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Yushi Ukai

Illustration by |  
Nekometaru

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PLAYING  
DEATH GAMES  
TO PUT  
FOOD ON THE TABLE

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# PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

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## Handover Documentation for the Current Head—Overview

Business is booming. Things have been smooth sailing, as both the size and profits of the organization are growing. Due to a surplus of new recruits, the total pool of players has bounced back following a temporary decline. There are no imminent problems of note.

However, there is one particular matter worth mentioning: We have ceased spreading rumors that there are special benefits afforded to high-performing players. The vast majority of players are either participating for financial reasons or for the games themselves. Nevertheless, the average number of games cleared per player is rising more sharply compared to before the rumors stopped. It is unclear whether this trend can be simply attributed to the higher skill level of players, or if the discontinuation of the rumors has had a positive effect. I wish to observe how things play out without making another official announcement.



CLOUDY BEACH

"This game is number fifty for me. **Pleased** to meet you."

Essay



"I'm not cut out for anything else, so I've reluctantly carried on as a player. I missed my chance to **quit**, and now I've even ended up crossing the thirty-game mark."

Airi



Maguma



"Those of you who want to **flock** together, go right ahead. But I'm gonna go my own way."

"Do you think it would be **rude** of me to go see her in this state?"

Yuki



CLOUDY BEACH

"I mean, do you see how gorgeous the ocean is? One day is nowhere near enough to get my fill. It's like that proverb about how you don't get bored of a pretty woman in three days."

Mozuku

"This may be inappropriate, but could I say something?"

"I've heard about you. From your mentor, that is."

"Don't come any closer."



Mitsuba



Koyomi



Hizumi

# PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

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## Copyright

Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table, Vol. 3

Yushi Ukai

Translation by Kevin Yuan

Cover art by Nekometaru

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**5. Leaving the Front Line**

Waiting beyond the wall are only those who have  
surmounted it.





**(0/10)**

Yuki awoke in an amusement park.

**(1/10)**

Surrounding her were numerous attractions—rides with names everybody knew, such as a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, go-karts, and spinning teacups; a ride with revolving planes whose name Yuki didn't know; a swinging ship ride, the name of which Yuki had once known but had now forgotten; and animal-themed rides that would begin to crawl after a hundred-yen coin was inserted into them. A haunted house was visible in the distance, along with a high platform presumably used for bungee jumping. Roller-coaster tracks coiled around the many attractions. From every angle, the location quite clearly looked like an amusement park, a fact that not even a three-year-old would mistake.

And Yuki had been made to sleep on its premises.

Looking down, she noticed that she had been dressed in a navy blazer: a school uniform. Although Yuki was indeed currently attending high school, the blazer was not a school-designated uniform. The outfit adorning her body was unfamiliar to her, but she had a good idea as to why she had been made to wear it. Apparently, a not insignificant number of students in the world were eager to visit amusement parks while intentionally clad in their uniforms, despite the amusement park's utter lack of relevance to school.

Upon sensing something strange in her hair, Yuki, fearing the worst, reached up and touched the top of her head. There sat a hairband fitted with an enormous bow, the kind visitors to an amusement park would often buy on impulse. Despite her immense desire to remove it, she decided to leave it on in case the accessory would serve as a key item.

Yuki wandered the grounds of the amusement park. Not a single one of the numerous attractions was in operation. No matter how much Yuki strained her eyes, the Ferris wheel did not move, the light bulbs on the merry-go-round emitted no glow, and the spinning airplane ride remained perfectly still. No children were galloping around the park, either; in fact, the entire area appeared devoid of life. Still, Yuki had the utmost confidence she was not alone. There was no chance she was all by herself in such a spacious venue, though she did not know whether the others were enemies or allies.

Yuki had awakened inside an amusement park, but she had *not* awakened from a leisurely nap. She had only ever gone to amusement parks a handful of times during her childhood, and she had never visited just to hang out with friends while wearing a school uniform, much less while wearing a hairband. Nothing about the situation had been by her design.

She had, however, chosen to participate on this occasion.

Yuki had willingly joined this game—this *death* game.

## **(2/10)**

Her real name: Yuki Sorimachi.

Her player name: Yuki.

She made her living as a player of death games. In the world where she went by her player name, Yuki—spelled with the kanji for *phantom*—no one had even a shred of ethics, nor the moral character humanity had cultivated over millions of years. In one game, players might have their limbs severed with a saw or their torsos punctured with a drill, while in another, they could fall hundreds of yards through the air before slamming into the ground. On some occasions, their bodies would be chopped up into pieces so tiny, it was impossible to tell they had originally been human. Players would even sometimes come to resent one another and fight to the death. And watching this all unfold was a paying audience of individuals with *eccentric* tastes. That was the world Yuki belonged to: the world of death-game players.

In that world, Yuki was seeking to clear ninety-nine games. The series of



events that led to her embracing this goal is rather convoluted and will not be explained here. Nevertheless, Yuki was dead set on achieving her goal and had recently cleared her thirtieth game, which meant she was 30 percent of the way there. In the death-game industry, there was a term thrown around to describe the high difficulty of clearing thirty games: the Wall of Thirty. Now that Yuki had overcome that hurdle, she had undisputedly joined the upper echelon of the playerbase.

With dozens of games under her belt, Yuki felt perfectly at ease. It did not faze her in the least to have been brought to the game venue (an amusement park) while unconscious and dressed in an outfit that varied every game (this time, a blazer). She even had the composure to infer she was not the only player around. A game taking place inside an amusement park would surely have dozens of other participants.

Her deduction was proven correct after she walked around for a few minutes, and she came across an expected sight.

“Hey there,” Yuki said with a wave.

Her greeting was directed at a cluster of players. Like Yuki, they were all girls in blazers. Only around half of them were wearing hairbands. Although they gave off the jolly impression of being a gaggle of high school girls, they showed no signs of cheer, perhaps because they were currently in a death game.

“Yo,” a tall woman greeted back. “Haven’t seen your mug in a while.”

Although Yuki herself was rather tall, this player was even taller. The woman had previously mentioned to Yuki that she had grown to five-nine in middle school and now towered at close to six-and-a-half feet tall. Yet she did not appear lanky in the slightest. The blazer made it difficult to tell, but the woman was well-toned, with a muscular physique that perfectly complemented her height. All three dimensions of her body were considerably larger than those of an average person. The sight of her standing among the other players seemed somewhat odd to Yuki; it was an optical illusion of sorts.

Her name was Maguma. She was an acquaintance of Yuki’s, and she was also a regular death-game player.

“Good to see you again,” Yuki replied. It wasn’t every day that she had to

crane her neck to talk to her conversation partner.

“How’s it been?” Maguma asked in a deep voice.

“Not bad. This game is a milestone for me—my fortieth.”

“Huh... Guess that means you’ve crossed the Wall of Thirty.”

“How about you, Maguma? Have you reached thirty yet?”

The last time Yuki had run into her, Maguma had cleared twenty games. A while had passed since then, so it was natural for Yuki to think the woman had crossed thirty, if she assumed Maguma had continued to play at regular intervals.

A grin formed on Maguma’s face, and a surprising number came from her lips. “Try forty. Just got there pretty recently. This is number forty-one.”

Yuki was taken aback by the fact that she had unknowingly fallen behind. With this game being Yuki’s fortieth, her total clears still numbered in the thirties.

“Thing is, mine’s not the most impressive record in the group,” Maguma said. “Essay is here. This is her forty-fifth.”

Maguma stuck out her thumb and pointed at a slender girl who was standing some distance away from the cluster of players.

Since Yuki had just been looking at Maguma, the other girl appeared even thinner than she actually was. Her hair was as fluffy as cotton candy, while her face was straight out of literary masterpieces of a bygone era; her expression suggested she always had complicated matters on her mind. The girl was scrutinizing an object in her hands: the same variety of embarrassing hairband as the one on Yuki’s head.

The girl was a regular player by the name of Essay. Yuki had run into her twice before.

After observing her for a little while, Yuki locked gazes with Essay, but the two girls exchanged no words. Essay silently nodded in greeting, and Yuki responded in kind.

“Three of us here have crossed thirty, huh?” Yuki commented.

“The playerbase is getting bigger and bigger,” Maguma replied. “This sorta thing isn’t unheard of nowadays.”

Because a single failure was synonymous with death, players who had cleared more than thirty games were a rare breed. Three such players meeting in one game should have been a far rarer occurrence.

Lately, however, Yuki had found herself in many such situations. As Maguma had said, the pool of death-game players was growing. The industry was still rebounding from Candle Woods, a game from some time ago that had caused great upheaval.

“By the way, what are the rules this time around?” Yuki asked.

“Ah, right... This is a survival game—”

### **(3/10)**

Maguma explained the rules to Yuki.

A number of “executioners” wearing mascot costumes were roaming the amusement park, and they were equipped with deadly weapons such as blades, firearms, and explosives. The players had to avoid their attacks for a set amount of time.

Thus, it was a *survival game*—a game with the objective of surviving for a designated period of time. However, with three experienced players in the fray who had cleared thirty games, things took a completely different turn. The players did not simply run away to survive; sometimes they stole weapons from the executioners and struck back. The number of players and executioners continued to decrease, and the executioners were the first to be wiped out. The threats in the game venue had been fully eliminated before even half the designated time had elapsed.

And so the players easily cleared the game.

### **(4/10)**

At the end of a death game, players generally followed one of two courses of



action. Some would be transported to a hospital. Though the organization behind the games did not guarantee participant survival, it offered support to players in other areas that was quite generous. Upon the completion of a game, players would receive cutting-edge treatments for any injuries incurred.

Since Yuki had not suffered anything remotely close to an injury this time, she naturally took the other path—a leisurely drive home courtesy of her agent.

“Bravo,” her agent said, the instant the car began to move. “I am as happy for you as I would be for myself. Truly, congratulations.”

“...Thank you,” Yuki replied.

Clearing forty games put her on the same level as that princess she had fought some time ago. It didn’t quite compare to surmounting the Wall of Thirty, but Yuki still considered it a major milestone, and it was undoubtedly an achievement worthy of praise.

Yet, despite the accomplishment, Yuki had a disconsolate look on her face.

That was because it had felt *too* easy. No curse like the Wall of Thirty’s affected a player’s fortieth game, so it wasn’t unusual that she hadn’t encountered trouble, but her heart remained clouded.

*Is it okay for things to go this smoothly?*

“By the way, Yuki, where shall I take you?” her agent asked. “Home? Or to visit *him*?”

Yuki looked down at her left hand.

Her left hand, so pale that no blood seemed to flow through its veins, was completely intact. In fact, the three fingers from her middle finger to her pinkie quite literally *had no blood flowing through them*. She had lost those appendages in her thirtieth game, Golden Bath, and had later replaced them with prosthetics.

“The latter, please,” Yuki responded.

Yuki had first learned of *his* services in her twentieth game.

In the death-game industry, there supposedly were craftsmen who made a living producing prosthetics. Although the majority of game-related injuries could be treated with the medical support offered by the organizers, sometimes injuries players received were irreversible, for example a gnawed-off arm or a leg that was blown to pieces. To address the needs of players who sustained such damage yet still wished to continue participating in games, craftsmen would manufacture prosthetic body parts. Yuki had heard this from a fellow player.

Yuki had first met a living example of *his* handiwork in her twenty-third game.

The game was set in a royal court, and the players were forced to fight one another in cheongsams. It was there that Yuki encountered a player with unusually hard limbs. Upon asking about them, Yuki learned that the player's limbs were not actually made of protein. The girl moved her limbs with such agility that it was difficult to believe they were artificial, and defeating this player proved quite the ordeal for Yuki.

Yuki had first required *his* services following her thirtieth game.

A careless blunder resulted in her losing the middle, ring, and pinkie fingers of her left hand. Although three missing fingers presented no impediment to her day-to-day life, the same could not be said when it came to her career as a player. On a battlefield where her life hung in the balance, Yuki's having three fewer fingers available to use as game pieces represented a significant disadvantage. Yuki felt deterred from playing her thirty-first game in that state and thus faced an urgent need to restore her fingers before her instincts began to dull.

That was why she had paid a visit to the prosthetic craftsman.

Fortunately, he had happily agreed to her request, and shortly afterward, Yuki's missing fingers had been restored to their original length. The stories about the craftsman's abilities held true, as Yuki's new fingers performed every bit as well as her original ones. There were only two things that could be considered problems. First, Yuki had to periodically visit the craftsman for maintenance.

And second, the craftsman lived deep in a forest, far removed from civilization.

## (6/10)

It was laughable how deep inside a forest the craftsman lived.

After spending several hours inside a car and reaching an area with no paved roads, when Yuki felt like her rear had fused with the seat underneath it, she and her agent finally reached the deepest part of the woods. The drive reminded Yuki of how Japan was, at its core, a country of forests. On the surface, it seemed as if humanity dominated every inch of the globe, but in reality, people only resided in small pockets of civilization surrounded by vast swaths of nature. The long journey had caused Yuki to ponder ideas such as these, which were a bit over her head.

Soon, a mansion came into view. It had a truly picturesque exterior, the likes of which one would only find printed in history textbooks. The land around the mansion had been cleared of trees, and a paved road extended to the front door, but Yuki's agent parked the car a short distance from the entrance—out of necessity.

"It appears we are not the only visitors," Yuki's agent remarked.

Another black car, the same kind as the one in which Yuki was riding, was parked directly in front of the entrance. That meant another player was here.

"Considering the timing, could it be a fellow player from the same game?"

"I don't know about that...," Yuki replied. "I don't think anyone got injured."

As far as she could tell, the other players in the amusement park game—Essay, Maguma, and all the rest—seemed to have completely human bodies, from the top of their heads down to the tips of their toes. Still, Yuki couldn't place too much confidence in her observations, as the game outfit had not been too revealing. Furthermore, since *that* craftsman's prosthetics were extremely elaborate, it would not be strange if she had failed to detect them.

Regardless, all would be revealed after she entered the building, so Yuki cut short her train of thought.

“I’ll be back soon,” she said before exiting the car.

Her agent sent her off with a wave.

The front door had been left unlocked—there was no need to fear burglars in a location as secluded as this. Having visited numerous times before, Yuki entered the mansion and confidently walked through its exquisite, classical interior. Before long, she reached the door she wanted and knocked on it.

There was no response.

*Is he out?* Yuki wondered as she opened the door and entered the room.

Inside was a workshop.

The lights were off, but thanks to her memories of past visits and the sunlight streaming in through the windows, Yuki had no trouble proceeding deeper inside. The space was overflowing with various items, making it seem far more like a storehouse than an ordinary room. However, it did not appear disorganized in the slightest; rather, it felt a little *too* organized. For example, the tools on the workbench were all laid out side by side, the shelves were spaced evenly apart in intervals that had likely been measured out with a ruler, and all the burlap sacks on the floor were slumped over in exactly the same way, as if they had been copied and pasted onto the scene. The deliberateness of the mansion’s owner could be sensed everywhere, down to the positioning of each and every small item. A chill ran through Yuki, one that made her feel like she was trespassing on a sacred site. She continued onward, taking great care to avoid brushing against any objects.

At the back of the room stood another door, behind which lay the craftsman’s personal room. If he wasn’t in the workshop, he had to be there. Yuki pressed her ear against the door but couldn’t hear any signs of life from the other side. Considering the possibility the craftsman could be asleep, Yuki intentionally made some noise before knocking, but there was no response.

*Guess he’s not in,* Yuki thought. Still, she attempted to open the door. All of a sudden—

“Graaah!!!!”

—a loud, intimidating voice boomed from beside her.



“Eeeep!” Yuki jumped with fright.

**(7/10)**

Yuki lifted off, and the moment her feet regained contact with the floor, the lights turned on.

“Gwa-ha-ha! Got you good, missy.”

Yuki blinked several times at the thing in front of her.

It was a *sack*.

And a large one at that, the kind that could be used to store coffee beans or function as a sandbag. Since it was violently swaying forward and backward, and a guffaw had come from within, someone must have been inside.

There was a switch on the wall next to the sack. The second Yuki realized it was a light switch, the sack had already revealed its contents.

An old man who resembled a dwarf from a fantasy story.

The man was of rather small stature. He was probably less than three feet tall, and standing upright, he did not even reach Yuki’s chest. However, his muscular physique suggested he weighed at least as much as Yuki. He had a long beard that brought to mind a string-pull game one could find at a carnival, as well as an eccentric laugh, which had filled the air just moments ago.

“...Hello, sir,” Yuki greeted.

“Oh, hello!” the man replied.

“Um... What on earth were you doing in there?”

Yuki looked down at the now-empty sack. It was rather large, but it seemed too small to fit an entire person. Yuki was impressed the man had managed to fit inside.

“Figured I’d give you a fright.” The man grinned widely. “My eyes landed on that sack when you came in, so I thought I’d put on a little show. I gotta say, that was a mighty fine reaction.”

Yuki brought her hand to her chest. Her heart was still beating somewhat

rapidly. How many years had it been since she had screamed like that? She had received quite the scare.

The man had gotten her good. Until he had shouted, she had detected no signs of another person in the room. That just went to show his experience of having interacted with many, many players.

This man, whose behavior and actions were a perfect match for his appearance, was the very prosthetic craftsman she'd been looking for. Nobody knew his real name. He requested to be called "Pops," but Yuki insisted on calling him "sir" instead. Although he had a lighthearted attitude, his skills were the real deal, and for quite some time he had been helping players who had lost parts of their bodies return to battle. Rumor had it that both the psychopath from long ago and Yuki's mentor, Hakushi, had made use of his services, but Yuki couldn't possibly picture either of them holding a conversation with the craftsman.

"Anyway... I take it you're here to get those fingers checked?"

The comment reminded Yuki of the reason for her visit. She answered, "Oh, yes."

"Weren't you here not too long ago? You sure are diligent. That's a good thing."

Indeed, Yuki had paid a visit following her previous game, too. This time, it was well before her next scheduled maintenance. However, she had come not out of diligence but out of *apprehension*. Everything had been going so smoothly that she was awash with worry and felt compelled to take stock of her current situation.

"How are things?" the craftsman asked.

"Fairly good, I'd say. I just cleared my fortieth game."

"Oh, really? Well done."

Despite the words of praise, the gloom on Yuki's face did not clear.

Just then, she recalled seeing a second car parked in front of the mansion.

"I saw another car outside. Is someone else visiting?"

“Huh? Oh, yes. Her name was...” The man paused for a second and stroked his beard. “Right, I think it was Airi. Have you met?”

**(8/10)**

Yuki entered the craftsman’s personal room after being instructed to wait inside. The space was furnished with only the bare necessities—a single bed, along with a desk and a chair. In addition to the furniture, a girl was sitting uncomfortably on the small, child-sized chair, which was a match for the craftsman’s height.

The girl had indigo eyes and a gloomy expression that suggested she was tired of everything in the world. Although she had grown out her hair and now had a much more mature countenance than the last time Yuki had seen her, her face and eyes were familiar.

When Yuki entered the room, the girl turned to look at her. The girl’s eyes opened so wide that Yuki could even make out the reddish parts around the edges.

“Y-Yuki?” the girl asked.

“...Hey,” Yuki greeted.

There was no mistaking it—the girl was Airi. Like Yuki, she was a survivor of Candle Woods.

Candle Woods. It had been Yuki’s ninth game, one that marked the first page of Yuki’s life, and it had boasted one of the highest player counts and lowest survival rates in death-game history. The formidable psychopath Kyara had gone on a rampage, killing the vast majority of the game’s players, including Yuki’s mentor, Hakushi. The only ones who had managed to survive the nightmare were the two girls standing here—Yuki and Airi.

Neither had seen the other since the end of the game. Yuki had assumed Airi had quit as a player, but evidently, things were different.

“Been a while,” Yuki continued.

“It’s good to see you.”

Yuki puzzled over what to say. Turning her attention to Airi's new hairstyle, she commented, "I see you've been growing out your hair."

The Airi in Yuki's memory sported a short haircut, but the hair on the head of the girl before her was much longer. Airi must have let it grow out in the year and a half since Candle Woods.

Yuki added, "It looks good."

"Thank you," Airi replied.

"Are you doing it for good luck? Like to help you survive or something...?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that..." Airi stroked her hair. "Another player told me it's easier to earn more prize money this way, since the audience tends to favor players with longer hair..."

"...Makes sense."

The prize money awarded after the games was funded by members of the audience. As such, the popularity of a player was directly linked to the amount of prize money they would receive. Just like the men of the world, the audience apparently preferred long-haired girls.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're doing okay," Yuki said, changing the topic.

"I suppose... Though not *all* of me is okay."

Airi lowered her gaze. Her indigo eyes fell to her feet, the ends of which were *rounded*. She wasn't wearing stockings—the girl had no discernible toes.

"This happened in a game a little while ago," Airi explained. "We were on a snowy mountain. Clearing the game was no issue, but an unexpected blizzard prevented anyone from reaching us..."

"...Wow. That's terrible luck."

"I've had enough. Honestly."

Those words sounded familiar to Yuki. She vaguely recalled the girl saying something similar when they'd stood face-to-face in Candle Woods.

"So you're still playing, huh?" Yuki asked. "Even though the last time we met you said you never wanted to be involved with the games again."



“I still think that. But I’m not cut out for anything else, so I’ve reluctantly carried on as a player. I missed my chance to quit, and now I’ve even ended up crossing the thirty-game mark.”

Her remark came as a shock to Yuki. So Airi had also survived the Wall of Thirty?

“There’ve been more and more girls like you recently,” the craftsman commented.

Yuki and Airi both turned to look at him; he had a toolbox in one hand.

“I was worried what would happen after Candle Woods. It’s good to see the industry recovering from that calamity. Having more customers makes me a happy camper.”

“...To be honest, that’s nothing for me to rejoice over,” Airi said.

“How come?” the craftsman asked.

“Since the player pool has been expanding...I fear it’s about time for it to shrink once again. Maybe history will repeat itself with a second coming of Candle Woods.”

Yuki thought that was a rather pessimistic outlook, but she had also wondered the same. It was more bizarre to hear words like *peace* and *smooth sailing* in this industry. The current situation could only be interpreted as an omen of an impending storm. The prospect of the second coming of Candle Woods instilled great fear in Yuki, fear that far transcended what she had felt during her standoff with the psychopath. Things were different now compared to when she had been nonchalantly clearing games. After having fought desperately to survive countless times over, after having battled through forty games, Yuki found the prospect of everything coming crumbling down all the more frightening.

**(9/10)**

The craftsman inspected Yuki’s prosthetic fingers. The maintenance ended without incident—no ninja burst in midway through, nor did any of Yuki’s real fingers accidentally come off—yet she left the mansion with the same cloudy

feelings she'd had when she arrived.

It would take a little while longer for Yuki's mind to feel at ease.

Around one month later, Yuki entered her forty-fourth game. That sinister game—Cloudy Beach—would become a new trial for her.

During the game, Yuki would clash against the successor of *that player*, who should have perished in Candle Woods.


**(10/10)**



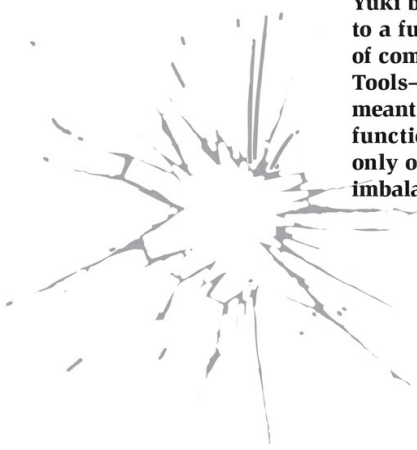
## What Yuki knows about craftsmen in the industry:

The organizers' medical technology is not all-powerful. Players receive medical treatment after every game. With the aid of the Preservation Treatment, the majority of injuries can be fully healed, but there are also a not insignificant number of cases in which a complete recovery is impossible. This is where craftsmen in the industry come in: They manufacture prosthetic body parts to serve players who wish to continue participating in death games despite having sustained irreversible damage.

The craftsmen represent a third party and do not belong to the organization behind the games. Because the industry generates a tremendous flow of money, many individuals are drawn to the market for death games. Since it is in the organizers' interest for players to return to the games, craftsmen are semiofficially recognized and have a mutually beneficial relationship with the organizers. It is unclear why the organizers themselves do not offer prosthetics to players. Perhaps they see it as outside the scope of their official duties, or perhaps they believe it best to leave it up to the free market.



As with any and all tradespeople, prosthetic craftsmen vary in terms of level of skill and the fees they charge for their services. Yuki's craftsman sells prosthetics of unparalleled quality that function as well as ordinary human body parts, and the fees for his services are quite attractive.



While craftsmen offer players support beyond what is provided by the organizers, even their services do not cover everything. Some organs are too delicate to repair, and even if they could be replaced by prosthetics, Yuki believes nothing can compare to a fully human body in terms of comprehensive functionality. Tools—such as prosthetics—are meant to serve a single specialized function, and if someone focuses only on a single area, that means imbalances are generated elsewhere.



**(0/11)**

Yuki awoke to a knock at the door.

**(1/11)**

Yuki always woke up late at the beginning of a game.

As a way to obfuscate the location of a game, the organizers would put players under with a sleeping pill while the players were en route to the venue, and that pill was consistently—and *unusually*—effective on Yuki. Despite having gone through the process on forty-four occasions, she did not see any signs of improvement regarding her body's reaction to the drug. This time, Yuki had once again slept as soundly as a college student who had only just recently begun living alone.

However, being in a state of slumber did not mean Yuki was completely defenseless. Even while asleep, Yuki was always subconsciously on guard. She would certainly awaken to any noise around her, and that went doubly true for the sound of knocking on a door—a noise that was meant to be heard.

Yuki sat up.

She was inside a wooden room around the same size as a classroom of the night school she attended. Wood planks enclosed the space on all sides—the floor, the walls, the ceiling. The place was equipped with ordinary kitchen, bath, and shower facilities, along with ordinary pieces of furniture, including a refrigerator, a dresser, a desk, a sofa, and a rug. While staring at the wooden-framed bed in which she'd woken up, she began to wonder how one would refer to such a room. Was it a log cabin, a boardinghouse, or a villa? Or perhaps it was a lodge or a cottage. After settling on the word *cottage*, she immediately perceived that the structure was built near the sea, from the roaring of waves



and the gorgeous blue hue of water visible through the window.

Yuki had awakened to the sound of knocking on a door.

—At least, that was her assumption. Since the noise had occurred at the instant of her rousing, she wasn't certain that had been the sound's source. However, a short while later, another more forceful knock came at the door, one that conveyed a clear intention to wake the person inside. Evidently, the first knock had not been an auditory hallucination.

Someone had to be standing outside. Yuki had no way to determine if they were her enemy or her ally, but the only way forward was to see who it was. She got off the bed and walked over to the door, which was also made of wood. Giving some consideration to the possibility that the knocker would come bursting through with a loaded gun the moment she let them in, Yuki opened the door.

Standing there was—

“Huh?” “Huh?”

The voices of both Yuki and the person who knocked on the door perfectly overlapped.

Standing there was Airi, a girl with beautiful indigo eyes and an aura of melancholy. Like Yuki, she was a survivor of Candle Woods. The two of them had just run into each other a month prior.

“...Hey,” Yuki said, offering the same greeting from their previous encounter.

“...We meet again,” Airi replied.

Unsure how to respond, Yuki took a good look at Airi. The girl's porcelain skin was on full display. She was wearing a swimsuit, an off-the-shoulder affair that seemed like it would come off with a gentle tug. Her feet were neither bare nor in sandals, but rather covered by a pair of beach shoes extending all the way to her toes.

“Um... You look cute in that,” Yuki said.

Airi touched her swimsuit and made a sour face before saying, “The same goes for you.”

Only then did Yuki realize what she was wearing. Her garments were different from Airi's—they were made of a snug material that covered no more than a tenth of the total surface area of her skin.

For this game by the sea, the outfit was a swimsuit.

**(2/11)**

A gentle light poured down on Yuki as she stepped out of the cottage.

She was on a beach. White sand and blue ocean stretched as far as the eye could see. Away from the water, the land was covered with nature, bursting with a vivid green that was as striking as the colors of the sand and ocean. Yuki had never been to a resort area before, so she had only seen this kind of scenery in photos. The sky overhead was covered with light-gray clouds. Since the game had only just started, it was probably sometime in the early morning.

The cottage had been built on stilts in shallow water. Yuki followed Airi and, after sloshing through seawater that reached her ankles, stepped onto the shore. The two girls walked along the water's edge.

Yuki's was not the only cottage on the beach. There were eight in total, evenly spaced out in a single horizontal line. Yuki had been made to sleep in the far-right cottage facing the water.

Airi pointed two cottages over, at the cottage third from the right. "That one's mine. I imagine each cottage has been assigned to a single player."

"Which would mean a player count of eight..." Yuki said, verbalizing the number of cottages.

Airi then gestured at the cottage two to the left of hers. "That one is assigned to a player by the name of Koyomi. Have you met her before?"

The name was unfamiliar to Yuki, so she shook her head.

"She and I woke up rather early," Airi continued. "I was wandering around the beach when I ran into her. We decided to split up and wake the other players... Oh, there she is now."

Airi was looking at the leftmost cottage, from which two players had just

emerged. They were specks in the distance, so Yuki couldn't make out their faces, but judging by how much of their skin was visible, she concluded they, too, were wearing swimsuits. The two of them were headed for the next cottage over.

"Koyomi and I decided she would work her way over from the left, while I would start from the right. We should hurry, too."

Airi increased her pace, and Yuki followed suit.

After a few minutes of walking, they reached the second cottage from the right. The door swung open moments after Airi knocked on it, suggesting that the cottage dweller had already been awake.

The girl who opened the door appeared to be around elementary school age. She had on a one-piece swimsuit, which was fitting for someone so young. Her expressionless face brought to mind the image of a doll, and her absent-minded aura made it seem as if she could float away right then and there.

"H...hello," Airi said to the girl. "Nice to meet you. My name is Airi."

The girl stared at Airi with a gaze so intense that Yuki half expected laser beams to fly out of her eyes. Shortly thereafter, she turned to Yuki.

Using the opportunity to introduce herself, Yuki said, "I'm Yuki."

"Hizumi." After that brief utterance, the girl fell silent.

Hizumi—was that her player name? She didn't seem to be much of a conversationalist. She was the epitome of a peculiar girl. Although this was Yuki's first time meeting Hizumi, she had met similar girls countless times before. As the death-game industry brought together outcasts of all stripes, encounters with players like her weren't rare.

Airi told Hizumi about wanting to gather everyone together and asked the girl to join them. Hizumi nodded and tagged along behind Airi and Yuki, albeit with staggering steps. The party of three marched onward and passed straight by the next cottage, which was Airi's.

When they reached the cottage after that, Yuki came across a second familiar face.

“Whoa...” Airi was clearly overawed by the player who *ducked down* when passing through the doorframe.

It was Maguma, a giant of a player whose large body towered higher than even the cottage door. Like the other three, she also had on a swimsuit; hers exposed her toned muscles for the world to see. Although Yuki didn’t voice her reaction as Airi had done, she felt similarly daunted at the sight of the woman’s body, much to her chagrin. Yuki knew that if she got into a brawl with Maguma, she would be turned into mincemeat in three seconds flat.

“What is it?” Maguma asked, staring at Airi.

Airi averted her gaze from Maguma’s abs, which were so cut that one would likely not tire of them even after rubbing them for an entire day.

“Oh, nothing,” Airi blurted out. “We were hoping to get everyone together, so could you come with us?”

Maguma agreed, increasing the size of their party to four.

Once they stepped back onto the shore, they spotted another group of four—presumably consisting of Koyomi and the players she had woken up—walking in their direction. Koyomi was out in front, and she looked over at Yuki’s team before pointing to the cottage directly next to her group. It was the fourth cottage from the left, the one assigned to Koyomi. Shortly afterward, the girl led her team inside. Apparently, that was going to be the gathering place.

Yuki’s group headed for Koyomi’s cottage as well.

As they walked over, Yuki said, “Hey, Maguma?”

“Yeah?”

“What game is this for you?”

“Number forty-three. I’ve cleared forty-two.”

Upon hearing that number, Yuki curled her lips into a smile. “This is my forty-fourth.”

“Seriously? Dang, you overtook me.”

A frustrated expression formed on Maguma’s face. Although Yuki wasn’t one

to believe that a higher game count made someone superior, she still felt a tinge of joy.

“Even Airi there has crossed thirty.” Yuki turned to look at Airi, who was walking out in front.

“I know,” Maguma responded. “I was with her for her thirtieth.”

“Wait, really?”

*So this isn't your first time meeting...*, Yuki thought.

“It was rough going,” Maguma continued. “We were in a mountain villa on a snowy peak, and we had to battle against a short and stout abominable snowman. Beating the game wasn't hard, but that was when the problems started. Our agents couldn't reach us 'cause of an unexpectedly strong blizzard. We held out fine for a while, but three or four days later, food and water were running low. By the end, we were fighting one another to the death over provisions. I've witnessed 'number thirty' for a bunch of players, but never a game like that. That girl was born under a strange star.”

“Ah... I get what you mean,” Yuki said, concurring with Maguma's opinion. “Something similar happened in our game together. She's a survivor of Candle Woods, you know.”

Maguma looked startled. “You serious?”

“Yep. It was apparently her first game, and she was on the Stump Team...the one that started at a disadvantage. Still, she managed to survive. I think she's the kind of girl who finds herself in tough crises but always sticks it out.”

“She's got the devil's own luck, huh?”

At that point in the conversation, Airi turned around, directing her gaze at Yuki and Maguma. Her eyes were free of anger or hostility, but they did convey a message: *Would you please stop?* The two acquiesced.

“Another game with three players who have crossed thirty...,” Yuki remarked, changing the subject.

“Nope. There's four,” Maguma said. “Didn't you see? Essay was part of that other team.”



Essay—a girl with fluffy hair and the aura of a scholar. The last time she and Yuki had met, she had already cleared her forty-fourth game, which meant she had a higher record than both Yuki and Maguma at the moment.

Apparently, she was in the other group of four. Since there had been quite some distance separating them, and since the girl didn't stand out much, Yuki had overlooked her.

"If there's four of us already, there could be others, too. How 'bout you, squirt?"

Maguma glanced over at Hizumi, the peculiar grade-schooler. However, the girl not only remained silent but also refused to even make eye contact, instead looking away.

Seemingly giving up on communicating with Hizumi, Maguma then turned to Airi. "How about Koyomi?"

"I didn't ask about her game count...but there's no doubt she's been a player for a fair amount of time."

"They sure aren't making this easy on us."

At least four of the eight players had cleared more than thirty games. Whether that should be interpreted as reassuring or frightening was still up in the air. If it turned out to be a competitive game—a game revolving around conflict among players—that would mean the girls would have to fight against seasoned veterans over limited spots to survive.

A player with the devil's luck who thought nothing of Candle Woods and the Wall of Thirty. A player with a body so brawny that one would be ready to admit defeat the moment they faced off against her. It was possible Yuki would have to battle them to the death.

**(3/11)**

As she had done with the others, Airi knocked on the door to Koyomi's cottage.

"Come in," came a reply from inside.

The voice sounded rather hoarse, as if it belonged to a woman who was getting up there in years. Was there really a player like that in the other group? And even if there was, would they really be able to join such a dangerous game? Regardless, the door was unlocked, so Yuki's group entered the cottage.

The interior featured the same design as that of the cottage where Yuki had woken up. Four players were sitting around a table in the center of the room. Among them was a player Yuki knew—Essay.

Maguma had been right; Essay was there, with her trademark cotton-candy-like hair and her calm, scholarly expression. Layered on top of her swimsuit was a gown, which very much resembled a lab coat.

The other three players were unfamiliar to Yuki. One of them was drinking a bottle of *ramune* soda that had likely come from the fridge, another was acting awfully skittish, and the third emanated a strong, elderly aura.

"Sit," said the older woman. Her voice matched that of the hoarse reply from earlier.

Yuki, Airi, Hizumi, and Maguma each sat down at an open spot around the table.

"Why don't we start by introducing ourselves?"

Yuki had met three of the other seven in past games. And judging by the demeanors of the others, she figured they also had some degree of connection with one another. However, because mapping out a relationship diagram would be too much of a hassle, the group followed the accepted custom of introducing themselves.

The late arrivals—Yuki's group—agreed to go first. Yuki shared her player name, along with the fact this was her forty-fourth game. Maguma stated, as she had to Yuki earlier, that this was her forty-third game, while Airi revealed it was her thirty-third. Yuki expected to also learn of Hizumi's game count, but like when they had first met, the girl mumbled only her name and nothing else.

Then it came time for the other four to speak.

"I'll start us off," said the woman with the hoarse voice. "My name's Koyomi, and this game is my twentieth. Nice to meet you."

Koyomi gave off the impression of being *remarkably* old. Appearance-wise, she looked to be in her twenties. She was the very picture of a healthy young woman—her skin lacked any wrinkles, her hair was free of gray, and there was none of that characteristic old-person smell wafting around her. Yet, for some odd reason, she had the aura of an extremely elderly woman. Yuki wouldn't blink twice if someone told her that Koyomi was actually 120 years old and was maintaining her youth by bathing in the blood of virgins. Koyomi's outfit in the game—a traditional short coat like the kind worn by female pearl divers—suited her quite well.

Koyomi turned a pair of inquisitive eyes on Yuki. "You said your name was Yuki? I know all about you."

"...? Have we met before?"

"Not directly, no. I've heard about you. From your *mentor*, that is."

Yuki's heart skipped a beat.

Her mentor—player name: Hakushi. A legendary player who had cleared ninety-five games. For a time, Yuki had been learning under her in a mentor-protégé relationship—a common practice in the games.

Koyomi claimed to have heard about Yuki from Hakushi. However, Yuki found that odd because—

"When did you hear about me? My mentor is, you know..."

*Hakushi has departed from this world.*

The woman had died in Yuki's ninth game—Candle Woods. That psychopath had mutilated her, down to every last rib bone. Yuki had seen the corpse with her own eyes.

So how could Koyomi have met with a dead player and heard about Yuki? Alas, no answer came from the woman's mouth; Koyomi simply grinned and reveled in Yuki's reaction. Right when Yuki was ready to grill her for more details, Airi nudged Yuki with an elbow.

"Yuki, she's a veteran player," said the girl with indigo eyes.

"What do you mean?"

*“Apparently, she’s been in the industry since before Candle Woods.”*

Yuki couldn’t hide her shock.

“Nothing strange about that, is there?” Koyomi remarked. “It’s not like every single active player at the time joined that game. Players like me might be a rarity, but I’m not the only one.”

“You...didn’t participate in Candle Woods?”

“I got a bad feeling when my agent came with the invitation, so I turned it down. I have a good nose for those kinds of omens, you see. That sixth sense is a big reason I’m alive and kicking today.”

Koyomi belonged to an older generation of players than Yuki and the others; she was from the pre–Candle Woods era. In which case, it was certainly plausible she had met Hakushi when the latter had still been alive—and it was certainly plausible Hakushi had shared stories about Yuki’s days as a foolish protégé.

“Interesting... So *you’re* that Yuki.” Koyomi giggled, as if finding something funny.

Yuki had a strong urge to question the woman about the extent of what Hakushi had divulged, but before she could—

“Sorry for the tangent. Go ahead.” Koyomi pointed to the scholarly girl.

“I’m Essay,” the player said, touching her fluffy, cotton-candy-like hair. “This game is number fifty for me. Pleased to meet you.”

Only Maguma, Airi, and Yuki reacted noticeably to that number. It was perfectly natural for the peculiar Hizumi to be indifferent, while Koyomi and the other two players had likely learned of Essay’s clear count before Yuki’s group had entered.

Yuki hadn’t encountered a player since Candle Woods who had reached fifty games. Along with thirty and forty, fifty was a milestone number in her eyes, as it represented the midpoint of her quest to clear ninety-nine games. While Essay had nothing to do with Yuki’s personal goal, the presence of a player who had reached that stage faster than she did inspired both respect and frustration

in her.

“Mozuku, you can go next,” Essay said.

The player Essay had tapped in acted jittery as she introduced herself. “I’m Mozuku. This is, um, my tenth game. Nice to meet you.”

The girl lacked any distinguishing characteristics. It was a refreshing sight to see such a nervous player. The attitude was typically the mark of a beginner who had not yet grown accustomed to the games, but if this was indeed Mozuku’s tenth time as a player, she must have been frightened not by the game itself but by the players around her, many of whom were veterans who had cleared thirty games—including the older, muscular woman sitting next to her.

“Um... I’m done,” Mozuku said, gesturing to the final player, the one with the *ramune* bottle in hand.

At this stage in the conversation, however, the girl was not only drinking soda. During the others’ self-introductions, she had taken out a pack of *takoyaki* octopus balls from the fridge and heated it up in the microwave, and she was still munching on the piping hot food. Even after Mozuku had given her the floor, and all eyes were on her, the girl continued snacking away. After making the others sit around until she finished her meal *and beverage*, she finally introduced herself.

“I’m Mitsuba. This is my thirtieth game. Nice to meet you.”

A shocking number had casually escaped her lips.

The Wall of Thirty—a superstition in the industry. The story went that players would face inconceivable irregularities in and around their thirtieth game that would greatly reduce their odds of survival. Both Yuki and Airi, and most likely Maguma and Essay, too, had struggled as a result of this curse-like phenomenon. Practically every player had heard of it, and Mitsuba was probably no exception.

Nevertheless, the girl showed no signs of apprehension. Considering the empty *ramune* bottle and pack of *takoyaki* next to Mitsuba, Yuki thought she must march to the beat of her own drum.

“Was I the last one?” Mitsuba asked, giving the other players a once-over.

The girl then walked over to the refrigerator and, as if her appetite had not yet been sated, pulled out a second pack of *takoyaki* and set it in the microwave. Staring at the plastic container rotating under an orange light, she continued, “I wonder what kind of game this is. All we have are a beach and swimsuits...and I guess *ramune* and *takoyaki*, too.”

“Seems to fit the pattern of an escape game,” Koyomi said in her characteristically hoarse voice. “This beach is isolated from the outside world. That’s an escape game setup if there ever was one.”

The beach was surrounded by a forest on three sides, and—quite naturally—the sea on the final side. To leave the beach, the players would have no other option but to enter the forest. As Koyomi had stated, the situation fit the traditional template of an escape game.

“Regardless, we should start by surveying our surroundings,” Essay suggested. Her authority as a fifty-game player seemed to be exerting its influence, as her words commanded the attention of most of the room. “It won’t be too late to start figuring out the rules after that.”

There were no objections. So the players stood up one after another, until only one remained—Mitsuba.

## **(4/11)**

Everyone but Mitsuba exited the cottage. The group of seven stepped onto the shore and began exploring. The swath of sandy terrain was long enough that a person standing on one end would appear to be a mere speck from the other. The players walked all over the meringue-colored sand, but after failing to find anything of note, they turned their attention to the surrounding trees.

The group entered the forest. Since all seven of them were accustomed to the games, nobody showed reluctance to march on ahead in a swimsuit.

“Let’s head straight through,” Essay suggested. The group did as she said.

If this was an escape game with a goal of making it through the forest alive, it stood to reason that an abundance of traps would await them among the trees.

However, it appeared there wasn't a single one. Although the players could not prove there were no traps, at the very least none of them had sensed a single one, nor had any of them activated a trap and gotten injured. The group continued onward and onward and onward and onward—

—until at last, their field of view opened up.

"Figures." The remark came from Maguma.

The group stood atop a sheer cliff. The grassy terrain came to an abrupt end, resembling a half-eaten piece of cake. At the bottom of the steep cliff face was the same blue ocean they had seen earlier on the beach.

To the left and right, the cliff stretched as far as the eye could see. Although it would be impossible to confirm unless they walked along the edge, it likely continued all the way around to the beach.

To summarize, the beach was surrounded by a forest, which itself was surrounded by sheer cliffs. In other words—this entire beach was *not connected to land*.

The players were on a secluded island.

"...If this is our situation"—Essay, who always looked as though she was thinking over complicated matters, was now actually mulling over something complicated—"this certainly changes the meaning of 'escape.' Maguma, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Can you see any land on the horizon?"

Yuki instinctively looked across the water upon hearing the question. She scanned the entire horizon, left to right, but failed to spot any signs of land.

"Not at all," Maguma answered, reporting the same thing. "Wanna look from my shoulders?"

"Yes, please."

Essay climbed up Maguma's back and hooked her legs around the woman's shoulders. The higher the vantage point, the farther away the horizon. That was why Essay had posed that question to Maguma, the tallest of the group, and



why she had gotten onto the woman's shoulders. Their combined heights, minus the length of Essay's legs, reached approximately ten feet off the ground, but even after the extra boost, Essay climbed down with a glum look on her face; it seemed the effort was futile.

"I just want to make sure—did any of you see land while on the shore?" Essay asked.

Nobody responded. The answer was obviously no.

"The distance to the horizon is around three miles, right?" Maguma asked.

"In this case, it would be slightly farther than that," Essay said. "From on top of your shoulders, my vantage point would have been at a height of about ten feet off the ground."

The horizon exists because the Earth is round, and due to the curvature of the planet, it becomes impossible to see beyond a certain distance. Yuki remembered learning in school that you could calculate the distance to the horizon with a simple application of the Pythagorean theorem.

However, before Yuki could turn her superficial knowledge into practical information, Essay beat her to the punch.

"That would make the horizon closer to four miles away. Since we're standing on a cliff, it would be even farther than that. Regardless, it's no small distance. So if this game is meant to be an escape game"—Essay stared out at the empty horizon—"we'll have to traverse at least that much ocean."

Four miles away. Yuki tried imagining that distance. The farthest she had ever swum was fifty meters, or around 164 feet, back in middle school. Swimming four whole miles would be the equivalent of swimming back and forth in a fifty-meter swimming pool more than a hundred times. Since her reference point was minuscule in comparison, Yuki had trouble getting a full picture of the situation.

"...No way that'll work," Maguma commented. "Whether we jump in the water ourselves or build a raft, we have no idea which direction to aim for, so we can't even set sail."

"You're exactly right. That's why, if we assume this is an escape game, there

has to be some kind of gimmick. Somewhere around here, there could be a map indicating our coordinates, or a method of communicating with people off the island. Or perhaps...”

Essay paused for a second before continuing.

“...Maybe this isn’t an escape game at all.”

Yuki noticed the shoulders of one of the platers—Mozuku, the hapless girl who had been thrown into a game of elite veterans—twitch at those words.

The idea that this was not an escape game but rather a competitive game must have crossed the girl’s mind. Should that be true, the players around her would actually be her enemies. Yuki tried imagining Mozuku’s present state of mind. What if Yuki had, in her tenth game—Scrap Building, if her memory served—been forced to fight players in their thirtieth, fortieth, or even fiftieth games? That feeling could only be summed up in one word: despair.

The probability that this distressing scenario would come to pass seemed rather likely at the moment, for on their trek to the cliff, the group had not stumbled upon a single object resembling a trap. Despite being in a death game, they had yet to come across anything that could lead to their deaths—besides, of course, the seven living beings here and the one on the beach, each of which were armed with a full set of limbs.

On the other hand, there was a more optimistic way of assessing the situation. Perhaps this was not an escape game or a competitive game, but rather a *survival* game, like the one Yuki had recently played at an amusement park. For example, it was possible the players would have to endure a hundred days on the island until the rescue ship prepared by the organizers came to retrieve them, meaning the wild environment of an island isolated from the outside world would be precisely what would threaten their lives. And, of course, it was too early to completely discount the group’s initial theory about it being an escape game. Perhaps a bottle containing blueprints for a boat had washed up on shore, and Mitsuba, having discovered it while playing on the beach, was poring over the details at this very moment.

Were they in paradise or purgatory? There was only one way to uncover the answer.

“Let’s keep exploring,” Essay said.

**(5/11)**

The group completed an entire loop around the island but found no passages to land.

The island was large enough that it took around an hour to circle the perimeter. Aside from the sandy shore, the rest of the island was covered with trees. The group searched both the perimeter of the island and inside the forest, but they didn’t come across any buildings other than the cottages, nor did they find any man-made items besides surveillance cameras that were used to transmit footage of the game. The players returned to the beach empty-handed.

By that time, the sun had already started to set.

“Oh, welcome back,” Mitsuba said upon their return. It seemed she had just gone for a swim, as she was carrying a swim ring on her shoulder and her entire body was wet. A trail of water droplets extended behind her on the sand.

“.....”

Yuki and the others ignored her. After having walked around for hours, they lacked even the energy to chastise the girl for slacking off and having fun all by herself.

“Mitsuba,” said Essay, the only one willing to speak to the girl.

“Yeah?”

“Have you learned anything new about the game?”

“Nope, nada. I’ve been around here the whole day, so I’m totally in the dark.”

“.....”

Essay looked away from Mitsuba and turned her gaze to the scarlet sky.

“Shall we call it a day?” she suggested. “The sun is setting, so let’s pick things back up tomorrow.”

A sudden breeze blew across the beach. The evening chill set in, assaulting

their skin, which was more exposed than usual.

“Will we have to sleep in our swimsuits?” Airi asked, hugging herself. “With these outfits, no number of blankets will be enough to fight off the cold.”

“Well, there weren’t any other clothes around,” Mitsuba answered. “There were tons of extra towels and swimwear, but not a single piece of normal clothing.”

Yuki had figured as much. It was hard to imagine the organizers preparing any clothing besides the game outfit. Since there were apparently extra swimsuits, the most the players could do to take measures against the cold was borrow relatively less-revealing outfits, such as Essay’s gown or Koyomi’s short coat.

After agreeing to meet again in Koyomi’s cottage the following morning, the players disbanded for the day and returned to their individual dwellings.

Standing outside her cottage door, Yuki noticed there was no lock. The door could always be opened or closed if you applied force to it. Since there was no way to lock the cottage, anyone could sneak in at any time.

Yuki entered the building. The same pieces of furniture she had woken up to that morning sat there untouched. One of them caught her eye: a sturdy, five-tiered dresser. She lifted it with both hands and carried it over to the door to use as a barricade.

Yuki had not envisioned a specific threat; she was only blocking the door as a precaution. Even if she had no problem with sleeping in a swimsuit, she was not so unflappable as to be able to sleep in a fully unlocked room. Since the door could swing outward, the dresser would not actually prevent someone from opening it, but setting up an obstacle was unquestionably better than having nothing there at all.

Afterward, Yuki had dinner. Since *a certain someone* had been snacking earlier that day, she already knew what was inside the fridge. It was stocked with food and drinks appropriate for the beach, including packs of *takoyaki*, *yakisoba* noodles, and bottles of *ramune* soda. Atop the fridge sat a microwave, which she knew was safe to use to heat up the plastic containers. Because Yuki had been walking around the entire day, her stomach was growling with hunger, but since she didn’t know how many days she would have to stay on

the island, she was hesitant to chow down like Mitsuba had without considering the consequences. Yuki decided to stop eating when she was 80 percent full. The food was delicious.

After showering, changing into a different swimsuit, and brushing her teeth with the provided toothbrush, she got into bed.

She had no intention of falling into a deep slumber. Although she had set up a barricade, she did not think for a second that it would be enough to guarantee her safety. It would only take one strong kick to bring down the dresser, not to mention the windows of the cottage did not seem sturdy by any means. If someone was adamant about getting into Yuki's room, none of those barriers would be of much use. She had to sleep lightly, in such a way that she could wake up at the first sign of an irregularity.

Yuki had acquired the ability to modulate her sleep. That skill was indispensable for games that lasted longer than a single day. Any player who had crossed the thirty-game mark—and even Mozuku, Koyomi, and, although her play count remained a mystery, Hizumi—had likely learned to do the same. It was a basic technique anyone in the industry would be expected to pull off. And so Yuki was able to swiftly achieve the level of sleep she desired.

Fortunately, she would awaken to see another day.

**(6/11)**

Yuki awoke to a knock at the door.

**(7/11)**

Yuki leaped up the moment the noise reached her ears, vigorously flinging her blanket into the air. Had someone been creeping up on her, that would have blocked their vision. With the strength of her legs alone, she stood up on the bed and adopted a fighting stance.

However, she was tilting at windmills, for nobody else was inside the cottage.

Feeling a pang of embarrassment, Yuki calmed herself down. Just then,

another knock came at the door. It was the same noise she had heard the previous day.

Upon straining her ears, she heard a voice repeatedly call out, "Yuki, Yuki." While working out the visitor's identity through her voice, Yuki made her way to the door.

Then she frowned at the object standing before it.

*A dresser.*

Yuki had set it up as a barricade the previous evening. The first thought that came into her mind: *What a pain.* She then asked herself, *Who the heck put this here?* before answering, *You did last night, stupid.* With arms that were not quite operating at full strength due to only having just woken up, Yuki moved the dresser aside and opened the door.

Airi was standing outside.

"Morning," Yuki greeted.

However, her visitor did not respond immediately. The girl was panting, and her cheeks were flushed. If Yuki assumed she hadn't caught a cold, did that mean she had sprinted over to Yuki's cottage at full speed? What reason would she have to rush over?

"Good morning." Relief came to Airi's face. "Did you place that in front of the door?" she asked, looking past Yuki at the dresser that had been relieved of its barricade duties.

"Yeah, well, I figured it couldn't hurt to be cautious," Yuki answered.

"...That was probably the right call."

"Huh?"

"Please, you have to come with me." Airi grabbed Yuki's hand and pulled.

Yuki felt her center of gravity tilt forward. "Wait, I haven't gotten ready yet..."

"That can wait."

Yuki touched her hair with her free hand. Since she had only woken up moments ago, it was rather disheveled. Yuki placed greater importance on her

morning routine than ordinary people. Since she innately carried the aura of a phantom, she looked all the more striking when she was unkempt from just waking up.

Yet Airi had still told Yuki to postpone getting ready, even after seeing Yuki's dreadful state. What could have made the girl so impatient?

Yuki could think of only one answer.

**(8/11)**

There were five other players on the beach.

A player whose giant body brought to mind the image of a bear: Maguma. A peculiar girl who seemed to rebuff any attempt at conversation: Hizumi. A veteran player who had been in the industry since the pre-Candle Woods era: Koyomi. A player in her tenth game who was once again acting all jittery: Mozuku. And the free spirit who had demonstrated an utter lack of cooperativeness the day before: Mitsuba. Adding in Yuki and Airi, that made seven.

Everyone turned to Yuki as she came out of her cottage. As someone who spent the majority of her private life in a tracksuit, Yuki was as prone to shame as anyone else. Being seen in an unkempt state, her phantom aura turned up to eleven, was extremely embarrassing.

"What were you up to?" Maguma asked, without a word of greeting.

"I was asleep," Yuki answered.

"...You sure are a sleepyhead, huh?" Maguma was aware of Yuki's disposition from their previous games together.

"Did something happen?" Yuki asked, with a sneaking suspicion of what had transpired. "There's, um...one player missing."

The others exchanged glances. Yuki had predicted they would react that way.

Maguma replied, "Remember how we agreed yesterday to gather in Koyomi's cottage in the morning?"



“Yeah.”

“So this morning six of us showed up. Neither you nor Essay came over, so we decided to head to your cottages. We had Airi go to yours, like yesterday, and I went over to Essay’s, since the two of us know each other from past games.”

Maguma’s expression turned troubled, as though the spirit of the scholarly Essay had possessed her. She then looked over at one of the cottages.

“That cottage over there, third from the left, is Essay’s. It’s right next to Koyomi’s. Since your cottage is all the way at the end, I reached Essay’s before Airi got to yours. There was no answer when I knocked, so I went in...”

The crease between Maguma’s eyebrows grew more profound.

*“Then I called everyone else over.”*

Yuki could sense the unease in the air amplifying. All the others—even Mitsuba, to some extent—had solemn looks on their faces.

“So we started wondering if you’d also *met the same fate*. It was the logical next thought. That’s why Airi sprinted over to your cottage. Thankfully, you came out without a worry on your face, and that’s where we are now.”

“I’m glad you’re safe,” Airi said. Her normal expression had returned, one that seemed like she was forcing herself to look at something she didn’t want to.

“Is Essay”—Yuki looked over to the cottage—“still in there?”

“Yeah.”

Yuki touched her disheveled hair and looked down at herself; she was covered with lint from her blanket.

“Um...Maguma?”

“What?”

“Do you think it would be rude of me to go see her in this state?”

**(9/11)**

Inside the cottage lay Essay’s corpse.

Players of death games had their bodies modified via a procedure known as the Preservation Treatment. The effects were wide-ranging, but the most important was the transformation of the blood. After a player received the Preservation Treatment, any blood that flowed out of their body would immediately solidify and change into a fluffy white substance. Hence, to players, the color of blood was not red but white. The color that signified gruesomeness, too, was not red but white. Yuki had so deeply internalized this notion, she would be startled just by seeing cotton jutting out of a mattress.

The inside of the cottage was covered with white fluff.

It was as if a plushie had been ripped apart, as if a bathtub filled with bubbles had been knocked over, as if a machine that made artificial snow had been left running at maximum power. And there *it* was, lying on the table in the center of the room. Although the body, too, was covered in white fluff, the distinctive cotton-candy-like hair peeking out made identifying the figure no challenge whatsoever.

It was Essay's corpse.

Or, to be more precise, it was her head and torso. Her limbs were scattered around the vicinity. Yuki had little trouble locating them, as they were relatively intact. Essay's left arm rested on the sofa, her right arm lay on the bed, and her legs were on the floor by the dresser. Although her limbs were still identifiable, their joints had been snapped, their skin had been torn, and their nails had been ripped off. They were also missing a few fingers and toes.

Essay's arms and legs were in a grisly state, but her torso on the table was even worse for wear. It had been cut open like a dried mackerel, and exactly five of its rib bones were pointing toward the ceiling like a hand reaching for salvation. Her other rib bones were not untouched—some were broken, and others were stabbed into the bed; not a single one was in its original position. With Essay's chest unprotected, it was unreasonable to expect the parts that lay deeper inside to be unharmed. Her heart, lungs, and other organs had been neatly organized and laid out like items confiscated by the police. Many of them

were placed near the entrance, constituting part of the reason Yuki found it difficult to step inside after opening the door.

Essay's body had been horribly mutilated. However, the fright Yuki felt was not because of the gruesomeness of the corpse.

"Yuki," Airi called out from behind. "This...is *the same*, right?"

Airi's words carried little substance on the surface, but Yuki fully understood the meaning behind them.

Exactly—the corpse seemed familiar to Yuki.

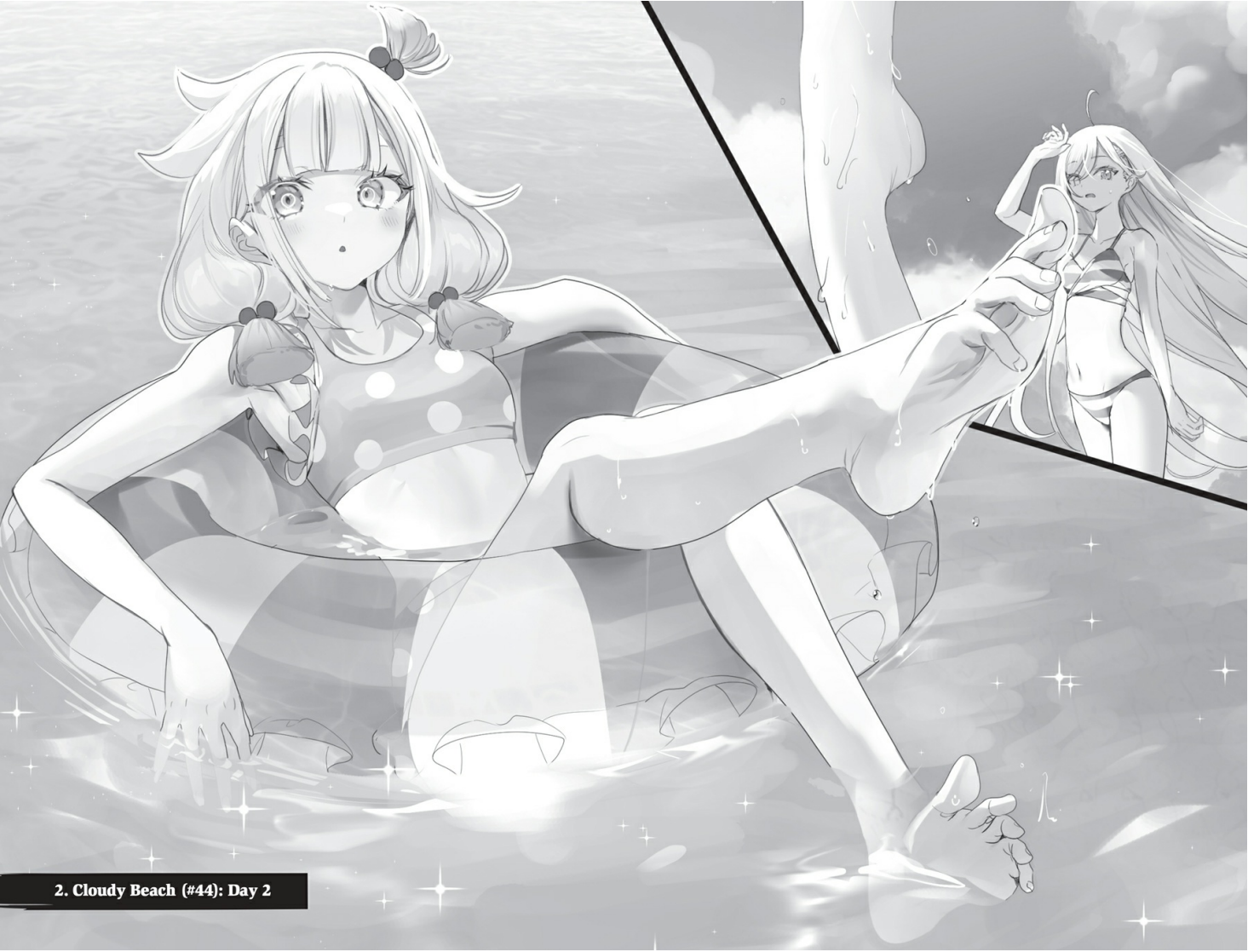
Of course, this was the first time Yuki had seen Essay dead, but she had seen a body in a similar state in the past. It had been during her unforgettable ninth game, Candle Woods. The body of the legendary player Hakushi, Yuki's mentor, had been torn apart at the hands of that psychopath—and the corpse before Yuki at this very moment gave off the exact same impression.

However, like Hakushi, that psychopath should have died in Candle Woods. In fact, it had been Yuki herself who had ended the woman's life by stabbing her repeatedly with a knife shaped like a bamboo leaf. Yuki could still vividly remember the sensation of clutching the blade and thrusting her entire left fist into the psychopath's stomach.

So why?

Why was there another mutilated corpse here?

**(11/11)**



2. Cloudy Beach (#44): Day 2

**(0/15)**

*Candle Woods.*

Yuki's ninth game, the game that had led to her decision to make a living as a player. No other game had been as special as that one, and Yuki was not alone in thinking so. Not a single soul in the industry was unaware of Candle Woods—it represented a watershed moment in the history of death games, with players regularly referring to time periods as “pre–” and “post–Candle Woods.”

The game was infamous for its high player count and low survival rate. There had been a total of 330 participants divided across two teams, but hardly any had managed to clear the game and survive. The majority of the game's players—the majority of the regular players in the industry at the time—had been killed as a consequence of a certain player going berserk.

That player's name was Kyara.

She was a homicidal maniac with agarwood-colored hair who had joined the game with a goal not to survive—but to *kill*. Making full use of her skill set, which was the polar opposite of a typical player's, she had driven the industry to the brink of collapse.

Much time had passed since then, and the industry had seemingly made a near-full recovery from the damage she had caused.

However—Essay's mutilated body before Yuki brought the handiwork of that psychopath to her mind. The sight could very well be a sign that everything would once again collapse into oblivion.

**(1/15)**

Seven players gathered in Koyomi's cottage.

Like the previous day, the players gathered around a table. Only two things about the situation were different. The first was that Mitsuba did not open the door to the fridge, either because she was not in the mood to eat or because she simply lacked an appetite. The second was, needless to say, the fact that they were down one girl.

The body of the missing player, Essay, had been left the way it had been found. Thanks to the Preservation Treatment, the players did not need to worry about the corpse rotting even if it was left out in the open, so they'd decided to first carry out their morning meeting.

Naturally, the conversation revolved around one particular topic.

“—There are a number of things I find curious.”

It was Koyomi who spoke first. She had the same hoarse voice and was wearing the same short coat as the previous day. It seemed she would take the helm as discussion leader.

“It's obvious what we need to figure out—why did Essay die?” Koyomi clearly enunciated her words, ensuring that the other players would not fail to hear them.

Why did Essay die? That went without saying—because this was a death game. The “death” aspect of the game, which had remained hidden the previous day, had finally reared its ugly head and sank its sharp fangs into her.

“Based on what we know,” Maguma said, maintaining her usual tough face, “it's gotta be murder. Can't imagine anything other than a living being tearing apart Essay's body with that much care.”

Initially, the group had theorized that this was an escape game, the kind of game in which players had to flee a designated space while evading dangerous traps that were lying in wait. However, nobody believed Essay had died in such a trap. The way her body had been mutilated was far too deliberate to have been the work of an automated device, and as far as Yuki had seen, there hadn't been anything resembling a trap inside Essay's cottage. Since none of the

other cottages seemed to contain traps, it was implausible to assume Essay's was the only one that'd been rigged.

This meant *someone* must have killed her.

"Question is, who did her in? It could've been the work of a trained animal or an assassin invited by the organizers. Or maybe..." Maguma trailed off, but it was clear where her sentence was heading.

"Let's start by sharing everything we know for certain," Koyomi suggested. "We're looking at two possibilities. The first is that there's someone other than us on this island under orders to attack players, and they killed Essay."

That would make this a survival game, just like Yuki's fortieth game in the amusement park. In that case, all seven players in the room would have to work together as a team.

"Probability-wise, I don't buy it," Maguma said. "We looked all over the island yesterday. If anyone else was here, we would've run into them."

"Exactly. That increases the likelihood of the second possibility—that we eight are indeed the only people on this island, and that the murderer is among us."

The players exchanged glances.

Koyomi continued, "If you stop to think about it, doesn't everything seem to point that way? After eight people spend a night on a secluded island in the middle of the ocean, with nowhere to escape, a dismembered body suddenly turns up. It's a textbook setting for a suspense story. It feels like it has to be that sort of game."

A closed circle mystery—was that the name?

This subgenre of detective fiction depicted murder cases that occur in an enclosed space shut off from the outside world, such as on an island at sea or in a mountain villa during a blizzard. Since Yuki rarely read novels, much less mysteries, she had never personally encountered such a work before, but she was at least familiar with the term.

"...If the murderer is one of us," Mitsuba said, resting her head on her hands, "then why did they kill Essay?"



“Cause that’s their victory condition, of course. Whoever it is would have been informed in advance that they were going to play the role of the ‘culprit.’ In that case, they would have to kill a certain number of players... Either two or three, I’d reckon.”

Two or three—Koyomi had probably reached that conclusion after factoring in the average survival rate. The vast majority of games were designed so that at least half of the participating players could survive. Yuki surmised three was the most likely number.

“Then...what do the rest of us have to do to win?”

“Who knows. Maybe we only need to survive, or maybe we need to unmask the culprit. Or perhaps, as we discussed yesterday, we’ll have to escape the island by rowing a raft all the way to land.”

“For now, it seems like we can focus on survival,” Yuki said, jumping in.

“Why’s that?” Koyomi asked.

“None of the rules have been explained to us. If we need to play detective and ultimately identify the culprit, wouldn’t the organizers convey that to us in a clearer way? Like setting the game in a spooky mansion and dressing us in deerstalkers and trench coats. It’s way too far-fetched to expect us to make the leap from the information we currently have to concluding that we need to investigate the scene and deduce the killer. And as we learned yesterday, escaping the island seems near-unfeasible.”

Koyomi appeared convinced by Yuki’s logic.

Yuki continued, “The rules haven’t been made clear because we don’t have any need for them, don’t you think? The players who aren’t the culprit simply have to survive for a designated period of time to clear the game. Meanwhile, the culprit needs to kill a certain number of players within that same time frame.”

Yuki turned her gaze to the refrigerator.

“Mind if I open that?”

“...? Be my guest.”

With Koyomi's permission, Yuki opened the door to the fridge. Inside were chilly bottles of *ramune* and packaged foods.

"How many packs did you eat yesterday?" Yuki asked.

"Two. Factoring in the ones Mitsuba ate, there should be four fewer than what was there initially."

"Then there was twenty-one meals' worth of food to start with."

Currently, the fridge contained seventeen packs. Adding back the four that had been consumed the previous day, that made twenty-one. Yuki could only think of one logical reason why it hadn't been a round number like twenty.

"You mean to say this game will last for a week?" Koyomi asked.

Even a grade-schooler could carry out the simple calculation. Twenty-one meals divided by three meals a day equaled seven days. Although the portion size of a pack was slightly less than appropriate for a single meal, and there likely wouldn't be any players who would want to routinely eat three meals a day in the middle of a death game, it was safe to assume the quantity of food was conveying a message about the game's duration.

"It's too risky to say for certain, though." Yuki closed the refrigerator door. "There's no definitive evidence. The little food we have is precious, so we should be careful to consume it without considering the consequences. And even though I'm the one saying this...I could be the culprit making up lies."

It was possible Koyomi was right about the players needing to actually unmask the culprit. Maybe the rules weren't clear because the players simply hadn't explored everywhere they needed to. Even if it seemed like they could clear the game by waiting out the week, Yuki wasn't in any kind of mood to spend the whole time doing nothing but eating and sleeping in her cottage.

Koyomi shot a glare at Mitsuba. "You hear that? The food is precious," she said in an annoyed tone. "You better return what you ate yesterday."

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh?' me. Got it? After this meeting, we're going to your cottage."

*After this meeting.*

As if spurred by those words, Mozuku spoke up. “Um, about that... What are we going to do today?”

The players all focused their attention on Mozuku, who was visibly worried.

“Are we...going to stick together in a group like yesterday?” The concern in her voice was as rich as a piece of fatty tuna.

The reason for her distress was obvious—she was nervous about the culprit being in their midst. Sticking together and acting as a collective group would mean spending time with the killer.

Of course, as evidenced by elementary school students walking to school in groups, it was safer to stick together than to be by oneself. With everyone banding together, the culprit would find it difficult to incite trouble. Still, Yuki could understand Mozuku’s anxiety.

“Count me out.” Maguma broke the silence. “The culprit is pretty much confirmed to be one of us. Being with them is way too dangerous. I’m gonna go it alone.”

“That’s exactly the thing you shouldn’t do.” Mitsuba smirked. “The people who go off on their own are the first ones killed. Don’t you know the first rule of thrillers?”

“I’m not gonna go down easy,” Maguma replied in the same forceful tone. “Even if everyone here ends up my enemy—I’ll strike you all down.”

Nobody could respond with the same level of conviction.

A giant player reminiscent of a bear. Yuki was well aware from past games that the woman’s muscles were not just for show. No player could stand a chance against her in a head-on fight. Her claim of being able to defeat the other six players simultaneously was by no means an exaggeration.

In Maguma’s case, she would be safer alone. The risk of being caught off guard by someone nearby far outweighed the danger of being by herself.

“Those of you who want to flock together, go right ahead. But I’m gonna go my own way.”

“Me too,” said an unfamiliar voice. It came from Hizumi—the absent-minded

player who had only said a handful of words the previous day. “I’d rather be alone, too.”

“...You two aren’t team players, huh?” Koyomi gave a wry grin. “Well, whatever. We’re all free to do as we see fit. Besides, it’s by no means certain there’s a killer in our midst.”

The theory of the culprit being among them was credible only because their search had turned up nothing the previous day. There was no hard evidence backing the logic. Maybe there actually was an assassin sent by the organizers who had either escaped detection or had arrived by night. The probability of the culprit being outside the group of players was not negligible.

“Still... Even if we do as we see fit, we’ll run into trouble if we aren’t coordinated to some degree. This game won’t be easy if we don’t know who’s alive or dead, right? So how about we gather for a daily meeting, just in the mornings? We’ll share what we did the day before and any new discoveries we made. We can act according to our own judgment, but we’ll mandate gathering here every morning. Does that sound good?” Koyomi turned to Hizumi and Maguma. “It’s not like either of you want to be alone the entire time, right?”

“...Well, I guess,” Maguma said. Her emotionless expression was likely a facade. “If we’re having meetings...do we have to reveal everything? Can we reserve the right to remain silent?”

“That’s fine. After all, the culprit certainly won’t tell the truth...and it’s not like the rest of us are unconditional allies. Feel free to keep your mouth shut if that’s what you want. Though, I believe speaking the truth will lessen the extent to which people suspect you of being the culprit.”

Maguma scoffed at Koyomi’s remark.

In these games, the attitudes of participants varied widely. Some were like Yuki, preferring to cooperate with fellow players in clearing games when possible, while others were like Maguma and Hizumi, preferring to act as lone wolves. Just as the culprit would attempt to hide their deeds, so too might other players conceal information to improve their odds of survival.

“Any other questions?” Koyomi took a look around the room.

After confirming that nobody had anything they wished to say, she continued, “Then we’ll disband for today. See you tomorrow. Hopefully, we’ll all still be among the living.”

### **(3/15)**

Maguma was the first to leave the cottage, followed by Hizumi. Mitsuba attempted to head out, too, but as she got up—

“You’re not going anywhere,” Koyomi said, stopping the girl in her tracks and making her sit back down with a pout.

The other three players—Mozuku, Airi, and Yuki—remained perfectly still around the table.

After gauging the attitudes of everyone else, Airi spoke up. “I’m thinking of paying a visit to Essay’s cottage... Would you all care to join me?”

A short silence followed.

Mitsuba was the first to respond. “I’ll pass. It’s too much of a hassle.”

“I’ll come with,” Yuki said. “I have a couple of things I want to investigate... But Airi, if you want to go to the scene of the crime, does that mean you plan to track down the culprit?”

“Yes. That is my intention,” Airi answered with a sullen look on her face, one that signaled exasperation at her life.

Running counter to her expression, Airi’s approach seemed awfully aggressive. Yuki found that surprising, but after giving it some thought, she realized it may actually have been well within her character. After all, Airi had killed five players in her first game, Candle Woods. Despite her gloomy countenance, she was someone who would get things done when they needed doing.

Airi glanced at the remaining two players—Koyomi and Mozuku. “I’d like for you two to join us if you’re able... Safety in numbers, as they say.”

In this kind of game, there were two ways to ensure one’s safety. The first was to act alone, as Maguma and Hizumi had elected to do. Not allowing other

players to get close would naturally decrease one's odds of being killed. The second was, as Airi had just suggested, sticking together in a large group. With multiple sets of watchful eyes on alert, the culprit would find it harder to act. The one approach to avoid at all costs would be acting in a *small group*, one perfectly sized for the culprit to wipe out with ease.

"I don't mind, but..." Koyomi responded, "can I take care of some business first? There's something I need to claim from this little troublemaker."

She pointed her thumb at the "troublemaker," Mitsuba, who pouted once more. Yuki thought back to earlier in the meeting, when Koyomi had demanded Mitsuba return the food she had eaten the previous day.

"That's fine," Airi replied. "Actually...we'll go with you. It would be dangerous for the two of you to be by yourselves."

"I-I'll join. Please let me go with you," Mozuku said, bringing the group to four.

"You're really serious about this, huh?" Mitsuba said to the others. She had clasped her hands on the table and was resting her chin on them. "We're on a heavenly beach, but you're really going to spend your time playing detective instead?"

"It's more bizarre for a player to be acting so frivolously in her thirtieth game," Koyomi shot back, bringing the girl's game count into the conversation.

However, Mitsuba showed no concern. "There's really a culprit, huh? I was watching everyone during the meeting, but I have no clue who it could be. Guess they're a pro at hiding it."

In truth, Yuki had covertly been doing the same. She had thought the culprit, however used to killing they were as a player, would have acted suspiciously after dismembering a human being with such brutality. But she had learned nothing more than Mitsuba—it had been impossible to tell who was responsible. Everyone had looked somewhat more serious than they had the day prior, but none of their behaviors could be deemed suspicious. Yuki had even felt unsettled about the overall *lack* of reaction to Essay's death. Although she was certainly in no position to judge, the players were all far too accustomed to the sight of death.

“Koyomi, did you hear any screams or noises last night?” Mitsuba asked. “Your cottage is right next to Essay’s, right? Were there no sounds of a struggle?”

“I didn’t hear anything. And these ears of mine are pretty sharp,” Koyomi answered. She then asked in return, “How about you? Isn’t your cottage to the left of hers?”

“Nothing at all. I had no idea there was a murder going on.” Mitsuba sounded far too carefree to be talking about a killing. “The problem is, any of us could have done it. These cottages can’t be locked. All it would have taken was sneaking in while Essay was asleep and killing her with a single blow. Sounds like a piece of cake.”

Apparently, Yuki’s cottage was not the only one lacking a lock. While they could put up a barricade, as she had done the previous night, preventing an intruder from opening the door at all was basically implausible.

“It certainly wouldn’t have been a ‘piece of cake,’” Koyomi rebutted.

“Wouldn’t it?”

“Nope. Sure, entering a cottage might not be hard, but going up against Essay? She was a seasoned veteran in her fiftieth game. Even pre–Candle Woods, there were hardly any players of her caliber. I wouldn’t consider it a piece of cake to sneak into her room and kill her.”

Koyomi’s explanation made perfect sense. Even in this game filled with experienced players, Essay stood out. She would surely have been able to wake up on command the moment someone entered her cottage. Even if she had been ambushed in the dark, it was unthinkable that she had gone down so easily.

“Why did they go after Essay?” Airi jumped into the discussion. “If I were the culprit, I don’t think I would intentionally target the player with the highest game count... I don’t mean to offend...but I would probably go after Mozuku or Koyomi.”

Mozuku visibly recoiled at the sudden mention of her name.

This game was number ten for Mozuku, and number twenty for Koyomi.



Although a player's game count was not necessarily a reflection of their abilities, there was some degree of correlation. If the culprit only needed to kill a certain number of players, it would be most logical to start by targeting the weakest of the bunch and working up from there.

"Maybe they wanted to cut off the head, so to speak," Yuki said. "Remember how Essay was acting as the brains of the group yesterday? The culprit may have intentionally gone after her to prevent us from coordinating..."

"And while Essay did have the highest game count, she didn't exactly look strong," Koyomi said. "That could be part of the reason. She wasn't the kind of player to fight with her fists, you know?"

"Exactly. True to her appearance, she was more of a strategist."

Yuki had been in multiple games with Essay in the past, and as far as she knew, Essay's brains were her biggest strength. She fell on the completely opposite side of the spectrum as physical monsters like Maguma. It wouldn't be unreasonable to think that the culprit had taken one look at her slender body and then concluded she was an easy target.

"We may be able to uncover why the culprit went after her by investigating the scene," Airi said.

Her words set the group into motion.

"Let's get going." Koyomi stood up.

Yuki, Airi, and Mozuku followed suit. Only Mitsuba did not move a muscle, until Koyomi told her, "You're coming with." With a sour face, Mitsuba rose to her feet.

**(4/15)**

The five players went outside and walked across the sand, heading for Mitsuba's cottage.

On the way there, Yuki spent time thinking about the cottages. From right to left, the cottages were assigned to her, Hizumi, Airi, Maguma, Koyomi, Essay, Mitsuba, and Mozuku. They were spaced apart equidistantly, and reaching an

adjacent cottage took several minutes on foot. Walking from Koyomi's cottage to Mitsuba's—a distance of two cottages—therefore required twice the time.

The group retrieved two packs of *takoyaki* and one bottle of *ramune* from Mitsuba's cottage.

“Well, this is my stop,” Mitsuba said, staying behind.

The party, now reduced to four, quickly doubled back to Koyomi's cottage to store the retrieved items in her fridge. They had completed their first mission without any issue.

The four players then made their way to Essay's cottage. Unable to dismiss the sense of looming danger despite being in a large group, Yuki remained wary of the other three as she walked. The sand crunched beneath the players' feet as they proceeded onward. It was the second day of the game, and the previously immaculate shore was now littered with footprints. Since the players each wore different footwear, ranging from sandals to shoes, they left behind unique footprints. For a second, Yuki thought they would be able to determine who had visited Essay's cottage by investigating the imprints in the sand, but she immediately realized that would be out of the question. After all, the cottages were built on stilts in shallow water, not on the shore. Although the four of them were leaving behind footprints by walking on the shore, someone wading through the water would not. Naturally, the culprit must have gone that route to carry out the murder.

It took little time to reach Essay's cottage, as it neighbored Koyomi's. Yuki stood before the entrance and, imagining what waited beyond, opened the door.

However—

Although she had mentally prepared herself for what she'd expected to see, she was taken aback.

“—Wha...?”

Yuki turned around. Airi, Koyomi, and Mozuku were behind her. The three of them seemed as cautious as Yuki had just been; they lingered some distance away. From where they stood, they could not see inside the cottage.

After noticing Yuki's surprise, Airi asked, "...Is something wrong?"

"Um, here, look."

Experiencing a momentary lapse in language, Yuki stepped aside. The other three came closer, and after reaching a position where they could peek through the doorway—

"...Huh...?" "Oh my..." "Wha...?"

—the players offered differing reactions.

Inside the room, Essay's corpse was *nowhere to be seen*.

The torso on top of the table, the limbs lying on the sofa and bed, the numerous organs laid out by the entrance—everything had vanished.

Yuki wondered if they had entered the wrong cottage, but she immediately dismissed the thought. There were two cottages to the left and five to the right—it was assuredly the same place she had entered earlier that morning. And although Essay's body was missing, the room was in the exact same state as before, with white fluff scattered all over, as if someone had ripped up a cotton comforter. This was undoubtedly Essay's cottage, the place where her body should have been.

Where it *should* have been.

"What does this mean...?" Yuki stepped inside; entering was much easier now that the organs lined up on the floor had disappeared.

"Could...someone have come in here before us and cleaned things up?" Airi suggested after following Yuki inside.

That was a reasonable explanation. If the corpse hadn't gotten up and walked away by itself, and if a mischievous breeze hadn't whisked it away, then someone must have carried it out.

In that case, the responsible party could only be one of two people.

"Maguma or Hizumi?"

Those two had left Koyomi's cottage right after the end of the morning meeting. Since the other five players had stayed put for a little while, either

Maguma or Hizumi had to be responsible for taking away Essay's body. Perhaps the two had even worked together to do so.

"But why? To give Essay a proper burial?"

While burying the dead was an accepted custom in society at large, that was not the case in the world of death games. Giving someone a burial in a game venue would make neither the deceased nor the organizers happy. For corpses that did crop up, it was common practice to either leave them be or move them to a place where they would not get in the way; both Maguma and Hizumi should have been well aware of this.

"This may sound rude, but I don't think either of them is the type to do that."

"I agree. There must be some other reason at play..." Airi put her hand to her lips, as if deep in thought. "Actually, if we assume the two of them are responsible—even if they were working together, there wouldn't have been enough time. No more than five minutes passed between the time they left the cottage and the time we went outside..."

Although the body would have been lighter due to blood loss and easier to carry due to being dismembered, it still would have had to weigh around one hundred pounds. Even Maguma would have a hard time carrying something that heavy.

When Yuki and the others had gone to retrieve food from Mitsuba's cottage, neither Maguma nor Hizumi had been on the beach. They would have needed to clean up the body and take off in the few minutes the others had been talking after the meeting. It would have been physically impossible to pull off such a feat.

None of the seven players could have carried away Essay's body. Thus, the logical conclusion was—

"Gives more credence to the theory of there being an outside culprit," Koyomi said, touching the table from which the corpse had disappeared. "The assassin let loose by the organizers cleaned up the body during our meeting... That's the only explanation."

The discovery of the corpse had caused their daily meeting to last quite a

while. There would have been plenty of time for someone to transport the body while the group had been having their extended discussion. Consequently, it was more logical to think that the culprit was not among the players.

Even if that was true, however, why the body had been moved was still a mystery. If it was also the work of the killer, then it certainly would not have been an act of mourning.

Would an investigation of the body have turned up something undesirable for the culprit?

## **(5/15)**

Although the disappearance of Essay's body came as a shock, it didn't change the group's plans. The four players began to investigate the scene.

The first thing that stood out about the room was Essay's blood. White fluff filled the cottage just as it had in the morning, either because whoever had taken away her body had been unable to collect it, or because they hadn't needed to. Because the blood had puffed up, it was difficult to determine exactly how much had been shed, but there was no question it had been a considerable amount—enough to have killed Essay.

However, contrary to the gruesome sight, there were no signs of a struggle. Nothing in the room had been destroyed, and there was not a single scratch on the wooden walls or floor. Both Koyomi and Mitsuba had testified to not hearing anything, and most likely, there would have been little to hear. The culprit had murdered Essay silently.

The group immediately concluded the culprit had noiselessly come in through the entrance, as there were no signs of damage to the windows or walls, nor was there any evidence of something having been placed in front of the door. It appeared Essay had neglected to put up a barricade. Maybe she had thought it pointless, since the door could still be opened, or maybe she had felt confident in her ability to fend off an intruder. Or perhaps she hadn't felt much need for caution, as the rules of the game had still been unclear the previous day.

Yuki was hoping Essay had secretly left behind a dying message, but there was

nothing of the sort. The group scoured the room, but they failed to discover any information—intentionally or unintentionally left behind—that could lead to the killer’s identity.

“Well, this is all we got for our troubles,” Yuki said with a hint of sarcasm.

She was staring into the open fridge. Evidently, the killer had not taken anything from it—six days’ worth of food remained inside.

“...Are you thinking of eating?” Airi asked.

“It’s not like these are offerings to the dead,” Yuki responded. “We won’t incur the wrath of the gods if we take stuff.”

Yuki grabbed a *ramune* bottle and opened it by pushing down on the marble. She offered it to Airi.

“...Thank you,” Airi said before accepting it.

Yuki opened another bottle for herself and took a sip. Even in a room where a tragedy had taken place, the drink was refreshing.

After taking out another two bottles, she asked, “You two want any?” The faces of Koyomi and Mozuku appeared distorted on the glass. “I’m feeling a little hungry, so why don’t we break for a meal?”

Yuki heated up four packs of food in the microwave. Since eating at the table where Essay’s body had been would not do their appetites any favors, the group stepped outside. Yuki and Koyomi gobbled the food down like they were eating a normal meal, and although neither Airi nor Mozuku seemed particularly at ease, they still ate, too.

“Shall we go over what we know?” Airi suggested while eating. “...Although... there isn’t much information to sort through.”

“Better than doing nothing,” Yuki said, offering her support.

“Then let’s start by narrowing down the time of death. When was the last time you all saw Essay alive?”

Everyone had the same answer: the previous evening, when they had dispersed and returned to their cottages.

“And we found her dead this morning... There weren’t any noises hinting at violence during the night, right?” Airi asked Koyomi, whose cottage was adjacent to Essay’s.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Koyomi answered. “Or more accurately, I wasn’t listening. No idea what happened after I nodded off. Even if our cottages are adjacent, there’s a fair bit of distance between them, and I certainly wouldn’t notice anything while sleeping.”

“How about her cottage lights? Were they on when you went to bed?”

“I wasn’t paying special attention to her cottage, but I’d say they probably were.”

“If we assume the crime happened after Essay turned off the lights and went to sleep, that would still mean it occurred sometime between last night and this morning...”

“If we factor in the time needed to dismember the body, it couldn’t have been later than early morning. The span of time is too long.”

Furthermore, since there were no clocks on the island, they couldn’t accurately determine the time of day, so the exact range of time during which the crime could have occurred remained uncertain. It was unlikely that would contribute to identifying the killer.

With these kinds of murder cases, it was typically common practice to estimate the time of death by examining the body’s state of rigor mortis, but the disappearance of Essay’s corpse made that impossible. The only way to narrow down the time range of the crime would be through player testimonies. Right now, it seemed unlikely the group would uncover anything new about the topic.

“Shall we discuss the method of killing next?” Airi suggested. “Between last night and early morning today, the culprit sneaked into Essay’s cottage. Since the windows and exterior walls are undamaged, we can assume that whoever it was entered through the front door. They probably killed Essay in one fell swoop; there were no signs of a struggle. After that, the culprit dismembered Essay’s body before returning to their own cottage.”

“Dismembered... Does that mean the culprit has a weapon?” Mozuku asked, speaking her first words in quite some time. “I can’t imagine someone accomplishing that barehanded...”

“I’d say so, yeah,” Yuki agreed. “The organizers must have given the culprit different tools to make it easier for them. At the very least, the killer definitely has a blade that can cut through flesh. And considering how easily they took out a player of Essay’s caliber, we can practically confirm they have more than that.”

Mozuku visibly quivered.

“If they’ve been supplied with weapons, then searching everyone’s cottages may lead to something...,” Airi suggested.

“Oh, no, but...” For some reason, Mozuku showed a great deal of reluctance. “Wouldn’t it be strange if the killer left weapons in their cottage...? Surely they’d hide them somewhere else...”

Her attitude seemed awfully suspicious. Perhaps Mozuku had something in her cottage she didn’t want other players to find. Still, Yuki agreed with the girl’s logic. The culprit wouldn’t be so incompetent as to leave evidence out in the open linking them to the murder.

“It’s not like anyone would want to casually invite other people in, either,” Koyomi said. “Forget an old lady like me, you wouldn’t feel comfortable having a teenage girl searching your room, would you?”

Although Koyomi had said it as a joke, she made a good point. The thought of the culprit possibly looking around every inch of one’s cottage would naturally make players hesitant about allowing a search. Besides, it would likely be difficult to search all the cottages. The two players who had chosen to act alone—Maguma and Hizumi—would certainly signal disapproval.

“...I suppose so...,” Airi said. Although she looked as if she wanted to object, she quickly changed tack. “Then let’s try to paint a picture of a culprit. For now, we have two theories—they’re either one of us or an outside party.”

“I’m not really buying either...,” Yuki said. “If the culprit is a player, they would have had to carry out Essay’s body in the few minutes after the meeting. If



they're an outside party, then it's odd we didn't run into them yesterday."

"We can set that aside for now. There's something more important to talk about," Koyomi said. "First, the culprit has a blade sharp enough to chop up a human body. And second, they managed to kill Essay, an experienced player in her fiftieth game, without her resisting. There's one question we should be asking: How can we protect ourselves from a killer like that?"

The air suddenly grew heavy. It was a reality none of them wanted to face head-on.

To reiterate, a player's game count did not necessarily reflect their ability. However, there was a correlation. Essay, the player with the highest game count among them, had been taken out. This implied that, if one of Yuki's group was targeted, they had absolutely no guarantee of safety, despite having the advantage of being able to exercise caution.

The time of the murder. The method. The culprit's profile. Soon after they had covered all those topics, and their moods had somewhat darkened, the group finished their meal.

"Um, Airi?" Yuki called out.

"Yes?"

"Can I talk about how the corpse seemed familiar?"

Airi's ordinarily gloomy face became even gloomier.

"I'm positive I killed *her*, but I wonder if she's somehow still alive... That psychopath, I mean."

"Well...I don't think she did this herself..." Airi gave a serious response. "But if there's someone like her around, then we need to be careful... This game might end up becoming another great tragedy like Candle Woods."

"Yeah, you're right."

"What are you two talking about?" Koyomi interrupted. "What was that about a psychopath?"

"Oh, um...", Yuki replied. "There was a player who enjoyed cutting up people in a game we were in long ago—Candle Woods."

The mention of the game's name seemed to draw the veteran player's interest.

"Huh...," Koyomi said.

"Her name was Kyara. She's long dead by now, so she can't show up in this game...but it's weird a corpse resembling her handiwork turned up. The culprit might be someone with a similar disposition."

"If it's not the psychopath herself, then maybe someone connected to her is in this game," Airi continued. "Remember? She had a protégé...Moegi. Maybe she had others, too, and one of them is among the players..."

Moegi. The name brought back memories for Yuki. That girl was as memorable as Kyara herself.

As in many other industries, the death-game industry featured countless mentor-protégé relationships. Since one wrong step could be fatal in this world, everyone in it understood the importance of learning the ropes from someone more experienced. Finding a mentor as soon as one could was essential for a player's long-term survival. For a mentor, taking on a protégé was equivalent to adding someone to their own team, growing the number of players who would ally with them out of common interest.

There was nothing stipulating those connections be one-on-one. Kyara could very well have taken on protégés besides Moegi. If one of them was in this game, the most likely candidate was the absent-minded—

Yuki shook her head.

It was too early to jump to conclusions. Kyara didn't have a monopoly on mutilating corpses. It wouldn't be strange if there was someone else around with the same fondness for the act, regardless of how unusual it was.

And yet Yuki felt nervous agitation. It wasn't a by-product of a sugar rush from the soda she had just drunk—it was an animalistic instinct. Although her sixth sense wasn't as sharp as Koyomi's—who had turned down an invitation to Candle Woods—over the course of her career as a player, Yuki had acquired the ability to detect foreboding premonitions of the future.

A game filled with elite players. Yuki's forty-fourth game.

*I'm sure this one will leave a mark on me.*

**(6/15)**

After heading back inside the cottage to throw away the empty packs of food and *ramune* bottles, the four players left the area.

“What should we do now?” Yuki asked the others. “Should we keep sticking together?”

“...No, let's call it here.” The response came from Airi. “You can continue to do so if you wish, but I want to be by myself.”

Yuki found that surprising. After all, Airi was the one who had invited everyone else to investigate the scene.

“Wouldn't it be safer to act as a group?” Yuki asked.

“Yes, but...if that's all we do, I don't think we can survive.”

Although those words did not offer much of an explanation, Yuki understood their implication.

Airi likely wanted to arm herself. Since they believed the culprit had weapons at their disposal, the immediate priority for all players was to prepare as much as they could to counter them. Although there were no traditional weapons on the island, a player who had surmounted the Wall of Thirty, like Airi, was probably bursting with ideas on how to outfit herself.

If that was her goal, acting alone would be better than staying in a group. While it wouldn't be inconceivable for Airi to prepare supplies while in a large group, she would run the risk of revealing her hand to the culprit, who was possibly lurking in their midst. The players had been temporarily working together because it was safer to do so, but after investigating the scene, Airi must have determined that going it alone was better.

“M-me too,” Mozuku chimed in. “I'd also prefer to be by myself...”

Yuki was even more surprised; she hadn't expected to hear that from a player like Mozuku. Combined with the fact the girl had objected to a search of her cottage moments ago, she seemed to be plotting something.

“...Can’t really call a pair of two a group, can you?” Koyomi looked at Yuki. “Shall we follow their lead and go our own ways?”

“Sounds good,” Yuki replied. “Let’s call it a day here, then. Hopefully, we’ll see one another again tomorrow.”

The four players bid farewell to one another and disbanded.

Yuki observed where the other three were headed: Airi walked toward the forest, as the players had done the previous day, and Koyomi and Mozuku went toward the beach in different directions, each going to their own cottage.

After watching them disperse, Yuki also took her leave. She first headed in the direction of the beach—but not toward her cottage. Instead, she was hoping to explore the perimeter of the island. During the search the previous day, she had only gotten to see the beach and the forest—the interior of the island—so she decided to look around the water’s edge. Her plan was to first search the shallow waters before heading a little deeper into the ocean. Although her top priority was preparing for a clash with the culprit, searching the game area was equally important, since it could allow her to uncover more of the game’s rules or find items prepared by the organizers.

So Yuki slowly waded through the shallow waters of the beach.

Immediately, she ran into another player.

“Oh, Yuki. Hello there.”

It was Mitsuba. The girl was in the ocean again today, floating atop a swim ring.

Yuki stopped a good distance away from Mitsuba, ensuring that she could make a quick getaway if the girl was the killer.

“...All that time yesterday playing around wasn’t enough for you?” Yuki asked.

“Not even close,” Mitsuba replied. “I mean, do you see how gorgeous the ocean is? One day is nowhere near enough to get my fill. It’s like that proverb about how you don’t get bored of a pretty woman in three days.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be that you *do* get bored of a pretty woman in three days...?”

“Is that how it goes? Anyway, I want to enjoy myself while I’m still able—it’s not like I can swim in the ocean if I’m hurt or dead. That would literally be rubbing salt in the wound.”

This game was supposed to be Mitsuba’s thirtieth, a milestone moment in a player’s career known as the Wall of Thirty. Despite that, she did not show even the slightest unease.

“Life’s winners are those who have fun, huh?” Yuki mused. She expected the girl to agree, but instead—

“I’m not a fan of that saying,” Mitsuba replied.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, isn’t it pretty glum? The idea of life having winners and losers. It’s not at all clear if you should interpret that as a good thing or a bad thing.”

*I guess that’s one way of looking at it,* Yuki thought.

The conversation came to a screeching halt.

“...Um...” Finding the silence awkward, Yuki searched for a topic. “Oh, have you learned anything new about the game?”

“Nope, nothing. No clues. Not even a single piece of trash. I tried heading farther out into the ocean, but I still couldn’t see any land.” Mitsuba kicked the water, sending both the swim ring and her body spinning. “You’re probably right, Yuki. About this being a survival game with a player playing the role of a murderer, I mean. Your theory ties everything together.”

Mitsuba thrust her legs into the water, slowing the rotational inertia acting on her body. When the swim ring came to a stop, the girl was directly facing Yuki.

“You just came from investigating the scene, right? Did you find anything?”

Yuki saw no problem with telling Mitsuba about what had happened. “Just the opposite, in fact. *We lost* something.”

“Meaning...?”

“Essay’s corpse is gone.”

“...Oh?”

“Her fluffed-up blood was still everywhere, though. It’s like her body vanished into thin air. The culprit probably took it away.”

“That’s an important clue.” Mitsuba stroked her chin. “So that means either Maguma or Hizumi has to be the culprit, right? The rest of us have alibis.”

“Not necessarily. If we assume one or both of them was responsible, they wouldn’t have had time to carry out the body. There were only a few minutes between when those two went off and when the rest of us left the cottage. In that sense, they both have alibis, too.”

“Ah... Point taken.”

“So we were wondering if the actual killer is an outside party. That theory has holes of its own, though... Anyway, we couldn’t find any conclusive evidence linking to the culprit’s identity.”

Mitsuba again kicked the water, causing her body to spin with the swim ring. “What’s your personal take on the situation? Who do you think is the most likely culprit? I don’t care if it’s a stab in the dark—I just want to hear what’s on your mind.”

Yuki took some time to organize her thoughts. “...I’d say either Hizumi or Mozuku.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Hizumi is...hard to get a read on. If she’s responsible, it makes sense that she was able to keep a blank face at this morning’s meeting.”

Yuki decided against sharing the real reason she suspected Hizumi—the girl reminded her of the psychopath from long ago.

“As for Mozuku... I dunno, it feels like she’s hiding something. This is supposed to be her tenth game. Maybe she’s only acting nervous, and she has an ulterior motive. Still, there’s no evidence pointing to her being the killer.”

“Oh yeah, I can see that.”

“How about you, Mitsuba? Any thoughts on the culprit?”

“Me? Well...” Mitsuba took the same amount of time as Yuki to think. “I think Mozuku’s pretty sketchy, too. Like, it’s all in her name.”

“How so?”

“This game is called Cloudy Beach, right? And her name’s written with the characters for *ocean* and *cloud*. There’s gotta be a deeper meaning there.”

“...Seems like a coincidence to me.” Yuki narrowed her eyes. “Besides, she’s had her player name since way before this game. And yeah, while the characters themselves are a match, they mean something totally different when you put them together in a name—it’s a type of seaweed.”

“Guess so.” Mitsuba roared with laughter.

*Someone sure is carefree*, Yuki thought.

“Well, none of the others can be trusted, either,” Mitsuba continued. “Every death-game player is suspicious in their own way. There’s always the chance someone other than the culprit will use the commotion to take me out.”

“Huh...? Why?” Yuki asked. Mitsuba’s statement came out of left field.

Mitsuba seemed puzzled, as if she couldn’t understand why Yuki didn’t get it. Moments later, she shot an uneasy smile at her.

“You’re too pure, Yuki,” she said. “I can’t believe you can still be so pure in your forty-fourth game.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The world is one of resenting and being resented. That goes doubly so in this industry. Wherever I go, there could always be a player who’s vowed to kill me at the first opportunity because of something that happened in a past game.”

“Do you have anyone in particular in mind?”

“What, you think I don’t?”

*Absolutely not.*

Mitsuba was a girl who marched to the beat of her own drum and had not a single cooperative bone in her body. She was certainly the type to have many enemies.

“It’s not like you’re an exception, Yuki,” Mitsuba said. “In fact, even I have strong feelings about you.”

“...?” Yuki grew even more confused. “Isn’t this our first game together? Have we met somewhere before?”

“Not directly.” Mitsuba’s reply was similar to what Koyomi had said the day prior. “But I know *of* you, Yuki. I have for a long time.”

Mitsuba got out of her swim ring. The seawater came up to her shins, as it did with Yuki.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret,” Mitsuba said, beckoning Yuki forward. “Here, come closer so I can whisper it to you.”

Yuki hesitated. The possibility Mitsuba was the killer crossed her mind. With only two of them on the beach, approaching the girl would come at great risk.

However, Yuki’s curiosity won out. What were those “strong feelings” Mitsuba had toward her? What did she mean about knowing Yuki for a long time? Her tone had made it seem like her awareness went beyond rumors.

At a glance, Mitsuba didn’t appear to be hiding a weapon capable of dismembering someone. She didn’t seem hostile, either. Those facts came together in Yuki’s mind, leading her to conclude it would be all right to approach the girl. So Yuki walked up to Mitsuba and leaned forward.

However...

...that was a lapse in judgment, for Mitsuba’s next words caused Yuki’s mind to go blank.

“I was Mishiro’s protégé.”

**(7/15)**

*Mishiro.*

The name of a player who had a *strong* adversarial relationship with Yuki. The two had first met in Yuki’s tenth game, Scrap Building, and they had reunited in her unforgettable thirtieth game, Golden Bath. Mishiro had stood before Yuki as the embodiment of the Wall of Thirty, the harrowing trial that afflicted players like a curse.



Yuki knew Mishiro had taken at least one protégé. In fact, Yuki had met and fought her—a player by the name of Riko. Mishiro must have instructed her to kill Yuki, because the moment Riko had heard Yuki's name, she'd glared in anger and begun to attack.

As it turned out, however, Mishiro had taken another girl under her wing.

And that other protégé swept Yuki's legs out from under her.

## (8/15)

Yuki was unable to react; her feet lost contact with the ground and her balance gave out. Only after Mitsuba's *Got you!* face and the blue sky entered her field of view did Yuki finally realize what had happened. But with no way to stop herself from falling, Yuki crashed into the water with a great splash.

Then a weight pressed down on her from above.

The bubbles spewing from her mouth prevented Yuki from identifying who was to blame, but the answer was obvious: Mitsuba. She was pinning Yuki down. Although the water level only reached up to their shins, Yuki would drown if she was kept beneath the waves in a supine position. Yuki forced her mouth shut and pinched her nostrils to avoid depleting her limited supply of oxygen, then attempted to sit up using her ab muscles.

"Must've been about a year ago." Mitsuba began casually monologuing while Yuki thrashed below her. "I met Mishiro right around the time I joined these games. Apparently, she was searching for players she could turn into her protégés...or rather, her *lackeys*. Subservient girls who were empty inside and would listen to her every command. I wouldn't call myself the subservient type, but I am empty inside. That's why I caught Mishiro's eye."

At last, Yuki managed to stick her head out above water, but Mitsuba pressed down on her face, submerging her yet again.

"I wanted a mentor to help me survive a long time, so I became her protégé. And geez, was it rough. It was always *Yuki this*, *Yuki that*, around the clock with her. I've never met anyone that vindictive. She's the kind of person who would hold a grudge against her least favorite elementary school teacher her entire

life. ‘If anything happens to me, crush Yuki in my stead’—that was what she ordered me and her other protégés.”

Yuki attempted to rip Mitsuba off her, but the girl deftly stymied her efforts.

“Don’t worry; I’m not going to kill you. I quit being her protégé, after all. And I’m not empathetic enough to be motivated to act on someone else’s grudges. I’m jealous of how the other girls could so passionately devote their lives to another person. I couldn’t do that even if I wanted to.”

Indeed, Mitsuba likely had no intention of killing Yuki. After all, she still emanated no malice. But regardless of her intentions, any human would die from being submerged in water for an extended period of time without air.

“I bet you’re wondering why I’m doing this. Well, I just felt like it. I was curious what kind of person could make Mishiro so obsessed, but from what I see, she deluded herself into having an inflated view of you.”

Ultimately, Yuki failed to push off Mitsuba. Instead, Mitsuba got up. With her newfound freedom, Yuki raised her head above the water to see Mitsuba picking up her swim ring.

“Farewell, Yuki,” Mitsuba said before briskly walking away.

Yuki stood there on the beach. Catching her breath, she muttered, “...What a free spirit...”

## **(9/15)**

Now that Mitsuba was gone, Yuki was free to explore the beach with peace of mind. She walked in the shallow waters, attempted to wade out farther into the ocean, took a lap around the island, and even did a little swimming.

However, she found nothing of note. She tried swimming out a comfortable distance from the shore, but not only did she not reach land, she also couldn’t even see any land to aim for. For the second day in a row, her search had borne no fruit. Perhaps there was nothing to be found in the first place, and her theory about the game’s only rule being to survive was correct.

As Yuki continued to go around in circles, the sun started to set. Right when

she was about ready to call it a day, she realized something extremely important: The players had all spent the previous night in their cottages, but there was no rule mandating they do the same that night. Nothing was preventing them from spending the night outdoors, and in fact, they were under no obligation to sleep in the first place. With Essay's killer roaming the island, sleeping in a cottage without a lock was far more dangerous than falling asleep in front of a mirror. This was no game of werewolf; there was no need to stay in a fixed location and wait for a wolf to attack.

In reality, however, the decision about where to sleep was not so simple. Sleeping outside offered no guarantee of safety, either, and more importantly, Yuki had made no preparations to do so. The beach was by no means an eternal summer paradise, as the air became chilly after sunset. The environment was not so forgiving that a player could enjoy restful sleep by simply bringing out a mattress and blanket. And while staying up the entire night to be ready to counter the killer's attack was a viable strategy, heading into the critical moments of the game in a suboptimal, sleep-deprived condition was just as risky as sleeping inside a cottage.

So—what was the best course of action?

**(10/15)**

Night fell.

Mitsuba was in her cabin, staring off into space.

**(11/15)**

She was wide awake, since she'd taken an extended nap after returning from the beach. Although Mitsuba lay in bed, covered by a blanket, her eyes were wide open, and her cottage lights were on. Unable to decide if she was trying to fall asleep or not, she stared off into space while the seconds continued to tick away.

As she lay there fully conscious, her mind naturally wandered to various places, like how she was tired of drinking *ramune*, and the daily missions of the

mobile game she had been playing lately. But those trivial thoughts paled in comparison to the ones about the phantom girl she had fought earlier in the day.

*So that's Yuki*, she thought. She'd grown tired of hearing the name back when she'd been Mishiro's protégé. According to Mishiro, Yuki was a truly godlike player. After meeting the girl in the flesh, however, Mitsuba concluded Mishiro had been suffering from delusions. Mitsuba believed she could have easily killed Yuki if she had so wished. Yuki was neither god nor phantom—just a completely ordinary human.

Mitsuba thought her mentor foolish for having obsessed over someone so unremarkable. This opinion also extended to Mishiro's other protégés, like Riko, whose minds had been completely dominated by their mentor's nonsensical motives.

“.....”

*But she wasn't as foolish as me*, she thought.

Mishiro, the other protégés—they'd all had life in their eyes. They'd all been driven. They hadn't been frivolous, like Mitsuba. Human happiness boiled down to the extent to which one could deceive the brain inside one's head. Foolishness was not something to be pitied—it was far better to be foolish than to not even have the capacity for it.

People often called Mitsuba a “free spirit.”

She, too, believed that to be true. Nothing in the world could hold her down. Although she wasn't incapable of finding things to be fun, she would always forget those memories by the next day. There was nothing she considered particularly compelling. Nothing captivated her spirit, and nothing made her feel alive. In the end, not even her mentor, someone who'd taken great joy in controlling others, could hold sway over Mitsuba. She was hopelessly empty.

Apparently, this very quality made her fit for these games. Even when her fellow protégés had all died, even when her mentor had perished, Mitsuba remained alive. After continuing to join games whenever invited by her agent, she reached her thirtieth—the Wall of Thirty. Perhaps this one would be what finally did it for Mitsuba. Perhaps it would finally offer her something she

couldn't escape from.

From the bottom of her heart, Mitsuba hoped that would be true.

That was why, when her cottage door opened, she felt not a hint of panic.

## **(12/15)**

The intruder entered brazenly through the front door. Their face was concealed, wrapped with thin pieces of fabric cut from a gown resembling a lab coat—the outfit Essay had been wearing. The covering was not just limited to their face; it was wrapped around their whole body, making them look like a mummy. However, it was almost certainly a girl beneath those layers of cloth.

There was definitive proof the mummy intended to hurt Mitsuba: They were holding a blade of a middling size in their right hand. It was larger than a knife, but too small to be considered a sword. It was likely best described as a machete.

There was no doubt about it. They had to be the culprit.

“Good evening,” Mitsuba greeted, sitting up in bed.

The ideal strategy for survival would likely be to shout at the top of her lungs to inform other players of the culprit's presence. However, that would be a little too embarrassing, and she had no way of knowing if anyone would hear her screams. Besides, Mitsuba was probably the only player who had ignored the dangers and stayed in her cottage while knowing the killer was on the prowl. And so she didn't scream. She had a plan for how to win without needing to call for help.

“Shall we do this?” Mitsuba jumped off the bed, bouncing off the springs of the mattress.

Clinging to her blanket, Mitsuba walked straight toward the culprit. The mummy did not appear the least bit intimidated, yet they did not seem eager to accept a head-on fight, either. Their free hand—their left hand, which was also wrapped with pieces of a gown—moved ever so slightly.

Mitsuba had known exactly what they had in mind.

And because of that—*nothing happened*.

“.....?!”

Mitsuba couldn't see the mummy's expression, but they appeared to be shaken. She continued to approach the mummy, just as she had been doing in the seconds prior. The mummy was completely startled, as if witnessing an impossible feat.

Their mental agitation was not lost on Mitsuba.

The exact same moment that the mummy reacted in surprise—from Mitsuba's perspective, before the mummy had even moved their left hand—Mitsuba broke into a run. She threw off the blanket, exposing her arms and legs. With as wide a gait as she could manage, Mitsuba closed the distance between her and the intruder in just three steps. For the final step, she stomped hard on the floor, turned horizontally while in the air, and channeled all her momentum to her legs.

She was giving a flying kick.

She hit her target in the chest. The mummy staggered back, temporarily winded. Mitsuba then delivered a high kick to the mummy's face, sending the intruder flying out of the cottage into the shallow waters that reached their ankles.

Mitsuba didn't let up on her assault. After exiting the cottage herself, she swiftly retrieved the machete the mummy had dropped. Her opponent had yet to recover from the kick to the face. With light movements, Mitsuba approached the mummy—

—and thrust the blade at their chest without a moment's hesitation.

There was no recoil whatsoever. The machete plunged through the mummy's chest so easily that it felt as though it were cutting through the air.

Mitsuba let go of the machete. The weapon was so deeply embedded in the mummy's body that it reached through to their back, and it stayed in place even after Mitsuba released her grip. The image of sticking chopsticks in a bowl of rice entered her mind, and she gave a self-deprecating smile after realizing how inappropriate the comparison was.

“—You won’t be getting what you want,” Mitsuba said to the mummy, knowing her words would fall on dead ears. “I removed *them* during the day. I’m not so obedient as to let myself be bound by that shoddy contraption.”

Mitsuba looked into her cottage. More precisely, her gaze was directed at the triangular sink strainer in the kitchen. Of course, she couldn’t actually see it from outside, but in her mind, she was picturing what was tossed inside there—twelve objects in total, which had forced Mitsuba to go through a painful experience.

She had noticed *them* just a few hours prior. After awakening from her nap, she’d discovered them while blankly staring at her body. That was the moment Mitsuba had understood why Essay’s body had been so thoroughly mutilated: The act had been carried out to conceal the existence of those objects. They represented the culprit’s biggest advantage against their victims, constituting a scythe of death that not even the fifty-game veteran Essay could escape from.

However, Mitsuba had noticed them. And because she had—this was the result.

“Now...” Mitsuba circled her finger around the mummy’s face. “Let’s see who you really are. Time to get a good look at that face of yours.”

Mitsuba ripped off the thin pieces of fabric that resembled bandages. Although she didn’t expect to need to put in much effort, it took a fair bit of time to remove the numerous layers of cloth. After much frustration, the bandages finally came to an end—

“...Huh?”

Mitsuba’s face froze when she saw what was underneath.

The next moment, a force struck her in the head, one powerful enough to knock her out.

**(13/15)**

Dawn broke.

Yuki stepped out of her cottage, alive.

After considering all her options, Yuki had decided not to sleep. Although she had the skill to fall into a light sleep, Yuki had been convinced that sleeping was dangerous; after all, Essay had been killed despite presumably possessing the same skill. So Yuki had waited inside her cottage, fully awake, preparing herself to counter an attack from the culprit. She had determined that to be the safest choice.

Thankfully, the morning arrived without incident. And since she had stayed awake, she did not need to be woken up by Airi knocking on her door, as had happened the previous two days. As soon as the sun came up, Yuki walked over to Koyomi's cottage. She considerately tapped on the door, loud enough to be heard by a waking person yet quiet enough to not rouse a sleeping one.

"I'm awake," a voice came from inside. "Come in."

Upon receiving permission, Yuki entered the building.

The cottage was unlit. The only light came from the door Yuki had just opened and the windows that were barely large enough for a person to fit through.

Koyomi was standing close to a window.

"Oh?" she said, upon seeing Yuki. "I'm surprised to see you here first."

Koyomi stared at Yuki inquisitively.

"...Aha. You didn't sleep, did you?" She immediately deduced why Yuki had gotten there before everyone else.

"Not a wink."

"If you're right about this game, there'll be five more days. Will you be okay?"

"I'll make it work... And you, Koyomi? Did you sleep in your cottage?" Yuki glanced over at the bed, which had signs of someone having slept in it.

"Sure did. It wouldn't be easy for an old lady like me to sleep outside or to stay awake all night. Ironically, I'm confident in my ability to sleep lightly. I don't have to pay any special caution. I'll wake right up if someone's approaching my cottage."



“...How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight. That makes me a grandma in this industry, doesn’t it?”

Although Koyomi’s age matched her appearance, she gave the impression of being far older.

“...I dunno,” Yuki replied. As she had done the previous two days, she motioned to sit down by the table.

“Hold it right there,” Koyomi said, stopping Yuki in her tracks. “Don’t get any closer. You wait right where you are until the next player gets here.”

“Huh? ...Oh, right.”

Yuki and Koyomi were the only two in the room, which provided the culprit the perfect opportunity to make a move. It was natural to be on guard, so Yuki waited obediently by the entrance.

Around half an hour or so later—at least, according to Yuki’s internal clock—a second player, Airi, arrived. When she entered the room and saw Yuki, her expression changed to one of utter disbelief.

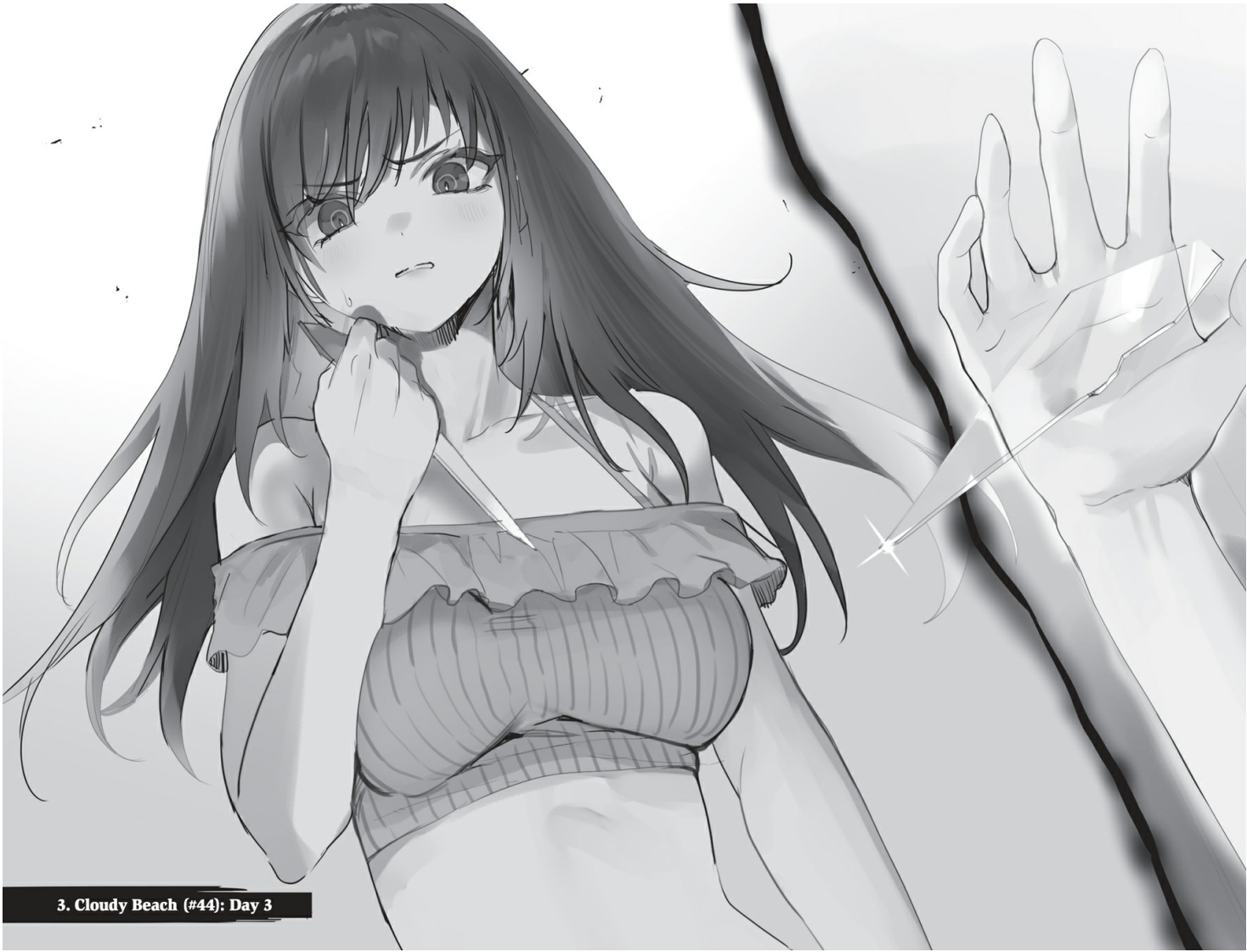
With skepticism on her face, Airi said, “Good morning.”

Intrigued by the meaning of the girl’s expression, Yuki replied, “Morning.”

Soon afterward, a third player appeared—Maguma. Hizumi came next. And finally, Mozuku entered, exhaustion coloring her face. Presumably, Mozuku would have arrived earlier had she stayed up the entire night; the girl’s exhaustion could likely be explained by her attempting to stay awake but accidentally drifting off in the middle of the night, getting only a middling amount of sleep before morning.

Five players had come into the cottage. With Koyomi, that made six.

There would be no seventh player arriving.



3. Cloudy Beach (#44): Day 3

**(0/22)**

Shortly before the start of Cloudy Beach...

A dark room—the curtains were drawn, and the lights were off. The only glow came from a single computer monitor, in front of which sat a girl who stared fixedly at the screen.

A video was playing on the monitor, depicting scenes straight from hell. People were dying left and right; it was a snuff film.

The footage was of Candle Woods, a legendary game in the industry in which the girl made her living. She had recently succeeded in getting her hands on the video, which allowed her to, despite being a player, observe the game as a viewer.

The game continued to unfold, reaching its final stages.

*“—And there’s no way I’ll lose to a punk like you!!”*

That powerful shout came from a girl who was wearing a bunny-girl costume and had the aura of a phantom. Her player name was Yuki. She was a protégé to the mighty player Hakushi, and she had inherited her mentor’s goal of clearing ninety-nine consecutive games. In this scene, she was snapping at Kyara, the homicidal maniac who had gone on a rampage in Candle Woods.

As the footage played out on the monitor, the face of the girl watching twisted into a grimace.

*It’s her. She’s my fated opponent—*

**(1/22)**

Mitsuba lay dismembered in her cottage.

She had, for the most part, met the same fate as Essay. Her limbs had been torn off, her torso was resting on the table, and her insides had been scattered across the room. It was the kind of corpse the average person would go their whole life never encountering, yet Yuki had seen bodies like this one several times before.

The body belonged to the girl who had nearly drowned Yuki the previous day. However, Yuki did not experience *schadenfreude* upon learning of the girl's demise; in fact, she felt sympathy. It was no pleasant sight for Yuki to see a player whom she was at least somewhat acquainted with meet a gruesome fate. She took care not to let her emotions show on her face.

Yuki was not the only living soul in the room; all six surviving players had gathered in Mitsuba's cottage. They had waited and waited, yet the girl still hadn't shown up for the morning meeting, so they'd decided to go to her, as they had with Essay one day prior.

When they had reached the cottage—the result had been no different from the previous day.

"In light of this new development," said Koyomi, "let's have another long discussion today."

Koyomi motioned to leave the cottage. She was likely planning on returning to her own, like the group had done the other day.

"Wait a second," Yuki said to stop her. "Let's hold the meeting here."

"—What was that?" Koyomi stared at Yuki for a moment before shooting a glance at Mitsuba's body on the table. "In front of a corpse?"

"Yes. We don't want to risk the possibility of the body disappearing again."

Yuki's remark elicited a look of confusion from one player: Maguma. It appeared she was unaware of Essay's disappearance, since she'd spent the previous day alone.

"Essay's body vanished," Yuki explained. "We went to check out her cottage after yesterday's meeting, but it was already gone by then."

“Huh... So you all weren’t the ones who cleaned it up?” Maguma’s question implied she had also visited the scene at some point the day before.

“True, it might be better to keep watch over the body today,” Koyomi said. “Everyone okay with that?”

Koyomi looked around the room, but since no one voiced opinions to the contrary, the group ended up holding the meeting in Mitsuba’s cottage.

First, the players cleaned the place. They gathered Mitsuba’s individual parts and pieced them together in their rightful places in a corner of the room. After covering the girl’s body with a blanket, several players joined their hands as if in prayer. The group then cleared away most of the blood turned white fluff, before sitting down around the table where Mitsuba’s torso had been moments prior.

Maguma sat directly across from Yuki. She was wearing the same swimsuit from the day before, but a greater proportion of her skin was now covered. There was cloth wrapped around her arms and legs, plus other parts of her body.

“Maguma, what happened?” Yuki asked.

“Huh?” Maguma looked down at the cloth wrapped just beneath her left elbow. “It’s one of Essay’s gowns. I borrowed a spare one from her cottage yesterday.”

“No, I figured that out... Why did you wrap it around yourself?”

“I got a little injured yesterday, so I bandaged myself up.”

Yuki raised an eyebrow.

*Injured? That rock-solid body? When? Where?* Yuki wanted to hurl those questions at Maguma, but before she could—

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Koyomi declared, forcing Yuki to back down. “First, each of us will report about what we did yesterday.”

Koyomi looked around at the other players before her gaze fell on Airi.

“If you don’t mind, could you start us off? And tell those two about what we found yesterday.”

Koyomi gestured to the “two” she was referring to—Maguma and Hizumi.

“Right. Let’s see...”

Airi shared the events of the previous day. After the morning meeting, their group had stayed behind in Koyomi’s cottage to chat. Then they had gone to retrieve food from Mitsuba’s room before heading over to Essay’s cottage. When they’d arrived, they’d found that Essay’s body had vanished into thin air.

The five players who had been together—Yuki, Airi, Koyomi, Mozuku, and Mitsuba—all had alibis. That meant the only people capable of hiding the body were—

“—You two,” Koyomi said.

Maguma and Hizumi. Everyone else stared at the two players who had left Koyomi’s cottage immediately the previous day.

“Don’t look at me,” Maguma responded.

Hizumi didn’t speak up, but she shook her head.

“Really?” Koyomi replied. “That would mean the culprit isn’t one of us.”

Yuki looked over at Maguma, again scrutinizing the cloth wrapped all over the woman’s body.

“Maguma, where did you get those injuries?” Yuki asked.

“Huh?”

“You said you got hurt yesterday. Can you tell us when and where that happened?”

“I don’t see why that matters.”

“Like Koyomi said, you and Hizumi are the only ones who were physically capable of hiding Essay’s body. You two also happen to be the ones who said you’d prefer to act alone. And today you show up with injuries. It’s almost like you got hurt fighting someone.”

“You accusin’ me of being the culprit?”

It didn’t seem that Maguma was intentionally being threatening, but Yuki winced at her intimidating aura nevertheless.

“Spare me the bullshit,” Maguma continued. “If I was the culprit, I wouldn’t need to be all sneaky and attack during the night. I’d just kill however many players I have to right here and now.”

“It’s possible some conditions have been imposed on the culprit that we aren’t aware of. Like maybe they’re limited to killing at most one player per night, or they need to keep their identity hidden from the others. If we take that into consideration, there’s plenty of reason to suspect you, Maguma.”

“.....”

“Can you tell us what happened?”

Yuki’s staredown with Maguma lasted a few seconds.

Maguma was the first to look away. “I cut myself on tree branches, that’s all,” she admitted. “I spent all day yesterday walking around the forest. Before I knew it, I was all scratched up. Nothing strange about getting a couple of cuts and scrapes walking around in a swimsuit, right?”

She had a point. That was especially true for a player with a giant frame like hers.

“I just didn’t want to fess up to it, okay? ’Cause it’s embarrassing getting hurt by something that isn’t a trap. Wanna see the scratches?”

“...No, it’s fine. Thank you for answering,” Yuki said.

“Don’t mention it,” Maguma responded.

“Let’s move on,” Koyomi said, turning to Airi. “Keep going. We investigated the cottage... Then what happened?”

## **(3/22)**

After that, the meeting continued without a hitch. Each player shared what they had gotten up to the previous day.

First was Airi. After investigating Essay’s cottage, she had gone into the forest surrounding the beach. While coming up with ideas for weapons she could use against the culprit, she’d searched for a spot that had seemed suitable for

sleeping outside. She didn't explain exactly what kind of weapons she had prepared or where she had slept, but she revealed to the group that she hadn't spent the night in her cottage.

Yuki went next. After investigating Essay's cottage, she'd explored the beach. Although she'd gone quite far out into the water, she hadn't learned anything particularly useful. She also mentioned running into and having a conversation with Mitsuba, though she kept quiet about having nearly been killed by the girl, out of a desire to avoid unwanted misunderstandings and out of frustration at herself.

Next were Koyomi and Mozuku. Both had apparently spent the rest of the day in their individual rooms after investigating Essay's cottage. Setting Koyomi aside, Yuki was rather curious about what Mozuku had been up to, as the girl had shown an aversion to having her cottage investigated. Still, since the mood didn't seem right for an interrogation, Yuki suppressed the urge to ask.

Then came Maguma. Like Airi, she admitted to spending the night outdoors. She had been walking around the forest to find somewhere to sleep, which was how she had gotten scratched. Compared to the previous four players, she divulged little information. It was unlikely she had spent the entire day preparing to sleep outside, so Yuki figured she must have been up to something else—and Yuki suspected that “something else” was the true reason for the woman's injuries.

Finally, it came time for the last player to speak—Hizumi.

“I wasn't doing anything.” That was all she offered.

“...Should we take that to mean you were in your cottage the whole day?” Koyomi asked.

Hizumi nodded.

The girl's statement was beyond suspicious, but since pressing her for specifics would also seem unusual, Yuki let it slide.

There was no information about more detailed rules of the game, nor clues that could help identify the culprit. Had nobody uncovered any, or was someone intentionally hiding what they knew? Regardless, the meeting came to



an end, and just like the previous day, Maguma and Hizumi immediately stood up from their seats.

Unlike the previous day, however, only four players were left behind in the cottage.

**(4/22)**

The air in the room was taut with tension.

The reason was obvious—Mitsuba was no longer with them. She had been a free spirit, the kind of player who unabashedly opened another's fridge and munched on what was inside. Her absence made clear just how much she'd influenced everyone else's moods.

Yuki glanced over at Mitsuba's body, which was hidden underneath a blanket. At that moment, she missed the girl's free-spirited ways. *We lost a good girl*, she thought.

“—I'll cut to the chase.” Koyomi spoke up. “What do you all think of those two?”

It was immediately obvious which “two” Koyomi was referring to. The two players who had persisted in acting alone. The two players not presently in the cottage. The two players most suspected of having carried away Essay's body.

*Maguma and Hizumi.*

“I mean, I *am* suspicious of them,” Yuki replied, “but even if we point a finger at them, some things still can't be explained. They wouldn't have had the time to hide Essay's body before we reached the cottage.”

Even when they factored in the amount of bloodshed, Essay's corpse still had to weigh around a hundred pounds. Carrying the corpse away in the span of a few minutes would be quite the arduous undertaking even for an iron-armed player like Maguma, with or without Hizumi's help.

“...Why did anyone need the body gone in the first place?” Mozuku asked. “Did it have something incriminating on it that they didn't want being found...?”

“If so, we might learn something new this time,” Airi said, looking over at the

corner of the room where Mitsuba's body lay. She turned to Yuki and asked, "Yuki, do you suspect Maguma?"

"To some extent," Yuki replied. "Only relatively so, compared to other players. It's not like I strongly suspect her or anything. If you only judge her by her attitude, she seems awfully suspicious, but she's always been like that. A lone wolf, so to speak."

Players generally settled into individual playstyles by the time they crossed the Wall of Thirty. Yuki's was one of "altruism," which involved helping out other players in various ways so she could gain a shallow but wide network of allies. Mishiro—the haughty, princess-like player Yuki had clashed with some time ago—had possessed a "domineering" style, characterized by the manipulation of others into doing her bidding. And although she had yet to cross the Wall of Thirty, Koyomi, who had avoided dangerous games like Candle Woods altogether, could be said to have adopted a "cowardly" playstyle.

On that scale, Maguma's playstyle was defined by "independence." She sought survival through enhancing her individual capabilities to the greatest conceivable extent. Others played no role in her strategy, a fact that frequently resulted in discord between her and her peers. She was a maverick of a different kind than Mitsuba.

In past games, Maguma had isolated herself in similar ways, too. To accuse her of being the culprit based on her attitude alone would be jumping to conclusions.

Yuki continued, "Still, she does seem to be hiding something... I'm almost certain she lied about getting injured in the forest."

Maguma would never be so careless as to suffer avoidable injuries. As Yuki had suggested during the meeting, Maguma had likely gotten hurt in a fight with someone—or she had faced an anomaly on the scale of the Wall of Thirty that was too much for even her to escape unscathed.

"Um..." Mozuku spoke up. "This may be inappropriate, but could I say something?"

"What is it?" Airi asked.

“So far there’s been one victim each night, right? And if we take the average survival rate into account, it makes sense for there to be three victims in total. In which case...will the game end after tonight?”

“Ah...”

It was by no means an inappropriate remark—it was a crucial observation.

The group had fallen down the rabbit hole of looking for the culprit, but this was a survival game. The game would not end by unmasking or chastising the killer—it would end by letting this player take lives until they were satisfied.

“The rules aren’t any clearer today than yesterday, huh?” Koyomi said. “But, Yuki, your theory probably hits the nail on the head. The rules haven’t been explained because there’s no room for misinterpretation: Everyone besides the culprit needs only to survive for a week. The issue is just how many players the culprit has to murder...”

At the very least, the number of victims had to be no fewer than two, as two players had already ended up dead. The theoretical maximum was seven players, if the culprit killed one player each night across the entire one-week duration of the game. However, that would be far too harsh a victory condition for the culprit, and considering the average survival rate, it made sense to assume the required number of victims would not be that many.

“If you think about it, it’s probably around three or so,” Yuki said. “Still, we have no way of knowing if the game will end after tonight. There’s no guarantee the culprit has to kill one player each day. They could be planning to take the evening off after two consecutive nights of murder.”

“I’ve been wondering about that, too,” Airi said. “Both Essay and Mitsuba were killed during the night, and on different nights at that. Is there a reason it has to be that way?”

The game was modeled after a closed circle mystery, set on a secluded island in the ocean. In which case, it wouldn’t be strange for there to be various conditions outlining how the culprit could kill. For instance, maybe they could only off someone during the night, or maybe they could only murder in a cottage. The dismemberment of the bodies was probably a consequence of one such condition. However, since Yuki was not the culprit, she had no way of

knowing the truth.

Beyond that, much about the game remained unknown. There was far too little information afforded to players who were not the culprit. That may have been an intentional design choice to force players to make their own deductions, but such a setup was a poor match for Yuki, who had chiefly relied on instincts rather than intellect to survive throughout her career as a player.

*What should I do to raise my chances of survival?* Yuki racked her brain for an answer, but—

“...Whatever. I’m too sleepy for this.”

As her head started to ache, Yuki frowned. She had stayed awake the entire night, wary of the culprit, and the consequences of doing so were now taking their toll. She figured she would have to take a short nap.

“How about you fill your stomach?” Koyomi suggested, pointing at the refrigerator that had lost its owner. “That should help wake you up.”

“I’ll do that...”

Yuki shuffled over to the fridge on her knees and took out a bottle of *ramune*. She stood up in the kitchen in order to pop open the marble inside the cap.

It was then that the triangular strainer in the corner of the sink entered her field of vision.

It was empty.

## **(5/22)**

Afterward, the four players investigated the scene. The state of the cottage was practically the same as Essay’s had been the day before, save for the fact that the group had cleared away the white fluff around the table and the corpse was still in the room. That was to say, in sharp contrast to the dismembered body, the room was virtually spotless. There were no dents in the floor from the swing of a club, nor was there a single scratch on the table from the slash of a knife.

The group wrapped up their investigation of the cottage and moved on to

Mitsuba's body. Upon removing the blanket, they discovered the corpse shockingly—or rather, *unshockingly*—remained there in the same grisly glory as before. Although the players had positioned the body parts back in their proper locations, none of the connecting joints were intact. The body had been thoroughly mutilated.

"I wonder if there's a reason the killer chopped her up like that," Koyomi mused.

Yuki gave the idea some thought. It was possible the culprit had done so for a practical reason, such as to obfuscate the cause of death, or maybe they were simply someone who took pleasure in cutting up bodies. Yuki believed there was a decent probability of the latter being true.

"These cuts aren't clean at all," Airi remarked, with an eye on Mitsuba's cleaved right arm. "Her limbs certainly weren't lopped off with a sharp blade. It seems like the culprit took great pains to cut through by hacking away at the same spot multiple times."

"Which means...they aren't used to wielding a blade?" Yuki asked.

"That, or it could have been intentional. Mutilating a corpse and severing limbs uncleanly are two sides of the same coin, after all."

Airi looked deep in thought. Yuki tried to mimic her expression but was unable to come up with any new revelations.

The four players split up after examining the body. Airi told the group she had something she wanted to investigate and headed off to Essay's cottage. Koyomi and Mozuku returned to their own cottages, apparently intending to quietly spend the day inside for the second day in a row.

After seeing the other three off, Yuki began to wonder about her own next steps.

She was 99 percent certain this was a survival game. Players would essentially clear the game automatically, so long as they were not chosen to be one of the victims. From the perspective of the culprit, it seemed most reasonable to target the weakest players first, but in reality, the game had not turned out that way. The first victim was Essay, a death-game veteran in her milestone fiftieth

game. The second was Mitsuba, a free spirit who was also facing a milestone: her thirtieth game. Rather than going after the weakest players, the culprit appeared to actually be targeting the *strongest* of the bunch. There was a decent chance Yuki would be chosen as the third victim.

What Yuki found curious was the fact that both Essay *and* Mitsuba had been taken out so easily. Mitsuba had made a total fool of Yuki on the beach the previous day. Could she have really gone down without fighting while being fully aware of the culprit's existence? And if so, was there some secret as to why she had been unable to resist? Had the players overlooked something crucial in this game, something that had even been able to take down Essay and Mitsuba?

On the topic of secrets, there was also something up with Maguma. She was covered in injuries she'd claimed were scratches from tree branches, but what were they actually from? Assuming her secret had nothing to do with being the culprit—could she have possibly stumbled upon the trick behind the game? Had she discovered a vital piece of information that would essentially determine who would make it out alive? Could she have been trying to hide it, without shying away from the risk of being suspected as the culprit?

Yuki decided to look for Maguma.

And so she entered the forest.

**(6/22)**

Fortunately, Yuki located Maguma almost immediately.

To be more precise, she discovered something that suggested Maguma was close by: a trap. The players hadn't come across any when they had explored the forest two days prior.

It was a simple trap, one that consisted only of sharpened stalks of bamboo jutting out of the ground. Still, a trap was a trap, and it was clearly man-made. Yuki was convinced Maguma had set it up. Airi had also spent the previous night in the forest, but the probability was low that this was her doing. Traps were a potential source of discord with other players, as they could harm someone

who wasn't the culprit. Only Maguma, ever the individualist, would set up something like that.

Maguma's roost had to be ahead. That was the implication of the trap, which was designed to deter intruders. It also meant the secret Maguma held was nearby. Continuing onward would come at great risk, as Yuki would likely need to overcome more traps in the process, but the risk that came with not doing anything at all was far greater. If the killer chose Yuki as their third victim, she had no guarantee of survival. She wanted to do everything she could to boost her chances of making it out of the game alive.

So Yuki proceeded deeper into the forest.

**(7/22)**

Airi returned to her cottage.

**(8/22)**

After the four players had disbanded, Airi paid a visit to Essay's cottage. She had suggested to the others that she was going there because of something she was curious about, but that was stretching the truth. Although she hadn't lied, she had made an intentionally misleading statement. She had gone to Essay's cottage not to investigate something she was curious about, but rather *to retrieve a specific item she would need* to investigate what she had in mind.

The item in question was Essay's outfit.

Essay had been wearing a gown reminiscent of a lab coat, and there were still spares of it inside the dresser of her cottage. It seemed Maguma had not taken them all.

Airi grabbed one of the gowns and returned to her cottage. After thoroughly searching the entire room to make sure no one was hiding anywhere, she sat on the sofa. She looked down at her left arm and firmly rubbed a spot just above her elbow—the same spot where Mitsuba's arm had been severed.

Upon feeling a strange texture, Airi stopped moving her hand.

*I knew it, she thought.*

There were objects around the size of a pill *embedded under her skin*. One in her inner arm and one in her outer arm, positioned directly opposite each other. They would have been almost undiscoverable if she hadn't been examining her arm under the strong hunch something was there; there were no signs the surrounding skin had been cut open, nor were there any abnormalities with her arm's mobility. In fact, Airi hadn't suspected anything until this very day—the third day of the game. In all likelihood, most of the other players still had yet to realize it. The only ones aware of the existence of these objects were the culprit and Airi, and probably Maguma as well.

The moment she felt that texture, everything fell into place. Why had the bodies been dismembered? *To conceal the existence of these objects*. How could Essay and Mitsuba have been killed without putting up a fight? *Because of these objects*. Why did Maguma have cloth wrapped all over her body? *To hide the scars made from extracting these objects*.

These things represented the traps devised for this game—*implanted devices*.

Before the start of the game, the organizers had implanted devices into the bodies of the players, almost certainly for the purpose of giving the culprit an advantage. Their most obvious function would be to transmit the locations of the other players to the culprit. Since the island had no shortage of hiding places, it would make sense for the devices to do that. Airi had previously speculated the culprit was watching the surveillance camera footage along with the audience, but that line of thinking had been far too naive. The culprit had direct knowledge of her location. That meant there was no difference in safety between sleeping inside a cottage and braving the night outdoors.

Furthermore, in light of Essay's and Mitsuba's deaths, it was reasonable to assume the implants had an additional function: specifically, the ability to *generate an electric current*. After more thoroughly feeling around her entire body, Airi found the same implants in her right arm, as well as four in each of her legs, for a total of twelve. If her hunch was correct, activating the implants would immediately cause a player to become paralyzed, incapable of moving any parts of their body. And what if the culprit had been given a remote control to manage the devices? What if they activated that function while standing



right in front of Airi? If that happened, Airi would be unable to put up any semblance of a fight and would be chopped up at the whim of the culprit. These devices had even rendered experienced players like Essay and Mitsuba completely helpless.

With these things in play, safety was but an illusion.

“...I have to dig them out,” she muttered.

It was unconfirmed as to whether the implants could generate an electric current, but if she assumed they had that functionality, they likely had restrictions on their usage. Since only one player had been killed each evening, the culprit was probably limited to using the device once per night. Regardless of what restrictions there may have been, however, the implants had more than enough potency to compensate. Now that she knew they existed, Airi was not so foolish as to shrug them off.

She had to remove them as soon as she could.

Airi slipped her hand under her off-the-shoulder swimsuit and pulled out a glass knife. She had secured the weapon the previous day, fashioning it from a shard she had broken off from a window in Essay’s cottage. The blade was dull enough that it could be safely stored underneath her swimsuit, but it was still sharp enough to cut into human flesh, so what was inside could be extracted.

Airi stood in the kitchen. With the tip of the knife, she tapped at the spots on her body that had devices underneath. As she imagined what she was about to do, she felt genuine hesitation. However, she convinced herself it had to be done. She then wondered if she would be able to find a better tool for the job than a blunt blade; perhaps she could dismantle the microwave and use one of its metal parts, or she could rip off and sharpen a bone from Mitsuba’s corpse. Although she could have done either, it would not change the fact that she would never find the perfect tool. She would never be able to completely dispel the thought of there being something even better. Seeking perfection would undoubtedly lead her to getting trapped in an endless mire. This was the time to compromise. This was the time to break through her hesitation.

She pressed the knife hard against her skin.

She didn’t look away. She wasn’t the type to do so. Airi would always stare

straight at the needle when getting shots as a child, and even when her mother had told her she couldn't attend high school because of their family's financial situation, she had quickly accepted it out of resignation. Even when she had been handed a knife and instructed to kill in Candle Woods, she had found herself unable to enter the cage of escapism, and even when she had been trapped on that snowy mountain during her thirtieth game, she'd only been able to resign herself to the situation, unable to grow upset or angry like the other players.

It seemed people needed rose-colored glasses to be happy.

*I suppose that means I'll never be able to find happiness.*

If only she hadn't realized the existence of the implants, she wouldn't be cutting into her own skin, wouldn't be feeling the pain of her heart beating faster than twice its normal speed. Although it was not her first time injuring her arm, that didn't change the fact that it hurt. Thinking it would be problematic if she let out a scream, she decided to bite down on the gown she had taken from Essay's cottage. Initially, she had decided to perform the procedure in the kitchen, so as to ensure the white fluff from the resulting wound would not fall onto the floor. However, she couldn't maintain her composure, and by the time she had extracted one of the pill-sized objects, she was lying on her bed, panting heavily.

Sweat streamed down her face like it would if she were a character in a manga. Airi grabbed the device and tossed it into the sink strainer. Even though it hurt just to move her left arm, she still flipped it over and touched the implant in her outer arm with her right hand. As usual, Airi's voice of reason held out, reporting to her a number in an exceedingly composed tone.

*Eleven more.*

**(9/22)**

The whole ordeal lasted no more than thirty minutes, but for Airi, those thirty minutes were an interminable hell, enough to make her think she had died and been reborn. After extracting all twelve implants, she felt around her whole body to make sure there were no more. She found none, at least where she was

able to search. Perhaps there was a thirteenth device implanted close to her heart and her efforts up to now had been completely in vain, but Airi maintained her calm state of mind and figured she would just have to accept it if that turned out to be true.

With the pieces of Essay's gown she had cut, she bandaged the wounds on her body, leaving her in the same state that Maguma had been in that morning. Since no other players had done the same, at this point it seemed only Airi and Maguma had realized the existence of the devices. Now that the killer had lost half their advantage over her, Airi's probability of being selected as the third target after Essay and Mitsuba should be hovering close to zero.

Airi was conflicted over how to handle the knowledge of the culprit paralyzing victims with an electric current. Like Yuki, Airi had adopted a playstyle of cooperating with other players to a certain extent, but she figured disclosing the truth would go beyond "a certain extent." If everyone extracted the implants in their bodies, the risk of the culprit targeting Airi would rise. Not only that, but if the culprit discovered Airi had exposed the existence of the devices, then they would have motive to go after Airi specifically, out of revenge for her stripping away their advantage. Was it better to share the truth or to keep quiet? Airi hemmed and hawed but ultimately decided to defer the decision. She had until the next morning's meeting to make up her mind.

In any case, she had bolstered her defenses.

Next, it was time to go on the offensive.

Airi's discovery had offered her an additional clue: Devices were implanted under the skin of every player on the island besides the culprit. That meant checking everyone's bodies would make identifying the killer a breeze. While she couldn't deny the possibility the culprit also had real or fake implants—the homicidal maniac in Candle Woods had modified her own body, after all—there was a good likelihood that wasn't the case. The players had been forced into only taking defensive maneuvers since they lacked clues to the culprit's identity, but now Airi had gained an avenue of attack. She couldn't pass up the opportunity.

This was a survival game. Players only needed to survive for a week, so

identifying the killer was unnecessary. However, Airi was skeptical about whether the game would play out according to the rules. If *that girl* was the culprit—if *she* was the kind of person Airi imagined her to be, there was no guarantee the number of victims would stop rising after reaching the presumed threshold of three people. At worst, the killer might even take out an outrageous number of people, way more than the rules required, just as in Candle Woods, that unforgettable game.

She needed to confirm her suspicions for herself. Depending on the situation, she would also need to devise countermeasures.

And so Airi headed to Hizumi's cottage.

## **(10/22)**

Hizumi—a player with an absent-minded demeanor.

To be perfectly frank, Airi was wary of the girl. She had managed to convey as much to Yuki the previous day, but she believed the protégé of Kyara had slipped into the game, and she strongly suspected it was Hizumi.

Both Essay and Mitsuba had been dismembered. It made sense the killer would need to mutilate both girls to extract the devices from them, thereby concealing the existence of the implants, but it seemed highly unlikely that was their sole reason. In fact, the culprit's butchery had completely failed to conceal the implants, as it had led Airi to grow suspicious over the unnatural manner in which the bodies had been cut. There had to be another motivating factor.

When Airi began to think about what it could be, the image of that psychopath immediately sprang to mind. Kyara—a fiend who had killed more than three hundred players, driving the death-game industry to the brink of collapse. With both Airi and Yuki, survivors of Candle Woods, playing in this game, there was only one answer: The corpses served as a message. A protégé of Kyara was lurking in this game, plotting to bring about a repeat of Candle Woods. Through the mutilated bodies, they had declared they would slaughter every last player on the island—including, of course, the two who had sent Kyara to hell. All the pieces seemed to fall neatly into place.

And the player most suspicious of being the psychopath's protégé...was Hizumi.

“.....”

*Are you a moron?* Airi's voice of reason said to her.

It was complete paranoia. A fantastical theory built upon speculation after speculation. Airi knew it was equivalent to a baseless accusation. Her mental constitution was not so simple that she would give in to mere delusions.

However—those corpses were utterly grotesque. Even in this world of death, bodies like those did not show up often. It was impossible *not* to link them to Kyara. And since quite some time ago, Airi had grown fearful of the second coming of Candle Woods. Although those misgivings were essentially unfounded, she couldn't help but harbor them.

Once those feelings took root inside of her, she felt compelled to make sure for herself. If she was mistaken, then the story would end there.

Airi knocked on the door to Hizumi's cottage. After she waited for a short while, the door opened without warning, and Hizumi appeared in the doorway. The girl fixed Airi with a death glare.

“What?” Hizumi asked.

While feeling overwhelmed by the girl's peculiar aura, Airi said, “I wanted to ask you for a favor...”

“What?”

“Could you let me search your body?”

“Why?”

Thinking that coming clean was the only option, Airi explained, “I discovered the organizers implanted devices in our bodies.”

Airi rubbed the cloth wrapped around her left arm. Hizumi instinctively glanced down at the same spot on her own body.

“I believe they function as transmitters and can also generate an electric current like a stun gun. That has to be the reason veterans like Essay and

Mitsuba were taken out so easily. I only realized it a short while ago, and I rushed to extract them.”

Hizumi touched her own arm, likely to confirm the veracity of Airi’s remarks. The reaction seemed genuine for a player who was not the culprit, but Airi couldn’t discount the possibility it was an act.

“Would you mind if I check you?” Airi asked. “We should be able to determine the identity of the culprit based on who has or doesn’t have these implants. I want to see if you have them. It won’t take long at all, so please...”

Airi took a step forward.

Hizumi retreated the same distance.

“—No,” she said. “Don’t come any closer.”

“...Why?”

“Stay away.”

Was she wary of Airi being the culprit? Or was she simply pretending to be on her guard?

Airi put her hands in the air. “I’m unarmed.”

“Liar. You’re hiding something in your swimsuit.”

Airi looked down at her off-the-shoulder swimsuit. True, it was possible to store a weapon under it. In fact, she had been concealing one there until a little while ago.

“I’m not hiding anything,” Airi responded. “I’ll take it off if that will convince you, but it would be a bit embarrassing...”

“Stay back!”

Airi was shocked, not only because she was being shouted at, but also because it was the first time she had heard Hizumi raise her voice.

Hizumi adopted a fighting stance. Things were on the verge of exploding. Airi wondered how she should interpret the girl’s attitude. Was she genuinely wary of Airi, or was she actually the culprit trying to avoid being investigated?

“I understand,” Airi said. “I won’t press the matter, then. Can I ask you a

question instead?”

“...What?”

“Are you familiar with a player by the name of Kyara?”

Hizumi’s eyes opened wide. Apparently, her stare hadn’t reached its final form.

“She has agarwood-colored hair. If you know anything—”

Airi’s words were cut short.

Hizumi chopped at her with her hand.

## **(11/22)**

Outside weapons were prohibited in death games, as the presence of tools not envisioned by the organizers could interfere with the flow of a game. Players were only allowed to bring in their bodies and the designated outfit, plus a few items that constituted exceptions, such as hair accessories and glasses.

However, taken another way, the organizers had no issue with players modifying parts of their bodies into weapons. In this world where minuscule differences could determine life and death, many players sought ways to exploit that loophole.

For example—nails. Although players could not turn them into actual blades, they could polish and sharpen them. By using them to pierce vital spots like an eyeball or the neck, one could potentially inflict fatal damage.

Hizumi’s hand had come close enough to hitting Airi that it had gone out of focus.

Airi leaped back, retreating faster than Hizumi could approach. She had done so on the spur of the moment, lacking the leeway to pay attention to her posture. Consequently, she toppled backward and landed in the shallow waters around the cottage.

As Airi tried to get back on her feet, Hizumi drew closer with a furious look on

her face. Before Hizumi could lunge at her, Airi grabbed ahold of the girl's hands. The two ended up grappling with each other, Hizumi on top and Airi on the bottom, neither of them able to use their hands.

“—Did you know her?” Airi asked. “Have you met Kyara? What's your connection?!”

“So what?” Hizumi replied with a gaze so intense, it seemed her eyeballs might pop out. “So what if I knew her? So what if I was her protégé? Are you trying to say I'm a fan of chopping people up? Are you trying to say I'll go crazy like my mentor?”

Mentor. Protégé. Hizumi had volunteered that information without Airi mentioning either word.

“You're all the same! You only see others how you want to see them! I'm me! I'm my own person, with my own free will and body! Don't make me out to be someone I'm not!”

Hizumi must have been unaccustomed to shouting, because she continuously adjusted the volume of her voice as she yelled.

“Listen up! I'm acting tame for now, but soon I'm gonna kill every last one of you! There won't be a single bone left of you when I'm done! You're all gonna die, and I'll keep living!”

Airi thought the girl was being awfully incoherent. While the meaning of each of her sentences came across, her words sounded incomprehensible when taken together. Airi only understood one thing—at this rate, Hizumi could very well kill her.

So, with no other choice, she steeled her resolve.

Airi lifted her knee and struck Hizumi in the stomach.

—A counterattack.

Hizumi gagged. It was only for a second, but the girl flinched. Airi used that opening to escape from under Hizumi and flee, splashing through the water as she ran.

“Wait!” Hizumi called out.



However, by the time the girl had gotten back on her feet, Airi had already opened a considerable distance between them. Given their difference in height, Airia presumed Hizumi wouldn't be able to catch up.

Airi reached dry land, sprinted across the shore, and dashed into the forest.

Without slowing her pace, Airi began to think. She hadn't come across any definitive proof, nor could she fully dismiss her doubts. All that was certain was Hizumi had reacted abnormally upon hearing the name of that psychopath. And although it hadn't been a direct admission, the girl had indicated she was Kyara's protégé.

Was she actually the culprit?

**(12/22)**

Yuki retreated.

The farther she proceeded—the closer she came to Maguma's hideout—the more ferocious and well-concealed the traps became. Although Yuki had unwavering confidence in her ability to avoid traps, her opponent was one step ahead of her, and Yuki found herself caught in a pitfall trap, the bottom of which was lined with bamboo spears. Although she avoided becoming a shish kebab and escaped with only scratches, she deemed it too dangerous to continue any farther.

So she retreated. Thinking that her efforts had been all for naught, Yuki walked through the trees.

"...Ah." "Ah!"

Suddenly, she came across Airi.

"...Hey there." "Long time no see."

Airi looked at Yuki's scratched-up body. "How did you get injured?"

"I got caught in one of Maguma's traps... I was hoping to see her."

"Ah..."

"And you, Airi? Did you get hurt?"

There was cloth wrapped all over Airi's body. She was in a similar state as Maguma had been that morning.

"...I'll leave it to your imagination," she replied.

Even her reaction mirrored Maguma's as well. She seemed to be hiding something. Upon taking a closer look, Yuki noticed the spots Airi had bandaged up were exactly the same as Maguma's.

"....."

Yuki rubbed her arm.

## **(13/22)**

After she and Airi went their separate ways, Yuki headed for a cottage. Not her own—Essay's. It was where Airi had gone after the morning meeting, after mentioning wanting to investigate something. Inside, Yuki retrieved one of Essay's spare gowns and a shard of glass from a broken window, then returned to her own cottage.

There, she sat on the sofa and touched her arm. Like earlier, she felt a strange object.

Maguma had cloth wrapped all over her body. Later, Airi had shown up in the exact same condition. Yuki was not so dense as to overlook the implication of that apparent coincidence. In this game, every player except the culprit had been implanted with devices. The primary function of these implants was likely to incapacitate a player via an electric current or some other means. It was the atypical *weapon* supplied to the culprit. Additionally, it was possible the implants also functioned as transmitters and monitors of each player's vital signs.

The girls' search earlier that morning had turned up no such devices inside Mitsuba's body, which meant the killer had probably removed them from the scene. The body had been dismembered so as to conceal that fact. Yuki was impressed Airi had still managed to sniff out the existence of the implants.

On the other hand, Yuki was frustrated at not having realized it herself. It wasn't a completely inconceivable trick. After all, in her thirtieth game, Golden

Bath, she had very nearly participated with a device inside her body—although in that case, it had been against the rules and ultimately had not happened. As excuses for missing the devices streamed through her mind—for one, she had stayed up the entire night—Yuki stood in the kitchen and began using the glass shard to extract the implants.

Since Yuki had had all four of her limbs severed in a past game, she ran into no trouble whatsoever. After recalling the parts of her body Airi had bandaged up, Yuki endured the pain and finished extracting *ten* devices—

“...Whoops. That was close.”

She then discovered implants in the heels of her feet.

Since Airi had been wearing water shoes, there was no fabric around her feet, so Yuki hadn’t immediately realized there were implants there. After she extracted the devices in both feet, that made twelve in total. Following a thorough search of every inch of her body, Yuki confirmed there were no more.

Then she let out a sigh.

Yuki was ashamed she had needed to glean this information from someone else, but beyond that, she was relieved. Now the probability of her being selected as the culprit’s target this coming night would fall dramatically, and even if she were attacked, she would be able to put up a fight.

As soon as relief washed over her, a thought popped into her mind.

*Guess I’ll take a quick nap.*

Yuki got into bed. Though she wasn’t expecting to enjoy a peaceful sleep, she figured a nap wouldn’t hurt. After all, she had removed the implants, and the murders had only been occurring at night. While clinging tightly to the edge of her consciousness, Yuki lulled herself to sleep.

Soon, evening came.

**(14/22)**

It was the dead of night.

Maguma flew awake.

**(15/22)**

Maguma was inside a makeshift tent constructed out of bedsheets.

Even a player like her, who was in a league of her own when it came to brawn, needed to adequately prepare to sleep outdoors. Although she had camouflaged her tent, it still stood out. Even though it was easy to spot, however, approaching it was a different story. Maguma had set up numerous vicious traps in the vicinity, paying no heed to the possibility of injuring a third party. On the off chance someone managed to break through, a tree vine tied to her wrist would inform her of the intruder.

And moments ago, that “off chance” had just occurred.

It took no more than a second for Maguma to spring fully awake. After exiting the tent, she instantly spotted the intruder standing several yards away from the entrance.

They had bandages wrapped around their entire body like a mummy.

Maguma immediately realized the bandages were pieces of cloth trimmed from Essay’s gown, as she had done the day before. Although it was nighttime, Maguma got a good view of the mummy’s figure thanks to the light in their left hand. The faint glow was emanating not from a tool like a flashlight or a lantern, but rather from an electronic gadget the size of a smartphone. Maguma had a good idea about what it did.

The mummy inched closer and closer to the tent.

“—I’ve already removed them,” Maguma said. “You don’t wanna waste that on me, do you?”

The mummy did not reply.

Deciding to show concrete proof of her claim, Maguma picked up the objects lying in her tent and tossed them onto the ground—while avoiding touching them with her bare hands, of course.

They were twelve devices, each around the size of a pill.

“My guess is you can only use that thingamajig once per day, right? And after running the current, you have to wait another twenty-four hours before activating it again. That’s why you had to go after one player at a time, instead of killing three at once.”

As before, the mummy remained silent.

Maguma continued, “That’s not the only function, is it? You found my hiding spot, so those things have gotta work as transmitters, right? But you didn’t know I had already dug them out, so that means they don’t measure heart rate or body temperature. Must’ve been quite the shock for you.”

*“How did you figure it out?”* the mummy asked.

The voice startled Maguma—because it belonged to someone she didn’t expect.

“Huh... So it was you? Now it’s my turn to be surprised.”

“How did you figure it out?”

“‘How’ is something I should be asking you...,” Maguma muttered before going on to answer the mummy’s question. “Might not look it, but I take real good care of my body. So I’d realize immediately if something got put inside me. I thought these things could be important, so I left them in on the first day, but I tore ’em out at the start of the second. Sucks for you, huh? You should’ve gone after me first.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

“Why would I? Who do you think I am? At today’s morning meeting, it didn’t seem like anyone had caught on. Go take your pick of the others.”

The mummy didn’t respond.

The light of the electronic gadget flickered off, and they vanished into the darkness. After making sure the assailant was fully gone, Maguma returned to her tent. She rewound the tree vine around her wrist, adopted the same posture she had been in a few minutes before, and closed her eyes.

*So she was the culprit all along.*

That naturally implied a certain truth. Maguma had doubted whether modern

science was capable of such a thing, but there was no denying it now. *That* was the kind of person the culprit was.

Maguma snorted. “I’m no fan of the way she does things.”

**(16/22)**

Yuki made it to the morning of the fourth day.

Once again, she had stayed up the entire night. Although the probability of the culprit targeting Yuki was low, as Yuki had extracted her implants, she had still remained awake. Part of the reason why was because she hadn’t been able to fall asleep, since she had taken a nap earlier in the day. For the second consecutive night, the killer had not shown up on her doorstep. As the sun appeared over the horizon, Yuki headed toward Koyomi’s cottage.

This time, however, she wasn’t the first to arrive.

“Yo.”

It was Maguma. She was waiting by the door, like Yuki had done the previous day.

“...Hello,” Yuki greeted.

Maguma took a good look at Yuki, who had bandaged herself in the same places Maguma had. “Huh, so you figured it out?”

“Not on my own, though...”

Yuki glanced at Koyomi, who stood by the window. Since she had on a short coat, Yuki couldn’t tell at a glance if she had extracted the implants. Even if Koyomi was unaware of their existence, she would surely realize the truth after taking one look at Yuki’s and Maguma’s matching bodies.

The three of them took their seats around the table. Soon, Airi and Mozuku also arrived.

With the number of players in the room equal to the number of current survivors minus one, Maguma rose to her feet. “All right...”

*“Where are you going?”*—asked not a soul.

## (17/22)

Hizumi had been murdered. Her dismembered body was lying in her cottage. Although the scene should have been the ultimate shocking sight, since the girl's body was no more or less mutilated than the previous two, it offered Yuki's brain little stimulation.

"That makes three," Koyomi said.

"Does that mean...the game is over? Nothing new is happening, though..." Mozuku commented.

"We may have to wait out the entire week, regardless of the culprit's kill count," Airi said calmly. "Or maybe the game isn't over yet. The rules may call for four or more victims..."

"If it's over, the culprit shouldn't have a problem coming out," Maguma said. "Until that happens, we should keep our guards up."

"....."

Yuki contributed no words to the conversation.

Hizumi had possessed a profoundly mysterious air about her. From the girl's aura and the fact that the victims had been dismembered, Yuki had privately suspected that Hizumi was the second coming of Kyara, but the girl seemed to have met her end without a whimper. It appeared safe to assume her theory was no more than needless worry, as the bodies had only been mutilated to hide the existence of the implants.

However, the unrest in Yuki's chest refused to settle. Who was the real culprit? Why had the game not ended? Besides the implants, were there still more secrets to the game?

## (18/22)

Once again, the players decided to hold their meeting at the crime scene.

Since it was their second meeting of this kind, they efficiently cleared away Hizumi's body and cleaned up the cottage before moving on to their accounts

of the previous day. Koyomi and Mozuku had stayed in their respective cottages, while Maguma had spent the entire day in her forest hideout. Airi reported that after extracting the implants in her cottage, she'd returned to her base in the forest. Yuki also told the truth about her actions from the previous day. Neither she nor Airi kept the implants a secret. Since three of the five players had cloth wrapped around the exact same sections of their bodies, the truth would have gotten out one way or another.

After completing their reports, Airi proposed searching everyone's bodies for the implants, as a way to identify the culprit. The investigation confirmed both Koyomi and Mozuku had devices embedded in their bodies. The players who had already removed their implants—Yuki, Airi, and Maguma—temporarily returned to their respective bases and brought back the devices they had taken out.

"...Where does that leave us?" Koyomi asked. "All of us survivors have or had devices in our bodies. Does that mean the culprit isn't one of us?"

"To be precise, Yuki, Maguma, and I—the three of us who already removed our implants—are not cleared of suspicion," Airi said. "We could have retrieved Mitsuba's or Hizumi's devices, turned in one set here, and purposefully injured ourselves. Faking it isn't impossible."

Although it certainly wasn't inconceivable, any ruse would be immediately exposed after a check of the players' wounds. If there had been implants in their bodies, their wounds would have cavities of the same shape. It would be implausible to fake that just by hurting oneself.

"I guess the culprit wasn't actually a player," Yuki remarked. "That's the only way to explain the disappearance of Essay's body..."

"...That raises a question, though: Where have they been hiding?" Koyomi asked.

With several mysteries still left unsolved, the meeting drew to a close.

The group disbanded. Maguma went off somewhere, leaving behind the usual suspects.

"Koyomi," Yuki called out, "if possible, I want to talk to you alone. Is that



okay?”

“...Alone?” Koyomi parroted back.

Reservation showed on her face. That was only natural. Although three players had already been killed, there was no guarantee the game had reached its end. Being alone with another player was still something to be avoided.

“...I don’t mind if we stay here,” Yuki said as a compromise.

“There’s something you want to talk about between the two of us?”

“Yes. It’s about my mentor.”

Hakushi—a player who had lost her life in Candle Woods.

“Koyomi, you were acquainted with my mentor, right? And you heard about me from her...”

“Ah, yes. I’m quite familiar with the two of you.”

“...What did she say about me?” Yuki asked, feeling conscious of Airi’s and Mozuku’s gazes.

It was something Yuki had always been curious about. Since the topic had nothing to do with the game, she had avoided bringing it up, but now that things had settled down somewhat, she figured it would be okay to ask.

“Hakushi said a lot, you know. Let’s see, if I were to boil it down to a few sentences...”

Koyomi took a few seconds to search for the right words.

“She said you were a foolish protégé,” she said. “A lazy sloth. The ultimate simpleton. The kind of athlete born with natural talent who would vanish immediately after making a big play. That’s generally how she viewed you.”

“...I see.” Yuki felt somewhat disappointed.

On second thought, those comments made sense. While the Yuki of today was a different story, the player she had been at the time of Candle Woods definitely fit those phrases.

Koyomi snickered. “Were you itching to know?”

“Well, I guess...”

“Essay asked me the same thing after we met. Seems like you’re on the same wavelength.”

A giant question mark appeared in Yuki’s mind.

“Essay? Why?” she asked.

“Why, you ask? Weren’t you fellow pupils?”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh? Did you not know?” Koyomi sounded surprised. “You had the same mentor. Essay also learned under Hakushi as a protégé.”

“...For real?” The shock caused Yuki to slip into casual language.

“Yep. First time hearing about it?”

“Yeah.” Yuki nodded. “I had no idea. I didn’t even know my mentor had other protégés...”

“Of course you wouldn’t be the only one. We’re talking about a ninety-five-game veteran. Of course she would have multiple protégés.”

That made sense. Hakushi had never told her about having other protégés, nor had Yuki ever imagined the possibility.

Koyomi continued, “Well, she didn’t actually take on *that* many protégés... The most she had at a time was five, maybe? Who knows how many of them are still alive...”

“...I don’t know what to say,” Yuki said. “It’s ironic one of them ended up dying in the same way as her mentor... And it had to be that gruesome manner of death, of all the ways.”

This time, a question mark lit up above Koyomi’s head. “What are you talking about?”

“Huh? I mean, Essay was killed and torn apart, right? My mentor died in the same way, so I was just thinking that both of them met the same fate...”

“.....?” Koyomi appeared more and more bewildered. “Hakushi’s dead? Since when?”

“Huh?”

*“She’s still alive. We went out for drinks just last week.”*

**(19/22)**

Yuki couldn’t process what she had just heard.

“...Huh?”

“We chatted for an hour or two at our favorite stomping ground. We even talked about you and Essay. She brought up how you were making a name for yourself after clearing thirty games.”

“No, but... What?”

Yuki clutched her head. She looked back up at Koyomi a few seconds later.

“Um, just to confirm, we’re both talking about Hakushi, right?”

“Yep. Her player name is Hakushi. I think her real surname is Shiratsugawa.”

“And she’s...alive?”

“Isn’t that what I’ve been saying? Do you want to go see her after the game? If you tell me your contact information, I can set up a meeting.”

“No, but... Her body was mutilated, wasn’t it? By a psychopath named Kyara. In the same way as Essay’s and Mitsuba’s were... Even her liver was sticking out of her body. How can she even process alcohol?”

“...Really? She told me she retired after Candle Woods, but I wasn’t aware she had taken that kind of damage to her body.” Koyomi’s expression grew more profound. “Wait, hang on... Then that means...”

Yuki probably had the same look on her face. In her mind, she pieced together the facts that had come to light, one by one.

Her mentor’s survival, despite her body having been mangled almost beyond recognition.

A fellow protégé, killed in exactly the same manner.

The inexplicable state of the game, in which there seemed to be no plausible

culprit.

Yuki's and Koyomi's voices overlapped.

"It can't be—"

**(20/22)**

Beneath a cliff, a player covered in bandages sat up.

**(21/22)**

The cliff, which had been formed by waves crashing against the land, was located along the perimeter of the island. At the bottom was a space barely wide enough for a single person to lie down. As the surface consisted entirely of rock, the location offered no comfort for sleep, and it was extremely dangerous to descend to reach that point. No ordinary player would consider using this spot as a base.

For an *unordinary* player, however, it was the perfect place to set up camp.

A player covered in bandages sat up.

She picked up the machete and electronic gadget next to her. The organizers had given her both items four days ago to grant her an advantage in the game.

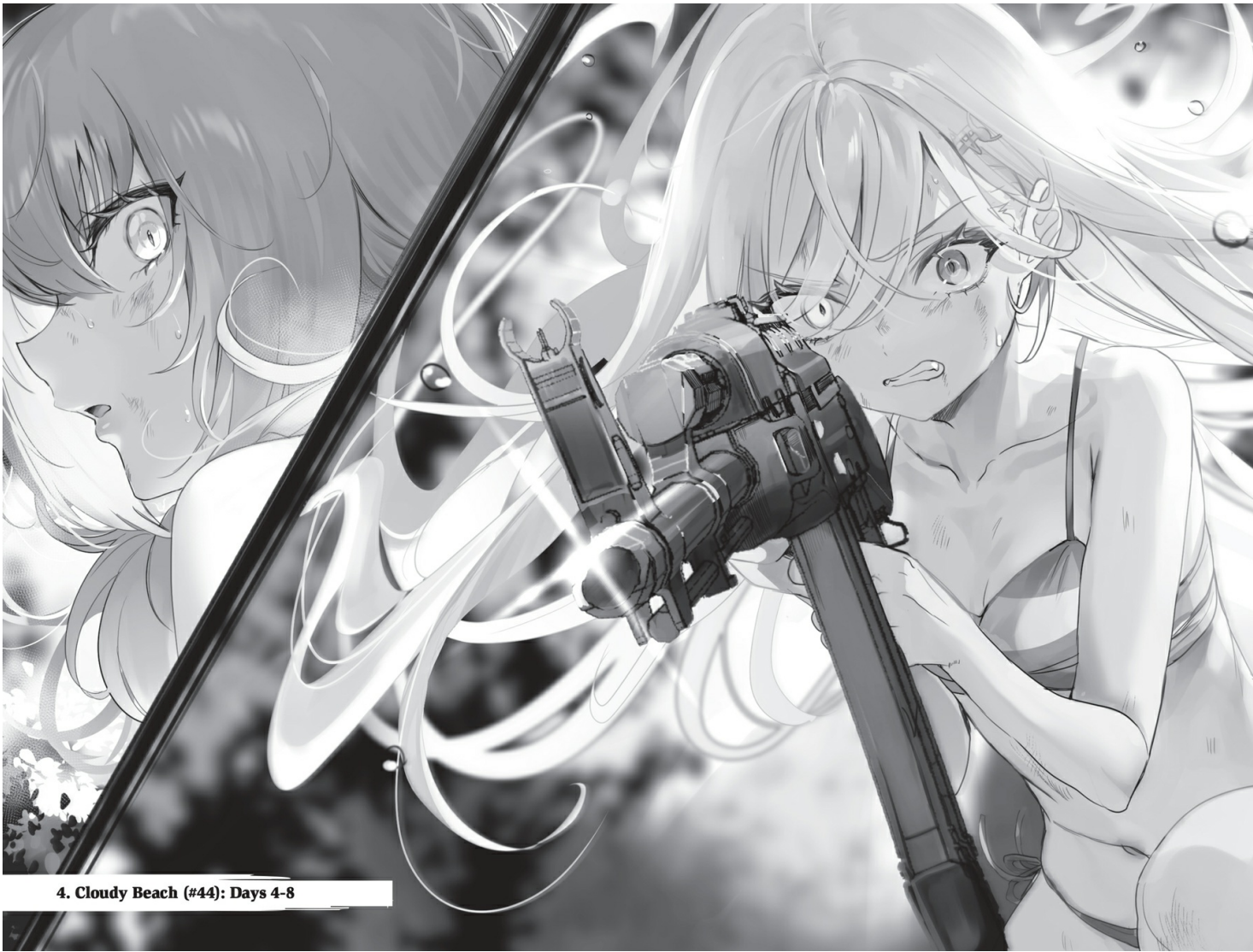
The player's face was reflected in the black screen of the device. Although her face was also wrapped in bandages, the wind had undone some of them while she was sleeping, exposing the top of her head...

...and her bluish cotton-candy-like hair.

Out of the eight players, only one on the island had that kind of hair. It was Hakushi's protégé, a seasoned veteran playing in her fiftieth game—Essay.

She was the one and only culprit.

**(22/22)**



**(0/22)**

*Learning.*

That one word perfectly summed up Essay's strength as a player.

She would gain knowledge from other people and the past and use it to guide her next steps. When seeking success, Essay was far more interested in observing the efforts of others than attempting to figure things out herself. Yet it was more than just an interest—her capacity for learning was truly outstanding. It was precisely the kind of aptitude that allowed someone to comfortably walk the high road in death games, which thoroughly punished players for even a single failure.

Essay considered Hakushi—the ninety-five-game veteran whom she had requested to be her mentor—a premier resource for knowledge. Her primary strategy for survival was mimicking every aspect of her teacher. She learned from not only Hakushi's direct teachings, but also from the woman's behavior. Essay even studied her mentor's past games—including Candle Woods, which she had obtained a video of from a certain source. Naturally, the knowledge she had acquired included information about a body modification procedure Hakushi had received, one that would grant a player nigh-immortality, allowing them to survive even being dismembered by a psychopath. To follow Hakushi's lead, Essay had needed to discard almost the entirety of her original body, but the decision had meant nothing to her. If she was going to stand above the competition, she would have to make greater sacrifices than others.

Her stellar results proved her way of doing things was correct. She effortlessly racked up clears, breezed past the Wall of Thirty, and found herself on the precipice of clearing fifty games—an achievement that had been rare even in the pre-Candle Woods era.

And now she was playing in her fiftieth game.

That was a milestone to be celebrated, and it offered Essay a brand-new experience: being informed of the rules in advance of the competition. The game would take the form of a closed circle mystery and be held on a secluded island in the middle of the ocean. A killer lurking among the participants would murder player after player, night after night—and Essay had been chosen to play the role of the culprit.

To mitigate the disadvantages of being a one-person team, the organizers had given Essay two pieces of equipment: The first was a large knife—a machete. The second was a small electronic gadget. Devices had been implanted under the skin of every player besides the culprit, and by using the gadget, Essay could pinpoint their locations at any given time. That was not the only function of the gadget; it could even be used to remotely activate the implants and send an electric current through the players' bodies, temporarily incapacitating them. However, since it needed to cool down for twenty-four hours after each use, Essay could use it to kill at most one player per day. She understood this stipulation was to make the game more like a closed circle mystery featuring a string of serial killings.

As for more detailed rules, the game would last for a week. The culprit, Essay, would clear the game if she killed at least three players in that time. There was no prescribed method of killing, and she was free to use or not use the gadget as she wished. However, her deeds had to be “murders,” not “disappearances”—in other words, she needed to leave the dead bodies where other players could see them. After the week passed, a rescue ship prepared by the organizers would arrive, and the victory condition for everyone other than the culprit would be to board the ship and escape the island. If Essay had failed to kill three or more players at that point, the many agents on the ship would execute her.

Essay had pondered the rules after being informed of them. The game was going to last a week. However, she only needed to kill three players. The advantage provided by the gadget could only be used once per day. The rules did not require she keep her status as the culprit under wraps, but she wanted to avoid detection if at all possible—

After some deliberation, Essay had decided to strategically let the first day go

to waste.

She would turn herself into the first victim. After misleading the others into thinking they were playing an escape game, she had dismembered her own body that night. There were two reasons she had made her death so over-the-top. The first was to give her competitors a strong impression of her demise, and the second was to lay the groundwork so she could extract the implants from her subsequent victims' bodies without raising suspicion. Despite ripping off all four of her own limbs and even splaying out numerous organs, Essay survived on account of the procedure she had undergone. And so she slipped under the others' radar and obtained freedom.

From the next night on, Essay had actively engaged with the game.

For her first target, she had selected Mitsuba. Since she only needed to kill a designated number of players, it would seem logical to target the weakest first, but the implants flipped the script of the game. It was important to get the stronger players out of the picture in the early stages, before anyone noticed the devices. That was why Essay had gone after Mitsuba first. She hadn't expected Mitsuba to have removed her implants, but when the girl flinched in surprise upon learning her attacker's identity, Essay used the opportunity to counterattack and secure victory.

For her second victim, she'd initially decided on Maguma. The woman was unrivaled in terms of physicality, but Essay had the perfect tool to negate her might. Her decision had been influenced by the fact that she was aware of Maguma's capabilities, on account of having played with her in multiple games before. However, since Maguma had already removed the implants, Essay turned to plan B and targeted Hizumi instead. Essay was aware the girl had been Kyara's protégé. Since before the game, she had been planning to eliminate Hizumi if the chance arose, in order to prevent a repeat of Candle Woods. Hizumi had discovered the existence of the implants, but since she had neglected to remove the ones in her heels, Essay had no trouble sending the girl to the same place as her mentor, Kyara.

And so she had succeeded in killing two players, but the third murder would be the real challenge. From the odd movements of the transmitters, Essay had deduced the other players had discovered the implants. She had already



confirmed Maguma had extracted hers. Yuki and Airi had likely done so as well, while Koyomi and Mozuku would both remove them in short order. Without those devices, Essay's advantage had whittled away to her lone machete. Since she had dismembered herself recently, she was not in peak form, either. Challenging the remaining players head-on would be unwise.

However, Essay had already settled on a plan of attack.

Before the game, she had envisioned countless ways it could have played out—including a scenario in which someone uncovered the existence of the implants, stripping Essay of her advantage. Since she had anticipated that possibility, naturally, she had already thought of a way to handle the situation. She was not so foolish as to play the game relying solely on the advantages she had been given.

Essay entered the forest. Before long, she reached her intended destination. She moved aside the plants she had set up as camouflage and confirmed that the object she had gradually been crafting since the second day of the game was still there.

It was a *raft* to take out to sea.

**(1/22)**

Four players were having a discussion in a cottage.

**(2/22)**

After the end of the morning meeting, the four players who stayed in Koyomi's cottage—Yuki, Airi, Koyomi, and Mozuku—took care of various tasks. Koyomi and Mozuku extracted the twelve devices implanted in each of their bodies. Yuki and Airi allowed the other two to investigate their wounds, proving that they had not injured themselves as a ruse. It was looking more and more likely that the culprit was not in their midst.

Once they confirmed they were all innocent, the group then began to mull over the utterly outrageous theory that had just been proposed.

“...Are you serious?” Airi asked. “You really think Essay is the culprit?”

Yuki and Koyomi both nodded.

Essay—she had been the first victim on the island. The others had been rattled by the dismembered state they had discovered her body in.

Yuki and Koyomi had shared the theory that Essay was not actually dead but roaming freely about the island, orchestrating a massacre. After they had said this, Airi and Mozuku had stared nervously at them.

“A thousand percent,” Yuki replied. “At the very least, that’s what Koyomi and I believe.”

“But, um, Essay was, you know...,” Mozuku said, raising an objection.

It was a classic trope in mystery stories—the first victim, presumed to be dead, turns out to be alive and well. In this situation, however, the theory sounded completely ludicrous. After all, Essay’s muscles, bones, and even organs had been ripped out of her body. The girls did not need a coroner to know she had been murdered. In the ordinary world, it would be completely unimaginable for someone who had gone through that to still be alive.

However, there were grounds for supporting the theory.

“There’s a player I found in exactly the same state who’s still alive,” Yuki explained. “My mentor. Though I was convinced she was dead...”

Yuki’s mentor, Hakushi, was a legendary player who had died a gruesome death in Candle Woods—or so Yuki had thought. Apparently, Hakushi had not been reduced to mere legend status just yet. Although she had retired from the industry, it seemed she was still in good enough shape to go drinking.

“Koyomi,” Yuki asked, “did my mentor...mess with her body?”

“Yep. She got the procedure around her eightieth game or so, I think. She had been battered over and over, so she had no other choice. A good portion of her body wasn’t human,” Koyomi explained. “Along the way, the word ‘fatal’ started to have a different meaning for her. Damage that would kill ordinary people no longer affected her. It’s shocking how she could survive such devastating injuries...”

Yuki thought back to the grisly sight she had seen in Candle Woods: Hakushi's body, mutilated by Kyara. Yuki wondered what in the world her mentor had done with her body to be able to survive such a nightmare; however, she had no choice but to accept it as fact.

"So Essay really is another of my mentor's protégés, huh?"

"Hakushi told me about Essay herself, and Essay confirmed as much before you all came into my cottage on the first day."

Koyomi glanced over at Mozuku, who had been with them at the time.

"...Yes, that's true," the girl confirmed.

"Your mentor is alive," Koyomi stated. "And there's a good chance her protégé Essay is still kicking, too."

Yuki looked down at her left hand. The appendages from her middle finger to her pinkie were artificial. Those were the only parts of her body she had exchanged. She had no knowledge of body modification procedures that could grant immortality.

However, the same was not necessarily true for her mentor's other protégés. Hakushi could very well have divulged her secrets to Essay.

"Everything comes together when you think about it," Koyomi said. "Why was Essay, the player with the highest game count and the least likely target, chosen as the first victim? Because she's the culprit. She must have planned to escape suspicion by faking her death. Why did her corpse suddenly vanish? Because she was still alive. While we were chatting, she gathered her things and left on her own. Why hasn't the game ended? Because the culprit—Essay—isn't actually dead."

Koyomi raised her voice even louder. "There have only been two victims. One more player has to die for the game to end."

The cottage grew so quiet, Yuki could hear the buzzing of the fridge.

"It would be wise to stick together," said Airi after a short while. "Regardless of whether Essay is the killer. We've pretty much confirmed the culprit isn't one of the four of us, so we should act as a group to protect ourselves."

Yuki and Koyomi nodded, indicating their agreement to the plan.

“But...”

The remaining player, Mozuku, began to say something.

“What is it?” Koyomi urged.

“Oh, um, nothing...” Mozuku walked back her comment with a mumble.

Yuki knew exactly what the girl was planning to bring up: The game would likely come to an end once another player died. That meant if three players in their group colluded to tie up and offer the fourth to the culprit, they would be guaranteed to clear the game. None of the four of them was the culprit, but that fact did not necessarily make them allies.

However, there seemed to be a tacit agreement not to mention this. Even when you factored in that risk, the benefits of working together were considerable. Essay might hesitate to take on four opponents at once and instead target Maguma, the lone wolf. Plus, they still did not know for sure if Essay was the killer. It was possible either Maguma or an outside party was the culprit, and the game had already concluded following the deaths of three players.

Yuki sure hoped that was the case.

**(3/22)**

The group decided to hole up inside a cottage.

While it was dangerous to stay in an obvious location, it was the only way the four of them could stick together in one place. Camping out in the forest would be too conspicuous, and since their plan was to remain in one spot for an extended period of time anyway, the risk of being discovered was the same anywhere.

The players decided to take shelter in Koyomi’s cottage, where they had all gathered before. The other three first went back to their own cottages and grabbed food, drinks, extra swimwear, and other various necessities. Yuki, frumpy minimalist that she was, had only a handbag’s worth of items, while

both Airi and Mozuku brought over several times as much—especially Mozuku, who had taken out an entire drawer from her dresser and stuffed it full. Yuki was mighty curious about what was inside, but Mozuku had draped a bedsheet over the drawer, hiding its contents from view. Yuki’s conscience stopped her from ripping it off to get a peek.

Their strategy was to spend the rest of the week in the cottage, taking turns keeping watch. Essay did not break through a window with her immortal body as if reenacting a zombie movie, and the group did not face a devastating betrayal in which three players abandoned the fourth while the latter was asleep.

And so the fourth day ended without incident.

**(4/22)**

Yuki opened the cottage door and walked out beneath the night sky.

The moment she stepped outside, she tightly hugged herself in response to the chilly air. She had borrowed one of Koyomi’s short coats, but that wasn’t enough to shield her from the cold. So a second into her shift as lookout, she was already hoping for the next player to replace her.

Yuki looked up to see a gorgeous starry sky. Since the environment was free of artificial light, the natural glimmer of the stars reached Earth with essentially no obstructions. Yuki was clueless about the stars, as she had only ever lived in urban areas since birth, and astronomy books had never piqued her curiosity as a kid. Her only impression of the stars above was a simple one—they were beautiful. Earlier, however, she had received a lesson from Airi, who had apparently had that very kind of childhood. As such, Yuki managed to locate the Big Dipper, along with the star it pointed to, Polaris.

The glittering night sky presented not only a beautiful sight, but also a practical benefit: One could measure the passage of time through the movement of the stars. Since there was nothing inside the cottage that functioned as a clock, at night the players used the stars to manage the lookout shifts. It was an odd method of telling the time, both romantic and primitive. As Yuki stood in the chilly air, her only wish was for the stars to start moving faster

in the sky by some twist of fate.

After cutting off her foolish train of thought, Yuki turned her focus to her duties.

She kept a watchful eye on the area around the cottage. She could not see Essay, nor any other scoundrels, for that matter. Yuki did more than just observe; she also patrolled the area while keeping her eyes peeled for any anomalies. After completing ten laps around the cottage, she no longer needed to consciously think about walking, so she used her free mental capacity to ponder other things.

It was the end of the fourth day. Since the game would only last a week, just three days remained. To be precise, because the game had started in the morning, there was a little over three days left. They were more than halfway through.

Ultimately, nothing had happened during the day. What was Essay doing? Was she coming up with a plan of attack after learning four players were sticking together? Or had she gone after Maguma, thinking it would be unrealistic to overcome the group's numbers, and the two of them were duking it out right about now?

Yuki hoped the latter was the case.

“.....”

She continued keeping watch. Barring the temperature, her time outside was tranquil. The many events that had transpired over the past several days had come and gone like a shooting star.

Upon reflection, Yuki had nothing to feel proud about with this game. On the second day, Mitsuba had made a fool of her, while on the third, she had gotten caught in Maguma's trap. She had also failed to realize the existence of the implants on her own, needing Airi to essentially spell it out for her. And although she was in the best position out of anyone to realize the truth that Essay was alive, the thought hadn't even crossed her mind until the fourth day. In this game filled with seasoned veterans, Yuki had continuously come up short.

Then there was Essay—Yuki’s fellow protégé, an experienced player in her fiftieth game.

Yuki had no choice but to acknowledge her. She couldn’t fully repress the thought that rose in her mind.

*Please don’t make me fight Essay.*

She hoped Essay would target Maguma. More than that, she hoped the theory about Essay being the killer was wrong. Ideally, a third party was the culprit, and the game had already concluded by virtue of three players dying. Those thoughts passed through her mind.

“...I’m pathetic,” Yuki muttered.

*Expecting and praying for things to go your way? That’s not how a player acts. Weren’t you the one worrying that things were going too smoothly up until a few days ago? Is this how you are in the face of a slightly more formidable opponent? Don’t be ridiculous. You’re completely ignoring Master’s teachings. Why not learn from your fellow protégé?*

*Take a lesson from the person who cut open her own body—*

“.....?”

Yuki furrowed her brows.

**(5/22)**

From then on—

Much to Yuki’s anxiety, time continued to tick away without incident.

The fifth day arrived. Besides the fact that their living arrangements as a group had become somewhat strained, there were no issues.

The sixth day arrived. Maguma did not show up to the morning meeting. Had Essay killed her, or did Maguma see no need to attend? Since Maguma might be the true culprit, she could have intentionally skipped the meeting so as to lure the group outside, so the four players continued to hole up in the cottage.

The seventh day arrived. The group began to worry they had gotten the rules

of the game wrong. Had they been correct on the first day about needing to build a raft to escape the island? Were they playing right into Essay's hands by sticking together as a group of four? Although a heated debate broke out between them, in the end, the group decided to settle for the status quo. They reasoned that since they had already reached the seventh day, it wouldn't be too late to act after first seeing what the following day had in store for them. Besides the discussion, no issues came up.

And, at last, the players reached the one-week mark.

On the morning of the eighth day, Yuki was shaken awake.

**(6/22)**

Yuki leaped up, vigorously flinging her blanket into the air. That would block the vision of whoever had shaken her awake. With the strength of her legs alone, Yuki stood up on the bed shared by the four players and swiftly adopted a fighting stance.

However, her efforts were meaningless, for the person standing there was not Essay.

"Wh-what's the big idea?"

In front of Yuki was someone wriggling underneath the blanket she had just tossed. After a short while, the girl managed to get it off, revealing her face.

It was Mozuku.

"...Morning," Yuki greeted. Relief washed over her in the same moment.

Yuki had let her guard down. How could she have failed to wake up before the girl had touched her? Although it was certainly not the first time in the past week Yuki had been startled awake by someone else, this was a new low. She had grown too careless in this uneventful stretch of days.

She scanned the cottage. Nobody was inside other than her and Mozuku. Since the group had adopted a system where one player would always be stationed outside as lookout, it was not unusual for there to be one person missing, but what had happened to the other person? Was she holed up in the



bathroom or something?

“I, uh... My bad,” Yuki apologized to Mozuku. “Is it time for my shift? Sorry that you had to wake me.”

“Oh, no, that’s not it...”

Mozuku made a troubled face, seemingly trying to recall what she had to say. Two seconds later, as if to replace all the air in her body, Mozuku’s eyes, nostrils, and mouth opened wide at the same time.

“Oh, right! They’re here to pick us up!”

Those words instantaneously dispelled the rest of Yuki’s drowsiness.

**(7/22)**

Yuki rushed after Mozuku outside, following the girl’s lead as she climbed the outer cottage wall onto the roof.

Airi and Koyomi were already there.

“Oh, finally awake?” Koyomi asked.

Without offering a greeting, Yuki hounded Koyomi for answers. “Is it true? Is our ride off the island really here?”

“Yep. Look over there.”

Yuki turned to face the direction Koyomi was pointing.

The cottage roof offered a greater view of the surrounding seascape. Yuki could even see beyond the forest to the ocean on the other side of the island. Although she still couldn’t spot any signs of land, she did see something on the horizon that hadn’t been there one week earlier.

*A ship.*

From Yuki’s vantage point, it appeared no larger than the size of a poppy seed, but it was unmistakably a ship.

“You have Airi to thank,” Koyomi said, now pointing to Airi. “She was on lookout duty this morning, and she had been keeping her eyes peeled from this

roof. She figured a ship would have to come from the other side of the island.”

“The waters on this side are shallow,” Airi explained. “No ship would be able to get close. It stands to reason that it would come from the side opposite the beach.”

Yuki trained her gaze on the boat. It appeared to be heading straight for the island. There was no chance a random, unrelated vessel would be coincidentally passing by at a time like this, which meant it had to have been sent by the organizers.

“So nothing actually ended up happening,” Koyomi commented. “Were we just deluding ourselves into thinking Essay was still alive?”

“Hard to say...,” Yuki replied.

It was undeniable a ship had come for them. However, the game had yet to end. Perhaps Essay was planning to take out a player when everyone else let their guards down, inches from the finish line. They had to stay on their toes.

“Should we really be here?” Mozuku asked. Her question was one that could sound quite profound, depending on how it was interpreted. “The ship can’t reach this area, right? Does that mean we won’t be saved unless we head to the other side?”

“No... Surely they’ll send a lifeboat or something for us, won’t they?” Airi offered an opposing argument. “The other side is all cliffs, so they would have a difficult time making landfall there, too. I bet they’ll use a lifeboat to reach us.”

“Essay is also still on the loose,” Koyomi added. “I’d be terrified to leave this cottage. It would be wise to stay put for a while and see how things play out.”

Yuki was of the same opinion. If Yuki were in Essay’s shoes, she would attack the moment the players attempted to leave the cottage to head toward the ship. Since they had long settled on a wait-and-see strategy, Yuki was reluctant to leave the area before the eleventh hour.

Her reluctance was certainly not rooted in a fear of Essay—at least, that was what she convinced herself.

Inside the ship, Essay's agent was swaying with the movement of the vessel.

**(9/22)**

Essay's agent was on board the rescue ship dispatched by the game organizers. The watercraft was sailing full steam ahead toward the secluded island where Cloudy Beach was being held to retrieve the surviving players.

Typically, rescue ships were small and light in order to prioritize speed, but the one carrying Essay's agent was of a far larger size. That was because it needed to serve multiple purposes besides simply rescuing players. For example, the vessel was equipped with medical facilities to ensure players who had sustained severe injuries would survive, along with inflatable lifeboats to reach the shallow waters of the island. There were also armed soldiers on the ship, waiting to carry out Essay's execution in the event she failed to complete her task.

There were agents aboard, too, ready to welcome back their players upon the conclusion of the game.

Essay's agent walked down a corridor of the vessel. While in her cabin earlier, she had been informed the ship would arrive shortly and had been instructed to attend to her duties. So, with a life jacket draped over her black suit, she hurried toward her assigned location. The other seven agents aboard the ship were likely doing the same.

Upon reaching a four-way intersection, the agent stopped in her tracks. A group of people had reached her intended path before her. Clad from head to toe in black, with helmets, goggles, gloves, boots, and other various pieces of armor, they emanated a menacing aura. These were the armed soldiers tasked with executing Essay.

While waiting for them to pass, the agent murmured to herself, "Those are gonna go unused."

She was referring to the burly firearms each soldier carried. They were ominous-looking submachine guns, the kind that someone might think would blow off their finger if they simply touched it with their bare hand, the kind that

would sell for quite a hefty sum even as a model gun, the kind that would shock people to death if you pointed one at them, no actual shooting required.

*Those weapons are pointless, the agent thought. You'll only have to use them if Essay fails. And sorry, but I'm afraid that's not going to happen. There isn't a player alive who stands a chance against her. She's more passionate, more talented, more guarded than anyone else. A world where she goes down in flames is a rotten one.*

There was plenty she wanted to say, but since she was terrified of vocalizing any of it to a cluster of armed soldiers, she kept her abrasive opinions to herself. The only verbal comment she had made was that one mutter from earlier, but it had been drowned out by the soldiers' footsteps and had likely not reached anyone's ears.

That was what she had thought, but on the contrary—

“Nope—I'll be using one myself.”

The reply rang out after the soldiers disappeared from the agent's view.

The voice had come from behind her.

“Huh...?” She turned around.

There stood Essay.

**(10/22)**

“Wha...?!”

Before the agent could shout, a hand covered her mouth.

“.....???”

The agent took a good look at the person in front of her as she mumbled.

It was Essay. Although the bandages wrapped around her body made it difficult to tell, her physique, the hair jutting out from the top of her head, and the voice from earlier all clearly belonged to her.

“Quiet. Things will get complicated if I'm caught.” It was indeed Essay's voice coming from beneath the layers of cloth. With her free hand, she brought up a

finger to her bandaged mouth and went “Shhh.”

The agent nodded. After Essay removed her hand, the agent quietly asked, “Um... So... What are you doing here?”

Essay was alive. That was expected and utterly unsurprising. However, the agent couldn't help but be shocked at how Essay had shown up in front of her looking like a mummy, along with how Essay had somehow gotten on the ship before it had reached the island.

“I have some business here to take care of, so I took the liberty of boarding early,” Essay answered.

Her body was completely dry. Did that mean she had paddled over on a raft? Had she seriously boarded a moving ship without a ladder? There was no doubt in the agent's mind that her player was a monster.

“Well, um... I guess I should say congratulations on clearing fifty games,” the agent said.

“.....?” Essay tilted her head in confusion. “Oh, no. That hasn't happened yet. I've only killed two players so far, so I still haven't cleared the game.”

“Huh? Then why are you here...?”

“Naturally, to ensure I can kill one more. Didn't you hear me? I'll be 'using one for myself.'”

Essay had said that. And the agent intuited the meaning behind those words. “It can't be... Did you come aboard *to obtain a weapon?*”

“Yes,” Essay nonchalantly replied.

“You can't do that! Those soldiers are here to execute you, you know! If they find out you've boarded the ship without having met the conditions for clearing the game...”

“I see no issue. The game is supposed to conclude after a week has passed, and the players have been rescued. Since that hasn't happened yet, those soldiers have no reason to kill me, even if they spot me. Isn't that right?”

*That may be true...*, the agent thought. “Still, it'll be a problem if you lay your hands on someone working for the organizers.”

“I do not believe so. Players are free to use anything present in the venue of a game however they see fit. And in this case, we can consider the venue not only the island, but also the surrounding waters. Since this ship has *entered the vicinity of the game*, nobody on board can reasonably object to anything that might happen to them.”

The agent was speechless. Her silence indicated both her inability to come up with a counterargument and her disbelief at her player’s intentions.

“I’m in a rush, so please excuse me.” Essay gave a small nod.

“Sure, okay...” The agent nodded back. “...You’ve really thought up a wild plan, huh?”

Who would ever come up with the idea of stealing weapons from the organizers in an attempt to clear a game?

Essay’s lips moved from beneath the bandages. Although her expression was covered, she must have been smiling.

“It’s my style to skirt the rules rather than follow them.”

**(11/22)**

Yuki lost sight of the ship behind the forest as it drew closer to the island. The group climbed off the cottage roof and waited for the rescue brigade to arrive.

A short while later, an inflatable lifeboat appeared from one end of the beach, likely having been deployed from the larger ship. It was heading straight for the cottage where Yuki and the others were standing by.

Yuki paid close attention to the lifeboat. Apparently, some modern lifeboats were equipped with engines, but the one currently approaching the island was manually operated. The person rowing was completely clad in black, though they were not wearing the characteristic suit of the games’ agents; the outfit they had on was more rugged, like the uniform for a military special forces unit. The individual’s helmet prevented the players from confirming their identity.

“Show us your face!” Koyomi’s voice reverberated across the beach. “Don’t take us for toddlers. We’re not going to go off with a stranger!”

The arms of the rower paused for a brief moment. But that was all. They kept on rowing the boat, as if nothing had happened.

After noticing that clearly suspicious reaction, the four players opened up distance between one another, preparing for what the future had in store. Depending on the weapon wielded by their opponent, they could be culled in one fell swoop if they were all bunched together.

“We’ll let them get a little closer,” Airi said. “If they still don’t show their face, let’s escape into the forest.”

The other three nodded in agreement.

The group closely monitored the rower’s every movement. Although each of their gazes was honed on the mysterious individual, that person did not glance back. They simply continued rowing in silence, showing no willingness to remove their helmet and reveal their face.

The very moment Yuki sensed danger...

...the person in black made a move.

They retrieved an object from the rear of the lifeboat that had been covered with cloth. They flung it forward with such vigor that the cloth came flying off, revealing the identity of the object underneath.

Even from a distance, the object was immediately recognizable as a sinister-looking gun. And its muzzle was, of course, pointed at the cottage.

With the stock resting against their shoulder, the rower got in position to shoot.

The four players reacted simultaneously.

**(12/22)**

Yuki leaped sideways. Airi took cover around a corner of the cottage. Koyomi crouched down where she was. Mozuku jumped inside through an open window.

Several gunshots rang out.

*Is that all?* Yuki wondered as she landed on the ground. Similar guns in manga and films always fired bullets in rapid succession with a *ratatatata*, so Yuki had been expecting—and half hoping—to experience the same. Apparently, however, being shot at was not so exaggerated in real life. And because this was the real world, nobody had gotten hurt. Yuki regained her footing, and as she began sprinting at full speed toward the forest, she saw that Airi, Koyomi, and Mozuku were already taking flight.

“I can’t believe her!” Yuki shouted while running. “Did she grab that gun from the ship?!”

The identity of their assailant was immediately obvious—Essay. Nobody else would possibly launch an attack on them.

She had to have sourced her equipment from the rescue ship they had spotted. If the culprit had been supplied with such a weapon to begin with, she would certainly have used it earlier. There was only one conceivable reason she had started using it at this point in time: The gun had not been on the island until moments ago. The organizers had likely brought it along for the purpose of executing the culprit, and Essay must have stolen it from the rescue ship.

More gunshots rang out from behind.

Yuki couldn’t stop herself from turning around to look. Fortunately, she and the other three were unharmed. Smoke was billowing up from several spots in the sand. It wasn’t that Essay was an inept markswoman; she was simply too far away. Since the group had remained cautious, Essay hadn’t been able to get within firing range.

“Wh-what are we supposed to do?!” Mozuku shouted. The girl had something in her hands that she must have retrieved from the cottage.

“What can we do but run?!” Koyomi replied. “Even if we outnumber her, we don’t stand a chance against a gun! As of now, our team is disbanded!”

Koyomi was swinging her arms widely, dashing at full speed. Since she had been crouching down in the water a moment ago, the sleeves of her short coat were soaked, splattering droplets around.

“Whoever gets targeted, no hard feelings! Sound good?!”



After stepping off the lifeboat, Essay dashed across the shore with submachine gun in hand.

Ideally, she would have preferred to kill a player on the beach, but she had known from the start that was going to be unlikely. Each one of those four players was a death-game veteran. If they had been the kind to fall for the surprise ambush she had laid—although apparently, it had hardly been a surprise—the game would have been a breeze to begin with.

Her targets were almost certainly cognizant of the ship's arrival. That was why they had fled into the forest. If they managed to cut through the trees to the other side, it would be game over for Essay. She was not going to let that happen.

Essay charged into the forest after the four players. The terrain presented both advantages and disadvantages. Because there was no shortage of obstacles that could shield against bullets, the threat of her gun was greatly diminished. But since it was difficult for anyone to maneuver silently, Essay could easily determine the others' escape routes. Furthermore, she was neither wearing a swimsuit nor her mummy costume—she was in full gear. Compared to the other four, who were functionally naked and had to pay heed to every individual tree branch in their path, Essay had the advantage in agility. It would not be hard for her to catch her prey.

The question was—*whom* should she target?

She did not need to deliberate over the choice—*Mozuku*.

The girl was playing in her tenth game, which made her the least experienced of the group. That would presumably also translate to her being the easiest to kill. In all likelihood, Mozuku had yet to learn to evade bullets by zigzagging through the trees, and she probably hadn't developed the technique to detect hostility and accurately anticipate the timing of gunshots. Of course, Essay could almost certainly kill anyone she came across with her current equipment, but the standard practice was to go after the easiest target. When Essay had still had the implants on her side, Mozuku hadn't been a high priority, but that

no longer applied. The girl's life was going to be hers.

Essay immediately caught up to Mozuku.

But contrary to Essay's initial assumption, the girl seemed to have the ability to detect the presence of others; she turned around to look at her pursuer. Taking advantage of the split second in which Mozuku's pace had slowed, Essay pointed the barrel of her gun at the girl—

—and opened fire.

Now that she was close enough to her target this time, she switched her gun to fully automatic mode. Mozuku dove behind a large tree nearby, but not before Essay confirmed that a bullet had struck her leg.

“.....!!”

Mozuku let out an incoherent scream.

Essay had landed a hit. Mozuku could no longer run away. Under these circumstances, finishing the job would be a piece of cake for Essay. She even felt assured enough to look away in order to replace her empty magazine, but...

...she was forced to stop after she sensed hostility coming from in front of her.

Essay looked up. Mozuku was peeking out from behind the tree, exposing about 70 percent of her body. Her hands were clasped together—but not in prayer.

They were wrapped around *an object shaped like a gun*.

Mozuku's trigger finger twitched.

**(14/22)**

Essay reflexively dodged out of the way.

Her mind was caught on how little noise the weapon had made the moment it had been fired. Out of both curiosity and the inertia from having evaded the attack, Essay half turned her body and saw the identity of the *things* that had hit the tree behind her.

They were the pill-sized devices that had been embedded in the players'

bodies.

Although only one gunshot had rung out, two implants had been fired. Wires extended from each of them, tracing back to the firearm in Mozuku's hands.

The weapon was a *stun gun*.

Not only that, it was the kind that could shoot electrodes. Essay had not been provided one as the culprit, nor had any such item been on the rescue ship. In light of the fact that it made use of the implanted devices, the weapon could have only come from one source.

“—You *made* that?”

Mozuku offered no response to Essay's surprised question.

A closer look revealed that the gun had been rather crudely put together and lacked any touch of craftsmanship. It had undoubtedly been handmade. The cottages on the island had a supply of electricity, along with various appliances inside. It would not be impossible for someone with the relevant knowledge to make such a weapon from scratch.

Essay thought back to what Mozuku had done during the game. Although Essay hadn't been directly watching the girl, she had monitored the movement of her transmitters. For the entirety of the second and third days, Mozuku had remained in her cottage. Essay had wondered why the girl hadn't been doing anything, but now everything made sense. Mozuku had cooped up inside in order to craft that weapon. Since it had been made with the implants, the girl must have completed it on or after the fourth day, but she had probably devised the idea of making a weapon long before that—quite possibly shortly after the start of the game.

As Essay stood there, frozen in shock, Mozuku tossed aside her gun—and pulled out a second one.

Before she could aim it, Essay moved. Not forward, but *backward*. She mimicked Mozuku's action from earlier and took cover behind a tree. Mozuku presumably realized that hitting Essay would be undoable in their current positions, so no gunshot rang out, and Essay was not shot in the leg like Mozuku had been.

Essay hadn't anticipated this turn of events. How could Mozuku possibly have made a weapon like that? Essay was somewhat confident in her own intelligence, but not even she could ever pull that off. The situation was a stark reminder that one could not judge a book by its cover.

Next, Essay wondered how powerful the gun was. While a handmade firearm would typically pale in comparison to a mass-produced one, the opposite applied to stun guns. As products for self-defense, stun guns on the market were purposefully designed to not be too powerful, but the gun in Mozuku's hands had likely not been produced with that consideration in mind. One shot could lead to instant death. Although Essay had taken great care in modifying her body, it was not a perfect insulator. An electric shock could prove just as or even more lethal to her than to an average person.

Judging there to be no other choice, Essay retreated even farther.

She fell farther and farther back, fleeing the scene. With her reason for targeting the girl completely neutralized by the discovery that Mozuku had a weapon, Essay decided it was wise to cut her losses.

She felt no panic. The game was not yet over. She had more than enough time to hunt down another player.

**(15/22)**

Essay's hostile presence vanished.

In response, Mozuku crumpled to the ground. She had already been sitting, but now she slumped even farther until she was lying on her face.

Her eyes turned to the peashooter in her left hand. She casually pulled the trigger. With a weak *pew!*, two small devices that had previously been implanted in her body came flying out.

"...Thank goodness..." Mozuku muttered while basking in the joy of being alive.

Then she tossed away her trump card—a *peashooter that did nothing beyond firing devices*.

It had all been a giant bluff. A stun gun shaped like a firearm that could shoot electrodes? Although Mozuku had desperately wanted to make one, her efforts hadn't panned out. While she had studied electrical engineering in college, she had dropped out in her sophomore year, so lacked the specialized knowledge to build one. She had never regretted not studying harder as much as she did now.

With no other choice, Mozuku had instead opted to bluff her way through by making an object that resembled a stun gun. Since Essay had used electrical shocks to paralyze and kill her victims, she had to be at least subconsciously aware of the danger the implants presented. That was why Mozuku had gambled on Essay retreating—and fortunately enough, the scenario had played out according to plan. Not even a player in the fifty-game club could read her enemies' minds.

Mozuku flipped over onto her back and put a hand to her pounding heart. She was mostly feeling fear, a natural reaction after playing a trick on a player well above her caliber. At the same time, however, Mozuku couldn't deny feeling a certain sense of exhilaration. Her soul felt like it was floating on air, in what could only be described as a rush of dopamine. She had stumbled upon something that had eluded her. After dropping out of college and society at large, she had been pulled inexorably into the death-game industry, but only now, in this moment, had she discovered something she could call her forte—a playstyle of “trickery.”

As Mozuku reflected on this, her pulse returned to normal. She hurried toward the rescue ship, dragging her injured leg behind her.

**(16/22)**

*Gunshots.*

Yuki was struck with terror as she sprinted through the forest.

She heard them quite clearly, which meant Essay had to be close—*extremely* close. Had someone gotten shot? What had happened? Had Essay managed to kill a player? Was the game now over?

The gunshots could have stopped for any number of reasons, but Yuki

continued to run. Rushing to the ship was the best strategy. She had been following the shortest route to the opposite side of the island, but the sound of the gunshots had made her alter course and take a slight detour. She continued in the direction of the ship while doing her best to head away from the noise.

And yet...

“.....!!”

A short while later, Yuki sensed malice in the air.

She immediately sprang into an evasive maneuver.

She managed to dodge by the skin of her teeth. Something had zoomed through her hair at a high speed from behind. To protect her body, she clung like a stag beetle to the largest tree she could find.

Yuki was impressed with herself. She had always been confident in her ability to detect hostility, but much to her surprise, it turned out she could also evade bullets. She attempted to calm the beating of her heart, unsure if her elevated pulse was the result of joy or fear.

She took a quick peek around the tree in the direction from which she had been shot at. Essay was nowhere to be seen. Was the girl too far away to be visible, or was she hiding? Either way, the bullet that had flown at Yuki was no stray round, for she sensed hostility aimed straight at her, piercing the air more fiercely than any bullet.

“...Guess I have to do this...,” Yuki muttered, pressing her forehead against the tree trunk.

She’d had a gut feeling that this was how things were going to end up. It was not the outcome she had desired, but she knew her fate was unavoidable.

The game would not end without a clash between Yuki and her fellow protégé, Essay.

**(17/22)**

Essay clicked her tongue in annoyance. Her prey had not cooperated with being hunted down. She had hoped to conceal her presence as much as she

could, but the girl had dodged her shot by a hair.

Yuki had been trained by Hakushi, just as Essay had been herself. The girl would not go down easily.

However, the idea of changing targets did not cross Essay's mind. The other two players, Airi and Koyomi, were also unmistakably skilled opponents, and even if she went to look for them, there was no guarantee she could catch them before they reached the ship. Besides, there was something about the situation that felt preordained. This encounter with her fellow protégé was nothing less than a message from the goddess of fate, telling her to crush Yuki once and for all.

*Consider it done*, Essay thought.

## **(18/22)**

Something had been stuck inside Essay's head the entire week: The tremendously difficult-to-swallow truth she had learned from Koyomi on the first day of the game.

Koyomi was a sworn friend of Hakushi's, a death-game player from the pre-Candle Woods era. So Essay had been unable to suppress her curiosity. At the start of the game, after having been guided to Koyomi's cottage, Essay had asked the woman how Hakushi had evaluated her.

"A genius, in a negative sense," Koyomi had answered. "A player who excels on the intelligence front but, perhaps as a result, has surprisingly odd misunderstandings from time to time. The type who enjoys temporary success but will eventually implode—or so she says."

"...I see," Essay replied.

"Don't take it to heart. She's always had a sharp tongue."

The lack of recognition from her mentor was upsetting. However, what stung Essay even more was the topic that came up shortly afterward.

"That reminds me," Koyomi said, "there was another player like you in that group we saw earlier. The girl who seemed like a phantom. Could that have

been Yuki?”

Essay had seen the other group of four on the beach while being guided to Koyomi’s cottage. Yuki had indeed been among them.

“Yes, but why bring her up?”

“Hmm? She’s another of Hakushi’s protégés, isn’t she? Did you not know that?”

Essay had run into Yuki in multiple games in the past, but this was the first she’d heard of that. Yuki had probably also been unaware.

“I wonder what she’s like. Hakushi seems to have high hopes for her...”

—The moment those words reached Essay’s ears, an indescribable feeling rose up in her heart.

“How so?” Essay asked on impulse.

In a casual tone that implied an obliviousness to Essay’s discomposure, Koyomi replied, “Apparently, because she’s a phantom. She’s already dead, so there’s no way she’ll die, or something like that...”

Essay was speechless. Her daze must have persisted for at least ten seconds.

After finally noticing Essay’s abnormal state, Koyomi said, “Oh, but it’s not like Hakushi has low hopes for you, you know. You’ve cleared more games, right? Which means she has to be expecting even more out of you.”

*That’s not reassuring,* Essay thought.

From their past encounters, Essay knew full well Yuki’s capabilities as a player. In her eyes, the girl had a knack for the games, but she would never reach Essay’s level.

*Why did my mentor deem me an “imploding genius,” while having “high hopes” for her?* Essay thought. *Don’t be ridiculous. I refuse to accept that.*

Then her dumbfounded mind fixed itself in one direction.

*My mentor knew absolutely nothing. After a year and a half in retirement, even her keen eye has deteriorated. I’m following the high road. This is the right way. There’s nothing the slightest bit wrong about my way of doing things.*



*That's why I'll clear fifty games. That's why I currently have an advantage in this game. There's not a chance in the world I'll find myself beneath that phantom girl.*

*And I'll prove that by crushing her.*

## **(19/22)**

Over the past several days, one thing had been on Yuki's mind: Essay's strategy for the game. On the first day, Essay had dismembered her own body in her cottage to feign her death. The players had all fallen for the ruse—but Yuki was surprised that Essay had done so in the first place. In her mind, a protégé of Hakushi should never have embraced such a tactic.

Hakushi was a legendary player who had cleared ninety-five games. Yet that record had no more value to her than that of a scarf she had abandoned knitting halfway through. Hakushi had only one goal: clearing ninety-nine games. With only four games standing between her and that objective, she had met an untimely demise. Although it seemed Hakushi had not actually passed away, her retirement implied that she was unable to return to a condition where she could participate again. The damage she had accumulated after playing in nearly a hundred games was preventing her from achieving her deepest desire.

Essay should have known how Hakushi's career had ended. In which case, she should have known not to *willingly adopt a strategy that would harm her own body*. And yet she had done exactly that. It was the ultimate lapse in judgement, a tiny rift in what had otherwise been a dominating performance.

And because of it, Yuki believed she could fight back. It was her excuse to challenge a seasoned, fifty-game veteran.

*Exactly, she thought. Essay's not perfect. She makes mistakes. I bet she sometimes lets her emotions get the better of her. Maybe she's made even more blunders than I'm aware of. There's no need to be frightened. Don't hold up your opponent on a pedestal. You can win against her if you do things the right way.*

*She may have an immortal body, but she doesn't have the supernatural*

*strength of a vampire or zombie. All that body of hers is good for is staving off death. The fact she's dragged the game out until the very end and found herself a weapon proves it. She's afraid of direct combat. I'll have a shot at winning if I can do something about that gun. Even if I can't kill her, I can at least incapacitate her and escape to the ship.*

Yuki left the shade of the tree.

With her destination in mind, she took off at full speed.

**(20/22)**

Yuki had to keep running. If she froze for even a second, she would be shot.

She couldn't run in a straight line, either. If Essay figured out her movements, she would be shot.

And so, while sometimes using trees as cover, other times moving in unpredictable ways, and even on occasion sniffing out hostility in the air, Yuki dodged the incoming attacks by a whisker. She continued to evade the barrages of bullets for several minutes, putting on a performance that could alter the very future of ground warfare if the world managed to replicate her technique.

Ideally, Yuki would be able to continue in the same fashion until she reached the ship, but she saw that as a hopeless undertaking. That was why she headed toward a completely different location, one that would serve as the jaws of death for Essay—and Yuki.

Countless sharp stalks of bamboo were jutting out of the ground—a trap Maguma had set. Her hideout was nearby.

But Yuki was not going there to seek Maguma's help. After all, the woman had likely already left the area and already reached the rescue ship. Still, everything she had created was perfectly usable.

Tricking Essay into falling into a trap—was not Yuki's plan, either.

She had the *opposite* in mind.

"I refuse to go down without putting up a fight!" Yuki yelled.

And then she laid bare her strategy, as clear as day.

*“I’d rather kill myself than fall into your hands!”*

**(21/22)**

It was a gamble.

If Essay’s condition for clearing the game was simply the *deaths* of three or more players, then Yuki’s declaration would be completely pointless. *Go right ahead*, Essay would say. And after Yuki fell into one of the many traps in the area, it would be game over. Essay would earn the distinction of having cleared fifty games.

However—what if it was not the *deaths* of three players Essay needed, but their *murders*? Then, the situation would be reversed. Essay *would be forced to keep Yuki from dying*. If her prey slaughtered itself, Essay would no longer be able to satisfy the necessary conditions for victory.

Yuki believed it was highly likely that Essay had been instructed to *murder* the other players. The game, after all, had been modeled after a closed circle mystery. If Essay let Yuki slip through her fingers, she would likely not have enough time to locate a new target. Yuki’s life was inextricably linked with Essay’s own.

The strategy was foolproof. The only issue was that Yuki would die alongside Essay.

That was why Yuki had to inject a little ingenuity into her plan.

Yuki’s legs gave way from underneath. The entire area, around three feet in diameter, caved into the ground. It was a pitfall trap, the same kind as the one Yuki had fallen into on the third day. After confirming that the pit was densely lined with bamboo spears, she desperately clung to the wall to avoid getting skewered. She stuck all ten of her fingers into the dirt and managed to avoid falling to the bottom.

Someone watching all this, however, would not be able to tell what had happened to Yuki. And so, Essay had no choice but to peek into the hole. She had to confirm whether Yuki was still alive, and if she was, Essay would need to

ensure the cause of the girl's death was not "skewering" but "gunshot." Yuki listened to Essay's approaching footsteps through the wall of earth. Like a spider, swiftly and quietly, Yuki climbed the wall of the pit.

Essay's shadow loomed over Yuki. At the same time, Yuki reached up and grabbed Essay's leg.

She pulled, sending Essay toppling over. Now back above ground, Yuki used all her might to pry the submachine gun out of Essay's hands before her opponent could reposition it. As Yuki suspected, Essay wasn't exactly strong, so wrestling the weapon away was no difficult task. With no time to read any instruction manual, Yuki pointed the barrel of the gun at Essay and pulled the trigger.

Bullets came flying out in rapid succession.

The magazine ran empty in two seconds flat. The recoil had been stronger than Yuki expected and had forced the gun upward, which meant only around half the bullets had hit Essay. Having been shot at point-blank range, Essay naturally ended up slumping down onto the ground, but, to little surprise, the damage had not been fatal. In a seamless motion, she got back onto her feet, pulled out her machete, and swung at Yuki.

Yuki defended herself with the body of the gun. Then she swiped the machete from Essay's hands. Although her opponent was clad in full-body armor, like a member of a special forces unit, Yuki thrust the blade into the only spot that was lightly guarded—Essay's neck.

Essay collapsed onto the ground but still continued to move. Since Essay was attempting to pull the machete out of her neck, Yuki got on top of her to thwart her efforts. Then Yuki swung at Essay, alternating with both fists, but the sensation was like punching through air.

"The heck are your vitals, you damn freak?!"

Even while flinging ungrammatical words of abuse at her opponent, Yuki continued her assault. Despite Essay's attempts at resisting, Yuki deftly held her down, pried off her armor, and ripped off the bandages underneath, revealing the girl's cobbled-together body, which brought to mind Frankenstein's monster. Yuki shoved her hand into the stitching of Essay's body and pulled out the first thing she came in contact with—a lung. She plunged her hand back in,

next pulling out Essay's heart. She continued the act, alternating hands to extract Essay's organs one after another—a liver, stomach tissue, small intestine, large intestine, kidneys, and even parts whose names she couldn't immediately recall. Whatever had been keeping Essay's body together Yuki tore apart with the ease of plucking grapes. Unbelievably, Essay continued to resist even after losing all of her internal organs, so Yuki had no choice but to go after her bones and muscles next. Yuki was no stranger to killing, but this was her first time thoroughly dismantling a human body. Just as she was beginning to feel respect for the psychopath at having repeated such an exhausting act—

—at last, Essay ceased to move.

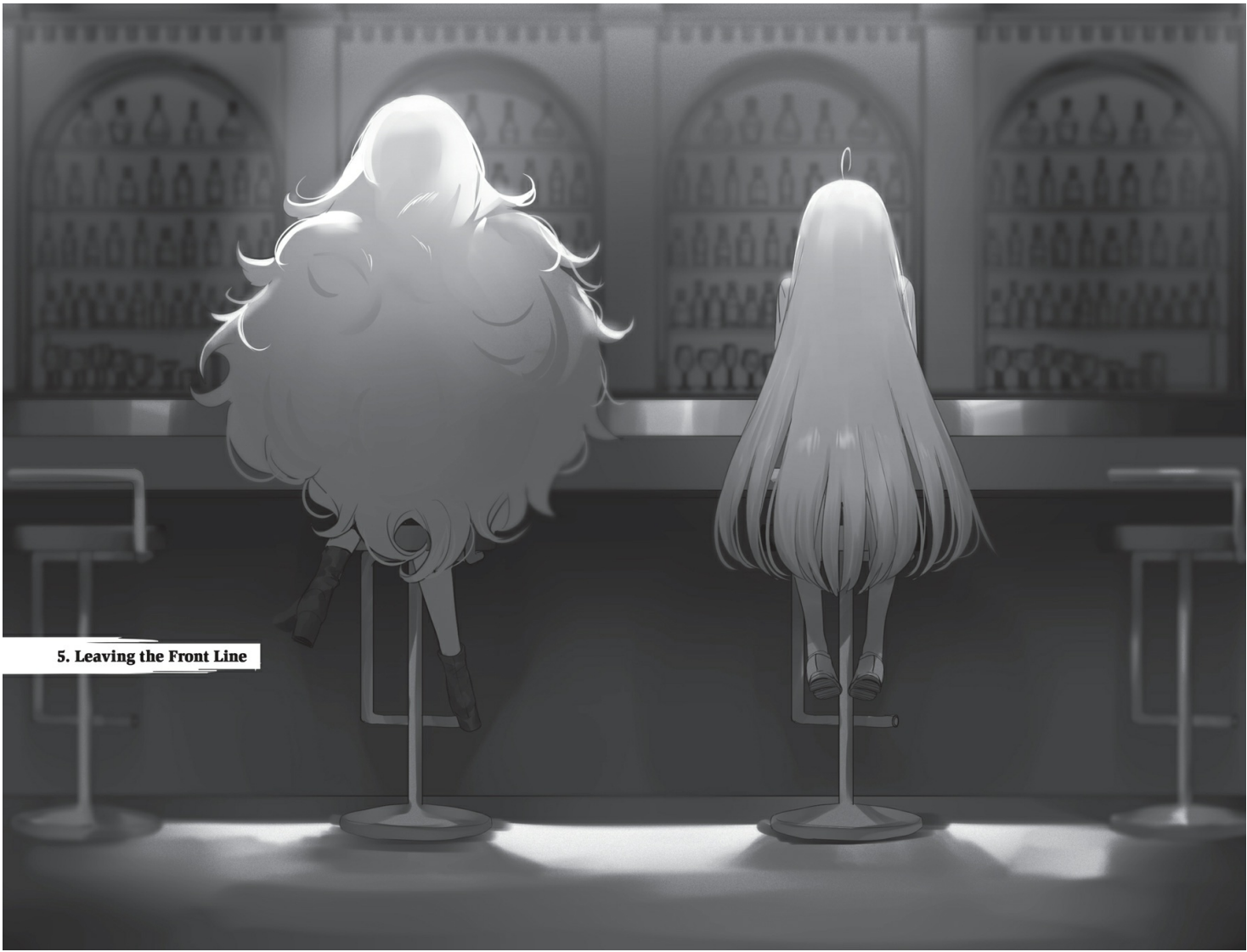
Yuki stopped her onslaught.

The girl did not seem to be playing dead. Yuki waited around for a while, but Essay's body lay completely still.

“...Good game,” Yuki said.

She wiped the white fluff off her hands and left the scene.

**(22/22)**



5. Leaving the Front Line

**(0/4)**

Yuki safely boarded the rescue ship.

She was welcomed by her agent, who had apparently been standing by after watching the game play out via surveillance cameras. The vessel appeared to be equipped with medical facilities, but since Yuki had sustained no major injuries besides the scars from extracting the implants, she did not receive a medical checkup and was instead guided to a cabin.

Immediately upon entering the room, she lay down and fell asleep. While her wounds were not deep, she was afflicted with tremendous fatigue that caused her to sleep like a log until the ship reached port. Thus, Yuki had no idea how the game had ended. Who was riding the ship with her? Had she really managed to kill Essay? After stepping back onto dry land, Yuki was driven home by her agent and had ample opportunity to learn the answers, but she decided not to do so.

After all, if any of them were still alive, Yuki would surely encounter them again.

**(1/4)**

Yuki had learned the location of the establishment from Koyomi when they had been cooped up together in the cottage. The date and time for the meeting had been set in advance as well. So Yuki traveled to the location during a time of day when most people would be snuggled up in bed, while night owls like her would only be beginning to stir.

It was a magic bar, an establishment where patrons could enjoy watching a magic show while indulging in drinks. Since her mentor was a regular, Yuki had assumed it would be a luxurious affair, but it was surprisingly unexceptional.

The bar was situated in a cozy little district, somewhat removed from an urban center. Upon entering the bar, Yuki discovered that the interior was quite small, with only ten seats in total and only one customer sitting inside.

“—Long time no see,” the woman said in a voice that lacked any hint of penitence for not keeping in contact.

She had a tall and slender figure and long, wavy hair. Her body was perfectly proportioned such that she had not even an ounce of unnecessary flesh. Her aura was one of invulnerability, and her voice carried oddly well. Her overwhelming presence would completely dominate the atmosphere of any room she was in.

It was Hakushi.

For the first time in a year and a half, Yuki came face-to-face with her mentor.

“...Good to see you,” Yuki replied before taking a seat next to the woman.

Quite frankly, she was still half in disbelief. After all, she had seen her mentor’s dead body lying before her very eyes, including the woman’s darkened organs and tattered bones. Despite everything that had happened with Essay, Yuki couldn’t erase the doubt in her mind that there had to be some mistake.

However, her doubts were dispelled within one second of reuniting with her mentor. The woman was no doppelgänger. It would be impossible to find someone with the same distinctive aura as her, even if you searched the entire world. Much to Yuki’s embarrassment, the resigned thought that she would never reach her mentor’s level surfaced in her mind. She felt far more inferior next to Hakushi than she had with Maguma and Essay. She couldn’t believe that her old self from a year and a half ago had been on regular speaking terms with the woman. Now that Yuki had leveled up, she was finally able to perceive the difference in their caliber.

“Order something.” Hakushi slid a menu over to Yuki. “My treat.”

“...Thank you.”

Incidentally, the government of Japan had recently lowered the legal age of adulthood. Thus, Yuki had officially become an adult, but the national minimum



drinking age was still twenty. Although Yuki lived on the outskirts of the law and saw no issue if she were to drink, she decided to go for a cola instead.

After placing her order, Yuki cast her gaze around the room—not to survey the bar, but to look for Koyomi. Yuki had heard it was supposed to be a gathering of the three of them, but had she not yet arrived?

In the end, Koyomi never showed. With only the two of them, Yuki and Hakushi got to experience the “magic” element of the bar. Yuki understood why her mentor was a regular patron upon seeing the exceptional skills of the bartender magician, but she was unable to genuinely enjoy the show because she was preoccupied with desperately searching for the right words to say to her mentor. In Yuki’s mind, Hakushi had died a year and a half ago. Being reunited was all fine and dandy, but Yuki had no idea what to talk about.

After the magic show had reached a stopping point, Yuki let go of her reservations and spoke. “Um, Master?”

“What?”

“So... You were alive all this time, huh?”

“Sure was.”

“I met Koyomi in my most recent game, and she told me about this place.”

“Yeah. She brought me up to speed.”

Of course. That was immediately obvious.

Hakushi continued, “I hear you had a showdown with Essay.”

“...Yes. She had an immortal body like yours.”

“So it seems.”

“Huh...? Does that mean you didn’t tell her about your procedure?”

“Of course I didn’t. I didn’t tell you, did I? She looked into it all by herself.” Hakushi rested her chin in her hands, causing a shadow to form on one side of her face.

“Master.”

“What?”

“Who would you have rather met up with tonight between Essay and me?”

A player whose strategy showed utter disregard for her own body didn't deserve to be Hakushi's protégé—that had been Yuki's reason for fighting Essay. And in the end, Yuki had claimed victory. However, how was it in reality? Which one of them would her mentor have wanted to survive?

With a brief sigh, Hakushi responded, “Essay.”

Yuki's heart jumped.

“—If I said that, would you go and swap places for me?”

“...Nope.” Yuki shook her head.

“Then that's that,” Hakushi said. “You're no longer my protégé. You shouldn't care about how people on the *sidelines* view you.”

**(2/4)**

Yuki left the bar after finishing her glass of cola.

Several minutes later, at the ideal timing for seat turnover, another customer came in. A woman who had the aura of an old lady despite only being in her twenties—Koyomi.

“Hey there.” “Hey.”

After that casual exchange of greetings, Koyomi took a seat.

“You showed up late on purpose, didn't you?” Hakushi said.

“Sure did. Figured the two of you could use some time alone.” Koyomi chuckled. “Still, what a crazy coincidence for two of your protégés to run into each other in the same game.”

“Seems like the games are matching players' levels more and more. The possibility may be small, but it's nothing to be surprised about... You didn't stir things up between them, did you?”

“Of course not... Probably, at least.”

*Really, now?* Hakushi thought.

Koyomi folded her arms on the table and rested her chin atop them. “I’m going to call it quits. That was my first game in a long while, and I’m surprised by how much the level of players has risen. I had no clue about the implants or Essay’s role, either. I only managed to survive in the end out of sheer luck... I couldn’t keep up with any of the others. It’s over for me.”

“That’s fine, coward.”

“Cowardice”: That was Koyomi’s playstyle. While cowardice may normally be considered a personality flaw, it was a virtue in death games. Koyomi’s abilities as a player were perfectly average, but she shined when it came to detecting the slightest hint of death. Hakushi was also skilled in sensing hostility and sniffing out traps, but Koyomi was a cut above. It was as if she was blessed by fate or had the ability to see the future—she had avoided Candle Woods, the game that had ended Hakushi’s career, because she had gotten bad vibes from the invitation. That made Koyomi a gifted player whom Hakushi respected.

If Koyomi saw no future for herself in the industry, then it would certainly be true. Hakushi was in no position to say otherwise.

“Maybe you can throw your winnings into the stock market.”

“No, the risk is too scary... So how was your meeting with Yuki? Has she graduated from being a foolish protégé?”

“She’s no longer a protégé, which makes her just a fool,” Hakushi replied. “She asked me who I would’ve wanted to win between her and Essay. There’s no end to her foolishness.”

“You’re being awfully harsh.”

“That’s my style.”

When she’d still been a player, Hakushi had adopted a playstyle of “negation.”

If she had any sort of talent, it was the skill to find flaws in anything and everything. She didn’t need to search to find her own faults. Her strategy for survival was to conquer each and every one of her weaknesses until she no longer had any.

In a nutshell, she was a very negative person.

“That won’t fly nowadays,” Koyomi teased.

“That’s why I retired without a fuss.”

“And so you passed the torch to Yuki... Do you still expect her to reach ninety-nine games in your stead?”

“Yeah. She’s the only protégé of mine who declared it loud and clear, so my hopes rest with her. But I wouldn’t mind if she decides to quit.”

“I’ve always wanted to ask, why ninety-nine and not a hundred? Is there a special meaning to that number?”

“Who knows.” Hakushi played dumb. She tipped back her glass with fingers that could no longer sense any temperature, sending alcohol flowing into the artificial organs in her body.

“Your body is far more mysterious than the magic of this bar,” Koyomi commented.

### **(3/4)**

A few minutes after leaving the magic bar, Yuki received a call. She fished out her phone and saw that it was her agent.

*That’s rare,* she thought.

Although she had told her agent her number, this was probably the first time the woman had ever called her. With equal parts curiosity and apprehension, Yuki accepted the call and brought the phone to her ear.

“Yes, hello?”

“Good evening, Yuki,” her agent said in a rushed voice. “Do you have time to speak?”

“.....? Sure, now is fine.”

“I figured I should tell you about this...although the details have yet to be confirmed.”

“What is it?”

“It concerns a game that took place around the same time as Cloudy Beach...”

After pausing for long enough to grab Yuki’s attention, the agent continued.

“While not comparable to Candle Woods—the results of the game were quite astonishing, so I hear. Only three of eighty players survived; the rest were completely wiped out.”

Cloudy Beach had indeed been a crucial game for Yuki. However, her battle was far from over. There remained many more obstacles Yuki would need to surmount in order to clear ninety-nine games.

**(4/4)**

# Commentary

## [Iori Kanzaki](#)

No matter the era, the concept of death is one that fascinates people of all ages and genders. I myself am no exception, as I enjoy stories of this nature. Characters gather together and meet their demises one after another, sometimes with their organs scattered around, other times with their brains pierced, until in the end only a lucky few survive. There are also works in which calamity strikes survivors in some form. In any case, these stories grant readers a taste of death. I suspect that the audience in this series also revels in the delight of being able to perceive death from a safe yet up-close-and-personal distance.

However, this is not simply a death-game story.

First of all, the characters are participating in games of their own volition. Players even go so far as to change their appearances (like Airi, who grew out her hair in hopes of inducing financial contributions from the audience), a sign that they enjoy the games from the bottom of their hearts. Although their lives are being toyed with, it feels as if they are actually the ones in control.

Furthermore, the story does not revolve around a one-off game; the fact that the games are held repeatedly is an entertaining aspect. It is especially unique that the games are not identical, but rather take place in different locations with different rules each time. Perhaps because of that distinction, the genre differs slightly across games. Past games like Ghost House (Volume 1) and Scrap Building (Volume 2) are classic escape-themed death games, while Candle Woods (Volume 1) and Golden Bath (Volume 2) play out like massacres, hewing closer to the mold of gory survival games in the vein of *Battle Royale*. In this volume, Cloudy Beach unfolds like a mystery, with advanced players finding themselves in a game reminiscent of werewolf.

And what I believe to be the heart of this series is the clash of emotions between youthful characters and the thrilling developments that arise as a result.

The Preservation Treatment—the mechanism in which blood that comes in contact with air transforms into a cotton-like texture. This novel conceit considerably tones down the image of “death” in this series. Of course, while there are scenes featuring grisly elements such as severed arms and legs, the imagery in readers’ minds instead becomes that of white fluff scattered about, giving death a hint of charm. Although the spectacle of dying is a selling point of the death-game genre, this work does not depict loss of life as something so grotesque. That is a big advantage that allows the thrilling developments between characters to take center stage.

Yuki, a player with a low-key aura like a phantom who shows little emotion when interacting with others, expresses a passionate resolve in inheriting her mentor’s will and occasionally demonstrates compassion for others. I suspect there are readers who are pleased by the fact that, as the story progresses, she is shown to not be so cold but is actually a kindhearted person. Then there are her relationships with the characters around her. Those other characters are not just present for her to kick down for the sake of survival. They are her rivals, sometimes friends, and in this volume, a fellow protégé. I was completely captivated by the battle to the death that played out like it would in a battle manga, with all the pride and emotions flying about.

Yuki has fought on after inheriting her mentor’s goal of clearing ninety-nine consecutive games. How will her attitude toward her goal change after learning the truth that her mentor is still alive? And what genre of death game will be featured next? I eagerly await the continuation of the story.

# Commentary

## [Yuuki Shasendou](#)

Any fan of this series should know that this story is *an extremely irregular mystery featuring a peculiar setting*. I hope you pay no mind to the absurdity of me using the words *irregular* and *peculiar* in the same sentence. If you are a reader of this brazen series, I believe you should understand the feelings that prompt me to want to describe it as such.

Despite featuring an outlandish protagonist who makes a living through playing in regularly held death games and having other distinctive characters who lead readers by the nose, this story is a fair-play mystery that guides its readers with rules.

The rules that are explicitly stated offer the information needed to poke holes in the games in advance to anyone with the ability to think as flexibly as Yuki. A reread would show that game setups, such as the double-bath venue in Volume 2's Golden Bath, are hinted at quite fairly. Furthermore, Yuki's unique sensibilities as a regular death-game player, which may seem quite baffling to readers at first glance, are unusually easy to accept due to the declaration that she lives according to her own rules. That holds true even for when she kills a girl whom she had been carrying on her back moments prior, and for her decision to devote her life to clearing ninety-nine consecutive games, a goal that may possess no meaning whatsoever.

With the groundwork complete, this volume manages to pull off a classic closed circle mystery through Cloudy Beach. Players are trapped on an inescapable, secluded island and must survive a killer who attacks night after night. This simple game fully satisfies as an exciting mystery in this series. The thrill of deducing the contours and conclusion of the game through clues that are gradually revealed is sure to delight even the most avid of mystery fans.



Additionally, those who have finished reading *Cloudy Beach* must have realized the special advantage this series has in presenting a mystery—the ability to depict an extremely long-term case.

The clues for this closed circle mystery are found not in the state of the corpses nor the alibis of the players. Rather, the elements of deduction are drawn from past volumes, from the existence of the psychopath Kyara, who appeared in Volume 1's *Candle Woods*, to even the mentor-protégé relationships of characters like Mishiro, who died in *Golden Bath*. Rarely do typical mysteries bring together the same characters for multiple cases. As such, each time, characters build new personal relationships, divulge their pasts, and hunt for motives.

For this series, however, because players are repeatedly participating in death games put on by the same organizers, they run into one another across multiple games, growing readers' understanding of them and their relationships. Thus, information from past games also serves as clever foreshadowing. In reality, the key to solving *Cloudy Beach* is information relating to the manner of death and the survival of Hakushi, Yuki's mentor, who had lived through *Candle Woods*. The long-term foreshadowing spans more than a full volume, a method that astonished me as the story unfolded before my eyes. This series was able to open up a new horizon precisely because it is a series with a peculiar setting.

Of course, as the series continues, the reader's understanding of the characters and the setting will keep expanding. It is for that reason that this series is blessed with an ideal rule: The newest volume will always be the most entertaining.

# Commentary

## Yozora Fuyuno

While I am beyond humbled to be writing a commentary for—and I mean it in a good way—this *absurd* story, that is exactly why I will use this space to write candidly about it as a single reader (from the perspective of a novelist).

After reading this story, the first thing I felt was despondency. That was followed by gratitude. Perhaps it may sound rather strange to be feeling gratitude, but from the standpoint of an author, that emotion naturally rose within me.

To be brutally honest, at the end of the day, the medium of the novel is meant to be a form of entertainment, and selling well is the ultimate guiding principle. Because of that, writers tend to make various calculated decisions during the writing process—for instance, making the plot as captivating as possible, designing characters that are likely to gain fans, playing on readers' sympathies, including fan service scenes to heighten expectations for the work, et cetera. These are all direct and effective approaches, and I get the impression that such decisions play a bigger role when it comes to light novels, which are more geared toward entertainment, especially those that are series. And the reality is that novels that make skilled use of one or more of those approaches indeed sell well.

However, this series mercilessly does away with those calculated decisions—by quite literally doing away with its characters. There is generally no plot armor for anyone besides the protagonist, Yuki, and her sense of humanity offers little to empathize with. In this volume, we finally begin to sense connections between characters, but there is something cold to be found in them as well. While the series does compromise by offering minimal inclusion of “reader-oriented elements” like uniforms and swimsuits, in the grand scheme of things, they amount to no more than mere embellishments.

So why do away with those calculated decisions that could otherwise be intentionally added in?

The answer is simple: to write a story the author considers entertaining. Everything boils down to that point. Although that approach cannot be unequivocally deemed correct when viewing writing novels as a business, there exists no desire more wholesome or pure when treating novels as entertainment.

Continuing along those lines, this series, which has been called “not right” and judged to be a monstrous work that divides readers, can be considered a result of the process of simply writing something entertaining. And so having encountered this work, which purely seeks to be entertaining, I am inspired and filled with gratitude as an author and a reader.

Volume 1 introduces readers to the world of the series and covers past events, Volume 2 highlights players’ struggles and offers a glimpse into the work of the organizers, and Volume 3 follows a clash of seasoned players and reveals the contours of the overarching story.

This series does not fit the mold of novels written for the purposes of selling well. In a sense, that makes this work unpredictable to readers—and perhaps to the author, too. And in another sense, it means this work has unlimited potential, far more than any other.

What kinds of developments await in such a series? What form will this monstrous work transform into in the world of novels and light novels? I can’t wait to see what the future holds.

## Afterword

...To be honest, reading the commentaries greatly surprised me.

Hello, this is Yushi Ukai. I am nervously in charge of this section.

Thank you very much for reading Volume 3 of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table*.

This volume strays away from the structure of the first two, featuring only a single game across the entire book. Besides the mere number of games in the book, the flavor of the game has also changed somewhat. That was, first and foremost, in order to set the scene for a game with many elite players. Yet, beyond that, I also made intentional efforts to alter the flavor of this volume. Although this series occupies a stimulating genre, I fearlessly hold the belief that I must continue to draw up new thrills, out of concern that repeating the same kinds of thrills will quickly grow old. And what came as a result was Cloudy Beach, a game on an island featuring veteran players.

I would like to express my gratitude to my editor, O, for approving this work that I wrote with doubts about its viability, as well as to Nekometaru for accommodating my unprecedented request for an illustration of a character wearing a short coat who is twenty-eight years old yet has the aura of an old woman. I also would like to sincerely thank Iori Kanzaki, Yuuki Shasendou, and Yozora Fuyuno for their commentaries.

By the way, a manga adaptation of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table* has officially been announced. The series will be drawn by Banzai Kotobuki Daienkai and published in *Comp Ace* magazine. Thank you to everyone involved in that effort as well.

Now then...I hope to see you again in Volume 4 of *Playing Death Games to Put Food on the Table*.



After overcoming Cloudy Beach, I learn that another game that took place around the same time ended in catastrophe, with only a handful of survivors. While investigating alongside Keito, a player I first met in a previous game, I find out about the rise of another psychopath.

From an incident on the trip home from school

From an incident on the trip home from school

to a game set in a pumpkin patch,

to a game set in a pumpkin patch,

until our bodies decay,

until our bodies decay,

we continue to play death games to put food on the table.

As I prepare myself for my inevitable encounter with this psychopath, I receive an additional piece of bad news, one concerning the permanent scar on my right eye that I had sustained in Candle Woods. On top of that, a night-school classmate of mine has begun to monitor my behavior, which only adds to my list of worries. In the midst of all this, I take on a game in which the living and the dead meet—Halloween Night.

PLAYING DEATH GAMES IN FOOD ON TABLE

Volume 4 coming soon from 



"We're death-game  
players, you know?"

"These are genuine  
games in which  
people die."

"Wh-wh-wh-what's going on...?!"

"Piece of cake."

"I'll continue  
down this  
road until  
I die."

"I'm Yuki.  
Nice to  
meet you."

"I—I can't! I don't  
want to die...!"

"I'm not new to this."

**Let's play.  
With our  
lives on  
the line.**

# PLAYING DEATH GAMES TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

Art by  
Banzai Kotobuki Daienkai

Story by  
Yushi Ukai

Character Design by  
Nekometaru

Volume 1 coming soon from



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