

Yamori Mitikusa



Romance of the Imperial Capital Kotoyami

*A Tale of Living
Alongside Spirits*

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Romance of the Imperial Capital Kotogami: A Tale of Living Alongside Spirits

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Kotogami at a Glance

SINCE time immemorial, *yokai* existed in every town and village, every river and tree. Some fell in love with humans. Some sought to destroy them. To tame the unruly *yokai* spirits and quell their pandemonium, the Narrator Association was created. A Narrator's weapon of choice was not swords or guns, but rather books known as Kotogatari used to seal the spirits within their pages. Once sealed, a history of the *yokai* would be recorded upon its pages to keep the spirit asleep. Only a sufficiently gifted Narrator could call upon these spirits through the narration of the *yokai's* history, turning the spirit within into Kotogami.

With the power of Kotogami at their command, Narrators have brought peace to the Yamato Empire.

--An Excerpt from *Kotogami at a Glance* by Narrator Spirit Master Neo

Note: This story is set in an alternate version of Earth and Japan, and place names are intentionally misspelled to reflect this.

Chapter One: Imperial Capital Panhandlers? No Thanks.

THE Imperial Capital was alive with stories again that day.

“Come one, come all! Come see, come hear! The spectacle, the sensation! The story of the incredible Narrators and the Kotogami word spirits, of magnificent and miraculous *yokai* of all varieties!”

Stories? I’d rather not.

So Akari Mitsukuri thought, heading home after a tiring day of work.

In the empty lot Akari had quickly averted her eyes from, a gaggle of children gazed starry-eyed at a puppeteer who had set up his traveling puppet theater on the back of his bicycle. It appeared his main trade was selling candy, but the children seemed more interested in the colorful cardboard backdrops and the story he was telling.

Now Akari couldn’t help but notice that there was evidence of *stories* everywhere she looked on the street.

On a wooden telephone pole, a foreign movie poster depicting a heroine gazing raptly at a silver screen heartthrob. On the door of a nearby bookstore, a flyer announcing: “Literary Compilations Now Available for Order!” Happy-looking customers were emerging from the shop, books clutched in their arms.

Everywhere you looked. Stories and books.

It was a tough world to live in for Akari, who hated storytelling of all kinds.

Of course, she could appreciate that many people seemed to get great enjoyment from these diversions. And she didn’t really have a problem with it, if that was how *they* chose to spend their time. But in Akari’s mind, a story was something akin to a lie, and that was something she couldn’t abide.

In this age of fanciful stories, Akari was a practical working woman employed at a trading company in the Imperial Capital.

These days, the general consensus remained that women belonged at home.

So for a woman to go to work and earn her own money, well, that was something out of the norm. At the same time, however, such women drew admiring glances for the gorgeous modern fashions they could afford and the independence they represented.

But Akari wore a drab *meisen* silk kimono, and she only worked to survive. She had no other choice, having not a single relative. There was no glamor in her situation.

Hair tied back in a modern English-style braided bun, Akari wore a simple, long kimono in a golden-yellow hue. Her kimono belt was pulled tight as she meandered along in sturdy boots. The kimono had a simple striped pattern characteristic of the type, but Akari liked the little flower petals in deep red and salmon pink that also adorned the material.

Beneath her feet, the ground was packed earth, but the city was rigged for electricity with lines crisscrossing the street. Most private houses even had electricity now.

The streets got muddy in the rain, though, and Akari had to be extremely careful about the long hem of her kimono.

“I fancy some grilled chicken skewers for dinner. I think I’ll pick some up on my way home.”

Akari’s thin, pinched face was lit with a smile. Payday tended to have that effect on her.

After obtaining a couple of grilled chicken skewers for her dinner, Akari reached her lodgings with a spring in her step. Only then did she realize the place was on fire.

She stood frozen as the building’s panicking inhabitants dashed past her, fleeing the flames.

The building was a blazing inferno. Everything she owned in this world was inside.

“It’s a Raiju!”

One of the rubberneckers yelled out, and Akari lifted her head. That was

when she saw the huge beast perched on the roof of a nearby building, encircled by a haze of purple lightning.

The creature was huge and hulking, easily able to step over a single-story house in one bound. It was hard to make out the beast's features, as purple lightning was streaking across its entire body, but its sides billowed in and out as it breathed like a living thing.

It had to be one of those beastly *yokai* the whole city had been talking about lately, Akari thought.

The Western disciplines of science—physics, biology, and so on—could never explain these creatures. Implausible though they might be, their existence was all too real. Yes...beasts, monsters, and demons were a part of the fabric of modern life.

The military was overwhelmed when it came to quelling the beasts, and the citizens could do little else but cower in fear of the attacks until they passed. There was certainly nothing Akari could do about this.

The police came running up then, firing at the beast's thick hide with their pistols. But the creature barely twitched.

One of the police was yelling at the onlookers.

"Get a Narrator! Our guns are no good here. We need the power of the Kotogami!"

Narrator. Kotogami.

Even in the midst of the emergency, Akari's face stiffened. That was when she realized she should probably flee, and her hand tightened reflexively around the oil-paper package she was holding.

The policeman was right—when it came to these beasts, only the Narrators and the Kotogami would be of any help.

Akari finally turned, meaning to escape from the situation, but her path was blocked by the crowd of onlookers. Their faces were a mix of fear, fascination, and burning curiosity.

And all the while, the Raiju's crackling lightning streaks were indiscriminately

striking all around.

With a crack like a gunshot, a nearby wooden electricity pole toppled to the ground, on fire.

The nearby onlookers all scattered as they fled.

Akari could finally run too. But her pace was so slow.

This wasn't surprising. Akari had never been athletic, and she'd always gotten the lowest scores for physical education at school.

The Raiju crouched, then leaped down from the roof, sending streaks of lightning crackling from its limbs. Everything Akari had ever learned in science class was now running on a loop in her mind.

If the beast's lightning was like natural lightning, it would seek the closest target. But lightning could travel faster than any human could run. And lightning could *electrocute* humans.

And what was more...

"I didn't even get to eat my grilled chicken skewers..."

A sudden flash of orange light made Akari close her eyes.

Then she went flying.

But she never landed. Instead, she felt arms holding her, one around her shoulder and the other tucked under her legs. Akari opened her eyes in surprise and discovered that a strange man was cradling her in his arms.

Immediately, she blushed. Akari may have been a modern working woman, but she'd never felt the touch of a man and had certainly never been held in one's arms before.

To further complicate matters, he had a gorgeous face. Akari could see it in profile, clearly lit by the glow of the fire and crackling lightning.

He was young. Late twenties, maybe. Still, plenty young enough.

His long black hair reached to his collar, giving him the rakish look of a philanderer. But his features were somehow refined.

His porcelain skin was flawless and his nose was perfectly shaped, straight as

a knife. His smooth features gave him the appearance of a traditional Kyoto doll and signified good breeding. His eyes had a shrewdness to them, and they sparkled in the light of the inferno like glittering night stars.

The man seemed not entirely human to Akari, but then she noticed his expression as he was looking down at her. It was the relieved look of someone who had just saved the life of someone important to them—a very human emotion.

“Are you all right?!”

“I’m...I’m fine.”

Before Akari could ask him if *he* was all right, the young man put her down. Then he thrust something into her hands.

Akari took hold of the object—a Western-style book with a hard cover.

The book had a gorgeous amber-colored binding and was about as thick as one of Akari’s fingers. It was well made and looked to be of very high quality.

But before Akari even had time to read the title, the young man addressed her in tones of urgency.

“Please! Would you open the book? Just to the first page!”

“Er, the first page?”

As Akari looked up in confusion, she could see the Raiju over the young man’s shoulder, rampaging this way. Akari blanched. She had to get away from there.

But then the young man turned and started hurrying *toward* the Raiju, without any hesitation.

Wondering what in the blue blazes the young man was doing, Akari nonetheless opened the book in her hands.

Golden light immediately began to emanate from the pages, glowing as bright as the nearby inferno. Threads of this golden light, which Akari suddenly realized were in the shape of letters, rose off the page and streaked over to make contact with the young man, causing his hair to change color.

The next moment, the Raiju disappeared from sight. Then there was another

loud crack like a gunshot.

As Akari stood dumbfounded, the book laying open in her hands, the golden-haired young man lowered his foot back to the ground.

The Raiju had been forcefully slammed right into one of the nearby buildings that hadn't yet caught on fire.

Raiju were known for moving so fast the human eye could barely register it, but the young man had managed to kick the beast straight in the midsection. Akari only knew of one type of being capable of doing something like that.

The Raiju picked itself up and was about to continue its attack, when it paused. Something like fear passed across its hideous features, and it cowered. Then it turned and lumbered away.

The young man came to rejoin Akari, who simply watched the beast as it grew smaller the farther away it went.

While the young man had faced off against the creature, his face had been fierce, but now he looked at Akari with a kindly smile.

"You can close the book now. Thank you for the assistance."

"Oh, right."

Akari closed the book with a clap, and the young man's golden hair turned black once more. He held his hand out for the book, and as Akari passed it to him, she took note of the title, which read, *Kotogami: Tomohito Yagyou*.

A Kotogami: a word spirit, a divine soul enshrined within the pages of a sacred book.

"You're a Kotogami?"

Akari looked up at his beautiful face, and the young man smiled, narrowing his eyes gently and nodding.

"I am. My name is Tomohito Yagyou."

The young man introduced himself, pronouncing each word slowly as if relishing the opportunity. His figure was backlit by the brightness of the nearby flames. It was like he'd stepped right out of one of those stories Akari despised.

In this country, the Yamato Empire, *yokai* coexisted with humans.

Since time immemorial, the *yokai* had been here, in every town and village, every river and tree. Some fell in love with humans. Some sought to destroy them. To tame the unruly *yokai* spirits and quell their pandemonium, humans created Kotogatari, spirit tomes, in which a spirit's soul could be captured and enshrined.

To define these book-enshrined spirits with a name, humans referred to them as Kotogami, word spirits, and treated them with reverence and curiosity.

At least, the ones who liked stories did. Akari was not among their number.

Luckily, the flames were extinguished before they could spread to the surrounding area. But Akari's lodgings were burned to cinders. So perhaps it wasn't so lucky for her.

Akari went over to a nearby public telephone and dialed the office of her company, which owned the lodging house.

"Yes, it's a shame about the lodging house. But there isn't anything we can do about it at this moment. We'll have to consult with the people in charge of these things."

"Yes, but..."

"Yes, yes, I know. The lodging house was very convenient. But you're of marriageable age. Maybe this is a good time to think about finding a husband. We'll arrange some compensatory funds next week. Until then, you're on your own. Good day to you."

"Thank you for placing a call today."

As the other party hung up and the operator's smooth voice came down the line, Akari heaved a sigh and replaced the telephone receiver.

As a working woman, Akari was confronted with the marriage suggestion on a daily basis. There was no point arguing back. And she knew her boss had only brought it up now because he genuinely believed it would be the easiest way to deal with her predicament.

"I always knew my company was stingy."

Akari stepped away from the public telephone and returned to the site of the fire. She was hungry and didn't know what else to do, so she sat down on a piece of rubble and bit into a grilled chicken skewer. Miraculously, her dinner had made it through the incident unscathed.

The chicken was completely cold now, but the meat was juicy, and the sauce was sweet and tangy. Akari was starting to feel a lot better, despite her shock.

"So I have to fend for myself while they sort out all the red tape, do I? And here I am, alone in the capital without a single relative. Find myself a husband. Are they insane? That's their suggestion? In today's day and age, financial security is a far better option than marriage."

Despite the Imperial Capital being awash with Westernization and modernization, people still thought a woman belonged in the home. And even working women were expected to quit once they reached marrying age. Female company employees were looked down upon all the time. Forget marriage, Akari wanted to be self-sufficient. And she was sick of people's attitudes. Nobody understood her at all.

"I wonder when they're going to get around to providing me with alternative living arrangements..."

Maybe never? That terrible possibility suddenly occurred to her.

Her company paid below the average, but Akari had chosen it because they offered free lodgings for employees. Even if she could find a new, reasonably priced accommodation, her current wages would barely cover her expenses.

"And the cheapest places to rent are always the scary places. Oh no, where am I going to sleep tonight? The bank is closed, so I can't withdraw any money until tomorrow. Am I going to have to sleep under the stars? Oh, but hold on... It's Sunday tomorrow, so the bank will be closed then too..."

A cold gust of wind buffeted her, causing her to shrink in on herself.

Everything was just awful. Why was this happening to her?

"Excuse me?"

It was getting close to sundown. If she was going to act, she'd need to get a

move on.

Akari was gobbling down the last of her grilled chicken, planning to rummage in the wreckage to see if there was anything left of her furniture and other possessions, when...

“Excuse me!”

Akari was sure the voice wasn’t addressing *her*. But she looked up anyway and saw the Kotogami who’d rescued her earlier, Tomohito Yagyou, standing there.

After he’d saved her from all the ruckus, she’d been so desperate to call her company she’d dashed off without even saying goodbye, let alone a thank-you. By the time her call was done, he was nowhere in sight, so there was nothing she could do about it. Still, she felt guilty for not properly thanking him when she had the chance.

Now that she was able to get a good, calm look at him, she could see he was a fine figure of a young man indeed.

He was tall and well proportioned, and his crisp white shirt and brown tailored three-piece suit hung perfectly on his frame.

She hadn’t noticed it before, but now she spotted a bag slung over his shoulder, just the right size to hold a book.

He could be an actor with those looks, thought Akari distractedly, standing up and bowing her head politely.

“Uh...Mr. Yagyou? Allow me to apologize for not saying thank you for your assistance earlier.”

“Tomohito’s just fine. At any rate, never mind about that! What are you going to do now?”

Feeling her cheeks grow hot under the Kotogami’s—Tomohito’s—concerned gaze, Akari averted her eyes.

He’d come from the pages of a book—a Kotogatari, the representation of everything Akari disliked. And yet he seemed so genuinely concerned for her well-being. She couldn’t dislike him just for being what he was. She wasn’t that immature. After all, she’d been working to support herself for two years now.

She was more concerned about the fact that he'd caught her sitting on the roadside uncouthly scarfing down cold grilled chicken skewers.

Akari quickly hid the empty skewers back in the oiled paper before she answered him.

"Oh, I'll manage somehow. Things tend to work themselves out, don't they?"

Akari knew she couldn't rely on anyone's help. She always had to put on a strong front to survive, but it was strange how saying it out loud made her feel better. And she had some delicious grilled chicken in her belly now. She was ready to take on the world again. But then her eyes opened wide as she saw what Tomohito was doing.

With a fluid motion, he dropped to one knee in front of her.

For a supposedly divine being, he could show a little more concern for his nice suit.

As Akari stared in shock at his straight-backed kneeling form, his perfect skin blushed a deep red as he spoke.

"Please become my mistress!"

Akari shot him a look of disgust, as if he were a cockroach.

His eyebrows leaped up in surprise as Akari recomposed her features.

Then she turned on her heel and started heading for the rubble.

If you spent enough time in the Imperial Capital, you were bound to run into one of them—the big-city perverts and the panhandlers. But right here, right now? Ugh.

It seemed as if these days, even Kotogami were running honey traps. Or maybe this young man was planning to use his good looks to leech off a rich older woman? Spirit or not, she didn't have time for this tomfoolery.

"P-Please, hold on just a minute!"

"I don't even have the funds to support myself, much less a boy toy, so please look elsewhere!"

Tomohito sprang to his feet to stop her. Even though Akari shot him a glare

that was several degrees below freezing, he was undeterred.

“Please don’t run away. I really do want to help you.”

“So that ‘be my mistress’ bit, that was just a joke?”

“I was a hundred percent serious!”

“...The finest of days to you, sir.”

Cutting him down with the polite parting words she’d learned at her all-girls school, Akari hurried over to a police officer who was sifting through the burned remains of the building. The police were known for being heavy-handed. If the young spirit kept following her, the officer would surely intervene on her behalf.

Akari had always thought a Narrator was needed to call forth a Kotogami from a Kotogatari book. Maybe this officer would know more about how it all worked.

“Please, just hear me out! I’m only a Kotogami—I assure you I’m not dangerous!”

“Officer! Can I get some help here?”

“Ah, wait! Please wait!”

Akari ignored the tenacious Kotogami and was about to raise her voice even louder, when a man in uniform suddenly appeared in front of her.

“All right, young lady. That’s quite far enough.”

The man was blocking her path. Late thirties, wearing a straight-collared uniform similar to a police officers’ but in a different color. Akari suddenly froze, noticing the collar and wondering if he was military. But his lack of that kind of aura gave her pause.

His hair was cut in an unkempt style, and his face looked sluggish and sleepy. His collar was unfastened, too. He looked nothing like a disciplined member of the military.

But Tomohito suddenly looked relieved as he hailed the man.

“Munakata! You’re finally here!”

“Calm yourself. I’ve been run ragged all day on Raiju hunting duty, and then

you call me out here all of a sudden...”

“What seems to be the trouble, you lot?”

As the military (*or was he?*) man just stood there looking clearly exhausted, the nearby police officers started to gather around them, drawn by the commotion.

As Akari bowed contritely, alarmed by their severe expressions, the police officers ignored her. They were looking at Munakata—more precisely, at his uniform—and the next moment, they were saluting him.

“A Yokai Containment Narrator! We had no idea! Thank you for coming!”

Yokai Containment Narrator? Akari could hardly believe her ears.

Among the Narrators who controlled the Kotogami spirits, the Yokai Containment Narrators were a special division within the military who controlled the dangerous *yokai* variety. Everyone in the city knew who they were.

Akari ran her eyes over Munakata again. At his waist, he wore a belt that held a military saber and a rather large item pouch. Just large enough to hold several books.

Munakata nodded vaguely, seeming to take the officers’ show of respect toward him as merely a matter of course.

“I’m Munakata, of the Imperial Army’s Yokai Containment Narrator Squad. The Raiju is being tracked by some of our other Narrators. I need you fellows to secure this area. Also, this young woman appears to have been attacked by the Raiju. I’ll be taking her with me for debriefing.”

“Certainly, sir!”

Hold on, why do I have to go anywhere with you? ...was what Akari wanted to say, just as the officers—her last hope for salvation—walked off.

The moment Akari began to despair over being abandoned to the slovenly-looking Munakata and annoyingly persistent Kotogami Tomohito, the aforementioned Munakata put his hand on her shoulder.

“All right, then. You’ll be coming with us.”

“Perhaps you could tell me the reason why I have to go with you?”

“You opened this one’s Kotogatari, did you not?”

Munakata stabbed a finger in the direction of Tomohito, who looked jumpy on his feet as he stood waiting.

Okay, I opened it, but so what? ...was what Akari wanted to say, but the words died in her throat. Maybe it was the presence of the military that was making her nervous.

And anyway, Akari wasn’t raised to talk back to authority.

It looked like she was going with them, then. But there was something else.

“Hold on. One more question.”

“Another one?”

Munakata made a face as though Akari was being a huge nuisance. But Akari was unperturbed by his sharp look. She met it head-on.

“When we get to where we’re going, will you give me something to eat?”

The grilled chicken skewers hadn’t quite cut it. Filling her belly was all she could think about.

Munakata looked even more annoyed and unimpressed. But Akari kept staring at him until he finally sighed.

“Fine, we’ll order in. Tomohito, would you mind?”

“Not at all! I’m delighted to be of service!”

Tomohito’s face lit up, and he bowed reverently.

Akari cheered internally, but she was getting sick of this Munakata guy already.

They got into a brand-new type of automobile and arrived in Shiyabu. It was the site of an army barracks and training ground, and the night air was still and solemn, heavy with military presence.

Their destination was a sturdy stone building that gave off a stately aura in the dusky darkness.

On the gatepost, Akari could read the words “Association of Yokai Containment Narrators” illuminated by the electric lights. So, this was where they had brought her.

Akari was led into the parlor, where she soon began to devour a bowl of deep-fried pork cutlets over rice.

Having pork right after chicken felt luxurious. These military men were generous after all. But Munakata ate a bowl of grilled *beef* over rice, and that sort of irritated her.

“You’re really chowing down on that, Miss Mitsukuri.”

Akari lifted her head as Munakata addressed her. She’d introduced herself in the car—the only conversation they’d shared—so he knew her name as well now.

“I was on my way home from work, that’s why. Don’t they say you always get hungry after battle?”

“Ah, were you?”

“Also, being stared at while I eat makes me nervous and eat too fast.”

“...I see.”

Munakata stopped looking quite so shocked over her unladylike gorging and shrugged instead.

Akari cleaned her bowl down to the last grain of rice before she finally stopped eating and looked up at Tomohito, who was standing beside the sofa. As their eyes met, Tomohito blushed a deep pink and blinked rapidly.

He really was incredibly handsome. But recalling his creepy request from earlier, Akari felt zero attraction.

“All right then, Miss Mitsukuri. Now that we’ve both filled our stomachs, let’s get down to business.”

“All right.”

Akari sat up straight, and Munakata pointed at the Kotogami standing beside them. Akari took that to mean Tomohito was the business they were there to

discuss.

“As I mentioned, my name’s Munakata. I’m a Yokai Containment Narrator with the Imperial Army. You know what a Narrator does?”

“Yes. They narrate the cinematographs, the moving pictures. They describe the story on the screen and speak for the characters so we can hear.”

“No, that’s not what I— Not that kind of narrator.”

“I was just joking. Everyone knows the Narrators are people who manifest Kotogami by telling stories aloud.”

Munakata’s face twitched. But Akari was just a layperson, and that was her understanding of how the Narrators worked.

Thanks to the Narrators taming the Kotogami, humans no longer had cause to fear them, and they could now peacefully coexist.

At school, Akari had learned about the ancient art of the early Kotogami-taming Narrators, an art that had begun in secret among a few select families. In time, it became more widespread, and now talented Narrators had even been inducted into the present-day military.

“But to be more precise, we need to use special books to seal the demon *yokai* and the good spirits alike. Take this one, for example—Tomohito Yagyou.”

Taking his cue from Munakata, Tomohito bowed gracefully.

Suddenly, Akari realized the golden letters that sprang from the pages of the book she’d opened had been the letters of his name.

“He’s under my charge, more or less, but tends to get out and go wandering off by himself.”

“Huh...”

But if a spirit could manifest, why would it stay in one place?

Akari muttered politely, not really getting it. Munakata thought for a moment, then pulled a book out of the pouch at his waist.

It was bound in stiff leather. Munakata opened it casually and began reading aloud.

“Begrudged though she may be, in service to thee,

Her loyalty be without reproach.

The dog spirit Kuroe.”

His voice was clear and resonant as he continued speaking languidly. Akari felt goose bumps prickle along her arms.

She was taken aback, maybe even a little impressed, by this surprising new side of him. But her rising sense of dislike for him was stronger.

She rubbed at the goose bumps with irritation. Nope. She really did NOT like this man.

While Akari sat there in discomfort, inky-black letters rose from the pages of the open book and formed the shape of a human—a woman.

Soundlessly, her feet made contact with the ground right beside Munakata. She was in all black, from her kimono to her hair. Only her skin was a corpse-like shade of white. One other thing—she had furry ears, like a dog. Here was another Kotogami.

She ignored both Akari and Tomohito, staring only at Munakata as she emitted an aura of darkness.

“How may I serve you, Master?”

“Take these bowls and give them to whoever’s outside. Tell them to have them returned to the restaurant.”

“Certainly.”

The young woman nodded briskly, picked up Munakata’s and Akari’s bowls, and left through the doors.

Akari watched her leave, the woman’s doglike tail wagging. Then Munakata started talking again.

“You have just observed a Narrator at work. We open the book and read aloud, thus manifesting the Kotogami. This fellow, however...he continually manifests of his own free will.”

“So you don’t have to read aloud for, uh, Mr. Yagyou to appear?”

“I’ve never even read his book, much less out loud.”

Munakata answered her question matter-of-factly. Akari suddenly recalled her meeting with Tomohito.

He’d saved her from the rampaging Raiju, his own book in hand. So if he could manifest himself at will, that meant he wasn’t exactly bound to its pages, didn’t it?

“That sounds like quite the conundrum.”

“I manifest at will!”

Tomohito flexed his bicep, but Akari ignored him.

She was starting to grasp the gravity of the situation. She raised an eyebrow at Munakata, who continued on cue.

“Well, there’s more to it, but it’s a long story. Essentially, though, he’s harmless. Due to that, and also because there doesn’t seem to be a single Narrator around who can actually read his book, he’s slipped through the net.”

“Harmless?”

“Well, he has been so far.”

Long story or not, shouldn’t he just tell her? But despite registering Akari’s concern, Munakata had simply reaffirmed the Kotogami’s harmlessness. Sensing that they were getting nowhere in this discussion of Tomohito’s origins, Akari decided to drop it.

“So what do you mean, no one can read his book? It’s right there—can’t you just open it?”

Akari furrowed her brow in confusion. Munakata held out his hand to Tomohito.

“Tomohito, give me your Kotogatari.”

“Certainly. Here it is.”

Tomohito solemnly withdrew his book from his bag and handed it to Munakata. Just as he’d done with the other one moments before, Munakata went to open it. But even as he tugged on its cover until his knuckles grew pale,

it wouldn't open. It was as if it had been glued shut.

Akari blinked several times. Munakata didn't seem surprised, however. He handed the book to Akari.

She noticed again how thin it was. Despite the splendid binding, the book itself was only about the same thickness as Akari's finger. She ran her eyes over the amber-colored cover, the gilt letters that read *Kotogami: Tomohito Yagyou*...and then she tried to open it.

It opened easily in her hands, exactly as it had earlier outside her burning lodgings. She could see the soft white pages within. This time, though, no golden letters floated out. It just looked like a regular book.

The moment Akari was about to flip through the pages, an elegant but bony hand reached out and stopped her. She looked up to see Tomohito blushing at her.

"D-Don't look at it so closely..."

He was embarrassed, as if she were snooping at some private, secret part of him. Akari narrowed her eyes, and Munakata cleared his throat with annoyance.

"So, to conclude, this Kotogami has chosen you as his Narrator. I'm handing him over for you to take charge of, and—"

"I decline."

Akari shook her head firmly, interrupting Munakata midsentence.

She didn't care if she was being rude or in danger of being carted off to jail for insubordination. She closed the Kotogatari book with a clap and slid it across the table toward the men, her back straight. Munakata and Tomohito looked at her, bemused.

"I abhor stories. Taking charge of a Kotogatari...that means becoming a Narrator, right? I want no part of this."

Akari had chosen her current company, Sumimata Corporation, mostly because it only dealt in practical things, like clocks.

This was unthinkable, being pressured into involvement with the very

embodiment of everything she hated. Stories. *Fiction*.

Fine, then. Some people needed stories in their lives. Akari only asked that they keep her out of it and wouldn't try to rope her in or involve her in any way.

Akari rubbed at her still-present goose bumps through her kimono, scowling at both men. Munakata sighed deeply and rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

"This is so annoying. Tomohito, this concerns you, not me. *You* convince her. You have permission, so go ahead, got it?"

"Certainly."

Akari blinked in shock. *Seriously?* Then Munakata lay down on the sofa and seemed to fall asleep. *Seriously?!*

Why was he so lazy?! As Akari sat there dumbfounded, the handsome Tomohito eagerly leaned in.

"I, Tomohito, shall take over the job of convincing you now."

"I refuse to be swayed..."

"First, strictly speaking, there is no need for you to become a Narrator. But if you agree to take me on, Mistress Akari, you'll be able to live in the special Narrator book repository office branch that I'm in charge of. We call it the Bookhouse."

Slightly stunned at being directly addressed as "Mistress," Akari nonetheless felt her stubborn resolve slipping.

A book...house? A real house, for living in?

Seeing Akari waver, Tomohito pressed on excitedly like a salesman closing in on a weakening customer.

"In recent years, *yokai* have become so numerous as to be almost commonplace, but as a result, the number of Kotogatari have increased too. And there are too many to be properly cataloged. There's been a shortage of Narrators since way back. So the Narrators' Association has decided to take on regular people as an experimental measure. We need custodians who can take charge of Kotogatari as Assistant Narrators and keep them in order. Of course, there's a salary included!"

“...Salary?”

You could hardly blame Akari for being intrigued by this.

After all, she'd lost her lodgings and all her worldly possessions that very same day. A free place to live, AND pay? She couldn't believe her luck.

“Yes, and for the role, you'll need to take care of the Bookhouse, catalog and care for the various Kotogatari... Oh, but actually, I can do all that. So you can continue your current job.”

This was sounding better and better. She could use her company wages to replace the things she'd lost, without needing to worry about paying rent. How convenient.

But still, the work of a Narrator sounded like a lot to take on.

“Why don't you pick someone who's had some education as a Narrator? I mean, what about Munakata?”

“A: I'm busy. And B: he's annoying,” Munakata said from the sofa. So he hadn't been asleep after all. And actually, Akari was somewhat inclined to agree with him...

From what she'd seen of Tomohito so far...he did seem like a handful.

Still, the question remained—why Akari? She'd never been one to be swayed by fancy promises. There was no such thing as a free lunch. If they just needed a gullible idiot for the job, they'd chosen the wrong woman.

While she was still mulling it over, Tomohito took the bag off his shoulder and held it out to her.

“I want you to take possession of my Kotogatari. Will you accept it?”

Er, nope! Akari wanted to say, but Tomohito's earnestness had her on the ropes.

Then Munakata interjected, “The holder of a Kotogatari cannot be disobeyed by the Kotogami sealed within. Better to say yes. Then you'll have some control.”

“Indeed, I shall never disobey your command. But if you accept, we'll enter

into a kind of contract, and my Kotogatari will henceforth open to you alone.”

“I don’t want that kind of...burden.”

“I... I see...”

Tomohito’s face fell as Akari set her jaw firmly in defiance. Despite his clear disappointment, however, he backed down.

It would be better not to enter into any unnecessary contracts.

She was doing the right thing by turning him down, Akari told herself.

It sounded like a sweet deal, yes. But there was no way Akari wanted to live with a Kotogami—a story personified. Not even if accepting would make her life a whole heck of a lot easier.

But Akari was conflicted. Really, really conflicted. After all, she had to make a living somehow, didn’t she?

Eyes still closed, Munakata cleared his throat as Akari continued to prevaricate.

“If you agree to take Tomohito off my hands, I’ll pay you a hardship compensation upfront.”

A hardship compensation, money in hand...she wouldn’t be penniless anymore.

Akari’s scowl unfurled as she immediately asked the most important question of all...

“I don’t have to deal with any scary *yokai* like that Raiju, do I?”

“No, that’s not part of your job description. I’m not saying you’ll never encounter any dangerous *yokai*, but if you do, your Kotogami will shield you as you escape.”

“I shall protect you, Mistress, I swear.”

Akari rubbed her chin, still uncertain. But she said nothing.

She felt as though Munakata was manipulating her into this. But he needed to be rid of Tomohito, and she needed money and a place to stay. It was purely transactional, wasn’t it? When she thought about it that way, she knew saying

no was no longer an option.

“I want a proper written contract, not just a verbal one. And I’ll do it ONLY until my company lodgings are rebuilt.”

“Thank you very much, Mistress Akari!”

Tomohito’s face lit up as he held his arms out to hug Akari, who dodged him.

His sharp suit and noble aura were becoming rapidly less impressive the more time she spent in his presence, but she had to admit, the Kotogami was handsome.

Munakata sighed with disgust and reluctantly opened his eyes. Yet he remained slumped on the sofa, radiating laziness.

“Make sure you do a decent job. I’ll have a contract drawn up listing your pay and duties. For today... Ah, yes. You can go straight to the Bookhouse. Tomohito knows the way.”

“Let us go together at once!”

Tomohito leaped to his feet and made as if to take Akari’s arm. Sidestepping him, she scooped up the book and the book bag.

She had to shorten the strap a little, but it felt quite comfortable over her arm.

Akari felt a little funny about carrying around one of her hated books, but she told herself it was all in the name of self-preservation.

“Good luck, then. I’ll deliver the necessary documents and so on tomorrow.”

Not even bothering to look at her, Munakata slung his leg over the sofa’s armrest in a slovenly manner and proceeded to fall asleep for real.

Feeling another stab of annoyance and dislike, Akari shrugged. She’d already made up her mind.

“Oh, I’ll carry those for you.”

Tomohito took Akari’s own purse, which made her scowl again. Nonetheless, she followed him out.

So, now the thing was decided, and it was too late to turn back.

THEY got into the automobile Munakata had waiting for them outside under the dimly glowing electric streetlights. They drove for around ten minutes before alighting outside an imposing manor house, with an iron gate and a tall hedge all around it. Akari was silent.

“This is the Bookhouse where I live.”

“Hold on, Mr. Yagyou...”

“Oh, you can just call me Tomohito. I am your servant, after all.”

Akari ignored him as he blushed modestly, and decided to speak her mind. She didn’t have the energy left for tact.

“This...is an abandoned ruin. Isn’t it?”

The walls of the house were almost completely overgrown with ivy, and the garden was a jungle of untended vegetation.

In the dim bloom of the streetlamps, it looked haunted.

“Don’t worry. The inside is perfectly functional.”

Tomohito opened the gate, seeming not to even notice Akari’s rising sense of alarm. The gate made a metallic shrieking sound loud enough to wake up the neighbors.

Tramping through the overgrowth, Tomohito led Akari across a set of crumbling paving stones to the front doors, which he flung open.

“And we’re home!”

As he spoke, the room was suddenly illuminated.

Akari was relieved that the place at least seemed to be wired for electricity. She gazed around the interior wordlessly. It was *probably* a rather large entrance hall, only it was hard to tell because it was crammed and piled high with curious objects and wooden crates. She couldn’t even see the floor.

“It’s got Japanese flooring, but everything’s a mess. You can just keep your shoes on.”

Akari stepped obediently forward, her boots crunching over what felt like

several layers of dust and gritty sand. She felt impolite walking indoors in her boots, but she wasn't about to go walking around this mess in just her socks.

The ceilings housed a thick network of cobwebs, and parts of the walls were peeling off.

To add to the dreary atmosphere, the light bulbs seemed to be reaching the end of their life span and kept flickering in a most disconcerting manner.

"Wait, Tomohito."

"Yes, Mistress?"

Tomohito turned back from his position deeper in the room and smiled at her, clearly pleased to be addressed by name. Then he noticed her expression and his smile faded.

"How long has it been since people lived here?"

"It was last refurbished three years ago, I think? Since then, no specific Narrator has been in residence. Sometimes Munakata uses it to store stuff, though."

So no one had lived there for three years. It really was abandoned.

"Is there even a place for me to sleep tonight?"

"Sleep? Oh..." Tomohito mumbled, shoulders slumping. Akari took a deep breath, jaw clenching.

"That low-down, dirty, lazy excuse of a military man! Forgot to mention the lodgings he promised were a junk heap, did he?!"

How dare Munakata manipulate her into living in uninhabitable conditions, simply to save himself some bother? She didn't expect special treatment for being a woman—just basic human decency!

As Akari tried to suppress a wave of anger, a deep crevasse began to form between her brows. Alarmed, Tomohito bent his head low before her.

"I am so sorry. I completely forgot that humans need to sleep. Just wait here a moment. I think there's some bedding left somewhere; I'll go and find it. Just please...don't say you're going to quit..."

“I’m not going to quit. You know very well I have *nowhere* else to go.”

Tomohito looked as if he was about to burst into tears. All of a sudden Akari found herself breaking into a wry smile.

He was just like a little abandoned puppy who, after being adopted at last, was terrified of being left alone again.

Akari had no idea why this Kotogami seemed so attached to her. After all, they’d only met earlier that same day.

Surely he wasn’t letting her stay here just to do her a kindness. She’d seen too much of the world to believe that. But Akari had always relied on her own intuition. Anyway, she was set to benefit from this situation.

Besides, she had the feeling it was better not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Just show me to the least disastrous room, will you? I’m very tired and I want to rest.”

After a full day of work, she’d had to contend with a fire at her lodgings, a Raiju attack, a clingy Kotogami, and a battle of minds with the military. No wonder she was exhausted.

Nothing really made sense, but it was too late for any more thinking. Tomorrow was also bound to be busy.

Tomohito looked relieved as he led Akari down a narrow corridor, deeper and deeper into the cluttered recesses of the dark and dingy Bookhouse.

Chapter Two: Kotogatari: Mayoiga

“UP... Please...”

Akari awoke to the sound of someone’s voice. Through her eyelids, she could sense the room was dark.

But it was strange that anyone’s voice should wake her, let alone a man’s. There was a man renting the room next to hers, but he didn’t sound like that. She could often hear him talking, because the lodging walls were thin. And also, today was supposed to be Saturday, and her neighbor usually slept in late on weekends.

“Please wake up. It’s morning. Oh, but you DO look very lovely asleep. Perhaps I could be permitted to gaze upon you a little longer...”

As the voice giggled a little, Akari suddenly remembered the events of the prior night and her eyelids flew open.

The room was dim. There were only a few small skylights in the ceiling for letting in light.

The wide room was crammed floor to ceiling with bookshelves, each shelf segment displaying a single book volume, cover facing outward, like a shrine display.

No, they weren’t *like* shrines. They *were* shrines.

All these books were clearly Kotogatari, with Kotogami enshrined within their pages.

This room was a special one for storing Kotogatari. It was built for temperature control and had been kept clean. Akari recalled Tomohito telling her this last night.

Akari was sure she’d never sleep well in a room full of the story spirits she abhorred, but there was nowhere else suitable for passing the night. Still, the

bedding that was provided was surprisingly useable, and she'd eventually turned in. And now here she was, being awoken by a beautiful young man who was beaming with joy...at her.

He was neatly dressed in the same suit as yesterday.

"Good morning, Mistress Akari."

"Thanks for waking me up, I guess, but next time you can just call out from the hall."

She was annoyed, not only because he'd caught her sleeping, but because it was way too early for his characteristic chirpiness.

Tomohito tipped his head to one side and observed her for a moment.

"What's wrong with coming in to wake you?"

"It's highly inappropriate for you to be delighting over seeing a lady sleep—a lady you've only just met."

"It's inappropriate?"

"Also, a man should never enter a lady's room without permission."

"He shouldn't?!"

Tomohito's eyes were wide and bewildered. Akari felt exhausted, even though she'd only just woken up.

Strictly speaking, this was not a man but a Kotogami. Still, she phrased it that way just because it made things easier to explain. If she'd been a younger woman, she'd probably have started screaming after waking up to find a man in her room. But it was obvious Tomohito had no intentions of laying hands on her.

Even so, thought Akari, but Tomohito had recovered from his surprise and now cleared his throat, his expression meek.

"That may be, but I am your servant. I ask for permission to come into your room and see you sleeping."

"Fine. But I'm calling you Mr. Yagyou in that case."

"...I won't do it again."

Akari had remembered that last night, he'd been delighted when she'd addressed him by his first name. Her threat was effective—he completely backed down. Did he hate being addressed by his last name so much? Or was being called by his first name such an honorable thing for him?

“A Kotogami is like a witch's familiar. While we may be hallowed, sacred spirits, we're also servants to our Narrator masters at the same time. There is no need for you to call me Mister.”

“What's a witch's familiar? Never mind, I think I get it.”

Akari started to get out of her futon, shrugging over his explanation. As Tomohito unfolded a kimono and held it open for her, she looked at him blankly.

“A change of clothing, Mistress. Let's get you dressed.”

“Put the kimono down and leave this room now, or I'm warning you it's going to be Mister, Mister, Mister from here on out.”

“What?”

“I can get dressed myself! Get out!”

“Oh, but it was my first chance to do something servant-like!” Still clutching her kimono, Tomohito howled like his world had just come crashing down.

He'd called it a change of clothes, but it was just her old silk kimono, the one she'd been wearing yesterday. She'd lost everything in the fire and had nothing else to wear, not even another pair of underwear. Sighing, Akari pulled on her boots as well, although she still hated to wear shoes indoors.

At the very least, she wished she could whack the dust out of her kimono, but she refrained.

She already felt odd enough about sleeping in what was basically a big shrine to countless spirits. If she started throwing dust about the place, she was half-afraid she'd anger them.

After dressing, Akari opened the door to find Tomohito kneeling outside, waiting for her. Face lighting up, he sprang to his feet. He really was just like an obedient puppy.

“Good morning again, Mistress! Breakfast is ready.”

“Breakfast...”

Akari’s mouth filled with saliva. An involuntary reaction, she told herself.

Looking around the old Bookhouse in the morning light, Akari noticed again how much of a hopeless disaster it was.

Cracks on almost every wall. The floor peeling. And that was only the surface of it. The corridors were windy and confusing—the only way through in most cases was to cut through rooms. And there seemed to be several stairways and doorways that didn’t lead anywhere. Getting out of the house without Tomohito’s assistance would be almost impossible. It was as if the entire place had been designed by a child playing with building blocks.

If this was the standard for a Narrator’s office, then the whole bunch of them had to be crazy.

Akari had a more pressing concern, however. What kind of breakfast was she to be served in a madhouse like this (did it even have a working kitchen?) by a Kotogami who didn’t seem to know even the basics about humans?

Akari trailed behind Tomohito, who strode along, clearly familiar with the house’s odd layout. Was he going to serve her uncooked rice or something? But when they reached the dining room, she came to a surprised halt.

“Is something amiss, Mistress?”

“It’s so clean.”

It was true. The dining room was sparkling—as if it belonged to a completely different world than the rest of the house.

The ceilings were cobweb-free, the floors showed not one speck of dust, and the air smelled fresh as if the room had been aired out. The drab dining table and chairs had been polished to a fine shine, and a fresh tablecloth had been laid out. A beam of light slanted through the window, illuminating the pristine room.

“Please have a seat.”

Akari was still stunned by the drastic change of scenery, but she sat in the

chair Tomohito indicated. That was when she noticed the dishes arrayed on the table. It was a picture-perfect Western-style breakfast.

The tableware was clean and free of smudges. The nearest plate held what looked like what they called a “salad,” with Japanese *komatsuna* and mizuna leaves. Another plate held golden-brown toast with a little dish of butter and a pot of jam beside it. There was also a bowl of hard-boiled eggs, if she wasn’t mistaken.

It looked exactly like photographs of Western breakfasts you might see in a woman’s magazine.

“I’ll just go and fetch the tea.”

“Hold on, Tomohito. Did you cook all this? And why is this room the only one that’s clean?”

Akari had come out of her haze by now. Tomohito blushed coyly.

“After we spoke yesterday evening, I realized I don’t know enough about basic human needs. So last night I cracked a few books and studied up, and at the same time, I cleaned. Sadly, I only had time to do the kitchen and dining room before sunrise.”

“You cleaned all night?! While reading books?!”

“Yes. Kotogami don’t need to sleep. I really wanted to serve you scrambled eggs, but there was a mishap in the kitchen. I’m not very good with the stove, you see, and they ended up burned. I had to quickly make some boiled eggs instead, and what with brewing the tea and all, things got rather frantic.”

Tomohito hung his head. Akari was at a complete loss for words.

Instead, she studied the table again. Apart from the salad, which would have required chopping, everything else was very simple to make. But the presentation was very pretty, and Akari appreciated that Tomohito had clearly tried hard to spark her appetite.

“By the way, I bought the groceries at a nearby shop last night. They’re fresh. And I had Kuroe check that everything was okay too.”

“Kuroe? You mean...that military brute’s Kotogami?”

“Yes. She came by with your hardship compensation money already, but the contract will take a little longer. I took the liberty of using some of the money to pay for the groceries.”

“Oh. No, that’s completely fine.”

Tomohito bowed politely. Akari just...sat there for a moment.

First, she hadn’t been expecting such an edible feast at all. And second, Tomohito actually being useful and resourceful had knocked her off-balance.

She’d thought of him as silly and over-the-top. Never would she have expected him to stay up all night cleaning and cooking for her.

After all, if it had been her, she’d have just given up and headed off to a nearby restaurant instead. She often did that when she couldn’t be bothered to cook

Akari’s plan had been to agree to the contract and use this convenient arrangement to get herself back on her feet. Her feelings hadn’t changed in that regard, but she was becoming more and more confused about who this Kotogami Tomohito was and what he wanted with her.

There was a lot to get done, though. Rather than think about it too deeply, she decided to focus on the here and now.

“Thank you, Tomohito. Well, I guess I’ll dig in.”

She needed food inside her before anything else, so Akari began eating.

“...What?”

“You thanked me! AND you’re eating a meal I prepared!”

“Sorry, could you hurry up with that tea? Thanks.”

Okay, so she’d revised her earlier opinion of him a little, but he was still a hopeless case.

He beamed brightly at her, and she found that she didn’t really mind it.

The tea was green tea, and it was horribly bitter. She felt somewhat relieved.

“Now then, shall we start cleaning?”

After clearing her plate, Akari quickly read the curt letter that had also arrived from that military layabout Munakata. Then, she got down to business.

She needed to go shopping since she'd lost all her possessions in the fire. But it was still early morning, and none of the shops would be open. She decided to make good use of her time by sorting out her bedroom in the meantime. Honestly, she couldn't stomach the thought of another night in that shrine room.

Incidentally, the envelope from Munakata had also contained half a month's wages in advance, so she decided to stop thinking of him as a brute and a layabout. Having cash in hand had sweetened her up considerably.

During her phone call to the company yesterday they'd told her she could take a few days off, so in that time she intended to turn this Bookhouse into somewhere actually habitable.

"I want to do something with all that junk in the entrance, and I would like at least one room that's completely clear. Oh, and I want to get the bathroom cleaned right away. Tomohito, where are the cleaning supplies?"

Apart from the kitchen, every other sink and drain in the place was disgusting. But she was dying to take a bath, so she was eager to get the bathroom sorted as a matter of priority.

"In that case, why don't you try summoning one of the resident Kotogami?"

Akari stopped rolling up her kimono sleeves and made a face as if she'd just bitten into a sour plum. Tomohito's face fell.

"Do you really hate Kotogami that much?"

"What I hate are stories. Also, I was told I wouldn't have to act as an actual Narrator."

As Akari snapped back at him, Tomohito actually began to look somewhat relieved.

"Yes, you're right, of course. However, this house is maintained by a Kotogami, so you'll need her approval before you can make any changes."

"Maintained by a Kotogami? All you do is battle, I thought."

“Yes, in truth, many of the Kotogami who are sealed within Kotogatari are Aratama... I mean, they are somewhat wild, and skilled fighters... However, the basic function of a Kotogatari is to enshrine a variety of spirits. Mistress Akari, have you ever seen a Narrator summon forth a Kotogami at a shrine festival?”

“Uh, no. I’ve made it my business to avoid Kotogami and stories in general.”

“Yes, you looked quite pained when Munakata was narrating.”

Wait, he noticed?

Akari stared at Tomohito, surprised. He looked deeply wounded by her words for a moment. The next instant, though, his expression cleared.

“Anyway, just as there are all kinds of people, there are also all kinds of Kotogami. I personally am not a fighting type. And there are many who are sealed into books for preservation purposes.”

It was true—Narrators often summoned the spirits to do things like make flower petals dance at festivals and on auspicious occasions.

Akari had been under the impression that Kotogami were dangerous demons sealed up to keep people safe from them. She felt guilty for thinking this now, but there was one thing still bothering her.

“You said you’re not a fighter, but you kicked that Raiju clean into the side of a building.”

“That was more of an adrenaline-rush type of situation.”

Akari nodded thoughtfully as Tomohito continued.

“Since this Bookhouse is sacred ground, you can call forth any Kotogami simply by speaking their name aloud. Why not think of them as fellow residents? Don’t you want to say hello?”

Akari thought about the Kotogatari volumes lined up in the room she’d slept in last night.

He was right. She was going to be living here for a while, and it would be very rude not to greet the current inhabitants.

“So all I have to do is say their name?”

“Yes. Here you go.”

Smiling, Tomohito swiftly offered her a book, clearly a Kotogatari.

Put off by his overeagerness and how he’d clearly had the book all lined up to give to her, Akari grudgingly accepted it.

The book had a sturdy cover and thick pages and was bound Japanese-style. The title read *Kotogatari: Mayoiga* in ink.

“Each Kotogatari begins with a written summary of the Kotogami in question, and then records of their doings throughout the years. To call forth a Kotogami, one only has to open the book to the first page and read out the name and classification of that particular spirit.”

Records of their doings... Akari gulped. Nonetheless, when she opened the black-covered book to the first page, she could see fat letters written there. All she had to do was state the name, right?

Akari recalled how Munakata had read aloud the previous evening.

“*The Mayoiga Mayoi.*”

Ink-black letters began to rise from the open book.

The swooping calligraphy rose from the page and swirled in the air before Akari.

Enthralled, she blinked, and the black tendrils turned into fluttering strands of ink-black hair.

In the next instant, a little girl about five years of age was standing in front of Akari.

Her hair was so black, it seemed to absorb the morning sunlight. And it was so long, it obscured her little body and fell to the floor in coils.

Through a gap in the girl’s hair, Akari could see a pale, cherubic face. But as cute as she was, the face was expressionless, as if she’d been made out of clay. She wore a long-sleeved black kimono tucked at the shoulder, and Akari noticed, with some surprise, the lace on the hem and sleeves.

As the little girl stood stock-still, Akari thought the contrasting Japanese and

Western elements of her clothing somehow seemed to make sense with the mismatched surroundings of the peculiar old Bookhouse.

But Akari still wasn't used to Kotogami appearing out of thin air, and she realized she was staring. She also remembered that there was work to be done.

"Hello. I'm the custodian, I guess. I moved in yesterday. My name's Akari Mitsukuri."

"I know."

Oh, she speaks, thought Akari. The girl was so lovely and otherworldly that it came as something of a shock.

"Well, I'd like to ask you to help with cleaning and tidying and decluttering."

Akari was slightly put off by the contrast between the girl's sweet voice and the harsh tone she used. Mayoi, meanwhile, continued to gaze up at her through scowling, night-sky eyes.

"No, I won't help."

"Mayoi!"

Tomohito reproached her sharply, and Mayoi turned her scowl on him. The next moment, she whirled her long curtain of hair and disappeared on the spot.

There was a pointed silence. Why was the little Kotogami so hostile? Tomohito turned to Akari, bowing apologetically.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mistress Akari. Mayoi was very rude just then."

"Never mind that. I have a question."

Akari was starting to get used to the unpredictable behavior of these spirits. She looked up at Tomohito and continued.

"How long have you two been living here together, anyway?"

"Let's see...ever since I came here, so I think it's been about ten years?"

"Don't you get along?"

"I'm mostly just the Kotogami in charge of running the Bookhouse office branch, so we've only ever chatted in passing."

“Well, still, it makes perfect sense. You’re the one at fault here.”

Tomohito’s eyes widened in disbelief as Akari rubbed her forehead. She was getting a headache.

“You know what I think? I think Kotogami are surprisingly human. With their own will and desires.”

“Yes. Being enshrined in Kotogatari volumes is what defines our existence. When that happens, we do tend to develop our own independent will, more or less.”

“Right. So after knowing each other for so long, you can’t suddenly bring a strange human into her home without discussing it with her first and expect her to be fine with it.”

Perhaps it wasn’t appropriate to compare Kotogami and humans. But Mayoi’s childish attitude just now—Akari understood it well. After losing her parents, she’d been passed off from one relative to another.

According to Tomohito, Mayoi was sort of like the landlord of this house. A stranger coming in and trying to invade one’s place of work—who’d accept that willingly?

Akari sighed. This wasn’t going well at all. Then she realized Tomohito was watching her anxiously, chewing his lip.

“Are you displeased, Mistress? I mean...a Kotogami who doesn’t even follow orders...”

Akari blinked at him uncomprehendingly. Displeased? Hmm, come to think of it...Tomohito wasn’t human, was he? He was a spirit, created to serve humans. “Mayoi’s duties involve household maintenance and repair. That’s the whole reason she’s here. This is complete abandonment of duty.”

“But I’m not a Narrator. I’m just lodging here. I have no intention of using such a sweet little girl as a servant. I’m fine just having a place to stay.”

Akari wasn’t exactly excited about having to live with a bunch of strange Kotogami either, but Mayoi’s honest, childish reaction had really tugged at her heartstrings.

Akari looked Tomohito up and down. Yes, she preferred the little girl, whom she could understand, to this walking, talking question mark.

“Anyway, I was in the wrong for not considering the feelings of other residents. And you were even more in the wrong.”

“Me?!”

“You betrayed that poor girl, don’t you get that? Was she cold with you last night as well?”

“Now that you mention it...when I spoke to her, she didn’t answer me.”

As Tomohito considered this, realization began to dawn on his face. *Finally*, Akari thought, putting her hands on her hips.

“Well, whether she likes it or not, I’m going to be living here. And since she didn’t say anything about *me* not being allowed to clean and tidy, then clean and tidy I shall. Where are the supplies you used last night?”

“Ah, yes. They’re right this way.”

Akari followed as Tomohito got up from his seat in a half daze and wandered out of the room.

Akari picked a room on the second floor to be her bedroom. She’d start there, and then she’d fix up the entrance hall and clear a path between her room and the dining room. If she got those areas done, at least then the house would be livable.

“Why is there...so much...JUNK?!”

Covering her mouth with a handkerchief, Akari put down the box she was holding. She’d picked an empty room on the ground floor to stuff with all the boxes and things that were currently cluttering the hallways. The box in question was filled with ornaments she couldn’t identify.

The boxes stacked high in the entrance hall were filled with an assortment of bric-a-brac, like ornaments, porcelain tableware, and artwork of questionable quality.

When she examined the stuff in the other rooms more closely, she realized a lot of it consisted of random swords and daggers, farming tools, and other

items that had no business being in a house like this. One of the rooms was filled with nothing but rows of Jizo Bodhisattva statues, a sight that made her pause. Tomohito, who had joined Akari in hauling boxes around, mistook her expression of frustration as a genuine question.

“All these items are things left behind by prior Narrators. You know how spirits and demons tend to take up residence in old objects? Well, one of a Narrator’s jobs is to transfer those spirits and demons into dedicated Kotogatari. These are the objects left behind after the transference. They’ve been stored here until they can be properly assessed and taken away by antique stores. Anyway, that’s why there’s so much stuff here.”

“It sounds like some sort of storehouse is in order.”

“Well, there was a storehouse once, but a Narrator had it torn down a few years ago.”

Akari could think of a few choice words she’d like to say to that Narrator, but there were more pressing matters.

The thing weighing on Akari most heavily was the mountain of books, which filled more than half the room.

“Why are there so many books? These aren’t Kotogatari, are they?”

Most of the selection seemed to consist of old newspapers and magazines, as well as printed books. They must have been of some value. But piled up carelessly in a heap like this, they seemed like junk to her.

Several volumes had slid off the stacks and were lying open. Akari pursed her lips, realizing she could read the text on display.

“All *fiction*.”

She could tell from the titles that while some of them were scholarly books, the majority of them were novels or collections of stories. These books were meant for recreational reading. Why were there so many of them here?

Akari gingerly picked up the fallen books and returned them to the stacks, trying hard not to look at any of the words. Tomohito watched her do this, his expression baffled.

“You hate books too?”

“I just don’t like made-up tales. It’s a visceral reaction. They give me the creeps. The shudders.”

At Akari’s all-girls school, young adult fiction books by women writers were all the rage. But Akari couldn’t stomach them and felt left out. When she had to write a book report, Akari was the outlier who wrote the report on her English-language textbook. The teacher thought she was being facetious at first, but her translation was so good they ended up giving her a solid B for effort anyway.

She’d been kind of famous at the school for that little stunt. As she reflected on how comfortable it had been to have nothing to do with fiction after starting with the company, she realized Tomohito was gazing sadly at her.

“I see. So you really hate them that much.”

“Well, no matter how true to life you try to write, it’s not true to life, is it? It’s a story. Trying to pass something fake off as real. It’s warped. That’s how I see it.”

Yes, that was her issue. She especially hated folk tales for this reason.

For example, anyone could say: *Once upon a time, this happened*. But even the storyteller couldn’t know for sure if it did. It seemed so irresponsible to Akari. Nothing was ever black and white. But Akari had no problem letting those who liked stories enjoy them. Go ahead. She just couldn’t find any enjoyment in them herself.

Tomohito paused, digesting Akari’s bitter stance on storytelling. It looked as if he had something he wanted to say, but he thought better of it and returned to the topic at hand.

“Anyway, you asked why there are so many books here. They’re left over from previous Narrators, and also Munakata tends to dump books here when he can’t be bothered with— Ahem. When he needs temporary storage for them. Apparently, a Narrator is in need of many books from which to learn phraseology and terminology. But as this Bookhouse doesn’t have a dedicated library...”

“The entire design of this house is a joke.”

Was this place really designed for Narrators? Akari was starting to have her doubts. But Tomohito just smiled wryly.

“I did manage to take a look at the blueprints back in the early days, but they’ve since disappeared... Ah, I’ll put these down here.”

Disappeared, did they? thought Akari dryly as Tomihito set down the heavy stack of boxes he was holding without even a grunt. He was slim built and delicate looking, but he seemed to have physical strength surpassing that of any ordinary man. Thanks to his help, the carrying work was now done.

“It looks like it’s finally time to start cleaning.”

As Akari made to walk out of the room, the door closed in her face. She turned the handle, but the door was now locked.

Again? she thought, grimacing. Beside her, Tomohito bowed, his face a mix of anger and guilt.

“I’m so sorry—Mayoi is acting up again... I’ll have to kick every door in the house off its hinges, and then...”

“All that’s going to achieve is provoking Mayoi even more. Can you climb out of the window and open it from the outside?”

“Certainly, Mistress.”

Tomohito unlocked the window and climbed out, then unlocked the door from the outside a few moments later.

Apparently, he’d found furniture and boxes stacked up against the door.

Akari stepped out, looking over her shoulder to see a curtain of black hair whirling at the end of the corridor.

“Curse you, Mayoi!”

Tomohito noticed her too and charged after her. But he soon returned, shoulders slumping. She’d given him the slip somehow. Mayoi was playing childish pranks on them, like a poltergeist.

Clearly, she had free reign of the house and knew all the best ways to trap and trick them. Her repertoire consisted of locking doors on them and blocking

their path with furniture, nothing dangerous, but she just wouldn't stop. Akari felt herself getting frustrated.

Perhaps Akari having possession of Mayoi's Kotogatari meant that Mayoi was prevented from doing her any actual harm. Kotogami were bound to obey whoever was in possession of their book and had spoken their name, after all.

Indeed, Mayoi was doing a stellar job of harassing Akari without even needing to lay a finger on her.

Countless times, Akari felt eyes on her and turned, only to see a flailing tendril of black hair or a lacy sleeve fluttering. Mayoi was watching her.

Undeterred, Akari and Tomohito took up brooms and cleaning rags, but it was impossible to move around with all the doors being locked before them. Their bucket of soapy water was kicked over. Their cleaning rags disappeared when their backs were turned and reappeared slung over light fixtures high above reach. Brooms were placed strategically so that they tripped over them. Akari was completely at the mercy of the small child spirit.

Just when the cleaning seemed to be done, Akari suddenly noticed that all the junk she'd painstakingly moved to the designated junk room was now neatly stacked up along the corridor. She flopped down on the floor in despair. Tomohito came running back from Akari's room just then and fell to his knees before her.

"I am so terribly sorry! I'm afraid your room appears to be full of books..."

"I see. So she's playing dirty, is she...?"

Mayoi must have been eavesdropping when Akari had mentioned hating books earlier. It had taken both Akari and Tomohito working together to move the books in the first place, but Mayoi had somehow managed to move them all by herself. She must have really wanted to get under Akari's skin.

"I have to say, I'm feeling quite fed up with all this."

"Here's her Kotogatari. You could always assume control of her, before this gets any worse."

"Could I?"

“Yes, such is the power of the Kotogatari. Our spirit tomes are a part of ourselves. If they’re damaged, we become weakened. And we can never disobey the one who possesses them.”

“But that seems kind of mean.”

Tomohito sounded extremely serious all of a sudden. Akari gently touched the bookbag she was wearing cross-body. Possessing this book was like possessing a living soul. What a heavy responsibility. No wonder she was hesitating.

“What is your decision, Mistress?”

Akari looked into Tomohito’s solemn eyes and sighed, then got to her feet.

She knew Tomohito was waiting for her order. But Akari felt zero inclination to do what he was suggesting. Mayoi’s interference was certainly hindering the cleaning process, but as long as she didn’t escalate things, Akari was willing to ignore her mischief.

“Before any of that, I’m going shopping. Will you accompany me, Tomohito?”

Tomohito’s eyes instantly widened. She must have said something surprising, but what?

“May I? I could stay behind and continue tidying if you need me to...?”

“I have a lot of things to buy. I can’t carry them all by myself. Having a man’s help would be good.”

“You need my help?!”

“That’s what I keep saying. Also, I don’t know any of the shops near here. I need you to guide me.”

As Akari untucked her kimono sleeves, Tomohito nodded his head vigorously, eyes sparkling. He was clearly delighted to be receiving orders from Akari.

He’s so weird, thought Akari, patting the dust from her kimono.

She looked around but couldn’t spot a hint of Mayoi’s long black hair. No doubt she was watching, though. Akari raised her voice a few decibels.

“Bye, Mayoi. We’re going shopping. Look after the house while we’re gone.”

Akari thought she could hear a tiny foot stamping the floorboards somewhere

in the house.

THE neighborhood around the Bookhouse was a quiet residential one, with houses spaced far apart.

It had been too dark last night to notice much, but as Akari followed Tomohito to the main street, she could hear the hustle and bustle all around.

“Is this the Shinkuju neighborhood?”

“Yes. This area was originally far from the city center, and a lot of Bookhouses were built around here.”

“Far from the city center? Isn’t it better to be closer?”

“If a Kotogami goes on a rampage, there will be fewer casualties like this.”

“Oh. I see.”

Great, another reminder of the dangerous responsibility she’d been manipulated into shouldering. Akari’s expression soured, but Tomohito didn’t notice.

“It’s become a bustling business district now, but many Narrators and members of the military live here, or so I’m told.”

Tomohito’s voice was cheerful as he looked back at Akari, a rickshaw driver dashing past on the main street behind him.

Shinkuju was located on the fringes of the city center, but recent rapid development had begun to revolutionize the area. There was a tram station now, with regular trams into the heart of the city. Department stores, cafés, and milk bars had sprung up, and young boys and girls gathered at the newly established dance halls, seeking a taste of modern excitement.

Also, since there was a lot of cheap housing, the area attracted writers and painters and all kinds of artists. It had become the birthplace of a certain type of chaotic, bohemian, delinquent culture.

Akari wasn’t sure how safe she felt there and made a mental note to find out more about the area later.

Keeping pace a step behind her, Tomohito spoke up. “What are we shopping for first?”

“Let’s start with the light things. I need kimono for work, and cosmetics.”

“If you need kimono, there are several back at the Bookhouse.”

“I’m not going to wear old kimono stained with blood, thanks.”

“The demons that once possessed them have already been safely sealed in Kotogatari.”

“That’s beside the point.”

Tomohito gazed at her without comprehension. Akari sighed and shrugged.

Even if there were kimono available that hadn’t been possessed by creepy spirits, Akari didn’t want to wear any clothing from that house of horrors. And she refused to feel bad about it!

That said, though, she *had* noticed a few nice hair combs and things like that among the curios and knickknacks, and she’d deigned to borrow those.

Tomohito had said the items were only being stored because of the difficulty in disposing of them, and surely no one would mind if she put them to use. Akari knew that if she heard any of the tales behind the items, she’d be too grossed out to use them, so she’d silenced Tomohito when he seemed about to launch into detailed explanations.

“But first off, I need lunch. Hey, do you even eat food?”

Akari wanted to go to a restaurant, but it would be terribly rude for both of them to take up a table when only one was ordering. She shot Tomohito an apologetic look, but he merely smiled.

“I have no need of food, but I can eat. Or I can return to my Kotogatari for a while and leave you to your lunch. Would you like me to do that?”

“Don’t give me that wounded puppy-dog look. Stay and eat with me. In fact, if you could sit opposite me, that would be even better.”

“Can I really stay? I was so afraid that you didn’t want to be seen with me!”

So he’d noticed that Akari had been trying to give him a wide berth while they

were in town. She blushed now, ashamed of herself a little. As Tomohito blinked at her, she felt a need to clarify something. Namely, the reason why she'd prefer he join her for lunch.

"Listen, it's not really socially acceptable for a woman to eat by herself in a restaurant in this day and age. So I need you there to deflect attention."

The rise of working women had changed the way society treated them all, to an extent. But women were still subject to judgmental glances whenever they were alone in public. That hadn't changed.

If she could work to support herself, then she ought to have the right to eat alone in public, Akari had always thought. But society didn't share her opinion. Even at her little commercial affairs company, which employed lots of women, she got critical stares whenever she left the office for lunch. It wasn't normal behavior.

"I don't usually give it a second thought when I eat out near my company's office. But since you're here, it would be a shame to waste you."

"I'm afraid I don't really understand what you mean, but I'm happy to be of assistance any way I can. Please use me to deflect attention as needed."

Tomohito bowed with visible excitement, and Akari smiled inwardly.

He really didn't know anything about how human society worked. At least not in a practical, real-world sense. If a man and a woman were seen walking together, anyone would think they were married. Or at least engaged. But since she wasn't likely to run into any acquaintances here, there was nothing to worry about.

Anyway, whether he understood them or not, Akari felt a little pleased that Tomohito didn't share society's strict views.

"Say, I wonder if there's anywhere around here that does a good grilled beef bowl."

The beef bowl Munakata had scarfed down in front of her last night was still hot on Akari's mind, a fact she'd never admit but which was true nonetheless.

After filling her belly with a very good and succulent beef bowl, Akari had

Tomohito show her where to buy various daily necessities.

Luckily, with Shinkuju being the birthplace of all things fashionable, there were plenty of secondhand clothing stores and sundry-goods stores around. Akari had been expecting to have to walk all over town. How convenient to have so many stores in close proximity.

Akari bought clothes, a slipcover for the Bookhouse's raggedy futon, and various daily essentials. The cosmetics she needed for work were what really burned a hole in her purse.

"I knew this would be a huge hassle, but I'm totally exhausted..."

"You poor thing. I can escort you somewhere for a rest if you'd like."

"The biggest problem was you, actually. But never mind."

As they stepped out of the final secondhand clothes shop (ruthlessly combed through by Akari), she shot a reproachful glance at Tomohito, who lolloped along beside her.

The shopping trip had actually been quite successful. The advance pay packet was generous, and while she couldn't afford to go overboard, she was able to buy the things she wanted without hesitation.

But being accompanied by a strikingly handsome young man drew too many stares her way. She'd forgotten to worry about that. In his smart three-piece suit, Tomohito looked as if he might have been the son of some aristocrat. Or at the very least, a high-end butler at some rich man's mansion.

And here was Akari, in her shabby silk kimono, being followed around by him and addressed as "Mistress."

Of course people were staring and doing double-takes. And shooting Akari suspicious looks, surprised that it wasn't the other way around, with her as the servant. She'd made Tomohito wait outside while she was buying new undergarments, but the rest of the time she felt under constant scrutiny in his presence. It made her cringe.

"Face powder, brow pencil, and rouge? You don't look like you need any of

that, Mistress Akari.”

As they walked away from the cosmetics store, Akari felt exhaustion wash over her as Tomohito commented on her purchases.

“A woman needs to wear makeup. It’s proper manners for any decent member of society.”

She supposed she should be glad he hadn’t made a comment like that in front of the beauty counter saleswomen, whose gaze had made Akari nervous. Should she just take it as a compliment?

She didn’t really feel like challenging him on it, after all.

Akari had chosen extra-white face powder and a lighter brow pencil, as well as the current fashion: rouge. Recently, women had been emphasizing blood flow to the cheeks using artificial rouge, and when Akari tried it, she’d liked the way it looked. And so, she bought it.

While she’d been consulting with the beauty counter staff and trying out samples, Tomohito had waited silently, never complaining about being left out.

Instead, he’d watched her shopping bags diligently like a proper servant. When Akari looked up at him now, he suddenly met her gaze.

As if realizing something, his eyes widened, then narrowed again. “Oh, but that ‘rouge’ looks very nice on you, Mistress Akari.”

Being praised so openly made Akari’s cheeks grow so hot, she doubted she even needed the rouge. How many compliments had she received that day already? He’d said something similar when she’d purchased her new kimono too.

Thanks to all the samples she’d tried, Akari was sporting a full face of makeup and was feeling quite pretty. Being complimented on it by someone else made her feel prettier still. How could she help blushing?

And Tomohito had waited so patiently for her. How could she crush his feelings after that?

“You seem to be in a good mood...”

The words just slipped out, but Tomohito blinked and smiled at her softly.

“Yes. Walking around town with you like this makes me very happy.”

“I mean...all you’ve done is watch my bags for me.”

“Precisely! Being useful to you is my number one joy!”

As he beamed at her, traipsing along with a spring in his step, Akari tried to keep at least a full arm’s distance between them. His behavior had her feeling on edge, still. They’d known each other less than twenty-four hours, and Akari wasn’t sure yet how to take his eager displays of servitude toward her.

Perhaps she was overthinking it, but Akari wasn’t the kind of woman who was used to people catering to her. She was more annoyed than anything else. Not even slightly thrilled.

Nodding mildly, she decided to change the subject.

“Are you sure you don’t mind carrying all of that?”

All her purchases had been wrapped up in a cloth bundle, which was now slung over Tomohito’s shoulder. He looked strange, dressed in a fine suit while carrying a sack of possessions like a commoner.

But Tomohito only smiled and readjusted the bundle.

“It is no burden at all, Mistress Akari. After all, you’ve got Kotogatari to carry.”

Akari touched the bag she was wearing slung across her body, lost for words for a moment.

Tomohito’s and Mayoi’s Kotogatari were inside. The bag was made of sturdy amber-brown leather and had some weight to it. She could still carry more, though.

After Tomohito had announced he would carry all the bags, she’d offered to split the load. But he’d refused, point-blank.

In the end, the only things he’d let her carry were a few cosmetics.

“Our Kotogatari volumes are of vital importance to us Kotogami. So if something were to happen, I’d certainly appreciate your full efforts to protect it. The leather won’t spoil, so if you could carry it close to you at all times, that would be splendid.”

“...As I said before, I am NOT wearing this thing to work.”

“Are you quite sure you won’t?”

Tomohito turned his puppy-dog eyes on her again, but she refused to back down on this one.

Even as his eyes glistened, Akari knew she couldn’t take something like that to the office. It would stand out, and people would ask questions. And what if it was confiscated?

“If it’s that important, it shouldn’t be taken out and about where anything could happen to it.”

“I see. In that case, I understand.”

Tomohito finally sighed and nodded in resignation.

He doesn’t seem to understand at all, thought Akari as they passed a *kashihonya*, a lending library.

Commoners couldn’t afford to just pick up the latest publications the moment they came out, so instead they rented almost everything they read from the myriad lending libraries available all over the city.

Akari couldn’t help noticing it. Perhaps because she was presently in the company of a book spirit. But there was nothing remarkable about this one—bookstores and lending libraries were a dime a dozen in the capital. And up-and-coming Shinkuju was no exception to the rule.

Reading books without having to own them. That might be a good arrangement for the readers, but Akari wondered how the books would feel about it.

Her mind wandering, she recalled the scowl on the face of the little girl Kotogami.

“I wonder what Mayoi is getting up to at the house. I hope she’s not moving all the junk into my bedroom to spite me.”

“No, Mayoi’s right there.”

Akari blinked.

Tomohito was looking at her leather bag for some reason.

“Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Kotogami always return to their designated Kotogatari after being separated from it a certain distance. Also, you didn’t manifest her with the power of a narration spell of your own, so the moment you removed the book from the Bookhouse, her residential spell dissipated. Mayoi is asleep inside her Kotogatari as we speak.”

“...So that’s why you wanted me to bring it along with us...”

Akari had left the house fully prepared for a world of trouble when she returned. She almost felt disappointed.

Akari should have been pleased, but she felt uneasy. Tomohito was watching her with a hesitant look on his face.

“Uh, about Mayoi...”

“You should mend relations with her as soon as possible.”

“Ah... Mistress Akari, you seem to believe the fault lies with me. But I dare say it goes deeper than that.”

His tone had softened now, and Akari looked at him shrewdly as he continued, his expression humble.

“I always intended to follow no other orders but yours, Mistress Akari, and so I have kept my distance from the other Narrators that have taken up posts at our Bookhouse. But Mayoi followed the orders of each of them. And not just because they held her Kotogatari, but of her own will.”

Wait, he always...*what*? Akari paused for a moment, struck by the first part of his sentence, which didn’t make any sense. But they were discussing Mayoi just then, and she wanted to hear the rest. She held her tongue and let Tomohito continue.

“Mayoi was enshrined as a Mayoiga variant of Kotogami, with the appropriate powers for that definition. She was assigned to perform basic household maintenance and upkeep for our Bookhouse. She was originally a house-dwelling spirit, and fostering a pleasant household environment was what made

her happy. So she had no objections. But the Narrators who took up posts here didn't treat her right."

"...Were they violent toward her?"

Akari grimaced, picturing it, and Tomohito looked sad.

"No...but they ordered her around, without even deigning to read her Kotogatari. Telling her to improve the residence more, make it nicer, make it happier."

Akari was becoming more and more puzzled. Sensing her confusion, Tomohito continued blandly:

"There are a lot of spirits whose purpose is to keep houses tidy and make them enjoyable to live in. For example, Zashikiwarashi—household deities in the form of red-faced child spirits with bobbed hair—and Mayoiga. Such spirits are easy to enshrine in Kotogatari. But while the category may be the same, the spirits enshrined within are all different, with their own unique personalities."

"So 'Mayoiga' is more like a job description, and not a description of Mayo herself?"

Akari thought she was starting to get it. Tomohito nodded.

"For a Kotogami to use their powers fully, their stories must be read with compassion. The Kotogatari is a guide for the narration, of course. But the Narrators who came here narrated without any compassion. They simply saw her as another interchangeable Mayoiga spirit."

"So it's kind of like trying to use one of the new modern appliances without bothering to read the instruction manual?"

Akari bit her tongue. How rude of her to compare a divine spirit to a household appliance. But Tomohito smiled, looking pleased.

"...Mistress Akari, you understand so well! But those other Narrators never bothered to even think about it. And when they realized she has greater power than most Mayoiga, they became so demanding. And yet, Mayo never refused their orders, despite their careless treatment of her Kotogatari."

So the spirit known as Mayo was unable to defy orders, even when treated

with disrespect. Akari wasn't sure how to process that. But then Tomohito changed the subject.

"You thought the house badly designed, did you not?"

"I mean, yes...some of the construction work seemed...haphazard."

"That was all Mayoi's work. She was ordered to alter the layout of the rooms using her power. But construction work is usually beyond a normal Mayoiga's power. It's possible the Narrators were only messing with her, at first. But Mayoi did her best to fulfill their every command to the very limits of her ability. After seeing what she could do, they pushed too far, not even bothering to read her Kotogatari with respect. Then, when she could no longer meet their demands, they left the Bookhouse for good."

Akari frowned, surprised by this tale. That was one explanation for the house's bizarre structure that had never even crossed her mind.

If what Tomohito was saying was true, then the spirit Mayoi had been forced to work like a machine, without the user even bothering to read the accompanying specification document. That would be fine if she were an actual machine. But Kotogami had feelings.

"There was no need for her to go that far, though, surely. Wouldn't it have been better to get far away from people who were pushing her, despite knowing what her limits were?"

"But it's a terrible thing for a Kotogami, to be left unread. We tend to cling to humans...hoping to be known just a little, by someone. And Mayoi was desperate to be known."

Tomohito's tone was so solemn. Akari felt she could debate the issue no further.

"If you'd like to know more about those days, the previous Narrators left journals in the house. And if you want to know about Mayoi, you can learn all you need from reading her Kotogatari."

"You want me to...*read* her Kotogatari?"

Akari's tone was incredulous, even angry, but Tomohito seemed oblivious.

“Yes. You seem to have the wrong impression somewhat, Mistress Akari, but a Kotogatari is basically just a historical account in the form of a story. Some events are... embellished, but all are true.”

“So you’re saying it’s a dramatization of true events?”

“Yes. It’s like a personal history, written by a third party. And as such, the writer’s bias may color the text. That’s what the Narrator who enshrined me always said. It’s not quite the same as a story, but it does resemble one. So I won’t push you into reading it too firmly.”

That’s when Tomohito fell silent. But his beautiful eyes remained fixed on Akari.

“...There is no higher joy for a Kotogami than to have their Kotogatari read by a human.”

Akari thought she felt the slightest stirring sensation coming from the bag hanging by her hip.

Joy. The word tugged at her. Even though she’d planned to involve herself as little as possible...

Akari thought about the little doll face, the long black hair.

Tomohito had said the Narrators hadn’t bothered to properly read her Kotogatari. They’d probably barely skimmed it. And yet, Mayoi had followed their commands. What was behind her desperation to be read, to be known, even superficially?

Was her wish to remain watching over this house?

No, she couldn’t let herself be swayed by sob stories. This was Tomohito’s word against, well, nothing. Who knew if it was the truth? Blindly believing anything Tomohito said was no better than believing in one of the deceitful stories Akari so hated.

Akari made up her mind to wait until later to draw a conclusion, but there was one more thing she wanted to ask Tomohito.

“Incidentally...your story makes it sound like you were there, too, when the Narrators were interacting with Mayoi.”

“Yes, it was when she was entrusted with the house’s care, back when the first owner was around.”

“So what were you doing while all those horrible Narrators were using her?”

“I... Nothing... Mayoi wanted it to be the way it was. And I’m a Kotogami too. I understand wanting to be known by someone.”

“...I see.”

She could detect no hint of regret or shame in his beautiful smile, and Akari pressed no further. She had a feeling there was nothing to be gained by doing so, anyway.

“All right. Well, I suppose all that’s left is to buy something to eat for dinner and head back home.”

“Certainly, Mistress. What would you like for dinner?”

“The house has a stove, right? Then I’ll make it myself.”

“You’re going to cook, Mistress Akari?!”

Tomohito didn’t seem to mind that she’d changed the subject, but for some reason the thought of her cooking had made him yelp. He seemed aghast at the mere suggestion of her taking this job away from him.

“You said you had trouble with the stove. And I want to eat cooked white rice and miso soup. Oh yes, we’d better buy some rice, and miso, and soy sauce too.”

“Then I shall hold your belongings as you cook! Even though it pains me to lose this task...”

“Let’s put these things away first, before I start cooking.”

They weren’t all that heavy, but they were bound to get in the way. And Tomohito’s theatrics were starting to stretch Akari’s last nerve.

When Akari pushed open the front door of the Bookhouse, she could see Mayoi’s black hair fluttering at the far end of the entrance hall.

“I apologize. Mayoi and the house are kind of a package deal, so she tends to jump out of her book at will whenever it’s brought onto the premises.”

Half-listening to him, Akari set about making dinner.

The gas and water kept cutting out, probably thanks to Mayoi's mischief. And Tomohito's rapt fascination with everything she was doing was another annoyance. But the meal she prepared tasted as good as it always did. Akari liked Western fare just fine, but you couldn't beat a bowl of steaming, fluffy white rice.

AFTER changing, Akari said good night to Tomohito and went to lay out her futon in the library.

"So I'm back in here again. Oh well, it's not like I've got the time or energy to move all that junk back out of the other room tonight, so it will have to do."

Muttering grumpily to herself, Akari nonetheless felt rather cheerful. After all, she'd just enjoyed a good hot bath.

At first, she'd planned to go to the nearby public bathhouse, but Tomohito had stopped her, saying it was too dangerous at night.

She'd quickly spruced up the bathroom and run a bath, which was full and hot in no time thanks to the house being equipped with a gas water heater.

Akari had thought Mayoi might have performed some mischief that would force her to take a cold bath, but no, she was able to enjoy this home comfort. Even if she did have to fend off a certain bothersome Kotogami who was armed with a sponge and a firm determination to scrub her back for her.

Now dressed in a sleeping robe, Akari sat down on the futon and looked around her. The room had an air of sacred stillness, save for the pile of new packages stacked up in a corner.

They didn't go with the room. They were the things Akari had bought that day. Nobody had tampered with them while she was in the bath. "So Mayoi didn't toss all my stuff outside like I feared."

The room was full of creepy things that would usually have caught her attention, but right now all she could think about was finding out more about Mayoi.

After thinking about it at length, Akari drew Mayoi's Kotogatari out from the satchel. She ran her fingers over the smooth black cover. And she felt a twinge inside her chest.

Tomohito had told her that a Kotogatari was like a historical report of a Kotogami, written in the form of a story.

He'd said they were something different altogether from the fictional stories Akari disliked.

"I don't even know why I hate stories so much myself..."

Akari had used the word *hate* to describe her feelings to Tomohito. But with a story open in front of her now, what she was feeling was apprehension and a desire to escape. It was a strange feeling, somehow subtly different from mere hate or dislike.

Her memories of her childhood were hazy, but Akari seemed to recall enjoying fables and fairytales before her parents died. It was only when she was all alone in the world, being shunted from one relative to another, that she'd begun to dislike them. The world of fantasy was something she began to actively avoid.

Looking down at the Kotogatari in her lap, she realized she felt even more nervous to read it than she would a regular novel. Nevertheless, she was very curious about Mayoi.

"I need information before I can form an opinion on anything."

Was she trying to convince herself by saying that out loud?

She had a feeling she'd been manipulated into this by Tomohito. But part of her really wanted to know more about Mayoi, too.

There were journals stacked on a separate shelf from the Kotogatari volumes.

Those were probably the journals left behind by the Narrators who'd taken up positions in this Bookhouse. There was also a conveniently placed reading desk in the room, complete with a chair and a hanging lamp.

Perhaps by reading, she could get some insights on how to make this new lifestyle of hers go smoother. But then she thought of something.

“Will Mayoi even *let me* read her Kotogatari?”

Tomohito had stopped her from reading his own Kotogatari, after all... But telling herself that if Mayoi didn't want her Kotogatari read, she'd surely stop her, Akari stroked the book's black cover again.

“Please tell me about yourself, Mayoi...”

Akari took a seat at the reading desk and placed the Kotogatari on the book stand. The dim electric light hummed overhead as she turned the pages with a dry whispery sound.

THE next morning, Akari, fighting back a yawn, ate the Japanese-style breakfast Tomohito had prepared.

The rice was cold leftovers from the batch she'd steamed last night, but with miso soup and boiled greens in fish broth, it made for a satisfactory breakfast.

“Mistress Akari, it appears you stayed up late last night. Why not go back to bed for a while?”

“No, I've got too much to do.”

Feeling self-conscious about the dark circles under her eyes, Akari brushed off Tomohito's concern and got up from the table.

“Tomohito, I have a request.”

“A request!”

Tomohito's face lit up, predictably. Akari cringed to see it.

“...There's no need to look so excited. All I want is to have a chat with Mayoi.”

Akari had stayed up all night reading Mayoi's Kotogatari and the old Narrator journals, and she thought she was starting to grasp the circumstances now. Mayoi's Kotogatari told the tale of a very lonely little spirit.

Once, a certain powerful family lived in a grand house inhabited by a little house spirit. During her time with them, she brought happiness and good luck to the household.

But then one day the powerful family moved away, leaving the little spirit all

alone in the beautiful mansion. She spent her days taking care of lost travelers who wandered into the house. This happened only once or twice every few decades. The rest of the time, the little spirit was utterly alone. Then one day, she was discovered by a Narrator and tasked with household management under the given Kotogami name “Mayoi.”

Mayoi had always adored human beings. Moreover, she was lonely from centuries of solitude, and so she obeyed every command given to her by her Narrator.

Akari thought about how Mayoi had left her purchases alone. And about how, when she and Tomohito had returned from shopping, Mayoi had caused no further mischief. That had to mean that Mayoi didn’t really want to drive Akari out. And unlike Tomohito, she’d made no attempt to prevent Akari from reading her Kotogatari. Which had to mean she didn’t mind Akari reading it, right?

Mayoi’s bad behavior was probably just a knee-jerk reaction to Akari’s sudden arrival. Mayoi had been mistreated by humans but still couldn’t let go of her attachment to them. She must have felt so confused. And that emotional turmoil had come out in naughtiness and pranks. The little girl was clearly desperate for attention.

But all that was only Akari’s conjecture. That was why she wanted to talk with Mayoi properly. Face-to-face, if possible.

Akari had a feeling that using Mayoi’s Kotogatari to call her forth, as the previous Narrators had done, would be counterproductive.

“...I plan to track Mayoi down to have a chat with her. If you wouldn’t mind —”

“Leave it to me.”

Tomohito cut her off before she could finish, disappearing from sight with a nod. Akari blinked several times, then almost jumped out of her skin at the sound of loud banging coming from down the hall, followed by a shriek.

“Yeek!”

“Mistress Akari wishes to speak with you. Come along at once.”

A moment later, Tomohito came into view again, beaming with pride as he staggered down the hallway while holding a struggling Mayoi under his arm.

“Mistress Akari! I have brought Mayoi to you!”

“How dare you treat a little girl that way?! Put her down at once!” Akari shouted at Tomohito, who wilted visibly and let Mayoi down.

“I know how she looks, but Mayoi is decades older than you, Mistress Akari...”

“I know that—I read her Kotogatari myself! I wanted to have a nice peaceful talk with her, but now you’ve ruined it! Next time, think before blindly leaping to assist me!”

“Y-Yes, Mistress...”

Tomohito bowed low, seemingly realizing Akari was seriously mad right now.

Akari took a deep breath and turned to Mayoi, who sat sprawled on the hallway floor.

Mayoi blinked up at her weakly, her long hair falling messily over her shoulders. From the sound of the banging, Akari feared she’d been subjected to violence, but she couldn’t see any visible bruises or scrapes.

Tomohito’s lucky there aren’t any bruises, thought Akari darkly as she sat down on the floor in front of Mayoi.

The little spirit’s long black hair was unkempt, as if it hadn’t been properly cared for. Between the strands of hair Akari could just spot two shining black eyes peering out at her.

“I read your Kotogatari. And I know what those other Narrators made you do. After everything humans have put you through, why didn’t you try to make me leave for real? Why the silly mischief?”

The records of the Narrators had all varied slightly, but generally they spoke of how pleased they were to be assigned to the residence, and how excited they were for the chance to try out such a rare collection of Kotogatari volumes.

It seemed she’d underestimated how special a Bookhouse this old building was.

From the writings in the old journals, it was clear that those Narrators were like children with a bunch of shiny new toys. But they grew increasingly annoyed with the Kotogami who didn't instantly follow their every order. What a bunch of jerks. Were all Narrators this selfish? Akari wondered.

But regardless, Mayoi had continued to heed the commands of those Narrators right up until the day they'd left of their own volition. She heeded even when those orders involved warping the original architecture of the house, when her role was only supposed to be tidying and maintaining it. Mayoi had to have grown exhausted.

And then, another human had come barging into the house. Wouldn't anyone want to kick said human out if they were in Mayoi's place? Akari definitely would. But the spirit had only messed with her. Why hadn't she seriously tried to get rid of her? That was what Akari wanted to know.

As Akari waited patiently, Mayoi's eyes filled with unease. Then she spoke in a tiny voice. "A house needs humans. Mayoi doesn't want to be alone anymore."

Akari recalled a passage from Mayoi's Kotogatari.

—When a baby was born unto the family of a wealthy household, the spirit appeared to care for the babe, and to improve the habitat of the humans, and to bring warmth to the household. To this end, the spirit devoted its entire being.

Mayoi's role as a spirit—it was to serve and maintain the house in which she resided. But what use was it to keep up a house with no human residents? Being a house spirit for humans, that was Mayoi's sole reason for existing. It really was just as the Kotogatari records said.

"I tried so many times to change the house so that my masters would like it enough to stay, but they never did, and all of them left. I'm so tired now. I was scared you were going to say you didn't want me either."

This was the first time Akari was hearing Mayoi really speak. Her voice was so innocent, so heartbroken.

The little girl spirit gazed at Akari through the strands of her long hair.

"Do you want to change the house too?"

It was as if the little girl was letting Akari know that she would do it, if only Akari requested it. But Akari shook her head.

“No, I don’t need you to do that. I’m not your mistress.”

“...You’re not a Narrator?”

Mayoi blinked at her in surprise. Relieved that they’d finally gotten around to the matter at hand, Akari continued.

“No, I’m not. I’m just in charge of looking after this house for a short period of time. I have no plans to make you work for me. All I ask is that you give me your permission to stay here.”

“But Tomohito calls you Mistress.”

“Haha... About that. We haven’t really cleared that up yet...”

“You ARE my mistress, Mistress Akari!”

“You be quiet. Hmm, anyway...”

Ignoring Tomohito, Akari turned her focus back to Mayoi.

“Tomohito prefers to call me Mistress, so that’s why he does it. But you’re your own person, Mayoi. If you want to call me that, you can. And if you don’t want to, that’s fine too. I know you’ve got your own will. After all, that’s why you were causing me so much trouble yesterday, right?”

Mayoi chewed her bottom lip and looked guilty as Akari gave her a wink.

“So, what about my request? Will you permit me to live in this house too?”

“...What kind of house would you like it to be?”

Akari blinked in surprise, but her answer came readily.

“If possible, I’d like to live in a warm, happy household just like the one described in your Kotogatari.”

Now it was Mayoi who blinked at Akari in surprise. Akari thought about what she’d read in the Narrator’s journals again.

“After all, you know all about running a household, don’t you Mayoi? It would be presumptuous of a layperson like me to tell you what to do. This house was

originally a Western-style manor, wasn't it? But it's had all kinds of adjustments to make it more like a traditional Japanese house. It might be nice to put it back how it was. You like Western-style things, don't you?"

The long-sleeved kimono Mayoi was wearing had lace attached to the collar and sleeves.

Such an adjustment would need hours of research and trial and error to produce something that didn't look like a mismatched mess. And Mayoi's kimono looked absolutely perfect.

Akari didn't mention the kimono out loud, but Mayoi noticed her looking at it, and her cheeks flushed.

"Really? It's okay?"

"Sure! Oh, but please make sure it stays livable, like a house."

From what was written in Mayoi's Kotogatari, Akari was pretty sure Mayoi could only rearrange the building in ways that would still keep it habitable by humans, but she felt the need to add that little caveat, just in case. Nodding, Mayoi got to her feet.

Akari noticed her fine black kimono again.

"Where's my Kotogatari?"

"It's right here."

"Open it please."

Akari got to her feet as well, pulled the book from her bag, and opened it. Then as if on cue, Mayoi began to slowly rotate on the spot.

"May my mistress's words manifest into being."

Mayoi smiled, her face so innocent, her black hair slowly flowing.

"Don't move for a moment, Mistress Akari."

"Huh?"

As Akari looked at Tomohito in surprise, Mayoi clapped her hands once.

"As I will it, so be it!"

Mayoi's clear voice rang out, and the air in the room seemed to undulate.

Everything began to whirl past her eyes, as if she were watching the scenery go by from the window of a steam train. Akari stumbled, her head spinning, but Tomohito held her steady. While this was happening, the Kotogatari lay open, pages unmoving.

The peeling walls were unpeeling, and the haphazard hallways were straightening themselves. Ornaments and paintings were leaping to take their proper place on walls and shelves. The junk in the hallway lifted into the air and zoomed off elsewhere. This power...it must be how Mayoi had managed to toy with Akari yesterday.

Then the storm of refurbishing and redecorating was over as suddenly as it had begun.

The surroundings were completely transformed. The positioning of windows and doorways now made sense. The walls of the hallway were now a serene cream color, offset by dark wood beams. And tasteful light fixtures sparkled on the ceilings. Presumably, the entire house had received the Mayoi makeover treatment.

Akari looked around her in wonder. The house looked so different with the ill-fitting, tacked-on traditional Japanese alterations removed. Then Mayoi spoke.

"I made it resemble the Western houses I like most from what I've seen in picture books."

"...Mayoi?"

Blushing with quiet pride, Mayoi herself had changed too.

So much so that Akari barely recognized her.

She still wore her black long-sleeved kimono, but in addition to the lacy sleeves and collar, it now boasted a puffy skirt. Her little feet were clad in white socks, with shiny Western-style patent leather shoes. Her once-long black hair was now bobbed in a modern short haircut that only just covered her ears. Mayoi was still beaming proudly, pointing her toes in her new shoes and shaking her head so that the short hair banged against her cheeks.

“I’ve tidied the bathroom and bedrooms too. And I stored the other things in the storeroom. Does it please you? I included all the things I like. Does it feel comfortable?”

Mayoi’s expression had grown anxious, but Akari gave her a big smile.

She’d been shocked by the transformation, but Mayoi’s alterations suited the little girl’s style perfectly.

“Yes, I love it. It’s a warm and happy house, just like how your Kotogatari describes it.”

Mayoi’s face lit up like a beautiful flower bursting into bloom, and Akari gazed back at her for a few moments, utterly charmed. Then she realized she was staring, and snapped out of it.

“...This is a *Western*-style house, isn’t it? Then I suppose I had better be wearing shoes as well!”

As Akari headed to the entrance hall for her boots, Mayoi came trotting alongside her.

“Mistress, these floors are all right to walk on even without shoes. They’re waxed and polished. You prefer not to wear shoes indoors, isn’t that right?”

“You made the floors like that, just for me?”

Mayoi nodded.

Truthfully, Akari had a hang-up about wearing shoes indoors. She felt pleased to have clean floors to walk on in her socks for the first time since she’d come to the house. She couldn’t believe Mayoi had noticed that about her and accommodated her preferences!

Filled with affection, Akari reached out and softly stroked her stylish bobbed hair.

“Thank you, Mayoi.”

The spirit gazed up at Akari, smiling a toothy smile that made Akari’s heart positively melt. But just then Tomohito took hold of Mayoi’s shoulder and tried to yank her away.

“Stop clinging to Mistress Akari!”

“Won’t! She’s MY mistress now too!”

Akari blinked as the girl clung to her kimono.

“Mayoi, I’m just the custodian, okay?”

“You won’t be my mistress?”

Mayoi sounded so sad, her little fists clenching the kimono fabric. *Ah, dang it*, Akari thought.

“I’ll make it a real good house! Please stay here!”

“All... All right, then. For now.”

“Mistress Akariiii...”

Tomohito whined her name, distraught, but Akari ignored him and let Mayoi take her hand to show her around the rest of the house.

The home was now completely in the Western style, with the essential facilities ergonomically designed to allow for multiple guest rooms on the second floor and a good portion of the ground floor.

“We’ll need plenty of rooms in the future when our number of companions grows, you see.”

Akari didn’t really get what Mayoi meant by that, but she was happy to take ownership of the master bedroom on the second floor and finally get out of that library shrine room.

AFTER she’d finished arranging her belongings in her new room, Akari took a breather.

Mayoi had transported her things to the room for her, but Akari had taken charge of arranging them to her own preferences.

The room was very large, and Akari felt a little bit anxious having this much space. Mayoi had done a great job with it, though, and the view from the window was of the department stores in town. It felt very modern, and very cozy.

The house had been put to rights, but the garden and the rest of the grounds still needed a lot of work.

Akari was almost done with her break when she heard a knock on the door.

She opened it to find Tomohito standing there, his nice three-piece suit looking a little disheveled.

“Mistress Akari, I’ve finished tidying up downstairs.”

“Good job. But why do you look like such a mess?”

“Mayoi and I were negotiating the division of labor... I’m afraid I lost half of the cooking duties to her.”

Akari couldn’t imagine why that would have messed up his suit like that. But as she looked at Tomohito standing there vibrating with frustration, she decided she didn’t want to bother asking.

And Tomohito didn’t seem about to elaborate either.

“Mayoi has already prepared today’s lunch. Would you come down?”

“Sure. But before that, Tomohito...”

Akari was curious to see what Mayoi had whipped up for lunch, but she needed to talk to Tomohito about something important first.

“You chased all those other Narrators out for Mayoi’s sake, didn’t you?”

His light-brown eyes blinked several times. Akari couldn’t help being struck all over again by the handsomeness of his features, but she carried on.

“From what I read in the journals, those Narrators were extremely irritated. Talking about various...interferences...”

“...Many of the Kotogatari in our collection contain Kotogami with... idiosyncratic personalities...”

“Actually, I recall some choice journal passages: *‘Why won’t that Kotogami do what I tell him to?’ ‘Why did I get recalled from duty? I haven’t even had the chance to make my report yet.’* And so on. A lot of entries complaining about a certain Kotogami. You know what I think? All these Narrator reassignments, they were a result of you whispering tales in Munakata’s ear about their

incompetence. Am I wrong?"

Tomohito's eyes grew wider as Akari reeled off the sections of the journals she'd memorized. She'd guessed from their conversations that Tomohito and Munakata had that kind of setup going on, but his reaction just then confirmed her suspicions.

"You memorized the journals?"

"Just the complaints, of which there were a lot. And I've got a good idea now that this Bookhouse comes with some serious baggage attached."

"It's true, there's a lot I've left out... But...didn't you believe me when I said I did nothing to help Mayoi when those Narrators were here?"

"No, not for a second. Not after seeing how mad she was when she thought you were betraying her, bringing a stranger into the house. Mayoi's smart. Smart enough to know how cute she is. And smart enough to get mad when she thinks the one person who always had her back has turned on her."

"I see. So then, what is the problem? I seem to have done something to displease you, but I don't know what it is."

Tomohito hung his head miserably and Akari blinked, taken aback. He looked stricken, as if devastated to have angered her. His aura of mystery had cracked.

"I'm not saying you've done anything wrong, only...why purposefully make yourself look like the bad guy?"

"That wasn't my intention..."

Tomohito looked bewildered, as if he'd been unaware of his own actions.

It was true: he'd hadn't lied, except by omission. But he'd intentionally phrased things in ways that obfuscated the truth. For all his fawning over Akari, he'd been keeping her at a distance. At least, that was the impression she got.

As a result, she started deliberating over how much of a distance to keep from him as well.

"So when you got out Mayoi's Kotogatari and recommended her to me, you weren't doing it for her benefit?"

“No, I simply thought she might be of some use to you.”

He obviously doted on Mayoi, and Akari was starting to wonder if he was just using her to help heal the little girl’s loneliness. But Tomohito had brushed the question off lightly.

He was gazing into space, a faraway look in his eyes.

“Perhaps I wanted Mayoi to also experience the happiness that comes from having one’s Kotogatari truly read and appreciated... Such a thing brings great joy to us Kotogami.”

“So someone read you and appreciated you once?”

“Oh yes... I was given the most splendid, most unique reading... But then...”

Tomohito’s lips curled into a happy smile, but Akari thought she could detect a hint of pain in his features.

She sighed, though, deciding it would be better not to read too much into a look.

At any rate, further digging at this point would be nothing more than a waste of time and energy. It was clear Tomohito meant to serve her well. That would have to do for now.

She did want to ask him exactly what kind of Kotogami he was, but she decided to shelve that one. It was interesting how differently Mayoi’s Kotogatari seemed to be written compared with his, but it was none of her concern. She wasn’t going to get herself involved. No, she was done interrogating him.

As she walked past, she placed her hand on his shoulder for a moment.

“You did a good job against those Narrators, that’s all I’ll say. I think the way you handled them was pretty cool.”

“...!”

Those Narrators sounded like a stuck-up bunch of snobs to Akari, from what she’d read of their journals. In her opinion, Tomohito deserved a gold star for protecting Mayoi from them.

She headed into the corridor with a spring in her step, leaving Tomohito gawping behind her.

“Since the house is all done, I’ll be heading into town again after lunch. Accompany me.”

“...Certainly, Mistress Akari.”

Feeling half excited, half nervous to see what Mayoi had prepared for lunch, Akari headed downstairs.

Tomohito remained standing in the doorway.

“You truly do seem to have forgotten it all...and yet, you haven’t changed a bit.”

Akari didn’t hear Tomohito’s hushed murmuring, nor did she see the bittersweet look on his face.

Incidentally, she had to concede that the lunch Mayoi prepared was far more delicious than anything she could ever make...

MAYOI walked silently along the moonlit Bookhouse corridors, twirling around every couple of steps.

As she moved, the long sleeves and full skirt of her ink-black kimono flared out, the lace trim fluttering. Mayoi had a huge smile on her face.

It wasn’t just because she was wearing an outfit she really liked. It was because she had been accepted by a human.

It wasn’t a Narrator who had come to the Bookhouse this time, but an ordinary young woman who called herself a custodian.

Mayoi, who had grown so tired of being mistreated by humans, could hardly believe it.

Her fellow resident, Tomohito, had let her be when she’d stopped caring for the house and had never said anything, not even when she’d ceased cleaning it altogether. She’d grown used to things the way they were. So the coming of the young woman had been a shock to the system.

First off, the most surprising thing of all was that Tomohito had brought the woman here in the first place. Tomohito had never shown any interest in Narrators, or indeed any inclination to learn anything about humans in general. She'd thought he was the same as her, having given up on humans almost completely, and finding out otherwise had felt like betrayal.

Mayoi had thought the woman looked quite impressive, actually, clomping about the house in her boots. But Mayoi had lashed out at her in pain. She regretted that now, a little bit. But the woman hadn't turned her back on Mayoi.

"Please tell me about yourself, Mayoi..."

How happy those words had made her! How she had hungered to hear someone say that!

Ever since she'd been enshrined as a Mayoiga, Mayoi had continued to care for the house as she was commanded.

That, after all, was her reason for existing and had been so even before she'd become a Kotogami.

But a housekeeper wasn't all she was. Even as a Kotogami, she had a story. A story recorded in the pages of her spirit tome.

She had so badly wanted to be recognized. To be seen as Mayoi, not just the Mayoiga category of Kotogami. And then Akari had arrived and noticed her. Unpretentiously, she'd read her Kotogatari. All to get to know her—to know Mayoi.

She was a Mayoiga spirit, the spirit of abandoned houses. But she was so much more than that too.

When she'd been enshrined in a Kotogatari volume and categorized as Mayoiga, she'd realized that humans love to take things at face value, never going deeper. But Mayoi still remembered how warm the touch of a human could be. How grateful they could be, for a job well done. She remembered how precious and lovely it was to be heard by them, to be answered by them...to be on the receiving end of their smiles.

So she wanted to believe the words of the woman...Akari.

What would make this new mistress happy? She'd told Mayoi to do as she liked, but Mayoi very much wanted to please her too. Nothing gave Mayoi greater joy than to please the humans who brought life and warmth to her household.

Akari seemed to like Western-style cooking. Perhaps next time she'd try cooking a different country's cuisine. There were so many Mayoi wanted to try. The new mistress would surely let her. At least, she was pretty sure she would.

As Mayoi twirled and spun her way down the moonlit corridor, sleeves flaring out, a moonbeam slanting through the windows illuminated the form of the other resident Kotogami, Tomohito Yagyou.

His expression was blank, lacking the expressiveness of the daytime. But Mayoi wasn't concerned. Over the past decade, she'd grown used to his empty looks.

Mayoi's job was to keep the Bookhouse neat. Tomohito was a Kotogami who had been assigned to this Bookhouse. She didn't need to know anything more than that.

It was none of her concern who Tomohito was or what his circumstances were.

But now that she'd met someone she could respect as her mistress, things were different.

"Tomohito."

Perhaps he was surprised to be addressed by her. He turned to her, his brows slightly raised. Then he grimaced, as if pained.

Perhaps he was still sore over having half of his chores taken away by Mayoi earlier that day. But she had every right to take them. She'd been indentured to this house for far longer than he. She had years of experience stored up, and she wasn't about to concede to him on matters of housekeeping.

But why did he care so much about serving Akari, anyway? It didn't track with his previous indifferent handling of the Narrators. Mayoi wasn't a bit concerned about the changes in him, but there was one thing she wanted to clarify.

“How long are you planning to serve her as your mistress?”

Tomohito blinked in surprise before quickly answering.

“I told you. Until she finds a peaceful and comfortable place in the world for herself.”

That wasn't what Mayoi had wanted to know, but it was a satisfying enough answer for now.

“All right. Then I should do my best, to make it a nice house for her. So that she'll decide she wants to stay.”

Akari had said she'd only be staying at the Bookhouse for a short amount of time. But she'd probably change her mind, if they could just make her feel at home. And after all, Akari had told Mayoi to do as she liked. Tomohito had brought Akari here, but as long as he didn't plan to interfere, then Mayoi would, indeed, do as she liked.

“You know, I've always appreciated that determined spirit of yours.”

Tomohito had seemed somewhat anxious over whether Mayoi would get on board the Akari welcome train, but now he only nodded mildly. It was as if he was saying: *Yes, good, that's exactly what I want you to do.* Mayoi puffed out her cheeks childishly. *I was gonna anyway,* she thought.

“As long as I have this body, I plan to serve Mistress Akari. That's all I need.”

“Yeah, well...you seem to be getting on her nerves.”

Mayoi grinned slyly as her cutting remark made Tomohito's mask of indifference slip. The woman, Akari, seemed to know well enough that Mayoi wasn't a child, but she couldn't help seeing her that way. It was clear she had tons more sympathy for the cute girl spirit than she did for Tomohito, who inhabited the form of a full-grown man.

But Mayoi was an old house spirit, not a little girl, and she had sharp powers of perception. Moreover, she planned to use every tool at her disposal to get closer to Akari. She had always been the spirit Mayoi, but now she was a Kotogami too. And she wanted nothing more than to be close to the one person who'd taken an interest in her, who'd read her Kotogatari for no other reason

than to get to know her.

“I won’t let you keep her all to yourself, Tomohito. So there.”

Tomohito’s poker face suddenly melted away entirely, and he looked flustered and upset. Grinning with satisfaction, Mayo floated off to the kitchen to plan tomorrow’s menu.

Chapter Three: A Convenient Misunderstanding

IT had been a few days since Akari took up her post as custodian of the Bookhouse, and time had passed quickly. Now she had to return to her real job.

Akari dressed in her new light-pink kimono adorned with red peony flowers and a bright red sash.

It was company policy for her to wear the mandatory work clothes, which consisted of a drab coverall apron, at the office. But Akari gave herself free rein to wear what she really liked underneath.

Her shabby work bag slung across her shoulder, Akari sat down in the entrance hall to re-lace her boots. Tomohito hovered behind her fretfully.

“Are you sure you’re not going to take the Kotogatari along with you?”

“I told you already. We can’t bring personal items to work. If it got stolen, I’d never get it back. Or it might get confiscated and disposed of. You don’t want that, do you?”

“No, Mistress...”

Tomohito’s shoulders slumped and he slunk back a step as Mayoi came trotting up.

Her beautiful kimono sleeves were tucked up and she wore a frilly apron. She offered a cloth-wrapped bundle to Akari.

“Mistress, I made you a bento lunch. Please bring it with you!”

“What a sweet girl you are, Mayoi! Thank you!”

Akari was genuinely pleased. She’d been wondering what to do about lunch. Mayoi blushed and smiled happily. But she was lingering. All of a sudden, Akari guessed what she wanted.

“...Hug?”

“!”

Mayoi’s face lit up. Akari had guessed right. A moment later, Mayoi flung herself into Akari’s arms. As Akari hugged her tight, bulky kimono and all, Mayoi snuggled close.

Mayoi had grown extremely affectionate toward her in a very short amount of time. But after so much loneliness, the little girl was still awkward about expressing her wants. Akari tried to anticipate her needs whenever possible.

After a few moments of silent hugging, Mayoi seemed satisfied. Then she looked up, her expression smug and aimed at Tomohito.

Akari swore she could hear the sound of his teeth grinding together.

“Urgh! I could make Mistress Akari a bento lunch, if only I had a moment to study the technique!”

“By the time you’re done with that, I’ll already have memorized all of Mistress Akari’s favorite foods.”

Akari watched them pensively. She’d thought they were close after a decade spent living together, but she’d been forced to revise that opinion.

For her part, Akari had become quite good at breezing past these little rivalry spats of theirs in the past few days.

Releasing Mayoi, Akari got to her feet as the two Kotogami stared each other down.

“I’m off. You two get along, now.”

“Then I shall see you off, Mistress!”

“If you dare follow me to my office, I shall take *all* your duties and give them to Mayoi.”

Tomohito froze and began stealthily slipping out of his shoes again. Akari sighed. *I knew it.*

“Mistress, I worry about you...but I understand. Have a good day.”

“I’ll see you both later.”

Akari looked over her shoulder. Tomohito was staring at her, expression

doleful, while Mayoi was waving cheerfully.

Hand on the door, Akari paused. Tomohito tipped his head to one side as he observed her.

“Is something amiss, Mistress?”

“...It’s nothing. See you later.”

It’s just been so long since anyone’s seen me off at the door, thought Akari, waving at them both with an odd feeling in her chest.

IT was cold out in the morning air, even though spring’s coming was evident.

Clutching her cape tightly around her shoulders, Akari headed to the streetcar station. She had to leave the house a little earlier than usual, but it was very convenient that the streetcar ran all the way from Shinkuju station to Marunochui, where she worked.

She went through the ticket gate using the commuter pass she’d bought yesterday and got onto the streetcar along with a crowd of other workers in suits. Now all she had to do was relax and get off at the station nearest to her office.

The wooden houses and buildings seen from the streetcar windows became classier and less mismatched as the journey progressed. Also, the streets running parallel to the tracks became increasingly populated with rickshaws and automobiles.

Akari disembarked at the nearest stop and found herself in familiar territory: Marunochui. It was heavily populated due to its status as the center of economic development in the Yamato Empire, and corporations and businesses abounded.

Akari’s company was among their number. And while the gray, sterile-looking company buildings loomed large, there were also a number of parks preserved for recreation, still thick with their original trees.

“I heard it used to be an army parade ground, though.”

She needed to cut through Hiyabi Park to get to her office. Just as Akari was

about to head into the green, leafy park, she heard a loud voice coming through a megaphone somewhere nearby.

“And so it seems evident that in these post-Westernized times of ours, the continued existence of the *yokai* is an anachronism! Why then does our government appoint these shady Narrators to positions of power? And why are these *yokai* allowed to run unchecked in our midst? I say this should stop!”

The speech was met with supportive cheers from a group of men standing around holding placards that read things like “Abolish All Narrators!” and “Burn All Kotogatari.”

Ah yes, the main reason why I didn't want to get involved, Akari thought, sighing to herself.

Hiyabi Park had been the gathering ground of late for these anti-Kotogami, book-burning activists. They viewed all *yokai* as dangerous beings and mistrusted the Narrators' ability to keep them in check. As radicals, they were demanding the burning of every last Kotogatari tome in existence.

Akari disliked stories, but her solution to that was to simply avoid them. She didn't feel the need to pursue their destruction. She grimaced at the activists and noticed that the other commuting workers walking nearby also looked uncomfortable and annoyed.

In Hiyabi Park, several newly erected signs said things like “Beware of Animal Spirits” and “If you encounter an animal spirit, remain calm and contact the Narrators' Association.” Akari wondered if those book burners understood that the Narrators were the ones dealing with the *yokai* disturbances. What did they think was going to happen if they got their wish—if the Narrators were shut down and all the Kotogatari burned?

But she kept her mouth shut, not wanting to get involved as she hurried across the park.

Akari's company, Sumimata Corporation, was a general trading company that dealt in Western clocks and imports, and manufactured gramophones for sale. Akari's job was primarily to assist the male employees.

She served tea, filed various paperwork, and did random accounting. There

were always piles of such work to be done. The female employees were also generally kept so busy doing routine tasks for other (male) employees that they were always playing catch-up with their own work.

It looked as if the other former residents of the company dorm were back at work today too, and the hot gossip of the office was all about the fire and the Raiju attack.

At lunchtime, the gramophone clock automatically played a record, a Western tune Akari didn't know the name of. The clock was one of the company's prized original products. Akari sighed from her seat at her appointed desk as the music played.

"After a few days off, work seems more draining than ever..."

It had taken some effort to get back into work mode. She hadn't made any major mistakes so far, but she felt as though she'd better be careful for a while.

"Miss Akari..."

"Oh, Mitsuko. What's up?"

When Akari heard the clear voice behind her and turned around, she saw Mitsuko Maruyama, who'd joined the company at the same time as her.

She was the same age as Akari. Dressed in a somber kimono with a fine pattern, hair tied in a tidy chignon, and emanating an aura of grace and refinement that immediately identified her as a graduate of an all-girls school. She could be somewhat timid, and usually it was up to Akari to initiate conversations with her. It was very unusual for her to seek Akari out this way.

Mitsuko chewed her lip for a moment before responding. "I heard your dorm burned down. I was wondering if you were okay."

"I don't know if *okay* is the word I'd use. All my stuff went up in flames. Hey, since you're here, why don't we eat lunch together and you can fill me in on everything I missed?"

"Oh, okay. Sure."

Mitsuko's expression instantly brightened as Akari pulled out her bento lunch. The two of them decided to head up to the rooftop together to eat. The office

stank of the men's cigarettes and was unpleasant to eat in.

"So, how's that new project you've been put on going?"

"It's going okay. There were a few mishaps, but nothing too bad. I'm just glad to be helping out."

Mitsuko smiled shyly. Akari was rather impressed. Mitsuko never complained, and she was very difficult to read. But right now, she was showing a rare confidence in her work.

It had surprised Akari when Mitsuko had been assigned a project involving the company's actual products. Most of the women spent their days on one miscellaneous office task or another. Not that Akari was looking down on office tasks, of course.

"You've got to be doing better than just about any other woman in the company, Mitsuko. I'd better step up my game and try to follow your example."

As long as it doesn't mean going above my pay grade, Akari thought wryly as Mitsuko blushed.

On the way to the rooftop, they encountered a man who was barking in a loud, angry voice as he loomed menacingly over some of the other employees.

"The blasted Raiju! Thundergod or not, I don't give a damn! It's destroyed our company dorm! Now we need to waste money rebuilding! This is going to hold back company advancement!"

"And this is why we have the Narrators? They treat those *yokai* like pets! And they get paid OUR tax money to keep the public safe. What a joke!"

The group of men walking the girls' way in the hallway were all in their forties or fifties. From the way they comported themselves, they seemed to be top management. Sumimata Corp. traded goods to the major department stores and did other big, impressive business-type things. A lowly assistant like Akari had never had a reason to come face-to-face with management before.

Once the men had gone and they'd checked that the roof was empty, Mitsuko sighed heavily.

"Ever since the Raiju attack, people have been publicly speaking out against

the Narrators and the Kotogami like that.”

“So it’s gotten even worse than usual.”

Akari frowned. The company’s prime location in the heart of expensive Marunochui was proof alone of its supposed quality. You’d think its top employees would be able to have a conversation without squabbling like children.

Actually, maybe the company being so big and all was the reason why these people were so self-assured about their views. Akari realized all over again that she was going to need to make sure the truth about her living in a Kotogami Bookhouse never got out.

She’d do the work she got paid for and be thankful for it. She wanted nothing more from this company than what she was owed.

“Also, Chief Gosaka didn’t seem too happy about you taking time off from work, so you’d better watch out for him.”

“Hmph. Sounds like he’s still vexed that I asked him how much longer those documents would take. Or maybe he’s still sore from when I pointed out that mistake he made. Oh, I also pointed out a translation error he made in another document.”

“I...I think all that may have contributed, yes. Everyone really depends on you in this company, don’t they?”

Mitsuko blinked at Akari with reverence. Avoiding the other woman’s gaze, Akari felt a touch of pride, but it was bittersweet.

Gosaka was a notorious offender of the crime of dumping his workload off on the female employees, who were all sick of him. He was also constantly making mistakes in his work, which he not only refused to own up to but also blamed on the female employees.

Before Mitsuko had been transferred to another department, she’d been Gosaka’s favorite target. Akari had stepped in to help her out countless times. All part of the job, Akari thought.

Making a mental note to watch out for Gosaka, Akari sat down on a bench

and unwrapped the cloth containing her lunch.

“Oh, Miss Akari. That bento seems a little different from your usual.”

“My housemate made it for me, actually.”

Akari normally brought a wicker basket with a few rice balls in it for lunch. She'd never used a fancy bento box like this, formed from a curved sheet of wood.

Akari opened the lid as Mitsuko looked on with interest. The inside was crammed with all kinds of goodies. Stuffed sweet-and-sour pork, spring rolls, and various side dishes consisting of lightly stir-fried vegetables. Half of the box was filled with yellow rice, which looked on closer inspection to be egg fried rice.

It seemed Mayoi could cook Chinese cuisine as well as standard Western fare. What a marvelous Kotogami she was.

Akari quickly got out her chopsticks and dived in to the side dishes. The sweet-and-sour pork lived up to its name and was delicious. The fried rice was crumbly and tasted so different from ordinary white rice.

The spring rolls were fried with a crispy exterior. The chef had paid close attention to achieving a variety of textures and mouthfeel as well as taste.

“Miss Akari...where are you living now?”

Akari stopped savoring the lunch and paused. Mitsuko was staring at her in bewilderment, her own bento box left unopened. It was the obvious question, but how to answer it? She couldn't tell the truth—that she'd taken on a custodian role at a Bookhouse.

“I have this...acquaintance...and they said I could live at their house if I helped with chores and so on. Kind of like a lodger? But I pay for my keep by helping around the house. Anyway, they like cooking food from different cultures, and they were generous enough to share with me.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Never mind that, though, Mitsuko. How's work really? No one's trying to make you do their share as well, are they?”

Akari was concerned about Mitsuko, who seemed rather gloomy. The other woman paused for a moment before smiling and shaking her head.

“I’m so glad for you, though, Miss Akari!

“It’s going to take at least two months for the company dorm to be rebuilt, so I’m thinking about staying with them until then.”

“I see. So you’ve figured something out on your own... How resourceful you are.”

“Oh, it’s not that impressive, Mitsuko.”

Akari hadn’t really done anything. She’d kind of fallen into the arrangement. It wasn’t anything to admire.

As Mitsuko continued to gaze at Akari with reverence, Akari popped another bite of sweet-and-sour pork into her mouth.

THE end of the workday arrived at last, and Akari joyfully began to pack up her things.

The Chinese bento lunch had been heavenly. Now she was excited for tonight’s dinner.

Akari headed down the stairs to the exit on the ground floor, wondering what Mayoi was planning to do about groceries for dinner.

“Mitsukuri. Your first day back, and you’re out the door on the dot? Tch. Typical woman.”

Akari heard the snide voice from behind her and turned to see the infamous Gosaka standing there.

Manicured mustache bristling, Gosaka came striding over to Akari with an air of menace.

Give me a break, Akari thought, composing her expression and giving him a brief, polite bow. She had to be civil. After all, he was her superior. And she wanted to keep her job.

“Hello, Chief Gosaka. If there’s nothing I can help you with, I’ll be heading

home now.”

“Hmph. Taking time off for personal reasons... At least catch up on the work you skipped out on before leaving—”

“Thanks, Mitsukuri! I can leave on time thanks to you helping clear the work backlog earlier!”

“Always happy to help! See you tomorrow! ...Now, Chief Gosaka, you were saying?”

Akari waved a hand in parting to the male employee who’d just thanked her, then returned her gaze to Gosaka, who was scowling.

She tilted her head to one side and blinked at him innocently. Looking deeply annoyed, he cleared his throat.

“A-HEM. Don’t think I haven’t noticed your snotty attitude, missy. You may be good at pushing papers around and making tea, but you’ll be sorry when the time comes to get married and no man wants you.”

Akari was far too busy just trying to keep a roof over her head and clothes on her back to care about marriage. So naturally, she didn’t care what Gosaka thought. But secretly, his words did sting a little.

Akari kept her expression still and composed. But Gosaka seemed to somehow know. His triumphant smirk proved it.

“Yes, you smarty-pants, marriage-delaying girls are all the same. Can’t find a man, and when you do manage to trap one, it’s always an ugly brute. Hahaha!”

Surely Gosaka was satisfied now. He had to let her go pretty soon, right?

Once she got home, tasty food would be waiting for her. The Chinese bento lunch was very rich, and she was in the mood for a nice mild fish dish. Not filleted, but a whole fish grilled, head and all. Maybe mackerel or sardines... That would be nice. Akari clenched her fists inside her sleeves, thinking soothing thoughts of dinner.

That was when she noticed something from the corner of her eye.

The crowd of workers parted and a strikingly handsome young man walked forward. As soon as he made eye contact with Akari, his face lit up like a

firework and he came hurrying over.

It goes without saying the man was Tomohito. Akari blinked at him, his collar-length hair mussed by the breeze. She could almost visualize a wagging tail emerging from his suit pants.

“You must be tired from work, Mistr—”

In a panic, Akari ran the last few steps toward him and quickly clamped her hand over his mouth to shut him the heck up.

As if surprised by her touch, his cheeks burst into color. But Akari paid his blushes no heed, simply glaring at him with fury etched across her face.

“If you dare call me Mistress or act in any way like a servant toward me in this of all places, I swear to you I’ll call you nothing but Mr. Yagyou from now on! This is my *job*! Don’t you dare screw it up for me! In fact, *help me* if you can!”

“Wh-What?”

Tomohito seemed confused, but he could only nod, cowed by the fury of Akari’s hissing.

Just then Gosaka stomped over to them, purple in the face with rage. Oops, Akari shouldn’t have just walked away from him midconversation.

“Mitsukuri! Who is this man?”

“I’m terribly sorry, Chief Gosaka. This is the person whose house I’m currently lodging at. He was concerned about me and came to meet me at work.”

“What! You’re living with a man?! What a disgraceful scandal!”

Akari couldn’t explain without letting Tomohito’s identity as a Kotogami slip, and she couldn’t think of a suitable excuse. Besides, she *was* living with a man. Well, not technically. But for all intents and purposes...

As Akari stood there chewing her lip, unsure what to do, Tomohito stepped forward with a tight smile.

“I can assure you I have the purest of intentions. Mistr... Miss Akari is a rare jewel and I intend to treat her with nothing but respect.”

Akari could just sense the ears pricking up on every passing coworker who

was leaving the building just then.

Among them, she noticed Mitsuko, and all the other female coworkers she was most familiar with. Akari rolled her eyes heavenward. *Oh, good grief*, she thought.

Gosaka seemed more shocked by Tomohito's proclamation than anyone else. He was gazing stupidly at the young Kotogami, his jaw hanging loose.

Akari understood that look. After all, Tomohito was beautiful.

On top of his physical qualities, that restrained, polite smile he was wearing right at that moment made him look intelligent and disciplined, and his three-piece suit was very similar to the ones worn by the higher-class businessmen in the area. He could even pass for the son of a nobleman.

It appeared as if Tomohito had decided to play along with Akari's frantic request for backup.

Yes, she had gotten through to him, it seemed, but was it her imagination, or had he actually grasped the whole situation quite sharply as well?

"Wh-Whaaat?!"

"Do excuse me. See you again tomorrow, Chief."

Taking Gosaka's confusion as her cue to escape, Akari quickly said goodbye and grabbed Tomohito's hand. Then, doing her best to ignore the gasps and the commotion from the crowd behind them, Akari fled from the building as fast as she could.

Please let the world end so I don't have to go to work tomorrow, she thought.

Once they were a safe distance away, Akari turned on Tomohito with a glare.

"I told you NOT to come to my office."

"I'm sorry! I couldn't help it. And you didn't say anything about not being able to come and greet you outside the building after work..."

Tomohito seemed to know that he'd twisted her instructions for his own benefit. He cowered before Akari's steely gaze.

The bookbag was slung across his shoulder. She'd forgotten that he'd been

wandering around by himself when she'd met him, carrying his own Kotogatari around.

Akari heaved a put-upon sigh. *Why do I always have to explain basic things to him?* she wondered. Nonetheless, she launched into yet another explanation.

"This area is filled with activists who are trying to do away with the Narrators. They're radicals, get it? So if any of them get wind that you're a Kotogami, they'll make mincemeat out of you."

"So telling me to stay away was to...protect me?"

"Partly. And partly for self-preservation."

Akari looked away as Tomohito's smile brightened.

Still grinning happily, he placed one hand over his heart and bowed politely.

"Thank you. But please be assured. Only a fellow Kotogami or a Narrator could identify me by sight."

"Hmm, you're probably right."

Akari rubbed her chin, thinking back on that scene at the company.

When she'd caught a glimpse of the faces of the other female employees, they'd all seemed very excited. Perhaps they were under the mistaken impression that Tomohito was Akari's fiancé.

She cringed for a moment. Then she realized that maybe this wasn't such a bad thing after all.

If she let people go on thinking they were engaged, then that would provide a convenient excuse for why she and Tomohito were living under the same roof. She wouldn't have to explain about the Bookhouse at all.

All right, I'll go along with it for now, Akari thought, just as Tomohito tentatively spoke again.

"So...you're not angry with me?"

Akari blinked, then looked away in embarrassment.

"Hmm, well, you did help me out, *this* time. But this is not to happen again, got that?"

“I shall make sure of it, I swear.”

Tomohito nodded earnestly at her.

The excitement over, Akari realized her stomach was grumbling. Lunch seemed a lifetime ago.

“Let’s hurry back. I wonder what’s for dinner tonight. We might need to make a grocery run...”

“I already went shopping, and Mayoi has finished preparing dinner. She said she was trying some Western-style cooking tonight.”

“I can’t wait! I hope we’re all right for funds, though...”

Akari was always worrying about money. But right now, she cared more about getting some good food inside her.

Tomohito held out the book bag to her as if it were only natural for her to take it. He took her own bag in exchange and they started walking home together, the air between them a bit awkward.

Wait a minute. How did he know where I worked? ...But Akari pushed that question aside. She was famished and didn’t have the energy for any further conversational battles with Tomohito.

Chapter Four: Kotogatari: DemonSlayer

AFTER that, Akari lived a double life. Working every weekday and doing Bookhouse duties on the weekends. Around two weeks had passed since this new lifestyle had begun.

Tomohito hadn't come to her office again, but all the female employees had been asking her about him, as well as some other employees she'd never even spoken to before. Akari was getting tired of shrugging off their questions, but she had to admit things were easier this way.

As for Mayoi and Tomohito's relationship, well, it was much the same.

They often fought between each other over who got to attend to Akari's needs, but their squabbles were proof of their closeness, so Akari let them be. She was also a little tired of trying to be a mediator. Mayoi had gotten more and more comfortable around her and had started coming to her for attention, which Akari found soothing. Also, the Bookhouse duties Akari was in charge of amounted to nothing more than keeping the books dusted.

Whenever she visited the library/shrine, she had this funny feeling that someone was watching her. But Tomohito had assured her that reading the books wasn't part of her job description, and she was more than happy to leave them unread on their shelves.

Never do anything that's not in your job description. That was Akari's policy.

Mayoi and Tomohito had been keeping the house in order, and the long battle against the unruly weeds in the garden seemed to be drawing to a close. Overall, the living environment was quite pleasant. Or so Akari thought.

Of course, another issue soon arose.

"Ack, I had no idea the gas and electricity bills would be this high..."

Akari sat on the sofa in the living room, staring with dismay at the bills from the gas company and the electric company that had arrived at the turn of the

month.

Beside her, Tomohito peeked at the bills, looking confused.

“You think that’s high? It seems less than usual to me.”

“Maybe it’s not so much for a big manor like this, but it’s five times what I was paying at my old place. I never even thought about it.”

Tomohito blinked at Akari as she heaved a sigh.

The six-tatami-mat room Akari had rented had one electric light, a gas stove, and a simple sink. The toilets were communal, and the nearby public bathhouse sufficed for bathing. That was a fairly normal setup for workers in the capital, and Akari had never thought anything of it. She’d just paid the monthly maintenance fees.

She was only one tenant, but this was a big house, full of electric lights. Akari had also succumbed to the temptation of taking a nightly bath. Even with her efforts to recycle the bath water for the laundry, the water bill was sky-high.

And yet, having a bathtub all to herself was such a treat, and something Akari refused to forego.

“And look at how much we’re spending on food... Mayoi’s Western dishes are so delicious, I can’t help indulging. But the ingredients cost so much!”

“I’m so sorry, Mistress.”

Mayoi had appeared from somewhere and now stood with her head hanging. Akari realized she’d spoken too harshly and quickly tried to comfort the girl.

“You mustn’t apologize, Mayoi. I couldn’t resist and kept asking you to make expensive Western dishes. But it’s all right. We’ve already decided to focus on Japanese food for a bit. The only problem is...I’m not sure how I’m going to pay these utility bills.”

As she stroked the girl’s bobbed hair reassuringly, Akari frowned at her housekeeping ledger.

The advance from Munakata had been spent. She’d been busy at work, and she’d handed her salary over to Tomohito and Mayoi to buy new light bulbs, cloths, and other sundries for the upkeep of the house.

She'd wanted to tuck the compensation money away for the future, but she'd had no choice but to spend it on necessities. Also, Mayoi had been desperate to win Akari's favor with food, so a month's worth of grocery budget had also vanished into the ether.

The easy life of the past few weeks had come with an expiry date. Akari was going to have to come up with something if she wanted to save money.

Tomohito cleared his throat nervously.

"Um, I think it would be best if the two of us stopped eating food with you at meal times."

"Hmm. Well, it's not that much more expensive to feed three than it is to feed one. Anyway, I don't want to eat alone. I'd appreciate it if you'd continue to join me for meals."

"Me too? I can eat too?"

"Of course, Mayoi. And we can't miss out on our daily afternoon snack, now can we?"

Akari winked. Yes, snack time was another recent pleasure she was unwilling to relinquish. Mayoi beamed back at her. Continuing to stroke the girl's glossy hair, she suddenly thought of something else.

"Don't the two of you need to replenish energy somehow? Like humans do by eating food?"

"Being read is what feeds me, Mistress."

Tomohito nodded in agreement with Mayoi.

"Being enshrined in a Kotogatari is what sustains us, mostly. But a Narrator's reading is what gives us the power to use our abilities. Being read every now and again is what nourishes us."

In other words, read, Akari thought. Her mind went again to the silent stacks of Kotogatari books in the library and she felt her blood run cold.

"All the Kotogatari in our collection have been tended to by Munakata, so there is no need to bother about that. Only Kotogami that are regularly manifested need regular upkeep. You have already given Mayoi a thorough

reading of late, Mistress, so there is nothing to worry about at all.”

“Huh.”

“I’m full of life, Mistress!”

Akari smiled as Mayoi made a fist and flexed her skinny arm.

Tomohito was in charge of the Bookhouse, so if he said it was all right, then surely it was. All Akari had to do was focus on getting by until payday. It was going to eat into her own salary, but she couldn’t give up the nightly baths. Darn this luxury she’d become accustomed to!

“Hmm, since we’ve got that big garden, maybe we could keep down food costs by growing our own vegetables? Oh, but perhaps I’d better not mess around with it. After all, I won’t be here for long...”

“If you’d like, it might be nice for you to do a touch of gardening... I’ve managed to clear the overgrowth somewhat, but there is further work to be done.”

“You want to tend the garden, Mistress? You really do?!”

Akari smiled as Mayoi bounced up and down on her toes. Slapping her knees, Akari rose to get on with the day’s plans, but just then Mayoi paused and turned in the direction of the front door.

“We have a visitor.”

What? thought Akari as someone knocked loudly using the door knocker.

When Akari and Tomohito went to open the front door, they found a familiar face outside.

“Mr. Munakata!”

“Hello. How are we getting along?” Munakata raised a lazy hand in greeting, looking as disheveled and lackluster as ever.

Akari was surprised by Munakata’s sudden appearance following his radio silence of late. Then, from behind her, an angelic voice rang out.

“Munakata, you old scruff. You never change, do you?”

Mayoi was standing beside Akari now, arms firmly crossed in her black

kimono, the lace sleeves flapping. She looked like a tiny child, but her haughty attitude was at odds with her cute appearance.

“...Mayoi?!”

“No more than you do, strutting about your house. It’s the only place you’ve got any guts.”

Akari had gasped when Mayoi sassied him, but Munakata didn’t seem particularly bothered.

“How dare you speak ill of my master?”

Kuroe, the girl with the dog ears, was standing at Munakata’s side. She jutted her face forward menacingly as she spoke. She, too, was wearing a black kimono, but it wasn’t gorgeous like Mayoi’s. It looked more like a mourning dress.

Kuroe drew back her lips in a snarl, exposing her canine teeth. But Mayoi was unbothered. Instead, she puffed out her tiny chest proudly.

“It’s the job of a guardian spirit to protect their master. Not to follow his every command like you, you pandering pooch.”

“Watch your words, you sniveling shut-in! You’ve never satisfied any master of yours in your life!”

“I’m a house spirit, duh. Of course I stay in. And I’ve got a mistress of my own now as well!”

“What, me?!”

Kuroe looked Akari up and down as Mayoi clung to Akari’s legs in a bear hug. Through Kuroe’s black hair, her ears seemed to flatten, and her tail seemed to straighten in shock.

Well, this was awkward. *I have to say something*, Akari thought.

“Um, sorry for Mayoi’s rudeness.”

“My mistress is a real good reader!”

“I won’t let you get away with sassing my master!”

“Pfffffft!”

Mayoi made a gleeful farting sound with her mouth in Kuroe's direction. Then she disappeared as if to say, *Welp, my job's done here.*

Akari looked on in sympathy as Kuroe stood there trembling with anger. Munakata, who had been silently observing Akari, spoke next.

"Miss Mitsukuri...you saw Kuroe just now, right?"

"Um, yes, but Mayoi was very rude to her first. Please...don't be harsh on Kuroe later."

Yes, she saw Kuroe... She was standing right there talking, after all, wasn't she? Akari didn't know what Munakata meant. At a loss for what to say, she'd ended up apologizing for Mayoi's naughtiness again. But suddenly, Munakata's interest seemed to be drawn elsewhere.

"So Mayoi's showing herself these days, I see. And I'm surprised she managed to tidy up the old storage house."

"Yes...I suppose... So this IS a storage house after all..."

Remembering how Munakata had told her nothing about the state of the house, she narrowed her eyes at him, scowling. But Munakata seemed unconcerned.

"If you'd asked for help with tidying up, I would have sent someone. I just didn't want to upset Mayoi. But this old place really needed sorting out. Thanks for taking care of it."

Akari's face reddened. *Jerk!*

He didn't want to upset Mayoi? Now she couldn't say anything back. And it was odd... Munakata looked strangely surprised, even impressed with her. But why?

The next moment, though, his face soured. He was looking at Tomohito, who was wearing a triumphant expression.

"I told you Mistress Akari is amazing. Do you get it now, Munakata?"

"Don't lecture me."

Munakata looked deep in thought about something, which intrigued Akari for

a moment, but she shrugged it off. This conversation was going nowhere.

“So what’s your business here, Mr. Munakata?”

“I wanted to see how things were going at the Bookhouse. And also, I think I may have a job for you. How about earning some extra pocket money?”

“All right, I’m interested. Tomohito, can you make some tea?”

“Certainly, Mistress.”

“Oh good, you’ve remembered your manners at last.”

Drawling sardonically, Munakata stepped inside at Akari’s invitation. She gave him a patronizing smile of her own as he crossed the threshold.

AFTER Munakata left, Akari began cheerfully clearing away the teacups. She had a paying job that coming weekend. She’d been so excited, she’d even thrown caution to the wind and served rice crackers with the tea.

“Mistress Akari, are you really going to take on the job?”

“I am. It doesn’t seem dangerous, and I want the pay.”

“But helping to curate a literary collection...?”

Tomohito looked so concerned, it almost put a damper on Akari’s enthusiasm. She thought back over Munakata’s job request again.

Basically, Munakata had tasked her with retrieving Kotogatari from a private residence in the city.

Apparently, high-class nobles were in the habit of collecting Kotogatari that housed the spirits of *yokai* as lucky talismans of sorts. In fact, Kotogatari could be found among the books of many a private collector. Households of a certain social status often employed Narrators to come and check their libraries when the time came to sell old books, just to make sure there weren’t any Kotogatari among the mix. Munakata wanted Akari to help with this sort of job.

“There really is a shortage of manpower with the Narrators, isn’t there, if they need a layperson like me to help.”

“There have been a lot of *yokai* rampages recently. The Narrators are busy

rounding them up. But even so, to make use of you this way is just...”

Tomohito trailed off, looking anxious. Akari had filled him in on the job description once Munakata had left, but Tomohito didn’t seem supportive at all.

Munakata had explained to her that all she’d need to do is go through the books and look for any Kotogatari—nothing dangerous at all. Akari had said yes at once, but looking at Tomohito now, she was wondering whether she’d made a mistake.

“Tomohito...is retrieving Kotogatari really so dangerous?”

“No, Munakata’s explanation was accurate. And it’s rare for any private collector to have possession of a Kotogatari that houses a dangerous *yokai*. Even if that was the case, professional Narrators would be called in immediately. You wouldn’t be in any peril. At least, that’s my guess.”

“So what’s the problem? You think I’m incapable of curating Kotogatari, is that it?”

Akari was relieved, but the relief gave way to indignation. Eyes widening, Tomohito rapidly shook his head.

“Never would I even think such a thing! You are highly capable, Mistress, and you have a natural gift for recognizing Kotogami! My only concern is that perhaps any Kotogami retrieved would become too attached to you. I should hate for an uncouth spirit to become a nuisance to you!”

Akari rolled her eyes internally as Tomohito stumbled over his words, desperate to appease her.

Akari had just learned that, sometimes, Kotogami could manifest themselves as noncorporeal spirits, like ghosts, and humans who could see them in this state were said to have “the knack” to identify Kotogami. It seemed that Kuroe, the dog spirit who had snarled at Mayoi from the front step, had appeared in ghost form today. Apparently, Munakata had brought her along in ghost form on purpose to test whether Akari could see her.

As he explained it, Munakata guessed that Akari had awoken this ability by living in close quarters with Kotogami over the past few weeks.

“That’s not going to happen. I’m not actually going to *read* any of the Kotogatari; I’m just going to sort through the books. Nothing strange is going to happen at all.”

“But even so... Oh...all right. I understand. It might actually be a convenient opportunity.”

Suddenly, the fight seemed to go out of Tomohito.

“But still, there is always a slight risk of danger. Would you agree to bring a different Kotogami with you to act as a bodyguard?”

“A different Kotogami? Do we need to go that far?”

Akari frowned. Surely he was overreacting? But Tomohito doubled down.

“Kotogatari housed in private collections are rarely well taken care of, and if there are any spirits that require re-enshrinement, well, that could be dangerous.”

“But I...”

“There is no need for you to narrate, I assure you. A Narrator’s ‘narration’ is generally only required when making use of a Kotogami’s powers. But to merely manifest the presence of a bodyguard, or should I say spirit guard, you will only need to call them forth.”

“That sounds intimidating enough!”

Akari tipped her head to one side in trepidation. But Tomohito seemed so insistent.

“Can’t *you* be my bodyguard? I sort of assumed you’d come with me anyway.”

After all, hadn’t he kicked that Raiju clean into the side of a building? Surely he was more than strong enough to act as her bodyguard.

But Tomohito looked conflicted and apologetic.

“I shall accompany you, of course, but I won’t be able to protect you if the worst happens. And if there is another Narrator there, I may not be able to protect you by myself...”

“Oh, I see...”

Tomohito's earnestness had started to work on her. Still, she was surprised he wasn't jumping at the chance to help, like he usually was. Maybe she did need another Kotogami. She didn't like it, but that extra money was too tempting.

"All right. But I have no idea which Kotogami to call on."

"Thank you, Mistress! I have a recommendation, so let us go to the library at once!"

"What, right now?"

Tomohito grabbed the tea tray from her hands, looking greatly relieved as Akari blinked at him.

"Yes! Don't you want to get to know the Kotogami in question first, rather than bringing along an unknown entity on the day of the job? Luckily, you have a full week to get acquainted and become firm friends! ...Mayoi, the teacups."

"On it. Off you go, Mistress!"

"Oh, all right, then."

Mayoi had appeared from somewhere and now waved her off as Akari turned to reluctantly follow a decidedly chipper Tomohito to the library shrine.

Filled with enshrined spirits, the room had the same peaceful, divine atmosphere as ever. Akari had insisted on giving it a thorough cleaning as well. She wouldn't have felt right about leaving it dirty.

Looking around at the bookshelves, Akari wondered how she'd ever managed to sleep in here. Finally, she turned to Tomohito.

"So what should I do? Which one should I choose?"

Please let it be the least annoying one possible, Akari thought. Tomohito pointed to a bookshelf on the right, where a Kotogatari tome sat taking up considerable space.

"This is the one you should awaken for this occasion. Please stand in front of the bookshelf, then clap twice, bow once, and remove the Kotogatari from the shelf."

Akari stood in front of that section of shelving, noting the presence of the

traditional shrine adornments—the thick rope garlands and the white zigzag-shaped Shinto ritual paper slips. As instructed, she clapped twice and bowed once. All of a sudden, the air in the room seemed to hum, and Akari could feel the divine energy. Carefully, she reached out toward the shelf.

The shelf was above Akari's eyeline, so she couldn't get a good look at the book's spine as she grabbed it.

Pulling the book off the shelf, she turned it over in her hands. It was bound in the classical Japanese style, its cover made of gray-blue washi paper that had been reinforced. *It's different from Mayoi's Kotogatari*, Akari noted. It was a thick and somewhat weighty tome.

"This is the account of the deeds of a certain samurai warrior—" Tomohito started.

"The DemonSlayer Kansuke Mishima!" Akari interjected.

"Oh...you know of him? Of course, he is the subject of many a Kabuki play and *yoruri* dramatic recitation, but I thought you hated storytelling?"

Ah, darn it, Akari thought as Tomohito's eyes widened.

Heart pounding, Akari pasted on a nonchalant expression.

"I've been educated, you know. I learned about culture and history at school, and I'm actually rather well acquainted with the tale of Kansuke Mishima."

"I see. I didn't realize that. Well, a Kotogami's strength and abilities are basically defined by the records written down in their Kotogatari. Historical accuracy doesn't really have a great deal to do with it, you see."

Akari was relieved that Tomohito had accepted her explanation, but she wasn't sure she understood what he was saying.

"Stories, folklore told by many tongues, they have a special kind of power; I can appreciate that. I figured that most Kotogatari are written based on urban folktales. And Kotogatari are used as a way of sealing away the dangerous *yokai* and other beasts, right?"

"Yes. And sometimes even humans turn into vengeful *yokai* or other spirits when they hold strong grudges. Some may even become...demons."

“Yikes, that sounds terrible.”

As Akari leaned back in distaste, Tomohito tilted his head to one side.

“Really? Well, Kotogatari were created to seal away Aratama—violent spirits—for safety. And to seal away humans who became twisted and turned into vengeful ghosts. Before Kotogatari existed, people even thought the emperor was a kind of god and worshipped him as if he were one, you know.”

“Ah yes. But even so...”

“Also, by making copies of Kotogatari that house powerful Kotogami, it’s possible to divide the spirit among multiple volumes. Although these copies tend to vary in their interpretation and as such tend to be much weaker...”

Akari nodded. In Kansuke Mishima’s case, that made sense. Even if his achievements and crimes had happened hundreds of years ago, who wouldn’t want a piece of that power?

“But what would be the point of copying an enshrined entity?”

“Mainly, to oppose demonic *yokai*. Thus, we can use the power of a Kotogatari in the form of a split spirit.”

“So in other words, to use as a weapon.”

Tomohito fell silent, his expression impossible to read.

Akari was going to take that as a yes. She sighed, stroking the gray-blue cover. It felt so nice and smooth beneath her fingertips.

“To call forth the spirit, you just need to read the name out loud, as you did with Mayoi’s Kotogatari.”

Akari nodded and took a deep breath before flipping the book open.

“The DemonSlayer Kansuke Mishima.”

A gray-blue ribbon of energy began to rise from the open pages.

This was different from how it had been with Tomohito or Mayoi. As she watched, the ribbon slowly twined around itself to form the shape of a human.

Akari blinked in surprise at the size of the figure before her. At last, the gray-blue ribbon faded away, leaving behind a virile-looking man in his midthirties

standing there.

He was about Tomohito's height, wearing an unstylish gray-green casual kimono. His hair was slicked back in a high ponytail, the tail part wild and bushy. At his belt, he wore a samurai sword, the handle obviously well-worn with use.

The atmosphere in the room suddenly felt heavy—perhaps due to the man's stern expression and rugged exterior.

Kansuke Mishima slowly opened his large, sharp-looking eyes and...yawned.

"Ahhh! I slept so well."

Akari blinked at him, her previous anxiety turning into confusion. Unbothered, Kansuke began to scratch his belly in an uncouth manner. In that moment, he went from being an impressive and somewhat oppressive figure to looking like a lazy slob.

Akari was shocked by this sudden transformation. Also...*gross*.

"You're Kansuke Mishima?"

"That's me. Hello there, girly."

He leered at Akari, eyebrow rising suggestively. But before she could react, Tomohito intervened.

"Good morning, Kansuke."

"Ah, Tomohito. It's a rare thing for you to call on me, is it not? I hope it's not going to rain blood tomorrow."

"I have a job for you. This coming weekend, I want you to act as a bodyguard for Mistress Akari here. You're the best spirit for the job."

Tomohito explained the situation in a calm voice despite Kansuke's boorish manner.

He had personally recommended Kansuke for the job, so she'd been expecting someone more...put together. He seemed friendly enough, but there was also something intense about him...

Kansuke didn't seem to notice her staring, however. He removed his hand from inside his kimono where he'd been scratching himself and began to rub his

jaw thoughtfully.

“All right. I understand the situation.”

“It’s wonderful to be working with you. I’m Akari Mitsukuri.”

“...I haven’t been out in the real world for a while. So I’m not opposed to helping you. Just one condition. No more getting changed in front of me, agreed?”

Akari paused mid-bow. She’d felt the need to introduce herself the same way she would if she met anyone new, spirit or human alike. But Kansuke had responded by saying something her brain couldn’t process at first. *What?*

“In front of...you?”

“We Kotogami can still process what’s going on around us to some extent, even while sealed inside our Kotogatari. We all got a pretty good view. You don’t have much meat on your bones, do you?”

Kansuke grinned, and Akari felt the blood rush to her cheeks as understanding dawned.

Shocked, she looked around at the shelves. Apart from a few empty spaces, they were crammed with Kotogatari tomes housing sleeping Kotogami. The first night in the Bookhouse, Akari had slept there. Changed clothes there. More than once.

She’d chased Tomohito out for privacy, but if the Kotogami had been watching her from those books...

A lot of things were starting to make sense now. Mayoi seemed to know Akari’s name even before she’d summoned her, and she’d also seemed to be more or less aware of what Akari had been doing there...

And all those times when Tomohito suddenly materialized to jump in and help her with something...she’d been carrying the bookbag with his Kotogatari inside at the time.

If Kotogami were aware of the environment outside of their Kotogatari, then that would explain so much.

Akari felt as if her cheeks were going to burst into flames. She was on the

verge of apoplexy.

But this was her fault for not bothering to find out more about Kotogatari, she figured. She could have kicked herself. And how embarrassing to have Kansuke tease her that way! It was easier to turn her anger outward.

“Mistress Akari? Is something wrong?”

Akari looked up at Tomohito, her eyes flashing with anger.

“Is something *wrong*? What do you think, MISTER Yagyou?”

“Ack! Mistress Akari?!”

“Stay away from me for a while. I’ll ask Mayo to tend to my room and meals.”

“But that’s horribly cruel! I—”

“Is it? Is it really? Why don’t you take a good look back over what you’ve done?”

As Akari fixed a trembling Tomohito with a look that could curdle milk and strip paint, Kansuke laughed throatily and walked past her.

“Girly, take me and use me as you will.”

He ambled out of the room, chuckling to himself. Akari thought about following him, but first she needed to deal with Tomohito. Harshly.

A week had passed in a flash since Akari summoned the Kotogami Kansuke Mishima.

As punishment for not properly explaining about Kotogatari books, Akari had stayed mad at Tomihito for a full twenty-four hours. Eventually, though, being addressed as “Mister” broke him and he’d started bawling for real. She’d relented then.

She had to admit she’d never really bothered to find out more about Kotogatari herself, so maybe she was partially at fault. But she stuck to her original policy. She wasn’t going to get too deeply involved.

Munakata had sent over a handbook on Kotogatari retrieval, and after work each day, Akari spent the evenings poring over it, trying to learn all she could.

“Once manifested, a Kotogami can use its powers to affect the real world, and it can repeat behaviors recorded in its Kotogatari. Once a narration has occurred, the Kotogami falls under the influence of its Narrator and will answer to no other.”

“Isn’t there some way to stop it?”

“Apart from waiting until the power of the narration spell has run its course, one could knock the Narrator unconscious, thus breaking the spell. Or one could seize hold of the physical Kotogatari volume and perform a re-narration to hijack command from the original Narrator.”

“Mayoi, is all this true?”

“It’s true, Mistress.”

The three of them sat together, Mayoi by Akari’s side and Tomohito across from them. When Akari turned to Mayoi for corroboration, Tomohito looked extremely sad.

But Akari ignored him, books and materials spread out in front of her. She questioned Mayoi instead of him.

“So Kotogami can only be seen by normal humans when they’ve been manifested?”

“Inside the book repositories, like this Bookhouse, they can be seen by regular humans, and they can also freely move about.”

“A book repository is sort of like sacred ground for spirits, did I get that right?”

“Yes. We can’t go outside, but we can eat.”

“I see... But none of the Kotogami housed in this Bookhouse have appeared...”

Mayoi puffed up her chest proudly. “The spirits enshrined on the Sacred Bookshelves can’t come out unless a Narrator reads them first.”

“But, Mayoi, you came when called. I didn’t have to read your Kotogatari. Why?”

“I’m different. This house and I are connected. After all, how can I serve the

master of the house from inside my book?”

Akari recalled how Mayoi had appeared all by herself in the house that first day. So Mayoi was different from the other Kotogami after all.

Mayoi swung her legs and giggled, seeming very pleased with herself.

Incidentally, the reason why Akari was studying in the dining room was because no one had replaced the busted light bulb in the study.

Pencil scratching across the page, Akari smiled to see how many notes she'd made already. Progress! Just then the door opened and she looked up.

Kansuke walked into the dining room as Tomohito fixed him with a hostile scowl.

“Ah, hello, girly. So you're home, then. Work, work, work. Good for you.”

“Hello, Kansuke. Yes, I have to work to eat. That's how I buy food. Hey, hold on... Are you *drunk*?”

“Ah yes, it's been a day-drinking kinda day. Thanks to you, I finally got to taste alcohol again after so long.”

“But I didn't buy any booze while shopping today...”

Akari frowned at Kansuke's ruddy-cheeked face, and all of a sudden Mayoi gasped, jumped up, and ran to the kitchen. She soon returned with a tearful expression.

“The cooking sake is all gone!”

“You drank...the cooking sake?!”

Akari's jaw dropped, but Kansuke just shrugged.

“You bought the good kind. Better to drink it before it's past its peak. It was delish.”

“Wait, what's that in your mouth? Is that...the dried squid I bought for my snack time?”

“You've got strange taste, girly. Dried squid's an old fart's snack.”

Kansuke grinned as he teased her, chewing on the dried squid. Akari glared at

him.

This kind of thing had been happening all week.

But before she could say anything else, Tomohito got to his feet and leaped at Kansuke.

“Kansuke, how dare you drain our finances?! Akari is too kind, but you’ve taken advantage! Exactly how many bottles of booze have you sunk this week?!”

“How am I supposed to remember? Everything was delicious, though. I’m not picky.”

“So you don’t mind if I only buy the cheapest stuff from now on?”

“Whoa, let’s not go that far.”

Kansuke whipped his head around to look at Akari, mild alarm in his eyes.

Akari got it, though. She had a taste for the finer things in life herself, when such things were available. But even as she nodded, Tomohito turned on her.

“You can’t possibly be fine with this, Mistress Akari! Isn’t the only reason you took that job tomorrow because of money?”

“Well, Kansuke has agreed to accompany me. I at least owe him a drink.”

Right. Never work for free—wasn’t that Akari’s policy, after all?

As far as she could tell, Kansuke Mishima was nothing more than your typical drunkard.

“All right, I’ll take on this bodyguarding job. But I won’t work for free.”

After she’d summoned him and explained what she wanted him to do, Kansuke had immediately requested to receive his pay in alcohol.

Akari had agreed, and ever since then, he’d been following a predictable daily pattern. He’d wake up and sink some booze, calling it “hair of the dog,” then he’d crash around noon, saying his hangover had finally caught up to him. Then in the evening he’d be back at it for what he called “happy hour,” which somehow lasted deep into the night. If left to his own devices, he’d drain an entire bottle of strong *shochu* a day. Akari’s wallet was starting to feel the

strain.

Kotogami or not, she couldn't ask him to work for free, so Akari had started picking up alcohol on her way home from work each day.

Seeing him in this drunken state, though, Akari was starting to entertain doubts about his ability to act as a competent bodyguard for her on the day in question.

She was also embarrassed because the old fellow from the local alcohol shop had started to recognize her. That thought made her cringe as Tomohito continued doggedly.

"Also, Kansuke, while it's true that Akari has some old-fashioned, some may say lowbrow, tastes, that's only part of her charm!"

"Tomohito. Shut up."

"Mistress?!"

Tomohito's jaw flopped as Akari shot him a frosty glare.

Akari still liked to think of herself as a young woman, so while she could accept being called old-fashioned, *lowbrow* was a step too far. Dried squid might be an "old fart's" snack, but it was one of her firm favorites.

Kansuke watched the two of them with an interested expression before pulling out the chair opposite Akari and pouring himself another cup. From the folds of his kimono he pulled out the rest of Akari's personal dried squid snack stash.

Akari twitched as Kansuke scrunched up his face and smacked his lips in appreciation. Yes, dried squid was delicious.

It was after dinner, but there was always room for snacks. Kansuke grinned and raised his sake cup temptingly.

"Join me for a drink, girly?"

"No. I have work to do tomorrow."

"Ah, I'd almost forgotten."

Kansuke displayed not one scrap of respect for Akari's position as mistress of

the household. Yet Akari found it impossible to dislike him, especially seeing the earnest enjoyment he took in the alcohol she provided.

As she watched him idly, Kansuke tipped back his cupful of sake and turned to her.

“Girly, no one’s going to pay you for studying that stuff. Just head on up to bed.”

“How dare you belittle Akari’s scholarly pursuits?!”

Tomohito wasn’t about to let that slide, and he snarled at Kansuke. Mayoi, too, shot him a nasty glare. Despite the tension in the air, Kansuke seemed supremely unbothered.

Kansuke merely rolled his sake cup between his fingers, gazing at Akari. She stared back.

“...You’re right. I’ll retire upstairs in a moment. You’ll be accompanying me for sure tomorrow, yes?”

“Well, you’ve certainly provided some decent booze. So, yes. I’ll work for you. At least until I’ve earned what I’ve already drunk.”

“Kansuke.”

Kansuke ignored Tomohito’s growl and got to his feet, patting the other man casually on the shoulder on his way out of the room.

Tomohito watched him go, trembling with rage. Then he turned back to Akari and bowed his head low.

“Mistress Akari, I am so sorry I recommended such a man to you. It was entirely my mistake. I think that perhaps I had better accompany you alone after all.”

“You know, I’ve been wondering: why did you suggest him in the first place?”

Tomohito paused for a moment, as if unprepared for such a question.

“Simply because, well...he’s strong.”

Tomohito chose his words carefully, as if reluctant to explain but finding himself unable to lie to her.

“There are many Kotogatari in the DemonSlayer category, but few have actually slain a real demon. The tales written in our records are enough to give us much power, but the more truth there is to the tales, the stronger we are. And Kansuke Mishima is one of the few whose slaying of demons is an actual historical fact.”

“Yes, I know the tales. They called him the DemonChaser. Apparently, his feudal lord once tasked him with hunting down a Nue and retrieving the women it stole. The sword he wielded was even known as Narugami’s Fury because he also used it to cut down not only a thundergod—or Narugami demon—who was demanding the sacrifice of children to end a drought, but also the very thunderbolts it conjured.”

Demons had power enough to rival even those of the gods, and they delighted in destruction. They were cruel and inhuman, taking delight in entering the homes of innocents and laying waste to everything they saw.

The Narugami demon Akari referenced had destroyed ten villages and one entire city and was said to feast upon the livers of human babies.

But the warrior Kansuke Mishima had pursued the demon without hesitation and cut it down with his sword.

“Yes. He is a splendid warrior. So much so that he doesn’t even need a Narrator, you might say. There isn’t a demon, spirit, or *yokai* he can’t handle. So I can think of no better bodyguard for you on this mission.”

“Okay, but what about the more...unsavory stuff he was supposed to have done? If all that’s written down in his Kotogatari too, then who’s to say he won’t end up going rogue on me?”

Tomohito hesitated, but Akari plowed on.

“Kansuke Mishima is famous for being a DemonSlayer, yes, but he’s *infamous* for something else. You know what I’m referring to. And yet despite that, you recommended him to me?”

“I recommended him precisely because you refuse to read any Kotogatari. He’s strong enough, even without being read aloud. In fact, a reading might even hinder his abilities.”

“He has a *powerful ability* to make alcohol disappear, I’ll give him that.”

“Indeed, that is, ah, a weakness. But the last time he and I came face-to-face, he was very different...”

Tomohito chewed his lip for a few seconds before rallying and continuing.

“Sometimes a Kotogami’s dark past is included in the Kotogatari records on purpose so humans can use those powers to their advantage. But more often, the problematic parts are intentionally omitted from the text for reasons of safety. So I foresee no problem, whether you narrate for him or not. Ah, perhaps I should have mentioned that sooner...”

Tomohito visibly held his breath, scanning her face to gauge her reaction.

But Akari just shrugged, blowing air through her nose.

“It’s fine. I didn’t ask. I have zero plans to narrate his Kotogatari anyway, so the contents of it are of no interest to me. Anyway, it’s good to know that I don’t need to worry about him going on a wild rampage. Like you said, no problem, right?”

“I see. That’s good, then.”

Tomohito sighed with relief, then blinked rapidly as he realized Akari was packing up her study materials.

“You’re really finishing up for the night?”

“Mm-hm. I’ve had too many late nights recently. I want to be fresh for tomorrow.”

“Indeed, I have noticed you’ve been shut up in your room working on something. And that you have borrowed documents from somewhere.”

Tomohito spoke casually, but Akari paused after getting up from her chair and shot him a cold glare.

“How do *you* know about that?”

“No...no real reason! I simply noticed the lights coming from your bedroom window...”

“Then let’s just leave it at that.”

Tomohito nodded, eyes shining as he continued to gaze at Akari.

“Then tomorrow I shall—”

“Mayoi. Wake me up tomorrow if it looks like I might oversleep, will you?”

“Certainly, Mistress. I shall wake you up.”

“So cruel...”

They both ignored Tomohito’s whining, Mayoi patting her chest as if to say “Leave it to me!” as Akari left the room to head upstairs for the night.

AKARI was not without doubts, however.

There had to be some reason Munakata had brought this job to her, a layperson, when one would assume it usually required a Narrator.

When she arrived at the Narrators’ Association office as instructed and took a look at the building in the daylight, she could see that with its white walls and columns, it looked rather like a Western place of worship.

Akari was greeted by Munakata’s Kotogami, Kuroe. Immediately, Kuroe shoved a haori coat into her arms. It was clearly a uniform of sorts, meant to identify the Narrators’ Association members.

The coat was a deep red-brown color, and on the back she noticed the emblem of the association, dyed in white, and on it what looked like a koto bridge and a flower vine in light indigo. Clearly, these elements symbolized the Narrator profession.

Akari wasn’t sure what to do with her hair and eventually opted to pull the top half up into a bun and let the rest of it fall down her back, out of the way of her face.

“That suits you very well, Mistress Akari.”

“Yeah, it’s not bad. Where’s my support Narrator? Are they running late?”

Tomohito blushed as Akari shrugged off his compliment, seating herself on a bench outside the Association building and sighing. It was already half an hour since the appointed meeting time had come and gone.

She watched as a string of people, both male and female, came and went from the building, all wearing either the same kind of haori coat as hers or the military-style uniform that Munakata wore. They also carried either a book bag or briefcase with them.

And of course, Akari had her own book bag with her.

Since they were outsiders, Kuroe was there to wait with them. But she barely moved a muscle and only stared at the gates. She was emitting that strange aura of hers again, and Akari was starting to feel nervous.

“Did I do something to upset her?”

“I think she’s nervous about being away from her Kotogatari. I can’t speak for every Kotogami, but it’s always nerve-racking to be apart from our books for too long, whether following orders or not.”

Akari nodded. That made sense. Still, she decided against saying anything to Kuroe just now. Better to leave her alone.

But then Kuroe’s chin jerked with recognition. A familiar shabby military vehicle was just coming through the gate.

It stopped with a screech of brakes, and a man dressed in a Narrator’s uniform opened the rear window and stuck his head out to stare at her.

“So you’re my support today? Just great. Get in.”

He looked a little older than Akari. Frowning at her, he rolled up the car’s window in an agitated manner. He seemed very high-strung.

Akari held out her arm as Tomohito made to enter the car. She had a feeling getting into a verbal battle right now would only make things harder.

“Tomohito, go into your book until we reach our destination.”

“...Yes, Mistress.”

Tomohito responded grudgingly before disappearing. Akari sighed and then realized Kuroe was leaving.

“Kuroe, can you give a message to Mr. Munakata for me?”

“What?”

“Tell him I’m adding an additional surcharge once this job is done.”

Kuroe blinked as Akari shouldered her book bag and opened the front passenger-side door.

She knew this was hardly the most appropriate place to sit when riding as an automobile passenger, but she’d rather eat sand than sit next to that surly young man in the back seat.

The driver seemed like a young military officer, perhaps a rank below that of a Narrator. He looked over at her, and she thought she saw a hint of sympathy in his eyes. But he said nothing.

As Akari settled back into her seat, she heard the Narrator growling in a grumpy voice behind her.

“Hmph. Just try not to get in my way, got it?”

Now Akari knew why Munakata had tried so hard to convince her to take this job: because nobody else would.

THE residence in question was located southeast from the city center, at the corner of a street of fancy houses belonging to members of the aristocracy and financiers.

According to the materials she’d read while waiting, the house was full of expensive items. In the grand entrance hall, a grandfather clock loomed imposingly.

Recently, there had been frequent cases of Kotogami manifesting of their own will inside the homes of rich folk. Those affected had been reaching out to the Narrators’ Association via their personal connections in search of assistance.

Usually, the Association would turn a blind eye to the trinket-collecting habits of the rich, but lately they had been seizing this opportunity to round up unregistered Kotogatari and had been dispatching Narrators to these residences.

Now, Akari found herself standing outside one such home.

“All right. I’m Second Lieutenant Amagai, of the Narrator division. We are now

going to perform an assessment. Make sure to stay out of the way. That means all of you. In case of resistance, I am authorized to use extreme force.”

Amagai hadn't bothered to apologize for being late to the appointment. Instead, he jumped right in, snarling warnings at the servants and the owner of the household. Then he turned and started casually ordering Akari around.

“I'm going to do a sweep of the residence. You go through the books in the library and look for Kotogatari.”

Before she could respond, Amagai went off with the house's owner. Heaving a put-upon sigh, Akari got to work. But not without remembering to acknowledge the head of the staff with a polite bow first.

Manners cost nothing. Besides, it was muscle memory for Akari, who, after all, worked in the corporate world herself.

“What the heck is that guy's problem?”

Tomohito had appeared suddenly, fuming in the face of Akari's calm resignation.

“Getting in a stew about it won't help. Just calm down.”

“But, Mistress!”

Akari shot him a look as he continued to huff and puff. Just then Kansuke spoke up from where he was casually leaning against a wall. He'd manifested as soon as they'd been shown to the library collection.

“There's no point getting angry over the words of a puny military man like that. Just ignore him while we're here. The mission will be done soon enough, after all.”

Kansuke seemed at ease as he rested against the wall with his katana slung casually across his body. But it was clear he wasn't about to take orders from anyone. And he obviously thought Amagai was as much of a twit as Akari did.

Tomohito fell silent then, which came as a relief. Akari sighed and handed him a book.

“Let's just get on with the job, shall we? I can't go through all these by myself.”

The entire room was crammed with books. It was going to take a long time to check them all. Tomohito nodded, in control of his emotions once more.

“...Yes, Mistress. I think it would be best if you simply held the books in your hands to sense for any irregularities. There is no need to open them. If you find any suspicious books, please give them directly to me.”

“All right. What about Kansuke?”

“Me? I’ll do my job too. Of course.”

When Akari turned around, she saw that Kansuke was sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, one knee bent casually. He didn’t look as if he was prepared to do any work at all.

They stared each other down, but Kansuke blinked first. Still, Akari decided to drop it. Rolling up her sleeves, she dove into the sea of books.

They had one day to get the job done. But thanks to Amagai being late, they were going to be cutting it very close indeed.

Akari picked up a volume and held it for a moment, waiting to feel something. There was no need to read the title.

She’d studied the materials well before coming, but she was still doubtful that she had the necessary ability to differentiate a Kotogatari from a regular book. Soon, though, one book in particular made her senses start tingling.

“...Hmm?”

The book felt warm, as if from the residual heat of someone’s hand. Or as if she were holding a small animal in her palm. Akari murmured in surprise, and Tomohito’s head whipped around.

“Good work, Mistress. There’s a malicious presence within, to be sure.”

“It’s not a Kotogatari?”

“This isn’t a spirit that’s been enshrined in a book. Instead, it’s a concentration of negative energy that has collected within a book, drawn by the story within. If we leave it be, it may cause harm to someone. We should exorcise the spirit.”

“Oh yes, that’s one of our duties as well. Let’s separate it from the rest.”

Akari recalled that the handbook she’d read had mentioned such spirits as well. She set the book aside and continued sorting. Mostly she just picked up a book from the pile on her right and immediately restacked it again on her left. Working in tandem with Tomohito, they managed to get through about half of the room’s books before Amagai came strolling in.

“What? You’re not done yet?”

Akari could practically sense Tomohito’s blood pressure shooting up, and she got to her feet to diffuse the situation. Tomohito really was a hotheaded young man.

“Excuse me, we’ve found several books housing negative spirits. Could you take care of them?”

“What? Oh. Something like that, it’d be quicker to just burn them.”

Amagai snorted at the small pile of books, then withdrew a stack of sacred paper slips from his bag. Carelessly, he slapped the slips onto the book covers.

Then, a frightening, oppressive aura began to slowly emanate from the pile.

As Akari waited, she felt the dark, heavy atmosphere in the room slowly begin to lift. The spirits had been exorcised. Potential personality disorder aside, this surly young man clearly possessed the necessary abilities of a Narrator.

“From what the owner tells me, all the books are housed in this room. I checked every room just to be sure, but I didn’t sense anything. What I’m saying is that I’ve done my part, and our job here won’t be over until you’ve finished doing yours.”

Akari let his passive-aggressive little speech roll off her like water off a duck’s back. She’d been expecting it, you see.

If all the house’s books were kept in this one room, then that meant Akari and her crew had almost the entirety of the workload. Somehow that piece of logic hadn’t registered in Amagai’s man-brain.

Akari knew his type. He thought that just because she was a woman, that automatically made her work inferior to his and gave him the right to look down

his nose at her.

Casually, she reached out and put a warning hand on Tomohito's arm. She'd been expecting this.

"Back to work, Tomohito. We'll have time for talking later."

"...All right."

Akari jumped right back in. At times like this, it was better to keep your head down and just think of the pay. Sighing theatrically, Amagai sat on the floor and watched.

"I can't believe you haven't made more progress when you have not one, but two Kotogami helping you. Are you here to be a Narrator or just to goof off?"

"My apologies."

Silence would be taken as insubordination, so Akari bit out an insincere apology instead. Let him berate her if that was what he wanted. He'd get bored all the sooner, then hopefully get lost.

"What's with the pretty boy? Only a young unmarried woman would want to manifest a Kotogami just for his looks. Pathetic. And where did you find that dirty-looking old samurai? Look at him—he's just slobbering around on the floor. Kotogami are meant to serve humans. If he can't even do that, he should be tossed out with the trash."

"I chose my Kotogami well, thank you very much."

Whoops. Akari had gotten sassy. She felt a pang of instant regret, but it was too late to take it back. Amagai stared at her, eyes bulging. He hadn't been expecting any backtalk from her, that much was clear. Akari lowered her head politely and attempted some damage control.

"Tomohito is here to assist me with practical matters. And Kansuke Mishima is here in case of any violent resistance from unruly Kotogami. Both have been doing a fine job."

Akari saw Kansuke's eyes widen with surprise from his position slouched against the wall.

But hadn't he been watching over the books with the negative spirits for her,

until Amagai came along and exorcised them? He'd done his job of protecting them both, just as Akari had said. He'd been on the alert, ready to leap in without delay.

Even Tomohito looked surprised.

"You noticed?"

"Mm-hmm. Actually, I noticed that Kansuke hasn't touched a drop of alcohol this morning. And when that dark aura rose from the books before, he prevented it from floating my way."

Akari wasn't sure how book exorcism worked, but that was how it had seemed to her.

The handbook also said that when a layperson takes part in a Kotogatari retrieval mission, they should be guarded at all times by a Narrator or capable Kotogami. Which means Kansuke did exactly what the handbook said to do. Still, he could have filled her in on what he was doing.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Second Lieutenant Amagai, I am only here in an assistant capacity and I do not have the qualifications needed to handle Kotogami. Without you being here, I felt it imprudent to do anything more than simply look through the books. I apologize for how long the process has been taking."

Feeling Kansuke's silent gaze on her, Akari bowed politely to Amagai and then returned to her work.

Amagai was probably about to give her hell for her impertinence. And Munakata would be none too pleased with her later on either. But whatever.

From the corner of her eye, Akari saw Amagai get to his feet, red-faced and trembling with rage.

Bong. Bong. All of a sudden, they could hear a clock's gong booming away downstairs.

Akari turned to check the clock on the wall. It showed three p.m.

At the same moment, a Western record began to play. A woman's voice, singing a sweet song.

The tune was so familiar. Forgetting her surroundings, Akari allowed herself to close her eyes for just a moment.

The books that Amagai had sealed with the sacred paper slips began to jitter violently.

“What the?!”

Before their eyes, the paper strips blackened and crumbled to dust, and a midnight-black shadow billowed from the books.

Before Tomohito could even leap in front of a shocked Akari...

Before Amagai could even reach for his book bag...

Before anyone could even move a muscle, Kansuke had sprung into action.

He leaped to his feet, black hair flying, eyes darting.

As Tomohito pulled Akari against him, the column of roiling black smoke was suddenly bisected neatly at the midpoint.

Kansuke had drawn his sword, quick as lightning, and dealt a killing blow without a fraction of hesitation.

Akari was still trying to process what had happened when Tomohito helpfully spelled it out, still holding her close.

“Kansuke has just cut down the vengeful energy! It appears it managed to take on a kind of physical form...”

“I... I see.”

“How did it do that, though? It shouldn’t have been strong enough to take shape.” Amagai was rubbing his chin, muttering to himself. Just then the house was filled with the sounds of screaming and a commotion.

Amagai’s head snapped up, and he clucked his tongue in irritation before snapping at Akari, “I suppose now I have to go and check that out. You, come with me.”

“Y-Yes, of course. Kansuke, Tomohito...”

Akari trotted obediently behind Amagai down the hallway. From another connecting hallway, the residence’s owner came skidding into view and dashed

toward them.

In the background, they could see several of the stronger male servants desperately holding shut a thick iron door, while another one fumbled for the lock.

Something was throwing itself violently against the door, making it shake on its hinges...

“What’s going on?!”

Amagai shouted imperiously at the homeowner, who wrung his hands in desperation.

“It’s a *yokai*! It...it emerged from a Kotogatari! A horrible Nue!”

Then came a mighty crash, as if an inner wall had been broken through.

In panicked tones, the owner told them everything.

How he hadn’t liked Amagai’s tone and the way he’d rudely taken charge of things, and so he’d hidden a Kotogatari, a precious heirloom, in the storeroom.

But then he’d heard a crashing sound, and when he went to investigate, he’d found the Nue laying waste to the storeroom, and he’d immediately locked the beast in.

Amagai ordered the owner and all the servants to evacuate, sending Tomohito to accompany them just in case.

Then it was only Akari and Amagai left standing in the corridor that led to the storeroom. And Kansuke too, of course.

“The Nue Kotogatari. It’s often replicated and used as a protective talisman. Old, established families keep one in the house to worship. The original was an Aratama, a savage soul. Our organization recommends the immediate retrieval of this type of Kotogatari. As the pages and bindings age and degrade over the years, the spirits within become even more susceptible to violence. As such, this Kotogami can no longer be safely sealed inside its book.”

Amagai flung the Kotogatari tome onto the floor. Its bindings were coming apart, and the text inside was faded and only half-decipherable, the pages yellow with age.

The fading and blurring of the text itself wasn't water damage or anything like that. Even Akari could see that it was a physical representation of the erosion of the binding spell that kept the Kotogami inside the book.

"Idiot. If he'd just handed it over to begin with... This way is so much more work."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Akari hoped the practical question would bring Amagai back from his self-indulgent brooding session.

The Nue was still rampaging around inside the storeroom. It could break free at any moment.

"I'm going to have to slay the Nue. I don't have time to prepare a new, blank Kotogatari. I'll have to end it here."

Akari felt her impression of Amagai improving somewhat. He sounded very competent.

From the firm set of his jaw, she realized that despite his constant complaining and obvious work-shirking, he was at least prepared to do his duty as a Narrator.

Personality flaws aside, he was good at his job.

In that case, she'd better step back. But Amagai looked at her thoughtfully for a moment.

"Wait. Where is your book bag?"

"Huh? Oh, I left it in the library."

"I see."

Amagai turned and started walking back down the hallway.

Surprised, Akari stared after him. She didn't notice Kansuke frowning beside her.

"Uh, where are you going, Mr. Amagai?"

"Didn't you say your Kotogami there is Kansuke Mishima? Even you must have heard his tale. In this situation, there's no better Kotogami for the job than

a DemonSlayer.”

“Wait, you want me to narrate Kansuke’s book...?”

Amagai’s plan finally registered with Akari, whose voice had grown high and squeaky with panic. Not that Amagai cared.

“From what I can guess, you haven’t made a contract with that one yet. So I think it would be more effective if I narrated. The Kotogami I brought with me in my own book bag...well, let’s just say we don’t get along too well.”

“Ah, but...be that as it may...”

“That display of swordsmanship just before—very impressive from a mere physical manifestation. And you say he hasn’t even had a narration spell cast? That book must have been bound by a master craftsman. Totally wasted on you, of course.”

Akari shuffled after Amagai as fast as she could, but her kimono was restrictive, and he was able to stride forth in comfortable modern trousers.

And to make things worse, she wasn’t very agile to begin with. She soon lost sight of Amagai, and just as she was beginning to fret, Tomohito appeared around a corner, back from escorting the home’s residents to safety.

“What’s wrong, Mistress Akari?”

“Tomohito! Amagai is saying he’s going to narrate Kansuke’s Kotogatari!”

Tomohito’s eyes widened, then instantly narrowed.

“Please excuse me, Mistress.”

Tomohito swooped her up in his arms. He could run much faster than she could, even while carrying a full-grown woman.

They’d lost sight of Kansuke too. He’d been right behind Akari... Where could he have gone?

“Amagai must have gotten ahold of Kansuke’s Kotogatari already. No matter what, we are duty bound to return to our Kotogatari when human possession changes hands.”

Tomohito’s explanation didn’t help to quell the sense of unease Akari was

feeling.

The two of them burst into the library to see Amagai turning Kansuke's Kotogatari over in his hands and inspecting it.

Amagai turned and frowned at Akari, who was gasping for breath. Then, ignoring her, he faced Kansuke, who was standing before him.

"Lucky you. You get to have your book narrated by a real Narrator this time, not just some random rookie."

"I think that's ill-advised. But do your worst."

Kansuke stared impassively back at Amagai, who flipped open the book's blue-gray cover and thumbed through to the corresponding page. Then, he began to read.

*"A warrior of centuries past,
who with mighty sword did slay
an Onigami demon god.*

May thy steel blaze again

in service to thy lord.

The DemonSlayer Kansuke Mishima!”

The blue-gray ribbon of energy arose from the book’s open page once more and enveloped Kansuke.

The magical energy unleashed was visibly many times greater than when Akari had manifested Kansuke by simply speaking his name.

It was strange, though. That blue-gray color... It seemed duller in her opinion. More...ominous.

The energy enveloped Kansuke, obscuring his impassive expression. When it cleared, the kimono he wore looked different.

Before, he’d been dressed in a casual, debauched manner, with a kimono but no overcoat. Now, he wore a men’s *hakama*—formal split kimono pants for samurai mounted on horseback—and dual swords at his waist. His shoulder-length ponytail was the same, but it seemed to be floating in a nonexistent breeze. His impassive expression was gone too, replaced by a grimly resolute jaw and steely, determined eyes.

“You seem so...”

...*Different*, Akari thought, trailing off midsentence. As she silently gazed at Kansuke, Tomohito interjected.

“Kotogami can be strongly influenced by a Narrator’s interpretation of their text. The Kansuke you see now has manifested himself in the image that man desires him to take.”

Akari, of course, had not narrated any of Kansuke’s text. All she’d done was read out his name.

It was amazing how much of a difference there was. Akari could hardly believe it, staring at Kansuke now.

“It seems a proper Narration could make a decent man of even your shabby Kotogami here. Well, let’s get going...”

Nodding with satisfaction, Amagai shifted his weight to move but paused as he noticed Kansuke's hand going to the hilt of his sword.

"Prepare to die."

Growling in a much deeper voice than before, Kansuke suddenly swung his sword.

It was a miracle that Amagai managed to dodge it. If he hadn't tripped over a pile of books at that exact moment and gone flying, he might have lost his head.

With the target missed, the momentum of Kansuke's swing made the sword crash into the bookshelf. This was no game. Kansuke meant to kill Amagai right there in cold blood.

Through her terror, Akari registered that Kansuke's expression had changed. That was not the face of the Kotogami she knew.

It was the face of a demigod—not a human at all.

The Kotogatari with the blue-gray cover had fallen from Amagai's terror-numbed hands and now lay open on the floor not too far from Akari.

It was clear that Kansuke's rampage wouldn't end as long as the book was open.

"Tomohito! Stop him!"

"Yes, Mistress."

Responding calmly, Tomohito faced off against the demigod.

Abandoning the samurai sword, which was still stuck firmly in the bookshelf, Kansuke drew the second sword from his belt instead and set his sights on Tomohito as his new priority target.

At the same time, Akari was leaping for Kansuke's Kotogatari. Scrabbling through the toppled avalanche of books, she managed to pluck it free. She gasped with urgency and quickly slammed the book shut before immediately opening it again.

All the things she'd learned during her study sessions...in her panic, she couldn't recall any of them.

Not sure if this was the right way, but not knowing what else to do, she went for it.

“The DemonSlayer Kansuke Mishima!”

It took all of Akari’s bravery to squeeze out the words in a high, wavering voice. Even as Kansuke raised his curved sword high above Tomohito, the blue-gray haze enveloping him immediately dissipated.

The sword crumbled into dust in his hands, and Kansuke’s form shimmered.

Then Kansuke was back to his previous self. Sighing deeply, he raised his head, dressed once more in the casual kimono Akari knew so well.

To Akari, his expression seemed to show deep pain and resignation.

Amagai was out cold. It looked as though he’d whacked his head on the floor when he’d tripped.

“What a fool. He invoked the LordSlayer side of Kansuke’s Kotogami soul. But he is only unconscious. He should awaken shortly.”

After Akari and Tomohito lifted Amagai into a sitting position, Tomohito assessed his condition. Akari was relieved it wasn’t serious.

Amagai knocking himself unconscious must have broken the narration spell and allowed Akari to take over and remanifest Kansuke in his safer form. That was good. But when she thought about what still needed to be done, Akari felt her heart sinking.

After all, the Nue was still locked up in the storeroom. Akari was certain she couldn’t handle that without Amagai. And if she fled, the Nue would probably destroy the residence, and maybe even the whole neighborhood and beyond. She wasn’t even sure she’d be able to flee to safety in time.

“It seemed like Amagai knew who Kansuke was. Why did he insist on narrating from his book?”

“He must have assumed that this copy of Kansuke’s book didn’t include the passages about him slaying his own lord. The copies in circulation don’t, as a rule. Those abridged versions of the Kansuke Mishima tale aren’t as powerful, but they’re considered safer to manifest.”

Akari rubbed her chin thoughtfully, looking back and forth between Tomohito and Kansuke, who was leaning silently against the wall.

During the previous week, Akari had actually read through Kansuke's Kotogatari as part of her studies. It had contained what seemed to be a full account of the doings of Kansuke Mishima. If the copies that were in existence had parts removed, then...

"Wait. That means this Kansuke Mishima must be..."

"Your suspicions are accurate, girly. My Kotogatari is the original text. Accordingly, I am the Kotogami that was born when Kansuke Mishima's own demonic soul was enshrined and sealed."

Kansuke spoke casually, as if none of these events concerned him very much. Akari was astonished for a moment, but then she realized that actually, that made a lot of sense.

Shooting Akari a quick, sharp glance, Kansuke continued.

"The higher-ups and the Narrators back then, they did NOT like me. I was very sword-happy, you see. I cut many a neck. But they sealed me in just the way I was, as a vengeful demon. That was part of the punishment. Then I had to serve humans for eternity as a Kotogami. But they made a big error. One of the things I did made me permanently unsuitable for servitude, you see."

"Yes, I know the tale. The one about you murdering your own lord."

That grisly tale was popular material for Kabuki plays and *yoruri* recitations, performed about as often as the one about him slaying the Onigami demon god.

The samurai Kansuke Mishima had been a retainer of a certain daimyo, or feudal lord. Showing a rare brilliance as a child and a particular gift for the sword, Kansuke had caught the eye of the daimyo, who had taken him into his service. But in his old age, the man had gone to his sickbed. When the end was drawing near, he called Kansuke to his bedside.

"I want my son to become a good lord after my passing. Swear that you'll support him, no matter what happens."

Kansuke nodded, and the old man breathed his last. But this one moment would prove to be the start of much misfortune.

The next daimyo was a diligent one, but he was also a highly cautious and suspicious man. Under his rulership, an era of peace dawned. He governed his lands well. But he was always wary of Kansuke, whom he had inherited from his father. One day, he set out to test Kansuke's loyalty. To this end, he placed upon the samurai's shoulders three seemingly impossible demands.

One, to slay the Nue, who had appeared in the Imperial Court.

Two, to slay the Narugami thundergod demon, who had appeared in the Ashiyama stronghold.

And three, to infiltrate a rival faction and divide it from within.

Having made that promise to the preceding daimyo, Kansuke had no choice but to accept the new lord's challenges so as to not betray his oath. However, the more fame Kansuke's name accrued, the more the wary daimyo treated him with suspicion. Faced with the new daimyo's scorn, Kansuke began to forget his promise to the old lord and began to bear a grudge.

As the Kabuki plays and *yoruri* recitations tell it, Kansuke took on the hate and resentment of all the evil spirits he slayed, soaking them up as if by osmosis. Generally, his character depiction became increasingly inhuman after that point.

The noble, upstanding samurai Kansuke began to change.

He started to frequent the red-light district and drink heavily. Sometimes he even wandered the town, indiscriminately cutting down the townsfolk with his sword. He began to take pleasure in killing.

And then, the fateful incident happened.

The daimyo ordered Kansuke to defeat another demon, one that was snatching away and violating scores of women.

"Leave it to me. I shall bring you the beast cut in two."

Kansuke went to slay the demon. That done, he returned to the castle dripping with blood. And there, he killed the daimyo.

Before, he had been known as the DemonChaser.

Following this, Kansuke turned into a kind of man-eating demon himself, and his crimes only grew. He cut down Narrators and Kotogami alike, any who tried to oppose him. After a final deadly spree in which Kansuke slaughtered half a castle full of people, he was besieged by scores of Narrators and Kotogami in a coordinated attack and was finally taken down to meet his grisly end.

He had slain his own lord, massacred innocent citizens, and laid waste to the peace of the age with his sword. He was a monster.

To this day, Kansuke Mishima was known as LordSlayer.

“Your fit of murderous rage just before...that was because of the inclusion of that tale in your Kotogatari, right?”

Kansuke smiled sardonically in response to Akari’s question.

“Yes. I am forever tainted by that incident when I killed my lord. That’s why whenever anyone narrates my book out loud, I am prompted once again to kill ‘my lord’...who, in that moment, for all intents and purposes, is the one reading my book. Not that I ever intended to serve a master ever again. Every Narrator who has tried to use me, I have slain. But I was sealed long ago. What luck for me that I found myself cataloged in that Bookhouse and awoken by the call of a little girly like you.”

Kansuke shrugged, then narrowed his eyes at Akari.

“Don’t you ever try to read me. You may have stopped my rampage just then, but the same thing will always happen. Don’t think I won’t kill you just because you’re a little girl.”

“But...Kansuke...”

While Akari was still trying to find the right words, Kansuke pushed himself off the wall and turned to Tomohito.

“Hey, Tomohito. Can you get in contact with the folks outside? I’ll face off against the beast; you call in reinforcements while I’m doing that.”

“Huh?”

Akari wasn’t sure she’d heard right. Kansuke was suddenly smiling, as if the

preceding intense conversation hadn't even happened.

"My job's to protect you, right, girly? I owe you several good bottles of booze worth of work. I can swing my sword well enough with only the power generated by you reading out my name."

"But...you're seriously going up against that Nue, all on your own?"

Akari was incredulous. But Kansuke simply stroked his sword hilt as he continued speaking.

"Did you miss that my story includes the tale of me slaying a Nue, among my other deeds? Even at half power, I can buy us time until backup arrives. And unfortunately it seems Tomohito's hand is out of commission for the time being."

Tomohito's what? Akari turned to look and realized for the first time that Tomohito was clearly hiding his hand inside his suit jacket.

"Tomohito, hold out your hand."

"It is no big deal, Mistress, I assure you..."

Reluctantly, Tomohito held his hand out toward Akari. It was bright red with fresh burn marks.

Akari had no idea how the burn had happened, but it must have been inflicted at some point during that skirmish moments ago.

"It will soon return to normal, so please do not worry. Only, Kansuke is right. I cannot protect you like this, Mistress Akari."

"So we're all up to speed. Girly, take my Kotogatari and head on outside to wait. I should still be in range. But don't go too far, or I'll be compelled to return to my book."

Kansuke still sounded so nonchalant. But Akari wasn't convinced.

"But you might get injured or, you know...die."

Tomohito's burn wound had smacked Akari with the sudden realization that Kotogami could be hurt. And how would Kansuke fare, acting at only half power?

Tomohito frowned, seeming hesitant.

“As long as a Kotogami’s Kotogatari remains intact, we cannot die. However, when we receive substantial injuries, the condition of our Kotogatari can degrade...”

“You’re much more likely to die than I am, girly. So quit your bellyachin’.”

Akari swallowed the last of her protests then.

Kansuke didn’t seem annoyed or impatient. Rather, he was looking at her with a kind smile, his features empathetic.

“After all, I killed my own lord. Perhaps it would be a fitting end for me to die hunting down a beast for a fair maiden.”

With a nonchalant shrug, he headed to the door of the library. That was when Akari felt something inside her mind go *snap*.

“I know, you know!”

Her voice was petulant, like a whiny child’s, but she didn’t care.

Both Tomohito and Kansuke turned back to look at her.

She stared defiantly at the samurai with narrowed, angry eyes. From the periphery of her vision, she could see Tomohito blinking and looking confused.

Still staring at Kansuke, Akari let the words pour forth in a flood.

“I know all about it—how that daimyo lord of yours was weak and spineless, and how he let his scheming retainer whisper venom in his ear about you. That’s why he sent you off on certain-death missions! And I know why you killed him too! It was because he was a tyrant—an oppressor of his own people! And because he had captured your little sister and kept her as a slave! And I know you covered it all up and took the blame for everything to spare your lord’s name, and you let that falsehood be passed down as historical fact!”

Akari stopped, breathing heavily. Kansuke’s eyes were wide and round with shock—the first genuine expression he’d shown since she’d met him, she thought.

Looking equally astonished, Tomohito nodded, muttering under his breath.

“Yes...the volumes Mistress Akari has been borrowing of late...all history books...”

“I may dislike stories, but that doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy reading reference texts.”

She felt immediately defensive, even though she knew no one was accusing her of anything.

It was true, though. She didn’t hate all books. In fact, you might even call her an avid reader of nonfiction and educational texts. Back at the all-girls school, she used to hole up in the library and feast her eyes on illustrated reference books about history, botany, and the sciences. Any subject, in fact, where flights of fancy were rendered wholly unnecessary by facts and logic.

Over the past week, she’d spent a lot of time sequestered in her room, poring over a history book on Kansuke Mishima that she’d originally read back at school, just to refresh her memory.

That was why she’d been slightly starstruck when Kansuke had manifested in his samurai garb like that. She’d thought she knew all about the historical figure, but it was like coming face-to-face with someone famous. She’d never admit to anyone how hard her heart had thumped in her chest at that moment.

“So what? Did you forget the part about me strolling around town killing random people for fun?”

“Oh, you’re a bad man for sure. I’m not disputing that. Your sword is stained with the blood of innocents. Even in that less civilized, long-past era, you were a monster.”

Kansuke’s jaw hung open a little. Clearly, he hadn’t been expecting her snappy comeback.

And yet...Akari didn’t feel like passing judgment on Kansuke’s crimes. Honestly, she had no idea why he hadn’t turned his back on his lord even sooner, or why he was still covering for his reputation to this day. Had he slain those innocents to make the story seem more plausible? Akari didn’t know. And either way, it wasn’t her place to judge.

Even so...

Akari did know a few things. She knew that samurai of that era were willing to do anything for their lords. Their loyalty was absolute. And she knew Kansuke's respect and reverence for his lord's late father must have been incredibly strong. Kansuke had been trying to protect the legacy of the son, for the sake of the father.

"You know what I think? I think you were really noble! That you did your duty by your first lord in the end, with that very sword of yours! And I think you were a compassionate man who cared deeply for his family, who leaped into action to save his stolen sister. I can't judge you. I just can't. You see..."

Akari's hands were clasped at her chest, her eyes shining with emotion.

"You see...I think you are a wonderful, *wonderful* samurai, Kansuke Mishima!"

Even as the words left her lips, Akari regretted them. Blushing a deep red, she covered her mouth with her hands in horror. She'd never meant to say anything like that. But in the heat of the moment, she couldn't stop herself.

Her cheeks burned with shame as she hung her head.

For a moment, Kansuke stared at her open-mouthed. Then he snorted.

Bending in two and grabbing his own knees, Kansuke started to bellow with laughter. Akari pursed her lips, unimpressed

Fine, let him laugh. It's fine, thought Akari. The tears rolling down his cheeks were taking it a bit far, though.

"Mistress Akari! I had no idea you felt that way... I feel somewhat jeal—I mean...surprised."

"Ugh, could you please NOT talk right now."

Tomohito's shocked reaction made Akari feel even more embarrassed. Finally, though, Kansuke managed to get his laughter under control.

"So what would you have said *wonderful* samurai do for you, miss?"

He didn't call me "girly" for once, Akari realized with surprise. Kansuke, meanwhile, observed her with a glint in his piercing eyes.

"It doesn't matter how you go about narrating my Kotogatari. My sword has a

mind of its own. There's no way around it."

"Are you saying you accept me as your...your lord?"

"You saw what just happened. Does it look like I accepted him as my lord? That's what I try to do to people who act like they've got me all figured out."

In other words: *Give it up, lady*. But Kansuke's expression seemed lightened somehow, as if an evil spirit had been chased from his body.

Thinking about it logically, he was right of course. However...

"You should easily be able to slay a Nue, if you could tap into that old power of yours, right?"

"Obviously."

Akari smiled wryly.

It wouldn't be Kansuke without a show of bravado like that.

"Right. Well, to that end... Tomohito, I have something to discuss. Wait, what's wrong with you now?!"

"N-Nothing, Mistress... Just a little jealous... What can I help you with?"

Akari rolled her eyes, ignoring his self-indulgent sulking.

"Let's talk Kotogatari for a minute... We can still manifest a Kotogami's power even if problematic events in the spirit's past are intentionally omitted from certain copies, right? So does the same ring true for events that were actually maybe true but were never included in the first place because history forgot them?"

"Your guess would be correct, Mistress."

"So then my question, nay, my suggestion is this: If the narration is so influential, is it then possible to manifest the Kotogami's spirit power into whatever form I like? I mean, can such factors be left to the Narrator's choice?"

Both Tomohito and Kansuke looked aghast at this question.

"Theoretically, it's possible if one specifies such a thing when narrating..."

"Hey, where the heck are you planning to manifest me? Don't put me in

Tomohito's body; I absolutely forbid it."

"All right. But here's what I'm thinking. LordSlayer though you may be, you'd never kill yourself, right? So what if you and your master—your Narrator—shared the same body?"

Kansuke looked trepidatious, but Akari met his gaze unblinkingly, despite her nerves. This plan was her suggestion, and she was prepared to take responsibility for whatever happened. Besides, she had faith in her convictions.

Whether Kansuke was a loyal samurai or a feckless reprobate was still to be seen. This way, Akari could find out who the real Kansuke Mishima was. She'd have proof.

Having clearly grasped Akari's plan, Tomohito was white and speechless. Kansuke, for his part, looked decidedly unimpressed.

"Are you some kind of idiot, girly?"

"A true samurai could do it, though, right?"

Actually, Akari had no idea what would happen. Maybe her plan would fail spectacularly.

She wasn't even sure why she wanted to go this route so badly. But she knew she couldn't turn back now.

Even so...Kansuke had been so frightening in his demigod form...just horrible. *What if...*

As Tomohito wrung his hands wretchedly, everything in the room seemed to suddenly vibrate.

The fury of the Nue was shaking the entire house down to its very foundations. There was no more time to lose.

Kansuke sighed reluctantly. What other choice did they have?

"All right. Then let's get on with it. Use me as you will."

"I'm just going to speak the truth. Then we'll see if you really are the greatest samurai the Yamato Empire has ever known."

Kansuke snorted again.

“You really do remind me of her, so much...”

Kansuke shook his head slightly as he gazed at her, and Akari thought she saw a glint of nostalgia in his eyes. What to make of that? Never mind. She’d gotten Kansuke on board. Reluctantly so, but on board all the same.

But Tomohito still seemed fretful.

“Mistress Akari, are you sure you’re all right to narrate from the Kotogatari?”

Nope, actually. She felt as though her resolve would fail her at any moment. Nonetheless...

“I’m sticking to historical facts. At least how I interpreted them. A bunch of people believing a falsehood doesn’t make it true. I hate when people think that. Now show me how to narrate.”

“Yes, Mistress...”

Chewing his lip, Tomohito watched as Akari picked up the blue-gray Kotogatari volume once more.

A sudden wave of fear seemed to rise up in her throat, but she forced it back down.

She didn’t know why she was so determined to do this, but she couldn’t stop now. The historical figure she had so admired—she didn’t want to believe he was that kind of man after all.

“Then please open the book to your desired page. Preferably one detailing the powers you wish to manifest. That will make it easier.”

As instructed, Akari opened the book. Then she flipped through until she reached the section about how the unequaled samurai slayed the fearsome Nue. The book was an old one, but the black ink of the cursive letters seemed fresh on the white page.

“Now, please narrate, describing the essence of the spirit you wish to manifest and in what form. Speak from the belly and summon the spirit. But choose your words carefully, as you address the soul of the spirit itself. It is an invocation, a prayer to the spirit’s immortal soul.”

An invocation... A spirit’s immortal soul... Akari let those words flow past her.

Focusing on the enormity of them right now would do her no good.

She didn't know what she wanted to manifest. She was just going to stick to what she knew in her heart to be true. That would be easiest.

This wasn't a story she was telling. This was her, communicating her true feelings to the Kotogami.

She tried to steady her thoughts. Gazing at the samurai before her, Akari took a deep breath and began to speak.

"In loyal service to thy lord,

thou defied morality itself,

and yet remain a hero among warriors.

Now lend to me thy sword, thy skill, thy loyalty,

as I lend to thee my body as thy vessel.

The DemonSlayer Kansuke Mishima!"

The blue-gray ribbon of energy began to rise from the book, seeming brighter than ever before.

Shooting over to Kansuke, the ribbon folded itself around him and drew tight, changing the shape and form of the man bound within.

When the ribbon faded away, only a mighty samurai sword remained, floating in the air.

It had a black lacquered scabbard, and the hilt was wrapped with white cloth. It was Kansuke's famous sword, known as Narugami's Fury.

Akari took the sword in hand. At that exact moment, she felt a presence enter her body and mind.

"Not bad, not bad at all."

She could hear Kansuke's thoughts inside her head. The sword, which must have been very heavy indeed, felt as light as a feather in her hand.

Then, Akari's body began to move without her willing it to.

She felt Kansuke within her, moving her body as he chose. She sensed his

surprise, his joy.

Akari's plan seemed to have worked. She tried to sigh with relief but could not. She was not in control of her body.

Fine, then. Akari relinquished control. Let the sword lead the woman.

"You can take charge of my body. My reflexes are terrible and I have no strength anyway. Just...be careful with it, okay?"

"That's the spirit. No pun intended."

"It's better to leave these things to the expert, right?"

"I couldn't agree more."

Her lips were moving, and her voice could be heard, but the thoughts were Kansuke's, not hers. How odd. Akari decided not to care about that right now, though.

"Agh... Hearing Kansuke's thoughts in Mistress Akari's voice... It's so... discombobulating!"

As Tomohito massaged his temples in worry, Kansuke-in-Akari thrust the blue-gray Kotogatari and the sword's scabbard into his hands.

"I can't carry these and walk in this restrictive kimono. Bring them."

Then Kansuke-in-Akari began to walk, carrying the unsheathed sword in one hand.

Akari had always been terribly clumsy and uncoordinated.

She was apt to stumble and trip over her own feet just walking through town. In fact, that was one of the reasons why she wore boots instead of traditional Japanese thong sandals.

She'd always thought of herself as slow and sluggish, but as the corridors seemed to flash past her on both sides, she was taken aback. She'd never moved this swiftly in her life.

And "she" was carrying a heavy samurai sword with both hands too, the actual Narugami killer.

If Akari was impressed by her body's untapped capabilities, Kansuke wasn't.

“Tch! A woman’s body is so slow! And heavier than I’d imagined...”

Stopping to transfer the sword to one hand momentarily, Kansuke took hold of her kimono hem with his free hand and roughly ripped it off around the knee area.

If Akari had been in control of the mouth, she might have squealed in protest. As it was, Tomohito did the honors for her.

“Kansuke, how dare you?! Treating Mistress Akari’s body in such a disrespectful way!”

“Oh, pipe down. We don’t have time to worry about sparing a lady’s blushes right now. Just come!”

As they drew close to their destination, the storeroom, they could see the fearsome Nue just nosing its face through a gap it had opened in the doors.

Its body was twisted and warped, with four muscular tiger legs and the snarling face of a monkey. Its long snake’s tail was swishing about violently. Its strength was so great that it had actually forced the sturdy-looking iron doors apart.

Fixing its gaze on them, it gibbered and shrieked. Could Kansuke really defeat a beast such as this?

“Stand firm. It’s only one beast, after all. Just leave this to me.”

Akari did as Kansuke instructed and let herself go limp. She didn’t want to get in Kansuke’s way by hindering his control of her body. It was all up to the sword now.

“On second thought, girly: your body probably won’t hold up long under this manifestation. I’ll make this as quick as possible.”

That didn’t exactly fill Akari with confidence, but before she could even blink, Kansuke suddenly put on a burst of speed.

Akari’s hair streamed behind her as they ran toward the Nue at top speed, Kansuke holding the sword high in the air.

Even as the beast began to squeeze its body through the gap in the doors, Kansuke sprinted past, swinging his weapon as he did so.

The sword slashed the vile monkey face just as the Nue came tumbling forward into the hallway.

The creature shrieked with rage and whirled around, searching for its mortal prey, the samurai-like girl.

But before the beast's eyes could focus, Kansuke whirled and came at it again.

The samurai fighting spirit was within him, despite the weaker female form he was inhabiting.

He was the Kansuke Mishima of legend, the fearless warrior who had slain countless demons.

His sword flashed, eating into the meat of the Nue's neck.

As the weapon in her hands sliced the creature's flesh in two, Akari was equal parts impressed and horrified by the violence, and her part in it.

The sinewy tiger limbs trembled and collapsed, sending the beast crashing to the floor.

Kansuke dodged the falling creature's impact by a hair.

Then, for good measure, he sliced the creature's tail from its body before it could lash out at him in its death throes.

Akari hadn't even noticed the tail twitching, poising itself to strike. But Kansuke had.

Taking the scabbard back from Tomohito, Kansuke wiped the blood off the blade, preparing to resheath it once more.

The creature's head stopped rolling across the floor, its momentum and life force finally spent.

As the sword slid into place, Akari felt her body suddenly being relinquished to her. Breathing hard, she stumbled and had to steady herself against the wall.

The familiar blue-gray ribbon of energy rose from the Narugami sword again, and Kansuke materialized in the hallway in its place, looking no worse the wear for the battle that had just transpired.

Akari's body felt heavy, and she was breathing hard, as if she'd been running

as fast as she could.

After the pitched battle, perhaps it was only natural. But Akari felt as though she'd been hit by a delivery truck.

Spots of light began to dance in front of her eyes. Kansuke leaped for her, but Tomohito caught her in his strong arms first.

"Well done, Mistress. Your own body's sword swing defeated the demon! But you must be exhausted. Being possessed by a spirit can be very taxing on the human psyche."

"Oh...yes... But what about Kansuke? Is he all right?"

"I'm right here."

Akari turned her head slowly and saw Kansuke standing there. He seemed his usual nonchalant self, but she could sense the heat of battle slowly leaving him like steam from a kettle, his tension unwinding.

"What in the name of all that's sacred has been going on here?!"

It was Amagai, slowly staggering his way down the corridor toward them. Akari cringed. Her troubles clearly weren't over yet.

A small part of her, though, felt pleased and proud. How fascinating that a mere human could actually slay a fearsome *yokai*. Even one as powerful as that horrible Nue...

A few days after the incident at the residence, Munakata took Akari out for breaded pork cutlets at a restaurant in the city.

The cutlets were deep-fried in oil, and the juicy pork inside was lovingly coated with crispy brown bread crumbs.

"I apologize."

Akari stared at Munakata, fork poised in midair. A man was apologizing to *her*? And not just any man, but a *military man*? And not just any military man, but *Munakata*...?

In this era of rampant male chauvinism, it was an absurdity for any man to

apologize to a woman, no matter the transgression. And a military man even ranked above high-status positions like stationmaster and school headmaster in the societal pecking order. How could such a man be apologizing and lowering his head to Akari of all people, in a public place like this?

By her side, Tomohito snorted derisively.

“You *should* be apologizing! Not only did Mistress Akari risk her life, she also suffered terribly in the aftermath of it!”

“You’re right, Tomohito. After that traumatizing mission, I had to deal with your mother-hen clucking for what felt like hours.”

“What?!”

Akari took a delicate sip of water as she shot Tomohito a haughty look.

It was true, though. She’d had a rough time of it. After the Nue extermination, Akari had been so weak she’d been forced to let Tomohito carry her home. The following day, too, her whole body had ached so badly that she was barely able to get out of bed.

Tomohito had been delighted, and his fussing over her had somehow made her feel even more exhausted. In the end, she’d banned him from her room, a rule helpfully enforced by Mayoi.

Akari put her fork down and looked Munakata square in the eye. She still hated the man’s guts, of course. But a double helping of breaded pork cutlets made his apology a whole lot easier to swallow.

“It’s fine. You paid me as promised and even treated me to some excellent pork cutlets, so it’s fine. Really.”

Besides, once she got home, Mayoi would be serving something she called *niku jaga*, a meat-and-potato dish the navy had apparently brought back from foreign lands. Akari had even splurged and bought beef, just for the occasion.

She’d already said all that she wanted to say to Munakata. There was no benefit in holding a grudge, especially when he’d been so earnest in his apology. He had to realize that.

So then why the groveling? What was his angle? Akari had to admit it was

refreshing, though. No man had ever apologized to her before, in all her years at the company.

“Then I’ll say no more. Only, Miss Mitsukuri... Out of curiosity, what did you do to that Amagai fellow?”

Munakata was back to his usual blunt self, but his expression right now was hard to read.

“What are you talking about?”

“Second Lieutenant Amagai is the son of a prominent Narrator family, and, well, he hates being assigned any duty that doesn’t directly involve narrating. I sent you with him because I hoped he’d feel the pressure to step up and be an example, but that doesn’t seem to have been the case at all.”

Akari pursed her lips. Of course they stuck her with the problem case. But never mind that. Why was Munakata staring at her as if she were some sort of rare animal?

“Yeah, what ended up happening with Amagai? Did he complain about my performance during the mission?”

In the aftermath of the Nue slaying, Amagai had taken charge of the cleanup and ordered Akari to return home.

What came about after that was a mystery to her. But Munakata was still wearing that unreadable expression. It looked to Akari like a mix of amusement and bewilderment.

“Second Lieutenant Amagai has suspended himself without pay as penance for his oversights during the mission. It is a crime to narrate from a stranger’s Kotogatari, no matter the circumstances or one’s rank. Additionally, he failed to neutralize the Nue threat. Usually, such failures would be grounds for instant demotion. But Amagai has been repentant and has taken disciplinary measures against himself, as I said.”

“What?”

Akari was truly shocked by this. Amagai had struck her as a very prideful man. He could have so easily passed all the blame onto Akari for her renegade

actions, but he hadn't. How odd.

Munakata leaned in closer, regarding Akari with what looked like ever deepening curiosity.

"He did say something interesting, though. He said you'd make a fine Narrator. In fact, he said he would never have come up with the idea of narrating the way you did—taking that Kotogami spirit into your own body, I mean. I've never heard the lieutenant say something so complimentary about another person before. It made my skin crawl."

"He said...what?"

Ignoring Akari's disbelief, Munakata continued speaking with visible fascination.

"Your aptitude surprised me too, in truth. I can scarcely believe you were able to actually read the cursive script Kansuke Mishima's book was written in. I was honestly very surprised indeed."

"Well, I have this acquaintance. Kind of an eccentric. We exchange letters, and they always write in various calligraphic styles. I learned that type of cursive from deciphering my friend's letters, you know?"

The person in question had been something like a guardian to Akari, and after she'd gone out into the world all on her own, they'd continued to send her letters, keeping in touch out of concern for her. It was weird, though. The letters were written with all different styles of calligraphy, as if each were written by a different hand. A strange ability to have, especially nowadays when printed text was all the rage. But as a result, Akari could read pretty much any writing, no matter how illegibly written it might seem to others.

But Akari's self-deprecating explanation only made Munakata scrunch up his face as if he were sucking on a sour plum.

Akari blinked at him. *Was it something I said?* But the next moment, he recomposed his features back into his usual bored with life face.

"Listen, hadn't you better start considering doing the Narrator thing for real?"

Akari was speechless, eyes boggling in horror. What a thing to suggest so

casually! She was literally only staying at the Bookhouse for the free perks and benefits. These rave reviews she was getting about her so-called aptitude were starting to give her the willies.

“Haha, very funny.”

“Those abilities of yours will make you an immediate asset as a Narrator. You’ve got grit, and you’re able to think clearly under pressure. Yes, you’ll need some training, but you can handle a bit of studying. And branch offices like that Bookhouse are meant for Narrators, you know, not homeless waifs and strays off the street. Why not make it your own?”

Munakata just kept on talking. Even worse, he looked completely serious. Akari stayed silent, wondering how she was going to get out of this. How many more times did she have to tell these people that she didn’t like books and didn’t want anything to do with them?

She was surprised by what Amagai had said, though. She’d thought he’d hated her. Also, Munakata’s praise had tickled her just a little. But no. Her mind was made up.

“Mistress Akari will not become a Narrator.”

Tomohito spoke in a firm but gentle voice just then, saving her the trouble.

Akari looked at him in astonishment. He was wearing his usual placid smile, but as she caught his eye, he tilted his head curiously.

“What is it, Mistress? Am I wrong?”

“No...no, you’re right.”

Tomohito had always seemed so desperate to keep Akari in the Bookhouse, so she was amazed that he appeared to respect her wishes all of a sudden. Still, there was no need to go digging into his motivations. Instead, she just shrugged.

Munakata watched the exchange between the two of them with a pensive frown. Then he, too, shrugged and changed the subject.

“Well, anyway. You should be more careful in the future. Spirits are still spirits, no matter how well we humans can mold them to our service. You got

lucky this time. Perhaps that's all there is to it."

"Don't worry, I'll never do that again."

Akari dismissed Munakata's warning. Ouch. Her body was still sore.

And at any rate, Kansuke had already told her he'd never repeat her little spirit possession experiment. Apparently, her body had been "cumbersome and annoying to control."

"Fine, then. Just enjoy reading normal-people books like the normal person you are."

Munakata backed down with a sigh. But then his face grew serious again.

He could turn the military spirit on and off, it seemed.

"One last thing. When the Nue emerged from the Kotogatari, did you notice anything unusual?"

"I don't know; I wasn't there for that. But I did see the Kotogatari book itself... It was all frayed and falling apart."

"Yes, the tome we retrieved is beyond repair. But the damage was caused by the Nue itself as it broke free from its pages."

Tomohito raised his brows, as if instantly picking up on what Munakata was inferring.

"So you think the Nue appeared not because the book was old and failing, but because of some other reason?"

"Yes. I also heard there were other books there that day, ones that held accumulations of negative energies? Recently, such evil entities have been materializing and causing a lot of trouble. The Narrators are trying to get to the bottom of this phenomenon."

"Is there something going on, then?"

Akari and Tomohito exchanged glances. Then Tomohito gasped a little, as if remembering something.

"I believe there was a strange sound, just before the evil energy manifested."

"Wait, what?"

“I might have just been imagining it... But there was a record playing right after that, as I recall.”

“Yes, I heard that too. That’s one of my company’s products. It’s a gramophone within a grandfather clock. I figured the owner is a customer.”

Munakata listened to their conversation without comment before addressing Akari.

“Miss Mitsukuri, where do you work again?”

“Sumimata Corporation. The grandfather clock in that residence is one of our large gramophone-style ones. They play records automatically at designated times. It’s one of our most popular products among our wealthy clientele.”

Of course, Akari wasn’t actively involved in the business’s trade herself, but she knew about its product lineup from working there.

“I see...”

“Mr. Munakata, is it all right if I order dessert?”

Munakata looked back at her in silence, arms crossed, lips pursed in distaste.

“Seriously? You’re not full yet?”

“I don’t want to miss this chance to eat really good food. But I do have dinner waiting for me tonight. An iced cream should bridge the gap nicely.”

“That sounds great, Mistress. I’d like one too.”

“...Fine. So no other problems since the job?”

Akari thought about her persisting, samurai-shaped problem back at the Bookhouse, and her expression stiffened.

Munakata picked up on this immediately.

“What is it?”

“What do you do if a Kotogami you’ve manifested refuses to leave?”

“Why, did that happen? Poor you. You’d think Tomohito hanging around like a bad smell would be trouble enough...”

Munakata leaned forward with interest as Akari explained the current

situation. She was so engrossed in what she was saying, she never noticed the look on Tomohito's face.

After topping off the meal with an iced cream apiece, Akari and Tomohito returned to the Bookhouse feeling well satisfied. There, they found Kansuke's large body sprawled on the sofa in the living room, napping. An empty booze container and some snack wrappings lay on the floor nearby. He'd clearly been hitting the bottle. Akari didn't remember buying those snacks, though.

Opening his eyes lazily, Kansuke raised a hand in greeting.

"Ah, you're home. How were the pork cutlets?"

"Delicious. Where did those snacks come from?"

"I picked them up as a reward to myself for doing the grocery shopping."

"That's what I thought. Why are you still out of your book? It's been ages since I manifested you. Why are you still here?"

After Kansuke had transformed back from a samurai sword into human form that day, he had sort of...lingered.

He should have been able to return to his Kotogatari by himself, but instead he'd been lounging around the Bookhouse, knocking back the alcohol and napping on the sofa like a slob. Even worse, he'd been going outside to buy himself snacks, carrying his Kotogatari around with him.

The Bookhouse was big enough that he wasn't really in Akari's way, and it was sort of useful having someone else around to pick up the groceries. But... Kotogami were supposed to disperse after a certain period of manifestation, weren't they?

She'd asked Munakata if it could last several days, but he'd informed her that a single narration should have been effective for up to twenty-four hours only. Kansuke should have made his exit by now.

Upon hearing this, Munakata had closed his eyes as if pained by a sudden headache.

"This is highly abnormal. The only oddity around here that I know of who outlasts his initial narration should be Tomohito alone. What did you do?"

“I mean, I just...spoke of my honest feelings about Kansuke...”

“A Kotogami manifests into form by the power of a Narrator’s words, and this power is what sustains them. Once that power is used up, the Kotogami vanishes. Attempting to force it and remain in this form will only lead to the Kotogami itself breaking down. And yet, Kansuke’s book still retains its condition, does it not?”

“Yes, it does. In fact, it even looks a bit cleaner and newer than before.”

“That must have been some narration. What exactly did you say—that’s what I’d like to know...”

Akari had already tried to evade his question and would offer nothing further. Munakata sighed at her with great annoyance. Jerk. Akari would remember that.

Ultimately, Munakata had told her to leave Kansuke be if he wasn’t harming anyone. It was clear that Munakata didn’t want to be bothered looking into the issue any further.

Remembering his irked scowl, Akari gritted her teeth. Just then, Kansuke hauled himself upright to a sitting position on the sofa, crossing his legs beneath him.

“Let’s think about it. Clearly, your narration struck a chord with me. That happens sometimes, you know.”

“This is correct. When a Narrator’s reading aligns with the true soul of a Kotogami, the manifestation period can be greatly elongated.”

“Yes, Munakata said as much...”

Tomohito’s interjection confirmed what Munakata had told her, but Akari remained unconvinced.

“So then why haven’t you tried to attack me?”

Kansuke’s dark rumored past as “LordSlayer” had become a curse, leading him to turn his sword on any Narrator, or “lord,” who called him forth. And yet, the past few days had passed without any sudden fits of murderous intent from

Kansuke.

Instead, he'd been working his way through her finest booze, sharing meals with her, and welcoming her home after each workday.

The frightening demigod version of Kansuke Mishima was nowhere to be seen. Akari was even starting to wonder if she'd imagined it. But she could still see him swinging his sword at Amagai's head every time she closed her eyes.

Kansuke watched her from his position on the sofa. He clearly knew what she was thinking, but his expression was unreadable.

"Hmm, I think I might know the reason behind that."

"Really?"

Kansuke gave her a sharklike grin.

"I've already had two lords die on me. Making it a triple would just be too cliché."

"Are you serious?"

Akari sat down on the sofa beside Kansuke to give her tired legs a rest. *Was this really the time for flippancy?* But then he put his big hand warmly on top of her head.

She glanced at him in surprise and saw a look of such fondness and warmth that she was shocked for a moment. Oddly, she had the feeling it wasn't actually being directed at her.

What are you looking at? she wanted to say, but then Kansuke actually began ruffling her hair affectionately, rendering her speechless.

"And besides, any way you look at it, you're not my lord, little girly."

Akari pursed her lips, unimpressed by his ongoing facetiousness.

"I don't even *want* to be your lord. Ugh, how annoying. Look, I brought you something. Do you want it?"

"Ah! What is it?"

"It's a new type of liquor from the West. It's called *Scotch*."

Tomohito lifted the bottle of amber liquid from the bag with his gloved hands and held it high. Kansuke's eyes gleamed with appreciation.

"Allow me to rephrase! You may not be my lord...er, lady...but you are my Mistress and I shall obey!"

Akari knew Kansuke was only hamming it up, but she was pleased all the same as she took the bottle from Tomohito's hand and gave it to Kansuke.

"Make sure you savor it. It's rare stuff."

"I've already gotten a pretty good buzz, but I think I can manage another glass, since it looks very fine indeed."

As Kansuke grinned at her, Mayoi suddenly appeared in the living room.

"Welcome home, Mistress. Dinner is prepared. Are you ready to eat?"

"Oh, yes! I've been looking forward to this *niku jaga* dish I've heard so much about!"

Akari jumped to her feet in excitement. Cradling the bottle of Western booze, Kansuke followed suit.

"The perfect time to crack this open and have a taste-test! Western cuisine with some Western spirits... Wait, why the face?"

"Don't you dare go eating my portion as well as yours!"

"I don't eat *that* much, you stingy mare."

Akari narrowed her eyes at him before heading to the door. *Snack thief*. But wait. That was odd. Tomohito wasn't leading the way as he usually did.

He was still standing by where they'd stashed the bags, his eyes narrowed. His expression was one of deep, unrequited longing.

"What's wrong, Tomohito? Let's go and eat dinner."

"...It's nothing, Mistress. I'll bring your bags to your room and be right down."

"Oh, that can wait. Actually, I can do it myself later."

She was hungry, yes. But she didn't want to eat while someone else was doing her errands for her. But Tomohito simply picked up the bags with his white-

gloved hands and frowned.

“This is a job I enjoy. Being of use to one’s mistress is what makes a servant his happiest.”

“Er, really?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Akari shrugged and decided to drop it. Tomohito was acting as if he were a puppy and she was trying to take away his favorite chew toy.

“All right. Thank you, then.”

“Certainly, Mistress. I shall be along shortly.”

With his usual crisp bow, Tomohito left the room.

Akari watched him go, feeling as though something was wrong. He wasn’t his usual perky self. Had something happened?

Shrugging, Akari turned to head to the dining room. But Kansuke hadn’t gone ahead as she’d thought—he was standing there waiting for her.

“Hmm? What is it, Kansuke?”

“Ah... Never mind.”

For a second there, Kansuke’s eyes had been glinting with a sharp light. But the next moment, he wore his usual mild expression again. *Hmm*, thought Akari, nonetheless heading over to join Mayoi, who was gazing at her with an excited, expectant look on her little face.

KANSUKE Mishima had felt the lingering remnants of the power Akari had invoked in him dissipating.

And yet, it seemed he could still roam freely around this Bookhouse. He felt no particular inconvenience from the lack of power. Why not stay awhile?

Kansuke found his thoughts returning to the girl who’d summoned him.

Black hair tied neatly back, a little poor looking. The kind of girl you could find anywhere. And yet, the way the words had rolled so lightly off her tongue as

she'd narrated his Kotogatari...it resonated with Kansuke's very soul.

In the few days he'd spent around her, it had become clear that she had no interest in stories and that she'd received no training as a Narrator.

But her narration... It was a perfect composition, like a traditional poem. An invocation of the gods. A true narration.

Kansuke had never been able to remain materialized for so long from just a single narration.

And he found himself glad...glad to still be here. How odd.

When he looked into her earnest, deep-brown eyes he recalled his sister, not his lord. Perhaps that was why.

Akari had called Kansuke a "hero among warriors," but he knew he was worthless. His sister, however, used to say the same thing.

"You are the finest hero in all the land, big brother."

Whenever Kansuke left for one of his lord's certain-death missions, she was the only member of his family to come and see him off. And each time, her words gave him courage. When his lord had started to become corrupt and Kansuke was preparing for what had to be done, his sister was by his side. But he hadn't been able to save her, in the end.

Just remembering what happened made the blood rush to Kansuke's head.

When his lord had forced him to look upon his sister's corpse, laughing at him, Kansuke had indeed felt his soul sink to the depths, felt himself becoming a demigod. Yes, his soul had been tainted; there was no denying that.

Yet, even while knowing that about him, Akari had given him a glowing narration.

And that narration had done something to him. It had brought the memory of his sister's lovely smile back to his heart.

If Akari refused to become a Narrator, then that was her business. But Kansuke had made a decision: to be the sort of man she'd described as she narrated his book.

Perhaps he had unfinished business here after all.

Kansuke ascended the stairs and reached the second floor of the Bookhouse, where a shadow stepped forth.

It was Tomohito, glowering at him. Kansuke raised a hand in greeting.

“Nice night, eh, Tomohito?”

“What are you doing? There’s nothing on this floor except for Mistress Akari’s room.”

Akari may not have been familiar with this cold, unflinching stare of Tomohito’s, but Kansuke knew it of old. Never before had he seen Tomohito so desperately devoted to any human, though...

Not wanting to get into an argument, Kansuke got straight to the point.

“I didn’t come here to see the young girly; I came to see you.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk to you. And it is an improper hour to be visiting a lady in her room, so please go back downstairs at once.”

So she’s been teaching you about the customs of human ladies, has she?
Kansuke fought back a smirk.

Then he jerked his chin at the white gloves Tomohito wore.

“Not going to take those off?”

“...I am still on duty.”

“Never mind that. Show me your hands.”

Tomohito’s face fell as Kansuke regarded him solemnly. The young Kotogami curled his white-gloved hands into fists, perhaps unconsciously.

Kansuke had already noticed that Tomohito had been wearing the gloves constantly for the past few days. And Kansuke knew what the Kotogami was trying to hide too.

“Why don’t you take them off?”

“There is no real reason.”

Kansuke narrowed his eyes at Tomohito, who remained stubborn but seemed

to waver ever so slightly.

Why was Kansuke here, anyway? His Kotogatari was a banned book. How had it ended up in this Bookhouse? Actually, Kansuke knew why. It was because of this Kotogami. He had been brought here as insurance, as defense against Tomohito, if the worst-case scenario should occur.

The samurai Kansuke Mishima had been the strongest force against evil spirits and demons that had ever walked the earth. As such, his Kotogami could be considered physically superior to all the others in existence. If one possessed the original Kansuke Mishima Kotogatari, one had nothing to fear, even in a house full of book spirits.

This was even more true because he was an original text and not a copy. And yet he had been left to linger on a shelf.

The Kotogami Tomohito Yagyou, however, had been wandering about calmly and freely and, more importantly, unguarded ever since Kansuke had been brought to the Bookhouse.

None of the Narrators who had been assigned here had noticed anything strange.

Tomohito had always kept himself at a reserved distance from those Narrators, and as such they had confused him for a weak spirit, only fit for clerical work. Even while helping Mayoi, he had made sure to keep himself inconspicuous.

From his shelf, Kansuke had been surprised when Tomohito began wandering the city, and even more surprised when he had brought home a human. Not just any human either, but a human *woman* at that.

Even from within his Kotogatari, Kansuke had observed how Tomohito fussed over the young lady. His estimation of Tomohito had come crashing down when he'd seen that.

The Tomohito Yagyou whom Kansuke knew was a crafty beast. And dangerous too.

He'd been docile so far, but he could change in a second if he found something that interested him. But why had he brought that ordinary-looking

woman to the Bookhouse? Kansuke had been burning with curiosity at first. Not that he'd ever admit it, of course.

Tomohito frowned at him now, still grasping the hand that had been burned by Kansuke's mystical sword.

"Please do not tell Mistress Akari how bad it is."

"You're bound to her, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

Before that girl had come along, Kansuke had never seen Tomohito act so human.

But he'd already figured out why.

"Even though she's the reason you were enshrined in a Kotogatari in the first place?"

All expression drained from Tomohito's face.

Kansuke continued before Tomohito could say anything else.

"I saw flashes of what went down between you two when I was inside her body."

"Ah, I see now. You and Akari joined souls in one body, sharing minds, memories. I have heard of such things occurring."

"Don't get me wrong. I understand why you did what you did. But I can't figure out your endgame. If you wanted to finish her off, why bring me along for protection? And why bring her here in the first place, if not as a potential Narrator?"

Kansuke kept pressing as Tomohito's shoulders relaxed just a little.

The samurai had only been able to view disjointed fragments of Akari's childhood memories, but if what he saw was true, then he knew why Tomohito was so fixated on the girl. And yet, his actions were so contradictory.

"What do you intend to do to her?"

Kansuke touched the sword hanging at his waist as he pushed the issue further.

At a range this close, and with Tomohito being the way he was right now, Kansuke could take him down. And if he really did mean to harm the girl, then Kansuke had no qualms with executing him right then and there.

Nevertheless, despite seeming to pick up on Kansuke's readiness to murder, Tomohito merely smiled beautifully.

"I will do nothing to her. My only wish is to see that sweet child happy once more."

That sweet child...? Kansuke was taken aback.

"A story has to have a happy ending, after all, don't you agree?"

As Kansuke gazed at Tomohito's angelic face, the meaning behind those words began to sink in.

"Human beings need family, and a happy home. I took both away from her. But she has a tendency to attract the attentions of beasts. I wanted to be prepared, just in case..."

In his mind, Kansuke could see a little girl crying out from loneliness: Akari. And the cause of her loneliness was...

"Don't tell me...you manifested Mayoi and me just for..."

"Leave Mayoi out of it. As for you...I don't much like you, but I do respect your strength. You're the only one who could take me on, after all."

Kansuke grimaced as Tomohito shrugged glibly.

Does this Kotogami realize what he's saying? Kansuke thought.

In other words, Tomohito trusted Kansuke's strength. This warmed the samurai's heart a little, he had to admit, as Akari's trust in him had also done. But Kansuke pasted on a scowl to hide his blushing.

"There was never any guarantee I'd take to the young girly. I could have snapped her neck just as easily, you know."

"No, I knew you would like her. There is no more conscientious reader alive than Mistress Akari. But I broke that part of her, and I intend to put it right."

Tomohito's smile was warm, inviting trust. But Kansuke still frowned.

Was Tomohito not aware of the pain and anguish that was so clearly visible behind that smile?

No, surely he was not. Kansuke sighed, running his hands through his hair and tugging at it.

“All right, all right. But you get this *one* favor, got that?”

“Why the attitude? As far as I see it, I’ve done you a favor and got you out of your musty old book.”

“That snotty, oblivious attitude of yours is why the young girly is always losing her temper with you.”

“Is it?!”

Kansuke took his hand off his sword, snorting a little at Tomohito’s bewildered expression.

“So, how long have you got?”

“It shouldn’t be too much longer.”

“Make sure not to leave any regrets.”

“You don’t need to remind me.”

Kansuke patted Tomohito on the shoulder and headed downstairs to his own room.

This was their story—Tomohito’s and Akari’s. Kansuke knew that. It wasn’t for him to understand. And so, he would withdraw.

“I wonder what the young girly would make of it all if she knew...”

She went around telling everyone she hated stories, not realizing the truth.

What would she do, when she found out the truth about the real identity of Tomohito Yagyou? This innocent girl, who had been unable to believe the worst of a cursed old samurai like him?

That night, Kansuke thought deeply about it all, rubbing his jaw distractedly for a long time.

Chapter Five: A Child Named Akari Mitsukuri

A peddler called out to Akari as she exited Marunochui Station on her way to work that day.

“Young miss worker! You look like you could use an anti-*yokai* talisman! It works well against the recent Raiju threat!”

“No thank you.”

Akari declined in clipped tones, hurrying past.

The book-burning protestors were out in full force, making a racket again. Akari was so sick of them. But the swelling of their ranks was in proportion to the increasing incidences of *yokai* trouble. The book collections of the rich elite all seemed to be susceptible to negative energy manifestations, just like the ones Akari had come up against during her side-hustle mission, so the Narrators were busy. They still hadn’t caught that Raiju either, and it kept popping up and causing random pockets of devastation in the city. In fact, public opinion of the Narrators’ Association had been growing more and more negative as of late.

Consequently, commuting to work had become an exhausting affair. *Just give up and go home already, why don’t you?* thought Akari as she took a narrow subpath through Hiyabi Park.

It was a fairly big detour, but the quietness of this part of the park gave her a few moments of peace on her way to work, and that was well worth it. As Akari walked along the quiet path, she still felt as tired as she had when she first woke up. But then she heard a strange noise coming from a nearby bush.

Curious, she moved closer and peeked in, immediately spotting a big clump of gray fur.

“...A dog?”

The animal was crouched down, so it was hard to tell, but it was small enough that Akari could have scooped it up in her arms if she’d wanted, and its fluffy

tail was slim and elegant.

Trembling all over, the creature lifted its face to look at Akari. She realized she'd been mistaken. Its face was sharper than she'd thought, and on closer inspection, it had six legs. Its sleek body was somewhat beautiful, but it was no ordinary beast, that was for sure. And yet, its kind was not so rare in this country. Akari was pretty sure she knew what it was.

After all, this park was full of noticeboards warning people to "Beware of Animal Spirits." These spirits posed no real threat to humans, but they often leaped out at people and frightened them. Sometimes they even drained a person's vitality.

The beast was wary of her and looked quite dirty and disheveled, but it seemed to wish her no harm.

She'd left the house a little early today, so she had a few minutes to spare. Akari squatted beside it, examining the creature more closely.

"Believe me, I know it's tough surviving in the big city. But if you stay here, the Narrators will find you and shut you up in a Kotogatari book, you know?"

The Narrators also performed exorcisms on ghosts and random *yokai*. The noticeboards in the park had the Narrators' Association contact details on them. But Akari had no intention of reporting this. Animal spirits were a natural phenomenon. In Akari's mind, humans had no right to deprive them of their rightful existence.

She was standing so close to the beast, and yet it hadn't tried to flee from her. Perhaps it didn't have the strength. It looked so skinny, as if it wasn't getting enough to eat.

Akari recalled how horrified she'd been when she'd seen the food prices in the city, back when she first moved there. Thoughtfully, she pulled her bento lunch box out of her work bag.

"I think you're probably new to the city, but I've been around and I can help you out. Let's see... Oh, Mayoi, you've outdone yourself again."

Akari yelped with delight as she lifted the lid off the box with a pop.

The box was crammed with ham-and-cheese sandwiches. Fresh green leaves gave the sandwiches some extra nutrition. There was also a juicy-looking loquat fruit as a side dish.

Akari had asked for something quick and simple for lunch. She'd been expecting rice balls, but she'd clearly underestimated Mayoi. *Ah, what a treat.*

Akari picked up a sandwich, tore it in half, and placed it on top of her lunch cloth on the ground.

The gray furry beast perked up its nose with interest. It rose off its haunches and leaned forward. Even *yokai* appreciated a good sandwich, it seemed. Akari was glad she had something tasty to offer it.

"You see? There's plenty of good food to be had in the city if you're willing to work for it. Oh, but don't go eating any humans, okay? They'll exorcise you for sure if you do that." Speaking softly, she reached out to stroke the creature's head.

She thought she felt a slight humming sensation in her fingertips as they grew close, but the fur was soft to the touch.

"You just keep on living the best way you know how."

The beast stiffened under her touch but made no attempt to escape. Giving it a final stroke, Akari straightened up. It was time for her to be getting to the office.

She stepped out of the bushes and back onto the path, already excitedly anticipating polishing off those sandwiches for lunch.

"Miss Akari?"

Akari practically leaped out of her skin.

She could hear her heart hammering in her ears.

Turning slowly, she saw Mitsuko Maruyama standing there wearing a sweet-pea-patterned kimono.

Mitsuko probably hadn't been expecting to run into her here. Her expression was stiff with surprise. Well, Akari's was much the same. But she was also painfully aware of the closeness of the beast, which was still cowering in the

bushes she'd just emerged from. Mitsuko would probably shriek with terror if she saw a real-life *yokai*, even a meek little one like that. She'd probably want to contact the Association immediately. Akari couldn't let that happen.

Pasting on a nonchalant expression, Akari tried to distract Mitsuko.

"Fancy running into you here, Mitsuko! I really like that kimono you've got on today. What are those flowers? Sweet peas? Say, are you trying to avoid those protestors too?"

"Er... Miss Akari, what are you—"

Ignoring the other woman's bewilderment, Akari grabbed Mitsuko's hand and started to lead her away from the bushes.

"Let's walk to the office together! It's almost time for work, after all!"

No one can press you for explanations if you're talking a mile a minute.

That was a little life trick Akari had learned at the girls' school, when it seemed as if she was always being bombarded with questions about herself. Young Akari would grab the hand of her nosy classmate and begin running, distracting them with games.

Mitsuko came with her willingly, cheeks stained red with embarrassment. Good. This should give the little beast time to finish its sandwich.

"Miss Akari!"

Mitsuko finally seemed to have gathered the courage to dig in her heels just as they reached the park's exit.

Akari turned an innocent, questioning gaze on Mitsuko, who smiled stiffly at her.

"I'm sorry, but...today I'm being sent to work elsewhere..."

"What, by Sumimata? Oh, is it that project you've been working on?"

Mitsuko nodded, looking awkward. Akari nodded too, figuring out what Mitsuko meant to say.

Sumimata Corporation had its head office, where Akari worked, but it also had several branch offices scattered throughout Marunochui. Akari had been

dispatched to them all on various occasions to assist with certain tasks.

“So you were headed to another office this morning?”

Mitsuko nodded again, softly tugging her hand free. She grimaced apologetically at Akari, who merely shrugged and gave her a cheery wave.

Of all the girls who’d joined the company at the same time as her, Mitsuko was the most nondescript of the bunch. The other girls were clearly jealous that Mitsuko of all people had been chosen for an important project. Personally, Akari didn’t have a drop of company loyalty, but she could see how it would feel good to contribute to successful sales.

“That’s all right! I’m sorry I dragged you along with me like that. Well, good luck today!”

Mitsuko blinked several times before giving herself a little shake and clutching her shoulder bag tight.

“Thank you.”

Mitsuko didn’t really look happy, though, and that gave Akari pause.

She hurried to the office nonetheless.

AFTER wrapping up the morning’s work as usual, Akari wolfed down her lunch and then headed to the company reference room to check something.

Even after donating half her sandwiches to the beast, she still had enough to feel satisfied. Now she could spend the rest of the lunch hour focused on finding out whatever she could about that gramophone clock the company sold.

She flipped through various files and ledgers under the dim glow of the electric light. Usually, people weren’t allowed in here, but Akari had been out for tea with the custodian several times and she’d gotten them to let her in.

“It looks like every fancy residence in the city has one of our gramophone clocks.”

Akari was going through Sumimata Corporation’s financial reports and invoices for that particular product. Incidentally, she’d also been asking the

other girls at the company who worked directly with the sale of that clock for info. As she scanned the list of customers, she frowned.

From her research, Akari was rapidly coming to realize that the growth of Sumimata Corporation was directly connected to the successful sale of the gramophone grandfather clock.

Since the clocks were built to order, they were very exclusive. And, yes, here was the invoice for the residence she'd visited on her *yokai* mission. In fact, she was able to cross-reference several of the customer invoices with the names of homes where *yokai* attacks had recently occurred, as reported in the newspapers.

"It's too much to call it a coincidence..."

While the clocks were indeed an exclusive item, the city was crammed with rich folk. There must have been hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of them in circulation.

"But even if they're the cause of it, I still have no idea why."

Apart from the fact that they played music, the clocks themselves were altogether unremarkable. Akari wasn't even sure if there was any connection between the music and the *yokai*'s manifestation. Perhaps it was some other catalyst entirely.

Tomohito and Kansuke had both mentioned finding the sound strange, so she'd thought the answer must lay with the music the clocks played. But then again, they might have been just imagining it.

Next, she decided to look through the clock manual. There was a list of the available records for selection.

"There are even musical pieces created specifically for the clocks... Wait... what in the world...?"

One of the singers' names caught her eye. It was Mitsuko Maruyama. The sounds coming from the clock had been sort of distorted, so Akari hadn't noticed, but the composition must have been a person singing.

"So this is the new project Mitsuko's been working on..."

She was sure Mitsuko had a lovely singing voice. It would sound quite scratchy and distorted on a record, though. Perhaps the song playing in that Nue mansion had been Mitsuko's recording?

Singers and actors—performers in general, really—tended to be looked down upon by the general population. Akari thought those skills were actually impressive, but perhaps this was why Mitsuko had avoided talking about her work project: to avoid that stigma.

How strange that someone she knew was involved in all this. She thought back to their encounter that morning, the forlorn look in Mitsuko's eye. She hadn't seemed very happy.

Maybe she should invite Mitsuko out for lunch and find out what was wrong. If she could get Mitsuko to open up about it, perhaps she'd start venting and drop some useful info.

"But for now, I should ask Munakata if there have been cases of Kotogami responding to voices on record players."

Akari left the reference room, a plan beginning to take shape in her mind.

FIGHTING back periodic yawns, she made it through the afternoon's work. She managed not to make any mistakes, but she knew her work speed was way down.

"Ugh, I'm so sleepy. Have to hold out until the end of the workday..."

Recently, Akari hadn't been getting enough sleep.

Tomohito and the others hadn't seemed to notice, but Akari knew she'd have to do something about it soon. She'd been having bad dreams, but she could never remember them when she woke up.

All she knew was that the dreams had started after the Nue incident.

"I just have to push through until bedtime. Or at least until I can make it home."

What's wrong with me? Akari wondered, just as she heard the voices of several employees talking behind her.

“I wonder what’s going to happen with that whole Raiju business.”

“We can’t rely on the Narrators. I want to believe things won’t end up like they did twelve years ago, but...”

Akari felt her chest go cold.

She knew it would be better not to turn around, but her body did so automatically anyway. She saw two male employees engaged in casual conversation.

“Twelve years ago was when that Aragami *yokai* disaster struck that village, right?”

“That’s it—that’s the one! It was in the papers. The whole village was annihilated. It was the worst disaster in the entire history of the Meijo period, wasn’t it?”

“Ah yes, that was very shocking.”

The men were gossiping away in their loud voices like they did every day. But today, Akari couldn’t seem to block them out.

“Those Narrators fumbled the whole thing badly. They couldn’t even take on one *yokai*, and as a result, the list of casualties was huge. I heard that incident was the reason the book-burning activists started their whole crusade.”

“*Yokai* are a huge problem to begin with. It’s a different world now, a civilized one. And yet they keep showing up and going on rampages. That village would have been saved if only they’d managed to seal the beast away properly.”

A slamming sound made Akari almost jump out of her skin.

A second later, she realized her palm was stinging. Oh...that sound. It was her hand, striking the desk. She blinked in surprise, then turned on the stunned-looking men with ferocity.

“Being sealed in a Kotogatari is, to a Kotogami, like being imprisoned! So watch what you’re saying!”

“What’s your problem?”

Akari didn’t even know what she was saying. She was in a fog from sleep

deprivation. Nevertheless, she couldn't hold back the angry words bubbling up from within her.

"Who made it this way?! Who decided that a Kotogami's happiness must lie in having their Kotogatari read?! What kind of existence is that?!"

Her words still ringing in the air, Akari took a deep breath and felt her thoughts begin to clear.

Everyone was staring at her. The whole office, not just the gossipy men. *Darn it*, Akari thought. But nobody said anything back to her.

All she could do was apologize.

"I'm sorry. That was rude of me. Forget I spoke, please."

"Uh, all right..."

As the men stood staring at her, dumbfounded, Akari scrambled to gather her things and leave.

Nausea was rising up inside her. She clutched at her collar, pulling it to give herself more room to breathe. If she ripped it, so be it.

Pale-faced and clammy, Akari didn't notice Mitsuko, who had returned to the office at some point. The other woman was staring.

Akari wanted to go home. Go home and eat something good. She felt sick, but she knew that would make her feel so much better. And she wanted to take a bath. How lovely to be able to take a bath whenever she liked, without having to go to the public bathhouse...

"Miss Mitsukuri, a word, please."

Someone called out to her as she shuffled quickly down the hallway.

Reluctantly, she turned. She couldn't very well ignore someone from General Affairs.

The boxy-shouldered man walked up to Akari and casually handed her a document.

"Maybe you don't need it anymore, but it's available now if you do. I just came to inform you."

Oh. So they'd finally gotten it taken care of, it seemed. Akari blinked, feeling numb.

"WELCOME home, Mistress Akari."

Back at the Bookhouse, Tomohito met her with his usual beaming smile.

Akari felt some of the tension instantly leave her body.

"I'm home..."

"Indeed, Mistress! Mayoi has made a splendid 'pot-au-feu' for dinner tonight! I hear it's a sort of Western stew."

Stew... The word made Akari's stomach gurgle. She must be okay still, if she had an appetite.

Akari nodded distractedly, and Tomohito's face fell.

"Whatever is wrong, Mistress Akari?"

"Huh? What? Nothing. I'm hungry. I'd like to eat right away."

"Certainly, Mistress, only—"

"Mayoi! Kansuke! I'm home!"

Akari took off her boots and headed into the living room, where she found Kansuke sprawled on the sofa, a bottle hanging loosely from his hand. When he saw her, he waved the empty bottle in greeting.

"Hello, girly. I was just having a little pre-dinner drink."

"When are you *not* having a drink?"

Mayoi materialized in the room then and picked up Kansuke's empty bottle.

"The answer to that is never."

"I helped out around the house earlier, didn't I?"

"You did the bare minimum."

Mayoi put her hands on her hips and glared at Kansuke, who firmly met her gaze.

Akari had gotten used to this scenario playing out whenever she came home. Its predictability was somewhat soothing.

And somehow cozy. Comfortable. Like a real family...

But she knew she shouldn't get too used to this. They were spirits, and she was just the custodian. It wouldn't do to get attached.

Mayoi was looking up at Akari with a bemused expression.

"Mistress, dinner is prepared. Would you like to eat now?"

"Yes. I'm starving."

"Save me a bowl."

"If you don't work, you don't eat."

Mayoi tutted loudly at Kansuke, who was still lolling on the sofa. Akari snorted with unexpected mirth.

The pot-au-feu was sort of like a *nimono* stew, but without the soy sauce flavor. It had a chicken broth base, and Akari found it very warming and soothing.

"For a Western stew, it goes surprisingly well with Japanese rice."

"I know, right?"

Tomohito watched solemnly as Akari and Kansuke nodded to each other, making noises of appreciation between mouthfuls.

"Mistress Akari, you seem to enjoy these Western flavors..."

"If it's good and I can eat it, I'm happy. That's me in a nutshell."

"I see. I'll bear that in mind."

Akari raised an eyebrow as Tomohito nodded gravely. Then she noticed that Mayoi was looking at her.

"What's wrong, Mayoi?"

"Has something happened, Mistress? You're not eating your usual amount."

"Come to think of it...usually she'd have asked for seconds by now."

Now Kansuke was on her case, too. Akari gazed down at her bowl.

It was still about half full with pot-au-feu. Her rice bowl wasn't empty either. Normally, she'd go for a second helping, but today she shook her head.

"Not today. Anyway, never mind that. I wanted to talk to you all about something. I heard from General Affairs today. The new dorm building has just finished being constructed."

Mayoi and Kansuke both looked visibly thunderstruck.

But then Kansuke nodded.

"I see how it is."

Akari wasn't sure what he meant by that, but before she could ask, she was distracted by Mayoi's trembling lower lip.

"You're *leaving*?"

"Yes. We promised that I'd only be here for a short amount of time."

It was good timing. If she stayed here any longer, she'd get attached for sure.

She'd wanted to give them a heads up, but she knew it was still a shock. Mayoi's face crumpled, and the little girl vanished.

Given Mayoi's past, this must have been especially hard for her. Akari felt terrible. But she wasn't a Narrator, and never would be. This was best for everyone.

Akari took another sip of the stew as Kansuke put his sake cup down on the table.

"You seemed to be enjoying yourself here. Despite that, you plan to leave?" Kansuke's expression was tight, but he couldn't hide the arrogant tone in his voice.

Akari was not to be swayed, however.

"I've been comfortable here. I was contracted as a custodian, but it's basically just been like living here. I've even been able to earn extra income. And I've enjoyed getting to know all of you too. Tomohito's been kind of a pill, though."

"I've enjoyed it as well. You're the one who summoned me, after all.

Tomohito *has* been a pill, though; you're right there."

"Why does your bonding experience have to come at my expense?"

Tomohito pouted pathetically, but Akari and Kansuke just grinned at each other and ignored him.

"Well, you're a living, human woman, girly. We spirits have no right to interfere in your affairs. But can't you tell us why you'd want to leave? I don't think Mayoi will accept it without an explanation."

"I just..."

Akari didn't know how to answer him.

Living at the Bookhouse had been extremely comfortable. She was even able to keep a safe distance from the stories she hated. It was a little tiring effectively having two "jobs," but nothing she couldn't handle.

The spirits had given her a lot of trouble as well, to be sure, but they weren't bad people.

Nevertheless, the very concept of handling a Kotogatari tome sent electric shocks of fear up her spine.

And if she stayed here as the Bookhouse's custodian, then sooner or later she'd have to narrate for these spirits—she just knew it. There wouldn't be any way of getting out of it.

Akari had been afraid of this the whole time. She felt safe now with Mayoi, Kansuke, and Tomohito. But the other, unknown spirits in the shrine room... Perhaps what she'd really been avoiding wasn't stories in general, but the actual process of narration and the power of the Kotogami themselves...

"No, no, it couldn't be that..."

"What is wrong, Mistress?"

Akari shook her head, hard. She needed to stay focused on what was right in front of her.

"It's nothing, really. I was never an apprentice Narrator to begin with, so it doesn't make any sense for me to be the custodian of a Bookhouse like this.

Tomohito, I need to get in touch with Munakata. Can you make that happen?"

She turned to Tomohito, trying to change the subject. He just gave her his usual polite bow.

"Certainly, Mistress. I shall go tomorrow. If that's all right?"

"Oh. Yes, of course."

Akari nodded, but something seemed strange.

She'd forgotten, but Tomohito had never protested when she'd talked about leaving the Bookhouse before, even though he'd begun their acquaintance by entreating her to be his mistress and then talking her into taking the custodian job. And even though they'd agreed it would only be for a limited period, his calm acceptance of her announcement had her feeling somehow dissatisfied.

Still, there was no point digging into the motivations of Tomohito Yagyou. Akari decided to drop it and got up from the table. Then she remembered what she'd found out at work and turned back.

"There was something else I wanted to talk to Munakata ab—"

But Akari stopped midsentence.

Everything in the room seemed to suddenly go dark. She felt her knees tremble and buckle.

The pot-au-feu threatened to make a reappearance as well, but Akari gulped it back down.

"Girly, what's wrong?!"

Akari fell into Tomohito's ready arms as Kansuke raised his voice in alarm.

"Sorry, Tomohito... Thank you..."

"Please permit me, Mistress."

Tomohito held firm as Akari tried to squirm away from him, pressing his gloved hand to her neck.

How long has he been wearing those gloves? Akari thought in a daze as Tomohito frowned down at her.

“Mistress Akari, you’re burning up.”

“Huh? Oh, yes. I do feel quite hot.”

Akari hadn’t realized it until someone else pointed it out, but perhaps the fever was the reason she couldn’t think straight today. Kansuke sighed, chiding her in a strict voice.

“Girly, if you’re not well, then just say so. We can’t have you getting sick on us now, can we?”

“I only just realized... I’m sure I’ll be fine if I can just get some sleep...”

The concern in Kansuke’s tone disconcerted her. Akari had always been alone, and she didn’t know how to handle having other people fussing over her like this.

If she didn’t work, she couldn’t get by. So forcing herself to keep going, no matter what, had become second nature to her.

This sickness...it had to be caused by her lack of sleep lately. Now that she realized that, she felt even more exhausted. If she could just get to bed, she was sure to get better. It wasn’t serious enough to need a doctor’s visit. Colds could be healed well enough by resting. She only hoped she’d improve fast enough to make it to work tomorrow...

“Excuse me.”

As Akari tried to stumble to the door, Tomohito intercepted her, swinging her up into his arms.

She blinked blearily at him as he frowned with displeasure.

“I shall carry you to your room. Please call in sick to work tomorrow as well.”

“No, I have to go to work...”

“Please, Mistress.”

Akari swallowed her protests, gazing into Tomohito’s glistening eyes.

Her fainting spell had come on so suddenly, and Tomohito was so insistent on caring for her...Akari had no strength to resist.

Head still fuzzy, Akari lay against the Kotogami’s chest obediently and let him

carry her upstairs.

RED flames were dancing.

Through the haze of her mind, she knew this was her childhood village. She was home again.

The flames were coming from the fires burning throughout the village. Everything was destroyed...crushed. Bodies were lying everywhere. The corpses of the village folk, who'd been chatting together, going about the business of their lives only yesterday...

They were all dead. Akari knew it.

She looked down at her hands. A child's hands. Of course. She'd only been about seven when it happened. Clumsy Akari kept falling and getting up again as she ran through the village, desperate. Her breath was harsh in her lungs, the blood pounding in her ears.

In her cold, sweaty hands, she was clutching a book.

A brand-new, sturdily bound book.

How could this have happened?

In the heart of the village, two demon *yokai* were fighting. With a sweep of its mighty arm, one crushed a nearby house into wood splinters, summoning the power of a storm. It was a terrifying, otherworldly sight.

But Akari's eyes were fixed on the other *yokai*.

It was big, and gold in color. Its body a grotesque, imposing form.

It had manifested in that form, exactly as Akari had narrated it.

But...they had asked her to do it. The Narrator had asked her. And her friend had too...

Narrate, and we can be together.

"So, what am I to you?"

Her friend was always so straightforward with her. And she could sense how

much he expected of her.

And so Akari had answered proudly, in her usual manner.

The only difference...the book in her hand. And the words she narrated.

“To me, you are the strongest demon! Stronger than any other!”

“That’s right. No one can beat me. I am fear personified, and no one can stop my wrath! Isn’t that right?”

She should never have nodded.

But she did. Emphatically. Then she’d backed it up with words...

As entreated, she’d narrated out loud the old village legend. It didn’t really match her perception of her friend, but *he* had told her to read it just as it was written in the book. But who was *he*, again?

She didn’t think it would matter. Regardless of how she narrated, the friend she knew would appear. Or so she’d thought.

But when she read out that name she was hearing for the first time, something completely different appeared.

It was the brutally cruel demon whose tale had been told in the village for as long as anyone could remember.

The friend Akari had wanted to meet...this horrible demon surely wasn’t him.

“But it was your words that manifested me.”

It was the same voice—the same voice she knew.

It was the same one that had always spoken to her, the one she’d never dreamed to doubt. She wanted to scream that it was wrong, but the words were stuck in her throat. Instead, she could only tremble and shake.

This is all my fault.

Akari had narrated it wrong, she must have, and that was why it had become that horrible *yokai*.

No, what if she hadn’t done it wrong? She’d read the Kotogatari exactly as it was written...so the creature summoned must’ve been exactly as described in

the account...

Was the friend she had so cared for nothing but an illusion all along?

Tears began to spill from her eyes, unbidden.

The *yokai* was terrifying, and its violence was horrifying, and the village she'd loved was in ruins...but somehow the worst thing of all was...

Hands and feet freezing. Air painfully pumping through her lungs. Something jumped in front of her...

She tried to run, but her legs were too tired. She couldn't make it another step.

A big hand came down in front of her, as if reaching to offer assistance, but she felt a flare of pain up her back as something burned her flesh.

"Aaagh!!!"

She could hear her dear friend crying out, but she could make no sound in return.

She couldn't breathe anymore. The pain was too much.

Was she...going to die?

But just then, her body was lifted into the air, her vision obscured.

"Forget, forget all of this... This was only a bad dream."

Someone was speaking to her in a kind voice. A somehow sad voice...an apologetic voice.

No, this was all her fault...so how could she forget? If she forgot, then everything would be lost...

Akari made one final vow to herself...

She would never narrate again. *Not ever.*

AKARI'S eyes flew open and her body stiffened. She couldn't catch her breath. Her heart was hammering against her rib cage.

She could tell her fever had only worsened. It didn't look as though it would

break before morning.

She was lying on the bed in her room. The surroundings were familiar and comforting, but everything seemed fuzzy around the edges.

It was still dark. Probably close to midnight.

She didn't feel as if she could sleep any longer. She'd finally remembered the dreams she'd been having.

"Why am I only recalling this now...?"

Akari's memories of the incident were so hazy. Before she knew it, the village was empty and she was alone...until a Narrator had come along and saved her.

With most of her memory gone, her home village had started to feel as though it were a million miles away. She'd even forgotten what had happened there.

How could she have forgotten it? That place had meant so much to her.

She supposed it couldn't be helped. She'd left the village forever twelve years ago, after all...

Akari shifted. She felt heavy and sluggish and sick. There was something damp resting on her forehead; she could feel it.

She removed it with her hand, realizing it was a damp cloth. She recalled getting out of her kimono herself and crawling into bed, but she didn't remember putting this on her forehead.

"Mistress Akari...?"

Akari turned her head to the side and saw Tomohito standing in the doorway, light from the hallway spilling in around him. He was carrying a basin of water.

"Are you awake?"

"What...are you...?" As she mumbled thickly, Tomohito's face lit up and he bowed apologetically, his tone anxious.

"Forgive me...I know you said I must not enter your room. But the nursing book says to monitor the patient closely, and I just didn't feel right about leaving you. If you could make an exception just this once..."

Akari smiled a little as Tomohito continued to sweat.

“There’s no need to act so afraid of me.”

“I...I see.”

Tomohito smiled with relief and snapped on the lights, then approached the bed and set the basin down on top of the Western-style chest of drawers. Then he scrutinized Akari’s face closely.

“Is there anything you need? If you can’t sleep, I could tell you a bedtime story. Oh, no, you wouldn’t like that...”

Tomohito chewed on his bottom lip. Akari smiled a little and croaked out a request.

“I’d like some water.”

“Ah, certainly.”

Tomohito brought a cup to her lips. Akari was a little taken aback but tried to sit up to drink from it. As she did so, she felt a streak of pain in her back.

“Tss!”

“What is wrong, Mistress?”

“My wound hurts...”

Akari wished she’d never said that. Tomohito blanched and gasped. He grabbed her shoulders and tried to pull her upright, but she shoved him off.

“It’s fine; get off. It’s an old wound...more of a scar now, really.”

“I...I see.”

“Can I just have the water, please?”

Tomohito hesitated before offering her the cup of water again.

Akari took a sip and realized she was far thirstier than she’d thought. She grabbed the cup and began gulping the water down. Tomohito watched her from his seat beside her bed, his brows knitted with concern.

Akari wasn’t sure what to say. Maybe it was the fever.

She got the impression from his intense staring that Tomohito wasn’t going to

drop the issue, so she put down the cup and turned her back to him. Gathering her hair over one shoulder, she pulled down the back of her collar, just a little.

“M-Mistress Akari?!”

“You can see it, can’t you? My scar, I mean.”

Tomohito had yelped at first, but as he realized what she was doing, he fell silent. Save for a gulp, that is.

He could see part of her scar, formed by the deep raking of claws. The scar was discolored and stood out from her skin. It stretched from her neck all the way down her torso, right to her lower back.

It was the kind of scar that drew concerned comments from the other patrons at the public bathhouse. Akari had long ago grown tired of this, and she always tried to use the bathhouse at unpopular hours.

This scar was the only remaining proof of Akari surviving the tragedy of her childhood village.

“It starts to hurt when it rains a lot, or when I’m not feeling well. That’s all it is.”

Recently, with all the bad dreams, she’d awoken every morning with her scar stinging.

Akari quickly pulled her collar back up. Tomohito wasn’t really a young man, he only looked like one, but she still felt awkward having his gaze on her bare skin.

“Are the bad dreams related in some way?”

Akari looked over her shoulder at him in surprise as he murmured tentatively. He was gazing into her eyes, a tearful expression on his face.

Akari sighed and flopped back down against the pillows. If he’d been there all night, he must have noticed her night terror. She still didn’t feel sleepy, so perhaps this was a good opportunity to talk.

“I’ve just been remembering the past a little.”

It was probably the Nue that triggered her. And that gossip she’d heard at the

office had been enough to give her dream tangible form. Tomohito sat silently beside her, listening earnestly.

“Tomohito, do you know about that Aragami demon attack that happened twelve years ago?”

Tomohito’s face went blank. It seemed that incident had left its mark on spirits as well as humans.

“I recall...a *yokai* that was enshrined in a village went on a rampage... The Narrators managed to seal it into a Kotogatari, but it was too late... The whole village was annihilated.”

“I think I might have been the cause of it all.”

Tomohito’s eyes widened as Akari debated on how best to phrase it.

Her body felt sluggish from the fever, but her mind was clear now. She felt she was starting to realize why she hated stories—no, not hated, feared—and why they gave her such a nagging discomfort inside.

She kept talking, as if cataloging her memories out loud. “I was friends with a spirit, you know.”

The words were spilling out, sounding nonsensical even to her own ears. Tomohito looked stunned, but he listened without comment.

“On the outskirts of my childhood village there was this *kubizuka*...you know, one of those burial mounds for people whose heads were severed in battle? It was kind of my playground. I always went there alone to play. And there was this voice, coming from the mound. It would always chat with me. It was a spirit, enshrined in the mound...”

The spirit in question had been cruel and brutal, and its tale was part of the folklore of the village.

It was pure evil incarnate. It kidnapped children from their beds, ate rich men alive, and stole anything it could get its hands on. It killed everyone who tried to stop it. The Imperial Court trembled in fear at the mention of the beast’s name.

Eventually, the beast was beheaded by the Narrators, but its soul’s wrath continued. In an attempt to appease the spirit, they honored it by enshrining its

head in a sacred *kubizuka* mound. The same *kubizuka* where Akari had played, on the outskirts of her village.

But the voice that came from the mound and spoke to her...it was kind. It set her soul at ease.

She couldn't remember what the spirit had said to her...but she knew she had come to regard him as a treasured friend.

"...A Narrator came to the village, and I think I told them about the spirit... I wanted someone else to know about my friend. Then one day that Narrator brought me to the *kubizuka* and handed me a book...

"And he asked me...to narrate the tale of the village demon."

The Narrator's name was Neo, and he'd showed concern for Akari as a child.

"It's to protect the village."

He'd said something like that...but at the time, Akari hadn't understood.

He told her that if she just did this one thing, then, in exchange, her spirit friend would be freed from its *kubizuka*. It could run through the fields with Akari, eat meals with her, and go on all sorts of adventures with her...

She remembered thinking, *How?* But the prospect of freeing her friend seemed so thrilling, and wasn't Neo her friend too, after all?

"So I narrated...and manifested a demon. And after that, my village was no more."

Looking back on it now, she knew that the book Neo had handed to her was a demon's Kotogatari.

She still didn't know why Neo chose her for this. She was just a child, with none of the abilities of a Narrator. But her narration had indeed manifested the demon, and it had crushed the village.

It was easy to kid herself that the whole thing had been a childish delusion. That she had done nothing wrong, and that she alone had been spared the rampage out of dumb luck and nothing more.

But after, when she'd been sent to live with relatives and was still grappling

with survivor's guilt, Neo had come to check up on her. He'd told her never to tell anyone the truth about the massacre. He'd told her to forget everything.

That alone—his concern—had made Akari suspect that she'd done something terrible after all...

Whatever Neo's motive had been, Akari had never known it.

"I narrated a story out loud. That's all. But because of that, I lost my hometown, my family. That's why I'm so afraid of stories..."

Putting her true feelings into words at long last...it brought her an incredible and instant sense of relief.

Her story was confusing and fragmented and made little sense; she knew that. But Tomohito listened calmly without interrupting, and Akari sighed, feeling as though she'd unburdened herself of something heavy she'd been carrying for years.

"Do you regret that you survived, Mistress Akari?"

"No. No, of course not."

If it weren't for Akari still being alive, no one would be left to remember her peaceful village as it once was. She had to keep on living, if only for that reason.

"But you regret that you narrated the tale of that demon...who you thought was your friend?"

Akari winced. Tomohito had prodded her old mental wounds.

But finally, she knew how she really felt.

"...It was my fault. That's how I felt...how I feel now."

"Mistress?"

Now that she'd said it, she felt the floodgates open.

Tomohito sat gazing at her in bewilderment.

"I told the tale of a brutish, cruel, repulsive demon! And that demon appeared exactly as I described it! I was so scared! And where was my beloved friend, the one I'd yearned to meet in person for so long? Was the friend I trusted just something I made up in my mind? I couldn't stand it! I wanted to escape from

everything! But I turned that demon into a Kotogami! I sealed it into the Kotogatari and made it real again and gave it power!”

There was more, but Akari couldn’t remember.

If her words had been taken as orders to a Kotogami...then it was the same as if Akari had destroyed the village herself.

She was a terrible person. Not only for the destruction of the village. Not only for the death of her parents. But also for taking away her friend’s freedom and damning its soul to reside in a book forevermore.

“I’m...so sorry...”

The loss of her parents, the destruction of her village...she’d suffered so much. But that was her curse to bear, as a survivor. After all...her sins were great.

Maybe with her narration she’d distorted her spirit friend somehow, out of hubris, out of longing to see him in person. And then when he appeared, she had rejected him, seen him as a monster. She hated herself for that.

She had no right to her tears. She clutched at the sheets, trying to hold the burning emotion within her chest, to keep it from spilling out.

A white-gloved hand covered hers and gently squeezed.

Akari lifted her head in confusion, meeting Tomohito’s soft gaze.

His eyes shimmered with deep sadness, and Akari forgot her pain for a moment.

“It is all right, Mistress Akari. That kind spirit you believed you met...I’m sure they were really everything you thought they were. So please don’t blame yourself.”

“No, you’re wrong. The demon enshrined in that Kotogatari...it appeared, just as I narrated it.”

That was the truth, wasn’t it? But Tomohito shook his head slowly, smiling.

“Have you forgotten already? How you yourself materialized Kansuke in a different form, simply by changing your narration?”

“Huh...?”

Akari gasped as she stared at Tomohito. Yes...while the true nature of a Kotogami was always the same, the manifested form could be manipulated. Tomohito's tone was light as he spoke to her, but she could see a hint of struggle deep in his eyes...

As always, though, his true thoughts were unreadable.

“You blame yourself. But have you never thought that you may have been deceived by that spirit?”

“To what end?”

“Perhaps it used you...for a way to free itself from the *kubizuka*.”

This hadn't occurred to Akari until just now. She blinked several times and Tomohito's smile broadened.

“I can tell from your expression that you have never considered this. What I can say is that I believe this spirit cared for you, no matter the form it took. Whether a fearsome demon on the outside or not. I believe that it was happy to be your friend, happy to be manifested into a Kotogami form by you.”

“That can't be true...”

“But it can. I should know. I, too, am a spirit.”

She could feel his hand trembling on hers.

He was speaking with such conviction. But why were his hands shaking? Holding Akari's hand, Tomohito continued with a bittersweet smile.

“Underneath a *kubizuka*, you can't be with humans this way...or hold their hand like this. It's not all happy things, of course, but it's nice, being in the outside world. Destroying your village, though...yes, that was unforgivable. But demons are...unaccustomed to human ways and human feeling. There must have been some extenuating circumstances, I think. I believe your friend would never have meant to hurt you.”

“Really?”

Feeling guilty for wanting to believe him, Akari gazed into his eyes. Tomohito

nodded in return.

“Of course. I truly believe myself lucky to be able to be by your side, Mistress Akari.”

“Wait a minute, why are you inserting yourself into this story?”

Akari’s expression was suddenly bewildered, her pain momentarily forgotten. Tomohito stared back at her, his eyes big and round.

“Have I said something strange?”

“Yes, but you’re always saying strange things, so it’s okay.”

Akari dismissed it, but Tomohito looked alarmed and started speaking more quickly.

“Then...then how about this? What if that spirit you were such good friends with felt bad about scaring you and regrets that it couldn’t protect you? And even now it wants to be useful to you, to help you in any way it—”

“Useful? Helpful? Like you, you mean? See, you’re putting yourself into the demon’s position again! You are SO playing devil’s advocate!”

“But... But I...!”

Tomohito sputtered, and Akari burst out laughing at him. He pouted, but she didn’t care.

“That sounds like a fairy tale.”

“Ah, forgive me! You may find this kind of conjecture to be silly, fanciful even...but I think it’s important to consider all possible angles!”

“You don’t have to get so worked up. I actually feel a lot better now, thanks to you.”

Akari smiled playfully, and Tomohito’s eyes widened.

Yes...such was the power of stories.

To entertain, to amuse. And sometimes to make us cry. To lighten our hearts, just for a while. As a child, she’d consoled her lonely soul with tales, told by friends whose faces she could no longer recall. How happy she had been to listen.

She'd forgotten it, but it had returned to her now. Her true love of stories...

It would be so nice if what Tomohito said was true. But the demon who was her friend had disappeared, none knew where to. A normal girl like Akari had no way of finding out. All she could do was imagine.

Meeting Tomohito and the others had made her realize that not all spirits were bad. Some were good—and it was all right to think of them that way. They had taught her that the shape of a tale can change based on the telling. It was all open to interpretation.

"I don't think my discomfort with stories will change going forward, though. But I think—yes. I think I can manage to read some fiction again. After all...I'll be lonely by myself, after I leave here. A hobby might help."

"I see. I will be lonely too."

Akari looked at Tomohito with some surprise.

"You haven't tried to stop me from leaving. Will you really be lonely without me?"

"We knew this arrangement would have an expiration date. It is all right. You've left me with so many wonderful memories to draw on."

"Are there so many? It's only been two months. For a spirit, that's like the blink of an eye, isn't it?"

"In truth, yes..."

Her fever had made her speak her mind much more than she usually would. But Tomohito simply smiled.

He continued, a hint of restraint in his expression.

"If you feel lonely, please return here anytime. Mayoi and Kansuke will always welcome you. Mayoi has overcome her trauma thanks to you. And Kansuke has cast off his curse. There are still many more Kotogami who would seek your narration. I am slightly jealous, but I assure you, there is no need for you to be alone any longer."

"I'm not a child anymore, you know."

“Really? Well, a matter of five or ten human years makes little difference to a Kotogami. So you may as well still be a child.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Grinning a little, Akari rolled her eyes. Tomohito gazed steadily at her, unconcerned.

Back when this all started, Akari could never have imagined having a heart-to-heart with a spirit like this. Even though she felt as if she’d been through the emotional ringer with this one in particular.

“I am leaving, though. I’m going back to being a regular person.”

Akari still believed she had no right to be narrating stories.

“I understand. I accept your decision. Now please get some rest, Mistress. I shall leave now.”

“Aren’t you supposed to stay with the patient until she’s asleep?”

“May...may I?”

Blame it on the fever. Akari cleared her throat, then snuggled down under the covers as Tomohito chuckled and settled back into the bedside chair.

“Tomohito...thank you for everything.”

“Of course, Mistress. I shall serve you always.”

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, Akari realized something.

Tomohito had told her she was free to return to the Bookhouse anytime, that Mayoi and Kansuke would always be there to welcome her.

He had not mentioned himself.

Chapter Six: Kotogami: Tomohito Yagyou

THE following day dawned with Akari's fever still high. Probably because she'd pushed herself yesterday. In the end, she had to admit defeat and allow Tomohito to call in sick for the next few days for her.

Mayoi made rice porridge for Akari and brought her books. She seemed determined to care for her mistress, despite her ongoing internal conflict over Akari's inevitable and impending abandonment of her.

As a final rebellion, perhaps, Mayoi seemed to have selected only fiction novels and books on Kotogami for Akari to read. Feeling tested, Akari nonetheless read each volume. She was nervous about it at first, but soon found herself absorbed in her reading.

Oops. All that time she'd avoided stories, and now here she was, spending almost the entire day with her nose in a book.

"I never realized the West had so many *yokai* of their own."

Akari closed the book on *yokai* tales from overseas that she was reading and exhaled through her nose.

Regardless of the truth behind them, *yokai* tales tended to pass into legend after centuries, and this seemed to be the case for both the East and the West. And then, inspired by these old "tales," new ones sprung up. It was truly fascinating comparing similar spirits from both Eastern and Western folklore.

Munakata even came to visit her, which astounded Akari.

She planned to return to work tomorrow. At her bedside, after only a little small talk, Munakata asked her outright if she was really going to quit as custodian. When she nodded, he looked somewhat disappointed.

"I wanted you to stay on just a bit longer. With you here, it's one less task for me to handle."

“How self-serving of you. So you’re not going to try to stop me?”

“There’s no point pushing the issue. Kotogami are divine spirits. Dealing closely with them takes a certain level of preparedness and shouldn’t be undertaken lightly. I’m not here to coerce you into anything.”

Akari narrowed her eyes, suspicious.

“What? You look like you’ve got a hair stuck in your throat.”

“I’m just surprised to see you take something seriously for once.”

“You don’t know the first thing about me.”

I know you’re a military man, and I know you know far more than you let on. But Akari didn’t say that. She just smiled blandly. Munakata sighed. He could probably tell what she was thinking.

“Well, never mind. If you want to leave, I won’t stand in your way. But I warn you, sometimes the Association is forced to bring in people against their will. If we call for you in the future, you should be prepared.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

His pithy little speech had Akari immediately suspicious, but Munakata changed the subject.

“Just agree to wait until the end of the month to move out. Right now’s risky. I don’t want this Bookhouse going unmanned.”

“What do you mean, right now’s risky? Do you mean all the recent *yokai* disturbances?”

“Something like that. But we’ve got a lead. We should be able to crack the case soon.”

Munakata seemed as unmotivated as ever, but that was kind of his default state. Akari shrugged. She’d even brought up her suspicions about Sumimata Corporation to him, but from his lackluster reaction, Akari figured she must have been overthinking things.

They agreed that Akari would wait until the first day of the following month to move. She would be going back to work as usual until then.

AFTER a good rest, Akari was feeling much better. She spent the first day back at work catching up on her own tasks and going around helping out the other employees.

She was wearing her favorite red-brown kimono with the colorful butterfly pattern on it and a red kimono sash. She was feeling pretty good, in fact.

“Miss Akari, shouldn’t you slow down? You only just got back from sick leave.”

Mitsuko, dressed in a mellow orange kimono with a pattern of yellow roses, peered meekly at her. Akari kept on handling the work she’d been tasked with as she responded.

“I’m fine. Actually, I’m glad to be here. Kind of an awkward situation at home...”

“Why, what’s happened? Did you have a quarrel with the...man you live with?”

Akari looked up at Mitsuko’s curious expression and groaned internally. She hadn’t meant to say anything about what was going on at the Bookhouse. Darn it.

“Well, not exactly. Actually, they took care of me while I was sick. But I made the announcement that I’m moving out, and there’s been a lot of sulking from the little girl who also lives there...”

Bringing up Mayoi would help to deflect things.

She didn’t want to talk about Tomohito, whom she could still barely look in the face. He’d mopped her brow during her feverish nights, and she also recalled that she’d opened up to him about some deeply personal things...

She must have been crazy to act so vulnerable in front of him, but the fever had clouded her judgment.

Her scar was a huge source of shame for her, and one of her secret reasons for never seriously considering marriage. She couldn’t believe she’d shown it to a man, even if he was a spirit. She’d made a huge effort to try to act normal around him since then, but it didn’t come easy.

Looking back on it now, she couldn't understand why she'd been feeling so emotionally vulnerable. At least the bad dreams had stopped after that.

She was sure she'd be back to her normal self entirely after another day or two. She just wanted a grace period. That wasn't too much to ask, surely.

Mitsuko watched Akari, who was blushing as she continued busily shuffling papers. Twisting her hands together, Mitsuko cleared her throat.

"Miss Akari, can I ask for your help with something?"

"You want my help? Really? Well, I know my taking time off inconvenienced everyone. I'll do anything I can to help out."

Mitsuko gave Akari a strained smile.

"There are rats or something in the gramophone clock warehouse. I've been told to go and check that the goods aren't damaged and then to also catch the rats."

"What? That's a big problem. Who gave you the order? And why can't they catch the rats by themselves?!"

"I...I just couldn't say no...but I can't do it by myself. Please help me..."

Mitsuko seemed to shrink in on herself, and Akari regretted her tone.

She knew better than anyone that questioning a male employee's order never turned out well for the women.

Anyway, this was a good opportunity. Akari had been planning to probe Mitsuko for more info on the project she was working on.

"Of course I'll help. Anything for you, Mitsuko."

"Oh...thank you."

Akari's plans for the afternoon were made. Mitsuko smiled weakly at her, her hands shaking just a little.

THE Sumimata Corporation's goods warehouse was located behind the main office building.

It may have seemed extravagant to pay for warehouse space in an expensive business district like this one, but it was more efficient to dispatch the goods to rich patrons all over the city from a central location.

Akari had finished up her work in advance and arrived at the warehouse ahead of Mitsuko. As she placed her hand lightly on the door, she heard a heavy thump inside. She yanked the door open.

Tread carefully..., Akari thought as she stepped inside, her face tense.

Fumbling for the switch on the wall, she flipped on the overhead electric lights. Row upon row of grandfather clocks were suddenly illuminated in the gloom.

To kill time until Mitsuko arrived, Akari decided to quickly patrol the room. She figured she'd better wait for her colleague before they started actually setting any rat traps.

Also, if she accidentally made so much as a scratch on one of these clocks, she could kiss this month's paycheck goodbye. Akari knew better than anyone else just how clumsy she could be. She'd better make sure to be extra-careful.

Some of the clocks seemed to be active. She could hear their pendulums swinging back and forth. *Tick-tock, tick-tock*. It would take hours to check over all of them by herself.

This company really doesn't know how to efficiently utilize its personnel, Akari thought wryly as she gazed at the clocks. Then, something moved in the corner of her vision.

Akari turned. Mitsuko? But if so, surely the other woman would have announced herself?

"Ew, maybe there really are rats in here."

What was she going to do? Akari was both uncoordinated and slow. There was no way she could capture a fleet-footed animal like a rat.

And who knew what kind of illnesses those critters had? Akari wasn't in the mood to get bitten. Still, she had better find out what they were dealing with. She tiptoed quietly over to the corner and crouched down, trying to get a better

look.

Something came scuttling toward her.

She fell on her butt, not even having time to squeal.

Sharp claws scrabbled at her kimono. It didn't hurt, but the thing was on her chest and she couldn't move. Its gray fur and doglike (*or was it fox-like?*) face seemed familiar to her, though... Akari's eyes widened.

It was the beast spirit she'd fed half her sandwiches to in Hiyabi Park just a few days before.

Its grayish, purpleish eyes narrowed as it bared its fangs and snarled at Akari.

{Where is my grimoire? You...}

The beast's snarl tapered off as it hesitated.

Akari couldn't begin to process what was happening.

The creature seemed to have doubled in size since they last met.

And it was speaking a foreign language. It sounded like English to Akari, but she wasn't sure.

She could see intelligence, however, in its purple eyes. Tentatively, she questioned it.

"Did you come from overseas?"

{Oh, not again! She's speaking a foreign language. There is so much about this land I find strange. Where am I?}

The beast wailed in plaintive tones, its tail drooping as it curled in on itself. Akari thought hard. She could barely follow what this thing was saying, but there was so much she wanted to ask it. She couldn't let this chance slip past.

{Wait, I can understand you. Can you understand me?}

Akari dug up the English she'd spent so many hours studying back at her all-girls school, and the beast's ears immediately pricked up. Its claws flexed as it clutched at her kimono.

{Do you understand me?}

{I don't speak English often, but I can understand if you speak slowly.}

{You've brought back memories. I never thought I would hear my native language spoken again.}

{Anyway, please get off me. I want to talk with you.}

Abandoning all interest in checking out the warehouse now, Akari sat up and faced the gray-furred beast.

This was the first time in her life she'd ever felt thankful for the English-language education she'd received at school. Oh, but she supposed it did occasionally come in handy at work when she had to check the spelling of promotional materials and so on.

She hadn't spoken it out loud in years, though, and she felt quite nervous. The creature gazed curiously at her, its tail swishing this way and that. It was really quite cute.

{So, young girl who speaks my homeland's tongue. Young girl who has brought me a taste of home. Tell me, what is this land?}

{You can just call me Akari. This is Sumimata Corporation... Oh, I guess that won't make any sense to you... Anyway, this island is called Jipangu, and we are in a warehouse in its Imperial Capital. This is where I work.}

{...Ah-kah-ree... Imperial Capital... So this is not Angland. How did I get here?}

{You don't even know why you're here? What are you, anyway?}

Before they discussed anything else, she needed to know what she was talking to. But the beast seemed surprised by her question.

{You cannot tell?}

Its tail flopped back and forth.

{I remember living free in my homeland. Then the humans built metal birds with which to explore the skies, and my original powers became much greater. But then the metal bird piece I inhabited was loaded onto a boat and we crossed the ocean. Then I was forced against my will into the pages of a book—a grimoire.}

Akari didn't know this word, *grimwar*. Given what Akari knew of the world of Narrators and Kotogami, though, this "grimwar" sounded almost exactly like a Kotogatari.

{And what name did they give you?}

{I recall being called...Raijoo.}

The beast's pronunciation was clumsy, but Akari knew what it meant immediately, and she was flabbergasted.

Could it be that this beast was behind the recent Raiju attacks? But Akari had seen that spirit up close, and it was many times larger than this small furry beast. The two didn't look anything alike. And this little one could carry on an intelligent conversation...

Akari hoped there had been some mistake, but the doleful-looking gray-furred creature continued.

{When I was sealed, I recall feeling that I was becoming warped. I recall fighting back. Then before I knew what was what, I had become like this. Ever since, I have been searching for the grimoire that sealed me.}

From this account, Akari had no choice but to acknowledge that it was in fact the same Raiju that had been laying waste to the streets.

Now what was she supposed to do?

The beast didn't seem to have any memories of the destruction it had wrought. If it remembered attacking Akari back then, it wouldn't be speaking so pleasantly with her right now.

Or maybe this was a trick, and it was waiting to see how she'd react? The beast peered up at Akari, who was kneeling before it.

{I was wandering in a daze, but your sandwiches gave me the strength to think clearly again. I wish to thank you.}

What a polite and well-mannered...Raiju.

It had the voice of an adult male, but its cut-glass English accent gave it an air of sophistication. Akari would be happy to listen to the tallest tale imaginable if only it were delivered in such a silky voice.

The creature apparently possessed an innate power for destruction, but it had done nothing to her. She felt she knew the beast's true nature.

{No thanks necessary. I'm glad it satisfied your hunger.}

{Your kind words gave me courage. I was...happy.}

Akari resolved to figure out this situation as best she could, drawing on everything she'd learned.

From the beast's report, it seemed that it had come from overseas to the Yamato Empire, and then it had been sealed in a Kotogatari. Then something had happened, and it had escaped. Right?

{Wait, so you've been out of your book like that ever since we met in the park?}

{No. Right after we met, my grimoire's owner appeared again, and I do not recall what happened then. I believe I was forced back into my grimoire. I tried to get out, and then before I knew what was happening, I found myself here.}

Akari wished she could speak to Munakata about this. This was so far beyond her capabilities. The best thing would be for her to smuggle the beast out unnoticed and get it to Munakata.

But without its Kotogatari, she couldn't get it out of this building.

"Now that I think about it, though, isn't there a good possibility its Kotogatari is nearby, maybe here in the warehouse...?"

A jolt of fear went coursing down Akari's spine.

What would a Kotogatari be doing there? Sumimata Corporation HQ wasn't a Narrator-controlled book depository. Nor was it a rich man's mansion with a private library collection. It was a practical, modern-day goods company, with no need or appreciation for Kotogami.

But the spirit attack in the mansion with the grandfather clock...and the Raiju rampages taking place in locations favored by Kotogami, such as rich men's houses and also...around locations where Sumimata Corporation's rival companies had their offices...

Didn't all of that point to this company's involvement in the recent string of

incidents?

{What is wrong, Ah-kah-ree? I cannot understand that tongue.}

Akari stopped rubbing her chin and snapped out of her pensive thinking.

{I'm sorry. Listen, I'll help you find that book you were bound to.}

{Will you? That would be most helpful!}

The beast gave a little hop forward and Akari stepped cautiously back. Still, she was determined help in any way she could.

{Say, do you have any idea where your grimoire might be?}

{I feel it must be close. Otherwise, I could not be manifested here like this.}

The beast seemed to have cheered up greatly. It gave its ears a sudden firm twitch.

{Yes! It is close!}

Its face lit up suddenly, and Akari blinked as she looked around them. Then she heard slapping footsteps behind her—from traditional Japanese thong sandals—and she whirled around.

“Miss Akari. So you *can* see it after all.”

A soft, clear voice. It was Mitsuko Maruyama, standing there with a blank expression on her face. Akari hadn't sensed her approaching and was taken aback. Then she blanched as she realized Mitsuko was staring right at the Raiju.

“Mitsuko? See...what?”

“You really are talented, Miss Akari. See how you've tamed the wild Raiju? You really do have the aptitude of a Narrator. I'm truly envious. And I need to use this stupid book to get it to do what I want. No fair.”

Did she just say...Raiju? No...

But Mitsuko kept muttering to herself, ignoring Akari altogether. Mitsuko was usually so docile, but now she was emanating a dark, ominous aura.

And she was holding a light-gray book in one hand.

{THAT IS MY GRIMOIRE!}

The beast snarled and made a sudden move toward Mitsuko, who tightened her grip on the book defensively.

{RAIJU. DOWN.}

Her voice sounded unnatural, sonorous.

The beast suddenly fell flat on the floor as if pushed down by some invisible force. It struggled and writhed against what seemed like an invisible hand, but its efforts appeared to be in vain.

Akari couldn't believe the power of this strange Kotogatari book.

"The binding force is weakening. I'll have to tell the bosses later. What a bother. Still, it has to be done. Wait...what time is it...?"

"Mitsuko, why are you holding a Kotogatari and handling a Raiju? And why did you really ask me to meet you here?"

Mitsuko gripped the spirit tome with a confident air as she looked around at the gramophone clocks. Then she turned her sharp gaze on Akari, scowling at her.

Mitsuko had her hair in a long braid tied up in a loop with a ribbon, which was a trendy style for young women at the time. She toyed with the braid, beginning to smile faintly.

"Ah yes, Miss Akari. How I have envied you."

They were having two different conversations. All Akari could do was listen as Mitsuko's odd behavior sent alarm bells ringing in her head.

"We joined the company at the same time, but you're so competent at your work. You can speak confidently with the male employees, and everyone trusts you with their tasks. On top of that, you're beautiful, and you can even speak English. I've always found you so amazing. I did what my parents told me to do—I went to an all-girls school and got a job to learn about the world outside. I envied you so. I really did. You sparkled so bright, like the heroine of a story. You made me want to try my best too. But no matter how much effort I put in, you were always better than me at everything."

"You shouldn't compare—"

“Well, I do! I do compare!!!”

Akari shrank back as Mitsuko screamed at her.

Trembling and clutching the book's cover with white fingers, Mitsuko continued.

“I wanted to be your best friend. I wanted to stand side by side with you and do all the things you did. I wanted to sparkle too! But for every skill I mastered, you mastered ten in the same time frame! When I burned down the company dorm, I thought things would change, but you figured out a solution all by yourself! And despite bragging that you didn't need to get married, you went on to get engaged to an amazingly attractive young man!”

“Mitsuko, wait...you burned down my dorm?”

“You bet I did. Oh, I only meant to burn down the one building, but the Raiju was hard to control. Things got out of hand. I'm sorry for that.”

Mitsuko's warped apology made Akari feel sick to her stomach.

It was clear there would be no reasoning with crazy Mitsuko. She still had the Raiju bound to her will, immobile. Akari was flooded with the feeling of unexpected betrayal.

Aware of the terrible danger she was in, all Akari could think about was *why* Mitsuko had done this. Meanwhile, Mitsuko was looking down at the book in her hands with a cold expression on her face.

“But you see the difference between us? You can use real Kotogatari, not cheap fakes like this one.”

“Fake? You mean...that's not a Kotogatari?”

“Nope. Look.”

Mitsuko flipped open the book and showed its pages to Akari, whose eyes widened.

It was too far away for her to read any of the words, but she could see that the pages were crammed full of random words that seemed like gibberish. And it was all typewritten.

“The men in charge call them ‘Pseudogatari’. They contain warped, sealed spirits that people can easily control. The warping process itself tends to render them unusable, but we can get around that by playing a specific sound to trigger them. Anyone can use them, not just Narrators. Our company plans to mass-produce and market them, together with special sound machines.”

“They’re going to...*sell* spirits?!”

Akari was floored. This was monstrous, beyond anything she could ever have suspected. Mitsuko grinned and flapped the book in the air.

“No, no, not real Kotogami spirits. It’s just for sealing up random ghosts that are knocking around. And they tend to break down with repeated use. But it’s fine, they’re going to market them as disposable products. Management said they’re going to advertise them as anti-Kotogami weapons for everyday civilian use.”

Akari felt the hairs on her arms stand up as Mitsuko shrugged.

Warping and trapping spirits was abominable, but Mitsuko didn’t seem to feel the slightest pang of guilt about it. She seemed detached, uninterested. Had she no respect for the spirit world?

After Westernization had come to the Yamato Empire, Kotogatari and the Narrators became commonplace in society. It wasn’t so far-fetched to believe that humans would eventually try to use them for their own profits. But Akari was gut-wrenchingly horrified all the same.

After all, her own company was involved. Which meant that, however unwittingly, *she* was involved.

For some reason, Mitsuko was now blushing.

“Apparently, I have the kind of voice that resonates with spirits. So they had me sing a recitation recording for them. It was embarrassing, but I did it. They also put me in charge of that Raiju. Oh, I’ve been given ever so many important company tasks! They had me do something called a *demonstration*.

“I would go to rival company offices and cause havoc with the Raiju Pseudogatari in hand, just to show what it could do, you know? Like, *Take that, have some thunderbolts, courtesy of Sumimata Corp!* Oh, and at the same time

it really killed public favor toward the Narrators. That was a bonus.”

“Our company is completely insane, isn’t it?”

Akari found the words tumbling out as she trembled with fear. But Mitsuko only nodded gravely.

“I think so too. They’re so lax. They spilled all their upcoming plans to me, a woman. And now they’re going to have an employee killed, just because the Narrators’ Association has started to suspect what we’re up to.”

Akari’s back stiffened. Kill an employee... Mitsuko was talking about her.

But she kept on chatting away, seeming oblivious to Akari’s suddenly deepening trepidation.

“They were all saying that it was worth it for one person to die, as long as they got to enjoy messing with those rival companies. They told me to get rid of you, since we know you’ve got links to the Narrators. That won’t do, you know, Miss Akari. Our company simply *hates* the Narrators and the Kotogami.”

“Mitsuko...you don’t know what you’re saying. You can’t commit murder just for the sake of the company. It’s deranged...”

“I know, Miss Akari, I know. They’re just using me like a pawn. But I can’t stop it, not anymore.”

Akari had tried to be brave, to call Mitsuko’s bluff. But now the other woman’s expression had gone blank again.

“When I first learned to use the Pseudogatari, I felt good. *That’s one better than Akari could do*, I thought. But once I finally had that achievement under my belt, I just had to find out that you’d gone one further than me again. You became the custodian of a Narrator office branch. Wow. You steal every one of my accomplishments out from under me, don’t you? I was so scared...so envious. I didn’t know what to do...”

Suddenly, the gongs of the clocks began sounding off, announcing the time. *Bong, bong.*

Then an unsettling melody began to play. Akari recognized it as the song from her Nue retrieval mission.

The music was clear, and easy to identify. She could make out Mitsuko's singing voice now, through the gentle distortion of the gramophone's speaker. It was sweet and somewhat beautiful, while at the same time chilling Akari to the core.

This was the sound trigger for the Pseudogatari Mitsuko was clutching in her hands.

The Raiju began to buck upon the floor.

It was writhing as if in pain, and streaks of lightning were crackling all over its body as it began to grow bigger and bigger.

Within seconds, it had assumed the fearsome hulking form Akari recalled from the day her lodgings burned.

Mitsuko's face was still twisted with jealousy, but now her lips began to curl into a smile, even as her eyes filled with tears.

"So, before you can take everything from me...I'm going to make you disappear."

"GRAWWR!"

Akari turned her back on the roaring beast and started to run.

She had to act quickly, before the monstrous Raiju could get her.

If it hit her with one of its electricity bolts, Akari would be burned to a crisp.

"Now, Raiju! Kill that woman!"

Akari could hear Mitsuko screaming orders amid the sizzling of the lightning.

Akari had been right all along to be suspicious of the gramophone clocks, but she felt no satisfaction. She was going to lose her life as a result.

But Akari couldn't give up. She had to run. She wasn't dead yet. And she couldn't bear the thought of dying in a place like this.

This crime went throughout the entire company, though. Even if she could make it outside, she might run into the company men. Or they might already be waiting outside to block her escape.

Chewing her lip, Akari felt the air begin to crackle against her skin.

It felt like static electricity, only stronger...

The Raiju leaped and landed in front of Akari, blocking her path to the exit.

It moved with the speed of light. Akari felt as if it had all happened within the blink of an eye.

Its black eyes were clouded, devoid of sentience. In its beast mind, Akari was nothing more than prey.

She knew it wouldn't listen to reason. But she had to do something! She had to think! The beast had her trapped!

"Finish her, Raiju!"

Mitsuko shrieked her final command, and the Raiju roared, flashes of purple lightning rising from its massive body.

I'm done for, Akari thought, her mind oddly clear.

Thinking about it now, she wished she'd decided to stay on as the Bookhouse custodian. But she knew she would never have quit her day job. So in the end, she'd have met the same fate anyway.

She wished she could help the Raiju, bring it back to its proper form. But her words wouldn't reach it now.

Akari covered her eyes with her hands, closing them.

Perhaps she'd been living on borrowed time since the first Raiju attack. Perhaps this was her destiny.

She felt the heat of the lightning. But the attack she expected never came.

Instead, a shadow appeared in front of her closed eyelids. It was so bright in the warehouse—the electricity of the beast illuminated everything like midsummer daylight. Someone was standing in front of her.

Akari opened her eyes, gasping.

He was standing protectively between her and the Raiju, his black hair flowing, his three-piece suit as crisp as ever. It was impossible, and yet it was really him.

"Tomohito?!"

He turned to her as she yelled out his name.

His face...his face was horribly burned. From the lightning?

His hair was black, not gold, so he wasn't in his most powerful form. He was stronger than any human, but it was clear he was no match for the Raiju like this.

Even so, Tomohito smiled reassuringly at her.

"Mistress Akari, are you hurt?"

"Never mind me, look at you! You've been burned!"

"Ah yes, I see that you are unharmed. Good. I made it in time."

"Tomohito, your *face*!"

Forgetting the danger they were in, all Akari could focus on were his burns. But Tomohito smiled, his voice as calm as ever.

"I made up my mind long ago to protect you. No matter what happens."

He turned around again, and the Raiju stopped rushing and leaped back in alarm.

Almost as if it was afraid of him...

Akari blinked, unable to believe her eyes.

Tomohito was standing there badly burned and wounded, but the Raiju was cowering before him.

Mitsuko was staring with disbelief too.

"Who is that man? A Kotogami? What is it doing here?!"

"I am Mistress Akari's servant, her guardian spirit. I am here to protect her, no matter the danger."

"Idiot! This isn't the time!"

As Akari yelled at him, his lower lip jutted out dejectedly. Wasn't he supposed to be gravely injured?

"But I have a plan, Mistress Akari. I took the liberty of sneaking my Kotogatari into your work satchel this morning."

Akari thought back to the start of the day, when Tomohito had thrust her bag into her hands at the door. His Kotogatari was surprisingly thin and light, and Akari often needed to carry a lot of heavy papers home from the office. There was a good chance she'd never have noticed his book in her satchel.

Meanwhile, Mitsuko was standing around, looking furious and confused.

"The male employees are outside waiting, you know!"

"Well, they were. But I put them to sleep."

Mitsuko gaped at him, stunned, as Tomohito shrugged.

Akari was rooted to the spot as Tomohito eased his amber-colored Kotogatari out of her bag and placed it into her hands.

"Here. Please hold it open until this is over. Just like how we did it back at your dorm fire. That way I can keep my power going until the end."

"Tomohito, what are you planning to do?"

"I shall protect you, Mistress. Just as I have promised."

Akari felt a shiver run through her as the Kotogami avoided answering her question.

Then he smiled at her—the most beautiful smile she had ever seen.

"Mistress Akari, this is going to be a sight to behold."

Taking her hands in his, Tomohito helped her open the book.

Gold letters instantly sprang from the pages, shooting over to envelop the Kotogami.

Akari watched in wonder. The flowing gold letters seemed stronger, brighter than they had during the dorm fire incident. They flowed in circles around Tomohito's form as he began to transform.

His body was swelling, growing bigger and bigger. Sharp claws burst from his fingertips and toes. His black hair turned a shimmering gold, and two mighty horns sprouted from his forehead, parting his golden locks.

Filled with awe, Akari and Mitsuko looked on.

The beast standing before them now was known to every man, woman, and child in the Yamato Empire. It was the villain of countless folktales, a beast whose tyranny brought fury and pain down upon the ancient capital. Both feared and revered in equal measure, it was worshipped by the people as a deity—a god of destruction.

The Aratama.

“Demon...”

Akari’s voice quivered. Her body was trembling.

It was beautiful and terrible at the same time. Standing in its presence filled Akari with a deep, visceral dread.

It was monstrous. Demonic. Akari wanted to run away.

She took a step back. Then she remembered what she was holding in her hands.

That’s right: the Kotogatari.

The golden-haired demon turned and looked over its hulking shoulder at Akari.

Its eyes were red, like burning coals. As they found Akari’s, she felt as if she’d been struck with a hammer. *I know those eyes.*

Her heart was hammering against her rib cage, but she fought against her fear, trying to think clearly. She realized Mitsuko had snapped out of her funk as well and was holding her hardcover book aloft.

“I heard the Kotogami were as strong as the famous legends say. You truly are amazing, Akari, manifesting a demon so infamous even I’ve heard of it. But I...I have *this!*”

Face twisting, Mitsuko roughly scrabbled through the pages of her Pseudogatari.

“Raiju! Destroy the Kotogami!”

The Raiju roared as Mitsuko yelled out an order, her voice quavering. Purple lightning streaked from the beast’s body.

As the thunderbolt ripped through the air, Akari cowered. But the demon simply stood there and took it.

Then it rushed, charging at the Raiju.

Face stiff, Mitsuko watched as the two *yokai* began a furious skirmish.

She may have been able to command the Raiju, but she knew nothing of battle. She was completely out of her depth.

There was a chance she would lose. Mitsuko knew it; it was clear in her frightened expression.

The golden demon swept its mighty fist again.

It should have dealt the Raiju a crushing blow, but for some reason its swing missed.

Instead, the Raiju sunk its fangs into the demon's flesh.

Immediately, the demon shook the Raiju off, but a fang remained stuck in its arm. As the two women watched, the arm turned into golden particles that blew away into nothingness. Mitsuko whooped and jeered triumphantly.

"Oh dear, it looks like your Kotogami is already crumbling into dust! Just like what happens to the Pseudogatari once they're worn out. The pages disintegrate and the spine collapses, and the spirit is lost forever. How long has it been since you gave that Kotogami a rereading?"

"A rereading? I haven't... I've never..."

Akari had never read Tomohito's Kotogatari. Not even once. Mitsuko curled her lip, giving the panicked Akari a disgusted look.

"Don't try to fool me. Obviously you've read that thing's Kotogatari, or you wouldn't have been able to manifest it."

It was too bad—Mitsuko had almost let herself believe she was stronger than Akari in battle.

But Akari wasn't listening to the woman anymore.

The only Kotogatari she'd ever properly narrated out loud was Kansuke's, and that was just the one time. She wasn't even sure if you could call that a

narration. It was more like a retelling of historical facts.

She was still reeling from the effects of direct eye contact with the demon's burning-coal eyes.

Could it be true? They had met like this before, but only once. Unless you counted all the times she'd seen it in her nightmares...

Akari knew the golden demon from long ago.

On impulse, she dropped her gaze to the amber-covered Kotogatari in her hands. She was going to have to read it. Everything that had affected Akari's life was written down on these pages.

She knew she couldn't let the demon just crumble into dust like this.

With trembling fingers, she turned the page.

The fluid calligraphy was instantly familiar to her. She leaned in, focusing on the story it told.

Thus ended the demon's long campaign of tyranny since ancient times, and it lost both its name and its head. It was sealed in a kubizuka as an Onigami, its deep grudge everlasting, and became known as the Golden Demon.

After many years, the enshrined demon soul met a young child. As wild as ever, its mind selfish, it nonetheless forged a bond with a human for the first time. The child performed a narration, manifesting the golden form of the demon and sealing it away as a Kotogami, thus marking the final entry in this Kotogatari.

.....—

I gave it the spirit name of Tomohito Yagyou. But the village child always called it...

A demon, one of the two locked in battle on the day her village was destroyed. Little Akari's much-longed-for childhood friend. She had called him...

"Mr. Demon..."

The gold demon paused mid-grapple with the Raiju, its body quivering.

Akari kept flipping through the pages, the memories coming back to her like a

flood.

The book didn't describe everything. But it sparked her memories, her childhood spent playing beside the *kubizuka* tomb of the spirit enshrined in the forest. The deep voice she heard from beneath the stones, the conversations they had together...

"Mr. Demon! Come out, come out and play!"

"...I cannot. I am only a head."

"Hmph! Well, if you ever manage to get out, come and play with me. Deal?"

"Stubborn child. If you ever saw my true form, you would sob and shudder with fear."

"Nope! 'Cause you're the coolest, Mr. Demon! I just know it! Hey, if you get out, we can eat sweet bean candy together!"

"...All right, then. Although I doubt such a chance will ever come, if I do ever find my body again, I shall play with you."

Akari bent over, a wave of nausea rolling through her.

She remembered now.

Her friend had always seemed so gloomy whenever she spoke of him coming out to play.

She recalled when it began. She'd climbed onto the mossy stone mound and heard a voice reverberating from beneath the stones.

"Is it fun for you, to sit on top of my head like that?"

Akari hadn't known what a *kubizuka* burial mound was. But she was tickled by the talking rock heap. She started going there to play every day.

Even after she found out that the rocks housed the village spirit, she continued to visit "Mr. Demon" daily. It may have been one-sided, but she'd begun to consider him her friend, and she imagined what he would look like based on the things he told her about himself.

The tales he'd told her in his deep voice...they seemed fanciful, like fairy tales, but they excited her all the same.

She had finished reading the final entry in the Kotogatari now. She raised her head from the book just as the air was filled with a thunderous roar, and clouds of dust began to swirl.

She lifted her arm to protect her face as the golden demon went rolling, crashing into the ranks of grandfather clocks and sending them falling like dominoes.

The Raiju, too, seemed to have been dealt a devastating blow and was lying immobile.

“Oh!”

The gold demon struggled to sit up as it clutched its right arm, which was starting to drop gold dust particles too. If Akari’s reading of the Kotogatari wasn’t enough to stop the disintegration process, then that probably meant the book itself was reaching the end of its life span...

But the demon turned to Akari with a bittersweet smile.

“I wanted to disappear before you figured it out... Things didn’t go as I planned.”

Even in this monstrous form, that calm, polite voice was the one she knew so well.

As she listened to the kind voice, Akari was filled with awful regrets, her soul in turmoil. From its words, it was clear the demon remembered her child self, too.

“Why...why didn’t you say anything...?”

“How could I? I was your childhood nightmare.”

The demon frowned at her question. But she could read Tomohito’s expression now, at long last. He was filled with immense remorse.

“There is no need for you to fret over what happened. I opted to be called forth as a Kotogami in order to protect you. But I let you come to harm, and I let your village be destroyed. Now that we have met again, all I want is to be wonderful again in your eyes, to somehow make amends...”

Akari couldn’t follow what he was saying at all. But the demon seemed so

earnest.

“In place of the family I stole from you, you have Mayo and Kansuke. In place of your lost village, you have the Bookhouse. In place of that sweet, innocent heart with which you narrated my tale...well, there is no way to restore that, I’m afraid. But everything else will be perfect, as long as I disappear. The demon is always slayed at the end of the story, is that not correct? An appropriate fate for the monster who laid waste to a village.”

“You did this to...repay me? You waited around like this for me to grow up, for twelve years?!”

“Yes. This is the end of my at-will manifestation.”

“But I was so afraid of you...”

The demon showed something like a clumsy smile as the emotional words spilled from Akari’s lips.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? I used to take such joy in the terror of humans. But I’ve never been able to forget that look of horror on your face.”

Akari was starting to cry now. The contrast of the demon’s fearsome form and its soft words was too much to bear.

The demon reached out its hand toward her, but its arm was already crumbling into gold dust. Its face twisted in frustration.

“Despite it all, I really wanted to be narrated with your words...”

Akari felt her chest aching with a pain that was mostly sadness.

He had wanted to return to her what she had lost, or at least provide her with replacements, and he had planned everything out so carefully to achieve that goal.

Ah, but he was so inhuman. She was so terrified of him as he stood there smiling at her with his demon face, even with both of his arms now crumbled away to dust.

She recalled the things he’d said on that night when she’d spiked a fever. He’d been talking about himself, after all. And yet, he hadn’t blamed her for forgetting him. His regret had spurred him to try to fix things.

And all the while, Akari had kept talking about how much she hated stories. There was so much she didn't understand, but she felt she was beginning to.

"So, Mistress Akari...please run now. Even in my current form, I believe I still have what it takes to defeat that malformed beast."

Akari hesitated, heart-struck. Was he saying goodbye?

"Remember when you said you'd be lonely without me? Was that just a lie?"

"No. I was a hundred percent serious."

He seemed confused by her question but answered readily. Akari felt anger bubble up inside her, then burst out.

"Then stay the course! Like a tenacious, unmovable demon! ...Idiot!"

"But, Mistress Akari, you fear me..."

"Oh yeah, I fear you! I do, but you're still my Mr. Demon! My friend, who I thought was the coolest! Who I longed to play with! You want to be wonderful in my eyes? What's wonderful about bailing on me now?!"

The red-coal eyes widened as Akari glared, shaking with emotion.

Her tears spilled down her cheeks and plopped onto the cover of the Kotogatari in her hands.

It was anger that was making her body shake. Anger over the audacity of this demon...and her own naiveté.

In that moment, Akari made up her mind. About everything that was going to happen from then on, about her entire fate.

Be brave, like a woman. She'd seen that saying somewhere.

"So watch this!"

"...Mistress Akari?!"

She slammed the Kotogatari shut. Closing a Kotogatari ends the current narration that is manifesting the Kotogami and allows a Narrator the opportunity to narrate anew.

Usually, the power manifested in the Kotogami will last until naturally

expended, but for this demon, who had already exhausted its life span, it would serve as a self-destruct signal.

The demon's red eyes opened even wider, and then the golden particles that made up its form began to disappear.

"Miss Akari, are you seriously discarding your own weapon...?"

Mitsuko snorted derisively, but Akari ignored her, immediately reopening the Kotogatari. Mitsuko's face fell.

Her mind running a mile a minute, Akari took a deep breath.

She didn't know if this would fix what had already disintegrated. But she knew that you could re-narrate a Kotogami. So surely all she had to do was start over, narrate again, and he would be healed. Right?

The first time she had narrated the demon, she had simply read what was written, never thinking any deeper about it. She also didn't know how this demon had managed to remain manifested for over ten years. He had said that her narration had brought him happiness. She would narrate again in hopes that he would be spared. Just one more prayer.

As an adult, she understood now.

"You are a fearful sight to behold. Those horns, those fangs, they are just as they were described in the folklore of my village. You are the physical embodiment of all the world's evil. You can steal lives with a mere swipe of your arm. But you also spent peaceful days playing with a child. You were a faithful, if annoying, servant to your mistress. You have a good heart and a desire to right the wrongs you caused. You are so much more than what you were!"

Yes, the demon tale she narrated twelve years ago was correct. The truth was horrid, shocking.

But the Kotogatari did not contain the entire story. Only Akari could tell the truth about the creature standing before her. She had to tell his real story. Whether in written or spoken words, that power lay only with her.

If she could just tell the story over...

She'd opened the book to the final page. It was fresh, blank. She stroked it with her fingers.

Glaring up at the rapidly disappearing demon in front of her, Akari began to speak in a loud, clear voice.

*"Demon of gold, you symbol of corruption,
you crystallization of evil!*

*Your hubris and wickedness led you to losing your head,
and still your wrath endured!*

*Until you befriended a human child
and awakened inside yourself a desire
for goodness, and happiness, and peace!"*

Yes. That was how Akari saw him.

A spirit with a terrible demonic past, who saw human suffering as insignificant, until he met a child who insisted on seeing the good in him.

How he frustrated her, and yet, she still wanted him by her side.

"...The Aratama Tomohito Yagyou!"

If this didn't work, Akari was happy to die right then and there.

If this merely provoked the demon, then let him slay her.

After all, one shouldn't manifest a Kotogami lightly. One must always be prepared for the consequences...

The half-crumbled Kotogatari in her hands was suddenly giving off waves of heat.

Red and gold streaks were rising off the final blank page.

The streaks shot past the Raiju, stopping the beast in its tracks. They blew past Mitsuko, who was standing wide-eyed with disbelief. They wrapped themselves around the disintegrating demon and manifested a new body for him, a body shimmering in gold. Then the streaks disappeared.

Standing in front of Akari now, in the form of a slim and handsome young

man, was the Kotogami Akari knew as Tomohito Yagyou. But he wasn't wearing his familiar three-piece suit. Instead, he was clad in a gorgeous kimono, the likes of which any woman could only dream of wearing. Not to be outdone by the kimono's splendor, his hair fell down his back in a swoop of the brightest gold. A single, slender horn rose high from his forehead. He had been completely renewed.

His eyes were a glittering ruby red.

He was beautiful, bewitching, extravagant. The shining, dashing demon of a child's wildest fantasies. He was just as Akari had always pictured when she was a child.

She felt weak, exhausted. But she spoke his name.

"Tomohito..."

He turned to her, golden hair flowing. His solemn face suddenly crumpled as he began to cry.

"Mistress Akari, why? Why did you narrate me anew?! Now I can't disappear in a noble and heroic way as I always planned!"

That petulant, tearful face. Akari had come to know it so well over the past two months they'd spent living together. Feeling relieved, Akari held up the book.

It was such a thin volume, but it felt so heavy in her hands.

"You came to me in my loneliest hour, and you were by my side as a Kotogami, even as I claimed to hate stories. And that is the true tale of the demon I love."

A tale that was precious to her. And she wasn't about to let it disappear on her.

Tears falling down his face, Tomohito tried to say something. But he was drowned out by the bonging of the grandfather clocks' gongs.

"Why?"

The sound was deafening, but Mitsuko could somehow still be heard, her voice hard and cold.

“Why can you do it all, Akari? Why can’t I? What is it about me that isn’t enough?”

As Mitsuko’s shrieks rang out, the Raiju seemed to jitter and twist in pain.

Mitsuko fixed Akari with a glare dripping with hatred and malice.

“Why can’t I do the things you can do?!”

After Mitsuko’s enraged scream, the Raiju instantly began to swell, crackling streaks of electricity arcing in every direction.

Tomohito grabbed Akari by the arm and pulled her aside, just as a thunderbolt struck the floor right where she had been standing.

With a thunderous roar, the Raiju threw itself against the wall of the warehouse. It rebounded, still writhing in agony, rampaging this way and that.

“Why, why, whyyy!!”

As Mitsuko continued to screech in a voice that could shatter glass, the lightning arcing from the Raiju’s body struck the grandfather clocks, and tongues of flame began to leap from the wooden casings. Staying here any longer would be suicide.

Akari gazed down sadly at Mitsuko, who was crouched on the floor clutching at her head like a madwoman.

“Tomohito, can that *yokai* be stopped?”

Tomohito looked back at her, hesitation in his ruby-red eyes.

“It’s been badly warped. It should disintegrate on its own before much longer.”

“Hey, I managed to fix you when you were about to disintegrate, didn’t I? I can’t just leave the poor thing. No more than I could have left you to turn to dust.”

Akari raised an eyebrow at Tomohito, whose eyes sparkled.

“Then shall we kill the girl? If we cut off the source of the power, that will be the easiest solution.”

“No. Don’t ever suggest such a thing again. Or it’ll be ‘Mr. Yagyou’ for

eternity.”

“Don’t even joke, Mistress...”

Tomohito pouted. But what a thing to suggest...

Was his moral compass still that of a demon? Akari hoped not. She’d narrated him anew, but a hint of his old wickedness was still with him. Perhaps that was his true nature, though.

Still, she’d decided to accept him for all that he was. Now, she looked up at him slyly.

“Or perhaps...you’re simply incapable of stopping the Raiju?”

“...Incorrect. I could crush that girl in a second. And I could slay that *yokai* with ease. So stopping them would be easy...”

The demon Tomohito Yagyou grinned, sharp fangs poking between his lips. Then, he leaped.

“No, nothing could be easier!”

He sprang toward the Raiju, lighter on his feet than in his previous form.

The air was beginning to grow wavy from the heat of the flames. As he closed in on the *yokai*, the demon Tomohito was grumbling to himself.

“The history written in my Kotogatari may be incomplete, but I have been placed in a Kotogami category that few belong to! A simple thing like this is... well within...my capabilities!”

Grunting with effort, Tomohito reached out and grabbed hold of the lightning streaks emanating from the *yokai*.

His golden hair floated in the air behind him.

“Lightning isn’t reserved just for Raiju, you know!”

Ripping the sparking lightning bolts to one side, Tomohito bared his fangs and grappled with the Raiju.

With one eye on him, Akari ran over to Mitsuko, who was still slumped on the floor.

“Mitsuko!”

Akari called out her name, and the woman looked up at her blearily, still mumbling to herself. Her eyes narrowed in hatred. She raised her hand high to strike, but Akari tripped on a shard of broken wood and went flying.

Mitsuko’s swing went wide as Akari fell on top of her, pushing the other woman flat.

Her hand was stinging. She must have gotten it caught on a wood splinter.

But no matter. She’d managed to keep Tomohito’s Kotogatari open—that was the important thing.

“Are you...all right...?”

Akari was genuinely concerned that she’d hurt Mitsuko, but Mitsuko responded by grabbing her hard around the back the neck.

Then, with a grunt of effort, Mitsuko flung Akari to the floor and climbed on top of her.

Pressed flat against the ground, Akari tried to fight her off. The other woman was crying, hot tears falling and splashing on Akari’s cheeks.

“Why can’t I do the same things you can do?! Why, when I’m trying my absolute best...”

So it was all Akari’s fault—that was what she was saying, right? Akari shook her head.

“Because you’re *not* me, Mitsuko.”

Mitsuko stopped snarling and looked down at Akari with surprise, panting like an animal that had been wounded in an unexpected counterattack.

Akari’s eyes were burning as she looked back up at her former friend. She felt on the verge of tears too.

“Listen, Mitsuko...I’m the one who was jealous of you. You’ve got a normal family, and you’re good at your job. But I can’t be like you. I can only be me.”

It was true. Akari thought of Mayoi breaking her back to perform feats that were beyond her ability. She thought of the poor Raiju, warped into a form that

was not its own. No matter the regrets we may have, no matter how much we wish things were different, we can't become what we were never meant to be.

Mitsuko frowned, not understanding.

"But I don't want to be like me."

"It's up to you what kind of person you are. We can make the most of the lives we have. You have to live in the best way for you, Miss Maruyama."

"I don't get what you mean. You're not making any sense. I don't know what I want to be. There's nothing to me. I'm an empty husk."

Mitsuko's eyes were blank, her heart closed. Akari found she had no more words of comfort to give.

Akari was always the pragmatic type, just getting by the best way she knew how.

But there was one more thing she could say.

"Fine, then stop focusing on your own life. Delve into the world of stories. You can learn about so many different points of view. If you want to be like me, then that's my advice. It was a story that made me the way I am, after all."

Just like how there were different interpretations of Katsushige Mishima. Like how there were different sides to the demon Tomohito Yagyou.

No human soul or Kotogami was ever truly good or bad, black or white.

And for all her talk of hating stories, Akari had been supported along the way by characters from books.

She knew, almost certainly, that this wasn't the answer Mitsuko wanted.

The other woman gazed into Akari's eyes, her pretty face still twisted.

"You really are something else, Akari. If only we could have talked like this about so many things before..."

Mitsuko's eyes were still unfocused, and she seemed to be babbling, but there was a hint of the old Mitsuko there. She let go of Akari's neck. Akari started to slowly sit up, but Mitsuko suddenly shoved her back down again.

Head clunking against the hard floor, Akari winced. Just then the debris

beside them began to move.

It was a pile of broken grandfather clocks that had been reduced to wood scraps from the earlier blast. It shifted and toppled onto the two women, Mitsuko's body bearing the brunt of the impact.

"Mitsuko?!"

Mitsuko crumpled like a broken doll, even as Akari tried her best to hold her up. Then she felt something nudging her hand. Mitsuko was trying to give her the gray book.

As Akari grabbed hold of the cover, Mitsuko's eyes rolled back in her head.

"Mistress Akari!"

"Never mind me! You just focus on capturing the Raiju!" Akari yelled back across the room at the demon Tomohito, who was looking at her in panic.

Mitsuko had given her the book. She couldn't waste this chance.

Akari ran her fingertips over the book's plain gray cover. She had taken possession. But far from standing down, the Raiju only continued its rampage.

Shoving the wreckage away, Akari laid Mitsuko down carefully on her back. Then she grabbed the book again and began flipping through its pages.

She could only make sense of one or two pages. The rest seemed to be a combination of random printed characters that didn't even form coherent words.

It was clearly a mass-produced product, cheap and flimsy. Akari felt her chest constrict with pity and anger.

Mitsuko had said these books were designed to be disposable products. But the beast wreaking havoc in front of her now was a natural soul, not meant to be disposable, nor was it meant to be sold as a product.

If the book disintegrated like this, who was to say whether the Raiju's spirit would be released again? What if, instead, it remained wild and violent, untethered? Or what if it disappeared without a trace, exterminated? Like the Nue had been...

Then that left only one option. She had to give the beast a decent narration. Right here, right now.

She didn't have much to go on, but the beast had given her a few hints about itself. It had told her that it had been forced into half-formed shape when it was sealed within the book.

And it had originally come from overseas, from Angland. Also, it had the power of electricity.

"Mistress Akari, I have captured the beast!"

"Great job, Tomohito!"

Tomohito grinned, gold hair flying, red eyes sparkling.

Then he flung the Raiju onto the ground before Akari. A little too violently, but Akari decided to overlook it.

It seemed as though the *yokai* had expended all its fighting energy. Even so, lightning still sparked and crackled over its body, intermittently making its skeleton visible.

Akari got to her feet, holding both books. She looked down at the Raiju.

She'd been reading about the similarities between Eastern and Western *yokai* only recently. She remembered being surprised how many features they had in common.

She was still afraid to narrate. But she knew she had to. If she didn't narrate, all would be lost. She had to give it a try.

If she could narrate with an open heart, tell the tale of its homeland...then maybe that would bring it back.

So, as Tomohito watched, Akari began to narrate the tale of the electricity-wielding beast from the faraway land.

"In the West, there lived a type of beast similar to the Eastern Raiju. Originally, these creatures lived in the hills. They were flying spirits, whirling freely in the skies. But then mankind invented airplanes. The beasts were fascinated by these

metal birds the humans built. They loved to tinker and fiddle with the metal parts. The humans studied these creatures and noted their characteristics: a love for machinery and a mastery of electric power. They named them Gremlins."

The beast at her feet stirred and stiffened at the sound of her words.

But before it could move, Tomohito had leaped protectively in front of Akari.

At the same moment, Akari began to speak louder.

"Western beast, wielder of electricity!

Newly identified by the humans

and noted for your love of mechanical parts!

Appreciated by the humans for your helpful tinkering,

your advancement of human mechanical knowledge,

born of your mastery of thunder and lightning!”

“The Gremlin... The Gremlin...”

But Akari was stuck.

She didn't know the creature's name. She flipped through the pages, but it wasn't written down anywhere.

She couldn't complete the narration.

The electricity running over the beast's skin seemed to sputter and falter. Tomohito's shoulders slumped in resignation.

But then the beast's eyes found hers, intelligence shining from within the purple orbs.

{You may name me yourself.}

Akari didn't hesitate. She knew what to call the beast. She would use the reading of the character for *lightning*. She raised her voice again.

“The Gremlin Rai!”

The arcs of electricity suddenly began to glow with an intense power, as if building for an immense lightning strike. Akari closed her eyes against the sudden increased brightness, Tomohito pulling her protectively against his chest.

But the lightning strike never came for her. Instead, it streaked past her, leaving darkness in its wake.

Wincing, Akari opened her eyes. Something was shimmering in the dim light of the flames. Shining...silver.

It was the hair of the young man standing in front of her.

He was slim and wiry, dressed in black and silver Western-style clothing. He

had Western facial features too, very handsome, with glittering purple eyes.

His most striking feature, however, was his sharp, triangular ears, which poked beastlike through his silver hair.

Akari was taken aback, although she'd been picturing something like this to begin with.

How odd that he came out looking like this, she thought.

The young man walked up to her, his gaze intense.

He touched her politely on the arm, the same arm that was cradling the gray Raiju book.

"I am a Gremlin, and my name is Rai. I belong entirely to you, Mistress."

"Er, excuse me?"

The young man was speaking perfect, unaccented Japanese, and his manners were unexpected.

But the next moment, golden-haired Tomohito had shoved his way between them.

"How dare you touch Mistress Akari without permission. You exist only on her mercy."

"Which is why I am hers. She named me and entered into a contract with me. I shall serve her until this body turns to dust."

The silver beast, Rai, seemed utterly calm, as if caring nothing for Tomohito's hostile tone.

Tomohito huffed, eyes widening.

"A contract?! Mistress Akari, permit me!"

Akari had been watching their exchange without really paying attention. Now she yelped as Tomohito grabbed her hand and turned it palm up. Ouch, her splinter wound! She'd forgotten all about it.

"No! Then a contract has been forged! With blood, yes, not tears like mine... Ah, wait! Then she and I are contracted eternally too?!"

Akari had the feeling she was in for a world of trouble as she watched Tomohito snarling at Rai. But for some reason she couldn't get her thoughts in order.

She clung to Tomihito's kimono, her knees almost buckling. It was so hard to breathe...

Yes, it was really hot inside the warehouse now. Akari realized the flames were licking their way up to the ceiling and growing closer.

Wait, is Mitsuko okay? Akari whirled around, looking for her.

At that exact moment, there was a mighty crash, and the warehouse's iron door blew inward. Then Munakata burst through the opening, dressed in his military uniform and riding on the back of a werewolf.

"Well, you're alive at least...but what the devil has happened in here?!"

Munakata scowled at them, a Kotogatari clutched in his free hand. He looked back and forth between the still-bickering gold and silver Kotogami pair, and then at Akari, who was standing beside them looking exhausted.

She looked back up at him. He seemed half relieved, half annoyed. And somehow kinda blurry...

"Oh, hi. Do you think you could wrap things up here?"

The room was starting to go dark around her. As Akari felt her eyes closing, the last thing she saw was Tomohito and Rai, both black-haired once more, staring down at her with alarm and concern.

She sank into darkness, clutching both of their books tight against her chest.

Chapter Seven: An Ordinary Life, with Stories

AKARI awoke to find herself in a city hospital that was under the influence of the Narrators' Association. Before long, Munakata showed up to fill her in on what had happened.

The fire at the Sumimata Corporation warehouse was safely extinguished in the early morning.

Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, the only damage had been to the warehouse itself. The cause of the fire—the Raiju—had been safely captured. The large-scale operation conducted by the Narrators and their Kotogami had been reported widely in the newspapers, and as a result, public favor for them rapidly returned.

The Narrators' Association was currently investigating both the Raiju and the illegal “Pseudogatari” books, their suspicions turned on not just Sumimata, but several other companies as well. In fact, the Association had already been planning to strike Sumimata and begin making arrests based on Akari's hunch. But then the fire happened first.

“You could see the fire from all over the city. We weren't able to keep it from taking hold. But it turned out well—we manipulated the media to our advantage.”

Munakata seemed exhausted, slumped in the hospital room chair in a slovenly manner. He looked clean and shaven, but his uniform was rumpled and the inner shirt had one or two buttons left undone. He was pale in the face, too.

Akari paused in cutting up one of the peaches he'd brought her. Taking pity on him, she offered him a slice.

Munakata sat up in his chair.

“You're willingly sharing food? Is the sky falling?”

“Oh, so you don't want it, then?”

“Hand it over.”

Munakata grabbed the peach slice from Akari’s hand and tossed it into his mouth.

“It’s sweet. Worth the high price, I’d say.”

“It’s the best season for them right now.”

Akari quickly polished off the rest of the peach. They were sweet as nectar this time of year. The juice flowed over her tongue and fulfilled her in ways the bland hospital food had not.

Immediately, she started cutting up the next one. Then she paused, feeling Munakata’s intense eyes on her.

“You must be feeling better if you’re able to inhale peaches one after another like that.”

“Yep. But yesterday when I awoke, I could barely even sit up.”

“You manifested two Kotogami at once. Even seasoned Narrators never try to do that. And what were you thinking, entering into two contracts and re-narrating both Kotogami, one right after the other? Are you insane? I’m surprised you survived, to be honest.”

When Akari had passed out in the flaming warehouse, it had been because of an overload of spiritual power consumption.

Munakata scoffed at her, and Akari sulkily stabbed a toothpick into another peach slice.

“I didn’t realize I was taking on such a big responsibility at the time.”

“Yes, that was partially my fault. I kept certain information from you since you were just a civvy.”

He shrugged, and Akari sighed. It was hard to stay mad at him when he apologized. And Akari herself had never bothered trying to find out more about how Kotogami worked. Anyway, she wasn’t really upset about it. She could let this one slide.

She sensed him shift in the chair and turned to look at him. But he just

steeped his fingers together and leaned forward thoughtfully.

“I should let you know that Sumimata Corporation is currently under investigation by the police for corporate malpractice. They, too, seem to have realized that the company has been using their musical clock product to call forth various spirits and incite them to violence. I’m certain they’ll link the company to the recent *yokai* disturbances. What happens then will probably depend on public opinion, but my guess is that heads will roll, at least on the managerial level.”

“So you’re not going to make the stuff about the Pseudogatari public?”

“The existence of those is a sensitive issue. We don’t want the book-burning radicals to get inflamed over this. They were in bed with your corporation all along, you know, trying to get the Narrators and Kotogami terminated. Where this case is concerned, the Narrators’ Association has adopted a policy of discretion.”

Munakata paused for a second.

“What I’m telling you is that Sumimata is going to collapse as a company. Is that all right with you?”

“Well, it’s what they deserve. The Raiju and other yokai disturbances...people could have been killed. They need to pay for what they’ve done.”

Akari felt bad for the other innocent employees who were about to find themselves out of a job, but she couldn’t blame the Association’s handling of the situation for that.

“It was idiotic of them to try to take down the Narrators and the Kotogami while using their own fake Kotogatari. They never really thought it through, did they? Fools.”

“You’re darn right. Messing with things they’re too stupid to understand. I don’t even want to know what they thought their justification was. I just want to see that whole twisted organization torn up by the roots.”

Akari blinked at Munakata, who had balled his hands into fists and was growling in a low voice. The fire in his gaze was so different from his usual tepid demeanor.

He really is dedicated to the Association after all, Akari thought. He gave her a questioning look.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just unexpected to see you taking something so seriously.”

“Don’t be fooled. My favorite thing to do is nothing. I hate it when I get a call to attend to a *yokai* case.”

Sighing, Munakata leaned back in his chair, his expression once again showing only boredom. With that cool-guy act of his, Akari figured he had a lot of younger military members who hung on to his every word.

“But you know, I’m not an Association member. Should you really be telling me, an outsider, all this?”

Akari gave him a sly grin, and his shoulders drooped as he rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

“I’d hardly call you an outsider. In fact, you’ve become something of a person of interest for our organization. I’ve been able to hide the existence of the demon Tomohito, but I can’t cover up the emergence of that Western beast. Tomohito complied with our cover story, but that beast is an unknown entity. And now he is under your control. The Association is currently investigating him, and you too.”

“So that’s why you’re here chatting with me, hmm?”

“Precisely. I was assigned as your inspector, you see.”

“I think they picked the wrong person for the job.”

Munakata just shrugged, not bothering to deny it.

“Miss Mitsukuri, may I remind you that you pulled off feats no ordinary Narrator ever could. You manifested a powerful demon with the power of your words, and you performed a re-narration of a warped Kotogami using your own words to restore it to a complete form. These accomplishments are unprecedented. And you did all this without any training whatsoever.”

“I just strung some words together. It was no big deal...”

“But that’s the issue. You didn’t even have to try.”

Munakata gave a deep sigh. He sulkily plopped his head into his hands.

“...I just can’t believe Neo-sensei hid such talent from me all this time! Darn it, why didn’t he tell me?”

Akari looked up sharply at that name.

Neo...the Narrator who had cared for Akari ever since that day twelve years ago.

“You know Mr. Neo?”

“Know him? He’s been my Spirit Master for the past ten years. When you came to the city, he ordered me to look out for you.”

What the heck? Those two are connected now? But Munakata was continuing to pout, as if this conversation was inconsequential and boring. But Akari got the feeling there was more to their connection than she knew.

“What happened to Tomohito and...everyone else?”

Akari still couldn’t believe that Munakata and Neo knew each other, but she wanted to know this more than anything else. Munakata nodded.

“Tomohito is back at the Bookhouse under house arrest. The...Gremlum, was it? We performed a basic sealing procedure on him, just until his spirit powers recharge. But he’s your Kotogami as well now, not ours.”

“Yes, about that. It hasn’t really sunk in... So I’ve become like his mistress?”

“You’ve become that for both of them. Your blood...and I think tears? ... Anyway, your essence became part of the very bindings of their Kotogatari. You’ll be able to rely on them and issue orders to them for the rest of your days. They will answer to no other Narrator but you.”

Akari recalled her tears now, dripping onto Tomohito’s Kotogatari back in that flaming warehouse. And she remembered holding the Raiju’s Pseudogatari in her injured, bleeding hand. When she’d narrated anew for them both, her blood and tears had then formed a powerful, binding spirit contract.

“The Pseudogatari was a fake, of course, just a simplified account of the

spirit's past, but enough to bind its soul within. The Gremnim... The Gremlump..."

"It's *Gremlin*. You're not very good at reading the Roman alphabet, are you?"

"Oh, be quiet. Let me finish."

Munakata scowled at her for a moment before continuing.

"That creature's past and its characteristics were close enough to a Raiju's that they were able to manifest it as a Kotogami, albeit in an incomplete form. We have it in custody at the Association right now, but...what do you want to happen?"

"What do you mean?"

Akari had no idea what he was asking her in that offhand manner of his.

So Munakata spelled it out for her.

"You are that Gremlin's Narrator. Whether officially recorded or not. And if you choose not to live as a Narrator and leave the Bookhouse, that fact won't change. A Narrator can never escape from their Kotogami. So this is your last chance. If you ask it, we can seal away both demons forever, and you will be free. The choice is up to you."

"You're giving me an out? You're not using this as a chance to strong-arm me into becoming a Narrator? I'm astonished."

Yes, that possibility had occurred to her. But Munakata had a look on his face that was a mix of reluctance and acceptance.

"Well, I can't deny that we used you when it came to Sumimata Corp. But we won't force you. You can live a normal life and enjoy reading books just for fun. We'll take care of the demons and everything else. It's your choice."

Perhaps this was his way of atoning for getting her involved in all this. Munakata was going to take responsibility after all.

He yawned hugely then, and Akari had the feeling he was never going to be completely reliable. But she also decided not to care.

"Let me ask one more thing first."

“Fire away.”

“What happened to Mitsuko?”

Akari hadn't seen her since the fire. Munakata raised one eyebrow, as if he hadn't expected Akari to care. He blinked several times before answering her in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Mitsuko Maruyama is currently in our custody as a vital witness. Interrogations have already begun, and so far she has proved most cooperative.”

“What's going to happen to her after that?”

“Nothing. The warehouse incident has been officially ruled an accident, and the truth has been covered up. She will be neither accused nor prosecuted. But she has an unusual power to her voice, and we intend to investigate it going forward.”

“I see.”

Munakata raised his brow again, seemingly picking up on the harsh edge to Akari's response.

“She will be kept under close observation. Potentially for the rest of her natural life. Perhaps that will be punishment enough.”

“To be honest...she deserves what she gets.”

Mitsuko was pathetic, but she'd still been prepared to murder Akari in cold blood. Akari wasn't a noble enough person to ever forgive her for that.

She smiled sardonically, and Munakata seemed, for a moment, disturbed. Then he shook his head, chuckling.

“You're a dangerous one, aren't you?”

“Speak for yourself.”

“But you know...for a girl with all the fight knocked out of her, Miss Maruyama was surprisingly insistent about one thing.”

Munakata snorted, and Akari frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“Between interrogation sessions, she had her nose constantly buried in a book. Once she finished one, she’d immediately demand another. We have no shortage of books at the Association, so that wasn’t an issue...but why the sudden interest in reading, I wonder?”

“...No real reason, I’m sure.”

Akari covered her mouth with her hand, silent for a while. Munakata gave her a questioning look, but she simply shook her head. Removing her hand, she forced herself to keep fighting back a smile.

Mitsuko had betrayed her horribly, and she would never, ever forgive her for that. Given five minutes alone in a room with her, she’d have some choice insults to throw at the other woman. But Akari couldn’t help feeling glad that her words had gotten through to Mitsuko in the end after all.

Shrugging off Akari’s reaction, Munakata got to his feet. It seemed their conversation had reached its end.

“You’ll be discharged tomorrow. You can give me your answer later, after you’ve returned to the Bookhouse, if you like. You should probably give it a great deal of thought before deciding.”

Akari couldn’t believe he was actually giving her ample time to think it through. She called him back as he was about to open the door.

“Munakata... I mean, Mr. Munakata. I’ve already decided.”

Munakata was looking over his shoulder at her, his mouth slightly open.

She was still filled with concerns about the path ahead, but it all seemed worth it in that moment, just to enjoy the expression on Munakata’s face.

THE following day, Akari gathered up her belongings to leave the hospital. When she slid the door to her room open, she found something big sitting outside, blocking the way. It was Tomohito.

His hair was not gold, but its usual black color, and shoulder length again. He looked odd sitting there on the floor hugging his knees, dressed in his fine Western-style three-piece suit. It was a miracle he hadn’t been chased out by

any of the nurses.

He got to his feet in a hurry as Akari looked down at him. Scanning her face, he cleared his throat nervously.

“Um, Munakata told me to come and pick you up.”

Ah yes. Munakata had said someone would be coming to escort her home. He just never said who. Akari smiled wryly. But Tomohito seemed different, on edge, as if unsure how to act around her. She could understand that.

“So where is our friend Munakata?”

“He said he’d done enough hard work for this year that we should handle the rest ourselves.”

“Hmph, typical Munakata. Here, take my bag.”

Akari handed her belongings to Tomohito and set off down the hallway.

She hurried out of the hospital, Tomohito trailing behind her with the bags. Once they were outside and headed to the streetcar station, he called out to her as if he couldn’t bear the silence any longer.

“Mistress! What’s going to happen now?”

“First off, we’re going back to the Bookhouse. We’ll take the tram. Or perhaps it would be nicer to walk? Oh, I hope Mayoi and Kansuke are doing all right.”

“Mayoi’s just happy you’re getting discharged from the hospital. Wait, we’re going back to the Bookhouse?!”

Akari looked back at him. Why was that so shocking?

“Yes, I always intended to return. What did you expect?”

“I thought you’d take Munakata up on his offer. Honestly, I’m surprised I haven’t already been sealed away. Munakata hasn’t even said anything.”

They’d known each other only two months, but still, she’d never seen Tomohito look so utterly lost. It was kind of a new look for him. Akari was enjoying it a lot.

They hadn’t come face-to-face since the warehouse fire, and honestly, Akari hadn’t been sure how she was going to handle him. But his reaction was making

it much easier.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you. When my dorm was burning...what were *you* doing there? The timing seems pretty suspicious to me.”

As they hurried along the road together, Tomohito started to look extremely guilty.

Akari narrowed her eyes at him. What was he hiding? Reluctantly, though, Tomohito confessed.

“I heard from Neo that you’d gotten a job in the city. I simply couldn’t stay away... I was just checking up on you, as usual, when we bumped into one another.”

“As usual? So you came to ‘check up on me’ more than once? No, get up! Don’t kneel on the ground in that nice suit, you dimwit!”

Akari had been thinking about Tomohito’s confession and hadn’t noticed him sinking down to his knees to grovel for her forgiveness. She grabbed his arm and yanked him back up. His face was contorted with guilt.

“Well, I knew you’d be angry if you knew the truth, Mistress Akari!”

“So in other words, you’ve been stalking me all over the city, hmm? Or did it start before I even moved here?”

“It started in the city! I swear it!”

Even so, what a creepy thing to do! Akari narrowed her eyes again. But he just looked back at her, his cheeks flushed with emotion, his own eyes wide.

“I never intended to make myself known to you! I just wanted to watch over you until I disappeared. But I couldn’t fight against my own desires...”

...Because after all, I’m a demon. Tomohito lowered his lashes.

His expression indicated that he felt a strong sense of conflict over his true identity as a demon.

“What’s your connection with Neo? And how have you been able to keep on manifesting for all these years? What really happened that day in the village?”

She finally asked him the questions she’d been unable to bring up back at the

warehouse. Now all her suspicions were bursting forth.

“At the time...you and Neo were trying to protect the village, weren’t you? But in that case, why did Neo ask me to read out of your Kotogatari?”

Akari was casting her mind back over her fragmentary memories of that day.

Tomohito blinked back down at her as she looked into his face, her heart pounding faster than she’d expected it to.

“Yes. Let’s talk about what happened twelve years ago. Neo came to your village to retrieve a demon that was residing in a *kubizuka*. In other words...me. Because there were other men, bad men, who were going to come and try to take me too.”

“So, that other demon was theirs...?”

Tomohito nodded.

“I knew I couldn’t let those bad men take me. So I chose to become a Kotogami instead, enshrined by your narration. The men were angry. They had arrived too late. So they tried to destroy me, and the village as well. It took everything I had to bring down their demon, their Aratama.”

Neo had never told her that. But as Akari listened, it all made sense.

“But why did it have to be me who narrated you and made you a Kotogami? Neo was an official Narrator, wasn’t he? Surely he would have done a better job.”

Tomohito blushed, a look of intense guilt flooding his features.

“I wanted my first time to be with you, with your words.”

He gazed into her eyes, his speech impassioned. He was so beautiful, so dazzling right then. Akari felt her cheeks growing hot.

“Truthfully, Neo never expected the narration of a little girl to actually manifest a demon like me. He simply indulged my wish. He was going to take over afterward. I insisted I wanted you to be the first to read me, though. But your narration gave me form. I don’t think you could ever understand how much joy that brought me...”

How could I? Akari thought. But Tomohito looked so happy. She found she couldn't speak. A moment later, though, Tomohito's face fell again.

"But in the end, I wasn't able to save you."

He brought a hand to his chest, his features twisting with regret.

"I know it was wrong of me, to terrify a child in that way. But I didn't understand why it was wrong at the time. The regret...it hurt me, like a sword to the chest. I didn't know why. So I made a deal with Neo. I came to the Bookhouse, to learn about humans."

"What kind of deal did you make?"

"He agreed to let me stay and be around humans until my manifestation power eventually ran out."

So that was why Tomohito had passed the last twelve years at the Bookhouse as a Kotogami. Even though he was so very different in form from the "Mr. Demon" of Akari's childhood...he was also somehow the same.

"Hey...the day of the fire at my dorm, why didn't you just tell me you were the demon from my childhood? Why didn't you try to make me a Narrator so that we could be together?"

Then he wouldn't have had to disappear. He could have stayed with Akari always.

But Tomohito shook his head.

"I only ever wanted you to be a good reader. You had such incredible aptitude... I wanted to restore your love of stories. Not as a Narrator, but as a person who accepts us unruly word spirits and makes a place for us in her heart."

A good reader. She looked at him, confused. There was such tenderness for her in his expression. She didn't really understand what he meant, but the passion in his words and his eyes stirred something in her heart.

"I don't get it."

"Demons can be touched by the influence of humans as well as Kotogami can, you know. As a demon, I committed countless atrocities, and the result was that

I lost my head. Instead of repenting, I continued to seek vengeance. I was every bit the evil demon of the folktales. But then you gave me a new form. Your words showed me a side of myself I never knew existed. Who wouldn't want to hold on to that for as long as was possible?"

Yes...he had kept himself alive for twelve years to honor what Akari had seen in him.

"But I didn't remember you."

"That made no difference to how I felt."

Still gazing earnestly into her eyes, Tomohito chuckled.

"That's why I made Neo promise not to try to make you into a Narrator if you didn't wish it. It was Neo's power that made you forget. I was worried it would break your heart to go on living with those memories. Even this old demon has a conscience."

Tomohito smiled bitterly, and Akari nodded.

She'd heard a little about it all from Munakata. Neo had been like a guardian to her after the incident, and when she moved to the capital, he had told his apprentice, Munakata, to look out for her. And he'd warned Munakata not to try to push her into their vocation if she didn't seem interested.

It seemed the root of this arrangement had been that promise made between Neo and Tomohito.

It had been Tomohito's attempt to protect Akari, out of concern for her well-being.

"If the Narrators heard about you, a young girl who could manifest a demon like me with her narration, they'd try to make use of you. A demon's Kotogatari ought to be destroyed. But when I met you again outside your burning dorm building, I was reaching the end of my manifestation. I thought it was the right time. My last chance to prove useful to you."

"You were worried the Narrators would try to take me?"

"I'm a demon. I understand the darker side of human nature...more than you know."

For all his gentle demeanor, this young man was truly a demon at heart.

Yesterday she'd heard a lot about demons from Munakata. The oldest of them had the longest list of misdeeds. The more notoriety they had in human circles, the more folklores they appeared in, and the stronger they would be as Kotogami.

The old demons, the ones who ranked among the fox spirits, the Tengu, and the dragons...they made for very dangerous Kotogami when enshrined in books. So dangerous, in fact, that the books themselves were condemned. Those Kotogami were enshrined for protective reasons, to be kept safely sleeping in their books for eternity. For even the most skilled of Narrators could accidentally break the sealing spell by a mistake in their narration.

In other words, they were deadly and volatile Kotogami indeed.

For someone to emerge with the power to control such a Kotogami demon... well, the Narrators' Association would be desperate to get their hands on such a person and make them into a Narrator.

"So I am bewildered, to say the least. To be allowed to continue to exist in this way..."

Tomohito was looking at Akari with eyes full of expectation and anxiety.

"But you told Munakata you didn't want me to disappear, didn't you? And given the choice, of course, I would desire to stay with you too. But my existence...the risks..."

"Ah yes, about that. Well, I've decided to officially become a Narrator, so no worries."

Tomohito's mouth fell open, his cheeks colored with emotion.

That expression really doesn't do his good looks many favors, Akari thought absently.

"Huh?"

"We're going to keep your demon identity secret, but yep, you'll be my official Kotogami familiar. And once I pass the Narrator qualifications, the Bookhouse will be my new office. Life's going to get pretty busy from now on..."

“Wait! Mistress, hold on just a moment, please! Are you sure this is what you want?!”

“Well, I can’t keep working at Sumimata Corp., can I?”

Not after what happened. Even with new management coming in, she didn’t want any part of that company any more.

So there was really nothing stopping her from becoming a Narrator. Usually, potential Narrators had to undergo heavy training from a young age. Akari would have her work cut out for her if she wanted to catch up. But she liked to study, and she was feeling motivated. As she began walking off again, Tomohito put his hand on her shoulder.

“Becoming a Narrator will mean that your entire life will revolve around stories, you know. And you’ll lose the chance to ever become an ordinary person again. That’s what it means to command a demon! I don’t want to be a burden to you like that!”

“So you want to quit as my Kotogami?”

“Never!”

Akari snorted with laughter at that. Then, as Tomohito’s face crumpled, she smiled at him.

“You’re right—I still have complicated feelings about stories and narrating in general. But I don’t want to lose hold of you. You were there for me when I was a child, back when my love for stories was true. So I’ll just have to push on through.”

Yes, it was Tomohito who had inspired her to give stories a chance again. Her old friend, the coolest, strongest demon there ever was. She wanted to show up for him, just as he’d been showing up for her for the past twelve years.

Maybe it was her turn to make him feel like he was someone special to her. And what was wrong with that?

Blushing a little, Akari patted him encouragingly on the arm.

“So listen, Tomohito. All I ask is that you continue to watch over me. And keep your demonly impulses in check, okay?”

This was what Akari had chosen. She knew what it meant to be with a demon. So even if one day Tomohito went wild and abandoned her...at least she was going into this prepared.

For now, though, she wanted to enjoy living with the full breadth of her memories available to her. As she smiled up at him, Tomohito took hold of her hand and pressed it lovingly against his cheek.

Akari held her breath, spellbound.

His gaze was so warm and sweet, like dripping honey. But at the same time, filled with a strange heat...

"If this is what you've chosen, then I will be your Kotogami, your demon, for always. I will be with you until you turn to dust, and at that moment I shall crumble too. For without your words, I cannot be, Akari."

"Yikes, intense much?"

"There is no force on earth more tenacious than a demon, you know. You'd better make sure you're ready for this."

His sharp fangs were poking out from between his beautifully shaped lips. Akari felt a thrill run through her veins at the sight of them. There would be no going back. But her choice was hers to own.

Knowing that a clumsy response right now could be risky, she pulled her hand away from Tomohito's cheek.

"You know, your way of speaking has changed since back then. You used to sound more...conceited."

That was something she'd had on her mind ever since she'd found out about Tomohito's true identity. He chuckled and blushed.

"Well, a Kotogami and their Narrator have a hierarchy to their relationship, do they not? When I was deciding how best to serve you, I thought that acting as a servant and treating you as my mistress would do the trick. So I simply adjusted my speaking style to be more...reverential."

"I don't really get it, but you do you, I guess."

Akari gave a wry grin in response to his convoluted answer. Her memories of

their time together were still fuzzy around the edges, but she'd remembered him being much more impressive and awe-inspiring, at least to her child's mind. But she supposed this sort of power balance made more sense for a Kotogami and his Narrator.

But for some reason, Tomohito was pouting.

"You know, you used to talk down to me way back when too. You probably don't remember, but you used to lecture me on human decorum. Telling me that losing my cool and rampaging like a demon was odious."

Akari's eyes widened as she noticed that even the tips of Tomohito's ears were flushed. She couldn't really remember how she used to talk to "Mr. Demon" as a child, but it seemed as though he remembered it like it was yesterday.

She closed her eyes for a moment. She'd lost her village and everything in it that day, or so she'd thought. But a major part of it remained and was here standing before her now.

She smiled to herself, feeling a warm swell of happiness inside. Then Tomohito rolled his shoulders.

"Well, your narration that day certainly had a big influence on me, but still, I've never forgotten my impressive demon roots. If you'd like, I can go back to speaking like a conceited demon, the way I used to?"

He narrowed his light-brown eyes at her and Akari felt her heart skip a beat. That was odd. They were just talking normally, so why was her pulse racing like this as she gazed into his eyes?

Did she want things to change? Not really. She'd gotten used to their dynamic, and going forward, it looked as though she would continue to be his "mistress" of sorts. So she simply shrugged.

"It's fine. I'm used to your current way of speaking."

"Then I shall continue. Now, let us return home, Mistress Akari."

"Okay. I hope Mayoi's not still mad at me..."

She was trying to change the subject, but she got the feeling he knew and was

chuckling at her. She ignored it, though. She was too busy thinking about how nice the word *home* sounded.

AS soon as she opened the door to the Shinkuju Bookhouse, Mayoi came flying into her arms.

The girl sobbed wordlessly as Akari stroked her glossy bobbed hair.

Then Akari explained everything that had happened and told her how truly sorry she was.

“I’m so sorry for worrying you. But...would it be all right with you if I made this place my permanent home?”

“You’re my mistress. If you are to be a Narrator, then my home is now yours too.”

Akari hugged the girl tight. Mayoi continued to sniffle and burble, refusing to let go.

Cradling the little spirit in her arms, Akari went to open Kansuke’s Kotogatari. He appeared immediately, with a wry *I knew it* look on his face.

“So you’ve decided to do the thing, have you, girly? I guess I can stick around and keep Tomohito in line for you, just in case.”

Then Kansuke placed his big hand fondly on top of Akari’s head.

She rolled her eyes. Did he always have to be so flippant? But she was secretly thrilled that he’d promised to stay by her side as well, offering his services to her so casually, as though there was never any doubt that he would.

Trying to hide how moved she was, Akari adopted a sarcastic tone of her own.

“As long as I keep you well paid in booze, right?”

“Throw in snacks, too, and you’ve got yourself a deal. But things aren’t going to be easy going forward, you know.”

Kansuke folded his arms and raised an eyebrow at Akari. Just then, Tomohito pushed his way in between them, his grin as wide as his face.

“That’s right, Mistress Akari! This is the start of Bookhouse Mitsukuri! Hehe,

as your contracted Kotogami, I'll assist you every step of the way! Because I'm your contracted Kotogami! For life!"

"No fair, I want to make a contract with her too!"

Mayoi tossed her black bobbed hair indignantly as Akari gave her an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry, Mayoi. I was told not to even attempt to forge any more contracts until I've had much, much more Narrator training."

Mayoi gasped, her face stricken, as if the world were ending. Flooded with guilt, Akari rushed to comfort her, but Tomohito interrupted, still smiling.

"Indeed! So in all the world, I alone am contracted to Akari! Yes, I alone!"

Tomohito jutted out his jaw at Mayoi and crossed his eyes in an extremely childish and unbecoming manner.

Ever since Akari had revealed her intentions to become a Narrator, he'd been insufferable like this. She was rapidly reaching the end of her patience with him. Snapping her fingers, she barked imperiously.

"Tomohito! Bring my bags."

"Yes, Mistress!"

He ran to get her bag. Akari snatched it from his hand and pulled a book out from within.

"What! That book..."

Tomohito wheezed wordlessly. It was the gray-colored book Akari had narrated from back in that flaming warehouse.

Oddly, there weren't any bloodstains on it. There was a strange new design on the cover instead. Akari gently flipped through the pages, then raised her voice.

"The Gremlin Rai!"

Silver strands rose from the pages, manifesting before Akari a young man in his late twenties. His silver locks flowed down his back, and he was sharply dressed in a military-style uniform. Rai opened his deep-purple eyes and fixed

them on Akari's.

"Mistress. I am so glad to meet with you once more."

"Sorry for not summoning you again until now."

Rai nodded, his expression unchanging. But he was clearly happy. The perkiness of his furry beast ears and the jaunty swishing of his tail were proof of that.

"Let me introduce you. This is my contracted Kotogami Rai. He's going to live with us from now on."

"I forgot all about him! Ugh, why does he have to live here?!"

As Akari introduced Rai to Mayoi and Kansuke, Tomohito seemed to snap out of his stupor and started yelping indignantly.

"Because he's my Kotogami as well. He won't respond to anyone's narration but mine, not anymore. Besides, someone needs to fill in the missing details in his Pseudogatari. He's my responsibility from now on."

Once Akari had made up her mind to become a Narrator, Munakata had agreed to release Rai to her care.

He had instructed her to narrate him regularly, since his manifestation was still unstable. That would keep him in existence until his backstory could be pieced together and he could be properly defined.

Akari had had no issue with that. Still, she felt sorry she couldn't offer more freedom to Rai after all he'd suffered.

"I apologize, Rai, but it looks like you'll need to hang around with us for a while."

"Not at all, Mistress. Your words defined my existence. So I shall serve you faithfully. Please use me in any way you see fit."

Akari blushed as Rai reached out and placed his hands warmly around hers, his purple eyes gazing deep into her soul...

Vibrating with anger, Tomohito clamped his hand down on Rai's shoulder and yanked him away.

As Rai stumbled back, Tomohito leaned into his face, scowling.

“Stay out of Mistress Akari’s personal space!”

“I wasn’t aware I was in it.”

Akari was bright red as Tomohito hissed his displeasure, and Rai met his eye with a challenging look.

“Actually, you kind of were. And grabbing my hands like that did surprise me a bit, to be honest.”

“So I suppose a kiss is out of the question?”

“Curse you, you dirty beast!”

Tomohito howled indignantly as Rai simply grinned.

Rai had the brash straightforwardness of a Westerner, and Akari had the feeling he was going to be giving her a lot of trouble in an entirely different way than Tomohito. Thinking about the future, Akari sighed with trepidation. Then Kansuke spoke up, his tone amused.

“Girly, who’s this delightful fellow you’ve brought in?”

“If you like him so much, then lend me a hand, would you?”

“Nah, I’d rather not get involved. Mayoi, time to serve the booze!”

Kansuke shrugged with indifference and disappeared into the kitchen.

DemonSlayer, was he? No, he was useless. Akari gnashed her teeth, just as Tomohito piped up again.

“Since you made a contract with him, I suppose there is nothing to be done about it. Anyway, he’s no competition for me. He can stay. But I outrank him. Just so everyone’s clear on that. Are you clear on that, beast? Now, be a good dog and serve Mistress Akari with loyalty.”

“Who are you calling a dog, you dumb demon?”

“You, you mangy cur! Make sure you remember your place! You’re the lowest rung on the ladder and don’t you ever forget it!”

Akari gasped and reached out to poke Tomohito warningly in the chest, but

Rai merely nodded and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

The smoke cleared, leaving a handsome silver-furred beast standing there. He was about twice the size of a wolf, with shiny, smooth fur and six strong legs. He looked big enough for Mayoi to ride on his back. Actually, he looked big enough for Akari to ride too.

“Rai? What happened to you?!”

“I am a Gremlin, but I also have elements of the Raiju folktale in me now. Thus, I can assume two forms. This one seems better for conducting lightning. The Raiju influence is why I can now speak your Eastern tongue as well.”

The beast wagged his fluffy tail, gazing up at Akari with his purple eyes.

“As long as this form pleases you, that is, Mistress.”

Pausing before answering, Akari ran her fingers through the beast’s plush fur. It was so soft. Akari was hardly an expert, but she knew fur this thick was unusual.

Also, she was relieved that the beast didn’t seem bothered by his current circumstances, or by Tomohito’s attempts at bullying.

“It would be nice if you could assume this form sometimes and join me for naps...”

“Certainly, Mistress.”

“Mistress Akarii?!”

Rai bowed his head politely. Akari hadn’t really meant to say that thing about the naps, but it just kind of slipped out.

As for Tomohito’s shrieks, well, she just ignored them.

Akari kept on stroking the silky fur. Rai half closed his eyes, as if in bliss. Then Mayoi came sidling up to stand beside Akari.

She looked Rai up and down, muttering under her breath. “Can’t the newbie do anything else?”

“You must be this house’s Silkie spirit. I have not seen one since I left England... As for what I can do...I can wield thunder and lightning, and I know

much about machines. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, little Silkie.”

Mayoi’s face lit up. Clearly, she had been charmed. She, too, reached out to stroke the beast’s silver head.

“Good. There’s a lot of things that need fixing around here. It’s nice to meet you too.”

“Mayoi! You traitor!”

They all turned to see Tomohito looking aghast. He was actually in tears.

He looks like a puppy that’s been abandoned, Akari thought, just as Kansuke came back carrying aloft a bottle of sake.

“What are we crying about now, Tomohito?”

“...Shut up, Kansuke.”

“That’s not the right attitude, Tomohito. You know, the young girly’s the only one who’s ever bothered to give me a decent reading too. Don’t go thinking you can keep her all to yourself.”

“Yeah, Tomohito! Mistress belongs to me as well. I’ll keep this house for no one but her.”

Akari stared at them both. Kansuke and Mayoi, both pledging their loyalty to her...

But Tomohito remained defiant, jaw jutting angrily.

“Mistress Akari read me first, years and years before any of you!”

“You don’t have to get so upset.”

“Yes I do! I’ve finally gotten the chance to be with Mistress Akari for life! We have to start this thing off right! We have to make sure everyone knows who her number one is!”

“Oh, so you want to make it interesting? All right. Let’s see if you can beat me in a fight, demon.”

“Gladly!”

“I enjoy a good brawl. I’ll join in as well.”

In quick succession, Kansuke whipped out his sword, Tomohito ripped off his white gloves, and Rai transformed back into human form.

They were going to fight it out to see who came out on top? Seriously?

Akari sighed and threw up her hands. But just then, the floor began to quake violently beneath everyone's feet.

Correction—under everyone's feet but Akari's and Mayoi's. Mayoi was standing with her hands on her hips, scowling.

"No bothering the Mistress! And no fighting in MY house!"

"Wow, Mayoi!"

None of the three had fallen, but they were all holding on to furniture and looking flustered. And impressed.

"I guess we can't..."

"...Go against what Mayoi says."

"Hmm, but—"

"DOES ANYONE HAVE ANYTHING ELSE TO SAY?!"

"Not a word."

"No, Mayoi..."

"Not me, little Silkie."

The trio mumbled in unison as Mayoi gave them the stink eye. It was so funny, seeing them all groveling before such a tiny child. Akari burst out laughing.

An ancient house spirit in the form of a little girl. A samurai warrior from the history books. A Western spirit merged with elements of Eastern folklore. And the strongest demon any folktale had ever told of. What a strange assortment of characters. How odd that Akari should belong to a group like this!

But this was her life from now on. This house...and these spirits.

Tomohito had tried to make amends for his part in her tragic past. But his efforts were misguided. After all, the happiness she'd lost in childhood could

never be replaced.

But he'd brought her here, to this house...to this new life.

He was so kind, so strange, and yes, sometimes he was frightening...but in Akari's eyes, he was still the coolest demon around.

Not that she'd ever tell him that. She could only imagine how such compliments would go to his head.

She kept on giggling, feeling her chest swell with emotions. Wide-eyed, the four of them stared at her.

That's strange. Akari frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"You're not half so plain as I thought, girly!"

"Your smile is beautiful, Mistress."

"You look so pretty, Mistress!"

Kansuke seemed taken aback. Rai gave her a wolflike smile. And Mayoi clasped her hands together, beaming.

"Your smile is all I need in this world, Mistress Akari."

Tomohito was grinning too, his face shining with joy.

Akari blushed. What a fuss to make over a smile. She glossed over the compliments.

"So has everyone finished bickering? I, for one, am starving."

"What can I prepare for you, Mistress?"

"I'd like Hamburg steak, and miso soup with tofu floating in it! I already bought the ingredients."

Mayoi nodded as she rummaged through the grocery bags Tomohito had put down earlier, then puffed out her chest.

"Just leave it to me!"

Akari smiled. Then she realized Tomohito was staring at her, his mouth open. She met his eye and nodded.

“That’s your favorite, isn’t it?”

“You... You remembered...”

Akari gave him the slightest of winks.

She recalled her childhood days spent sitting on the *kubizuka* mound, chatting with the demon as she ate sweet bean candy. How he had envied her ability to eat food back then. And how nice to know she could carry on sharing meals with him every day.

Tomohito seemed to swell with happiness. Beside him, Kansuke was talking to Rai.

“Have a drink with me, little buddy from the Western lands.”

“What are we drinking?”

“Alcohol, little buddy. What else? The great friendship maker, since ancient times!”

Somehow both smiling and frowning at the same time, Rai allowed Kansuke to put his arm around him and lead him out of the room. But before they could leave, Akari remembered something.

“Wait a second! I need to give this to you first, Rai. You too, Tomohito.”

“Me too, Mistress?”

She took both Rai and Tomohito by the hand and led them to the library, where the Kotogatari were displayed.

“You need a proper place on a Kotogatari shelf! It’s just like choosing your own room! Go on—pick a shelf!”

Rai’s wolflike ears twitched.

“A place of my very own?”

“Yes. This is your home after all, from now on.”

Rai looked down bashfully.

“I don’t remember much of my old life...but I do recall the comfort that comes from having a place to belong to.”

Rai started examining each shelf carefully to see which he liked best. Meanwhile, Akari turned to Tomohito, who was standing there looking hesitant.

“Which one is yours, Tomohito?”

“My shelf? It’s that one, Mistress.”

Tomohito pointed to an especially large shelf, with plenty of space for displaying a book. Just the right sort for a Kotogatari containing a demon of Tomohito’s strength and power. But the shelf was mostly symbolic, since Tomohito seemed to much prefer walking around outside his Kotogatari as he saw fit. Akari knew that.

“But why this talk of shelves all of a sudden?”

“Because I’ve made my home here now. There’s no need for you to go out all over the city looking out for me. You deserve a place to rest too.”

Books belonged on a bookshelf. That was just common sense. Mayoi and Kansuke returned here to their books after manifestations, so it followed that Tomohito and Rai should do the same.

But Tomohito was gazing at Akari with an imploring look in his eyes.

“I’d rather have my book stored in your book bag. Then you could carry me around with you and always keep me close.”

“Ah, that sounds like too much effort.”

“But, Mistress!”

Akari placed Kansuke’s volume onto his shelf first. Then she set Tomohito’s amber-colored book onto his as he watched. He made no protest, and she realized he didn’t really mind having his book stored here after all.

As she moved on, Tomohito remained standing in front of his book, gazing at its amber cover. He appeared a bit dazed, but also somewhat relieved.

“I’m not finished yet, am I?”

“No. You’ll continue to be, as long as I remember you always and keep telling your story.”

Because stories can never end, as long as there is someone around to tell

them.

As a child, Akari had lost everything and everyone, along with her memories. But there was someone else who had kept the memory of her childhood in his mind and heart all this time...Tomohito.

He looked at her with surprise now. Apparently, his question had been rhetorical. But her answer made him smile, a smile that reminded her of flowers blooming after a long rain. Then he nodded vigorously.

“Yes, Mistress!”

Finally, Rai turned to look at them, his inspection of the bookshelves seemingly complete.

“Mistress, I have decided.”

Akari solemnly placed Rai’s book onto his desired shelf as he watched with anticipation. Then she turned to face the two Kotogami, her expression bright and clear.

“Now that that’s taken care of, let’s eat!”

Dinner that evening was a noisy affair, filled with laughter and good cheer.

As for the Hamburg steak and the miso soup with tofu floating in it... Akari had never tasted anything better.

Afterword

NEW readers, hello. Old readers, hello again. Yamori Mitikusa here.

Thank you for picking up this copy of *Romance of the Imperial Capital Kotogami: A Tale of Living Alongside Spirits*.

I've always wanted to read a really traditional Japanese story like this one. That's actually why I got into writing novels in the first place. I'm so glad I've been able to make that happen with this title.

Personally, I just love that late Meiji (1868–1912), early Taisho (1912–26) period when Japan was undergoing rapid modernization, but at the same time, old folktales about *yokai*, spirits, and the underworld still persisted.

So when I was having trouble coming up with things to write about, a friend of mine said, “Why don’t you just write what you like?” and I thought of writing a story set in that time.

Then I had to decide what it was that really fascinated me about the Taisho period, and I came up with a story based on books and the power of words.

In Meiji, and then in Taisho, the folktales of gods and *yokai* increasingly began to disappear, to be replaced by scholarship and research. People began to write down detailed accounts of these creatures of folklore. And I thought: What if the very souls of the *yokai* themselves lived on in these written accounts, as enshrined spirits? And what if we could manifest them?

But there were other things I wanted to write about too. For example, I love stories with action scenes. And my character archetypes of choice are handsome guys, cute little girls, and boorish middle-aged men. What if I incorporated all those elements into my story? And so I tried it. I just went for it. It took a lot of agonizing and soul-searching to squeeze and cram everything in together, but when I was done, I was able to puff out my chest with pride and yell: “Yes! This is it! The Taisho-period fantasy I’ve always longed to read!”

And so, when I got the news that my story would be made into a novel, I felt

like shedding tears of joy.

It may be fate that this story about spirits born from words (or *koto no ha* in Japanese) has been released by the Kotonoha Label in Japan.

To my friends, who encouraged me to keep writing when I was facing difficulties...

To everyone involved at Kotonoha, who afforded me this opportunity and worked with me to get this novel published...

To Tokihito Saiga-sensei, whose artwork brought the world of the Kotogami into such colorful, tangible form...

To all who contributed to the distribution of this work into the wide world...

And lastly, but perhaps most importantly, to you, reader, for picking up a copy of my story...

I say thank you.

“Listening” to the fragrance of Japanese apricots—Yamori Mitikusa



cross infinite world



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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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