.

His expression grew dramatically grim, almost diabolic. This expression could mean only one thing: Utsume had realized a fatal error on his part. A failure.

But what mistake had he made here?

Exactly.

Utsume had figured it all out. In a quiet wail, he cried out: "A familiar? How could I be so blind! There were *two magicians!*"

Takemi had no idea what he meant. "Your highness, what—" he started to ask, but somebody abruptly grabbed his shoulder, and he swallowed his words.

Takemi turned around to find Toshiya gripping his shoulder tightly.

"Murakami?"

But Toshiya was not looking at him. He was looking at the entrance to the darkened room, his body tense.

Takemi stiffened as well. "Is somebody there?" he whispered nervously.

A moment later, a beam of light entered the hallway. Footsteps followed it, and then a figure appeared in the door, shining a light at him.

"What are doing here?" the figure asked.

Shielding their eyes from the blinding light, they could just make out the blue uniform of the security guards.

Three

This is bad. Walking down the dark corridor with the others, Toshiya could not stop this thought from echoing through his mind.

Utsume, of course, looked the same as ever. Takemi and Ryoko, however, looked a little worried. The middle-aged security

guard, in his blue uniform, led the five of them along. He had caught them looking through Aki's bag, and so he was escorting them to the staff room.

"This way," he said, not listening to a word they said. He obviously thought they'd been stealing. As he walked, he constantly checked to see that they were following him.

It was going to be difficult to convince anyone that they weren't thieves. However, because they genuinely had been there only to pick up their friend's bag, there was a good chance they might be able to get off with a warning.

What bothered Toshiya was the loss of time this would involve. He didn't know what was happening to Aki, but he was sure it would be better to act quickly.

Dammit.

It would be a simple matter to get away from the guard. But they would have to knock him out, and then . . . that would lead to even more trouble in the future. So, they couldn't exactly try to escape.

They reached the brightly lit staff room.

Takemi and Ryoko looked more nervous than before.

"Go on in," the guard said, opening the door.

They all filed in dutifully. The guard followed, closing the door behind them. There was nobody else there.

That didn't make sense. Sure, things were a bit chaotic, but . . . it was still only six o'clock. No, with all that had happened, this room wouldn't have been left unmanned.

"I brought them," the guard said calmly. Abruptly, he wrapped his arm around Utsume's throat.

It was so sudden that Toshiya couldn't react. And by the time he had worked out what was happening, it was too late.

"Don't move," a man's voice said, "especially the little supernatural girl. You do anything suspicious and there's no telling what will happen to your 'channel.'"

This inappropriately mild voice came from the reception area in the corner of the staff room. The reception area was screened off, so they couldn't see who was speaking.

Toshiya scowled.

Ayame turned pale.

Events were unfolding much too fast for Takemi or Ryoko to keep up.

"Good evening," the man said, standing up. He was a tall man, getting on in years. He wore a well-tailored black suit, and he smelled faintly of expensive shampoo.

Utsume looked at him without any visible emotion. With his usual lack of intonation, he said, "Agency?"

"Precisely," the man said, smoothing back his gray hair. "I am Agent Haga. We will be getting to know one another very well."

He beckoned them into the reception area, where he produced his business card.

"Oh, thanks," Takemi said without thinking, taking the card.

It read: "*Haga Mikihiko, Civil Servant.*" There was nothing else on the card.

"Let's get down to business," Haga said peaceably, looking around at the row of impassive faces. "You are Kyoichi Utsume, the modern day Sendou?"

"Sendou? I suppose you could say that. Yes," Utsume replied flatly.

He was still in the security guard's clutches. Everyone else was sitting on the sofa across from Haga.

The guard's face was blank. It was now dubious whether he was actually a real guard, after all.

"What's a sendou?" Takemi asked in a whisper.

"Sendou Torakichi was a child in the Edo period who met a kami-kakushi but made it back home. Hirata Atsutane wrote about him in *Senkyo Ibun.* Sendou claimed to have been captured by a *tengu,* returning to this world with clairvoyant abilities." Utsume shrugged, disinterested.

This did sound a little like Utsume, Toshiya thought. That also meant this man, Haga, knew quite a lot about them. They couldn't let their guard down.

Toshiya glanced at Utsume. Utsume was staring poker-faced at Haga.

"Pray excuse the blunt question; this is my job," Haga said with an elegant, grandfatherly smile. "Are these events caused by this supernatural girl?"

"No."

"You would say that regardless," Haga said, smile never fading. "I'm afraid I can't trust you at your word."

It was as if the smile were plastered on.

In the present situation, his smile was inappropriate. Utsume was still in the guard's grip. Toshiya was glaring at Haga furiously. Takemi, Ryoko, and Ayame all looked frightened. With this much tension in the air, no normal person could stand there and smile. There was something very artificial about this man.

"Regrettably, we can think of no other cause. First, there was a blatantly unnatural incident like this lightning strike, and then the disappearance of Yanagawa Norihiko. . . . You can see why we want to blame the kami-kakushi, can't you? Especially considering we happen to know one," the artificial man continued.

"Oh? Yanagawa disappeared?" Utsume said.

"Oh? Playing dumb?" Haga echoed, eyes narrowing. "Yes, we have confirmed his disappearance. I imagine the police have been contacted by now. As I'm sure you are aware, it is our job to eliminate unnatural beings. I'm sure the deceased Kijou explained this to you? Because telling the truth would mean your death, it's natural that you would lie about this. It is a terrible shame, but we hardly can trust you unconditionally."

Extremely unpleasant. Toshiya felt his body tense, involuntarily reacting to the word "death."

Haga's gaze instantly shifted to Toshiya, wordlessly holding him back.

This man didn't miss anything. Toshiya gritted his teeth.

"I don't recommend it," Haga said, voice as calm as ever. "There is only so much you can do with one leg. And this man is extremely good at killing people," he added, pointing at the guard. "Don't try anything rash."

"Okay," Utsume said, giving in.

Not so easily dissuaded, Toshiya stayed on the alert.

"I'm glad we agree," Haga said sardonically, apparently not expecting anything else from Toshiya. "At any rate, we came here to verify the situation before proceeding to disposal; we thought we might as well ask the kami-kakushi herself if this was her doing.

"That, however, is merely a formality, so don't imagine that keeping secrets from us will in any way affect the outcome. We have just one final question . . ." Haga smiled. "Is this situation the work of your kami-kakushi?"

The tension in the air was about to burst. Everyone sat in silence. Toshiya swallowed.

This was bad. No matter what Utsume said, Haga was here to dispose of him. This was literally his final question.

Toshiya clenched his fists.

Ryoko was clutching Takemi's arm, trembling.

Ayame was white as a sheet.

"Well?" Haga asked one last time.

At last, Utsume opened his mouth. As if the threat of death this man represented did not matter to him in the slightest, he said quietly, "So, why have you not disposed of me already?" He asked as if this one thing alone completely baffled him.

Haga was silent for a long moment.

Then, Haga began laughing, as if he'd never been so amused in all his life.

In response, Utsume wore an expression that looked, if anything, a little dejected.

When Haga was finished laughing, he resumed his quiet smile, and he regarded Utsume again. "Indeed, you do have an interesting mind. A very acute observation," he said, smile never wavering. "Let me see . . . because you are a very special case, it might be worth telling you."

"Because you're going to kill him anyway?" Toshiya growled.

Haga ignored him. "Kyoichi Utsume . . ." he said, leaning toward Utsume. "You remain alive only because we allow it. You are nothing but a test case, an exception—a sample and a guinea pig. Although we could kill you at any time, we are letting you live for observation purposes,. After all, there have been very, very few people like you."

Toshiya was astounded.

"I thought so," Utsume said, bored.

Ignoring the reactions of the others, Haga continued: "In other words, you have been allowed to live so that we can study you."

"I see."

"There are no previous examples of humans successfully coexisting with unnatural beings. At the moment, you are regarded as a low-risk sample, and so you are allowed to live. Eventually, however, you would become nothing more than a part of her story. You would vanish, and she would become an urban legend. Then, that legend would lead to further victims. We will dispose of you before that happens."

"Really?" Utsume said dubiously.

Fascinated, Haga asked, "What?"

"Perhaps you simply don't know what her story is," Utsume said, as if he were holding all the cards.

"Possibly so," Haga admitted. "However, that changes nothing. Now that she has caused an issue like this, we have no choice but to dispose of you."

"Like I said, she didn't cause this circumstance," Utsume said, annoyed.

"And why should we believe that?"

"Does this situation seem like the result of a kami-kakushi to you?"

"What else?"

"That's a leading question."

Utsume and Haga stared at each other in silence, the former expressionless, the latter still smiling.

After a long silence, Utsume sighed, saying, "This is caused by a curse placed on Aki Kidono."

"Your majesty!" Ryoko almost shrieked. To her, it must have seemed like he'd betrayed Aki to save his own skin.

"Oh?" Haga said thoughtfully. He pondered this for a moment. "Are you aware of the unique characteristics of Kidono's bloodline?"

"*Inugami-suji?*"

"Exactly."

Toshiya looked confused. He'd never heard anything of the sort. The others looked the same. Even Ryoko hadn't ever heard of this.

"Did Kidono say that?" Takemi asked.

Utsume shook his head. "That was the only thing I could think of that fit his question—and that made sense with the current situation."

"Brilliant," Haga said, genuinely impressed. "According to our investigation, Kidono's mother is from ***** Prefecture, where her family had a reputation as inugami-suji. The family home was demolished completely; since then, the family has dispersed across the country for the last three generations. It seems they were fleeing from the reputation their family had. It is fully possible she has never heard the stories."

"Ah . . . !" Ryoko said suddenly. It looked like she had remembered something.

"Inugami-suji, *sarugami-suji*, *hebigami-suji*—all are popular examples of what folklore calls *tsukimono-suji*. We know that those families are very close to unnatural beings," Haga continued. "What does that mean? Most of these beings spread by infecting people with their stories; in the case of tsukimono-suji, though, the bloodline itself holds the story.

"Whether these beings started the stories or the stories created these beings is now a chicken-and-egg question, but with an entire village infected, it would be safe to say they must have appeared quite frequently in the past.

"Of course, it seems the tsukimono-suji families were ostracized, or even chased out with fire, so these villages purified themselves eventually."

If anything, Haga's smile grew broader the more ghastly his subject.

Tension and fear made Toshiya gag.

Haga nodded. "I see. Inugami? That matches the black dogs several students mentioned—but what does that really mean? Nobody knew that Kidono is from an inugami bloodline. Even you didn't know. Conditions are inadequate for a manifestation."

He folded his arms and thought. Apparently, over the two hours since the lightning strike, he had been doing a fairly detailed investigation, even speaking to other students.

If he knew so much, then he had to already have been well aware that this was not a kami-kakushi; he had been testing Utsume, finding out how much Utsume had to do with it, if he knew anything, if he would be useful, and if he was still safe.

"May I ask one thing?" Utsume said.

"What?" Haga replied.

"What are the Agency's views on magic?"

Haga appeared slightly surprised at this sudden shift in topic. "Magic? I assume you don't mean fantasy novels, but actual magic. That's more the field of the Western branch than our own. These beings rely heavily on the presiding culture, so each culture has to develop its own systems in order to understand what is happening."

"But you know about it?"

"Yes, I have read reports from our Agency colleagues in the West. According to them, some forms of magic are a form of self-hypnosis, designed to awake one's paranormal susceptibility—or

rather, one's psychic abilities. Whereas we use hypnosis, they use rituals and spells—different tools, same effect. Therefore, magic and related spirits stand a good chance of bearing the taint of the other world. In fact, magic probably accounts for the majority of cases over in the West."

"Then demons are . . . ?"

"Mostly illusions, or delusions. Once all of that is stripped away, you are left with a being from the other world. All legends dealing with the paranormal are connected to humanity's innate fears, so these 'demons' often connect to hell. Demons are given particularly strong form through knowledge of demonology, and they present a nearly universal shape the other world can take. What of it?" Haga asked, tilting his head.

Utsume didn't answer.

"Suit yourself," Haga said with a lenient smile. "We will look into Aki Kidono. Thank you for the information. Depending on the result . . ."

He appeared to think better of what he'd been about to say. "No, that would be saying too much. Excuse me."

He bowed his head and stood.

The guard behind Utsume released him at last.

Both men turned to leave the room, and Toshiya breathed a sigh of relief.

But a moment later, Utsume called after them, making him tense up again.

"Are you sure you want to let me go?"

Toshiya shuddered, not only because Utsume was provoking the agent, but because of a terrifying emptiness that lurked behind the Dark Prince's words. As if representing the hollowness of his soul, there was disappointment that his life had been spared.

It was reflecting a deep, powerful thirst for death that Utsume himself seemed to be unaware of.

Haga half-turned toward them. "Are we sure?" he repeated, smiling. "Just be glad you can be of use to us."

And with that, Haga and the guard were gone. Somehow, they'd managed to move without a sound, vanishing down the darkened hallway.

They did not appear to be coming back.

Toshiya relaxed again. He leaned against his crutches, breathing heavily. As the heightened state of alertness faded, he remembered something he had to ask: "So, Utsume . . . is that going to be okay?"

"Is what?"

"You know. You told them about Kidono. Is Kidono going to be okay?"

Hearing this, Ryoko snapped out of her stunned stupor. "Ah! Yeah, is she?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Impassively, Utsume said, "Of course not."

"Dark Prince!"

"I could have taken the fall; but if I had, I couldn't have been sure you would be safe . . . and we couldn't have done anything about the magical attack on Kidono. We all would have been finished. Getting away from them was worth the risk."

The sheer calculated ruthlessness behind this silenced Ryoko. "I suppose . . ."

"I might have been able to do something," Toshiya grumbled.

"With that leg?"

"You never know unless you try."

"I do. You never stood a chance. You know that perfectly well."

Takemi and Ryoko's eyes went wide. Toshiya and Utsume almost never butted heads like this.

"Shut up," Toshiya growled, looking away.

Situations like this were the only thing Toshiya was good at, and he'd been completely useless. He was furious with himself.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"We'd better get moving." Utsume stood up.

"What?"

"Let's go," he repeated. "We've taken the advantage. We might be able to save Kidono."

"Huh?" Toshiya said, gaping up at him.

Ryoko and Takemi looked just as shocked. "Eh?"

"I'll explain later," Utsume said, narrowing his eyes. "Follow me."

It was an order.

Four

"For the Agency to uncover the cause of this incident, they must progress first from Aki to the cursed fax, and then from there to the other cursed fax. It should take at least a day or two for them to have absolute proof. We have to try to clear this up by then," Utsume announced, striding through the rain on his way from the school to Aki's house.

"Can we?" Toshiya asked. That was the obvious question. It seemed to him they had no resources at their disposal.

"Yeah, I've finally worked out everything," Utsume said, nodding. "It's a simple story: All we have to do is stop the

magical ritual—the one disguised as a cursed fax—from reaching completion. If we can keep Kidono from receiving the fourth night's fax this evening, things will start getting better. We have until two a.m."

"That *is* simple—so simple, I have to wonder why nobody thought of it until now," Toshiya said, somewhat taken aback. In retrospect, he wondered aloud why they had let her accept three nights' worth. They should have stopped the faxes right away.

"There's a simple reason for that. Kidono is stubborn," Utsume snorted. "Stopping her is easier said than done."

"True enough," Toshiya said gloomily. They might have a long night ahead of them.

As Toshiya fell silent, Ryoko spoke up for the first time since they had left the school. "Your highness . . . all of this was caused by the fax, right?"

She'd been thinking hard all this time.

"That is correct—and yet, not correct," Utsume said. "The cursed fax began everything, but the cause of the incident today was not the curse. That was definitely brought about by Kidono herself."

Ryoko managed to look both anxious and confused at the same time. "How so?"

"Like I said, *there were two magicians,*" Utsume said, exactly as he had back in the classroom. "I explained how that fax was patterned on a magical ritual, right? Who actually performed the spell, though?"

"It isn't the person who sent the fax?" Toshiya asked, surprised.

"Fifty points," Utsume said, shaking his head. "Like I explained before, magical spells are techniques used by magicians

to elevate their own consciousness. They use spells and symbols as a means of controlling their own minds.

"If you think about it, in that case, the magician would be able to use the symbols himself, meaning there would be no reason to send them to Kidono—unless they *had* to be sent to Kidono, and there's a very limited range of explanations for that."

"Ah!" Toshiya said, working it out. "To make Kidono read them!"

"Exactly. Whoever sent the fax forced Kidono to perform the magical ritual. That's why he turned the ritual into a fax and sent it to Kidono so carefully, in the correct order and orientation.

"It was a very effective method, now that I think about it. As the fax slowly prints, and you run your eyes over each page, the ritual automatically would enter your head in the proper order. The outlandish design of it made it even more likely that she would stare at each page despite herself. Without even realizing it, she ended up performing the ritual.

"So, there are two magicians: whoever sent the fax—and Kidono.

"As the person sent the fax, he looked at the pages himself, so the ritual was being performed simultaneously on both sides of the phone line. The sender performed it with a clear target in mind—Kidono—allowing Sabnock to create the 'curse of rotting flesh.' Kidono didn't know who was sending the fax, though, so the only possible target of the ritual was herself. Thus, she ended up using a different aspect of Sabnock: providing familiars."

Utsume sighed. "And now, Kidono has her familiars: the inugami that had been sleeping in her own blood."

"Those are the dogs?"

"Sabnock might be purely coincidental. Like the man in black said, magic has the effect of awakening latent psychic abilities. It's possible that looking at the fax alone was enough to awake Kidono's 'powers.'"

Then, Utsume frowned.

"Either way, the inugami react when Kidono wishes someone harm. Regardless of whether it is a conscious desire, the inugami sense her ill will, her aggression, and they attack. That is what tsukimono-suji do. Even if Kidono really didn't want harm to occur, the inugami wouldn't notice; they follow their instincts and attack all their master's 'enemies.'"

Toshiya grimaced.

"Right now, we don't know who is sending the fax, so Kidono's antagonism is focused on the curse itself. For the moment, that has kept the curse from progressing very far. One characteristic of the inugami is that they assume the role of the active element in curses; thus, what we have now is a power struggle between the demon and the inugami. That's why Kidono is so exhausted and, as you saw for yourselves, she is starting to lose track of who her real enemy is.

"No matter what happens, we have to stop Kidono from receiving the next fax. The farther it drives her into the corner, the more active the inugami will become, and things will get completely out of hand. We have to stop her before it's too late, before things get so bad that there's no turning back."

"But," Takemi said, "nobody knew Kidono had this inugami-suji. So, why—if we believe what the man in black said—why did the inugami appear?"

Toshiya looked puzzled. It was a strange point to fixate on, but he had to admit Takemi had a point. Occasionally, Takemi could be quite perceptive.

Utsume's reply was really very simple: "Someone knew."

"Huh?"

"Somebody knew about them. And whoever it was knew that Kidono was inugami-suji . . ."

Suddenly, Toshiya knew what Utsume was driving at.

"That person is probably behind this."

○ ○ ○

When they drew near Aki's apartment, the mood on the street was not a pleasant one. There was absolutely no one around. And even from the outside, peering upward through the rain, they could tell that Aki's room was in a hell of a state.

Her veranda faced the road, but the window had broken and was temporarily patched over with cardboard boxes.

Looking down, there were shards of glass lying in the street.

Clearly, Aki had come home, because there was light spilling out between the curtains.

It was too weak to be the florescent overhead light, so it was probably a flashlight. Every time the beam passed across the window, it spilled out onto the street; someone obviously was moving about inside. It seemed the lights, or possibly all power, was out.

"Jesus," Toshiya said.

"Girls aren't supposed to live in a place like this," Ryoko said.

"Neither are men," Takemi added.

Toshiya didn't have an opinion either way.

Utsume, who never seemed to care at all, simply stared blankly up at the window.

"It looks like Kidono's at home," Toshiya said.

"Yeah. If we can talk some sense into her by two, we win," Utsume nodded. "If she'd run off somewhere else, then at least the symptoms wouldn't have grown worse; then, we would have had to look for her, though, which probably would've been far more trouble."

"Yeah," Toshiya said, remembering how hard looking for someone had been the last time.

"I thought there was an eighty or ninety percent chance she was in her room," Utsume said. "I don't have any proof of it, but I suspected there was a good possibility the cursed fax contained a hypnotic suggestion drawing her here."

This made sense to Toshiya; Aki had been oddly insistent about receiving the fax. She hadn't seemed like her judgment was entirely intact. It was like she had taken leave of her senses.

"Let's go."

They started up the apartment stairs.

The atmosphere around Aki's room was so thick that each step required encouragement.

The farther up they climbed, the gloomier Ryoko became. Obviously, this reminded her of her awful experience the day before.

Ayame was looking around nervously. Her attention was focused on the shadows, so presumably, she could see *something*... presumably, Aki's inugami.

Toshiya very deliberately ignored her. He didn't want Ryoko or Takemi noticing and getting any more nervous than they already were. They all needed their wits about them. Terrified people were no help to anyone.

They reached her door. Everyone stood to the side.

Utsume rang the doorbell.

There was no response.

But someone inside had heard the doorbell, judging from the sudden stillness inside. Aki was definitely in there.

"Kidono," Takemi called out. "We need to talk! Let us in!"

"Aki!" Ryoko called.

No answer.

Aki was trying to be as quiet as possible, but she could not make herself vanish. The unnatural silence, the tension in the air—they could all sense that someone was in there. It was clear Aki could hear them calling.

"Kidono! If you won't open the door, then at least listen! Don't take the next fax! If you don't take it, you'll get better!"

"Useless," Utsume said. "If we can't get her to open the door and let us unplug the phone, then nothing we do will work. As long as she's alone in there, the moment the phone rings, she'll respond."

"Hypnotic suggestion?" Toshiya growled. It was clear they had to talk her into opening the door somehow. Toshiya wasn't good at persuasion.

"We have until two. Seven more hours," Utsume said, glancing at his watch. He leaned his back against the wall. "We can take our time."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the phone rang inside the room.

Utsume's eyes snapped wide open. "Too soon!"

The note of uncharacteristic panic in Utsume's voice could mean only one thing.

"The cursed fax?"

"I'm sure of it! I can smell rotting flesh!"

Toshiya clucked his tongue and started looking around him.

"Aki! Aki!" Ryoko wailed, banging on the door, panic-stricken.

It was hard to hear over her yelling, but it sounded like the phone had stopped ringing. Aki must have picked up the receiver.

"Every second counts. Can you break down the door?" Utsume asked Toshiya.

"This will be faster," Toshiya replied, moving over to the kitchen window, which was right next to the door. It was a long, narrow, horizontal window with bars over it.

"Good point," Utsume nodded.

"You're kidding?" Takemi yelped, taking the opposite point of view.

Toshiya put his hands on the bar. For most people, the window would be a little high, but Toshiya was tall enough to reach. He gave it a few tugs, getting a sense of the strength.

"Looks flimsy, but it's actually pretty strong," he grunted, and he tossed his crutches to Takemi, who barely managed to catch them.

Ignoring him, Toshiya put both hands on the base of the bars, at about shoulder height.

He raised his injured leg and rested his knee against the wall. The leg wasn't strong enough to push with, but it could keep him steady.

He took a deep breath, filling his unusually powerful lungs with oxygen.

Then, he pulled, muscles rippling on both arms, his shoulders, and his back. He threw his weight back, putting it all on the support leg.

"Grrraah!" he grunted, pulling.

There was a snap, and the screws came out of the wall.

"Whoops . . ." he barely managed to avoid falling over backward while standing on one leg, like a bridge.

That leg started to hurt, so he tossed the bars aside, using the movement to push himself upward and into a standing position.

"Wow," Takemi gushed.

Ignoring him again, Toshiya took off his jacket; he pressed it up against the window, which he hit through the jacket. The glass shattered, and he reached in and unlocked the window.

When it was open, he turned around and took his crutches back from Takemi. "Kondou, you go in," he said.

"What? Seriously?" Takemi said stupidly.

"The space is too small for me, and Utsume's not nearly athletic enough. I'm not about to shove a girl through, either."

"Y-yeah, but . . ." Takemi stammered.

"I'm not asking you to go in and fight—just get the lock open," Toshiya said, pointing at the door.

Takemi looked toward Utsume and Ryoko. Utsume nodded silently, and Ryoko looked at him with mingled anxiety and expectation.

"O-okay, then," Takemi said, giving in. But a moment later . . .

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Inside, Aki was screaming over a hideous crashing sound. Something was slamming into the walls, tearing them apart, destroying everything.

The smell of rotting flesh poured out of the broken window, through the cracks in the door, so strong that everyone could smell it.

This was not like any rot they'd smelled before; it was a far more grating, clingy, unnatural smell. Toshiya imagined it was what a corpse would smell like. It mixed with the animal smell, forming an odor so horrible they all nearly threw up.

The air pouring out was cold. It was like the chilled air that comes out of an open refrigerator, a soothing coolness on the face and arms. They could not even imagine what was happening inside. Now, they could no longer hear the screams and crashes.

Ryoko wailed, almost bursting into tears, and Takemi's face went white as a sheet.

There was no time to waste. Toshiya grabbed Takemi.

It was impossible to lift him with only one leg, so he wrapped his arms around Takemi's waist and yanked him into the air, basically throwing him through the window like a bale of hay.

Half in, half out, Takemi yelped in surprise, but he didn't forget his mission. Still screaming, he let himself tumble forward into the room. They heard him fall off the counter inside and let out a wail of pain.

"You hurt? If not, hurry up and open the door!"

"Augh! Argh!" A further series of yelps and cries moved from the window to the door, and then they heard the bolt and chain being unfastened.

The door opened, and Takemi came tumbling back out. Toshiya stepped over him and into the room.

Inside, things were in such a state that anyone would have thought the place abandoned. There was no sign of Aki, but the cool air was filled with the smells of rotting flesh and blood.

The chill and the stench spread out from the open door, leaving only the smell of blood behind.

The cardboard covering the broken window had been blown aside, and wind sprayed drizzle into the room; even it was no match for the overwhelming stench of blood.

Aki wasn't here. They could only assume she'd gone out the window.

"We were too late . . . ?"

The room was a wreck.

Exactly as with the classroom, the room had been torn apart to an extent that left them speechless.

As they had surmised from outside, the overhead light was gone, and the ceiling itself had been gouged away, leaving a black hole in its place.

There was a pool of blood on the floor, and drops of blood spotted the remains of the furniture. There were drops all over the room, as if someone had been dragged back and forth by a pack of wild animals.

There were claw marks scratched into the walls, and the phone had been trashed, beaten until it was hardly recognizable, bits of it all over the room. The pages of the fax Aki must have received moments ago were scattered to all corners of the room.

"Aki . . ." Ryoko gasped, sinking to the floor.

Takemi appeared equally stunned, at a loss as to what to do.

Utsume and Ayame stepped forward into the room. Utsume was sniffing the air. Then, he looked slowly around, calling out to Takemi, "Kondou, look after Kusakabe. Get her outside."

"Eh? Ah . . . yeah, okay," Takemi said, helping Ryoko to her feet and leading her out the door.

"What's up?" Toshiya asked.

Utsume didn't answer. He picked up one of the blood-stained pages. Something fell from it, wriggling.

A maggot.

The fax had been torn apart and scattered, and the back of each page was absolutely covered in maggots, as if boasting of the sheer power behind the curse.

The fallen maggot writhed around in the pool of blood, flashing its white belly, bathing itself in Aki's dark red blood.

Bits of paper were all over the room, each of them covered in wriggling, writhing, squirming maggots, squirming on the fragments of the cursed fax.

Even Toshiya could not repress a shudder. This was definitely not something Ryoko should be allowed to see.

"The demon Sabnock's curse of rot," Utsume muttered. "Looks like the battle between the two forces isn't over yet. I suppose that's a small blessing."

"Why do you say that?"

"The return wind is blowing. Any time you use a curse, or magic, it will come back to hurt you in the end—especially if you fail. This backlash is called the 'return wind.' I think the term comes from a folk religion . . . forget where exactly, but it was based on the onmyou-dou."

"So . . . ?"

"If the inugami lose, then Kidono will receive the full brunt of the curse of rot. If she wins, she will escape from the curse, but the return wind will come for her soon afterward.

"Curses and their backlash are never really worth it. Nobody ever comes out of it well with them involved. Kidono has a lot of suffering ahead of her, but at least there's still a chance we can save her. It's a cruel choice, but we're lucky to have it."

"I see . . ."

Toshiya didn't care about some folk religion, but at least they might be able to help Kidono. Toshiya's friendships might be a little distant, but he was still instinctively terrified of the notion of a friend's death. Right now, that fear was overpowering everything else.

The root cause of it was trauma related to Utsume. Toshiya didn't particularly dislike that trauma.

For now, this faint hope allowed him to relax a little.

"So, where is Kidono now?" Toshiya asked, without expecting much.

"No clue," Utsume said, exactly as expected. "This means we're back to square one. More puzzling still is why the fourth fax came at this time of day."

"Ah!" Toshiya had almost forgotten. "It's like he knew we were coming."

"Indeed. How did he know? I assume he was watching the place . . ." Utsume picked up a scrap of paper from the floor and began thinking hard. The maggots fell off it one by one, writhing on the floor at his feet.

Leaving the thinking to Utsume, Toshiya moved over to the open window, looking out into the rain.

It was dark out, with big, fat drops of water tumbling out of the sky.

Damp air drifted in through the broken window, making the room seem all the more ruined.

He felt like he was staring down at the town from an abandoned building. It seemed unreal, so removed from his regular life. It was like he was no longer in Hazama, but in some other place.

The town was tinted a wet gray, as if it were dead. It reminded him how artificial cities really are.

Suddenly, he saw something moving in that still landscape: a person, in a white raincoat, sneaking out from around the corner and lurking behind the telephone pole across the street from the window.

He looked up, and his eyes met Toshiya's. It was a young man, about Toshiya's same age. Toshiya couldn't make out the boy's clothes under the raincoat, but he was wearing glasses.

When Toshiya's eyes met his, the boy instantly spun around. He ran off down the road, rounding the corner again a second later.

"Hey! Just now . . . !" he cried out, but only Toshiya had seen the man. He tried to run after him—but with one leg, it was impossible. He left the room as quickly as possible anyway, surprising Takemi, who followed after him.

"What is it?"

"A strange looking man! Went 'round that corner!" Toshiya yelled back, racing down the street. Takemi passed him, making it around the corner first.

Toshiya followed as fast as he could.

When Toshiya caught up, Takemi was standing just around the corner. The road ahead of him was empty. There was nobody in sight.

"Too late!" Toshiya had known they would be, but it still made things all the more frustrating. He had let their one clue escape, at the worst possible time.

The other three came after them, opening umbrellas. Toshiya shook his head.

"Oh, well," Utsume said. "No matter how fast you were, from inside the room you'd never have made it in time. There's nothing else we can do today. Let's go."

Suddenly, Toshiya felt very tired.

Something invisible bounded through a puddle beside him, splashing.

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The five of them trudged back to school.

No one said a word. All of them looked tired. Of course. They had walked all that way, but had nothing to show for it. The only thing remaining for them was a faint hope. Ryoko looked like she might start crying any minute.

Passersby looked surprised at the air of intense gloom emanating from a group so young, who merely continued walking through the rain in silence.

When they reached the school, there was a big black car parked next to the bus stop.

A man in black stood next to it, under a black umbrella.

"You look tired," Haga smiled. "Utsume and Murakami live quite far from here. I'd be happy to give you a ride," he said, gesturing toward the car.

Everyone exchanged looks. Why was Haga here? Every face registered the question.

Utsume snorted, not interested. He must already have figured it out.

Toshiya was unable to hide his displeasure. It was obvious: The men in black had been watching them the whole time. Haga's genteel smile began to really grate on Toshiya's nerves.

For a long time, the five youths and one old man glared at one another in the rain.

Chapter 5:

Night of Dark Princes

One

A few hours earlier . . .

Aki was running down the hallway.

She had fled her seventh period class right after disaster struck and was headed toward the covered walkway and the gardens.

Aki shuddered.

She had figured everything out.

She understood everything now.

She knew what had happened to Yanagawa, and why. She knew what had happened to her, and what was happening to her now.

This was not a curse—which was why she was headed for the garden.

The covered walkway between the main school building and the second building passed by the gardens and provided a nice view of the pond.

Aki stopped running there and called out—called out to the girl standing under the walkway.

"Togano!"

"Mm?" Yomiko said, taking her eyes off the heavy clouds overhead and turning toward her with a smile. "Ah, Glass Monster."

This name no longer bothered Aki.

"Togano . . . what are *those things?*" she growled.

Yomiko smiled, tilting her head to one side. "'Those things'?"

"*The invisible dogs!*"

Yomiko had warned her of them, so she must know something.

Aki said so, forcefully.

Yomiko gave her an innocent smile. The witch seemed so very happy, like a child who had at last been understood.

"You know what they are!"

"Well, yes. I'm a witch," Yomiko said, smiling. "I told you, didn't I? About the shape of your soul?"

"What does that—"

"I told you. Invisible monsters, clear like glass—and just a little violent."

Aki gaped at her, astonished.

"It's so sad not to know yourself, yet to be dragged around by that lack of knowledge," Yomiko said, giggling. "That's why I told you. Your flesh and blood provides a home for those transparent creatures. You've heard the word inugami-suji before, right?"

Tsukimono-suji. Aki had heard of that before.

"Then, Yanagawa died because of me? It's my fault? I didn't want that!"

"You know that isn't how it works. Inugami reside in your blood and react to every little whim that crosses your mind. They do anything they can to carry out what you desire. But they are animals, and they can only do so much. Adorable, aren't they?" Yomiko chuckled.

Aki understood her instinctual aversion to this power now. "Never get angry, never be jealous, never hate anyone," her mother had told her, over and over again. In hindsight, this suggested her mother had known all about it.

Aki bit her lip. "So, what are they, exactly?"

"Mm? Inugami."

"I don't care about the name or where they came from. What *are* they?"

Yomiko looked taken aback. A moment later, however, she grinned from ear to ear, like a child who has found something extraordinary. "Wonderful! Wonderful! You are such a fascinating person! Most people would never dream of asking that! Most people would relax once they knew the name and origin. It's a wonderful thing to seek to understand something's true nature."

"Cut the crap."

"Okay," Yomiko said happily. "Your answer should come not from me, though, but from my friend."

"Friend?"

"Yes. My friend . . . *the one standing behind you.*"

Only then did she notice him—the tall black shadow of a man standing with his back to hers.

Without turning around, Aki recognized him. The cloak of night, the smile like a crescent moon . . . even the little round glasses. She knew him instinctively, like knowledge she'd acquired long, long ago, like he was a being in every human mind, from deep in the collective unconscious.

The sound of rain was gone.

Aki realized she was no longer in the garden.

The covered walkway was still there, but the landscape around it had become a dark wasteland.

The sandy surface of the ground stretched all the way to the horizons, and the sky was pure, unchanging black.

Here and there in the wasteland stood sinister pillars, like obelisks; these just served to emphasize the desolation.

Were they stone or metal?

Were they statues or machines?

Were they new or carved by the winds?

It seemed equally clear that they were designed with purpose—and utterly without.

They simple stood on the wasteland in defiance of gravity—or leaned sideways, or traced a long arc—scattered across the ground, like ruins.

It was like a drawing of some other world from a children's book.

Despite the darkness, she could see all the way to the horizon. She could see as if there was moonlight. But light did not exist here.

"Welcome . . . to my nameless hut."

The man with his back to hers had spoken.

Yomiko, who had been right in front of her, was gone now.

Aki whispered, "Jinno . . . Kageyuki . . . ?"

"Yes," Jinno said, a smile in his voice.

She had heard about him from Toshiya and Takemi. The whole story had seemed very fishy to her, but now she understood. Now she believed.

And she knew he was something that could never be accurately described as a "magician."

They stood there, surrounded by the unnatural quiet of the other world.

"Will you answer my question?" Aki said. She had no intention of commenting on his sudden appearance.

"Speak your question. That is why I am here," Jinno replied. His voice was thick and syrupy.

Aki repeated her question: "What are they?"

"Inugami. You inherited them from your ancestors, and their power slept within your blood," Jinno said, the same answer she already had heard.

"That answer isn't good enough," Aki snapped.

Jinno chuckled, amused.

Disgruntled, Aki said, "What?"

"Nothing . . . you are a fascinating person. Like Yomiko Togano said, most people would be satisfied if given 'your blood,' or 'your genes' as an answer, without any real basis. Just as everyone knows that 'genes' are the smallest particles containing information on how a human is to be constructed."

Jinno chuckled again. It was a snide sort of chuckle, which made Aki frown.

"The world is but a nightmare, yet you still struggle for ordinary dreams."

"Huh?"

"You are completely correct. Genes? Blood? For your mind not to be deterred by words like that shows that your mind is operating perfectly—as a human being, a creature of great intelligence. Completely correct—a little bit *too* correct. The world rejects your rationality, because you have not accepted the collective delusion the world provides."

"'Collective delusion'?"

"Like genes," Jinno said. His night-colored coat flapped once, as if it were severing something.

"Just as you said, 'it's in your blood' is not a reason for anything. Human beings are independent individuals capable of changing into any kind of being by will alone. Blood, genes, family—these are nothing but illusions created by humans to remove some of the uncertainty life can bring. The number of people who go against these things, creating their own destinies, proves the point. On the other hand, there are many cases where this pursuit of individuality, this escape from the collective

delusion, has left people without a 'home' to return to, ultimately destroying them."

"But the opposite is also true," Aki said.

Certainly, there were people like Jinno described. But there were many people who did nothing of the kind. In fact, the second kind of person was far more common: people defined by their blood, people unable to escape from their blood, from their homes . . . like Aki seemed to have found herself.

"Why do you think that is?" Jinno asked. "Many people cannot escape their blood, their home, their genes. They cannot run from them. Why do you think that is?" he asked again.

Aki could not answer.

"Because the 'blood' does not lie within them. It is a collective delusion," Jinno cackled. "'Blood' and 'home' can't be constructed as separate entities; they are like grime, formulated only because of the powerful pressure from everyone around you, everyone participating in the collective delusion. Children born in a merchant's home are expected to have a head for business. Academics expect intelligent genes; athletes, physicality; craftsmen, dexterity.

"Before children have a mind of their own, that mind is warped by the pressure around them. The direction this provides is something humans require; however, another side of it forces humans into a role they are completely unsuited for. The expectations around them seem important, and they become bound by 'blood,' by 'home.' There is no such thing, but people are forced into those systems anyway. The same is true of tsukimono-suji.

"Think about it. No matter how you look at it, they are a collective delusion. Regardless of whether such things actually

exist, their blood is always with humans. A family is hated, repressed, and—eventually, an inugami attack occurs, even though those creatures don't exist. Strange, isn't it?

"The only evidence that inugami exist lies within the collective delusion. Why? Because the existence of inhuman things like us *is* that collective delusion. We are dwellers of delusion, which is why we are here. Well? You can't deny it, can you?"

"I . . . I . . ."

"Your blood has been labeled 'uncanny' by the minds of those around you. The minds around you have warped your true nature. Part of your existence has been determined by those minds. And there is a disconnect between their labels and your mind, your ideals."

"I am . . . " *I am myself*—she couldn't even manage to say that. Her faith in her own identity was shaken.

"Your way of life is like a mirror," Jinno said. "You reflect all the ill will directed at you right back at everyone else. Your identity is formed by reacting to the malice of others—oddly similar to the characteristics of the inugami.

"Your identity has a splendid shape of its own, but you should understand that it is not the shape you believe it is. Your identity is far more dependent on others than your ideal would have it. You are not disconnected from blood—from the minds of others. In fact, the more you reject your surroundings, the more their influence traps you.

"And your greatest misfortune is that you have a mind intelligent enough to realize that blood is nothing more than an illusion."

"I . . ."

"Human psychology is not so perfect that it can escape from those bonds."

"What should I . . . ?" Aki said, falling to her knees.

"You must make sure," Jinno said, his voice coming from behind her. "Move forward. Find out for sure—who you are, what you are. Then, you can reach a decision—after you are sure. And you must make that decision for yourself."

Although Aki hung her head, there was a strength to her expression that could be taken as resolve.

Jinno chuckled. "Let's go. Let's bring resolution to the problems that lie hidden within you. You already are part of the fable, and you must decide: Are you someone who walks in the world of people? Or are you someone who is lead by the Prince of Darkness?" he almost sang.

"The Dark Prince?" Aki said, grinning. "If the one leading me were Kyo, that would be fine with me," she murmured. It was not a hope she could entertain now, though.

She smiled sadly. A tear ran down one cheek.

Jinno chuckled, "The Dark Prince of the human world? The shape of his soul does justify the name. The state of his heart is the polar opposite of mine. In other words, his role is to *harvest all human possibility.* Fundamentally, all humans have the potential to become more than human, but their mind draws them back to being people.

"Fascinating, really—even though the boy himself has a mind far closer to darkness than anyone . . ."

Aki could not understand what Jinno was saying, but she already had made up her mind, regardless. Still staring at the floor, she announced to the shadow behind her: "I'm going now."

"Are you?" Jinno said. "Then, I shall take you directly to your battleground. If you meet them on your way, your resolve will be blunted."

She let this pass at first; a moment later, though, she realized she had no idea what he meant. She turned slightly. "Take . . . ?"

"Yes. You wondered how?" Jinno said merrily. "Possibly, such a practical notion was unlike me, but there's nothing strange about it. Why? Because the other world is omnipresent—especially here, in the nameless hut. It is nameless because it is everywhere, and yet nowhere. When you leave here, you will be where you want to be. Whether that is to flee or to fight—that is your choice."

Behind her, Jinno's cloak flapped.

"However, it seems you already have chosen the fourth night."

Instantly, everything went black around her, like a power failure.

Stunned, Aki whispered, "What *are* you?"

"What am I?" Jinno's voice came from the darkness. "I am a guide. The Dark Prince of the Night, the Night Given Name. Everything in the world that moves toward darkness is led there by me."

And with that, his presence vanished.

It took some time for her eyes to get used to the darkness, for her to realize that she was in her room.

Until then, she stared absently at the blinking red light on her phone.

And thus, the fourth night began.

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Two

A single light moved in the darkness.

A boy was working furiously in the dark night, in the rain.

He was in a shelter near the mountains, just large enough to keep the rain off him—and only then because there was no wind.

He wore a white raincoat, wet with rain. The concrete floor beneath him was soaking wet, as well.

There were no other buildings nearby, and no other lights.

Darkness surrounded the shelter. By the light of his flashlight, the boy was pulling several rolls of paper out of his raincoat.

The paper was a little wet, and covered in tightly packed, scribbled letters.

He barely could see anything beyond his hands. But the creepy white pages gleamed, reflecting the light.

The sound of the rain covered everything, making him all the more terrified.

His breathing ragged, he laid down the pages on the floor.

Have to hurry . . .

His hands shook. He pulled a small, flat can out of his pocket—a can of lighter fluid he'd bought on the way.

There were nearly one hundred pages, and they would never burn all the way through if bound together. The boy crumpled and tore the pages, making a mountain that would burn easily. Then, he poured lighter fluid on top of it.

Hurry! Have to destroy them!

He couldn't bear to wait for the can to empty. He fidgeted nervously, and some of the fluid sprayed up onto his glasses. Hurriedly, he wiped them off.

The fluid mixed with the rain water, though, leaving a white mark on his glasses that wouldn't come off. The boy's teeth chattered out of frustration and panic. The sound his own teeth were making appeared to make him even more frightened.

Shit, shit!

His breathing grew louder, forcing itself between his chattering teeth.

He never should have started this in the first place. If he hadn't started this, he wouldn't have ended up here.

The cursed fax . . . He'd heard the stories, but he hadn't thought it would be like this. The pages of the cursed fax had appeared in his mailbox at the dorm one day, to his great surprise. There was a letter with them, with a simple explanation of how to use a fax machine—and one phrase that particularly interested him: "*Fax this to the one you hate.*"

He'd gone to a convenience store to fax it every night. And then, he'd gone secretly to see if it was working.

Tonight, there'd been a call to his cell phone from an unlisted number. He couldn't tell if the voice was a man's or a woman's. The person said only one thing before hanging up: "Fax at seven tonight."

That was when he had started getting scared. Whoever it was knew he was sending the cursed fax—and was giving him orders. He had no idea what would happen if he disobeyed. If anyone found out what he was doing . . . it might prevent him from getting into college.

But . . . *they'd seen him.* The man in the girl's apartment had seen his face.

It had been a trap, he thought. *I'm finished! I have to destroy the evidence, at least!*

That's why he'd bought the lighter fluid, as well as some matches. Then, he'd snuck out of the dorm after dark.

The rain and darkness oppressed him.

Hahh . . . hahhh . . . His breathing grew even more ragged.

His trembling hands produced a match. He tried to take out one, but spilled a dozen onto the ground.

He struck a match. His hands were trembling, and it didn't catch. Was it wet? Once again. The match broke. *Shit!*

Several matches later, he got one lit at last. He dropped it on the fluid-soaked mountain of paper.

Red flames bounded forth, and the whole mountain went up quickly. The cursed fax was burning.

His chest hummed with relief—or excitement, he wasn't sure which.

He watched it burn, not daring to blink.

Okay . . .

A smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. But it faded quickly. In the thick, black darkness around him, he could hear something moving. He could feel something . . . some *things* watching him.

He turned around.

Slowly, fearfully, he aimed his light toward them. There was nothing there but the road and some bushes—nothing unnatural, just the silvery sheen of rain falling through the beam of light.

Still, he could feel their presence.

Rustle . . .

The bush quivered.

He stood up, his light shaking.

Slowly, he shone the light along the road, into the bushes.

He looked everywhere.

Nothing there.

Nothing at all.

Nothing . . .

And then, his right foot went out from under him, folding at the ankle.

He fell heavily to the ground. There was no strength in his legs. He looked at his right foot, and there was a big hole in his pant leg, through his socks.

It was something out of a nightmare.

Half his ankle was missing.

Sharp teeth had bitten right through his clothes from behind, tearing off a chunk of his flesh.

He could see right down through the muscle to his bone . . . the jagged white edges of his tendon. And red blood came pouring out, forming a puddle on the ground beneath him.

He couldn't take his eyes off the puddle. His eyes were so wide open that they nearly popped right out while staring at it.

A few moments later, the pain finally reached him.

"Eeek . . . kk . . . aauuuuggghhhhhhh!"

A horrible, high-pitched screech tore out of his throat, only to be drowned out by the thundering rain.

Glittering eyes shone from the bushes, from the road, from all around him.

There were animal footprints on the concrete, where the flashlight shone.

The footprints were all around him, inside and outside the shelter—surrounding their prey.

He could hear them breathing, inches from his face.

Then, he was knocked onto his back, invisible fangs sinking into his throat.

"Gah . . . !" he tried to scream, but his throat was blocked with hot fluid. Instead of a scream, he blew bubbles of blood.

His head hit the concrete with a sickening thud, knocking off his glasses.

Vicious growls came from all around. A pack of animals was breathing around him, biting his ears, his cheeks, his nose, his eyes.

It hurt so much, but he couldn't even scream.

His arms, his legs—they were torn apart, torn away.

His stomach tore open—and fangs, heads, dug into him.

Unable to see, overwhelmed with pain, his consciousness sank into darkness.

Yip yip yip yip yip.

The shrill sound of barking dogs echoed through his skull.

○ ○ ○

One night had passed since Aki vanished.

The rain had been stopping and starting fitfully since dawn, showing no signs of stopping completely.

In the morning, Takemi went to school with the vague hope that Aki might show up for class. Nothing of the kind happened.

Everyone else had been hoping the same thing; Ryoko, in particular, was crestfallen.

Nobody knew where she was.

Instead of that, though, everyone was talking about something else. . . .

A senior named Souya had been found dead.

Hearing this news all day was making Takemi's mood even bleaker.

The dead boy apparently had slipped out of the dorm in the middle of the night and was found in a shelter near a hiking path a half mile away.

Rumor had it that he'd been attacked by wild dogs.

The body had been mangled badly, and the jogger who found it had nearly fainted.

His raincoat had been torn to shreds, his stomach eviscerated, his face barely recognizable.

His identity had been proven mainly by the student I.D. in his wallet.

Apparently, he had snuck out to burn something in the shelter. He had been attacked shortly after burning whatever it was, and there was nothing left but ashes and the empty can of lighter fluid.

The boy had been sneaking out every night for the past few days. That didn't exactly prove anything, but they could assume . . .

"Probably, almost certainly, this Souya was the one who sent the fax." Utsume sounded sure of it. "The boy Murakami and Kondou chased after was probably him. I imagine that is what led the inugami to him. And then, he was attacked."

"I knew it," Takemi said, sighing. They'd gone to classes, waiting fruitlessly for Aki, and it was now their mid-day break. All of them looked downcast.

"Anyone ever heard of him?" Toshiya asked.

Takemi and Utsume both shook their heads. Contact between the grades was not common here—particularly in the Literature Club. Takemi had lived in the same dorm and didn't know him, so of course Utsume would have had no chance.

Ryoko said thoughtfully, "I didn't know him, but . . . Aki did say something about getting a love letter from a senior once. She turned him down politely, according to her, but maybe, just maybe, that was him."

Although it was pure speculation, it would explain what had happened.

"So, he was out for revenge?" Takemi murmured.

"He's dead now, and it doesn't matter," Utsume said heartlessly. "Our problem is Kidono. Even if the magician is dead, the demon has his orders, and I doubt he'll simply abandon them. And now, there's no one to banish the demon. There may not be anyone who can send it back. . . ."

"Mm."

"And we still have the men in black to deal with. If they find her first, we never will. I would imagine they'd dispose of her the moment they found her. We have no time to waste—the situation is very dangerous."

The Dark Prince sounded very grim.

"You were watching, so you must know. Where is Kidono?" Utsume had asked the day before, when Haga was driving them home.

"We lost her," Haga had said. "We're looking for her now."

So, at the very least, they wanted her captured.

"Unless . . ." Utsume said gravely. The Agency was powerful, and they knew just how easy it would be for them to make someone disappear.

"They're blaming Yanagawa on the dogs, as well."

After vanishing from the classroom, Yanagawa hadn't been seen again. Several students had mentioned seeing black dogs, and the story had stuck.

"Can dogs really drag away a full-grown man? Not like they're tigers . . ." Toshiya muttered. When paired with Souya's death, though, it was enough to send the police hunting in the mountains the next day and posting guards tonight.

The dogs would be rounded up, and everyone would rest a little easier, certain the killer had been captured, regardless of whether it was even physically possible.

If this was a result of the Agency's cover story, then they had been far too successful.

Clearly, they could make Aki's disappearance go unnoticed.

"We have to find her before they do," Utsume said. "There's no guarantee she's safe now. If we do nothing, though, then, assuming she's safe now, we'd have let her die."

He said this so bluntly that Ryoko shivered.

"What can we do?" Takemi asked. He was feeling pretty helpless. They were up against the Agency, and their movements were being watched. He had no idea how they even could get away from the men in black in order to start looking.

Utsume had a plan. "I don't like the idea, but it seems to be our only option," he said, sighing.

"Yeah," Toshiya agreed, apparently entertaining the same notion.

They looked at each other and nodded.

Takemi looked from one to the other. "What?" he said.

"The witch," Toshiya said.

"Ah . . ."

"No matter how secret the Agency is, they don't have any real psychics working for them. After all, their job is to kill all psychics to protect humanity," Utsume said, shrugging. "It might be a waste of time, and there are all sorts of reasons not to ask, but . . ."

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"Are you that worried about Kidono?"

Under the covered bridge at noon, the witch smiled.

They had explained the situation, and that had been her answer.

"Of course!" Ryoko said earnestly. "If you know anything, please tell us." She was almost begging.

Students passing by saw them talking to the most famous weirdo in the school, and they stared, curious.

Yomiko smiled at Ryoko, completely free of malice. "I did warn her, and she is a very smart girl. I believe she will find the answer herself," Yomiko said, turning her smile toward the others, as well.

Takemi didn't understand how she could be so casual, but he possessed neither the vocabulary nor the nerve to tell off the witch.

"I don't disagree," Utsume said sardonically, "But time is a factor."

He had not bothered explaining about the Agency. That left some of the details a little fuzzy.

The large gap in the information they had given Yomiko was completely transparent; it was hard to tell if she had noticed or not.

"This is her problem."

"I know."

"A very delicate problem, one only she can understand."

"Yeah."

"And she can't put off making a decision—she must find her answer, here and now. Your getting involved might compromise that," Yomiko said, as if she knew everything that was going on.

Takemi had no idea what they were talking about.

Utsume narrowed his eyes. "How much do you know?"

"I don't know. I understand," Yomiko said, smiling. "I can see what she is, and I understand what problems lie ahead of her. I traveled the same path myself," she said, looking up at the sky.

The sky was dark, covered in heavy, swirling, gray clouds.

"When humans discover a point of departure within themselves, they must decide the stance they will take toward the world.," Yumiko sang. "The bigger that departure, the more it can control them."

Utsume regarded her in silence.

"You already have made your decision. So have I. But she has to make that decision now. And that decision must be hers. I'm right, aren't I? You know that you should wait."

"We don't have that kind of time," Utsume said, rejecting Yomiko's speech. "If she had the time to make up her own mind, I would have let her."

Yomiko smiled. "Then, you will decide for her?"

"If need be."

"You don't understand yourself at all, but you always say the right thing, as if you do," Yumiko chuckled. "The shadow surfaces unexpectedly, leading people toward something. That is unmistakably your true nature."

Her smile seemed so very gentle.

Then, she said, "Okay, I'll help . . . or I would, if you actually needed it."

"What do you mean?"

"One of you already has a way to find someone."

"What?" Utsume said, surprised.

Yomiko reached out a hand, pointing.

Everyone turned to look.

"Me?" Takemi said, stunned.

The bell hanging from his cell phone rang once inside his head.

Three

Five thirty p.m. After school, a taxi pulled up to the gate.

Utsume had called the taxi, and the five of them got in. Takemi sat in the passenger seat.

"To the harbor," Utsume said, giving the driver a few directions.

Off they went.

A few minutes later, they reached the dorm, and Ryoko got out of the taxi. She was sulking about it, but ultimately, the others had insisted they couldn't take her with them to rescue Aki. It was too dangerous, of course, but it was the other reason that finally made her agree.

"Take care of Aki, your majesty. Promise me you'll save her," Ryoko said just before getting out.

"I can't promise anything," Utsume said.

He had never yet let her down, though; she knew that, so she said nothing else.

Takemi smiled weakly at her.

Ryoko looked fairly gloomy, but she smiled back. Takemi took this as her being nice to him, and regretted making her do that.

The taxi drove away again.

Rain splattered on the window, and the familiar streets of Hazama flowed steadily past them.

The rain seemed to be getting stronger.

Inhaling the smell of the taxi cab, Takemi sat in silence, staring out the window.

"You're from the high school? What brings you to the harbor?" the driver asked suddenly.

"Eh? Oh, um . . ." Takemi stammered.

He couldn't tell him the truth. It was a logical question, though—there was nothing to do in the harbor at Hazama, especially on a rainy day like this, when even the fishermen would stay home.

Takemi tried to come up with a good excuse, but his mind went blank. "Um . . . I'm going to take a picture . . . of the harbor," he managed at last.

"Hm? You're in the Photography Club, then?"

"Um, yeah . . ."

"Your friends, too?"

"Oh, no, just me."

"Might be hard in this rain. Hope it turns out well."

"Thanks."

Although it was just small talk, Takemi found himself breaking into a cold sweat. He had never been a good liar. Something as insignificant as this was enough to give him an ulcer. And his day was just starting.

At last, the taxi reached the harbor. Takemi paid with money Utsume had given him and got out. The empty taxi drove back into town.

Takemi stood in the harbor alone.

It was called a harbor, but it was mostly a parking lot.

His shoes were getting wet, so he took refuge under the shelter by the vending machines.

He bought a can of coffee and stood, watching the rain fall.

Rain splattered against the concrete.

The sea was choppy.

He grew bored with the view quickly, becoming lonely.

"I should have brought a book . . ." After all, he had no idea how long he needed to stay here.

He was at a loss.

Just as he was about to give up, a black car pulled up in front of him.

They were here.

The driver's side window rolled down, and a gray-haired man poked out his head.

"Kondou, wasn't it? One question: What happened to the other three?" Haga asked with his trademark plastered-on smile. "The taxi drove away empty, apparently. Where is Utsume?"

Takemi said nothing, giving the man a frozen rictus of a smile.

Stall the men in black. That was Takemi's job. He had planned to keep his mouth shut, but he was, by nature, a little weak.

Haga grinned back at him.

Takemi's back was soaked with sweat.

"Well, there's no point in you standing there. Get in," the back door opened.

Takemi continued to stand there, smiling desperately.

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In the mountains near Seisou University and the university's high school was a hiking path that was about two miles long.

The course started near a residential area, passed along the border of the campus, and climbed into the mountains, where it ended in an observation park about half way up.

After that, it was called the mountain road.

The name changed, the path itself did not. It was not as well looked after as the hiking path, so almost nobody ever walked it.

There were signs posted advising people not to risk climbing it during inclement conditions; this was because the road was dirt, and it became very muddy when wet. Obviously, there were few people who bothered climbing as far as the park in the rain, especially with all the stories about wild dogs; there was little chance of anyone coming up here at all.

Even volunteers keeping watch would not come up this high now that the sun had set.

And above the park, in the mountains some distance from the mountain road, was a place where no one would ever come.

That's where Aki was.

She had turned off the mountain road onto a small foot path and followed it for a few dozen minutes. Now, she was in a grassy clearing, where there was a small break in the trees.

Long ago, a very old tree had been uprooted in a storm, and it had left a small clearing. This had allowed in just enough sunlight for grass to grow—which, in turn, had stopped the forest from reclaiming the land. The clearing continued to hold its ground stubbornly.

The fallen tree was covered in moss, and the grass was knee high.

Aki was crouched down under the tree, staring intently at the fallen trunk, as if she had elected to rot away here along with the tree, like the tree had called out for her to join it, and she had found the idea attractive.

She crouched there like a doll, like a corpse—surrounded by darkness and green.

Rustle, rustle.

The sounds around her never ceased.

Not the rain—the sound was something moving around her.

This sound only encouraged her self-imposed isolation. It was proof, a stigma, and provided more than enough reason for Aki to cut herself off from the world.

Inugami.

That was her reason, that was her stigma.

"You must not hate, you must not be jealous." She remembered her mother's words like it was yesterday. She always had assumed they were just part of the basic morality every mother teaches her children.

Her mother had said it over and over, almost habitually. But it was not morality.

Those words were for one thing and one thing only—controlling the inugami.

She had been hated in her hometown, and she had hated her hometown in turn. She had fled from it, and she was determined not to let her daughter, who had received the inugami blood, go through the same pain. That's why she had drilled those words into her head.

I've betrayed her, Aki thought. She had not followed her mother's teachings.

Unable to avoid all the rain, Aki was wet all over. Her hair was soaked and heavy. Her clothes clung to her skin.

This felt good to her. She felt like plants would grow from her, she would melt into the ground and become dirt again.

She sat perfectly still, in perfect silence.

Drip drip drip drip.

There was a wet sort of noise.

She could see dozens of wet, soft, tiny things wriggling out of the grass.

"They're here," she muttered.

She could make out the scent of rotting flesh under the smell of the rain, a stench so horrible it made her gag.

Her left hand itched. Blood was barely flowing through her finger anymore; it tingled, the itch so strong that it hurt.

Gangrene had rotted away her entire index finger, and it was advancing down into her palm. The base of her thumb and middle finger were black now, too. A clear fluid stood on the cut itself. She desperately wanted to scratch it, but knew the flesh would peel away if she did.

Blackened blood oozed out of it, mixing with the clear fluid and dripping onto the ground.

When the rotting blood hit the ground, maggots swarmed up out of nowhere, greedily feeding on the fluid. The sticky fluid glistened, the fat, round, white maggots sucking on it with a sickening noise.

She thought she'd lost an awful lot of blood the last few days—yet still, it bled.

Her body felt cold, and her consciousness was growing fuzzy, but her powerful will refused to allow her to flee reality.

The demon was coming.

The scent of rot was growing concentrated.

The shapeless demon had been awakened, and it was here for no other reason than to spread rot.

She couldn't see them, but she could tell the inugami were increasing in number, preparing to devour this enemy.

Rustle rustle rustle.

Drip drip drip drip drip . . .

The smell and the sound were driving her mad, everything around her like something out of a nightmare.

At this rate, she was going to lose her mind.

Or weaken and die.

Rot away to nothing, eaten by maggots.

If so . . . even if that were the case, Aki could accept that.

She was staying right here.

Aki stood up slowly.

Her eyes were still very weak, but a little bit annoyed.

In silence, she stared ahead of her—down the mountain, the way she had come, through the dark, dense forest. She could see where she had forced her way through the forest, where she had broken bushes. Aki stared hard at them. They were shaking, ever so slightly.

Then, they opened, and a vivid flash of red stepped out of the green and black.

"We're in time?" Toshiya said, furiously shoving his crutches against the slope. Behind him followed Ayame and Utsume.

She was not surprised. Part of her had expected them.

Toshiya was in a blue raincoat, and Utsume was holding an umbrella out for him. That umbrella was a vivid red, and it matched Ayame's clothes, standing out beautifully against the green forest.

"You fools," Aki croaked. "How . . . no, *why*, did you come?"

She meant it. If she were to fade away here, at least she would have avoided hurting her friends. The one thing she feared more than anything could have been avoided.

She glared listlessly at Utsume.

"The mountains are another world," Utsume said, ignoring her question. "That's what people once believed. The mountains are a different world, where mankind's power does not reach. They often viewed the mountains as the land of the dead.

"*Tengu* are a personification of the mountain's mystery; hidden villages and Mayohiga are both in the mountains. People captured by kami-kakushi are said to have been taken to the mountains, and many mountains are believed to be homes for gods."

He was lecturing, like an academic giving a speech.

"The smell of rotting flesh, the smell of animals, insects, and monsters. A place like this deserves to called a different world.

"A long time ago, people would have said you had met with a kami-kakushi, Kidono."

None of this seemed to have any meaning to her.

She could feel the logical, emotionless tone calming her, though. Ultimately, that was Aki's character. For the first time, she was aware of it. And the knowledge made her sad. She could no longer have contact with anything.

"You did not answer me, Kyo," Aki said, eyes half-closed.

The smile that crossed Aki's face was horribly similar to the one Ayame had once used.

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Four

"How did you find me?" Aki said, standing there like a ghost.

"Kondou's bell. It works on maps, as well. We had him dowse until he had you locked," Utsume replied, standing there like Death.

Listening to them talk, Toshiya still couldn't believe the events leading up to this moment.

They really hadn't notice. All the way here, Toshiya had been watching their surroundings closely, but nobody was following them. Nobody was watching them.

They had set out knowing full well the men in black were watching them. Utsume had put them all in the taxi, and they had climbed out of the car with Ryoko near the girl's dorm. Then, they had walked all the way up here. They had not hidden at all—simply walked normally down the streets. But nobody had noticed.

In fact, the men in black never saw them get out of the car. Passersby had ignored them, as if they were invisible. A cat in the window of a house had turned its head to watch them pass, but that cat was the only thing that had paid the three of them any attention at all.

It was a very strange experience—as if they had become ghosts.

And the girl who was behind all this was standing under the umbrella Utsume held up, looking ill at ease. She was looking nervously from Utsume to Aki, and occasionally back at the bushes.

The power of a kami-kakushi.

Utsume had finally made up his mind to use his ultimate weapon.

Following his orders, Ayame had spoken a verse aloud, and the three of them literally had been wiped out of existence. Their

forms had been pulled into the other world, and they had become undetectable in the real world.

This is a little much, Toshiya thought. He had known Ayame wasn't human, but he still hadn't been ready for this. The girl was dangerous.

Now was not the time to concern himself with her, though. He had other things to worry about.

Silently, Toshiya pushed back the hood of his raincoat, making it easier to see.

His head grew wet, but he didn't care. There was no telling when something would happen—when the invisible animals would attack.

He could smell rot—and animals. He knew what those meant: the curse and the inugami. Both of them were still alive.

Maggots came with the smell, wriggling all over the ground, waiting for Aki—and possibly the others—to rot away alive, so they could feast.

Like a knight defending Utsume, Toshiya stood slightly behind him . . . with only one good leg, he wasn't laughing.

Despite Toshiya's mounting tension, Aki displayed a terrifyingly gentle smile.

"Like I told Ryoko," she said, still smiling, "go home. This place is cursed. Not only the fax—my curse, as well. I'm telling you that there's no predicting what I will do."

Her voice sounded so peaceful. However, it failed to disguise the note of desperation, the lack of control.

"Not you. The things around you," Utsume corrected her.

"They aren't that much different," Aki replied. "I don't know how much you've figured out, but they are not something I can control consciously. They react to my malice. They *are* me. They

are my own thoughts, and yet . . . not. I don't really want these things to happen, and yet . . . I do."

What am I saying? Aki thought, annoyed with herself.

Normally, Aki wouldn't ever sound so incoherent. She knew she was contradicting herself. This made it all the more painful.

"They are real. And I can't control them. If I concentrate . . . before, I could hold them back, but I can't now. They want blood, and I can't stop them.

"And I have to say, there have been more than a few times when I've wanted to kill you, Kyo—and Murakami, and Ryoko, and Kondou. I know how bloodthirsty I can be. If I stayed down there, I'd kill you all.

"As of now, I've killed Yanagawa. I can't let it happen again. I'm not going to shed a tear for *him,* but if I killed one of *you* . . . I know I'd regret that. Please don't make me."

Aki spoke in as level a tone as she could manage.

"Don't make you . . . ?" Toshiya muttered. He wanted to ask if she knew a senior by the name of Souya, but he figured it would be better not to tell her about Souya's death. Utsume didn't mention it, either.

Instead, Toshiya said, "We feel the same way."

His head hurt. Why were all his friends like Utsume and Aki? Why did they all place so little value on their deaths? That was *his* job. He was the one who risked his life to protect his friends.

"You're being incredibly selfish," he snarled.

"Yeah, I know," Aki said, smiling wearily. "You really have to understand that there's nothing you can do. If you try anything, the inugami will stop you.

"Like they did with Yanagawa. Like they did with the curse. They've been sleeping inside me all this time, and now they're

hungry. Anything you try will be baiting them, and they will eat you for it. I don't want that to happen," she finished with a trace of sadness.

Even the slightest hint of emotion could betray her. The bushes behind them shook violently—the inugami, reacting to that tiny little note of sadness. Aki tried desperately to keep her emotions in check, under control.

"So . . . hurry . . ." she begged. "Hurry . . . get out of here."

"It's not that easy," Utsume said. "One question."

His voice was utterly calm.

"Is something like this worth dying over?"

It sounded less like a scolding than a genuine question.

For a moment, Aki was stunned. "What?"

"Is the chance that you might kill a friend really a good enough reason to die? I mean, isn't that true for everybody?" Utsume asked.

Still reeling slightly, Aki asked, "Don't you care that you might get killed? Or is it that you just don't get that I could do that at any time?"

"No," Utsume shook his head. "You mean that. When you want to kill someone, you might actually do it," he said, and he cocked his head. "How is that different from anyone else? I don't see a difference. Every day, all over the world, do you know how many people kill their friends? All humans live with the possibility that someone close to them will kill them. And every human being is capable of killing another.

"Given the chance and the means, every single human easily could kill a friend. You just so happen to have the chance and the means at the same time, which . . . is not a problem. It's a perfectly ordinary possibility. You're the same as any other human, so why should we be frightened?"

He meant every word.

Aki gaped at him.

People always were killing one another, and they always lived with the possibility of being killed.

This was an extreme argument, but it was also the truth, and something Utsume clearly believed. Toshiya knew. In elementary school, Utsume almost had been killed by a classmate, and that had driven the truth home.

The aura of death that hung around Utsume had first appeared then. Utsume never forgot that he might be killed suddenly by the person he'd laughed with the day before—by Aki, by Takemi, by Ryoko, or even by Toshiya, who'd been his friend for ten years.

Utsume lived inside this death. That was the way he saw the world. With that knowledge in mind, he went about his life. For Utsume, death was simply one possibility, and it was always one step away.

"Kyo . . . why do you keep on living?" Aki asked, baffled.

"I don't know. I wonder . . . if not knowing . . . is why I don't die," Utsume replied. "It's possible that I continue to live so that I can continue to ponder why it is that I'm alive. I live to think. And that's the only reason I haven't died. After all . . ."

"After all?"

"There's no guarantee I'll be able to think when I'm dead."

"That sounds like you," Aki said, as if staring into a bright light. "I've always admired that about you, Kyo. I can't be like that, though; I can't bear how indiscriminate the weapon I wield can be. I can't get past that."

Her sad smile had turned to one of despair.

"Then, toss the weapon aside."

"If I could do that, I wouldn't be here. *They* are *me*. How can I toss myself aside?"

"Do you really think that?"

"What do you—"

"Exactly what I said. There is nothing humans have that they can't throw away, even if that thing is yourself."

There was a long silence, with only the sound of the rain beating against the umbrella. Aki's expression had frozen, but she must have understood Utsume.

She was hesitating.

The glimmer of hope he had given her had made her waver.

"I never answered your first question," Utsume said.

"My first—"

"Why did we come here."

Aki's face twitched. She whispered softly, "Stop."

"I came to ask if you wanted to come back."

"You can't . . . even if the inugami were gone, the curse would be there still. Without them to defend me, the curse would eat me alive. Either way, my fate is decided. There's absolutely no reason to put you in danger . . ." Aki shook her head.

"I thought you would say that, so I thought of a way that you won't be able to refuse," Utsume said, pulling something out of his backpack. Several pieces of paper, large and small, white with red spots.

"You forgot these. So, I brought them for you."

The pages were covered in tightly scribbled letters, rows of symbols, fragments of text.

"The cursed fax!"

"Yes. This is now the curse's stronghold. There are many reports of participants and observers alike showing symptoms

after attending a demon summoning. By this time, we already are part of it."

At this, Aki moaned. "Kyo, you . . ."

"I know. I'm not so far gone that I don't know what I'm doing," Utsume said, and he flung the pieces of paper into the air. The rain quickly hammered them to the ground, soaking the pages. The pages quickly began to smell of rotting flesh. The group had grown used to the smell that had been surrounding them, but this new stench broke down their resistance.

"Urp . . ."

"Let us finished the fourth night, from where it was interrupted. The powerful and fearsome Marquis Sabnock is here." Utsume chanted, sounding like a real magician. "We can't go back. We already have lost the banishing ritual. The demon will remain in our world until he fulfills his purpose or is destroyed.

"Kidono, it's all much too late. I do apologize, but if things go wrong here . . . we're going to die together," Utsume said.

All the despair Aki had been holding back flooded onto her face.

Hiding behind it, there also was a little—just a little—relief.

Five

"By the highest name, I do command thee. In the name of the Creator, Him unto whom all creatures must be obedient, obey my commands! I, being made in the image of God, created according

unto His will, do command thee to appear! *Adonai el elohim elohi ehyeh asher ehyeh zabaoth elion iah tetragrammaton shaddai . . .*"

Utsume's whisper shook the damp air.

As Utsume whispered, Toshiya could feel the forest around them losing all sense of normality.

The stench of rot was thickening, saturating the air until it was almost impossible to breathe without vomiting. This rotting air seemed to be seeping directly from the space around them; the stench, the air, the space around them completely demolished all things natural.

The moment Utsume had thrown the remnants of the fax into the air, as if that were a catalyst, the whole process sped up; the boundaries between the worlds began melting, reality encroached upon.

The spell Utsume was muttering was pretty basic, but the changes sped up, regardless.

The words Jinno has said to Toshiya echoed through his mind: "Our world is being steadily eaten by the other world."

The other world was all around them now. All it took was a little spark, and the other world would seep through into theirs—like the demon that was appearing here.

The inugami were solidifying, as well.

The smell of animals came shoving up through the rotting air, surrounding them. Among the trees, in the bushes, in the hollow of the decaying tree, in the grass, in the darkness all around . . . animal eyes were gleaming.

Ferocious animal snarls sent low vibrations through the rotting air.

Everything around them was hostile.

Hostility and hatred, madness and decay, they filled the forest, so concentrated that it was hard to breathe. An explosive sort of tension connected everything, like a taut bow. Between this tension and the horrible stench, Toshiya's stomach was tying itself in knots.

The rain moistened the remnants of the fax.

The wet paper dissolved at an unnatural speed, leaving a dirty white stain on the grass. The stain began to wiggle, melting into the ground and becoming maggots. Soon, the ground was covered in wriggling, crawling maggots, all over the grass, right at Toshiya's feet.

Maggots wriggled on every blade of grass, animals lurked in all the bushes.

A field of maggots and invisible monsters was right in front of him.

"This is a nightmare . . ." Toshiya managed to say at last. Cold rain mixed with his greasy sweat, forming lukewarm beads that rolled down his forehead. No normal human could stand this level of discomfort and fear for long.

Utsume stopped whispering his spell; in an abnormally level voice, he called out to Toshiya: "Murakami."

"What?"

"No matter what happens next, protect Ayame and me."

Toshiya gulped. Utsume almost never asked for anything, especially not for something like this. He almost never bothered to consider his own personal safety. This request could mean only that his odds of success were extremely low. Chances were, all four of them would wind up dead.

Even so, Toshiya answered crisply, "You didn't have to ask."

"Sorry."

Utsume said nothing else.

Toshiya lowered his injured leg to the ground, wielding his crutches like weapons. He pointed the tips at the bushes, toward the maggots and inugami.

The grass on the ground worked in his favor. The heavy rain and the grass both gave him some sense of the creatures he could not see.

After having spent three months on them, he knew exactly how to handle his crutches. They were basically sticks of wood, and they would make decent weapons.

"Kidono, are you ready?" Utsume said, calling through the unnatural air.

"For what?" Aki asked with a hollow smile. Her face was white as a sheet. Blood was still oozing from the wound on her hand, dripping onto the ground. Yet her smile never wavered. "Are you going to kill me? That will end everything. I don't mind being killed, if you're the one killing me. I desire nothing more," she said, still smiling. It was a tired, weakened smile, a smile of death, half resolved, half resigned.

She spoke again. "Kyo . . ."

"What?"

"No, nothing. Forget it."

Changing her mind, she lowered her head again. She was soaking wet, and she looked so small, so fragile.

Utsume said nothing, simply glancing at Ayame.

She nodded, opening her hands and taking a deep breath.

And then, the balance shattered.

"The mountains are the hidden land. The hidden god is the mountain god. Sky of glass, field of graves. Everything returns to the mountains."

A clear, strong voice reverberated through the air—with it, a sensation completely different from the perilous balance between the rot and the animals. The air quivered with Ayame's voice, bringing a feeling of emptiness and silence with it. It cut through the stench, battered past the aggression, tearing apart all the sensations that had saturated the space around them.

Toshiya could hear the maggots squirming faster, could hear shrill howling echoing through the woods. The horrible balance was broken, and everything around them began to move, searching for an enemy.

"Here we go," Utsume said.

Toshiya did not need to be told. He could feel the malice in the air, could feel it turning wild and mad. He swallowed. The air was filled with hostility and rot and stillness.

Ayame's song shook the world, turning everything back to nothing.

"The mountains are the land of the dead. The land of the dead is a hollow ground. Sky of glass, field of graves. Everything returns to the mountains."

Toshiya could hear things scraping against the trees.

Then, Utsume said, "Allow me to lecture for a moment."

The bushes thrashed, gouges appeared on the trunks of the trees—chunks torn out by invisible claws.

Amid all this, Utsume began speaking, as if nothing were happening.

"According to Frazer, spells can be divided into two essential types: imitative magic and contagious magic."

"Utsume, what are you—"

"Quiet. Listen. Imitative magic is based on the idea that 'like produces like' and describes the kind of spell where people

hammer a nail into a doll dressed like the person the spell is targeting.

"Meanwhile, contagious magic is based on the belief that 'things which have once been conjoined must remain ever afterward, even when quite dissevered from each other'—in other words, a part of the target, hair, or fingernails, is used as an element of the spell to influence or affect the target.

"These two principles seem to be archetypal elements of the human imagination and are found in the spells of almost every culture in the world. Most of them believe the latter principle to be more powerful."

Utsume droned on, ignoring Toshiya's skeptical look. Words flowed out of him, like his speech itself was a spell.

But Toshiya had long since stopped paying attention. The invisible monsters were going insane. In response, the maggots rapidly were entering chrysalis. Moments later, they would hatch, tearing out of the shell and taking off. Soon, there was a swarm of buzzing black flies all around him.

The flies swirled, forming a kind of black fog, filling the air. They covered the trees, covered the grass. The fly-covered surfaces were moving constantly, laying white, grainlike eggs everywhere.

The grains immediately began to move, devouring the grass, the tree bark, growing rapidly. In seconds, they were fat, juicy maggots, in their chrysalis, transforming.

As this cycle repeated, the invisible monsters began tearing through. They ripped apart the flies, crushed the maggots, the chrysalises, the eggs, making a paste that flew everywhere. The paste splattered across the grass in long tendrils, and the maggots ate it, growing.

Flies were everywhere.

The flies joined together, settling on Utsume's umbrella.

The invisible monsters attacked the umbrella.

Utsume dropped the umbrella, and the red cloth soon was covered in maggots and flies.

The swarm was battered by unseen claws, the umbrella shredding in the blink of an eye.

"Utsume!" Toshiya screamed. Instantly, he felt an animal brush past his leg.

He had dodged by accident. The sturdy hem of his heavy-duty rain coat had been torn away, bitten off. There were maggots crawling on it. Toshiya quickly brushed them off. Cold sweat ran down his back. Utsume was not the only person he had to worry about.

"Malice, spite, envy, and curses. Let them all come back to the mountains. Killers, thieves, the damaged, and the mad. Leave them all in the mountains."

Ayame chanted on.

As if none of this were happening, Utsume continued his lecture.

Toshiya swung his crutches around, threatening, fighting the menace he could not see, trying to drive away anything that came near Utsume and Ayame.

He stole a glance at Aki once, to see if she was all right.

He shouldn't have.

The grass was rotting away, and the bushes were thrashing wildly, but Aki's inugami were protecting her, and nothing could hurt her. When Toshiya let his guard drop to look, however, the inugami pounced. One of them lunged into his blind spot and bit his right arm. He almost dropped the crutch.

Flies swarmed around the wound.

"Shit!"

He brushed them away, wrapping the wound in the remains of his shirt, hiding it. Fear mingled with instinctive revulsion, leaving him close to panic.

"Since the dawn of time, tsukimono, curses, and the like have been dealt with by means of spells and violence," Utsume continued, not even glancing at Toshiya's injury. "The violent solution is very much the same approach as that of the men in black. If all the people involved are dead, the entire incident never happened. This obviously is not an option, so I am going to use a spell. Contagious magic."

Utsume produced a scrap of paper, about the size of a business card.

"The spell will not work if it is doesn't use the same base knowledge. By explaining all this, I have created that basis. Now for the spell components . . ."

Utsume's lecture was reaching its climax. Toshiya could tell the inugami were heading toward him. The bushes parted, and there was a quivering in the grass, heading straight at him. He knew what that meant.

"Argh!"

Toshiya threw himself between them the moment he noticed. Instantly, pain shot down his arm and leg.

His right leg folded, knocking him on his side. The strain he was putting it through had proven too much for his half-healed leg. And now, he was in trouble.

One after another, like wild carnivores, the inugami went for their prey's legs. And like trained attack dogs, they attacked his hands, because those hands held weapons. Their teeth were as sharp as razors, and they went right through Toshiya's heavy

raincoat. They tore his skin, fangs sinking into his flesh like rows of needles.

Frightened, he tossed away the crutches and began swinging his arms wildly. He threw unseen creatures to the ground, flinging them off him.

He'd been bitten all over, and he was shuddering with pain. Claws had torn his skin, and his body was wet with the blood. And all his wounds were covered in maggots and flies. He panicked, rolling wildly.

Then, he felt breath on his face, realized the dangers, and swung his arm. He hit something—an invisible monster had been going for his throat, he realized after he had blocked it. He shivered.

Toshiya covered his throat with both arms, feeling a series of sharp pains burst along them. He knew this was bad, but there was nothing else he could do. He was completely on the defensive now; he could no longer fight back at all. His body was strong, and he had not yet received any fatal wounds, but it was only a matter of time.

He was done for, and that frightened him.

Toshiya was going to die.

He might die instantly, his spine or his jugular severed . . . or with his heart and stomach torn out, being left to die a little slower—either way, just as certainly. He rolled himself up, trying to protect himself, but he could feel unseen heads prying past his guard. They knew exactly where a human's critical points were. And every wound was covered in maggots. Between the pain and fear, his mind went blank. Death was now inevitable.

Yip yip yip yip.

He heard a shrill barking nearby.

A moment later, he realized it was only inside his head, and a wave of terror passed over him.

Yet the sound grew louder, echoing through his head, consuming his consciousness. The barking filled his mind, until he could think of nothing else.

He lay there convulsing, his mouth wide open.

A shrill sound, like a scream, was pouring out of his throat.

But it was not a scream. It was a howl.

He could hear this howl coming from his own mouth—a high, piercing howl, like a dog's; he did not recognize it as his own.

Fear and hostility that did not belong to him were overflowing through his mind.

Ooooooooooooooooooooo!

He was still on the ground, but his head was raised up, howling away without him ever trying to.

There was nothing in his head but hostility, and all of that was directed toward something he could feel welling up in front of him, something huge.

In the center of the clearing, something horrible was oozing forth.

The flies were gathering, swirling, taking form—like a steeple, at first, but the shape of it slowly twisted, and the mass of flies began to look like something else: a black tower, the edges of it crumbling, changing shape. And inside it, the form took flesh, was created.

The flies flew away, and then they gathered again, the outline shimmering and reforming.

It was an enormous man.

The demon stood up, four sticklike limbs rising through the dark forest.

The field of maggots, wriggling and white, squirmed to greet their dread master.

The demon had arrived.

Made up of countless flies, the outlines of it blurring in and out, Sabnock raised its lion's head and roared.

Countless shrill howls echoed in response.

Yip yip yip.

Inside Toshiya's skull, the inugami went mad.

"Please, stop!" he heard Aki shriek, far away.

Everything had been stained and crushed by fear and madness, this unnatural, saturated nightmare.

In the center of the nightmare stood Utsume.

"Listen!" Utsume growled. "As evil begets evil and blood begets blood, return ye to the flame! Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, vanish with the spell that binds ye here!"

He thrust out the scrap of paper. Despite his confusion, Toshiya could see that half of it was stained with blood.

The thing that wasn't him could tell.

That paper connected to him.

And to the enemy in front of him.

The demon raised its head. The inugami stopped moving.

Everything around Utsume froze.

Even the air stopped moving.

Then, Utsume's right hand opened, producing a lighter.

He struck a flame.

Everything there that was not of this world suddenly grew terrified. Inexplicable fear exploded in Toshiya's head, in the space around him.

They all realized as one . . .

. . . realized who the *real* enemy was.

Oooooooooooo!

All the hostility converged on Utsume.

"Too late," he said, touching the flame to the paper.

Instantly, everything was covered in a silent flash of light.

"That sword is for your master, that knowledge for your character,

Cutting, slicing, carving, cleaving, the lord of the dark is coming here,

Mountains are the homeland of the gods, of the darkness.

Mountains are the realm of the gods, not the dog gods.

The heavens are wise, whereas the dogs are but children,

Blood calls to blood, and the spell takes no form.

The kingdom of darkness is in the mountains, the kingdom of death is in the mountains.

The land of the tengu is in the mountains, the land that is hidden is in the mountains.

The master that is lost is in the mountains, the dream so uncanny is in the mountains.

The god of curses is in the mountains, the Prince of Darkness is in the mountains."

Toshiya's mind cleared suddenly, and he bounded to his feet.

The inugami that had crept into his mind were gone. All the maggots that had covered his body, all the inugami that had surrounded him, had vanished.

Toshiya stood there, dazed.

The area around him was burning, red flames dancing.

At first, he thought it was a forest fire. Everything around him—the grass, the rotting tree, the bushes—was on fire, sending showers of sparks into the air.

But then, he realized it was not the forest that was burning; it was something else entirely—not the grass, but the maggots.

The showers of sparks were, in fact, the flies, still flying even as they burned.

And the flames in the bushes, in the trees . . . were animals, running frantically, their bodies turned to fireballs.

"Once, songs and chants were prayers or mantras. The word of God." Utsume said, against the flames.

"The word of God made the world, the mantras defined the world, and prayers can change the world. This is magic, these are spells, techniques cultivated by mankind to instill its will upon the world."

Poems were songs were spells, Utsume explained quietly.

"Ayame's song was the key. Her song changed the world. Ayame cut this area out of the world, the way a magician creates boundaries. In this space, magic was the law."

The piece of paper was burning away merrily in Utsume's hand.

His other hand held a lighter. When Utsume had touched the flame to the paper, all the insects that were part of the demon and all the inugami ignited.

The maggots crackled, melting away. The flies drifted away, the shape of the burning demon giving way to red flames and collapsing.

The flames gave the previously unseen inugami shape as they rolled and thrashed, screaming in pain.

The howl of wings and the high screams of the animals filled the area.

The rotten air was cleansed, replaced by the smell of burning paper.

"Is that . . . the cursed fax?" Toshiya asked.

"Yes. The fourth night's fax, stained with Kidono's blood—the only spell component that would be contagious for both the inugami and the demon. If I had weakened just one of them, the other would have taken action. I had to destroy them both at the same time."

The cursed paper was burning brightly, as if it had been dipped in lighter fluid.

While Utsume spoke, the last traces of the demon crumbled away, the flies tumbling to the ground, the maggots turning to ash. Even the damp paper that made up their original form had burned away.

There was not a trace of them left. Everything had burned.

The plight of the inugami was far more wretched.

Through the forest, around the trees, in the bushes, at their feet, the invisible monsters—now, flaming monsters—ran wildly, screaming shrilly.

It was like a scene out of hell, filled with the beauty of some other world.

They say flames burn on old battlefields. The fires raging around them suggested those uncanny flames: overwhelming, serene, and illusionary.

The trees and bushes were covered in flames. Hundreds, maybe thousands of animals were burning.

Each flame took the shape of a small creature, screaming in pain as it ran across the grass. They resembled dogs, but made of flame. They fled, but they could not flee themselves.

There were burning inugami everywhere. It seemed like everything was burning—the trees, the bushes, the grass. The flames burning the inugami were not of this world, though, and the trees never caught fire, the flames never spread.

These otherworldly flames slowly took their toll on the inugami.

One after another, their movements ceased, and their corpses turned to embers. They crumbled, leaving nothing behind. The inugami vanished.

Using its last reserves of power, one of the inugami flung itself at Utsume. Now that he could see them, though, it was no challenge at all for Toshiya to keep it away.

He kicked it hard, and it fell to the ground in a shower of sparks, crumbling away to embers.

It seemed so fragile. It was hard to believe they had almost killed Toshiya a few moments before.

Sparks flew everywhere.

Millions of embers drifted through the still air.

The paper in Utsume's hand turned to ash, burning with a blood red flame.

He let go right before the flames reached his hand.

Still burning, it fell, burning away completely just before it reached the ground. Nothing was left but embers. The number of inugami was shrinking rapidly, all turning to embers and sparks.

The last one staggered weakly to Aki's feet.

She stared down at it sadly, and it crumbled, joining its fellows.

As if she had been waiting for this, Aki passed out.

Her knees crumbled, and she fell onto the grass.

"Augh!" Toshiya yelped, running over to her. He checked to see if she was breathing, touching her cheek.

She was as white as a corpse, yet her cheeks were burning up. Still, her breathing was calm, and she didn't appear to be in any discomfort. She didn't seem to be in any immediate danger.

"Looks like . . . she's alive," Toshiya said, relieved.

"The inugami burned along with Kidono's blood. I'm sure she's anemic, or running a fever, or both. We should get her to a hospital quickly," Utsume said.

"Yeah, I know," Toshiya said, still relieved.

Toshiya's blood was on Aki's pale cheek. He considered wiping it off, but abandoned the idea. He would just make it worse. There was blood and dirt all over him.

Utsume looked up at the night sky. The last sparks were drifting upward.

Beside him, Ayame looked up, as well.

The sky around them was covered in red dots, sparks dancing everywhere.

"Sky of glass, field of graves. Everything returns to the mountains. Malice, spite, envy and curses. Let them all come back to the mountains."

Ayame chanted as the sparks drifted away, up into the night sky.

"Ah . . ." Toshiya said, looking up with them. He could see a small piece of the sky through the trees, just above the clearing.

The heavy clouds were gone, and the sky was clear.

And *red.* The sparks were moving toward it, as if being sucked in, melting into it.

Then, the other world's sky faded, dissolving.

The red sky vanished like a mirage, and the sky was black and gray again—the normal, ordinary sky.

"This is our ultimate weapon," Utsume said, still staring upward. "For some reason, I am able to understand a certain principal of the other world. Ayame can summon that other world into this one. As long as we're fighting something from that world, they cannot escape this theory, this principal.

"This is magic, one kind of magic, given to me by a contract with Mephistopheles."

Utsume's Mephistopheles—Ayame—cast a frightened look at Toshiya. She looked at him apologetically, as if asking for forgiveness.

Toshiya thought to himself that Utsume had, essentially, embraced destruction. In return for the power of the other world, he had embraced the possibility of his own end. And he was sure Utsume knew this. Utsume wanted this contact with the other world despite the danger it posed.

"So . . . this contract. What do you plan to do with it?" Toshiya said, glaring at him.

"That's a secret," Utsume said, looking back at him without emotion.

They gazed at each other for a long moment in silence, their wills battling wordlessly.

Toshiya thought about saying something else, but he abandoned the idea. He didn't want to waste the energy. They still had to climb back down the mountain.

The rain had stopped.

The last embers of the inugami faded away, vanishing from sight.

Chapter 6:

The Witch Does Not Declare an Ending

"You did it."

When the four of them reached the bottom of the mountain, with Utsume and Ayame carrying Aki between them, they found a black car waiting for them.

Haga was leaning against it—Takemi, as well, with his hands bound behind his back.

"You talked?"

"Sorry," Takemi said, hanging his head at Toshiya's glare.

Utsume said nothing, simply gazing at Haga without emotion.

Ayame looked up at Utsume anxiously.

Haga slowly looked around at all of them. Then, "Amazing. You really are irregular, Utsume," he said, grinning broadly. "In our records, there are very few examples of someone expelling the outside influences without killing the first degree infected—and still fewer examples of someone doing so deliberately. Sendou or Dark Prince . . . both names fit you very well. Truly amazing."

Haga clapped his hands together, a dramatic gesture that did not give them any sign of his true opinion. It reminded Toshiya of Kijou.

Haga stepped forward, taking Aki from Utsume.

"Utsume!" Toshiya gasped when Utsume handed her over willingly.

"Don't worry. When we're certain nothing is wrong, we will return her," Haga said, glancing at Toshiya.

But what if something was wrong . . . ?

"Fine," Utsume said.

When he reached the bottom line, Utsume never resisted, always abandoned everything—even his own life. When there was no avoiding something, he always let it happen.

This was simply a manifestation of Utsume's underlying emptiness; in this situation, however, it was a little tough to watch.

"She'll be fine. I'll take care of her," Haga said reassuringly.

"We can't stop you," Utsume shrugged.

Haga grinned. "If you keep quiet about what's happened, then we'll put everything back to normal."

"I'm not one to gossip."

"Good," Haga agreed.

It felt like they'd made a pact with the men in black. Haga put Aki in the car; then, he undid the handcuffs, releasing Takemi.

"I think you'll come in handy," Haga said, looking at Utsume. These last words seemed to echo in Toshiya's ears.

A few days later, everything was finished.

One teacher, Yanagawa, had vanished, and a male student, Souya, had died in an accident. The police who went hunting in the mountains had returned with fourteen wild dogs, so everything appeared to be resolved successfully.

They had saved Aki.

The Agency took her away; but a few days later, they'd been informed that she was in the hospital, weakened and suffering from severe blood loss.

Aki herself remembered nothing about the few days in between.

Her demolished apartment had been restored, leaving no traces of the damage done.

There were no personal possessions left—instead, she found five hundred thousand yen in cash.

Nobody said anything about it—not her landlord, not the real estate agency, not her neighbors. It was as if nothing had happened.

Over the course of the next few days, though, all the residents except Aki moved out. Some of the rooms filled again, whereas others stood empty for the time being.

"It's kind of creepy, but . . . oh, well," Aki said, shrugging, and she resumed her routine.

A few days before, she had been prepared to die; now, she returned to normal, as if she had merely been possessed . . . literally. Her finger had recovered miraculously from the gangrene and didn't need to be cut off. It was still bandaged, but she would recover with only minor scarring. The doctors were all amazed.

"Oh good. Hands mean a lot to us girls," Ryoko said, far happier about this than Aki seemed to be.

With few exceptions, everything returned to the way it had been.

But in return, there was very little they understood.

Nobody would ever know what had happened to Yanagawa.

Nobody could say for sure why Souya had died.

Nobody could be certain if the inugami had truly vanished.

The details of the cursed fax remained a mystery, with nothing decided except for a vague assumption that the now-dead boy had sent them.

There was really nothing they knew for certain.

But somehow, they all stopped talking about it . . . which meant it had all been nothing.

It was the clearest day in recent memory when Kyoichi Utsume visited the garden. He stood there with his trademark emotionless gaze, Ayame at his side.

Ayame appeared to be quite nervous. She always appeared nervous when she met the person in front of them. This probably had something to do with said person's other name. Ayame had plenty of reasons to be frightened.

The witch, Yomiko Togano, looked at the duo and grinned.

"The two of you almost never come here."

She smiled, as if she had never thought an evil thought in her life.

The complete lack of malice in her smile would unsettle any normal person. Like a cloudless mirror, looking into it forced everyone to gaze upon his or her own inner darkness. Most people did not realize this consciously and were merely creeped out. They found Yomiko a little frightening.

But that was hardly a mistaken impression.

"What is it today, shadow person?" Yomiko asked.

"I came to ask a question," Utsume replied with the same lack of intonation he always used. It was impossible to read any emotion from it.

"A question?" Yomiko said, tilting her head to one side.

Utsume nodded. "What was the meaning of all that?"

"That?"

"The cursed fax."

Yomiko looked puzzled, but Utsume didn't seem to care. He kept talking: "The notion that a witch performs magic seems to fit. You made the cursed fax, right?"

"How did you know?" Yomiko said, admitting it instantly, as if she'd never intended to hide it.

Her puzzled look earlier had not been playing dumb; she had simply been surprised that Utsume knew.

"When did you realize?" she asked.

"When Kusakabe told me that you had warned Kidono about invisible dogs, it was one of several possibilities that occurred to me. You might not know about Kidono's history, but I imagined you could identify her bloodline simply by looking. Then, when we went to stop the fourth night's fax, you got ahead of us. By then, I was almost certain. As far as I knew, the only person who was aware of our actions was you."

"The Shadow knows everything."

"That's why I didn't want to speak to you," Utsume said, frowning.

Yomiko giggled.

"But I was so happy when you did!" she said. It was hard to tell if she was joking or if she really meant it.

Utsume ignored her.

"The cursed fax is a tool that forces both the sender and recipient to perform the magical ritual. Someone with that knowledge forces others to gaze upon the other world. Kidono almost died. What were you trying to accomplish?"

Then, he repeated his first question: "What was the meaning of it all?"

"There was no meaning, only a reason," Yomiko said.

"A reason?"

"Yes. This is a focal point."

Utsume frowned.

Yomiko laughed.

"All cities are. They start the world changing."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. There is no meaning. You understand so many things, but this one thing you just don't get," Yomiko sighed. "That's why you didn't cross over, that's why you took something back with you."

"What?"

"Meaning is made by humans. A world given meaning is no longer the world it originally was. It is stable, but it belongs to humans. The world is a lot less well defined than that."

Utsume fell silent. He couldn't work out what Yomiko knew.

Yomiko spread her arms wide, as if indicating the world.

"When humans give it meaning, it becomes their domain. That makes humans feel secure. But that also means they are not looking at the *real* world. The more you think about the meaning of things, the less you can see the world for what it is—which is only proved by how many things in this world don't make any sense.

"You are very intelligent, and you're good at giving things meaning. No matter how strange something is, you can give it meaning, pulling it into the domain of mankind. That's why beings with undefined properties are drawn toward you, like that kami-kakushi. Unless someone defines them, they cannot preserve their existence on their own."

Ayame's shoulders quivered.

Seeing that, Yomiko giggled. "Don't worry. I'm not blaming you—or the Shadow. I didn't say this was a bad thing. It's all part of the world. All kinds of people see all kinds of worlds. That's the shape of the world. And the world needs everyone," she said, almost singing, with a beautiful smile.

"Remember: The world is a story.

"All kinds of people read the same story, and they have their own understanding, feelings, theories, ways of looking at it, pros and cons, morals, points of fascination . . . every reader is different. But the story everyone reads is one and the same—everyone is reading a story called 'the world.'

"The world is a story, which is why stories can change the world. And it is humans who create stories. And cities are where humans gather. That's why cities are focal points. This is where rumors and urban legends are born—elements that can change the world. I'm just giving that a little push, you could say . . . for fun."

She looked up at the empty sky.

Her arms flung wide, a dreamlike expression on her face.

Her words and actions were very, very strange. Utsume stared at her in silence. Ayame clung to his arm, terrified.

At last, Yomiko looked at him again.

"You don't want to watch as the world changes?" she asked.

She smiled again, a completely innocent smile—a clear, angelic smile.

"You're insane." Utsume declared quietly.

"Yeah, not just me, though . . . you are, too," Yomiko said, smiling as if it were only natural.

"We're both insane. I'm a witch, you're a Dark Prince. I'm sure we're both nuts!"

She giggled. There was a nasty smell in the air around her—that horrible, stomach-churning smell of rotting flesh.

○ ○ ○

For a few days after that, there was a string of suicides by young girls in Hazama City.

It was covered on the news and briefly debated as a serious societal problem. Eventually, though, many people decided it only meant that girls that age were unstable.

Society relaxed and forgot about it. And it was as if nothing had happened.

There was no way for anyone to know that the girls all had been tsukimono-suji, or that they all had received the cursed fax.

Afterword

First, I'd like to thank you for reading this book.

And to everyone involved in the production of it—my editors, Mine and Wada, and the illustrator, Midorikawa—thank you.

So . . . the other day, I was talking with a friend of mine about the Agency that is featured in this series. "I can't believe you had the nerve to rip off that movie so blatantly," he said, to my great surprise.

The movie *Men in Black* is based on an urban legend, a rather famous one in America: the idea that mysterious men in black suits appear before U.F.O. researchers and witnesses and stop them from going public with the information. So, basically, I screwed up; I assumed that the popularity of the movie meant that everyone knew the original legend, as well.

I intended them to be based on the original legend, but many readers were extremely bothered, to my great embarrassment. I still have a lot to learn.

"Stories come together in the dark of nightmares,
Mad as the cherry blossoms, and complex as a watch."

This has become my motto recently, and it makes my head hurt how far I am from that ideal.

Sometimes, I think I'm pulling off things pretty well, but nightmares are still more terrifying, cherry blossoms are crazier. Through sheer lack of experience, the complexity is more like a sundial.

I could not be more honored that there are people who like my work, despite this.

But things only work out the way they work out, right?

I may be unworthy, and I've never known myself to quite reach my goals, no matter how hard I try. I spent ten years trying to become an illustrator and less than a year trying to be a writer. I wanted only to be an artist and never wrote a novel in all those years. There's something extremely sad about the notion that I spent ten years misjudging my abilities.

Humans are confetti.

—Gakuto Coda, July 2001

Coming Soon . . .

The Hanged Man

The third volume of this intriguing,
thirteen-volume series will arrive
in stores in September 2008!

One

Takemi wore a confused gaze. Utsume's was emotionless, Aki's distrustful, Toshiya's hostile.

"So, where should I begin . . . ?"

No one possibly could mistake the mood in the room for friendly—and yet, Haga, the organizer of this gathering, was unperturbed as he glanced around.

"I had hoped to have Kusakabe here, as well, but so be it."

He had nerves of steel.

Toshiya forced back down the rage he felt building inside him, disgusted with the man's sheer gall. He could not trust a single thing this man said.

There was a peaceful smile on Haga's aging features, as if he had no idea what they thought of him. The smile seemed painted on. Their first encounter had been disastrous, and Toshiya had a particular grudge against that smile.

This man was an agent, who worked for a certain Agency, hunting down unnatural beings that invaded our world. That's how Haga and the other men in black had described themselves.

Like the urban legends about men in black showing up to question people who'd seen UFOs come to life, these men had been hovering around their lives since they first encountered the other world.

Because of his successes, the Agency now seemed to be hoping to win Utsume to its side. However, Toshiya had no intention of ever trusting the men in black, considering they first had tried to kill him, and then tried to kill Aki.

The others seemed to have similar opinions. With the exception of Utsume, they all were glaring at Haga.

This time, there was some confusion mixed in, though . . . because of the girl, the one Haga had brought with him today—a high school girl, staring fixedly at the ground. She was about their age—maybe a year older—slim, and a littler taller than average.

No one recognized her. None of them could figure out what this nervous-looking girl was doing here.

"Well," Haga said, looking around him once more, "first, let me introduce you. This is Fuyumi Oosako. She's a senior, attending Seisou High, like you."

At this, the girl bobbed her head. The movement caused her short hair to sway slowly.

Everyone stared at her. She wasn't much older than them, but she looked haggard. Her coloring was poor. She was either sick or fatigued, and she looked exhausted. She was staring fixedly at the edge of the table, without offering so much as a glance in their direction. Yet her body was both tense and timid in its pose, as if she were extremely conscious of her surroundings.

She seemed to be working very hard at not looking around her, somehow. Toshiya, who wasn't sure what to make of this, frowned at her. Then, things began to feel off. In that moment, Toshiya sensed something very wrong in the girl's manner.

It might have been his imagination, but it made too strong an impression on him to be dismissed so easily. Although her face was turned toward the ground and half hidden behind her hair, he could swear he'd seen her expression shift. He could swear he'd seen her smile. For a fraction of a second, her lips had twisted, curling into the shape of a smile.

But when he looked again, all signs of it were gone. All that remained was a certainty that something about her felt creepy.

Apparently oblivious to this, Haga said, "Fuyumi is the reason I called you all here."

"Huh?" Toshiya asked, on the attack at once. "You dragged us all here for what?"

Toshiya was confident that he hated the Agency more than any of his friends did. He was ready for a fight from the moment an agent walked into the room.

Ignoring manners, he allowed his hatred to show clearly in his expression and his body language. He was not about to let any danger get near Utsume.

Haga didn't flinch, however; it was Fuyumi who recoiled from Toshiya's intensity.

When he noticed that, Toshiya made a sour face. He hadn't intended to scare her. She made it hard for him.

"Hear me out," Hag said, smiling peacefully. "I didn't come here today to do anything to you. In fact, I'm here to ask for your cooperation."

"Cooperation?" Toshiya growled back, not letting down his guard.

"Yes, cooperation, from the Dark Prince Utsume and his companions."

Utsume's eyes narrowed slightly, but he showed no other response.

Haga looked around the room. The tension in the air was almost visible.

There was a long silence, and then Aki sighed, as if to suggest she understood everything. "Why don't you just come out with it?" she said, giving in. "There's only one reason why you'd have business with Kyo."

"Hey!" Toshiya grumbled. "Why should we listen to him?"

"It's not like we really have a choice," Aki calmly responded.

"Well, at least listen before you make up your minds," Haga said. "We can decide if you want to cooperate afterward. I promise you will be allowed to refuse." He smiled again.

Obviously, Toshiya did not trust that smile. The others looked equally dubious.

Haga spread out his hands expansively. He glanced around at each of their faces, and then he began: "Fuyumi recently visited a psychiatrist, complaining that she had been seeing things."

Toshiya glanced at Fuyumi again.

"They tried counseling, medication, and several other methods, to no effect. A certain psychiatrist brought the news to our attention. This doctor had been told a thing or two about what to look for, and he believed this case met those conditions. This is how we became aware of her condition," Haga explained, giving Fuyumi a significant glance. There was a trace of reserved observation in his manner, very much like that of a doctor.

He paused dramatically, testing if she would stop him. Then, he continued: "The cause of her 'delusions' is the other world."

Takemi appeared surprised; everyone else in the room seemed to have guessed as much, though.

"Thought so," Aki muttered, annoyed. "That's why you need Kyo?"

"Exactly."

"'Need' meaning you intend to conduct an experiment using him as a subject?"

"Same thing," Haga said smoothly. "Her particular condition is difficult to approach using our method, so we have decided to entrust the matter to an expert monster-hunter."

Essentially, the matter was beyond the Agency's abilities, so it was turning the case over to a group of high school students—just to see what would happen.

At this point, Utsume finally broke his silence: "When did I become an 'expert monster-hunter'?"

"Oh?" Haga said, feigning surprise. "If you disagree, it's merely a result of your perception."

Not many people could make such declarations concerning Utsume.

"This world is full of people labeled against their wishes. That we disagree simply proves the discrepancy between your perceptions of yourself and other people's perceptions of you. Looked at realistically, I'm sure someone as intelligent as you can see which perception is more accurate. I'd advise you take this moment to adjust your perceptions of your own status."

Utsume snorted, saying nothing.

Haga leaned toward Utsume and launched into an explanation, "Listen to me. You've easily driven off unnatural beings without killing them, beings the Agency never could've handled. We have been waging a secret war against these beings for decades, and you have methods at your disposal that, for one reason or another, we've been unable to use. Most humans are powerless against the other world, which is why we dispose of those who've come in contact with it—there is no other way to cut the link they've made. Anyone who makes contact with the other world will die or go mad, never surviving intact. Anyone who knows the other world belongs to that world.

"The Zen master of Ibukiyama is a perfect example, old as it is. One day, this Zen master heard a voice from the sky. It said, 'I will guide you to paradise.' Before the eyes of his students, the Zen

master vanished into the sky in the east, being led by a Buddha. The students didn't doubt their master's ascension. However, he was found seven days later at the back of the mountain, crazily chanting sutras. Three days after that, he died, without ever recovering his wits. It's a story from *Konjaku Monogatari*. This is what happens to normal humans who have encountered a kami-kakushi," Haga said forcefully.

"But you—you entered the other world. And against all odds, you've remained on the human side of things. All that contact and knowledge of the other world, with a being from the other world by your side, and yet your mind remains much like ours. This is very surprising indeed. Perhaps you will be able to save people that we cannot save.

"That's something you know well, Kidono. Utsume was able to save you; perhaps he will be able to save Fuyumi, as well."

Aki did not reply.

"Your experience with the other world nearly killed you. By our methods, we would've had no choice but to dispose of you, the same as with Fuyumi. Yet you were saved.

"What do you think? Do you think Utsume might be able to save Fuyumi, as well? Surely, you agree that it would be a shame to do nothing, sentencing her to die."

Still Aki did not answer. She simply frowned unhappily, something that clearly signaled her agreement.

Toshiya also had been unable to stop himself from acknowledging Haga's point. He turned his gaze to Fuyumi. If they refused to cooperate, then their decision inevitably would lead to her death.

For a moment, he pitied her—but he quickly shook off those feelings. Pitying her shouldn't change Toshiya's top

priority: Utsume's safety. Anything to do with the men in black should be regarded as suspect. And more than anything else, the sinister impression Fuyumi had made on him was bothering Toshiya.

No one could think of anything to say.

Eventually, Takemi asked, "What should we do, your majesty?"

Utsume answered at once: "Tell us more."

"Utsume!" Toshiya yelled angrily. "I'm against it. It's too dangerous."

"Yes, it is dangerous . . . but it's also interesting," Utsume said flatly.

"Hey!"

"I won't insist. If you don't want to hear, leave the room," Utsume said quietly. "Well? Now's your chance."

Nobody moved.

"It might be very dangerous," Utsume said.

"So? If you're in, then so am I," Aki said lightly. "I'd be dead if you hadn't saved me. I plan to make myself useful." She folded her fingers together on her lap.

Ayame, seated as always at Utsume's side, naturally showed no signs of leaving.

Takemi did not have Aki's resolve; the moment passed while he was still trying to make up his mind.

None of them moved.

Toshiya looked around at the others and then sighed. He sat back against the sofa with enough force that it creaked loudly, and he glumly closed his eyes.

"You're staying?" Aki asked.

"Of course," he grumbled.

Two

The mood grew increasingly grim.

Haga turned quietly to Fuyumi, saying, "Go ahead."

"Okay," she answered tentatively. She did not immediately continue, though.

As she waited for Fuyumi to speak, Aki nodded to herself. She'd expected this. She felt sorry for Toshiya; at the same time, she knew this wasn't something they could run from. No matter how much Toshiya hated it, the other world always would be at Utsume's heels. Aki believed Utsume was drawing it toward himself unconsciously.

Utsume and the other world were inseparable. Aki, unlike Toshiya, had no real objections to this state of affairs. Unless things like this happened, Aki stood little chance of being any service to Utsume. The strongest link between her and Utsume was the other world. Without that, Aki stood little chance of standing close to him. At least, that's what she believed.

Ultimately, if she could stand at Utsume's side, then the misfortune of strangers or Toshiya's feelings didn't matter—even if she were wronging Fuyumi, Toshiya, and Utsume in the process. She knew it was self-centered, but she sat there anyway, without a trace of guilt.

She nearly had died, but it had not changed her. Undoubtedly, she was afraid to acknowledge anything, afraid to change. She had longed for the strength to remain unchanged no matter what happened, but this was not real strength.

That line of thought threatened to send her into the abyss in her heart, though, so she felt relieved when Fuyumi at last began to speak, interrupting Aki's thoughts. She focused back on reality, listening carefully. Aki was always good at covering. That had not changed at all.

"I think it all started then," Fuyumi began at last, speaking as everyone stared straight at her. "My brother was the first to be affected. At the end of April, he became unable to sleep, and he began complaining that he was hearing and seeing things. He began acting like he wasn't himself."

Fuyumi paused to explain that she had a brother in college, and then she continued in a low, flat voice—as if she were struggling to keep her emotions in check: "It was just insomnia, we thought. We believed it would get better—until two months ago, when he ran out of the house, screaming wildly. He ran up into the mountains, where he hanged himself from a tree with his own belt."

The group reacted with stunned silence.

"We couldn't save him. He was dead . . . a suicide."

This shocking story left Takemi looking dumbfounded.

Aki listened quietly, watching and waiting. It was painful to look directly at Fuyumi as she quietly told her story—but as she spoke, something very different from sadness began to creep over her features.

"My brother had tied a belt to his neck, and his body was hanging from the branch." Fuyumi's eyes stayed glued to the table, never moving. "He looked like a doll, hanging there. He'd died of suffocation, and his face was swollen, black and purple."

With a faltering voice, she described what she had seen: "His eyes were wide open, bright red with blood—like they were

about to pop out, like the congested blood was pushing them out of their sockets. His lips were swollen, hideously discolored, and there were bubbles at the corners of his mouth. The belt was biting into the skin of his neck, twisting it out of shape. His hands and legs hung limply, floating in the air. He was like a broken toy, deformed. . . ."

On and on, her description continued. As she spoke, she grew more and more unnatural. The air around Fuyumi had long since left the realm of normality behind.

Aki and Toshiya exchanged glances. The other two were staring at Fuyumi—Takemi absently and Utsume coolly.

Fuyumi droned on, never moving, simply staring at that same spot on the table. As she herself grew stranger, her unnatural experiences began to exhibit themselves through her words.

Fuyumi's brother had killed himself. He hadn't left a note, but considering the situation, it was safe to conclude that his illness either had caused his death or led to it directly. Thus, the investigation was open and shut. No one suspected a thing. After all, strange things happen.

Fuyumi had been of the same mind, considering her brother's weird ravings and actions had been growing steadily more frequent, and he obviously had been unwell.

"It's calling me!" he would say. Or "can't you see it?" Sometimes, it was "don't come in!" These phrases were sometimes spoken, sometimes shrieked. Despite their frequency, Fuyumi had believed her brother would get better. Most of the time, he was perfectly normal—and until a few days before his death, he had been going to college and taking classes without any problem.

To Fuyumi, he had been her brother, just as he always had been, only with these strange episodes now and then. He was

fighting them valiantly, struggling to be normal, trying not to bother the people around him.

When the strangeness was upon him, he would say odd things or lock himself in his room, not letting anyone in. If someone were to try to enter, he'd resist furiously, scowling, roaring at the person to stay out, as if he were someone else entirely—as if he were someone very sick indeed.

So his suicide seemed sudden, but not suspicious. Everyone agreed. Fuyumi had been certain that her brother's suicide was caused by his insomnia. It was a nervous breakdown, she had thought.

That, however, was not the case. She first realized this two weeks after her brother's death. That day, she'd entered her brother's room—not for any particular reason, or at least not for any she remembered. Her memories of that day were very fuzzy, with many missing pieces. She could remember fragments, though, and she used them to piece together the story.

When she'd entered her brother's room, she found a book lying on the table, one she hadn't seen before. Although Fuyumi had been in her brother's room several times since his death, she didn't remember having seen that book before.

Puzzled, she gave it a closer look. It was a book from the school library. She vaguely remembered that it was very thin, but that was all the detail she could recall. Her only vivid memories were of the book being there and the stamp on the inside cover that read, "Not for circulation." That mark had made a strong impression—a very sinister impression, somehow. She didn't know why, but it felt as if her eyes were being dragged into the pattern, like she was staring down at the book from a dizzyingly high place. Her body had felt as if she were shrinking back from

the object, yet she was being pulled toward it at the same time—a terrifying feeling of vertigo.

In that moment, she'd forgotten everything. And unable to resist, she had begun to read the book.

Fuyumi remembered nothing more than that. Her eyes had scanned over the sentences helplessly. And then, the next thing she knew, it was morning. She could not remember the title, the contents, or where the book was.

When her memories resumed, it was morning, and the book was gone.

She would have assumed it was a dream if she had not missed so much time. However, something told her that it had really happened.

"I got some books at the library today, but a book I'd never seen before got in the pile by accident." Her brother had mentioned this to her, just before he'd started acting strange. She'd completely forgotten about it, but her brother had been holding a very thin book at that time. Although she remembered nothing else, she knew the book was probably one in the same.

Fuyumi's father was a librarian at the school library, so she'd asked him about the thin book. He told her he remembered nothing like it in the collection.

Although it bothered her, there was nothing else she could do. She had no clues, and no idea what had happened to the book. It was questionable whether the book even existed. She had no choice but to doubt her memories, even her own sanity.

And then, all that was forgotten—because from that day on, Fuyumi began to see things. She learned what her brother had been afraid of, what he had seen and heard. Fuyumi's terrors had begun.

First came dreams.

That first night after she'd found the book, Fuyumi had dreamed that she was sitting at her desk in her bedroom. The door behind her opened with a creak. She slowly turned around . . . only to see a corpse hanging outside the open door.

She had bolted awake.

Then, she'd had the dream every night after that, every time she fell asleep.

Soon she had stopped sleeping. She kept the light on all night, waiting for morning to come.

It wasn't that she couldn't sleep—she was just afraid to. The corpse in the dream was terrifying. It was more than that, though: She felt like the dream was calling to her.

The hanged body in the dream was waiting for her, waiting for her to come to it in the dream.

She couldn't tell anyone. She couldn't ask anyone for help. If she told someone, she'd be laughed at—or worse, sent to the hospital. She couldn't make her father worry like that, because Fuyumi's father was a single parent, and Fuyumi was his only surviving child. When her brother had been sick, her father had refused to allow him to see a psychiatrist; he couldn't admit that his child might've had a mental illness. So, just like her brother had done before her, Fuyumi was forced to pretend nothing was wrong, to pretend she was normal.

At first, she managed well enough—until the hanged man left her dreams and entered her waking world.

One month ago, Fuyumi had begun hearing the sound of the rope creaking. After that, Fuyumi had started to see it. "Ever since, in the corner of my eye, I regularly see the shadow of a hanged body," Fuyumi said quietly. "And the sounds grew worse.

Any little noise started to sound like voices to me." Fuyumi never once looked up. "Every sound I hear seems to be calling out to me, saying, 'Come here, come here.' The first time I saw it, I was peering out a classroom window; hanging from a tree way over by the university, I saw the shadowy figure of a hanged man."

Her revelation was met with silence.

"When I looked again, though, scared at what I might see, there was nothing there. So I thought the dreams had made me jumpy—and that one time, that would be all. But I was wrong. Since then, I've seen it again and again and again." She droned on, no emotion in her voice. "It's always at the edge of my vision, and I never see it clearly. I always catch a momentary glimpse of it, like something seen out the window of a moving bus.

"But I've been seeing it more and more often now, and it's getting closer and closer to me. At first, I would see it only once a day. Now, I see it many times, every day. At first, I would see it at distance—through a window at school, when I was standing in the garden. Now, it's close enough to reach out and touch—across the garden, across the hall, across the room, just outside the window. It's getting closer—getting closer to me!"

Everyone gulped.

Her words matched the horrific nature of her story. And yet, as she described her own horrors and her brother's death, her tone was much too calm. Moreover, Fuyumi persistently included detailed, grotesque, and unnecessary descriptions. Her manner was so obviously unnatural that no one would believe she was in a normal mental state. Even her concerns for her father sounded horribly empty.

Is she repressing her emotions? Or has she long since lost her mind? No sooner had the thought crossed Aki's mind than

Fuyumi's voice leapt up a notch, and she began raving with diseased passion.

"When I realized it was getting closer, I began to get scared. When it finally reached me, what would happen? I could think of nothing else. The body was only three feet away from me. When I looked in the bathroom mirror, I could see a rope over the stall behind me—as if someone had hanged herself in the toilet stall. When I turned around, nothing was there. The delusions were becoming more and more realistic, and I began to think I was seeing my own destiny. I know my brother saw it, too; I was seeing the same thing my brother saw!"

Fuyumi began talking faster and faster. Her mouth moved on its own, like she was possessed.

"I couldn't take it any more. I tried so hard not to think about it, but I knew I was doing just what my brother had done. What would happen to me when the hanged man got to me? Would I go crazy and hang myself like my brother? I was so scared that my head was spinning. I really thought I was going crazy." There was a tremor in Fuyumi's voice.

"Still, the hanged thing appeared. I'd wake up in the middle of the night, and it would be hanging at the foot of my bed, glaring down at me. I could see its empty eyes. The face was hidden in shadow, but the eyes were open wide, and one of them was pointed the wrong way. There was a thin cord digging into the flesh of its pale throat, squeezing it, stretching it. It was hanging from the rope, this heavy thing—not a person anymore. The rope was digging into the skin, so deep that it seemed to fuse with the flesh of the neck. Long, white, twisted, the rope, the neck, the elongated throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the

throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat, the throat . . ."

Fuyumi's words suddenly had begun jerking out of her, repeating like a broken record.

Aki felt a shiver run down her spine.

"Fuyumi!" Haga said sharply, grabbing her shoulder.

Instantly, Fuyumi was calm again, just like before.

"After a lot of thought, I went to see a psychiatrist, without telling my father. I was reluctant to go there, but . . ."

Her voice was emotionless again.

The dramatic change was coldly sinister, Aki thought. Her throat was dry. Toshiya's was, too, apparently—because he started to say something, but it didn't quite make it out. He forced himself to swallow and tried again. "There?" he asked.

"The hospital. The mental hospital."

"Naijin?"

"Yes," Fuyumi nodded.

Anyone would be reluctant to set foot inside that place, with its reputation locally. Fuyumi obviously had needed help, though.

Fuyumi fell silent.

At last, Utsume spoke. "A few questions."

"Yes?" Fuyumi said, not looking up.

"You are the only one who sees it—no one else ever does?"

"Right. I indirectly asked my friends, but they clearly couldn't see anything. My brother also had been the only one who could see anything—I never saw anything when he was going through it."

Utsume frowned and glanced down at Ayame beside him. "Can you see this girl?" he asked.

"Yes, I can," Fuyumi said.

She had spoken without looking up again, but Utsume apparently believed her, regardless. "Okay. So, none of us have reached the critical information yet," he mused, glaring at the air.

Aki followed neither the question nor the conclusions he'd apparently drawn from it. She stared at him, puzzled.

"What does that mean, your highness?" Takemi asked.

Utsume replied, "Beings from the other world are transmitted by the telling of stories, remember? However, we all have heard the story, and we can't see the hanged man. Fuyumi can see Ayame, though, so she's not unresponsive. In other words, the real story is not what she just told us."

When she heard this, Fuyumi muttered, "I'm . . . not lying."

"No. Your story is true. It merely describes the surface phenomenon, though," Utsume explained, shaking his head. "Your story describes what the being does, not what it is. If your story were the real thing, we'd all be able to see the hanged man now.

"We don't see anything, though, so we're not infected yet. There must be some information you've kept secret—or that you've forgotten. Going by what you've told us, the real story is probably in the book that vanished. That's mere conjecture, though, nothing but a theory."

Utsume's choice of words bothered Aki. Although she was a bit surprised that he was taking this unstable girl at her word, that wasn't what really bugged her.

Aki opened her mouth to speak, but Haga held up a hand to stop her. "Very well done," he said, clapping. He sounded very impressed. "Your methods are extraordinary, Dark Prince."

Haga's praise elicited no response.

"You've reached the heart of the matter far, far faster than we did. It's a shame that your methods are inhuman and we cannot use them. After all, they are also highly dangerous."

Utsume showed no reaction at all.

Haga ruefully shook his head. "Oh, well," he said, shrugging.

At last, Aki found an opening to ask Utsume about what had bothered her: "Kyo?"

"What?"

"I'm not following your line of thought. You said if her story were the real thing, then we'd be able to see the hanged man, too."

"Yes," Utsume nodded.

"Then, that means the hanged man actually was here?"

"Exactly."

"Aha. I get you now. I knew you'd skipped something," Aki said nodding. It all made sense now.

For a moment Takemi was lost. He had missed something, and he looked confused for a beat. Then, quite suddenly, he got it. "Eh? Oh! What? What do you mean?"

"It was here. That doesn't call for a double-take," Aki snorted.

"Really?"

"Probably by that window. Ayame tugged my sleeve, so I knew something was up; then, while Fuyumi was talking, she never once looked at the window. I couldn't see anything, but Ayame could. It was definitely there."

Ayame nodded gravely, and Utsume folded his arms.

Everyone gaped at the window, spooked.

Fuyumi said quietly, "It was."

They all turned to look at her.

"It was there the whole time—behind the lace curtains, watching me."

A strained smile floated across her face. Then, she giggled.

Aki folded her arms tightly. She glanced over and saw goose bumps on Takemi's arms.

"I-it was here?" he said, glancing nervously at the window.

Only the wall of the neighbor's house appeared outside the window now, but the shadow of the lace curtains made it look rather sinister. There was nothing strange about it—it was just a trick of the mind—but it was hard to stay calm with the knowledge that something *had* been there.

Fuyumi did not stop laughing. Her lips were curled in a smile, yet she was obviously suffering, not enjoying herself. Her laugh spilled out of her as if her lungs were convulsing.

For a moment, the air seethed, but then Utsume suddenly resumed his questioning as if nothing had happened.

"It sounds like there are three symptoms: nightmares with auditory and visual hallucinations," he said. "We can assume the insomnia and withdrawal from others are the result of these rather than symptoms themselves. The symptoms are not the true nature of the situation, though. We still don't have enough information."

Utsume fixed his gaze on Fuyumi. "You can't remember anything about the book?"

"Sorry. Nothing," Fuyumi said sadly, her smile fading.

"The title or author?"

"Not at all."

"Do you remember what the book looked like?"

"No, nothing clear. If I saw it, though, I might recognize it."

Utsume closed his eyes, falling silent. At last, he opened them again, at the same time changing tactics: "The hanged man from your dreams and visual hallucinations . . . he isn't your brother?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"It isn't him?"

"I don't think it is."

"Anything else happen that you forgot to mention?"

"Um . . . ?"

"No matter how small, did anything strange happen?"

She thought for a minute before speaking. "Ah. I'm not sure about this, but it seems like I've been prone to sleepwalking occasionally."

Utsume's eyes narrowed. "Sleepwalking?"

"N-nothing serious. I mean, I can't sleep at all because of the dreams, so I get really tired in class; if I'm not careful, I'll pass right out. I mean, I fall asleep—but I don't have that dream, and I've never been yelled at for sleeping in class. I don't remember doing it, but I'm told I still take notes. The handwriting it terrible, though, not like mine at all, naturally," she laughed.

This response was perfectly normal, with no trace of the weirdness that had settled over her while she was telling her story.

She seemed as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, as if her true personality had emerged.

Aki frowned.

Realizing the conversation had reached a stopping point, Haga interjected. "Well? Will you cooperate?" he asked, looking around. "You understand the situation, I gather. Fuyumi is in a very precarious position." Haga leaned forward. "You handle this, or we will. The choice is entirely up to you."

He was pushing for a decision. And he did not need to remind them what the Agency's method would entail.

"Well?" Haga said, regarding Utsume with interest.

"Utsume," Toshiya interrupted, "I think we should think about this carefully."

"Either way is fine with me. Do what you like," Aki said.

"Y-yeah," Takemi hurriedly agreed.

Utsume folded his arms, closing his eyes.

"Give us some time," he said, conscious of the others' opinions. "Everyone is involved, so our decision should be unanimous. If we decide now, conflicts will arise."

"Oh?" Haga said, leaning forward. There was a glint of steel behind his soft smile. "You think that answer will suffice?"

"I don't care if it does or not," Utsume said, brushing off Haga's veiled threat.

"Why?" Haga asked.

"I merely stated our requirements. It's up to you to decide if that will 'suffice.'"

"That's your answer, then?" Haga asked, smiling at him. Utsume's life was in Haga's hands.

Aki gulped, on the edge of her seat.

"So be it." Haga abruptly relented. "You have until tomorrow. When you decide, you have my cell number. Please, decide quickly—don't forget that the more time that passes, the more danger Fuyumi is in."

Haga stood up. "Let's go, Fuyumi." He paused. "I hope to hear good things from all of you tomorrow," he said, smiling.

The smile was almost enough to make them forget his threat.

Fuyumi sluggishly got to her feet. "Please," she said, bowing.

In that instant, Aki thought she caught a glimpse of Fuyumi's true mind. When she had bowed, for a brief moment, Fuyumi's expression was serious, desperate. However, when she'd raised her head again, her expression wore the same gloominess as before.

As Fuyumi followed Haga out of the room, Aki asked herself which was the real girl. *Which Fuyumi is the real one?*

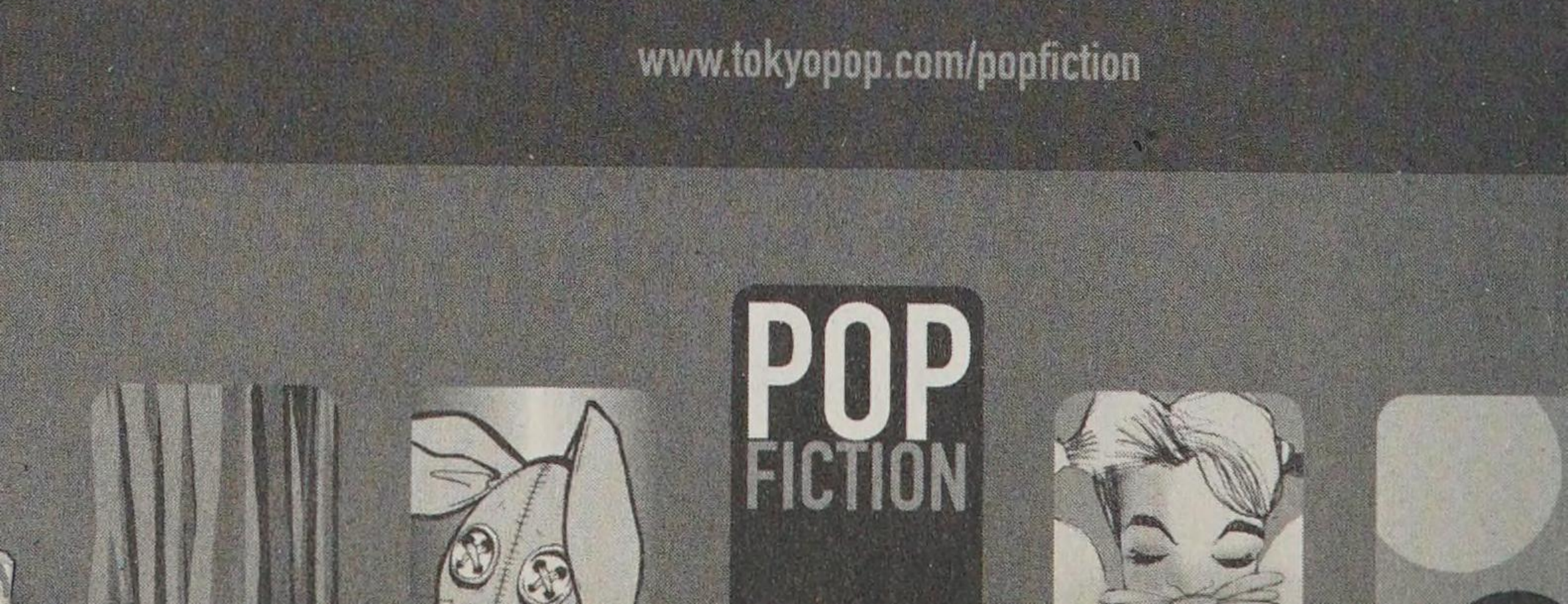
It was purely an instinctual response; Aki herself had no idea why this question floated through her mind.

To be continued . . .

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