

Puppet Yoshino

Spirit No. 4

Astral Dress—Hermit

Weapon—Puppet Type [Zadkiel]

02

*Koushi
Tachibana*

Illustrated by
Tsunako



Date A Live

Puppet Yoshino



*Date
A Live*

Puppet Yoshino



“Wha—?!
Sh-Shido?!”

Tohka
A Spirit

“Not to
your liking?”

*Origami
Tobiichi*

Shido's
classmate



“How could
you be
making out
with some
giiiiiiiiiiiiiii-
rrrrrrrl?!”

“Shido, we've got
an emergency.”

Kotori Itsuka
The commander of Ratatoskr

“—?!”

Shido Itsuka
A high school student

“Yoshino
A second Spirit
...”



"Target acquired.
Begin annihilation of code name Hermit."

"Eek...!"

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**“Hmph.
Sorry, but I won’t let you get in Shido’s way.”**

Date A Live

Puppet Yoshino

02

Koushi Tachibana

Illustrated by
Tsunako



New York

Copyright

Date A Live 02
Puppet Yoshino

Koushi Tachibana

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Spirit

A uniquely catastrophic creature existing in a parallel world. Cause of occurrence and reason for existence unknown. Creates a spacequake and inflicts serious damage on her surroundings whenever she appears in this world. A very powerful fighter.

Strategy No. 1

An nihilate with force. This approach is very difficult, since the Spirit is extremely powerful, as noted above.

Strategy No. 2

...Date her and make her all weak in the knees.

Puppet Yoshino

Spirit No. 4
Astral Dress = Hermit
Weapon = Puppet Type [Zadkiel]

Prologue

A New Day

“Shido! I made something—cookies, they’re called!”

Hair as dark as night swinging down to her waist, eyes gleaming like crystals, an almost ridiculously beautiful girl thrust a container out at him.

“T-Tohka...” Shido Itsuka reeled, overwhelmed by the sheer force of her.

“Mm, what?!” Tohka Yatogami demanded, beaming at him, flowers practically blooming to life behind her.

“...Oh, uh.”

A long list of complaints came to mind, but he couldn’t say anything when he saw her blindingly white smile.

Tohka stared at him curiously before pulling the lid off the container.
“Anyway, Shido. Get a load of this!”

Inside were indeed baked objects that might have been—very generously—described as cookies, complete with twisted shapes and scorched edges.

Although Shido and Tohka were in the same class, the school was experimenting with a system that split them up into smaller groups for home economics, supposedly to make sure everyone had enough to do. Today was Tohka’s turn in the kitchen.

“These are...,” he started and then trailed off.

“Mm. I did receive some instruction and help along the way, but I made them!” she said and beamed at him once more. “Try one!”

He felt an indescribable chill run up his spine. It wasn’t Tohka’s cookies; it was the fact that the envious eyes of every boy in the classroom were turned on him.

Maybe that was inevitable. After all, a girl gifting a boy with homemade cookies in any situation inspired jealousy in other boys. All the more when the girl was *the* Tohka Yatogami, who had jumped to the top of the most-datable-girls list immediately after she transferred to the school (according to the rumors).

Even his best friend, Hiroto Tonomachi, next to him was staring with vacant eyes and muttering, “Dammit, dammit, dammit... The only good Itsuka is a dead Itsuka.”

Tohka raised an eyebrow. “What’s wrong, Shido? You’re not eating them.”

“Oh. N-no, it’s, uh,” he said, face stiffening.

Her shoulders slumped in dejection. “Mm... I guess you’re the better cook and all...”

“Th-that’s not what I meant! Th-thanks.” Steeling himself, he took a cookie from the container and slowly brought it to his mouth.

Fwk! A chrome bullet shot across his field of view. Launched from the hallway, the silver flash obliterated the cookie in his hand before plunging into the wall.

“Wh-what the...?!” He froze for a second and then followed the silver trajectory with his eyes to discover a fork twanging, tines deep in the drywall. The design was simple, and he assumed the utensil was from the home ec room.

“Hngh. Who’s there?! You could’ve hurt someone!” Tohka shouted, looking toward the hallway.

Following her lead, Shido turned his eyes in that direction to find a girl standing there silently, arm stretched out like she was participating in a javelin throw.

Hair that just grazed her shoulders, pale skin. Her face was extremely attractive but without so much as a hint of what might be called an expression on it. The girl seemed inorganic somehow, like a doll.

“...T-Tobiichi?” A line of sweat trickled down his cheek.

“Mm.” Tohka frowned.

They both stared as Origami Tobiichi slowly walked toward them.

When she arrived in front of Shido, she popped open the lid of the container she held in her left hand and offered it to him in the same way as Tohka had earlier.

“You don’t have to put Tohka Yatogami’s ‘cookies’ in your mouth. If you’re going to eat something, eat these.”

Inside the container were rows of cookies so perfectly uniform they looked like they were straight off an assembly line.

“Uh, umm.”

“Out of my way! Shido’s eating *my* cookies!” Tohka cried.

Shido tried to figure out exactly how he should react to this latest development.

“*You’re* in my way,” Origami said, not so much as flinching, her face utterly impassive. “You should leave now.”

“What did you say?! You waltz in here second, acting like you’re the star of the show!”

“It doesn’t matter who was first. You can’t make him consume your cookies.”

“Wh-what?!”

“Your handwashing was insufficient,” Origami stated flatly. “Additionally, while baking, you sneezed three times when you inhaled some flour dust. Extremely unsanitary.”

“Wh—?” Tohka’s eyes grew wide, as though she had been caught off guard.

For some reason, the boys in the classroom began to whisper at Origami’s statement, their eyes on Tohka’s cookies.

She appeared not to notice the sudden commotion. She balled her hands into fists. “Sh-Shido’s strong! That’s not enough to kill him!”

“There is not a clear cause-and-effect there,” Origami said. “Also, you got the measurements wrong. I can’t imagine your cookies turned out properly.”

“Wh—?!” Tohka frowned, glancing back and forth between the two containers of cookies. “Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“I’m under no obligation to instruct you. At any rate, it’s clear my cookies are more likely to satisfy him.”

“Sh-shut up! As if any cookies of yours could be any good!” Tohka shouted, snatching one from Origami’s container, hand blurring for a moment as she tossed it in her own mouth.

“Pwaah...” Her cheeks flushed pink, a look of ecstasy on her face. Apparently, the cookie was pretty good. She quickly gasped and shook her head from side to side to regain her composure. “H-hmph! Nothing special!

Mine are definitely better!"

"That's not possible. You should gracefully accept your defeat."

"What did you say to me?!"

"Hmm?"

"C-calm down, both of you."

If Shido didn't intervene, this was going to come to blows. He stepped in between the two girls and pushed them apart with a placating, "Now, now."

"Mm... So then, Shido, whose cookies do you want to eat?" Tohka demanded.

"Huh?" he said, stunned.

Tohka and Origami thrust their cookies at him from either side.

"Hmm, Shido?"

"..."

Both girls had their gaze focused on him, eyes flashing with light so sharp that it threatened to cut him. He felt sweat gush from his forehead and instinctively staggered back a step.

He felt like his own death was imminent, no matter which cookie he ate.

Obeying his own survival instincts, he took a cookie from each container and shoved them into his mouth at the same time. "Y-yeah, they're both great!"



Tohka and Origami narrowed their eyes and stared at him suspiciously.
“You ate my cookie just the teensiest bit faster!” Tohka claimed.
“Mine was point zero two seconds quicker,” Origami noted at the same moment.

“...”
“...”

And then they quietly looked at each other.

“...Umm.”

This was not the first time he’d been caught in *these* crosshairs. Almost resigned to his fate at this point, Shido placed himself between the two girls. Just as he’d expected, fists started to fly toward heads and stomachs only to be absorbed by the head and stomach of the poor boy who’d stepped in the middle.

Chapter 1

Mission: Under One Roof

“...Aah...,” Shido sighed.

He plodded along the residential street at the pace of an old man with bad knees as the sun began its journey back to the horizon. His face was haggard with exhaustion, and the hair that hung over his eyes was dull and lifeless. He was only sixteen but looked much older.

And who could blame him?

“...Aah.” Another sigh.

Tohka and Origami kept going at each other, and he stepped in to stop them every time. This wasn’t the first of these fights. They’d been happening almost daily since Tohka transferred to Raizen High, the public school Shido attended. If it were the bickering of two teenage girls, he wouldn’t have been as anxious as he was.

“...”

He cast his mind back to Tohka and Origami in their forms he witnessed last month. One a Spirit, a world-ending catastrophe. The other, a wizard with the Ground Self-Defense Forces Anti-Spirit Team. Both in possession of superpowers far beyond the human domain.

An average guy, Shido was constantly put in the position of trying to stop them from ripping each other’s faces off. On top of physical exhaustion, he was on the verge of mental collapse.

“Can’t they get along for five seconds...?” he grumbled, then shook his head at his own idiocy.

Until a month ago, the two girls had been literally trying to kill each other.

The “commander” said Origami and the rest of the AST wouldn’t come for Tohka because they weren’t getting a Spirit signal from her. Even so, she wasn’t exactly champing at the bit to become best friends with the now-powerless Spirit.

Shido wouldn’t last much longer if things kept up the way they were. He was about to sigh even longer and louder when he jerked his head up.

“...Hmm?” He felt something cold trail down his neck. “...Gah.” He scowled at the sky.

At some point, it had turned leaden with clouds.

“Rain? Give me a break! The forecast said it was going to be sunny,” he muttered to himself, cursing the weather forecaster, who was more miss than hit these days.

As though the sky had been waiting for that very moment, fat droplets started to mark out dark spots on the pavement.

“Yikes...” He held his bag up over his head and trotted toward his house.

The rain started to come down harder, as if to mock his efforts, and turned into a downpour.

“Oh, come on. Seriously...?” He frowned in annoyance, cold rain seeping into his skin through his wet uniform.

His first thought wasn’t about how uncomfortable the uniform felt plastered to his skin or about catching a cold, but the somewhat domestic anxiety of whether his blazer would be dry in time for school the next day. Which was perhaps only natural, given that Shido was taking care of all the chores while his parents were away for work.

He started to run down the road, trying in vain to keep his uniform from getting totally soaked. Right when he was about to turn at the T-intersection, his feet stopped abruptly.

“Uh...?”

It wasn’t that he was simply too tired to go on or he’d decided he was fine with being wet. Something had appeared just up ahead, which he found much more interesting than beads of water falling from the heavens.

“Is that...a girl?” he asked.

Yes. A girl. A small shadow wrapped in a cute cloak. He couldn’t see her face because a large hood with decorative rabbit ears hid it completely from view. Even more curiously, on her left hand was a ridiculous rabbit puppet.

This girl bounced around the deserted road, looking like she was having

the time of her life.

“What...?” He stared at her, frowning as a question popped inside his head.

He wasn’t curious about why she would be bouncing around in the rain without an umbrella, but *why*? What about her had so instantly commanded his attention?

Her outfit was indeed eye-catching. But that wasn’t it.

He couldn’t quite put the feeling into words, but it was like something was out of place, a strange, uncanny sensation. He felt almost certain he’d experienced this before and very recently, at that.

“...”

The chill of the rain and the clamminess of his wet uniform didn’t bother him anymore. His eyes were fixed on the girl dancing beneath the stormy sky.

Fwoosh! Thud!

“Huh...?” His eyes snapped open as the girl tripped.

She slammed into the ground face-first, sending droplets of water up into the air. The puppet on her left hand broke free and flew off ahead of her. She lay on the road, motionless.

“...H-hey!” He sprinted over to her and cradled the small body. He turned her over. “Y-you okay? Hey!”

At last, he saw the girl’s face. She was probably about the same age as his little sister, Kotori, but her fluffy hair was blue like the ocean. Her soft lips were the color of cherry blossoms, and she was as beautiful as a porcelain doll.

“...!” Her eyelids sprang open to reveal sapphire eyes surrounded by long lashes.

“Aah, thank heavens... Are you hurt?” he asked.

All the color drained out of the girl’s face, eyes darting around, and she leaped up and out of his arms. Once she had put some distance between the two of them, she shivered and sent a fearful glance his way.

“...Umm.” He guessed it had maybe been a little imprudent to touch her, even if he’d only been trying to help. That said, he hadn’t expected she would react this way. “I-I’m—”

“Eek! S-stay...back...please!” the girl squeaked in a frightened voice.

“Huh?” He took a step forward.

“Please...don’t...hurt me...” She shivered like a small animal in the rain, fearful of the threat Shido apparently presented.

“Umm...” He wasn’t sure how to react until he noticed the puppet on the ground. It had slipped off her hand when she fell. He slowly bent over to pick it up and offered it to her. “Is this...yours?”

“...!” She opened her eyes wide and started to race over to him but quickly stopped again. As she carefully eyed the distance between them, the look on her face said she wanted her puppet back, but she was also afraid to get too close to Shido.

He smiled a little and inched toward her, holding it out to her.

“...!” She trembled, but at last, she seemed to understand what he intended to do, and her own feet started to move slowly in his direction.

When she was close enough, she snatched the puppet from his hand and stuffed it onto her own, making its mouth move.

“*Whoa there, buddy. You really helped me out.*” The rabbit spoke in a curiously high-pitched voice, through ventriloquism, Shido supposed.

Cocking his head curiously to one side, Shido looked doubtfully at the girl’s face, but the rabbit kept going, as if to stop him from saying anything to the girl.

“*So when you picked me up there, you ended up touching a whole lot of Yoshinon. How’d you like it? C’mom, be honest. You can tell me.*”

“Uh...?” he said.

“*Playing dumb, huh, you lucky perv.*” The puppet rocked back and forth, like it was trying to show it was laughing. “*Well, you did help me out there, so I’ll let it slide this once.*”

“...Uh, okay. Sure.” He offered a pained smile.

“*Mmkay, then. Thanks muchly,*” the puppet chirped, and the girl whirled around and sprinted off.

“H-hey!” he called out, but the girl didn’t so much as look back at him. She raced around the corner and out of sight.

“What was that...?” He stood rooted to the spot for a few seconds, scratching his cheek, dumbfounded.

“Oh!” He had been so focused on the girl, he hadn’t noticed that he was drenched to the bone. Plus, he’d knelt down on the ground, so his trousers were dirty to boot. “Gah. Just my luck...”

Do we have any stain remover left? he wondered as he ran a hand through

his hair. Droplets of water flew into the air.

Now that he was this wet, there was no point in hurrying anymore. He aired out his grievances with a sigh and started toward his house. “Aah... I’m soaked,” he grumbled.

He reached his house at last and put his key into the lock and then frowned slightly. “...Hmm?”

He grabbed the knob and pulled. Just as he’d expected, the door he knew he’d locked when he went out opened without any resistance.

“Dammit, Kotori.” He sighed. “I guess she’s finally back?”

His little sister, Kotori Itsuka. Thirteen years old, in her second year at the local junior high school. Also the commanding officer of Ratatoskr, an organization that worked to neutralize the Spirits through peaceful means.

She’d been so swamped with work in the aftermath of taking the Spirit Tohka into protective custody that she hadn’t been home for a month.

“Honestly,” he groaned, her face popping up in the back of his mind. He understood she was busy with the whole Tohka thing, but he couldn’t turn a blind eye to the fact that she didn’t have permission to be away from home. It seemed like she’d been going to school, at least. But as her older brother, it was his duty to say something to her.

“And—”

He swallowed hard. He had a lot of questions for her. Everything that had happened to him last month seemed impossible now, like something out of a dream. And Kotori was at the center of it all.

“...” His heart started to pound, even though he was just going to talk to his little sister.

“Raaah!” He puffed up his cheeks, braced himself, and stepped into the house. “I’m home!”

He took off his rain-soaked shoes and socks and rolled up the hems of his trousers before stepping up into the house, leaving wet footprints in his wake.

He could hear the TV down the hallway. So Kotori was in the living room.

Shido changed course for the bathroom on tiptoes. He couldn’t exactly talk to her in this drowned-rat state. It would be best to dry himself off and change clothes before heading into the living room.

With his schoolbag in one hand, Shido opened the door to the changing area that led into the bathroom with a practiced move...and froze in place.

“—?!”

There was a girl in the changing area who should not have been there.

Long hair the color of night spilling down her back, eyes like crystals. She was so gorgeous, her presence so powerful, that the superlative *most* ten times in a row wouldn’t begin to describe even a tenth of her beauty.

Shido knew of only one such girl. A Spirit, a world-ending catastrophe. And Raizen High School, Year 2, Class 4, student ID #35.

Tohka Yatogami was standing in front of him. Without a single thread of clothing on her body.

“T-Tohka...?” he murmured, stunned.

Her body, a work of art in and of itself, instantly caused Shido’s retinas, nerves, brain cells to vibrate, evaporate, explode. Breasts comfortably cupped in a hand, a waist that darted in below them, a soft butt. A bewitching and mysterious nude body that would no doubt push the girls of the world beyond envy and on to something akin to reverence.

“Wha—?!” She jumped and looked over at him. “Sh-Shido?!”

“Oh! Uh! No! It’s not! ...I just—!” He didn’t know what it wasn’t, but the words spilled heedlessly from his mouth.

“Wh-whatever...!” she cried. “Just get out!”

“Hngh...!” He took an impossibly perfect right straight to the solar plexus and staggered backward until he hit the wall. He slid down to the floor.

Slam! Not a heartbeat later, the door to the changing area banged shut.

“—Nnrgh. Ugh... Sh-she actually hit me for real...,” he choked out, coughing, and then made a slight revision to that statement. If Tohka had hit him for real, his body would have collapsed into a handy foldable version of himself, neatly storable in a drawer.

Gradually, the pain in his gut subsided, and the skin-colored image that ate into his brain and retinas faded. He managed to get the pounding of his heart back under control.

The door to the changing area opened a crack, and Tohka’s beet-red face peeked out. “...Did you see anything, Shido?!”

“...!”

He shook his head vigorously back and forth as Tohka stared him down. The truth was, he *had* seen something, but if he was stupid enough to come clean, he really would be bent into a new shape small enough to fit in a suitcase.

“Hmm...,” she said, perhaps satisfied with this, and opened the door the rest of the way.

Naturally, she was wearing clothes now, but she wasn’t in her school uniform. Instead, she was clad in his own favorite loungewear, lent to her by Kotori, he assumed. His clothes were a size too big for her, and her collarbone was peeking out of the collar, which was strangely hot. Shido wasn’t exactly sure where to rest his eyes.

But this was no time to worry about that. He stabbed a finger at her. “Wh-what are you doing in my house, Tohka...?!”

“What?” She frowned, like she had no idea why he was asking her that. “Your sister didn’t tell you? She said I should stay over for a while for some kind of training or something.”

“T-training...?!” Now he frowned and turned his gaze down the hallway.

He got to his feet, marched to the living room, and yanked open the door. “Kotoriiii! Explain yourself!”

“Uh?” The pigtailed child sitting on the sofa watching TV looked over her shoulder with eyes round like walnuts. “Oh, hey, Big Bro. You’re home.”

“Y-yeah, just got ba—There isn’t time for that!” He almost answered her like everything was normal before shaking his head furiously. “Did you bring Tohka over...? What exactly is this ‘training’...?!”

“Settle down.” She waved a distracted hand at him.

“How am I supposed to settle down?!” he shrieked. “Wh-why is Tohka here...? Wasn’t she supposed to go home with Reine?”

“Huh? Oh, her.” Kotori pointed toward the kitchen.

“Huh...?” Shido turned his eyes in that direction and froze again.

“...I stopped by for a bit.” An extremely sleepy woman was seated at the dining table separating the living room from the kitchen, dropping sugar cube after sugar cube into a steaming mug.

Reine Murasame. Ratatoskr analyst and Shido’s assistant homeroom teacher. She was not in her usual garb of military uniform or lab coat but rather in his mother’s pajamas with a towel wrapped around her neck. Her hair looked a little damp.

“R-Reine?” He gaped. “What are you doing?”

“...Mm?” Reine appeared to sink into thought briefly and then tousled the back of her head. “Oh, sorry. Did I use too much sugar?”

“That’s not what I meant!” he shouted in frustration. It was true that she

had put in so many sugar cubes that he worried she might have diabetes in the future, but that wasn't the issue at the moment. He patted his chest to calm his racing heart. "What's going on here? Doesn't Tohka live on *Fraxinus*!?"

Now in the custody of Ratatoskr, Tohka lived in a separate area inside *Fraxinus*, the airship owned by the organization, while she attended school. Her power might have been sealed away, but she was still a Spirit, often referred to as a living natural disaster. So a room on the ship had been prepared for her in a closed-off area that was strictly sealed, allowing Ratatoskr to respond immediately in case anything happened and efficiently carry out regular exams. Thus, at the end of the school day, Tohka usually returned to *Fraxinus* with Reine.

"...Ohhh, yeah. I guess that needs an explanation," Reine said, rubbing eyes adorned with dark bags. "...But before that."

"Before that...?" he parroted.

"...Shouldn't you change? You're dripping on the floor."

"Ah!" he cried out softly.



"...So? What exactly is going on here?"

Now in fresh, dry clothes, Shido turned his gaze on Kotori and Reine, who were sitting across from him in his little sister's room on the second floor of the Itsuka home. Big enough to squeeze in only six tatami mats, the small room was furnished with a pastel-colored dresser and bed, with fancy accessories and stuffed animals crammed into every available space.

He would have preferred to continue the conversation in the living room, but they would be talking about some things Tohka was better off not hearing, so they'd taken the discussion upstairs. Tohka, meanwhile, was engrossed in a rerun of some anime in the living room. She wouldn't be making a peep for the next twenty minutes at least.

"Mmkay." Kotori poked her cheek with a finger. "Tohka's going to be living here for a while—as of today!" She puffed her chest out, pleased as punch, an innocent smile on her face.

"And I've been trying to ask you *whyyyyy!*" Shido shouted.

"...Mm, well, calm down, Shintaro," Reine cooed.

Just as he'd feared or maybe expected, she still had his name wrong.

"It's not Shintaro, it's Shido," he corrected.

"...Oh, right. I'll fix that. Sorry, Shin."

"..."

Nothing had been fixed. She'd just shortened her nickname for him. He could only assume she was doing it on purpose. When he looked at her dazed face, however, it did actually look like she was aware of her mistake. But he didn't have time to follow up on the issue of his name now.

"...Broadly speaking, there are two reasons," Reine began in a quiet voice. "One. It's for Tohka's aftercare."

"Aftercare...?" he repeated.

"...Shin. Remember you sealed Tohka's power with a kiss last month?"

"...Uh-huh..." He dropped his gaze as he felt the kiss all over again on his lips. His face reddened.

"Ooh, my big brother's turning red!" Kotori squealed, sounding like she was having the time of her life. "How adorable."

"Sh-shut up!" He looked away.

"...Well, that was great and all, but there's one problem... Now you've got this invisible Path running between you and Tohka."

"A Path?" He frowned. "What does that mean?"

"...Put simply, when Tohka's mental state becomes unstable, the Spirit power sealed in your body could potentially flow back into her."

"Wha—?" He felt a shiver run up his spine.

Tohka's sealed Spirit powers flowing back into her...? Did that mean she would be equipped with the power to rip asunder heaven and earth again? Just thinking about it made his hair stand on end.

"...As you also know, Tohka's living in a separate area of *Fraxinus* right now," Reine continued, ignoring or unaware of Shido's confusion. "We're constantly monitoring her mental state. When she's on *Fraxinus*, her stress levels are dramatically higher than when she's at school."

"Th-they are?"

"...Mm-hmm. And she doesn't seem to like the testing twice a day much, either. Her stress levels are still within acceptable limits, but I can't really say it would be smart to let her be like this. And so...." She put a finger to her chin. "Her test results have stabilized, and it's getting to be time we moved her living quarters off *Fraxinus*."

“Uh-huh... Is that right?”

“...Mm-hmm. All of which is to say that until we can build a special housing unit for Spirits, Tohka will be living here.”

“Wait. Hang on.” He pressed a hand to his forehead.

“...Something wrong?”

“Wh-why does it have to be *our* house...?” he asked.

“...Well, to put it simply, Tohka’s most stable when she’s with you,” Reine told him.

“Huh...?” He gaped at her.

“...Basically, you’re the only human being to have earned her trust so far. Kotori and I see her relatively frequently, but she still doesn’t trust us. We want to try and see how Tohka does in a place where she’s a bit more stable.”

“...Ngh...,” Shido groaned, sweat beading on his forehead.

When she said it like that, he couldn’t help but feel that this was the only sensible move. And—well, the fact that Tohka trusted him... He didn’t exactly hate that, either.

He shook his head slightly, as if to get his thoughts back on track. He couldn’t consent to this situation so easily.

“So? What’s the other reason?” He pressed Reine for more information.

“...Mm-hmm. That one’s much simpler... It’s for your training, Shin.”

He gasped. Tohka had said the same thing before he’d changed out of his wet clothes. *Training*. He didn’t have particularly good memories associated with that word.

“Right, Tohka said that, too... But what’s the use in training now?”

“...Hmm? And why wouldn’t you continue?”

“Why? ...I mean, her Spirit power’s been sealed away...”

Reine shook—or rather wobbled—her head from side to side. “Who said Tohka was the only one?”

“Huh? So... What do you...?”

“...I’m sure you can piece it together,” she said. “Tohka’s not the only catastrophic creature causing spacequakes—code name Spirit. At the present stage, several others have been confirmed.”

“Wha—?! ” He felt something tug at his heart.

Tohka wasn’t the only Spirit?

A feeling that was impossible to describe—nerves or maybe fear—roiled in the pit of his stomach and radiated outward through his body, making his

fingers and toes tremble.

Reine paid no mind to the frozen Shido. "...Shin. We want you to continue talking to the Spirits. So you have to train."

"...Y-you have to be kidding—," he cried out, planting his hands on his knees.

"Hmm?" Kotori said, breaking her silence. At some point, the ribbons that tied her hair up into two bundles had changed from white to black.

"—" He'd seen this before. She was in *commander mode* now.

"You don't want to train, Shido?" she asked, seeming very grown-up all of a sudden, in contrast to her childish attitude earlier. "You're saying you don't want to date the Spirits and make them fall for you anymore?"

Right. The method of peacefully neutralizing the Spirits espoused by Ratatoskr sounded idiotic when put into words: have Shido get friendly with the Spirits and seal their powers with his body.

"O-of course not!" he cried.

"Huh." Kotori leaned back slightly and lifted her chin. "So then, that's the end of that, I guess."

"Uh...?"

"We sit back and watch quietly as the world is ripped apart by spacequakes. Or we patiently wait for a miracle and for the Spirits to be killed by the AST... It'll be one or the other, I suppose."

"...Urp."

At this, he was at a loss for words. It wasn't that he had forgotten. But his heart ached when she spoke that truth out loud.

The Spirits existed in an alternate space that they referred to as a parallel world and only occasionally appeared in this world. But when they did, they warped the walls of space-time, bringing about the phenomenon known as a spacequake. Although the quakes differed in scale, areas where the Spirits manifested were completely obliterated, like the aftermath of a massive explosion. The Self-Defense Forces Anti-Spirit Team—the AST—viewed these Spirits as extremely dangerous and attempted to exterminate them with firepower.

"There's one person in this world with the unique ability to seal a Spirit's power," Kotori said. "And you're saying you don't want to do it. So that's the end of the discussion then, isn't it?"

"...Wh-what...the...?!" He groaned in agony. Without his knowledge,

he'd been saddled with such a heavy responsibility, and the weight of it was making his shoulders hurt. To get to the heart of that, he needed to confirm a few things himself. "Kotori."

"What is it?" she replied leisurely, perhaps having guessed more or less what his question would be.

"Tell me: What exactly *is* Ratatoskr? When did you join this group? And what is this power of mine?"

This was what he'd been wanting to ask this entire time, questions he hadn't been able to get answers to, given Kotori's long absence from the house.

She sighed, pulled one of her beloved Chupa Chups from her pocket, unwrapped it, and popped it into her mouth. "Right. This is the perfect opportunity. I guess I could give you the overview." She leaned back against the large cushion behind her. "Ratatoskr was formed by a group of sympathizers. Well, if I had to say, it's like a kind of nature conservancy. Of course, its existence is not made public."

"Nature conservancy... Huh." Although this didn't quite click for him, he was reluctant to interrupt her. He waited for her to continue.

"Yes. And as to the reason for the formation of Ratatoskr, the biggest objective, well, that's to protect the Spirits and give them a happy life. Although some of the Rounds, the top executive group, have the perverted desire to make the Spirits' powers their own and do all kinds of things with it."

"Huh...? Your objective isn't to avoid the spacequakes?"

"Oh, well, of course, there's that, too." She waved a dismissive hand. "But that's secondary at best. If that was our only goal, we'd be no different from the AST."

"Ngh, well, I guess. So then...how and when did you end up commanding this organization? I had no idea." He hadn't intended to accuse her of hiding things, but her keeping such an important secret, something that was life-and-death in the worst-case scenario, annoyed him a little as the older brother.

Perhaps guessing at this mental state of his, Kotori sniffed at him. "I was appointed the commander of Ratatoskr's combat unit around five years ago."

"Five years ago, huh...? Wait. What?!" Shido did some mental math and jerked his head up. "D-don't be ridiculous. Five years ago...you were still only eight!"

No matter how unusual the organization was, it was not a sane state of affairs to put a third-grade girl in the position of commanding it.

"Well, for a few years, it was more like training," she replied. "It's just recently that I've actually taken command."

"N-no, that's not the issue here. What is a little girl—?"

"Well, what can I say? Ratatoskr recognized my superior intellect."

"This makes no sense!" he cried.

"Say what you want, but it won't change the facts. Be a good boy and believe what your little sister tells you. Do you think arguing makes you look smart or something?" Her words and manner were almost entirely different from the cute Kotori he knew.

Sweat ran down his cheeks. "Is this dual personality of yours also Ratatoskr's fault?"

She snorted. "Rude and simplistic. Think a little harder before you speak. First of all, this—"

"This?"

"..." She looked up at him with a somehow mysterious expression before shaking her head as if to brush off his outburst. "None of that matters. An incident five years ago became a turning point for the organization."

"Hey, don't dodge the—"

Kotori cut him off by snapping her Chupa Chups stick at him. "We discovered a boy who could seal the Spirit powers with a kiss. This led to Ratatoskr shifting to a policy of actively protecting the Spirits."

"Wh—?" He furrowed his brow, dumbfounded. "Y-you're saying that was...me?"

"Yes." She nodded and put her lollipop back into her mouth.

"H-hang on a second here." His head was in complete chaos. He'd been given too much information at once, and he couldn't process it all. "Why do I have this power in the first place?"

"Dunno." She shrugged.

"Uh? W-wait, what? You don't get to feign innocence after telling me all that."

"I'm not feigning anything. I seriously don't know. You can take the power from a Spirit with a kiss and seal it in a stable state in your own body. All we know is that you've got this ability. At least, I don't know why you have a power like that."

“S-so then, how did you find out I could do this?! Five years ago! What happened exactly?!” He pulled his hair frantically with both hands.

“...” She glanced down, averting her eyes, her face colored with unexpected grief. It housed an expression steeped in deep emotion. As if recalling some painful memory. As if regretting an irreversible mistake.

His heart flipped over in his chest. “K-Kotori...?”

“Uh. Um.” She jumped slightly. “Right, they checked you out with, uh, Ratatoskr’s measurement device. And that’s how they found out. It was the same for me,” she told him in an evasive manner, far from the decisiveness of her commander mode.

For some reason, he felt like he couldn’t press her any further.

“A-anyway.” She cleared her throat and snapped out a finger at him. “What you need to know right now is that you have the power to do something about the Spirits. That’s it! So I’m going to need you to make a choice. About whether you’ll seduce the Spirits for us or not.”

Shido pursed his lips. It was such a mean-spirited question. He was the only one who could seal the Spirit’s powers. If he didn’t do it, Spirits—creatures in the same situation as Tohka, who he’d been so desperate to save—would be assaulted by the AST. Even though they weren’t necessarily intending to destroy the world, they were unilaterally categorized as a catastrophe and targeted for annihilation. Not to mention the issue of the spacequakes. Unless the Spirit’s power was sealed, they could be looking at another massive disaster on the level of the Great Eurasian Spacequake at some point.

He let out a long sigh and picked at his hair. “Let me think about it a bit.”

“Well, that’ll be fine for now.” Kotori snorted before turning her gaze on Reine sitting next to her. “Okay then, Reine. Make the preparations.”

“...Mm, leave everything to me,” Reine said, her head bobbing from side to side. “...It’s basically ready.”

Kotori whistled. “Fast as ever.”

“...Preparations? For what?” Shido got a bad feeling as he listened to their disquieting conversation.

“What? Tohka’s room, of course,” Kotori replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “She’ll be using the guest room upstairs.”

“H-hang on a sec! I said I’d think it over!”

“Mm-hmm. So don’t pay us any mind. You go and think on it long and

hard.”

“How am I supposed to do that?!” he shouted.

“So loud.” She plugged her ears, looking exasperated. “Either way, our only choice is to have Tohka stay here until the special housing unit’s ready. And it’ll be too late to start training once you’ve made your decision.”

“You say that, but...I don’t know how an adolescent boy and girl can live under the same roof!” he cried, blushing beet red.

She laughed. “If we thought you were capable of having some passionate love affair, we wouldn’t have had to put in all this work.”

“Hngh...!” It made him sad that he couldn’t argue that. “That’s still no excuse...!”

He heard a door opening behind him—the entrance to Kotori’s bedroom. His shoulders jumped up as he looked back.

Tohka was giving him an uneasy look from the hallway. He didn’t know how long she’d been standing there.

“...Shido... Am I not allowed to be here...?”

“...Urp.”

He felt something catch in his throat at the sight of her sad eyes, the ends of her eyebrows tugged down. If there was a person alive who could say no in the face of this, he would like to meet them. He sighed long and hard.

“...F-fine...!”



“So how exactly will I be training? What on earth do you intend to make me do?” he asked Kotori, who was sitting on the living room sofa, about three hours after he’d been basically strong-armed into nodding his head in agreement.

It was just the two of them. Reine had gone back to *Fraxinus* after the earlier discussion, and Tohka had headed for the guest room after supper. Her things from her room on *Fraxinus* had arrived, so he assumed she was unpacking.

“Nothing in particular,” Kotori said, satisfying her post-dinner cravings (with a Chupa Chups, naturally—not a cigarette), black ribbons tying up her hair.

“Huh...? What’s that supposed to mean? You wouldn’t shut up about training before.”

“Mm-hmm. To be more precise, your task is to simply live your life, I suppose.”

“Excuse me?”

“The objective is for you to talk to girls without getting flustered, since you’ll be going on dates with many Spirits going forward.”

“...Ohhh, now that you mention it, you did say that.” He remembered what he’d been forced to do last month with the dating sim and training to become a pickup artist, and his cheeks stiffened.

“This time, you’ll get hands-on training with a girl living with you. Basically, I want you to remain calm and act like a gentleman even if you are suddenly thrust into temptation.”

“...Uh-huh.”

“So during the time you’re living with Tohka, all you have to do is not panic or get flustered—no matter what kind of eyebrow-raising thing happens.”

“Wh-what the...?” he groaned, a massive crease forming between his eyebrows. A question popped up in the back of his mind. “...But, like, why do I have to seduce the Spirits to begin with? I can seal their powers with a kiss, right? So then I catch them off guard and—”

“Oh my. So you like it rough, Shido? Be careful you don’t wind up in the morning papers.”

“As if!” he shouted.

“It won’t work.” She shrugged, exasperated. “Their powers won’t be completely sealed unless they open their hearts to you.”

“Th-they won’t...?”

“Nope.” She shook her head. “I’m not telling you to make them head over heels for you, but it’ll be pretty rough if they don’t trust you enough not to refuse a kiss at the very least. That’s why Reine monitors the Spirit’s mood and your affection rating so closely.”

“R-right...” The more he heard about his power, the less he understood it. “Hmm?” He leaned his head to one side.

Kotori was speaking in a whisper. “Right. Understood. Mm... Bye...”

When he looked very closely, he could see a small earpiece in her right ear.

“Kotori? Who are you talking to?”

“Ohhh, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. So anyway, Shido.” She bounced up off the sofa. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Huh? Then go.”

“The lightbulb was burned out when I checked. Could you maybe change it first?”

“Sure… I guess I could.” Somewhat suspicious, he pulled a spare lightbulb out of the cupboard and headed to the bathroom with it and a stool to stand on. He set the stool down on the floor and opened the door. And froze in place.

“…?!”

But that was only natural. Because someone was already in the bathroom.

“Wh—? Shido?!” Tohka was sitting there with her panties pulled down to her knees.

“T—! T-T-T-T-T-T-Tohka…?! Why are you in here—?” he squeaked, feeling his heart thudding in his chest.

Weird. The door hadn’t been locked. Plus, the light that Kotori had said was burned out was shining brightly, but the switch outside was in the off position. It was easy for someone to walk in by accident.

“I—I could ask you the same thing! Close the door already!” Cheeks flushing, she yanked down the hem of her sweatshirt while she grabbed the roll of toilet paper from the wall and threw it at his face.

“Gah…?!” The toilet paper might have been soft, but it did make its own impact when thrown with force. A yelp slipped out of his throat, and he fell down backward on the spot.

Tumble, tumble, tumble. After its kamikaze attack on Shido’s nose, the toilet paper drew a white line down the hallway.

“Wh-what is going on…?” he groaned, staring at the ceiling.

Kotori appeared above him suddenly. “Pathetic. I *just* told you not to panic and get all flustered.” She was standing in an imposing stance with her legs apart right by his head, so her underwear was on full display. But even Shido was not depraved enough to get worked up at the sight of his little sister’s panties.

“…Kotori. You did this,” he snarled.

She flicked up the stick of her lollipop as the corner of her mouth tugged upward.

So she had calculated this when Tohka went into the bathroom and launched a surprise attack. She'd even gone so far as to do a little work on the lock and the light switch.

"Your condition is always being monitored on *Fraxinus*, Shido. The crew and the AI there make detailed decisions about the success or failure of your response. Naturally, you failed now," Kotori said and showed him what she'd been keeping hidden behind her back.

"Huh...?"

It was a small radio. She turned it on and fine-tuned the bandwidth.

"Fraud rules the world. Corruption consumes its adults. We must resist following their path. Put our power on display—a devastating wonder. Don't halt your treading feet from marching toward the future..."

A voice dispassionately recited a poem. He'd heard this somewhere before. Right. He'd written it himself when he was in junior high.

"Ah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!" Shido cried out so loudly it threatened to crush his vocal cords, and he reached to turn off the power.

"No use in that. I mean, it's already on the air."

"Wha—?!" His face turned bright red.

"A variation on your previous penalties. I can't have you going along all happy-go-lucky just because this is a practice round," she told him. "Anyway, relax. As long as you don't fail at everything, the author's name won't be released."

"So you're basically saying that it will be if I do fail!" he yelped.

"I'm telling you to get used to girls before that happens. I'm not saying you can't be excited. As long as you respond calmly however nervous you are, you'll be in the clear."

"Th—that's impossible!" The video game was one thing, but Shido had no previous exposure to this in real life. He had no immunity. "A-and, like, didn't you say we couldn't upset Tohka's mental state...?!"



“Oh, we’re all good there,” Kotori reassured him. “There are all kinds of emotional upsets. The possibility of the Spirit’s power flowing back with this sort of thing is low.”

“B-but still...”

He heard a creaking sound from behind. Tohka had opened the door slightly and was peeking out, her face perfectly red.

“T-Tohka...?” He averted his eyes slightly. It might have all been Kotori’s fault, but it was still hard for him to look at Tohka when she seemed all embarrassed. “S-sorry... I didn’t do it on purpose. Forgive me...”

“I forgive you... So, um.” She pointed at the white line drawn in the hallway, her cheeks flushing even more deeply. “F-fetch the roll for me.”

“Oh...” Now that he was thinking about it, he was pretty sure no one had put out an extra roll of toilet paper. He got the roll that had escaped down the hall, wound it back up, and handed it to Tohka.



“Shido. The bath’s ready. You go on ahead,” Kotori said casually to a tense Shido right when the clock hit eight PM.

“The bath, huh?” he replied, wondering exactly what card she was planning to play now, and looked around the living room.

Kotori was lying down, clutching a game console controller connected to the TV. Tohka was not there, of course. She had vanished earlier when he stepped out for a few minutes. Kotori said she’d gone to her room to get something, but he was not so naive as to believe that at this stage of the game.

“Nah, I can go later,” he said with composure. “Why don’t you go first?”

“...” A twitch.

The fact that her toes, which had been bouncing happily in time with the video game music, stopped for an instant did not escape his notice.

“I’ll pass. I’m at a good part right now,” she said in a transparent lie, her eyes still glued to the screen.

Shido was sure of it. This was a trap. Kotori had no doubt sent Tohka to the bath while he’d been out of the room, in another surprise attack like the scene in the bathroom before, so she could delight in watching him squirm

again. There was no way that the clever Commander Kotori Itsuka would overlook the opportunity for that classic of all classics, the bath scene mishap.

However, he'd already run into Tohka in the changing room when he came home that day. Kotori was too smart to go putting her train on the same track twice.

"Come on now, don't be like that." Shrugging slightly, he readied the special attack he'd been saving for just such a moment. "You can use the fancy bath salts today."

"...?!" Kotori's pigtails jumped up and stood on end (metaphorically speaking).

When bath salts were used in the Itsuka house, the first person to take a bath was given the task of putting the salts in so that everyone could enjoy the healing powers of its bubbles. And Kotori had never missed an opportunity to take on that role.

"..."

"..."

A quiet moment after supper. If someone who knew nothing of the situation were to see them now, they might have looked the very picture of a harmonious family. But an intense psychological war (or something like that) was playing out below the surface.

So what's your move, Kotori? In his mind, Shido saw the somewhat surreal sight of the impregnable Fort Kotori under violent attack by bath bombs.

Her toes were twitching, as though her soul were on fire. Certain of his victory, he pulled the corners of his mouth up into a grin.

Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don't underestimate me, girl. Shido Itsuka has not been your brother all these years without picking up a trick or two!

However...

"H-huh," she said after a while, her voice shaking. "Oh yeah...? Cool... Shido, you. Go on. First."

"Wh—?" He frowned at this unexpected response. She might have been in commander mode, but she shouldn't have been able to resist the magic of the fizzy bubbles of bath salts!

He looked at her very, very closely and saw that she was shaking, and she was strenuously massaging the palm of her hand.

“...”

Her entire being was clearly in a battle against the urge to leap up and run to the bathroom.

“Sorry I took so long, Kotori. Now, time to fight!”

Shido heard a voice from behind and looked back with a start.

Tohka was standing there with a blanket in her hand.

“Tohka?!”

“Mm... What’s wrong, Shido? You got a weird look on your face.”

“O-oh, nothing,” he stammered. “Where’d you go?”

“Mm. Kotori asked me to play a game with her, but I was feeling a little cold. So I was looking in my boxes for something I could put on my lap.”

“Wh—?” He reeled at this revelation, the world turning inside out in front of his eyes. So Kotori was telling the truth? Was he simply punching at shadows here...?!

Overcome with a sense of defeat for some reason, he staggered out of the living room. “I’m going to take a bath.”

“What’s wrong with Shido?” Tohka asked.

“...No idea.”

With the girls’ voices behind him, he went out into the hallway, grabbed a change of clothes and a towel, and then closed the door to the changing room.

“...” He paused for a second and then knocked on the door to the bathroom before opening it, just in case.

“Huh. So it really isn’t a trap.” He let out a sigh of relief as he quickly undressed in the changing room and stepped into the bathroom. He reached out for the bath salts, but surprisingly, he felt kind of bad for Kotori. He decided he’d let her use the special salts tomorrow and contented himself with throwing in the regular non-bubbly kind.

He quickly washed himself in the shower area next to the tub and then sank into the milky-white water.

“Haah...” His long sigh bounced off the walls of the bathroom, echoing. “I’m totally wiped out today.”

He sighed again as he splashed water on his shoulders. He could feel the exhaustion melting out of every pore on his body and slowly closed his eyes, drifting away in the comfortable warmth of the tub.

“*Hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm.* ↪”

Abruptly, he heard a nasal humming. “Huh...? What’s that...?”

He opened drowsy eyes and turned his face in the direction of the song. And then he froze, blood curdling as he cursed his own carelessness.

“...!”

And this was to be expected. On the other side of the clouded glass that separated the bathroom from the changing room, he could see the hazy figure of a girl with black hair.

“S-so this was your objective, Kotori!!” he groaned, pressing a hand to his heart.

A surprise attack with a feint, leading him to suspect she was playing the same trick twice. But she hadn’t been luring Shido to Tohka—just the opposite. It was a simple but effective scheme. He had nowhere to run.

“You planned this, didn’t you...?!”

He suddenly had a vision of Kotori in sunglasses, a bold grin on her face as she raised a whiskey glass to him, saying, “Can’t beat me, boy.”

Now was not the time for a leisurely analysis of the situation.

Tohka had undressed and now had a hand on the bathroom door.

Bewildered, he decided he couldn’t let her find him in here, so he sank into the water and pulled the tub lid closed above him.

As if on cue, he heard the door opening. This was followed by the clattering of the bath lid being pulled back again.

“Hup!” Without so much as a glance at the tub, Tohka leaped into the water.

Water sprayed, and he suddenly felt something soft near his stomach.

“Mm?” And here, at last, Tohka sensed that something was askew.

He popped his face up over the surface of the milky-white water, forced to say hello since his lungs had run out of air. “H-hey.”

“...”

They stared at each other for a few seconds.

“Nnnnnnnnnnnnn...?!” Tohka’s face turned tomato red.

“C-calm down...!” he yelped.

“Idiot! St-stay down!” She grabbed his head and pushed it back down into the tub.

“...! ...!”

Not having been able to get a real breath, he did not have sufficient oxygen in his lungs for another trip into the water. They grappled briefly in the small tub before Shido passed out and bobbed to the surface.

“Failed again!” He half heard Kotori above his head, and the radio made a lengthy speech, but he couldn’t respond to either.



“I...really took a...hit there.”

After regaining consciousness, Shido pulled himself out of the bath before heading into the kitchen to wash the dishes piled up in the sink. By the time he finally finished prepping the meals for tomorrow and staggered back to his own bedroom, the hands of the clock were pointing to eleven.

Good girls like Tohka and Kotori were already asleep in their own rooms, and while it was still early for a healthy teenage boy, he was exceptionally exhausted. He felt like Kotori had to be out of ideas for today at least, so he dived into his bed and quickly fell asleep.

“...ri. Kotori, wake up. It’s time.”

“Unh... Nnn.” Kotori twitched at the voice in her ear in the middle of the night. Everyone was fast asleep.

Thirteen-year-old Kotori Itsuka’s sleep was not so light as to be woken by something like that. She twisted on the bed and rolled over to pull the blanket around her before her breaths slowed once more into the gentle inhale-exhale of sleep.

“...Kotori. Kotori. You have to wake up.”

“Mmm.” She rubbed her half-open eyes and sat up slowly. “Whaaat is it...? Big Broooo.”

“...It’s not Shin. It’s me, Reine.”

“Reineeee?” She let out a big yawn. “What’s up? It’s late.” She patted her pillow and groped around for her cell phone. She made the screen light up and looked at the time. Three thirty AM. A time when all children—good and bad—were lost in dreamland.

“...Everything’s ready. Just need you to give the order.”

“Oh.” She opened her mouth. “Mm, right... I asked you to wake me up.” Head bobbing like Reine’s usually did, she patted her pillow once more and picked up the bite-size lollipop that had been placed there before roughly

tearing the wrapper off and popping the candy into her mouth.

“—!” She shuddered fiercely. It felt like something was exploding on her tongue, and a sharp scent wafted up into her nostrils.

Yes. This was no ordinary Chupa Chups. This was a super-refreshing, super-menthol lollipop, her secret weapon she sucked on only when she wanted to hold back sleep.

She took her black ribbons in hand and tied her hair up into her usual pigtails. “Aah. I’m awake now. Sorry, Reine.”

“...No problem. So to get right to it, my report. Shin’s entered deep sleep.”

“Yeah? What about the team?”

“...On standby, just as you asked. Ready to go at any time.”

“Good,” she said and left her room on quiet feet, then went down the stairs and made her way to the front door. And then with a *clack*, she unlocked it.

Several men wearing black combat clothing and balaclavas were waiting there, looking like an American special forces unit.

“Target’s upstairs. Get to it.”

“Roger.”

The men crept soundlessly into the Itsuka house.

“Mm... Unnnh.” Shido stretched out on his bed.

His eyes took in the morning sun pouring in the window, while his ears caught the chirping of birds.

“Mm...morning already?” He yawned and turned over, blinking rapidly. He felt something soft touch his cheek, and he frowned. “Uh...? What’s this...?”

To find the source of the softness, he slowly moved a hand up to his face to feel it.

“Mm...!”

He heard a somehow adorable voice above his head.

“...” He stopped breathing for a moment, his thoughts racing.

Shido glanced around and found a thin fleece fabric in front of him. When he looked up at the ceiling, the light fixture there was not the one he was used

to seeing.

This was...not his room. From the fixtures, he guessed that it was the upstairs guest room, a room he generally had no reason to enter.

“Which. Means...” He slowly turned his face upward.

“...Mm?”

Just as he expected, he found Tohka’s beautiful face there.

It seemed she had also just woken up. Their eyes met. And a brief silence followed.

“...”

“...”

“Eeeek...!” Tohka squealed.

“Wh—?” Shido yelped.

They both leaped up, one to the head of the bed and one to the foot, as if the bell for the start of the match had just sounded.

“Wh-what are you doing, Shido?!” she shrieked. “Why are you in my bed?!”



“I—I don’t know!” he shouted, in a total and inexplicable frenzy. “Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why am I here?!”

“That’s what I’m asking!”

“Riiiiiiight?!” Shido screamed back.

“Aaaand batter out.” Kotori sighed in the doorway. “You have to keep your cool, Shido.”

“...Kotori?!” he yelled. “Y-you didn’t—? You did this?!”

“Whatever do you mean? You must have been unable to contain your youthful libido and climbed into Tohka’s bed. You can quit with the weak excuses.” She shrugged through her brazen lies, a slight smile on her lips.

“Wha—?” Tohka’s face flushed scarlet, and she pulled the blanket up to cover her chest.

“I-I’m innocent!” he cried.

Kotori paid him no mind and instead began to fiddle with the phone she pulled out of a pocket. And it was his phone, for some reason.

“Hey—! That’s *my* phone! What are you doing?”

“Huh? Ohhh.” She turned the screen toward him. An e-mail was displayed there, the name of Shido’s best friend, Hiroto Tonomachi, in the address field.

He gasped. Because the body of the message read, *This radio program is amazing. Give it a listen. It’s mind-blowing. The kind of thing that’ll change your life forever.* Followed by a link to a website.

“Huh...? Wh-where’s that link go...?”

“Oh, they started streaming that program from yesterday,” she told him casually. “Now anyone can listen to your tour de force masterpiece whenever they want, as long as they have access to the Internet.”

“Wha—?!” Fear opened his eyes wide, and he reached out his hand. “D-don’t—”

“Go!” She pushed the send button before he could finish speaking.

“Aaaaaaaaaah?!” He yanked his phone away from her and desperately pressed the cancel button. But it was too late. The conveniences of modern civilization had delivered this ruinous information to his best friend at the speed of light. “Wh-what are you *doing...?!*”

“Delivering your penalty. I can’t have you freaking out just because you touched Tohka’s boob.”

“Wh-what did you say...?” He cocked his head to one side. Something

wasn't quite clicking here.

Now that she mentioned it, he *did* have a hazy memory of touching something extreeeeeemely soft right before his brain woke up fully. Ever so timidly, he looked toward Tohka, and her eyes were also round as saucers.

And then she started to pat at her own body, as if remembering some forgotten sensation. When she got to her chest, she froze. Her face turned bright red, with such force and saturation that it almost sent up smoke.

“Unh... Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!” She let out a fierce shriek and started throwing everything she could get her hands on.

“Whoa...! C-calm down, Tohka!” Shido tried to make a quick exit, somehow dodging the barrage of objects, but when he placed a hand on the doorknob, he was hit with a red cow statue and knocked unconscious.

Chapter 2

Rainy Girl

“Heey, Itsuka! ...Dude, what’s wrong with you?” Tonomachi greeted Shido when he dragged himself into the classroom in the morning.

Tonomachi might have been his best friend, but a total stranger would have likely reacted the same way, given his current state. Not only were his face and hands patched up in bandages, but he was staggering on heavy feet as if on the verge of collapse.

“...Oh, you know,” Shido replied vaguely, a faint smile on his lips, and then let out a sigh.

“Oh, right!” Tonomachi smiled suddenly. “I gave it a listen, that radio program you sent me. What *was* that? It was totally hilarious.”

“Ngh!” Shido’s face stiffened. “Y-you listened to it already...?”

“Yup. The bit at the start anyway. I guess it’s supposed to be a joke? I mean, if they were serious, it’s pretty cringey!”

“Ah...ha-ha-ha... R-right.” He produced a dry laugh and deliberately averted his eyes. He would have very much preferred that Tonomachi forget all about that radio program. He changed the subject. “S-so anyway, what’re you looking at?”

His friend was staring very intently at the pinup page at the end of some manga magazine.

“Oh, this? I wanted to ask you something.”

“Wh-what?” Shido asked.

“So—nurse, shrine maiden, or maid,” Tonomachi said, unusually solemn. “Which one do you like?”

“...Excuse me?” He gaped at the unexpected question.

“They’re doing a reader poll to decide on the next pinup costume,” Tonomachi explained. “But I can’t decide, you know?”

“...Ohhh, is that it?” He sighed.

Tonomachi thrust the magazine at him. “So? Which one?!”

“Uh, umm...,” he stammered, overwhelmed by his friend’s strange intensity. “Maybe...maid?”

Tonomachi’s eyebrows jumped up in surprise.

“Wh-what?” Shido asked.

“I can’t believe you’re into maids! It was nice being your friend! We’re through!”

“...” Shido scratched his cheek, choosing to simply turn away and walk over to his own desk.

“Oh! Hey!” Tonomachi called. “Where’re you going?!”

“...I thought our friendship was over.”

“Man, you’re no fun. Maid lovers and nurse fans gotta come together. It might open up a whole new world!” Apparently, Tonomachi preferred nurses.

Shido ignored his friend and set his bag on his own chair.

The girl already seated at the desk next to his, reading a thick technical book—Origami Tobiichi—glanced at him silently. “...”

“H-hey... Morning, Tobiichi.”

“Morning,” she replied, her voice monotone, and tilted her head slightly to one side. “Maids?”

“...O-oh.” He hurriedly waved his hands. “Forget it; it’s nothing.”

“Oh?” She dropped her eyes back down to the page.

“Morning!” Tonomachi waved at her, but Origami’s face remained stony. He shrugged exaggeratedly and pushed up against Shido. “I know I say this every time, but why does she only say hi to you? Hngh! Argh!”

“H-how should I know? Quit it.” He brushed his friend away and took his seat.

The classroom door clattered open. Tohka stepped in.

Given that she also lived in the Itsuka house, they took the same route to school. People would get all kinds of ideas, however, if they arrived at school together, so they made a point of leaving the house at different times. The things she said—and implied—when she first transferred to his school still

lingered in the minds of their classmates, and he would absolutely lose it if fresh fuel was added to that fire in the span of fewer than seventy-five days, before the rumors were forgotten.

“...” She sat down at the desk on the other side of his and opened her mouth without meeting his eyes. “...Um, so. Sorry about this morning... Were you hurt?”

“N-nah.” He gave her a pained smile and picked at his face. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Mm...” She nodded slightly.

“...Ah.” He finally noticed that several of their classmates were listening in and looking at them with curiosity.

Tohka hadn’t noticed yet. “B-but, I mean, it was your fault. I was just surprised... It was so sudden.”

He could hear everyone around them gasping.

“T-Tohka...!” he yelped. “Could we talk about this later...?”

“Mm? Why?” She raised her eyebrows at him before finally noticing the eyes on them. “...!” She gasped as if remembering his careful instructions the day before to keep their living situation a secret.

A bead of sweat ran down her cheek. “I-it’s not like that. Me and Shido aren’t living together or anything!”

“...!” The students around them jumped in their seats.

“I-idiot...,” he muttered to himself and deliberately raised his voice. “O-oh! You mean when you bumped into me on the way to school this morning! A-are you okay, Tohka?!”

“Mm...? Y-yeah!” Picking up on his signal, Tohka managed to make their stories match up, albeit awkwardly.

It sounded forced, but their classmates accepted this slipshod story, which seemed more likely than two of their classmates living together.

Everyone, except for the girl to his left, who was glaring at them with eyes so cold, he almost got frostbite.

“...”

Shido let out a deep sigh, certain that the cracks in their cover story would reveal themselves soon enough.

Surprisingly soon, as it turned out.

The bell rang to signal the end of fourth period and the start of lunch.

“Shido! Time for our midday meal!”

“...”

Desks from both sides docked with his, crashing together. Naturally, Tohka was on the right and Origami on the left.

“...Mm, who invited you?” Tohka sniffed.

“I could ask the same thing,” Origami replied without missing a beat.

“H-hey,” he said, trying to placate the two girls. “Calm down. We can just all eat together, okay...?”

Tohka and Origami sat down quietly and reluctantly. Then they each pulled their lunch out of their bags. When Shido followed suit and set his on his desk, he opened it as the girls opened theirs.

Origami’s eyes widened the slightest bit, and he cursed his own carelessness.

He had made his lunch himself that morning. And of course, he always took care of Kotori’s at the same time. (Well, whenever Kotori wasn’t missing for months.) When there was a sudden need for one more lunch, that had been his job.

“...” Origami’s cold gaze shifted back and forth between the contents of Shido’s and Tohka’s lunches. The exact same items were on offer in both.

“Mm? Wh-what?” Tohka looked at Origami suspiciously as the other girl peered at her, perhaps not realizing the gravity of the situation. “There’s nothing for you in here.”

“What is this about?” Origami demanded.

“O-oh, this...?” Shido looked anywhere but at her. He was starting to perspire. “A-actually, it was—I bought this at a lunch place this morning. And Tohka just happened to—”

“Liar.” Origami cut him off and lifted the lid of his lunch box from where it lay upside down on his desk. “This is the lunch box you’ve been using ever since you bought it one hundred fifty-four days ago for fifteen hundred eighty yen at the discount shop by the station. It’s not from a lunch place.”

“H-how do you—?” he started, baffled.

“That’s not the issue here.”

He thought it very much was the issue, but Origami’s tone brooked no argument, and he was overwhelmed, at a loss for words.

“Hmph! What are you two talking about?! Don’t go leaving me out!”

Tohka said from the side, puffing up her cheeks indignantly.

Vwnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnmmmm.

A shrill alarm blared through the neighborhood. Instantly, all lunchtime chatter stopped.

The spacequake alarm. A sign of the impending disaster known as a spacequake, the most devastating of catastrophes that had posed a serious threat to humanity for the last thirty years.

“...” Origami didn’t say a word, although she seemed to hesitate for a moment even as she immediately stood up and raced out of the classroom.

“...” Shido could only follow her with his eyes, feeling a complex range of emotion. He felt a bit gross about feeling grateful for a spacequake, but that alarm had saved him by ringing at just the right moment.

While Origami Tobiichi was a student at his school, she was also a capable member of the Self-Defense Forces Anti-Spirit Team. Which meant that she was currently headed for the battlefield. To kill a Spirit like Tohka.

“...” He gritted his teeth together. He knew he couldn’t stop Origami, but...

“...It’s the alarm, kids,” came a spaced-out voice from the doorway. In her white lab coat and glasses, the physics teacher—Reine—pointed toward the hallway. “Hurry and evacuate to the underground shelter.”

Fear on their faces, the students filed into the hallway.

“Mm? Shido, where is everyone going?” Tohka tilted her head as she watched their classmates.

“O-oh,” he said. “The shelter. It’s in the basement.”

“What’s a shelter?”

“I’ll explain later. We should get going, too, Tohka.”

“M-mm.” With a lingering look of regret at the lunch she hadn’t touched, Tohka stood up and followed Shido out into the hallway.

“...Shin. You’re going this way.” Reine grabbed him by the nape of his neck.

“R-Reine?” he said. “Which way?”

“...To *Fraxinus*, obviously,” she told him, lowering her voice so the other students couldn’t hear her. “I know this is hot on the heels of yesterday, so

you might not have come to any conclusions about the future yet, but—No, that's exactly why I want you to see this. You need to witness the Spirit and the situation she's in.”

His throat was dry, and he swallowed hard before clenching his hands into small fists. “...I understand. I'll come with you.”

Reine nodded, her eyes sleepily half-open. She glanced over at the line of students marching toward the shelter before turning her face toward the stairs. “...Let's hurry. Not much time before the spacequake.”

“R-right. So—Oh! Reine, shouldn't we bring Tohka?” he asked, glancing over at Tohka. The girl in question was looking in surprise at their classmates forming neat lines in the hallway as they evacuated.

“...Oh, her. Hmm, let's have her evacuate to the shelter with everyone else.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“...Mm-hmm. With her power sealed away, she's not much different from any other human being. And I'd rather she didn't watch the battle between the Spirit and the AST and end up remembering everything that happened to her. I told you, didn't I? Ratatoskr wants to lower her stress as much as possible.”

“No, but—,” Shido started but was interrupted by a shrill voice farther down the hallway.

“C-c'mon! Itsuka! Yatogami! And even Ms. Murasame! P-please don't just stand there! If you don't hurry and evacuate, you'll be in danger!” Tamae Okamine—Shido's homeroom teacher, known to her students as Tama—called out in a panic, her small shoulders squared.

“...Mm, it'll be a hassle if she gets us. Let's go.” Reine gave him a signal with her eyes and turned her feet toward the stairs.

“Ah! Hey—” He was a little concerned, but he didn't have much of a choice. He nodded and scratched his head as he took Tohka's hand and placed it in Tama's. “Please take care of Tohka!”

“Fwah? Huh? Oh, s-sure. Of course!” Tama opened her eyes wide, caught off guard at being suddenly entrusted with the girl. Then she gave a firm nod. “I'm the teacher, after all!”

“Shido...?” Tohka frowned, seeming a little worried.

“Listen, Tohka. You have to evacuate with her.”

“But what about you? What are you doing?”

“Oh... I have something really important to do. You go on ahead. Okay?”

“Ah! Sh-Shido!” Tohka shouted.

“Itsuka?! Ms. Murasame?! Where on earth are you going?!” Tama cried out as Shido chased after Reine toward the exit.



“Aah, you’re both here. The Spirit’s about to show up. Reine, get ready,” Kotori greeted them from her captain’s chair as soon as Shido and Reine arrived on the bridge of *Fraxinus*.

“...Right.” Reine flipped up the bottom of her lab coat and sat down in front of a console on the lower deck of the bridge.

“Now, then.” Kotori turned curious eyes on the silent Shido. “Sorry I couldn’t really give you much time. Have you made up your mind, Shido?”

“...”

Before he could respond, a shrill siren began to wail on the bridge.

“Wh-what’s that?” His eyes widened.

“Powerful Spirit waves confirmed! She’s coming!” a male crew member shouted from the lower deck.

Kotori snapped her fingers. “Okay! Switch the main monitor to video of the anticipated appearance site.”

A bird’s-eye view of the town was displayed. The main street, lined with shops. Naturally, there wasn’t a person in sight; it looked like a ghost town. The center of the video suddenly twisted abnormally.

“Huh?” For a second, he thought there was something wrong with the monitor, but that wasn’t the case. It was the space itself. Ripples spread out like the aftermath of a stone thrown into a pond—but in empty space. “Wh-what the...?”

“Oh? Is this your first time seeing it, Shido?” Kotori asked, as the distortion grew even larger.

He thought he caught a glimpse of a tiny light, and then he heard a tremendous roar, and the screen went white.

“__!”

Even though he knew it was only happening on the monitor, he reflexively covered his face with his arms. When he opened his eyes a few

seconds later, willing the strangely intense pounding of his heart to slow, the screen showed an entirely new scene.

There was a hole in the town. That was the only way he could describe it. Part of the street where buildings stood only an instant ago had been scooped out like a shallow bowl. The shops and lights and electricity poles and even the pavement were all gone. And the surrounding area looked like a massive hurricane had ravaged it, perhaps because of the blowback from the explosion. It looked very much like the place where he had met Tohka for the first time a month earlier. In other words, this was a...

“Spacequake...!” Shido concluded, voice shaking.

“Yes.” Kotori nodded. “The instantaneous damage brought about by the distortion of space when a Spirit manifests in this world.”

He’d seen the ruined buildings and burned-out landscape any number of times before, but this was the first time he’d seen the moment of the explosion. His palms were slick with sweat. He’d thought he knew what a spacequake was, but now he felt the horrible truth of it in his bones. The town, the space where people lived their lives, destroyed in an instant. The sheer terror of it all.

“But the scale of the explosion this time was small, hmm?” Kotori said.

“It does look that way, yes,” Vice Commander Kyouhei Kannazuki, the tall man in attendance behind her, replied. “Fortuitously—is what I’d like to say, but we are dealing with Hermit here.”

“Mm, right,” Kotori agreed. “She does have a pretty subdued personality for a Spirit.”

Shido silently poked himself in the forehead. *This* was a small explosion? For a second, he didn’t know what the two were talking about, but he soon remembered.

They were right. The scale of this spacequake was barely on the level of a dozen meters. For them, it was relatively slight. Of course, knowing this in his mind didn’t quiet his heart.

“Hey, Kotori?” he said, curious about one thing the vice commander had said. “What exactly is the ‘Hermit’?”

“Ohhh. The code name for the newest Spirit. Hang on a sec. Can you zoom in?” she asked the crew on the lower deck.

The camera panned in and approached a crater in the middle of town. And when the ground grew clearer, another change appeared on-screen.

“...Is it raining?” he murmured.

The display darkened abruptly, and drops of rain began to fall.

He quickly dismissed the sudden change in the weather—because in the center of the crater, he could see a small girl.

“...?!” He gasped. It felt like someone had reached into his chest and grabbed hold of his heart.

A girl was standing alone in the center of the screen. He’d seen her before.

“Th...at’s...”

A girl of maybe thirteen or fourteen with blue hair and a hood with bunny ears. Her coat was too big, and her outfit underneath was made of some mysterious material he couldn’t quite identify. On her left hand was a rabbit puppet with an absurd design.

As long as there was nothing wrong with his eyes and brain, there was no mistaking it. This was the girl he’d encountered on his way home from school the day before.

“...? What’s wrong, Shido?” Kotori asked, no doubt curious about the sudden change that had come over him.

He turned his attention to the screen once more to confirm that his visual organs were not playing tricks on him and then opened his mouth. “I...I’ve met her before...”

“What did you say? When exactly?”

“Just yesterday. On my way home from school, it suddenly started to rain...”

He picked through his memory to give her the general overview of what had happened the previous day.

Once he was done speaking, Kotori shouted a command to the crew on the lower deck. “Send me the numbers for the Spirit waves from sixteen to seventeen hundred hours yesterday to my terminal. Step on it!” She dropped her gaze to her personal display and ruffled her hair in annoyance. “...I can’t see any disturbance in the numbers. So it’s the same as with Tohka then? ... Shido, why didn’t you tell me this yesterday?”

“I—I couldn’t have. I didn’t know she was a Spirit when I met her...!” he cried, as the speakers on the *Fraxinus* bridge roared. “...?! What the—?”

“There’s a Spirit here,” Kotori snapped. “We’re not the only ones going to work.”

Shido flinched. “The AST?” he asked hesitantly.
“Mm-hmm.”



When he returned his eyes to the screen, smoke was curling up above the position of the girl—the Spirit known as Hermit. It must have been the aftermath of a missile. Around her, a group of people floated in the air, wearing showy mechanical armor. The Self-Defense Forces Anti-Spirit Team. The AST. Unlike Kotori's organization, Ratatoskr, they were a special squad with the objective of annihilating the Spirits with firepower.

A small silhouette popped out of the smoke. Hermit. She twisted up into the air, brandishing the puppet on her left hand, weaving through the circle of AST members, and floating up into the sky.

The AST members reacted immediately and chased after her, firing an obscene amount of ammunition from the weapons they had equipped.

“...! Watch out!” Shido shouted reflexively, but a warning through a screen had no power, and the countless projectiles launched by the AST flew mercilessly toward Hermit. His eyes snapped open, and he gritted his teeth. “Those bastards... I mean, she’s just a little girl!”

“...Bit late for that, Shido,” Kotori said, rolling her eyes. “Didn’t you learn anything from Tohka? The AST doesn’t care what form the Spirit takes. All that matters is their duty to protect the world and eliminate this threat to humanity. That’s their most basic instinct.”

“B-but...,” he protested as the girl hopped up into the air from inside a cloud of smoke.

Hermit didn’t attempt anything resembling a counterattack, however. She was simply running away.

“That girl...isn’t fighting back?”

“No. As usual,” Kotori told him. “Hermit’s one of the most docile Spirits.”

“...So then—”

“If you’re looking for pity from the AST, you can forget it,” she said. “As long as she’s a Spirit.”

“...” He bit his lip at this curt response. He didn’t need her to tell him that. He knew as well as she did that the Spirit’s personality, her nature, didn’t matter to the AST. They were attacking an enemy that was a danger to this world. There was only one way to turn that on its head.

He clenched his fists so tightly, it was a wonder he didn’t start bleeding.
“...Kotori.”

“What?”

“...As long as the girl doesn’t have any power as a Spirit, the AST will stop targeting her, right?” he asked quietly.

Kotori raised an eyebrow before turning her gaze in his direction. “Yes, that’s exactly right.”

“The spacequakes...will stop, right?”

“Yes.”

Shido fell silent for a few seconds and then took a deep breath. “And I can do that, right...?”

“If you still don’t believe it after everything that happened with Tohka, then I don’t know what to tell you.”

“...” Shido ran his hands through his hair and then announced his decision. “Help me, Kotori. I want to save her...!”

“Heh-heh.” Kotori flicked her lollipop stick up in delight. “There you are. That’s my big brother.” She turned and yelled toward the crew on the lower deck. “All personnel, prepare for type-one capture!”

“Roger!” The crew began to move at their consoles as one.

“Now, then.” She licked her lips. “Let’s get our date started.”



“Hey, Ms. Tama?” Having evacuated to the large shelter built below the high school, Tohka clutched the hem of her skirt to try and calm her racing heart as she spoke to Tamae sitting next to her.

“Y-you’re calling me that, too?” Tamae turned her face toward her, noticeably calmer than she had been in the hallway.

Tohka paid no attention to the objection in her eyes as she continued. “What exactly was that noise before? What is this place?”

“Wh-what are you talking abouuuut?” Tama asked, surprised. “That was the alarm, the spacequake alarm. There’s a possibility of one, so we all evacuated to the underground shelter. We’ll be safe here.”

“Spacequake...?” Tohka cocked her head curiously to the side. “What’s that?”

“What?” Tama was even more surprised. “A spacequake is a spacequake. You don’t know what that is?”

“...Hmm.” Tohka pulled her mouth into a dissatisfied pout. It seemed like

this spacequake or whatever was common knowledge. Maybe she shouldn't have asked. Shido told her to keep from doing or saying anything conspicuous. She had to get through this without revealing her lack of knowledge.

Tama, however, interpreted the silence, hurriedly waving her hands in front of her. "Oh! No, no, it's fine. Right, I guess there are some people who don't know."

"...Mm, sorry."

"No, no," Tama said and then snapped a finger up. "A spacequake is what we call the disasters that occur randomly over a wide area. Put simply, it goes like this: Randomly, somewhere in the world goes *boom!* There's an explosion. We are all kinds of theories as to what it is, like a change in air pressure or something about plasma, but the cause is unknown."

"An explosion?" Tohka frowned.

"Yes. The biggest one was thirty years ago. The Great Eurasian disaster. It was actually the worst catastrophe in history with more than a hundred and fifty million people killed."

"Wh-what?! That sounds really dangerous!"

"It is. That's why we evacuate to the shelter," Tama explained, sounding increasingly like a teacher. "Well, spacequakes that big don't happen anymore, but in the last few years, there have been frequent small explosions in this area."

Tohka knitted her brows. "S-so then, where did Shido go at such a dangerous time?"

"Wha...? Uh, umm... Well." Tamae pushed her glasses up with a troubled expression and looked around at the students in the area.

"..." Tohka clutched the hem of her skirt even more tightly. "Shido."

Thump, thump. She heard a noise from her chest. She didn't know why, but she had a very bad feeling. And when the thumping noise had reached a peak, she lifted her face with a gasp.

"Umm... He's all right, I think. I can't see him anywhere nearby. But I'm sure he just went back for something he forgot. I know he's somewhere in the shelter." Tamae returned her gaze to Tohka. "Huh...? Y-Yatogami?"

Tohka was gone.



“Phew... Is here good?” Shido said to the small earpiece in his right ear, after being sent to the ground via the transporter in the bowels of *Fraxinus*.

“Yes. *The Spirit’s gone inside a building. Don’t make any mistakes on first contact.*”

“Roger,” he replied, perspiring profusely, and took his hand away from the earpiece. He took a deep breath to calm his pounding heart.

He was inside the large department store that dominated one end of the shopping street.

Hermit apparently appeared fairly frequently, and when Reine combined her analyses of the Spirit’s mental state with the behavior patterns they’d observed, they had come up with a rough way forward. Naturally, that path might vary to a greater or lesser degree depending on the movement of the AST, but if things went south, they could recover Shido and head for the next expected location.

The CR unit, the AST’s main gear, was not suited to fighting indoors. They might try to destroy the building and smoke the Spirit out like they did with Tohka, but for the time being, at any rate, they would wait for the Spirit to come out of the building. And that brief time—from a few minutes to half an hour—was critical for Shido to talk with the Spirit on the battlefield.

“...”

The middle of April. He remembered how he had spoken with Tohka while Ratatoskr whispered instructions in his ear via this very earpiece. He never dreamed he would be back on the battlefield before a month was out. But his back was against a wall here.

For whatever reason, Shido had an incredible power. He’d been told that he could use this power to stop both the spacequakes and the attacks on the Spirits. And this was exactly what he himself wanted.

“Still, though...” He sighed. The way to exercise this power and put an end to all the damage was to seduce a Spirit and kiss her. For Shido, the hurdle here was pretty high.

“*Shido. Hermit’s signal is somewhere on this floor,*” Kotori said.

“...!” He froze.

“Did you come to pick on Yoshinon, too?” a voice suddenly called down from above.

He jerked his head up and saw the girl in question, Hermit, floating upside down in defiance of the laws of gravity.

“Bad boy. Yoshinon’s really nice. Not fair to play mean tricks—hmm?” The girl spun around in the air and landed feetfirst on the floor. And then she opened and closed the puppet’s mouth. “Oh-ho! Why, if it isn’t the lucky perv!”

The puppet stared hard at his face and deftly clapped its hands. He wondered how she was moving it with just the one hand. But he couldn’t let his attention be taken up with such questions now.

“Stand by,” Kotori instructed in his ear.

1. “AAH, IT’S BEEN A WHILE. HOW’RE YOU DOING?” GREET HER WITHOUT FUSS.
2. “LUCKY PERV?! WHAT DO YOU MEAN, LUCKY PERV?” MAKE A LIGHTHEARTED JAB.
3. “HEH... NO IDEA WHAT YOU MEAN. I’M JUST A PASSING STRANGER.” GO HARD-BOILED.

Kotori stared at the three choices displayed on the main monitor of the *Fraxinus* bridge and licked her lips. Also shown on the monitor was a torso shot of Hermit, together with her various parameters and several text windows. From any angle, it looked like a romance simulation game—the screen of a so-called dating sim.

“Choices, people!” she barked.

The crew on the lower deck of the bridge pressed their buttons.

The results were soon shown on the small display at Kotori’s seat: (1), (2), (3)—all with the same number of votes.

“What? It’s gotta be two! That typical dating sim jibe! It’s definitely the second one!” a member of the crew insisted.

A voice quickly rose from another part of the bridge. “Isn’t that risky

given we don't really know the girl's personality? One is the compromise here."

"No, no, from this data, we know Hermit basically doesn't attack humans! We should go with three for the win!"

"...Hmm." Listening to the competing appeals from three different directions, Kotori put a hand to her chin. And then she moved toward the mic and opened her mouth. "Shido, go with number three."

"...What the...?" Shido muttered, butt on the floor, listening to the instruction delivered to his ear. It was just too weird.

"*Hmm? What's happening?*" The puppet neatly cocked its head to one side.

There was no time to think. Shido quickly got to his feet and set one foot up on a display chair nearby. "Heh. Don't know anyone fitting that description. I'm just a passing stranger," he said, sounding uncomfortable, and gave his hair a toss.

To be honest, he was incredibly embarrassed.

"..." Hermit's puppet simply gaped.

A few seconds passed.

"...H-hey, Kotori," Shido grumbled. "It's your fault we're in this weird mood..."

"*Pft! Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha!*" The puppet burst out laughing and shook its head from side to side. "*Aaah, you're surprisingly droll! Ah-ha-ha! What ancient past did you dig that line out from?!*"

"Ha-ha-ha... I'm so glad you enjoyed it." He grinned along with the puppet. He thought *droll* was also fairly dated, but he kept that to himself.

"*See?*" Kotori said, all proud.

"Yeah, fine, sorry," he replied in a quiet voice before turning back to Hermit.

"*Aah, but, Lucky Perv.*" The puppet turned its gaze toward him at the same time. "*Weird place to run into you. Ah-ha-ha! Plenty glad to see you, though. Seems like everyone just hates Yoshinon. Soon as we get yanked out, they start pew-pew-pewing at us.*" The puppet laughed again.

"*That's one upbeat Spirit, hmm?*" Kotori asked.

For once, he and Kotori were thinking the same thing.

But he was curious about one thing Hermit said.

“So...uh, Yoshinon is...?” Shido asked.

“Aah, what an oversight!” The puppet opened its mouth wide in surprise.
“That Yoshinon would forget to introduce Yoshinon! Yoshinon is Yoshinon’s n-a-m-e. Cute, huh? Right?”

“Y-yeah.” He nodded, overwhelmed by the puppet’s intensity. “...It’s a good name.”

“*Yoshinon, huh?*” Kotori’s voice in his right ear was questioning. “*Hmm, so this Spirit has its own name, unlike Tohka.*”

“Mm.”

She was right. Tohka hadn’t had a name. Shido was the one who gave her the name Tohka.

The puppet brought its face in close, interrupting this line of thought.
“*Soooo? What’s your name?*”

“Oh! Right. I’m Shido. Shido Itsuka.”

“*Shido, hmm? Pretty cool name you got there. Not as great as Yoshinon, though.*”

“Y-yeah... Thanks. Umm...Yoshinon?”

“*Right here! You called? Yoshinon is impressed with your communication skills, folding a name you just learned into the conversation!*” The puppet spread its arms out in an exaggerated gesture.

“Oh, it’s no big deal or anything, but, ummm...” He smiled in return. “Yoshinon’s not the puppet’s name. It’s yours, right?” Shido made eye contact with the girl with blue hair.

“...” The puppet’s sunny chatter stopped abruptly.

Beep! Beep! He heard an alarm through his earpiece.

“*Shido!*” Kotori cried. “*Her mood is plummeting. What exactly did you say?*”

“Huh...? Oh, I just—I was only wondering why you were only speaking through ventriloquism,” he naively said.

The puppet loomed even closer. “*I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, Shido. What’s ventriloquism?*” Same easygoing tone. And it was a puppet, so it still had the same look on its face, but Shido felt pressure for some reason and took a step back.

“O-oh... It’s—”

“Shido. We can think about reasons later. Right now, you have to get that Spirit’s mood back up,” Kotori instructed.

“R-right!” he said, looking anywhere but the puppet. “Yoshinon is just Yoshinon! Aah... Ha-ha... Ha.”

“*Oh, you! You’re a real scamp, Shido!*” the puppet cried, the dreadful awe of a moment ago dissipating as though it had never been.

“Wh-what was that just now?” he muttered.

“*No idea,*” Kotori replied. “*Well, however friendly she seems, you’re up against a Spirit, after all. No letting your guard down.*”

“Umm.” He didn’t know what to say next.

“*Don’t just stand there,*” Kotori said with annoyance. “*Do something so the Spirit doesn’t run off.*”

“...Wh-what...?”

“*That is so obviously obvious. You are in a department store, aren’t you? Just be all, hey, if you’re free, let’s go on a date. Listen. The key here is that it’s not ‘what about a date?’ It’s ‘let’s go on a date.’ Don’t give her the choice.*”

“Uh...huh.” Shido was a little daunted, but nevertheless, he turned back to Yoshinon and with no preamble whatsoever, he uttered the words exactly as he’d heard them. “I-if you’re free, let’s go on a date.”

“...Just like that? You could try and sound a little more natural.” Kotori’s exasperation came through loud and clear.

Yoshinon didn’t seem the least bit perplexed at the sudden invitation. The puppet clapped its small hands together, thrilled at the mere idea of a date.

“*Ooh! Ooh! Yes! You don’t look like much, but you do make the bold proposals, don’t you? Hoo-hoo, of course, that’s a yessir, you bet. I mean, I finally met someone I can really talk to. Yoshinon’d actually like to ask you out!*” The puppet cackled with laughter.

“O-oh yeah...?” He smiled.

“*Well, let’s just call this one a win then.*” Kotori sighed.

Shido started walking through the department store with Yoshinon.



“...” Clad in her wiring suit, ready for battle with her Outrange stuffed with

all the ammunition it could handle, Origami floated in the sky above the department store. Several other AST members similarly equipped bobbed in the area, and the mood was tense.

The AST—Anti-Spirit Team—was the most specialized of all the special units in the Self-Defense Forces. Using the Realizer, a device that re-created fantasy in reality, this team fought back against the world-killing catastrophes that were the Spirits. But because there were few people who could use the Combat Realizer unit, equipment that adapted the Realizer for the purpose of battle, some team members were not actually enlisted, like Origami.

She lived outside of the garrison and attended school, mobilizing only in the event of an emergency. She was something like a reserve officer from the Self-Defense Forces who was mobilized extremely often.

“...”

Raindrops beat down mercilessly on the surface of the Territory deployed around her. It had been nearly an hour since the Spirit—Hermit—entered the building. And she stubbornly remained there, showing no sign of herself to the outside world.

“Someone’s persistent, hmm?” came the voice of her squad captain, Ryouko Kusakabe, over her comm. *“Pretty unusual for Hermit to stay in one place for this long. She’s usually more like fwp, fwp! Twisting around in the air.”*

Exactly. Hermit’s behavioral pattern was basically constant flight. No matter how hard Origami and her squad came at her, she never counterattacked; she just ran. Origami would not be particularly happy if Hermit had learned how to pass the time until she was Lost inside of a building.

“Possibility of attack?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“I put in a request, at any rate.” Ryouko’s voice came back almost like a sigh. *“They said to stand by.”*

“Repair’s possible if the building’s destroyed.”

“Well, thinking about it logically, that’s true. But it’s not so easy. It costs money to get the relief corps moving. And above all else, Princess was one thing, but our target now’s the little bug Hermit, you know?”

“...”

Princess.

Origami moved her eyebrows slightly at this category name. She didn’t

know how it happened, but the Spirit who held that designation was currently attending her school as a human girl, Tohka Yatogami. As soon as she became aware of Tohka's presence, she had reported to Ryouko. But she had been denied permission to attack because they couldn't confirm a Spirit signal in her for some reason. She pushed back and had them check her papers, but they found nothing out of the ordinary there, either.

Although it vexed Origami beyond belief, at present, at least, Tohka was a resident of Japan and thus to be protected by Origami and her team.

“...?”

Abruptly, she caught a flash of beautiful hair the color of darkness on the edge of her field of view. Hair just like Tohka's. Origami narrowed her eyes.

She turned her face downward, toward the rainy main street, devoid of people.

“...” But she saw no sign of Tohka there.

She shook her head silently. Maybe she was just nervous. She couldn't let her nerves allow the Spirit to escape her. She let out a deep breath and sharpened her focus as she continued to stand on guard.



Shido wondered how long it had been since he'd run into Yoshinon. They were walking around the department store, having a lively conversation. Kotori was giving him instructions, but Yoshinon seemed to have a strangely low threshold for what was funny and cackled with laughter at the slightest thing. The numbers were good on the bridge of *Fraxinus* where they were monitoring her mental state. Things were proceeding so smoothly, he almost wondered if that sudden change in mood earlier had been all in his mind.

“Hmm, this is going surprisingly well,” Kotori observed. “Maybe she’s just the type to latch on to people. Your affection rating is excellent, too. I doubt she’d turn you down if you asked for a kiss right now?”

“...Whoa, whoa.” Shido nervously touched his face, not knowing if she was joking or serious.

He was actually surprised himself at how things were going. Tohka was able to converse more or less normally now, but when he'd first met her, she was extremely distrustful of humans, and she'd nearly killed him at the

slightest misstep on his part.

“*Chatting suuuure iiiis fuuuuun.*” The puppet flapped its mouth open and closed. “*Those people are such boors, y’know?*”

“Ha... Ha-ha.” He laughed in vague response.

Something was bugging him, though. He’d wanted nothing more than to engage the Spirit in conversation, and with the numbers for mood and affection going up, there was no problem there. Or at least there shouldn’t have been.

“...” He glanced over at the girl manipulating the puppet. When he’d met her yesterday and again today, the puppet alone spoke at length and rather eloquently through her little ventriloquist act; the mouth of the girl herself never so much as twitched. Almost like... Right, like a puppeteer in traditional puppet theater.

“*Ohhh?*” The puppet looked at him abruptly, and Shido twitched.

“...!”

“*Wooooow! What’s that, huh?!*” It flapped its hands excitedly and trotted off. It was the girl’s legs that were doing the running, naturally.

What had caught Yoshinon’s interest was a small jungle gym for children in one corner of the toy department. The girl deftly scrambled up the ridiculously colorful plastic castle with both feet and her right hand.

“*Mwa-ha-ha! How d’you like this, Shido? Pretty cool, huh? Yoshinon’s cool, yeah?*” it asked, excited, once she reached the peak.

“Wh-whoa, it’s dangerous to stand up there.” He raced over to the jungle gym. He knew it was just an indoor set for children and not that high off the ground, but she’d still be hurt if she fell from the top. And yes, he knew that she could fly, but somehow the image of her slipping and falling the previous day lingered inside his brain.

But Yoshinon shook the puppet hand, looking unhappy. “*Aah, come on! I’m asking if I’m cool or not—uh! Ah, ah, wah?!*”

“Wha—?!”

Yoshinon lost her balance dancing and waving her hands on top of the jungle gym and came crashing down on top of Shido. He fell to the floor, crushed by the small girl.

“Ngh... Nah,” he groaned as he turned over. For some reason, his front teeth hurt. And then he noticed that something was off.

The symmetrical face and blue hair of the girl in front of him. He felt a

curiously soft sensation on his lips.

It took a few seconds before his brain understood exactly what was going on.

“Wow. You get the job done, Shido.” This was unexpected even for Kotori.

And of course it was. After all, Shido was currently exchanging a kiss with the girl who'd fallen on him from above.

“...” Without a word, Yoshinon lifted herself up, and their lips finally pulled apart.

He hadn't planned it, but...he'd kissed her. And that should have sealed her power. However...he wasn't sure what the issue was, but he hadn't felt that warmth flowing into his body the way he had when he kissed Tohka the month before.

The siren blasted once more from the other side of his earpiece.

“Wha...?” he said, furrowing his brow. So her power wasn't sealed?

This alarm was the one that sounded when the Spirit fell into a bad mood and Shido was in danger. Which meant that right now Yoshinon was—

“Ouch...” The voice that came from the puppet's mouth was even. “Sorry 'bout that, Shido. I wasn't paying attention.”

“Huh?” Dazed, he opened his eyes wide. Yoshinon didn't seem at all angry. In which case, what exactly was the alarm in his ear all about?

“Shido, we've got an emergency,” Kotori said, unusually panicked. “Probably the worst thing possible.”

“Huh...? What on earth...?” He heard the crunch of a hard footstep from behind and shuddered. He looked back ever so timidly to find an entirely unexpected face there. His eyes flew open wide. “T-Tohka...?”

Yes, Tohka, who was supposed to have evacuated to the underground shelter at Raizen High School. She had gotten rained on at some point; she was completely drenched. Her shoulders were heaving as she panted for breath, as if she had run there at top speed.

“Shido,” Tohka said, interrupting his thoughts, as she shook herself slowly. A chill ran up his spine, even though she had only spoken his name. “...What are you doing?”

“...Wh-what...?” He unconsciously touched his lips at this question and then immediately thought the better of it and hid his hands behind his back.

Clearly not caring much for this gesture, Tohka screwed up her face like a

child and squeezed a trembling voice out from the depths of her throat. “I—I was so worried...”

“Huh...?”

“How could you be making out with some giiiiiiiiirrrrrrrrrrl?!” she shouted and stomped a foot on the floor.

Bam! The ground collapsed where her heel struck, and cracks radiated outward.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wha...?” He opened his eyes all the way, a shiver of fear running through him.

There was no way an ordinary teenage girl could make the floor cave in just by stomping on it. Of course, Tohka was no ordinary teenage girl. But with her Spirit powers sealed, she shouldn’t have had anything beyond average physical strength.

“Wh-what’s going on, Kotori...?!” he asked his earpiece.

“Come on,” she replied with a sigh. “I’ve told you a few times now. There’s a Path running between you and Tohka, and when her mental state becomes unstable, it’s possible for the power to flow back a little.”

“H-huh? So what, you’re saying Tohka’s mental state is unstable?”

“Yes. Do something to put her in a better mood before this gets worse.”

“E-easy for you to say. What am I supposed to...?”

Tohka walked over to Shido and Yoshinon and looked back and forth between them with sharp eyes. “...Mmmmm.” She pursed her lips and glared at Shido while she snapped a finger out at Yoshinon. “Shido. Was your ‘important thing’ meeting this girl?”

“Oh, uh, th-the thing is...,” he stammered. On paper, yes, that was exactly right. But he doubted that Tohka would understand his true intent in her current state if he said yes.

“Aaah, hooo boy... So that’s it?” Yoshinon said shrilly, recovering from the surprise of Tohka’s appearance. Shido had no idea how the Spirit was doing it, but the rabbit puppet wore a mischievous smile. “So, um, you are?”

“...Tohka,” Tohka replied indignantly.

“Dear, dear Tohka. I hate to be the one to break the news, but looks like Shido here’s over you.”

“Wha—?” Tohka gasped.

“...?!” Shido held his breath and turned toward the puppet.

“Oh, well, I’ll try to be delicate. Sounds to me like he blew you off and

sidled up to ol' Yoshinon here. That's pretty final, don'cha think?" The puppet looked at her questioningly.

"..." Tohka's shoulders trembled, and she looked like she was about to burst into tears.

"Wh-what are you—hngh?!" Shido started to yell, but Tohka slapped a hand across his mouth.

"Shido, be quiet a sec," she told him with a forcefulness that brooked no argument, as she yanked his cheek to its limit with viselike strength.

"...! ...!"

"Ah, you know, I'm sorry." The puppet looked utterly delighted as it continued. "Yoshinon's just too hot. It's a real problem."

"Ngh. Nnnngh." Tohka clenched her jaw so tightly, he could almost hear the creaking of the joint.

"Now, I'm not saying it's your fault or anything, okay, honey? It's just, well, you can't go blaming Shido there for ditching you and running into Yoshinon's arms."

For a while, Tohka simply stood there, shoulders shaking, as she pinched Shido's cheek, but then she cried out, as if her patience had reached its limit. "Unh... Ungah!" Finally, she jerked her hand away from Shido's face. "Sh-shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up! There's no way! That's impossible!"

"Yesss, well, protest all you want, darling, but the fact remains. Come now, Shido, go on and tell her. Tell Tohka that you don't want her anymore."

Tohka grabbed the puppet's chest and yanked it up. Of course, it was just a small puppet and easily slipped off the girl's hand into the air.



“...?!” Her puppet taken from her, the girl opened her eyes wide. Her face drained of color, and sweat beaded on her forehead. Her breathing became visibly ragged, and her fingertips began to twitch.

“Y-Yoshinon?” Shido turned concerned eyes on the girl and the dramatic change in her, still rubbing his throbbing cheek.

Tohka seemed to not have noticed that something had come over Yoshinon. With eyes sharp as knives, she interrogated the puppet she clutched in both hands. “I—I—! He does want me! Shido... Shido said it was okay for me to be here! You’re done making fun of me! Hey! How about you say something already?!” She held the puppet up by the neck and shook it, seemingly convinced that it had been the source of the voice.

“...! ...!” Yoshinon cried out silently at this sight. Her whole body was shuddering, like the easygoing banter of earlier had never happened. She pulled her head deeper into her hood, as if to hide her eyes, and tugged gingerly on Tohka’s skirt.

“Mm. Wh-what?” Tohka glanced down at her. “Don’t interrupt. I’m talking to this kid here right now.”

“Please... Give it back...” Yoshinon bounced up and down, trying to take the puppet Tohka held up high in both hands.

Now that Shido was thinking about it, this was probably the first time since he’d met her the day before that he was hearing her actual voice.

“What are you doing, Shido? Now you’ve gone and knocked off Yoshinon, too. Hurry and stop them!” Kotori’s voice was insistent in his right ear.

“H-hey, Tohka. Um,” he said after some hesitation, “...maybe you could give that back?”

“...!” Tohka’s eyes flew open in shock. “Shido... So you’re actually siding with...this girl instead of me!”

“H-huh? No, that’s not what I—,” he protested.

Yoshinon threw her right hand up into the air and swung it down. “Zadkiel—Freezing Puppet!”

A massive puppet smashed through the floor in front of him.

“Wha...?!” he yelped.

It was a short and stout stuffed animal, about three meters tall. Its surface was smooth like metal with a white pattern carved into it. And he could see ears long like a rabbit’s on top of what looked like the head.

“A—a puppet...?!” he cried.

“Wh-what is *this*?!?” Tohka shouted.

Yoshinon pressed up against the back of the puppet that had materialized from below her feet and pushed her hands into the holes there. In the next instant, the puppet’s eyes glowed red, and it shook its sluggish-looking bulk as it called out in a low roar. Something like white smoke oozed from its body.

“It’s freezing...!” He instinctively stepped backward. The smoke was extremely cold, like the gas released from liquid nitrogen.

“Now *she* manifests an Angel...?!” Kotori shouted. “*Shido, this is bad. Get out of there!*”

“H-huh...?! Wh-what’s an Angel?!” he cried out without thinking.

That thing in front of you! The ultimate shield to protect a Spirit, the most powerful lance in partnership with the Astral Dress! The miracle made manifest, what makes a Spirit a Spirit! Did you forget about Tohka’s Sandalphon?!”

Sandalphon. The name made Shido’s eyebrows jump up.

The massive throne that Tohka had manifested last month when she had her Spirit powers. And the sword. That’s what Kotori was talking about. It was very obvious. Which meant that even though he’d kissed Yoshinon, he hadn’t managed to seal her Spirit powers.

Yoshinon pulled her hand back slightly, and the puppet—Zadkiel—leaned back with a growl.

The windows in the walls of the department store started to shatter, and rain gusted in from outside. Actually, that wasn’t quite it. It wasn’t that the windows had broken and the rain had come in—it was more like the droplets of rain had beaten and broken the glass from the outside with incredible force.

“Eek?!” His eyes widened in surprise, and he looked at the puppet towering before him, knees weak.

Fwp! The doll turned toward Tohka.

“...! Tohka!”

Her name had barely flown out of his mouth before he was grabbing her hand and pulling her down to the floor, covering her with his own body.

“Wha—?! Shido?!” Tohka shrieked, as a fearsome number of what looked like bullets passed through the space where she had been standing a millisecond earlier. They gouged holes in the merchandise before melting

into transparent liquid and flowing along the floor.

“I-is that rain?!” he shouted.

Raindrops hardened like hail had ignored gravity and shot at Tohka from the broken windows.

“...” And then Zadkiel, controlled by Yoshinon, moved.

Shido immediately turned his back to the Angel to protect Tohka.

Zadkiel kicked at the ground with a nimbleness that belied its sluggish silhouette, passed through the spot where Tohka had been, and leaped outside through a broken window, grabbing the puppet that had fallen from Tohka’s hands with what would have been its mouth on its way.

“...” Shido watched Yoshinon disappear before opening his mouth. “W-we’re saved...yes?”

“Yes. *The signal’s withdrawn completely,*” Kotori said. “*You really play fast and loose, Shido.*”

“Ah... But why all of a sudden—?”

“Whatever! Will you get away from me already?!” A hand grabbed his face and rolled him away.

“Waah...?!” He didn’t have to wonder about whose hand it was.

Tohka, who had only an instant earlier been in his arms, was gritting her teeth, her cheeks flushed, looking for all the world like a child having a tantrum as she squared her shoulders and stood up.

“T-Tohka...?”

“...Don’t touch me!”

“Ow...!” He frowned and yanked his hand back.

She looked shocked for a moment, but she quickly groaned and whirled her face away.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Tohka...?”

“Shut up! Don’t talk to me! Y-you care about her more than me...!”

“H-huh? What are you—?” he began, stunned.

“Unh! Unh! Unh! Unnnnnnnh!!” She stomped away. With each stomp, the ground caved in.

“Hey—Whoa?!” Unable to keep his balance, Shido tumbled over.



“Notice to all AST personnel. Spirit’s on the move. Once the signal is confirmed, attack will recommence.”

The report came to Origami as she stood in her full-body wiring suit.

“Roger,” she replied and readjusted her grip on Oldest, the anti-Spirit Gatling gun she held in both hands. Her current equipment was Outrange, which could unleash a barrage of troublesome bullets from outside the target’s range.

The rain, which had started at the same time as Hermit appeared, bounced off the wall of her Territory, as she kept her guard up and focused on the building and the Spirit signal displayed directly on her retinas.

Boom! The wall of the building was blown outward, sending a cloud of dust up, and the Spirit signal projected on her retinas blinked.

“Fire!”

At the order from her squad leader, Ryouko, Origami and her squad mates pulled their triggers. Hundreds of bullets were sucked into the building with a wild roar, sending up massive plumes of dust and smoke.

“...” She narrowed her eyes, finger still on the trigger. Her super visual acuity refined by her Territory caught a shadow moving at high speed in the smoke. Silently, she gave commands in her mind, and the small missile pods on her legs were deployed, firing ten shots from each leg, homing missiles aimed for Hermit.

“—?!”

Hermit had slipped through the anti-Spirit Gatling gun bullets in the rain, but now she turned her eyes on the homing missiles headed straight for her, a look of surprise on her face.

“...!” But she quickly pulled her hands back, and the puppet danced lightly up into the air, shaking off the pursuit of the homing missiles.

By then, however, the other AST members had also caught sight of the Spirit. Homing missiles shot in from the rear, while numerous Gatling gun bullets rained down from all directions. It was impossible for her to evade this barrage.

“Eek—”

Origami heard something like a small shriek as the bullets all hit their target. A massive explosion rolled up into the sky.

The Astral Dress that the Spirit wore likely nullified the majority of the attacks, but even if Princess might have walked away unscathed, Hermit

wouldn't.

Indeed, she could see the massive puppet dropping downward where the bullets converged.

"Yes! Can't slack off now, though! Fire! Fire!" Ryouko's command echoed in her ears.

But Origami's finger on the trigger twitched. She could see the Spirit and the massive puppet melting away into space.

"Is it...Lost?" she heard one of the AST squad members say.

They called it "Lost" when the Spirit returned to the alternate space they referred to as a parallel world. The objective of the AST was to eradicate the Spirits with firepower, but because it was extremely difficult to completely defeat a Spirit, battles generally ended when they were Lost.

Sun poured through a break in the clouds. The rain beating down on her Territory stopped abruptly.

"All personnel, return to base," Ryouko commanded.

"..."

Origami lowered the barrel of her gun and relaxed from her battle stance.

"...?" When she followed to return to base as instructed, she spotted something curious with her Territory-enhanced vision and temporarily dropped altitude.

Chapter 3

A Twisted Show of Mercy

“Heey, Tohkaaaa...,” Shido cooed, a note of bewilderment in his voice, as he knocked on the door. He got no answer.

“Tohka...” He knocked again. “Please, just hear me out...”

Bam! The whole house shuddered, and he jumped in surprise. “...!”

“*Hmph. Leave me alone.*” He heard a muffled voice from the other side of the door. “*Just go to her already, you big stupid head.*” And then it was silence once more. She was in a total snit.

“What am I supposed to do...?” He put a hand to his forehead and sighed gloomily. He was standing at the end of the hallway of the second floor of the Itsuka house, in front of a door with a piece of paper on it that read *Tohka* in extremely bad handwriting.

It had been about five hours since Yoshinon was Lost to the parallel world. *Fraxinus* had picked up Shido and Tohka and brought them home, which was all fine and good, but as soon as they’d walked in the house, Tohka had locked herself up in her room and refused to come out.

“*Shido, got a sec? There’s something I wanted to confirm with you.*” He heard Kotori’s voice over the earpiece still sitting in his right ear.

“Uh...? What? Now’s really not a good—”

“*Shido, you kissed Yoshinon, right?*”

“...Huh? Where’d that come from?” His voice rose an octave.

“*Whatever. Just answer me. Your lips touched Yoshinon’s. No mistake there, right?*”

“...N-no...”

“Hmm...”

“S-so what about it? I’ll tell you right now, that was a complete accide—”

“I know. I’d actually give you a pat on the back if you’d done it on purpose.”

“...So then, what?” Shido asked.

“Well,” Kotori replied. “It looks like the Spirit’s power wasn’t sealed at all, even though you kissed her.”

His eyes grew wide. She was right. Yoshinon had definitely wielded her Spirit power after they kissed.

“Your likability wasn’t as high as it was with Tohka, so maybe it makes sense that you couldn’t seal all of her power. But it does bug me a little that you couldn’t seal any of it. Number-wise, I figured you’d have gotten twenty or thirty percent locked away there,” she said and fell into thoughtful silence. “...Maybe Yoshinon has some kind of unique ability. Or—”

“H-hey, Kotori, I know the whole thing with Yoshinon is a big deal, too, but, um,” he interrupted, turning his eyes to the door of Tohka’s room.

“Ohhh, you’re talking about Tohka,” Kotori replied without much of a pause, perhaps intuiting what he was thinking. “How’s it looking?”

“Not great,” he told her honestly. “I’ve been trying to talk to her for a while, but I’m getting nowhere.”

“I see. From the numbers, it looks like the power she actualized momentarily there has gone through the Path and been sealed again. But it’d be best to get her mood back up as soon as possible, hmm?”

“Her mood? ...How?” he asked.

“...Shin. If you don’t mind, maybe you could leave that to me?” He heard a curiously sleepy voice in his earpiece—Reine.

“Huh...?”

“...She’s obviously very worked up right now. And tomorrow’s Saturday, right? Could you let me have her during the day? Make some excuse like I’ll take her shopping for some necessities.”

“That’s fine with me, but why?” he said.

Reine was silent for a moment before letting out a sigh. “...It’s better if the problem person isn’t there. A woman’s heart is an intricate organ. Remember that.”

“O-okay...” He scratched his cheek in confusion.



“...So that’s the story, Tohka. I wanted to go shopping, and I was hoping you’d come, too?”

The following day, Saturday, May 13. Ten AM.

Reine arrived at the Itsuka house as promised and stood in front of Tohka’s door. She was wearing neither her lab coat nor a military uniform but rather a knit shirt with a battered stuffed bear peeking out from its pocket and dark trousers, with a bag hanging from her shoulder to complete her shopping look.

But just as she had the day before, Tohka cried out wildly from the other side of the door. “*Shut up! Leave me alone...!*”

Shido let out a sigh. “She’s been like this ever since yesterday.”

“...Hmm.” Reine put a thoughtful hand to her chin. And then she pulled what looked like a small computer out of her bag and began to poke at it with one hand. She stared at the screen for a moment, then put the terminal away and took a step toward the door. “...Tohka.”

“I told you to stop bothering me! I—”

“...How about we stop somewhere for a bite to eat while we’re shopping?” Reine said, and Tohka abruptly fell silent.

And then a minute or two later, the door opened with a creaking sound, and Tohka’s grumpy face popped out. She hadn’t changed since the day before, and her school uniform was still damp. It looked like she hadn’t slept much, either; dark circles hung below her eyes. Anyone who saw her walking alongside Reine would probably think they were sisters.

“Wha—?” Shido opened his eyes wide, stunned. “R-Reine...? What exactly did you do...?”

“...Nothing.” She shrugged. “Tohka’s hunger metric is rising, is all. I figured she was probably about at her limit.”

“Makes sense. She didn’t come out when I called her for supper last night, though...”

“...Well, she likely didn’t want to see your face.”

“...” He flinched. Reine said such cruel things so naturally.

But she wasn’t wrong. When Tohka finally came out of her room, she jerked her face away as soon as she saw Shido and marched down the

hallway. “Let’s go then!”

“...Mm, let’s,” Reine said, giving Shido a signal with her eyes, as if to let him know she had things under control. “It’s been raining all morning. Don’t forget to bring an umbrella.”

“...Th-thanks for your help!” Shido could only watch as the two women walked off. He stood there blankly for a few minutes. “Umm...”

He quickly realized this was a waste of time. Puffing his cheeks out, he got himself together and went downstairs.

“No school today. Maybe I’ll go shopping, too.”

He’d been planning to stop by the grocery store on his way home from school the day before, but with everything that happened, he hadn’t actually gotten the chance. He quickly changed clothes and stepped out of the house, umbrella in hand.

“I guess I should lock the door? Kotori’s sleeping and all.” He turned his key in the lock before splashing out onto the rainy road.

He hadn’t been walking for too long when he caught sight of a familiar figure and his feet stopped.

“...?!”

He knew that green hood with rabbit ears.

“Y-Yoshinon?” he asked himself, furrowing his brow.

Yes. There, in the rubble of the previous day’s spacequake, an area that was currently off-limits, he could see the Spirit Yoshinon. He hid himself behind the wall and stared at her.

“The alarm...isn’t going off... Is this the same situation as Tohka?”

Now that he was thinking about it, the alarm hadn’t gone off the first time he’d run into Yoshinon, either. Maybe she was a Spirit who frequently went back and forth between their two worlds.

“...But what should I do then...?” Now that he’d found her, he couldn’t just let her be, but he didn’t know what to do, either. He thought about it for a minute or two and finally pressed a button on his phone.

It rang for a while until finally a sleepy voice reached his ear.

“...Haaaaallo... What is it...?” It was clear she had just woken up. It was Shido’s little sister.

“Hey. Morning, Kotori.”

“Mm... Mornin'... What's wrong?”

“...Emergency,” he said. “I found Yoshinon.”

“...” He heard something like a cheek being slapped hard on the other end of the line. It was followed by a crisp voice completely different from the sleepy tone of a second ago. *“Give me a detailed overview of the situation.”*

“R-right.” He was a little surprised by this change, but he still managed to briefly explain what had happened.

“...I see,” she said. *“Another quiet appearance? How frustrating. Okay. The Spirit hasn't noticed you yet, right?”*

“Right... At least, I don't think so. What should I do?”

“*You got your earpiece?*”

“Huh? Oh yeah.” He patted his pocket to check that the small device was in there. Ever since the thing with Tohka, he'd been told to carry it around with him just in case.

“Good. Put it in and stand by. Make sure you don't lose sight of the Spirit.”

“Huh? He—”

Click. Beep-beep. She'd hung up on him.

“St-stand by...?” He frowned at the vague order. There was nothing else he could do. He obediently put in his earpiece and kept an eye on Yoshinon.

Before five minutes had passed, his sister's voice was echoing in his earpiece. She had apparently taken that short interval to get herself dressed and moved to *Fraxinus*. *“Can you hear me, Shido?”*

“...Yeah, loud and clear.”

“We can't just leave her to run around. Let's try making contact.”

“...Roger.” He took a deep breath before he started to walk toward Yoshinon.

She didn't seem to have noticed him yet; her gaze was firmly fixed on the ground.

“Okay, I'm going to talk to her.”

“Okay—Actually, hang on a sec.”

Just as Shido was about to make contact with the Spirit, a window popped up

on the large monitor on the bridge, displaying three different ways to keep from inciting the Spirit.

1. WHEN YOU SPEAK TO HER, ROLL OVER ON YOUR BACK, EXPOSE YOUR BELLY, AND SHOW HER YOU'RE NOT AN ENEMY.
2. WRAP YOUR ARMS AROUND HER AND PULL HER CLOSE AND DECLARE YOUR LOVE.
3. GET STARK NAKED TO SHOW HER YOU HAVE NO WEAPONS AND THEN CALL OUT TO HER.

“Tch!” Kotori clicked her tongue and glanced down at the empty seat in the lower part of the bridge. “This is hard without Reine, but we’ll just have to power through.”

Reine would have been shopping with Tohka at that moment. They couldn’t toss Tohka aside and put her in an even worse mood.

“Make your choices!”

The order went out, and the crew’s selections appeared on the screen beside Kotori. (1), (2), (3). They all had the same number of votes.

“Ugh! Really split on this one, hmm?” she muttered, frowning.

“It’s one!” a voice rang out from the lower deck. “Revealing your stomach is a submissive pose in animals! It should put the Spirit at ease!”

“Don’t make me laugh!” came another voice. “It’s obviously the second choice! Rabbits can die of loneliness, you know!”

“She’s just wearing a rabbit hood; she’s not an actual rabbit! Anyway, Commander, it’s definitely three! Total nudity to show we have no weapons! The only choice is nudity!”

“Shut up, you old maid! You just want to see a teenage boy naked!”

“H-how rude...! Don’t you know that becoming nude was effective in winning over a primitive person brought back to life in our modern era?!”

“What are you talking about?! Anyway, it’s two! Two!”

“No, I’m telling you it’s one!”

“Nudity! Nudity!” someone chanted.

“...Quiet! All of you!” Kotori slammed her hand down on her console and

glared at her overwrought crew.

The bridge fell silent instantly, and she slowly picked up her mic.

“Shido, before you talk to her, take off your clothes.”

On the lower deck, several female crew members and for some reason one man struck victory poses.

“*Not a chance!*” came Shido’s anguished cry through the speakers.

“...?!” And the on-screen Yoshinon jumped in terror.

“...! Crap!” Shido cried as Yoshinon turned around with a gasp.

Her face was pale, her teeth were chattering, and her whole body was shaking. “...Eek! Eeeek...!” Looking like she would burst into tears at any second, she thrust her right hand up into the air.

Shido’s heart half stopped. He’d seen this move before—when Yoshinon made that huge puppet appear.

“H-hang on! Calm down!”

There was no way he was going to get through to her like this.

“*Shido!*” Kotori cried out, also noticing Yoshinon’s hand shooting into the air. “*We can still make it in time! One! Roll over and show her your belly!*”

“H-huh?!”

“*Hurry!*”

He had no other choice. He tossed his umbrella aside and rolled over onto his back on the rain-soaked road. “You got me! I give up!”

“...?!” Yoshinon looked utterly baffled at this, her hand hanging in the air. And then very timidly, she brought her right hand back down and peered at Shido.

“...D-did it work?” he whispered.

“*Probably. Try talking to her without provoking her.*”

Still on his back, he slowly lifted his head. “H-hey.”

“...” Yoshinon only glared at him warily.

“Wh-what’s going on today...?”

“...”

“Th-this rain really is something...”

“...” Still silence.

“...Wonder what’s going on here, you know?” He tipped his head to one

side. Maybe he was having visions or something, but he was pretty sure he could see Yoshinon's left hand. She wasn't wearing the puppet. He frowned.

"Hold up," he heard Kotori say.

A selection of options was displayed once more on the *Fraxinus* bridge monitor.

1. KEEP TALKING AND WALK OVER TO HER.
2. WITHDRAW MOMENTARILY TO RECOVER.
3. ASK ABOUT THE FACT THAT SHE'S NOT WEARING THE PUPPET.

"Hmm." Kotori stared at the aggregated results from her crew on her small display and groaned. Most had voted for the third option. Everyone was apparently curious about what had happened to the puppet. Kotori wanted to know, too.

"Shido, go with three. She might have lost the puppet and could be looking for it. At any rate, I want a reaction here. Ask about the puppet."

"...Roger," he whispered and looked at the Spirit. "Hey? Are you maybe... looking for your puppet?"

"...!" Yoshinon's eyes flew open. She immediately trotted over to him, grabbed his head, and shook it like she was interrogating him. "...! ...?!"

"Ah! Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow! Cut it out!" he cried, and Yoshinon released him with a gasp. He sat up, a wary eye on her, and asked again, "Does that mean you're looking for it?"

She nodded vigorously several times and turned anxious eyes on him, almost like she was asking after the whereabouts of the puppet.

"S-sorry. I don't know where it is, either," he told her.

She made a face like she had just been informed the world was ending and slumped down to the ground. She hung her head and began to sob. "Unaaah... Aaaah..."

"Uh. Um..." He didn't want her to whip out her giant puppet monster, but

this was also not great. He looked around frantically.

“*Calm yourself, Shido,*” Kotori said in his ear.

After taking in Yoshinon’s reaction, a third window appeared on the main monitor.

1. “I’LL MAKE YOU FORGET ALL ABOUT THAT FELLA.” PLAY THE DEPENDABLE GUY.
2. “I’LL HELP YOU LOOK FOR YOUR PUPPET!” PLAY THE NICE GUY.
3. “THE TRUTH IS, I WAS THE PUPPET!” PLAY THE FUNNY GUY.

“Choices!” she commanded.

The aggregate results were shown on her personal display. Most of the crew had chosen (2). Followed by (1). There was only a single vote for (3).

“Well, two’s the safe choice, I guess.” She nodded. “But who picked three?”

“...Was I wrong?” She heard the vice commander’s dejected voice from behind.

“...” Kotori ignored him and pulled the mic close. “Shido, help her look for the puppet.”

“Aah! The way you neglect me...!”

She ignored this interjection from behind, too.

“Uh, um, Yoshinon.”

“...!” She jumped once again. She swung a hand, and a lump of water swelled up, turned into a bullet, and shot past the place where Shido was sitting.

“G-gah?!” He shrank back instinctively. “S-sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you!”

Staring guardedly at her (and trying to avert his eyes whenever they met hers), he straightened up and bowed. He spread his hands to show he wasn’t resisting. “So. I-if you’d like...I could help look for your puppet?”

“...!” Her eyes widened in surprise. And then a few seconds later, her face

brightened for the first time, and she bobbed her head up and down vigorously.

“Okay.” He let out his breath and finally lifted his butt from the wet ground. He’d gotten pretty soaked, but now wasn’t the time to worry about that. “Umm. So. When and where did you lose the puppet?”

Her eyes wandered like she was hesitating before her light-pink lips parted. “...Yes...terday...” She hung her head, clutching her rabbit-eared hood, and tried to hide her eyes as she spoke falteringly. “Scary...people. Attack...me... And then... G-gone, g...”

“Um? So you were attacked by the AST yesterday?” Shido said, and Yoshinon nodded. “I see. So after that then...”

He looked around, taking in the scene. Crumbled buildings and cracked roads. This was going to be a lot of work.

“We’ll send as many cameras as we’ve got,” came Kotori’s voice from *Fraxinus*. *“Try to talk with her as much as possible while you’re looking.”*

He tapped the earpiece to indicate his agreement and turned his eyes back to the Spirit. “Okay! How about we start looking, Yoshinon?”

“...!” She nodded, and after she moved her mouth for a minute, her voice came out. “I...am...”

“Huh?”

“I...am...not...Yoshinon... My name...is...Yoshino. Yoshinon...is. My...friend...”

“Yoshino...?” Shido spoke her name questioningly, and the girl—Yoshino—started to run. “Oh...! Hey!”

Perhaps surprised by his voice, the girl jumped once again. The rain around her instantly turned into needles that came whirring toward him.

“Aaaah!?” He instantly ducked and managed to dodge them. He was just lucky there weren’t that many of them. If she’d launched more rain needles over a wider range, Shido would have been a human cactus right about now. “C-calm down! It’s me! It’s me!”

Yoshino looked back, trembling, and let out a little sigh when she saw his face.

“H-here.” He stood up slowly. “I know you’re already wet, but it’s better than nothing, right?” He picked up the umbrella he had tossed to the side of the road and offered it to her.

She cocked her head to one side curiously, a puzzled look on her face.

“...???”

“Ohhh. You hold it like this.” He put the umbrella in her hand and opened it for her.

Her eyes grew wide as saucers as she looked up, perhaps surprised the rain was no longer touching her. The droplets hit the clear plastic umbrella and bounced off, glittering as they fell aside.

“...! ...!” Yoshino flapped the hand that wasn’t holding the umbrella excitedly.

“O-oh, you like it, huh? Go ahead, use it!”

She turned questioning eyes on him.

“Huh...? Me?”

She bobbed her head up and down.

“Oh, I’m fine. It’s okay. You can use it.”

Yoshino looked back and forth between the umbrella and Shido for a while, as though hesitating. Finally, she bowed neatly. “Th...ank...s...”

“*Look at you, all white knight.*” He heard Kotori’s teasing voice in his right ear.

“Sh-shut up.”

Well, if the Spirit felt like it, she could probably dry those wet clothes pretty quick. Or better yet, it’d be nothing for her to set up an invisible film and repel the rain.”

“R-really?”

Well, either way, he couldn’t stand to see a little girl getting drenched in the rain. He wiped his wet face and joined Yoshino in the puppet hunt.



“So?” Kotori asked. “You find the puppet?”

“No, not yet. There’s no sign of it,” came the response from one of the crew on the lower deck.

The time was 12:30. Approximately two hours had passed since Shido began the search with Yoshino. Working in the rain, he was probably freezing, which only added to his exhaustion.

She could have sent members of Ratatoskr out on the search, but they’d get nowhere if they scared Yoshino by tossing her into a group of grown-ups.

And even if they didn't frighten the Spirit, there was a chance that her gratitude and warm feelings would be scattered among a group instead of tightly focused on Shido.

"What about the video?" She turned her eyes to her right.

"The resolution's bad," the crew member at the console said without lifting their eyes. "But here's something."

"Put it up on-screen."

The video from the encounter between Yoshino and the AST on the previous day popped up on the bridge monitor. The camera had been keeping its distance to avoid getting caught up in the battle, so the image quality was worse than usual.

"At the moment the Spirit was Lost, she didn't have the puppet," the crew member informed her. They zoomed in to show a close-up of the falling Yoshino. "However, the puppet can be seen at the mouth of the Angel immediately before the AST bullets landed. It seems reasonable to assume it was lost in the attack."

"So where's the all-important puppet then?" Kotori asked.

"The smoke is quite thick, so I can't be sure. But I did see a shadow dropping down, which leads me to believe we are not looking at the worst-case scenario, which would be if the puppet was burned up in the attack."

"...Hmm." She put a hand to her chin. "Is there any video of that area from after Yoshino was Lost?"

"I-I'll check!"

"*Grrrrrrr!*" A sad grumbling came through over the speakers.

"Yoshino?"

"...!"

Pushing back his rain-soaked hair, Shido turned to Yoshino, looking for the puppet next to him. It had been around two hours since the search began.

She flinched in fear once more, but she didn't launch any water bullets or needles, so he took that as a sign that she'd gotten used to his voice a little, at least.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She flushed a deep red as she shook her head from side to side, but her

stomach grumbled again at the same time.

“...!” She crouched down on the spot and yanked on her hood to completely hide her face.

It seemed Spirits also got hungry, although he'd been told it was possible for Spirits to subsist solely through their special powers. Now that he was thinking about it, however, Tohka had been quite the glutton even before he sealed her powers.

“...What should we do?” He didn't know how long Yoshino had been looking for the puppet before he arrived, but it was already past noon, so it was no wonder that she was hungry. He was getting a bit peckish himself, so he tapped the earpiece for instructions.

“Okay,” Kotori replied, having gotten the gist of things. “*How about you take a break and get something to eat?*”

“Mm... I guess so.” He stood up straight and stretched before turning to Yoshino. “How about we take a little break?”

She shook her head, but then her stomach growled again, and she jolted. “...!”

“Come on,” he urged. “Don't overdo it. You won't be able to look for Yoshinon if you pass out.”

She appeared to think for a moment before reluctantly nodding.

“Great. So then...,” Shido started before suddenly remembering. “Ah!” He did have his wallet with him, but they'd have a hard time going into a restaurant with him looking like a drowned rat. He set his hand to his chin briefly before tapping the earpiece.

“...Hey, Kotori. So would our house be an okay place to take a break?”

“Whoa. *I take my eyes off you for one second and you get all bold. If you're planning to get your way with her, be careful.*”

“...Hey.”

“I know. Well, I guess there's nowhere else. I'll allow it this once.”

“Wohkay,” Shido replied and said to Yoshino, “Then... Let's go.”

She nodded silently.



“...Mm.”

Rubbing her grumbling stomach, Tohka walked behind Reine through the rainy town. She was not feeling particularly great given that she hadn't eaten since lunch the day before and she'd barely been able to sleep. She had a feeling that this not-great feeling was not only from hunger and lack of sleep.

"..." She gritted her teeth and kicked at the wet pavement. However, this obviously couldn't clear away the irritation in the pit of her stomach.

Reine stopped abruptly ahead of her, and Tohka managed to pull herself to a stop on the verge of slamming into the other woman.

"...How about we eat first?" Reine suggested. "Is this place okay?"

They were standing in front of a building with a colorful sign. Tohka was pretty sure this was what they called a family restaurant, a place that served food.

"Yeah." She nodded. "It would be great if we could do that. I'm about to die of hunger."

"...Then let's go in."

They folded up their umbrellas and went inside, where the server led them to a seat in the back of the nonsmoking section. They looked over the menu and ordered food right away. While they were waiting for their order to come, Tohka drained the glass of water the server had set on the table before her in one gulp to try and stave off her hunger.

"...Tohka." Reine looked at the other girl with sleepy eyes adorned with deep, dark bags.

"What?"

"...I wanted to talk a little while we're waiting for our food. You mind?"

"Mm... Well, I guess not," Tohka said but pulled back slightly as if to show that she was on guard. "What exactly did you want to talk about?" She never knew what this woman Reine Murasame was thinking. And yet she felt like Reine could see everything in Tohka's own mind, which was a little disturbing.

Whether or not she picked up on what Tohka was thinking now, Reine pulled a device out of her bag absently and opened it on the table.

"What's that?"

"...Oh, don't worry about it," Reine said as she nimbly tapped the device with one hand.

Tohka was bursting with curiosity, but she tried her best to ignore the machine and turned her gaze back to Reine's face.

“...Well, it’s not like I’m particularly good at talking, so I’ll get right to it.” Reine looked up at Tohka. “Could you tell me the reason for and the cause of the annoyance you were—no, that you’re feeling even now?”

“—” Tohka inhaled sharply. “I’m not—”

“...I’m guessing you’re upset with Shin for meeting another girl?”

Shin. That was Reine’s name for Shido.

“Wh-why would you bring Shido up...?!” she demanded.

“...Oh dear. So he’s got nothing to do with this?” Reine arched an eyebrow.

“...” Tohka set her elbows on the table and shook her head in her hands. She then let out a deep breath before speaking with a heavy heart. “...I don’t know.”

“...You don’t know?” Reine asked in return, looking at her quizzically.

“Mm. I don’t know why I’m in such a mood, either.” Tohka hung her head even further. “Yesterday...Shido left me at school...and went and kissed that girl or whatever.”

Kiss. Just the word made her chest hurt for some reason.

“...Mm-hmm, looks that way.”

“It’s not like...there’s something wrong with that. I can’t blame Shido for who he sees or who he kisses... But the second I saw them, I was just, I dunno, very—Right, I really hated it.”

“...Mm-hmm.” Reine nodded in understanding.

“When I realized it...I started yelling. And then...that rabbit told me Shido cared for her more than me... And I just, I couldn’t even stand it. I was so sad and scared, and I didn’t know what was what... I don’t even understand it myself. This is the first time this has happened to me.” Tohka exhaled heavily once more. “I guess...there’s something wrong with me, huh?”

“...No, nothing wrong with you. Those are very healthy emotions.”

“Th-they are?”

“...Mm-hmm. Nothing to worry about. But it’s probably a good idea to clear something up here.”

“Clear something up...?” Tohka frowned.

“...Mm-hmm. That kiss was a total accident,” Reine said, glancing at her device. “Shin definitely doesn’t care more about that little girl than you.”

Tohka yanked her face up. “R-really...?”

“...Really.”

“But Shido...”

“...If he didn’t care about you, he wouldn’t have risked his own life to save you,” Reine pointed out.

“Oh...” Tohka couldn’t think of anything to say to that. Her attention had been so taken up with the mysterious emotions sinking in her gut that she’d completely forgotten. Hadn’t Shido protected her the day before just like he had last month? And it was all despite the fact that he might have been pelted by those assassin’s bullets.

“...I...” Pressing a hand to her chest, she swallowed hard. How stupid. She half groaned and tousled her hair. And then she leaped to her feet.

“...Tohka?”

“Sorry. Can we go shopping another day?” Tohka bit her lip. “I have to apologize to Shido.”

Reine pressed a hand to her chin and nodded slightly. “...Go.”

“Thanks,” she said and then slipped out of the family restaurant, picked up her umbrella, and ran down the rainy street.

“...Hmm. Well, that’s one issue solved...I guess?” Reine muttered to no one in particular. She was alone at the table, looking over the graphs and numbers displayed on the screen of her small terminal.

She’d guessed at the factor distorting Tohka’s mental state. Although she’d pouted like a child throwing a tantrum, Tohka didn’t think badly of Shido, and she didn’t hate this girl Shido had met with. She’d simply been faced with an unfamiliar fear and uneasiness, and she hadn’t been able to get past the irritation she felt about this situation. Or something close to that.

So even if Reine hadn’t managed to improve Tohka’s mood entirely, it hadn’t been so hard to change her awareness of her situation. She just had to make her realize that Shido kept her safe. And what that meant. And how she felt when she understood that.

“...Well, jealousy’s a part of love, too,” Reine muttered and closed her terminal. “Be careful, though. Love is definitely an emotion that will kill the world.”

“And here we are!” The server appeared out of nowhere to fill the table

with the high-calorie dishes Tohka had ordered. “Double cheeseburger set with extra rice, fried chicken, fried oyster set, the grilled meat plate, a margherita pizza, and spaghetti Bolognese. The iron dish is hot, so please be careful with it.”

“...Hmm?” Reine looked up in surprise.

“Enjoy!” With practiced ease, the server bowed at a forty-five-degree angle before moving quickly away.

“...Hmm.” Faced with this much food, the lone Reine scratched her cheek. “This is...a problem.”



“Let’s see. We’ve got eggs and... Oh! There’s chicken, too. And there’s still rice left in the rice cooker. We can do chicken and egg bowls.” Shido quickly decided what to make for lunch after taking rough stock of the fridge, and he pulled out the necessary ingredients as he glanced over at the living room.

Yoshino was sitting on the sofa, looking around curiously. He’d changed right after they got to the house, but Yoshino was still in the same rabbit coat. Just as Kotori had said, she wasn’t the least bit wet, even though she’d been out in the rain all that time. He wondered if this was that Astral Dress thing, like Tohka’s dress of light.

“Just hang on a sec. I’ll whip something up,” he said as he chopped up an onion. “Oh! If you’re bored, you can watch TV.”

“...?” Yoshino looked blankly at him.

“Mm, the remote there.” He pointed at the table. “Right, that. Push the top button on the left.”

She followed his instructions and pressed the button. Instantly, the TV up against the wall lit up, and laughter blared out of it.

“—!” Yoshino gasped and shrank back, and before he knew it, the water in the sink had bubbled up and flown bullet-like into the TV screen.

“Wha—?”

“*Idiot. I told you not to scare her.*” He heard Kotori’s critical voice in his ear.

Yoshino, meanwhile, had opened her eyes again, hurriedly bowing her head at him.

“N-no. Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry I scared you.” A dry smile spread across his face, and then he returned to cooking.

He heated some stock diluted with water and tossed in chopped onion and chicken. Once these were cooked through, he dumped in the beaten egg. He poured this mixture onto rice piled in bowls and scattered some microgreens on top as garnish. He was used to the work. In less than ten minutes, he was done cooking.

“Okay, lunch is served. Let’s fill our stomachs and then get out there and find Yoshinon.” He went into the living room, bowls in hand. He set one in front of Yoshino and the other down for himself across from her before heading back into the kitchen to get some chopsticks and a spoon just in case.

“Okay then. Let’s dig in,” he said, clapping his hands together and bowing, and Yoshino dipped her head as if imitating this gesture.

“...!” She picked up the spoon and brought a mouthful of Shido’s top-notch dish up to her mouth. Immediately, her eyes flew open, and she slapped the table.

“Hmm?” But when he turned his gaze toward her, she averted her eyes.

The look on her face said that she wanted to say something but was too embarrassed to speak. Finally, she popped a thumbs-up at him. Apparently, she liked it.

“G-great...” He smiled and held up his own thumb in reply.

She had clearly been pretty hungry. She shoveled spoonfuls into her mouth and polished the bowl off in no time.

“You’re going to take a bit more of a break, right?” Kotori started, as if she’d been waiting for Yoshino to finish eating. *“I want as much info as you can get on the Spirit, and this is the perfect opportunity. Can you try asking her some questions?”*

“What questions?” he asked in reply, his voice low, and Kotori told him exactly what he should ask about. “Ohhh, that?”

He looked at Yoshino, who was sighing with satisfaction after emptying her bowl. “Hey, Yoshino? I wanted to ask you something. You mind a few questions?”

She tilted her head to the side curiously.

“Um. You really love that puppet—Yoshinon. Just what exactly is it to you?” he asked.

Yoshino opened her mouth hesitantly, clearly very nervous. “Yoshinon...

is my...friend. And...hero.”

“Hero?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yoshinon...is my...ideal...self. Who I...want to be... Not weak...and indecisive like me...but strong and cool...”

“Your ideal self, huh?” He picked at his face and recalled when he met Yoshinon in the department store. The Yoshino who spoke through the puppet had indeed been a totally different person, in everything from tone to attitude. “I—I like the Yoshino here now.”

He smiled, remembering the barrage of jokes from the puppet when Tohka had appeared. That Yoshino *had* been cheerful and easy to talk to, but he wished she wouldn’t force herself. Although it was a little hard to hear what she was saying, he was much fonder of this Yoshino, the one who tried to answer him sincerely, if tentatively.

Blush spread from her neck to cover her face, and she curled into herself, hiding in her hood.

“Y-Yoshino? What’s wrong?” he asked, trying to peer in at her face.

She let go of the hood and timidly raised her face. “...No. One’s ever... said that...to me...before...”

“O-oh yeah?”

She nodded.

Well, that just might have been the case. She *was* a Spirit, after all, meaning she didn’t have too many chances to talk to people in the first place.

“*Shido, was that...calculated?*” Kotori asked.

“Huh? Was what calculated...?”

“...*Oh, if it’s not, that’s fine.*”

“H-huh...?” He frowned. His sister wasn’t making a lot of sense to him.

“*Forget it. There’s no problem at the moment. You’re surprisingly relaxed. I guess your training living with Tohka is helping?*”

“...Hmm, who knows?” he replied in a vague way. He was indeed sort of relaxed, but he couldn’t tell if it was because of the training or not.

He didn’t have time to think about that now. He turned back to Yoshino and asked his next question. “So, um, you basically never fight when you’re attacked by the AST. Is there any reason for that?”

Yoshino hung her head again. She grabbed at the hem of her dress underneath the coat, made of the same film of light as Tohka’s Astral Dress, before speaking in a whisper. “...I...hate...painful things. I hate...scary

things. I thought...those people...they must...hate painful...and scary things, too. So. I..."

Her voice was hoarse and so quiet that if he wasn't careful, he would miss what she was saying.

And what she was saying made him feel like his heart was being gouged out.

"Yoshino... So that's why you—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence.

"But...I." Shaking all over, Yoshino continued. "I...am...weak and afraid... I'm...no good...by myself. I'm so...hurt...and scared. I can't...do anything...and my head...gets all confused... I just know I'd...do... something terrible. To everyone." She said the latter with tears in her voice and sniffled before speaking again. "That's...why...Yoshinon is...my...hero. Yoshinon...tells me it's...okay...when I get scared... And. Then...it really is...okay. So... S-so..."

"..." Shido had unconsciously bitten his lip. He was clenching his hands so tightly that he thought they might start bleeding. He wouldn't have been able to stand it otherwise.

Yoshino...this little girl...was too kind—and so sad. Because she hated painful and scary things, she was intentionally kind to people who had come at her any number of times with animosity, malice, and hostility. She had tried not to hurt them. How difficult and distressing that must have been.

Yoshino thought of herself as *weak*? He shook his head at her self-assessment. She wasn't weak. Aah, but what a twisted show of mercy.

"—" Unthinkingly, Shido stood up. He went around the table and sat down next to Yoshino and stroked her head gently.

"...! Ah...! Um!"

"I...," he started as the girl gasped. "I am going to save you."

Her eyes grew wide.

"I *will* find Yoshinon," he continued, while stroking her head through her hood. "And I'll give it back to you. Not only that—I'll make it so you don't need Yoshinon to protect you anymore. None of those bad things are going to come near you. I...will be your hero."

The speech was very much out of character for him, but he couldn't stop. After all, there was one thing seriously missing from Yoshino's kindness. Her saintlike mercy wasn't turned toward herself at all. In which case, someone

had to show her some compassion from the outside. This wasn't about her being a Spirit or any of that anymore. He simply could not let the idea stand that there was no hope for Yoshino, for a girl so unbelievably caring.



“...? ...?” She darted her eyes in surprise for a moment, but after a minute or two, she parted her small lips. “Th...ank...you...”

“...Uh-huh.” He was happy that she’d said it, but when she spoke, his eyes went to her sweet lips, and he had to look away awkwardly.

“...? Shido...?” Her head leaned to the side as she looked at him.

“Oh, uh, huh. Sorry about before.”

“Huh...?”

“Oh. Like, um...I kissed you,” he said, confessional style. A kiss was serious business for a girl, although to be honest, it wasn’t that it didn’t matter one way or the other to him, either.

But Yoshino opened her eyes wide, baffled. “...What’s a ‘kiss’?”

“Huh? Ohhh, it’s...when you touch lips,” he explained, and the look on her face said she still didn’t really understand.

She pushed her face up in front of his. “Like. This...?”

“...!” His heart leaped up in his chest. She was close enough that if he moved his face just a little, his lips would touch hers. But his training came back to him like muscle memory, and he managed to keep a veneer of cool somehow. “A啊. Right, like that.”

Yoshino nodded slightly. “...I don’t...really...remember.”

“...Huh?” Shido frowned at this response.

The door suddenly flew open.

“Shido...! I’m sorry, I—” Tohka barged into the living room, her shoulders heaving. And then she froze in place as soon as she saw Shido and Yoshino, facing each other like they were about to kiss at any moment.

“Huh...?” He gaped for a second. Sweat exploded from every pore on his face. “T-T—! T-T-T-T-T-T-T-T-T-Tohka...?!”

“...Eep...!” Yoshino looked back and let out a tiny cry.

Maybe that was only to be expected. To Yoshino, Tohka was the scary person who’d taken her puppet. And more than anything else, Tohka was radiating murder from where she stood silently in the living room doorway.

On top of that, a shrill buzzer had been sounding in his right ear for a minute now to inform him of the emergency.

“...” Without a word, Tohka put on a calm smile and came slowly into the living room.

He felt a twitching under his hand. Yoshino had apparently flinched.

“T-Tohka, so this, okay...” He waved his hands back and forth, feeling

like a man who'd been caught in flagrante delicto.

But she passed right by them, slipping through the living room and heading into the kitchen, where she took all the food and drinks out of the fridge and went out into the hallway. From the other side of the door, he could hear brisk feet stomping, and just when he figured she'd reached the second floor, he heard the loud slamming of a door.

She was apparently going to lock herself up in her room again. And this time with plenty of provisions, a castle under siege.

"Uh. Umm," he stammered.

"...*This got messy.*" He heard Kotori sigh.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do here?" he asked her.

"All you can do right now is let her be. Anything you say to her now will likely have the opposite effect."

"Y-yeah...?" He glanced over at Yoshino. But at some point, she had vanished from the sofa. "Huh...? Yoshino?"

"I'm guessing she was Lost to the other world when Tohka came in. Looks like she was really traumatized by having her puppet taken from her."

"Makes sense..." He let out his breath and then frowned at a discrepancy.

Yoshino remembered that Tohka had taken her puppet...but she had said she didn't remember the kiss with Shido. In fact, she hadn't seemed particularly bothered by it the day before, either. Maybe she didn't attach any particular emotion to the act of kissing itself. Each Spirit was an individual, with their own ideas and values, and so that was a possibility. Even so, he felt there was something a little off about Yoshino's reaction.

A question—or rather a concern popped up in the back of his mind. He pressed a hand to his mouth as he spoke. "Hey, Kotori. Something's bugging me... Could you check into it for me?"

"*What is it?*"

Shido told her about the question that had occurred to him.

"...*Hmm. Sure. I'll have Reine look into it once she gets back.*"

"Great. Thanks," he said.

"...*Ohhh, right, right,*" Kotori continued. "*I forgot to tell you with Tohka barging in, but I have some good news.*"

"Oh?"

"*After going through the video, we found out what happened to the puppet.*"

“Really?! So where is it?”

“Well, the thing there is...”

The words Kotori spoke made his cheeks spasm.

“Unh. Hngah!” Having raced into her room on the second floor, Tohka dug into the food she’d brought up with her, scarfing down whatever she laid her hands on. Stress eating.

“What was that...? I mean, what *was* that?! Hngh! Mmmphrrgg!”

Shido had invited the girl from the other day over while Tohka was out. That was the extent of the matter. There wasn’t a single thing for Tohka to be angry about. Shido was Tohka’s good friend. And that friend had brought home a new friend.

The correct reaction for Tohka would definitely have been to apologize to Shido and make up with him before reaching a hand out to the girl and saying, “Welcome. I’m sorry about the other day.”

But she couldn’t do it. The instant she’d seen Shido and that girl together, that same yucky feeling raced through her body, and she couldn’t stand to be in the same room as them.

“Unnnnnnnnnnh...!” she moaned as she ate random snacks. “...Shido.”

I want to apologize to Shido. I want to make up with Shido.

But...that gross feeling swirled in her chest, and she just couldn’t do it. She wrapped her arms around her knees and groaned in agony.

Chapter 4

Many Orders from the Tobiichi House

“This is it?” Shido let out a pained sigh as he looked up at the condo before him, a bag of snacks in his left hand and a piece of paper with a map on it in his right. He patted his chest to check his nerves and took a deep breath. “This is my job. Beyond my control.”

But even so...

“Why do I have to go in like I’m robbing the place?” he grumbled.

“*No other options. I mean, you’re basically the only one who can get an invite to Tobiichi’s,*” Kotori told him through the earpiece he wore.

Yes. He was about to pay a visit to the condo where Origami Tobiichi lived.

After carefully combing through the video from when Yoshino was Lost, they’d discovered that Origami had picked up the puppet on her way back to base. To try and get it back, he’d asked her a few days earlier if he could come hang out sometime and gotten her to invite him over.

“...But, like, did I even need to get her to ask me over? To take a single puppet, I mean, Ratatoskr could just—”

“...*We tried already.*” Kotori sighed.

“Huh?” He frowned.

“*I’m saying we attempted to sneak in three times a few days ago but failed on each go. She’s got infrared rays set up throughout the place; our team got sprayed with tear gas; there’s even a sentry gun positioned in the key location. Six members of our organization were sent to the hospital. What the hell is she fighting against?*”

“Uh-huh...”

“If we’re talking sheer numbers, we could force our way in and take it. But getting an invite from the girl herself, well, that pretty much takes the cake, doesn’t it?”

“...Understood.” Given that Shido was essentially a beginner in this field, he was extremely reluctant to do this job, but he couldn’t sit back and do nothing after seeing how anxious Yoshino was. Plus, he had something he wanted to talk to Origami about himself.

There was one other thing bugging him, so he posed the question to Kotori. “That reminds me... How’s Tohka?”

“*Same old. She’s locked up in her room.*”

“...Oh.” He rubbed his cheek, troubled.

Tohka had been weird ever since she came home the other day and saw that he’d invited Yoshino to the house. She was attending school, so it wasn’t like she’d locked herself up in her room like before, but he couldn’t help feeling that she was avoiding him.

After groaning to himself, he switched gears. That was an issue that gave him stomach troubles, but he was here now.

“...Wohkay.” He took a deep breath and stepped into the condominium, slipping through the automatic doors. He entered Origami’s apartment number in the device set up in the entryway.

“*Who is it?*” Origami said immediately.

“O-oh...it’s me. Shido Itsuka.”

“*Come in.*” She had no sooner spoken than the automatic doors on the other side of the entryway were sliding open.

He went inside, got on an elevator, rode up to the sixth floor, and at last arrived in front of the specified door number.

“Okay, just like we planned,” he said.

“*Mm-hmm. It’s up to you now,*” Kotori replied.

Super-small cameras operated by Ratatoskr were buzzing around him like flies. They would search the apartment while he had Origami’s attention.

“...Fwoo.” He took another deep breath and then rang the bell.

Immediately—so fast that he wondered if Origami had been standing on the other side waiting for him—the door opened.

“H-hey, Tobiichi. Sorry for just inviting myself over today—,” he started to say, raising a hand in greeting, and then dropped the bag of baked goods

he'd been carrying in his left hand. It made a *splat*, like ruined cakes that the staff would have to enjoy later.

The reason was simple: Origami's outfit.

Well, this *was* her house. She was free to wear whatever she wanted. It wasn't the kind of thing that Shido could lodge a complaint about. But this was unexpected. A dark blue dress with a frilly apron. A cute accessory on her head. Yes, she was dressed head to toe in perfect maid style. The school's top genius of all people. The ice princess Origami "Cocytus" Tobiichi.

"Uh... Uhhh... Tobiichi?" he managed to say, sweat all over his face.

"What?" She cocked her head questioningly to one side, her face expressionless as a doll's, like always.

It was really her. He'd had a fleeting hope that she would do or say something to make this make sense, like, "Actually, I'm Irogami, Origami's twin sister who loves cosplay!" But that hope was quickly dashed.

"O-oh... Your outfit's really something," he finally said.

Origami dropped her gaze down to her own clothes, puzzled, before tilting her head to one side again. "Not to your liking?"

"Uh. No, that's not it..." Not only did he not hate it, he found it irresistible, but he couldn't exactly say that. He looked anywhere but at Origami, his face turning red.

"Come in." She appeared not to notice his confusion as she invited him inside the apartment.

"Th-thanks..." He picked up the paper bag he'd dropped and then grabbed the doorknob with a trembling hand and pulled it closed before taking off his shoes and stepping up into the apartment.

And then frowned. He was suddenly getting static from his earpiece. He tapped it to signal Kotori. He could faintly hear her voice in reply mixed in with the static.

"*Ngh! Can't be—jamming—Shi—get through—you ha—*"

Then the signal was cut off entirely, and he could no longer hear anything.

"...?! H-hey...," he said to his earpiece.

"What's wrong?" Origami looked back at him.

"Oh!" he yelped. "N-no...it's nothing."

"Okay." She faced forward again, and he let out his breath.

He didn't know why, but apparently, he couldn't transmit here. Which meant the cameras might also have been knocked out of operation. But even

if they were still working, if he couldn't communicate with *Fraxinus*, they might as well have been dead, too. Meaning he now had to complete this mission on his own.

"...Come on, seriously?" he muttered quietly so Origami wouldn't hear him, and ran a hand through his hair.

He wasn't going to get anywhere complaining, though. He swallowed hard to steady himself and followed Origami into the living room.

"...Hmm? This smell..." He caught a whiff of something sweet the moment he stepped into the room. It didn't smell like food, though. If he had to say, it was...

"Tobiichi? Are you burning incense?"

"Yes."

"O-oh." This was a little surprising. He'd gotten the impression that Origami Tobiichi wasn't too interested in that sort of thing, although he didn't actually know her that well. He was a little embarrassed at seeing a different side of his classmate.

It was strange, though. He felt sort of spaced-out with this incense burning, like his mind would float off somewhere if he let his guard down the tiniest bit. Clearly, whatever scent it was, it seemed to induce relaxation.

"Sit," she instructed.

"Th-thanks." He sat down at the low table in the center of the living room.

"..." Once he was seated, she also sat. Right beside him.

"Huh...?" Normally, people seated themselves on the opposite side of the table, but maybe this was normal in the Tobiichi house. Looking at her expressionless face, he started to feel a little uncertain of his understanding of common sense.

"Umm..."

"..."

"Uh..."

"..."

After a minute, Shido nodded to himself. *Right, of course. This is standard in the Tobiichi house. No reason to break out into a sweat. This is normal.*

He was actually uncomfortable, and he tried to start a conversation to make the situation less weird. "T-Tobiichi?"

"What?"

“Oh, maybe this is a dumb question, but...do you live by yourself?”
Origami nodded.

“...Y-you do?” He’d had an idea that she did, but now that he knew for sure, his heart started to pound. He was visiting the home of a girl who lived alone. “S-since when have you lived on your own?”

“After my parents died five years ago, I lived with my aunt for a while, but when I started high school, I moved here by myself,” she explained.

“So you’ve been living alone since you started high school,” he said.
“That must be hard.”

“Not really,” she replied, moving the muscles in her face the bare minimum required while staring hard at his face.

We’re just having a conversation, but I feel this weird vibe.

To mask the confusion in his heart, he ruffled his hair in an exaggerated gesture. “Oh. Ha-ha. Ha... Actually, that’s pretty amazing. I’ll probably be living on my own soon enough, but when it’s just me, I’m sure I’ll get lazy with cooking and cleaning and stuff.”

“Not a problem,” she declared.

“Huh?” He turned a curious face toward her.

“I’ll do it.”

“...?!” He froze for an instant. “Um... Does that mean...?”

She got to her feet in a smooth motion without waiting for his reply.

“Um...?” he asked.

“Wait here.” On silent feet, she paced toward the kitchen. She was apparently going to brew tea.

Shido stared absently at her back as she stood in the kitchen and then shook his head with a gasp. “Right, the puppet.” He looked around the room.

Simple furniture in a light, nondescript color. Not only was there nothing particularly feminine, but the place didn’t feel lived-in at all. It was like a showroom.

“...Hmm.” At first glance, he couldn’t spot anything puppetlike. There weren’t a lot of things out on display, but there was lots of storage, so it looked like he was going to have to do some actual digging to find it. Plus, there was the issue of how to distract Origami. He figured the best thing would be to look for the puppet when she was in the bathroom or something. Maybe the opposite would work, too. He could pretend to go to the bathroom.

Origami came back into the room with a tray laden with two teacups and two saucers, sugar and milk. Without a word, she laid them out on the table.

“Enjoy,” she said and sat down next to him again. For some reason, he felt like she was closer than before.

“O-oh, thanks.” The scent of her shampoo tickled his nose, separate from the scent of the incense. He wiped away the beads of perspiration from his forehead before reaching out for a teacup. And then frowned.

“...?!”

The contents of his cup and Origami’s were clearly different. Her tea was a clear and vibrant reddish-brown. His, in contrast, was a dirty liquid so full of sediment, he couldn’t see the bottom of the cup. For a second, he thought it was coffee...but the moment he brought the cup closer to his face to try and understand the true nature of the liquid, his nostrils were assaulted with a violent odor on par with a biological weapon.

“Enh?!” He reeled backward.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wh-what’s wrong...? What on earth *is* this?!”

“Tea. Foreign.”

“Wh-which peculiar country drinks *this...?!*” Scrunching up his face and pinching his nose shut, he peered into the cup once more. The color was such that his animal instincts firmly rejected the idea of ingesting it. *Maybe it's one of those things, like, if you can swallow it, you're a real adult.*

“Oh... Tobiichi? I’m flattered you’d make me something so valuable, but I’m actually not too good with this kind of thing.” He tried to refuse the cup of whatever it was.

Origami pushed the teacup on him.

“Uh... Tobiichi?”

“Enjoy.”

“Wait, it’s not so much ‘enjoy’ here as...”

“Enjoy.”

“Um. So.”

“Enjoy.”

“...Thank you so much.”

He hated himself. Unable to flat-out refuse her, Shido turned toward the cup.

“...” He flinched at the idea of drinking it as is. To make the flavor even

slightly less offensive, he picked up one of the creamers on the table and poured the liquid into his cup.

It did not dissolve. The fat completely separated from the milk and floated up to the surface of the liquid, like an oil spill in the ocean. He felt like he'd actually made the situation worse.

“...Aah, to hell with it!” He lifted the cup and poured the liquid down his throat. “Ohbahoo...?!”

The flavor that violated his brain proved just as intense as the scent. It made him wonder if this was what aqua regia tasted like, although he was sure he'd never taste that poison in his lifetime and have the chance to find out. It wasn't so much bitter or spicy as it was painful.

“W-water...!” he cried, but there was no water nearby.

“...!” In a wild panic, he ripped open the package of snacks he'd brought and stuffed the crushed person-shaped baked good (a Tengu specialty) into his mouth. He tasted a soothingly gentle sweetness and fell backward lifelessly.

“Haah...! Haah...!” he panted and then pressed on his chest. “Uh...?”

For some reason, he felt like his body was weirdly hot or maybe burning. Was his temperature that high today?

“...” Silently, Origami placed a hand on the side of his head as he lay on his back and then straddled him, covering him like she was trying to start a wrestling match.

“...?! T-Tobiichi?!?” he yelped.

“What?” she replied evenly, sounding as though he was the one being weird.

“U-uh, what are you...?”

“Can’t I?”

“N-no...I think,” he managed to say, somehow keeping his head as his brains threatened to boil over. The comfortable weight of her, that lovely scent particular to girls, the soft sensation, the rustling of the maid uniform—all of it mixed together put him in real danger. If he let his guard down even just a little, he was very likely to pounce on top of her himself.

“Oh.” Origami blinked. “Then a condition.”

“Huh...?” he asked.

“In exchange for getting off you, I want you to accept one request from me unconditionally.”

“Wh-what is it...?” He swallowed hard.

She paused in a moment of unusual hesitation and then said in a small voice, “You call Tohka Yatogami ‘Tohka.’”

“Huh...? Ohhh. Y-yeah, I guess I do,” he agreed.

She was right. He’d been the one to give her the name Tohka to start with, so that was only natural. Reine had given her the surname when she forged her documents.



“But you call me Tobiichi.”

“Uh-uh-huh...”

“That’s extremely unfair.” Origami turned her face away.

“Uh...? Oh, um...” He figured out what she was driving at. “So then? You want me to call Tohka ‘Yatogami’? I dunno if I can get used to that.”

“...” Without a word, she pressed her weight against his stomach. It was merely the mass of one girl. No real weight, but that wasn’t the issue. He was certain steam was going to jet out of his ears at any moment.

“S-so then, what do you want me to do...?!?” he cried.

She shifted back to her original position and turned her face away slightly.
“I want you to call me Origami.”

“Uh...mm.”

“Won’t you?” she asked. It was the same inflectionless voice as always, but he felt like there was the slightest note of worry hiding in it.

“Oh. It’s not impossible...I think.”

“Oh.”

“...”

“...”

Silence fell once more.

Even Shido understood what that was about. He cleared his throat.
“Umm... O-Origami.”

“...”

When he spoke her name, she lifted herself from his stomach without a word and stood up. And then, still no sign of expression on her face, she hopped once on the spot.

“Huh...?” Shido sat up, eyes round at the surreal sight.

Origami seemed to pay him no mind as she parted her lips. “Shido.”

“...!” He gasped. Now that he was thinking about it, that might have been the first time she had called him by his first name. He felt like she always referred to him by his full name, Shido Itsuka.

“H-hey,” he replied, a strange feeling in his chest.

She jumped up again. Naturally, not a single muscle in her face moved.

...Could she be...happy?

She lowered her eyes as though soaking up the echoes of his voice for a few seconds before exhaling shortly. “Wait here.” She turned on her heel abruptly.

“H-hey, Tobi—”

“...”

“...Origami. Where are you going?”

“To take a shower.” She glanced at him before walking out of the room.

“Huh...?” Suddenly alone, Shido was stunned for a moment before he finally grasped the situation and let out a sigh. Then he flopped back down onto the floor. “Aah...”

He placed a hand on his chest. His heart was pounding. He couldn’t stay like this forever. After a few seconds, he shot up into a sitting position.

“Right...! This is my chance to look for the puppet!” He’d forgotten in the weird series of shocking experiences since he’d arrived, but that was his ultimate goal. And a completely unanticipated, one-in-a-million chance had fallen into his lap.

“But why’d she suddenly go take a shower?” He shook his head, not completely understanding. Maybe she’d sweated a lot?

Still, she was a little too trusting, wasn’t she? If he had a little more nerve, he could go peep at her. Based on the impression he’d gotten from everything else she’d done, Origami seemed not to care too much about that sort of thing.

“...Well, either way, this works for me.” Shido got to his feet and examined the living room more carefully than before. “Nothing really jumps out at me.”

He went to check the contents of her shelves on stealthy feet. The truth was his search would have been more efficient if he’d knocked everything to the floor like in a robbery or police search, but he couldn’t exactly tear up Origami’s apartment. His final objective was to recover Yoshino’s puppet, but it was also critical that he didn’t draw her attention to this mission if he could.

“Everything is super neat; it makes it hard to look through anything.”

Even the interiors of her storage spaces were perfectly arranged. He was sure she’d notice if he moved anything even the slightest bit. If he focused on that, however, he’d be paralyzed. He forced himself to proceed with the search, setting things back in their places as best as he could.

“Doesn’t look like it’s in the living room. So then...” He turned his eyes toward the kitchen on the other side of the dining table. He figured chances in there were slim, but there was still the nonzero possibility that she was using

the puppet as an oven mitt. He should probably take a quick look at least.

“Let’s see...” He moved into the kitchen and checked the cupboards and below the sink.

“Hmm... What’s this?” He arched an eyebrow at several small empty bottles littered in the garbage can at the far end of the kitchen. “What the...?”

Frowning, he picked them up. RED SNAKE ATTACK, PINOCCHIO: INCREASE YOUR DRIVE, OYSTER GOLD 1000, MACA MAGIC, etc., etc., etc.... A parade of expensive aphrodisiacs, a waste of several thousand yen each. Whatever they were, they were definitely not what a teenage girl should be downing instead of nutritional drinks.

He scratched at his cheek.

Okay, there’s no way anyone would do this, but if you did put them all into a pot and simmer them, I bet that new drink would have a seriously potent flavor. And if you gave it to a guy to drink, it’d make him super driven, his whole body shine golden, and one part of his lower body burn a bright red.

“W-well, it’s not polite to pry into people’s preferences.” Which wasn’t particularly convincing coming from Shido, who was doing the most impolite of things, searching a girl’s home. “So it’s not in the kitchen. Next.”

He returned the empty drink bottles to the garbage and moved forward, turning his eyes to the living room doorway. He was pretty sure there’d been another door in the hallway leading from the front door to the living room. Origami had left for her shower fifteen minutes ago already. He quickened his pace and walked toward the last door.

“...” His feet stopped. Immediately opposite the last door was the door to the changing room and from there, he could hear the sound of the shower. His pulse, which had slowed a bit, sped up once again.

“...Calm down; calm yourself.” He did all the old superstitions that were supposed to relax you and counted prime numbers as he imagined Origami with a potato head.

To be honest, none of this really settled his nerves. For some reason, his brain was ready to rampage like a berserker that day. He honestly wondered why. He was so worked up, it was as if he’d consumed several bottles of expensive aphrodisiacs.

If he stayed where he was, he was likely to commit a very serious

mistake. He put his hand on the knob of the last door in a panic and pushed it open.

“...This is...her bedroom.”

There was a bed and a Western-style wardrobe in the small space.

“...Hmm?” He frowned dubiously and narrowed his eyes. Something was off somehow. The room was so small? No...

“...She sleeps in a huge bed.”

Yes. For some reason, she had a double bed, which made her bedroom look strangely small. Even more curious, the bed was newer than the other furniture. Like brand-new. Like the-plastic-had-only-come-off-that-day new.

“Did she get it recently...? No, but even still...,” he said as he moved to the head of the bed and tilted his head to the side once more.

There were two pillows side by side on top of neat sheets stretched out in perfect hotel style. And on the cover, the words *No problem* were embroidered in a fun font.

“...” Without a word, he turned one pillow over. On the back, it said *As you please*. There was no room for choice.

“...”

He stood silent for what seemed like a long time.

“W-wohkay...” He couldn’t understand even if he wanted to, so he gave up on thinking about it. “Where’s that puppet...?”

He lifted his face and cried out, “Oh!”

On top of a tall dresser on one side of the room, he caught a peek of a familiar silhouette. A rabbit puppet with a silly design. There was no mistake—it was Yoshino’s.

“So you were up there, huh...?” Shido let out a sigh of relief. Now he could help Yoshino.

“...Tch.” When he stepped toward the dresser, he heard a *chak* from outside the bedroom. It wasn’t the sound of a regular door. That was probably the sound of the bathroom door being opened. It seemed that Origami had finished her shower.

“Crap...” He snatched the puppet off the top of the dresser and stuffed it into his pocket before sneaking back to the living room on silent feet. He let out a sigh of relief. He’d made it.

Now all he had to do was get home with the puppet. Why did he have a feeling that was going to be the biggest hurdle yet? He desperately wanted to

believe it was all in his mind.

“Oh. Right,” he muttered to himself. He’d managed to achieve his most important objective in visiting Origami’s house. He had one other personal objective, however.

Ever since she’d invited him inside, Origami had set the pace, so he hadn’t been able to segue into the conversation. He wouldn’t get too many chances like this. He wanted to talk with her for real just once about the Spirits.

As if to interrupt his thoughts, the living room door opened.

He gulped and turned his face that way. “H-hey, Origami. I wanted to ask _____”

However...

“Y—?!” When he saw her, he froze in place.

The Origami that came into the living room was not wearing the earlier maid uniform. Instead, she had nothing but a towel wrapped around her naked body. It clung to her so that the lines of her body were clearly visible, perhaps because of the water left on her from the shower. Her beauty was captivating.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh—?”

She might have been in her own home, but coming out dressed in a towel when you had a guest who was a boy your age was definitely not normal.

“What?” She spoke as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Suddenly, he was unsure about why he was so confused. “...O-ohhh! Did you forget a change of clothes? Ha. Ha-ha-ha... Pretty silly, huh?” He choked out a pained laugh and turned his head in the opposite direction, his neck creaking like a machine that hadn’t been oiled.

“...” She said nothing and silently walked over to him before bending her knees to sit in a position where he could feel not only her breath but even the warmth of her body. And then she pressed herself up against him.

“—?!” His shoulders jolted, and he leaped back to put some distance between them.

“...?” Her head leaned to one side. “What’s wrong?”

“Wh-what’s wrong...?” he repeated.

She inched closer to him.

“O-Origami!” he cried desperately. “Um. I—I wanted to ask you something!”

“What?” She stopped where she was.

“Oh. Uh, right...” He tapped the earpiece to check it. He heard nothing, no sound. The signal was completely cut off. Whatever he said now wouldn’t make it to Kotori and her crew. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth. “Um. Origami, you hate...the Spirits, right?”

“...”

Instantly, he felt her mood change.

She tilted her head, as though questioning why he would bring that up. “Why?” she asked, looking straight into his eyes.

That was only natural. The question was truly out of the blue. If he had been connected to *Fraxinus*, he was sure they would have gotten mad and told him not to spill any secrets or put Origami unnecessarily on guard. But he couldn’t not ask her.

Origami. The girl who’d lost both parents to the Spirits, who now turned her sword on those Spirits.

“Oh, it’s. Um, right. I was just thinking like maybe there are...good Spirits, too.”

“Not possible.” She curtly shot the idea down. “Just by appearing, the Spirits destroy the world. Just by existing there, they kill the world. That’s harm. That’s catastrophe. The enemy of everything that lives.”

“Th—that’s kind of—”

“I refuse to forget”—she cut him off; her expression and her tone hadn’t changed at all, but for some reason, he felt an intimidation that chilled his core—“the Spirit that took my parents from me five years ago.”

“Five years...ago,” he repeated, stunned.

She nodded. “Five years ago, there was a large-scale disaster in the residential district of Nanko in Tengu.”

“Huh...” He frowned. He had lived in that area himself before. He’d moved into the house where he lived now because his old house had burned down in the disaster.

“It’s not public knowledge, but that disaster was the work of a Spirit.”

“Wha—?” His eyes snapped open in surprise.

“A Spirit clad in red flames. It took everything from me. I can never let that go. I will defeat every Spirit. I won’t let them make anyone else live through what I did,” she told him in a voice that was quiet and decisive as she clenched her hands into fists. “And naturally, Tohka Yatogami is no

exception.”

“Huh...” His eyes grew wide at the sudden mention of Tohka.

“She’s not recognized as a Spirit now. But I can’t allow her to exist.”

“...B-but Tohka doesn’t make spacequakes happen now; she doesn’t run wild,” he protested. “So she’s no different from a regular girl, right?”

Origami shook her head without even a hint of hesitation or thought. “It’s true the Spirit signal has disappeared from her, but the cause of that is unknown. It’s only natural to prepare for the worst case.”

“...Th-that’s...,” he stammered. She wasn’t wrong. After all, she didn’t know Tohka’s power had been sealed by his own ability. “But...the spacequakes don’t happen because they want them to, you know? And you’d still—”

“—?” She looked at him curiously. “How would you know that?”

“Oh, it’s...” He’d said too much. He searched for a way out of this and sent his eyes racing around the room.

She continued in a monotone. “This is the perfect opportunity. I also have something I want to ask you.”

“Wh-what...?” he replied.

“April twenty-first. I saw you in the middle of a mission.”

... A chill ran up his spine. That was the day Tohka had appeared silently in this world. The day he had sealed her powers with a kiss.

“Who exactly are you?” she asked, looking at him with quiet eyes.

“Oh. Um, the thing is...” He hemmed and hawed. He couldn’t really say anything about Ratatoskr. “...” He bit his lower lip and tried to calm his breathing. “Tobiichi. You might not believe me, but would you at least listen to me?”

She nodded without the slightest hesitation.

“Mm. So, right. I can’t tell you the details, but...I’ve actually met Spirits a few times and talked with them. Not just Tohka. With Yoshino, too.”

“Yoshino?”

“Ohhh, Hermit,” he clarified.

Origami’s face didn’t so much as twitch, but he felt like she inhaled a little quicker than usual. “Very dangerous. You should stop,” she warned him in her monotone.

Shido shook his head from side to side. “Tobiichi. Have you ever talked with Yoshino, even once? No, I guess not. I mean, you didn’t even know her

name.” He turned his whole body toward her and continued. “Please. Just for a minute—even a second. The next time Yoshino appears, try talking with her. There might be evil Spirits like you say. But Tohka and Yoshino—I don’t know how to put it exactly. They’re great! They’re nice, in a way that most people aren’t even!”

“...” Origami said nothing but simply stared at him, the picture of composure. The look she gave him was strange, quiet, but he oddly didn’t sense any coldness in it.

“...” Aah, right. Shido finally realized why he was talking to her like this. He knew she didn’t have the power to influence AST’s decisions. There was a reason he was deliberately risking leaking information, the reason he *had* to do it. Naturally, the desire to save Yoshino was the biggest factor, but it wasn’t the only one. He felt like he finally understood it in a real way, with his heart.

“Right. I...” He looked at her again. “I...want to do whatever I can to help Yoshino. And I want you to accept Tohka. But I want just as much for you, Tobiichi—I don’t want you to kill such good kids!”

“...” She wordlessly stared at him.

“I mean, you’re amazing! You’re only in high school, but you’re fighting to protect the world. That’s not something just anyone could do. I have serious respect for you.”

He had no right to say that she was wrong. This girl had lost her parents because of Spirits five years earlier, and she had taken up arms to protect people because she didn’t want anyone else to go through the same fate. There was no way he could sully her mission with cheap words.

“Why...? Why does it have to be this way? There are no bad guys here. Tohka, Yoshino, you—you’re all so nice.”

“That’s—,” Origami started and then cleared her throat. “That’s just how it has to be.”

“...” He looked at her with wide eyes.

“Assume what you’re saying is true and Hermit doesn’t want to fight us. But as long as she’s a Spirit, there will always be the danger of the spacequakes. We can’t allow this one girl to put human lives in danger.”

An extremely reasonable assertion. Kotori had said something similar. If anyone was wrong, it was probably Shido.

He slid the hand on his forehead down over his eyes, as if to hide the look

on his face, while he gritted his teeth. His head understood what she was saying. But his heart could not accept it.

“Tell me one last thing,” he said. Origami looked at him with a tilted head. “When you can’t detect Spirit power anymore like with Tohka, you don’t attack that Spirit, right?”

His argument was idealistic, to be sure. It was really over-the-top. But he could still find the hole in this terrible logic.

“...” For a while, she said nothing. “That’s not what I want. Even if the signal’s gone, it’s too dangerous to leave a Spirit be.”

“...That’s—,” he started.

“However,” she continued. “As policy from above, we are forced to accept the Spirits as human when we are unable to confirm a Spirit signal. I can’t attack at my own discretion.”

“M-meaning?”

“I’m expressing assent to that question,” Origami said, still utterly composed.

Shido swallowed hard and clenched his hands. “Thanks. That’s all I need to hear right now.”

“Oh,” she replied briefly. “Was that your objective when you asked to come over today?” Her gaze dropped the tiniest bit, the merest hint. Even though there was no change in her usual monotone, he got the impression that she was unhappy.

“No. That’s not it at all. I came over today to talk with you, Tobiichi...” He definitely couldn’t say anything about the puppet, but he wouldn’t lie, either. Although he had ended up doing the search because his earpiece had died, his original objective had been to chat with Origami so she wouldn’t get suspicious while the cameras looked for the puppet.

The slightly thorny air that had grown up around her evaporated instantly. And she inched closer to him again.

Vwnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnmmmm.

The spacequake alarm rang outside.

“I-is there a spacequake?” he gasped.

“...” Origami was silent for a few seconds before sighing and standing up.

“Origami?” he asked.

“I’m being dispatched. You hurry to a shelter.” She stepped out into the hallway.

He gaped for a minute or two. “...It can’t be Yoshino, can it?” He squeezed the puppet in his pocket, frowning at the alarm echoing in his ears.

Chapter 5

Frozen Field

“...?!”

Yoshino opened her eyes and shivered in confusion. She had been drowsing in a darkness of sorts, but suddenly, the darkness was gone, cold air caressed her cheeks, and before her eyes was a city.

“Uh... Ah...!” She whirled her head around.

She was in the middle of some unknown town. The area around her was devastated, like the aftermath of an explosion. From the sky poured cold rain. She'd experienced this world and these sensations so many times, she was almost sick of it. If there was a difference this time, it was that her peerless friend was not sitting on her left hand.

“...!” She heard a familiar sound from the sky and gasped. She jerked her head up and found several people clad in mechanical armor floating there, just as she'd expected.

“Target confirmed. All personnel, commence attack.”

“Roger!”

Bullets flew from the humans' hands and feet straight at Yoshino.

“...!!” She kicked at the ground and twirled up into the sky, carving out a complicated trajectory through the air to evade the humans' attack.

“We're not letting her get away!”

“Understood!”

Voices rang out behind her, and she was showered with even more bullets.

Each of them was a special blow with lethal power. A manifestation of

their malice and murderous intent that could have killed her a hundred times over and then some if she hadn't been wearing her Astral Dress.

“...! ...!”

In a state of confusion, Yoshino flew up into the sky, crying out silently. Her heart was pounding. Her stomach hurt. Her head was spinning.

She couldn't accept the fact that someone would turn this nastiness, this homicidal wish on her. It was different from the other times. Usually, Yoshinon was on her left hand. And Yoshinon was very strong. Yoshinon didn't think anything of an attack like this. Which meant Yoshino could also be okay with it. She could make sure she didn't hurt anyone.

But now...

“Eek...!” She felt an intense impact on her back and plummeted to the earth with a small cry. The attack wasn't forceful enough to pierce her Astral Dress, but it was powerful enough to slam her and her protective garb into the ground.

Terror flooded her heart. Her teeth chattered. Her feet trembled. Her vision shook. Her head was so jumbled, she was powerless in the face of all of this.

“Unh, ah, ah...”

The rain came down heavier.

“Good. We go all at once now!” the leader-looking woman shouted, and the humans turned their sinister weapons on Yoshino.

She felt their desire to kill her, even more determination and violence than before.

Yoshino threw her right hand up into the air.

“...Zadkiel...!!” She brought her hand down as she cried the name of the catastrophic Angel.

“Did we get her?!” Ryouko's voice over the comm sounded a little excited.

Origami let out a shallow breath as she stared down at the smoking earth, her guard still up.

“...”

It had been approximately thirty minutes since the alarm rang and the people had finished evacuating. After confirming that Hermit had indeed

appeared, Origami and her team immediately set out on an annihilation mission.

The nine AST members on the spot were clad in Outrange equipment. They were soldiers of destruction, heaped with every possible anti-Spirit firepower, centered on the wiring suits that covered their bodies and the standard thruster units. Normally, this would all have been so heavy that they wouldn't have been able to move, but the Realizer compensated for this weight with the absolute field and gravitational mitigation of the Territory. Every one of these soldiers was assessing the situation, arms still turned on where Hermit was last sighted.

“Wha—?” a baffled voice came over the comm.

The smoke coiling up from where Hermit had fallen disappeared, revealing a ponderous puppet that hadn't been there a few seconds ago. Hermit's small body was plastered to its back.

“That's...,” Ryouko said.

Origami had seen this puppet before. It was the weapon Hermit manifested last time, an Angel.

The Angel leaned forward and planted both front feet on the ground. White smoke jetted from its four limbs, stomach, and mouth, accompanied by a low rumble. The puppet turned its head to the sky.

“Grrrrazzzzzzzzzz...”

It let out a strange howl, like a buzzing in the ears. And then the ground around the puppet cracked as a whiteness radiated outward from it.

“Wh-what is that?!” came the uneasy voice of a team member.

Hermit's puppet paid them no attention, merely unleashing its disturbing howl and radiating its chill air, while the ground grew whiter and whiter.



“...” Origami looked around.

The same thing was happening in every part of the town, as far as her eyes could see.

The pools of water created by the sudden downpour were swelling up, taking a sharp form, turning into countless thorns and freezing in an instant. A frost descended and crawled along the roads, around the buildings. It was like the entire town had been shoved into a freezer.

In the blink of an eye, Origami's world was covered in ice. To make things worse, more water was pouring down from the skies at that very second. When the countless drops of water touched the ice covering the ground, they instantly froze in place. A castle of ice, endlessly invaded and added to, burying the city of Tengu.

“All personnel! Stand your ground! Fire!” Ryouko commanded, and Origami gave an order in her mind.

The firearms equipped all over her body moved. The rest of the AST were similarly strafing Hermit with as many bullets as they could fire.

“...” Origami stopped breathing for a moment.

The projectiles froze long before they reached her and plummeted to the ground without even exploding.

She immediately gave a new mental order, launching a simple analysis. In her field of view, a faint but terrifying broad Spirit signal appeared.

“Wh-what is this?”

“Probably the rain,” Origami replied to her comrade's bewildered question.

“Th-the rain?”

“Yes. The rain is imbued with Spirit power, albeit a minute amount.”

The instant their bullets touched the downpour that completely obscured her field of view, they were coated in ice so that even their momentum was frozen, and they fell out of the sky. The rain and cold air were imbued with Spirit power. This curtain of water was a powerful defensive wall to protect the expanding ice castle and the master sitting inside of it.

“...!” She jerked back in alarm when she saw Hermit, glued to the back of the massive puppet, begin to move.

“*Grrrrazzzzzzz.*” Growling even louder now, like a machine in motion, the puppet reeled backward.

It wasn't spewing out the cold air, Origami realized. It was more like it

was taking a breath, like it was inhaling deeply.

“...! *All personnel, fall back!*” Ryouko shouted in her ear.

She gave a mental order to her thruster unit and left the area of the sky where she’d been floating with her team members.

The puppet had no sooner brought its head back down than it was emitting something like a beam of blue light from its mouth, together with a painful, earsplitting squeal.

“*Whoa?!*”

“*Hngh!?*”

She heard the pained cries of her team members through her comm. Apparently, two of them hadn’t gotten away fast enough. She twisted around in the air and glanced down.

“ ”

Two balls of ice about three meters across rolled over the frozen landscape. There was no mistake. Those were the owners of the voices crying out over the comm.

“...*Frozen with their Territory? This can't be real...!*”

“...”

As she listened to her team members, Origami kept her guard up and her eyes on Hermit.

As if sensing the chaos among the AST, Hermit started to move again. The puppet turned its back to Origami and her team and began to crawl on all fours, fleeing at tremendous speed, almost sliding across the frozen earth.

“*Ngh! After her!*”

“*Roger that!*”

Origami and her comrades gave the order to fire their thruster units.



“...?!” Jerked out of sleep in her room on the second floor of the Itsuka house, Tohka lifted her face with a gasp at the sudden roar of an explosion.

“Wh-what was that?!” She sat up and opened the window with a clatter. And then shivered on reflex.

She wasn’t shivering because she was suddenly overcome with terror. The air blowing in was unexpectedly frigid. The temperature had dropped to an

abnormal low. Tohka frowned suspiciously and looked around.

“Wh-what...?”

Rain poured down as far as she could see, and the droplets that touched the ground froze in an instant.

“What on earth is happening?” she asked herself and then suddenly remembered she’d heard some kind of a *vwnnnn* sound while she was napping. She’d thought it was just a dream, but...

“Was it...that alarm thing?! So then, this is...a spacequake?”

It was very different from that explosion that Tama had told her about, but she could tell just by looking that this was not normal. She had to hurry and evacuate to that shelter thing.

She was about to do exactly that when something weird shot past her window at incredible speed.

“...?!”

A puppet with a short and stout form, maybe three meters tall. And on its back, a girl wearing a green coat.

“That’s... I know her.”

Yes. It was the girl Shido had been seeing.

“...”

Tohka felt her heart pound. She had no reason to think so, but she was suddenly certain that Shido was with that girl. She bit her lip and leaped outside.



“Wha...? What the...?” Leaving the condo with the puppet, Shido opened his eyes wide at the scene that spread out before him.

The familiar cityscape had turned silver. And not from snow piling up on the ground. The city had turned to ice.

“*You didn’t hear the alarm? It’s Yoshino.*” His earpiece, which had been silent, crackled to life with Kotori’s voice. “*Anyway, what were you doing before the Spirit appeared? You took your time getting out here.*”

“Oh. I got stuck in some birdlime in the entryway,” he told her.

His foot had been caught in a trap when he was leaving Origami’s apartment, delaying his exit to the outside. It was a strange trap. It had indeed

taken him a while to extricate himself, but it hadn't been anywhere near impossible to escape from. If he had to say, the trap wasn't there so much to catch intruders from outside as it was to briefly stop someone trying to flee from inside.

"...No, no, no, no." This was not the time to be wondering about such things. He shook his head and got his thoughts back on track. "Is...Yoshino doing this?"

"Yes," Kotori replied. "*We don't have the luxury of time here. She's pulling in rainwater from the drains and freezing it. If this keeps up, it could have a serious impact on the city's foundations and underground shelters.*" She sighed. "*The only ones who can stop Yoshino are you and that puppet. You mind going?*"

"Of course I'll go. I can't just walk away from Yoshino or the town."

"...*Shin, can I add one more thing?*" He heard a sleepy voice. Reine. "*I checked into a bunch of things, and it looks like your concerns were not necessarily misplaced.*"

Concerns. That must have been referring to the thing Shido was talking about when Yoshino came to the house the other day. Now that he was thinking about it, Kotori *had* said something about having Reine look into it.

"...*We don't have a lot of time, so I'll be brief. Yoshino—*" Reine gave him a quick overview of the situation.

"..."

Listening to her, he felt like his heart was being squeezed by an invisible hand. But weirdly, he wasn't the least bit surprised. He only felt a sense of acceptance that this would be how it was with Yoshino. He was more convinced than ever that he really did have to save her.

Turning his eyes out toward the town once more, he took a deep breath. He patted his chest above his fiercely pounding heart and prepared himself mentally for the mission ahead.

"Okay," Kotori said. "*Turn right and go straight until you hit the main road. Judging from the speed at which Yoshino's advancing, she'll arrive there in about five minutes. You should be able to get there before she does.*"

"Roger!" He started to move faster.

"Go get that affection meter up and give her a smackeroo."

"...Unh." He flinched at hearing the plan out loud.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

“Oh, uh,” Shido said, color rising in his cheeks. “It’s nothing, but... Um.”

“*What, now you’re getting all bashful?*” Kotori sighed in exasperation. “*It’s not like it’s your first time or anything.*”

“Th-that’s true, but...” He remembered the moment in the department store, and his face grew even redder. “Uh, that was basically an accident, but if I go in for the kiss now, it’s almost criminal, y’know?”

“*Ohhh. Huh. So you like little girls, Shido?*”

“...N-no!”

“*Ugh. What’s that reaction? Did I hit the bull’s-eye? So the sweet spot’s middle schoolers? Eek, scary. I better watch out,*” Kotori teased.

“Ew, there’s no way.” He scratched his cheek. They might not have been related by blood, but he’d grown up with Kotori. She was his little sister. He was definitely not into her.

“...”

There was an uncomfortable silence in his earpiece.

“Kotori?” he asked.

“*Shut up. Just go already!*” she shouted, a little on edge, unusual for her high-handed commander mode.

“Wh-what’s that about...?” Something didn’t quite click for him, but he started running in the cold rain nevertheless.

He somehow managed to maintain his speed without letting the icy surface sweep his feet out from under him and came out onto the deserted main street.

“*She’s coming.*”

Even without Kotori telling him, he could see a stocky silhouette in the distance.

A smooth, inorganic form. Long ears like a rabbit’s on the head. There was no mistake. That was the Angel that Yoshino manifested, Zadkiel.

“Yoshinoooooooooooooo!” Shido cried out loud enough to almost rip his vocal cords apart.

“...!” Yoshino twitched in response, clinging to the back of the puppet charging toward him. She had apparently noticed him.

Zadkiel moved like it was gliding across the frozen road and stopped in front of him. And then the stocky puppet bent over, and Yoshino raised a face stained with tears.

“H-hey, Yoshino.” He waved casually. “It’s been a while.”

“...Shido...!” She pushed herself up and bobbed her head up and down as she pulled her arms out of the holes in Zadkiel’s back. Something like a ring glittered on each of her fingers, with thin threads stretching out from them and disappearing inside the puppet. Maybe she moved Zadkiel like a marionette.

“Yoshino, I have something I wanted to give you.”

“...?” She brushed away her tears with a sleeve and looked at him quizzically.

“This.” He reached into his pocket for the hand puppet.

“*Shido!*” Kotori shouted as a beam of light flew toward Yoshino from behind him.

It grazed her shoulder and cheek before flying off to the rear.

“Wha—?” he gasped and looked over his shoulder. “O-Origami...?!”

His classmate was floating there, enveloped in bombastic equipment and holding a massive weapon. And she wasn’t alone. At some point, all the AST wizards had gathered around Shido and Yoshino.

“*Boy! You’re in danger. Move away from the girl,*” instructed a woman, who sounded like the captain, in a businesslike manner. Her voice was distorted as though passing through a machine.

“Unh... Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah...!” came a cry next to him.

“...” He looked at Yoshino. She was staring at the AST and shaking all over. He frowned and swallowed hard.

“Ah! Aaah, aaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaah!” Yoshino put her arms back into Zadkiel. And then she slid backward, a wave of bitingly cold air washing over the area.

“Y-Yoshino...! Wait!” Shido pleaded.

But Yoshino could no longer hear him over the rumbling of Zadkiel inhaling.

“Th-that’s—!” Racing down the frozen street, Tohka shivered in fear at the sight ahead of her.

On the open road, she could make out Shido, the blue-haired girl she’d seen the other day, and the AST. And the girl was retreating on top of the puppet, making it lean back like it was sucking in the surrounding air.

“—” Tohka felt a pit of ice in the bottom of her stomach. For some reason, she understood—on a level that could only be described as instinct or intuition—that this was very bad. The air was somehow vibrating in a way that was very similar to the shuddering that happened when Tohka was about to launch a blow with the full force of Sandalphon.

“...! Shido!” she shouted, knowing only too well that there was no point in it. She immediately plunged a heel into the ground and shouted the name of her most powerful sword and throne, of the miracle made manifest.

“Sandalphon...!”

But nothing happened.

She screwed her face up. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t anticipated this. Kotori and the others had more or less explained to her what kind of being she was and how they wanted her to be now. During that process, she’d also been told that her powers had been sealed.

Of course, it would have been a lie to say that this hadn’t made her anxious in the beginning. After all, the power she’d had up until that moment was gone overnight. She’d come to understand that this was necessary for her to live with Shido as a human being. And to be honest, she couldn’t believe how great her life was now.

She still couldn’t stand Origami, and it wasn’t as though she completely trusted Kotori and Reine. But spending her days with Shido filled her with a brightness she’d never felt before.

However...

“Sandalphon. Sandalphon! Sandalphon...!”

In order to save him, she had to once again access the power she wasn’t supposed to need now. She plunged her heel into the ground again and again. But no matter how many times she tried to summon it, Sandalphon did not appear.

“Hngh. Please... Come to me, Sandalphon!”

Gritting her teeth, furrowing her brow, on the verge of tears, she continued to kick at the ground.

“...Ngh!”

In her mind, the sight of Shido felled by that assassin’s bullet sprang back to vivid life. His side completely gouged out. Him falling helplessly to the ground. Her unable to do anything at all. She definitely didn’t want to go through anything like that ever again.

The girl brought Zadkiel's head back down.

“...”

Spiraling out of control, Tohka's mental state became unstable. Psychological stress that threatened to render her unconscious stormed through her head.

“Hngh. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Zadkiel spewed that compressed cold air from its mouth...

“Wh-whoa...?!” Shido fell down on his backside, pushed back by the incredible pressure radiating from Zadkiel.

The AST members deployed in the area launched repeated attacks on the Angel as it started to suck in air, but they were all repelled by the rain.

And then Yoshino released a torrent of cold air from the puppet.

“Wh—?” He didn't know exactly what the attack was, but he was pretty sure whatever it was, it was powerful enough to instantly end his life. And there was no way he was going to be able to dodge it, not now.

“Shido—,” he heard Origami say, but it was too late.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

After being frozen in place for a few seconds, he frowned as he opened his eyes. And gaped.

“Th—that's—”

A massive throne had risen up in front of him and protected him from Yoshino's blow.

“S-Sandalphon?”

Yes. That magnificent, metallic throne. Steel armrests, seatback with the hilt of a sword peeking out. This was none other than the Spirit Tohka's peerless weapon Sandalphon.

“Wh-why is this—?”

“Simple.” Kotori's voice echoed in his ear.

“Kotori? What's going on? Wasn't Tohka's power sealed?”

I told you. If Tohka's mental state becomes unstable, there's the possibility of the sealed power flowing back from you to her. She's far from full power, but I never imagined she'd be able to materialize her Angel.” She paused meaningfully. “...She sure loves you, huh, Shido?”

“Huh...? S-so why’s Tohka’s...?” While he gaped in astonishment, things were moving around him.

He wasn’t the only one surprised by the appearance of the throne. Yoshino’s eyes were wide as she momentarily stared at the unfathomable mystery before quickly fleeing on Zadkiel’s back.

The AST fired their thrusters and went after her.

Origami glanced at the throne in front of Shido before shrugging slightly and going after Yoshino with the rest of her team.

“...”

He stared dumbfounded for a moment before gasping out loud. “Right! I have to go after Yoshino, too.”

“Shido!”

He heard a cry from behind. The adorable tone, the unique intonation. And above all else, the throne in front of him. He didn’t need to ask who it was.

“Tohka... Huh?” But when he looked back, his eyebrows jumped up at an unfamiliar sight of her.

She was wearing her usual Raizen High School uniform, but beautiful films of light shimmered on her chest and skirt and other key points on her body.

“Tohka, what’s that...?” he asked, looking over her amended uniform.

“Mm?” She blinked a few times and then dropped her gaze to her own body. “Oh?! What’s this?! My Astral Dress?!?” She apparently hadn’t noticed her new look until he pointed it out to her.

She patted at the films of light and then lifted her face with a gasp and turned her eyes back to him. “Are you okay, Shido? You’re not hurt?”

“N-no, I’m okay. Thanks to you,” he replied, looking up at the throne towering before him.

She looked away awkwardly before continuing, her voice slightly trembling. “Um. Okay, I-I’m sorry...for stuff.”

“Huh...?” He stared at her with blank eyes.

“I mean!” she groaned. “I got all annoyed at something I don’t really understand... I didn’t even say thank you... I got in your way. I’ve wanted to apologize this whole time...”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m the one who should be apologizing...”

They needed to have an actual conversation, but there was no time for that

now. He swallowed hard.

The Spirit Tohka's Angel, Sandalphon. And her Astral Dress. Though it might not have manifested completely, the fact remained that this was still an ability that went beyond any human understanding. Tohka has the Spirit power to resist the AST's CR unit and Yoshino's Zadkiel.

Shido let his thoughts race for a few seconds before turning back to the semi-Spirit. "Tohka, I need a favor."

"Mm...? What's going on?" Her head tilted to one side.

He dropped to his knees without hesitating and bowed his head deeply.

"Sh-Shido?"

"Please. Lend me your power. I know it's unreasonable of me to ask this of you. But I have to save her... I have to save Yoshino!"

"..." After a brief silence, Tohka spoke in a small voice. "Is Yoshino... that girl?"

"Yeah."

"..." She gasped and then continued, sounding sad somehow. "...Is that it? So you do care about that girl. More than me."

"...Who told you that?!" Shido lifted his head and looked at her.

"Huh...?"

"That's not true at all," he told her. "That's not what's going on here."

"*Shido. Danger. Giving Tohka unnecessary info—*" Kotori started to say something, but he ignored her and kept speaking.

"She's...like you, Tohka."

"Like me?"

"Yeah. Yoshino is like you, a Spirit."

"...Really?!" Tohka furrowed her brow.

"That's not all," he continued. "Just like you, she's got this power she can't do anything about, and she's been suffering all this time!"

"..."

"I made a promise to her. I said I'd be her hero. I said I'd save her. But I won't even be able to catch up with her by myself!" He bowed his head deeply once more. "Please, Tohka. Lend me your power!"

"..." Silence descended on them. But it didn't last long.

"*Fwoo. Haah.*" He heard a deep breath, followed by a brief almost-laugh. "...Ha-ha."

When he raised his face, he saw that Tohka was pressing a hand to her

forehead. And then she spoke very quietly. "...Aah, is that it? So that's what's been going on. How could I have forgotten that it was a boy like this who saved me?"

"Tohka?" He couldn't hear what she was saying over the pouring rain.

She ignored his questioning tone. "I just have to go after that girl then?" Now her voice was louder, clear to him, almost drowning out the rain.

"Tohka...!"

"Don't say anything more. No time," she said, taking a few steps toward Sandalphon. And then she kicked it. The massive throne toppled over forward and changed shape ever so slightly.

"Th-this—"

"Get on. You're in a hurry, aren't you?" Tohka jumped onto the back of the sideways throne.

"R-right..." Baffled, he climbed up onto the sideways Sandalphon. No longer a throne, it looked more like an ill-formed boat or surfboard now.

"Hang on," she warned, and then they began to slide along the frozen ground at an unbelievable speed.

He was pushed back by the wind and pulled down by an intense gravity. He grabbed on to whatever handhold he could find on the seatback.

Tohka didn't hang on to anything. She simply stood casually on Sandalphon's back like she was connected to it through powerful magnets in the soles of her feet or something.

"If I go any slower, I'll lose sight of her! So we gotta do this!"

"Y-yeah...!" he barely managed to say over the intense wind.

"*Honestly.*" He heard an exasperated voice in the earpiece in his right ear. Kotori. "*It's great that Tohka agreed and all, but that was rash, Shido.*"

"Lecture me later...!" he said. "Just help me now, Kotori!"

"*Of course.*" She sighed. "*It's our mission to rescue Spirits. We'll do whatever we can.*"

"I owe you one...!"

Sandalphon continued to accelerate and shoot forward over the ice, but Shido somehow managed to pull himself to his feet and stand up with some help from Tohka.



“Squad B! Go! Surround Hermit!”

“Roger!”

Origami heard the voices of Ryouko and the members of her team responding over the comm.

Together with two other AST members, she changed direction slightly and broke free from the main group chasing Hermit. Their destination was the intersection approximately one kilometer ahead.

Her Territory neutralized the wind pressure that was so strong, it would have prevented her from keeping her eyes open, along with the gravity that would have caused her to lose consciousness.

“...”

When she arrived at their destination, she put on the brakes, which felt like striking her foot down in the sky, and reversed direction. She could already see Hermit and the puppet coming this way.

Once the three members of Squad B had sighted their target, they deployed to the sides, gave commands in their heads, and launched the two anchor units equipped on the sides of their thrusters toward the ground. Threads of light stretched out from the six anchors, weaving through one another to form a massive net.

“Laser web deployment complete,” Origami said. “Connection with beta and gamma confirmed.”

“Good! We’ll herd her in!” Ryouko came through over the comm.

“...?!” Hermit popped her head up. It seemed that she had finally realized this was an ambush. But it was too late.

Ahead, a lattice of magical light stretched out on both sides. Behind, the pursuit of Ryouko and the rest of Squad A. And Origami and Squad B floated above with their deployed laser web.

“Ah. Ah, ah, aah...!” Hermit opened her eyes wide and cried out in despair, clinging to the puppet’s back.

The AST, however, had no sympathy or mercy for Spirits.

“All personnel! Attack!”

The team pulled out their No Pain blades—sight-equipped, high-output laser weapons for close-range fighting—and charged Hermit.

However...

“Unh...Ah. Ah. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Hermit screamed, and an incredible wind whirled up around her. The falling rain froze like hail and

formed a vortex that covered the Spirit to create a dome, where a snowstorm raged on the outside.

“—Tch.” Regardless, Origami brought No Pain down on the ice storm barrier protecting Hermit.

She quickly noticed something strange. No Pain—and the Territory stretched out around Origami—began to freeze with a crackling sound at the point of contact with the dome.

She immediately extinguished the blade and temporarily released her Territory.

“...Ngh!” The equipment attached to her body instantly regained its weight, and the distant view she’d seen so clearly grew hazy. Not to mention the biting chill that blanketed the town and the icy rain pouring down from above touched her now for the first time. It was as though she’d teleported from a greenhouse to a snowy mountain in the time it took to blink. Her heart leaped up as if stunned, and she struggled to breathe.

“Basic Realizer, restart,” she somehow managed to say, fighting an exhaustion that threatened to render her unconscious.

An invisible barrier popped up around her once more, and she began to float gently. She fired her thrusters and narrowly escaped Hermit’s barrier.

“*Hngh! Is everyone okay?!*” Ryouko shouted. She’d likely escaped the barrier in the same way as Origami.

But there were only five voices including Origami’s in response. It seemed that the other two had been frozen with their Territories.

“...” She turned her eyes toward the snowstorm dome on the frozen road.

Hyoooooo. Swirling with a frigid whistle, the half sphere was about twenty meters across—a fortress of cold ice bullets imbued with Spirit power raging.

From the moment it froze the Territories and laser blades—neither of which had material form to begin with—it was clear that this was no ordinary snowstorm.

“Ah. What a hassle. What’re we supposed to do about this?”

“There is a way,” Origami replied and sent the barrier data she’d scanned earlier to her teammates.

“This is...”

“Yes. The Spirit power value of the barrier was not significant. The field was reacting to the magic output by our Realizers and temporarily increasing

defenses locally.”

“In which case...it can’t freeze us if our Territories are released?”

“Most likely,” she agreed.

Ryouko groaned in frustration. “That’s just too impractical. Sure, we’ll escape being frozen, but that barrier’s made of chunks of ice. They’re like bullets at that velocity. Our wiring suits are more or less bulletproof, but I can’t imagine they’d keep us safe until we made it inside.”

“So then how about an attack with a gun not imbued with magic?” another team member suggested.

“...That’d be tough, too. Even assuming the bullets did get through the barrier, the Spirit’s got her Astral Dress. A physical attack can’t so much as scratch the Spirit if it’s not cloaked in magic.”

Ryouko was exactly right. A Spirit’s Astral Dress could only be shattered with the magic output by the Realizer. But the snowstorm barrier cloaking the area reacted to that very magic. It was a double wall with different characteristics. This was indeed a hassle.

But Origami fired her thruster and flew up into the air.

“Origami?”

“We can just do this,” she muttered as she lowered her eyes, regulated her breathing, and increased her focus. Then she expanded her Territory from a radius of three meters around her to nearly ten meters all at once.

The more the Territory was expanded, the lower its density became and the more its attribute values dropped. With her Territory now deployed to ten meters, it probably wouldn’t have been able to stop an attack from the Spirit, but that was fine for the moment.

She approached a mixed-use building nearby.

“—!”

Krr, krr, krr, krr, krr!

The tip of the building entered her enlarged Territory, twisted off, and floated in the air. The concrete exterior wall peeled away, the insulation was torn to pieces, and the steel bars of the foundation were forcibly twisted off with an earsplitting squeal. Computers and papers, likely from an office inside of the building, spilled out of her Territory and tumbled downward.

It was quite heavy. The load on her brain was intense, and she was attacked by a ferocious headache.

“O-Origami...?! What are you doing?!”

Ignoring this, she held the tip of the building up and flew to a point directly above Hermit's barrier. And then she let out a small breath. "We crush it with physical objects. This should force a momentary release of the barrier. Be ready for your chance."

"...*Honestly. Reckless as always!*" Ryouko said with a sigh before giving the order. "*You hear that, gang?! It's a bit brute force, but it doesn't look like there's any other way. Stand by as close as possible to the barrier with output on maximum! All personnel attack when the barrier drops!*"

"Roger!" The other AST wizards readied their equipment and set their Realizers in motion.

Origami quieted her breathing and brought down the hand holding the building aloft. The incredible weight of the lump of steel and concrete plummeted toward the snowstorm dome.

Her eyebrow arched almost imperceptibly.

A beam of light caught the tip of the building she'd just dropped, and the enormous chunk of concrete was split clean in two.

"..."

That wasn't all. By the time it reached the ground, it had turned into mere scraps and fragments. Hermit's barrier remained intact.

"That was...", she started, and an earsplitting alarm beeped in her ear.

"*Origami! Th-the Spirit signal has increased! This signal—*"

Before Ryouko was even done speaking, Origami was shrinking her expanded Territory down even smaller than normal, to a diameter of two meters. The larger pieces of equipment now accidentally peeked out of her Territory and were forced to obey the laws of gravity once more. They slammed into the ground.

Instantly, hair the color of night danced before Origami's eyes.

"...!"

She felt an enormous load on her Territory, even though its defensive powers were greater now at the smaller size. She didn't need to guess at the cause of this new burden: the sword the girl before her had swung.

"Hmph. So you guarded?"

"...Tohka... Yatogami." Origami groaned the girl's name and pulled her laser blade No Pain off her hip to launch a slicing attack at Tohka, who was clad in scattered pieces of Astral Dress.

"Hup!" Tohka dodged this flash and planted her feet on the fence of a

nearby rooftop.

“Why are *you* here?” she demanded, while keeping her blade of light carefully turned on the Spirit.

“Hmph.” Tohka smiled boldly as she pushed back bangs wet from the rain. “Sorry, but I won’t let you get in Shido’s way.”

“...” Wondering why he was suddenly brought up, Origami readjusted her grip on No Pain.

“*Ngh! Why is Princess here?*” Ryouko cried with annoyance. “*Did she come to help Hermit?*”

Yes. A triple-A rank Spirit—otherwise known as Princess.

Normally, no Spirit signal could be detected from the girl in front of her, but it was there now, however weak.



“Ngh! Deal with Hermit later. All personnel, change target to Princess!”

Ryouko shouted.

A reasonable decision.

This was indeed their chance to hit Hermit, but they'd get nowhere if Princess attacked while they had their hands busy with her. The barrier was definitely annoying, but Hermit wouldn't go on the offensive as long as they kept a certain distance, so it was only natural to save her for later.

For some reason, however, Origami felt like Tohka nodded slightly when she saw Ryouko and the others float up and head in her direction. Almost as though things were going exactly as she'd expected.

She had no time to ponder this. Tohka launched herself off the fence, brandished her sword, and came at Origami once again.

“Hngh.” Origami readjusted her grip on her blade of light and soared through the sky to counterattack.



To go back three minutes in time.

“Shido! What is *that*?!?” Tohka cried.

He jerked his head up from his precarious position atop Sandalphon (with Tohka's support) as the throne slid along the frozen road at top speed.

“Wha...?!” he gasped.

It was a bizarre sight. A snowstorm swirled above the ground to create a neat half sphere, and AST wizards were ostentatiously readying their weapons on all sides of it.

“What the hell is that...?!” he cried.

“...It's a barrier Yoshino built. Hmm, nice work, too.” Reine neatly explained the results of analyzing the chilly dome. It was a fortress of ice that would automatically fire back in response to attacks from the AST with their CR units.

Shido digested this information and explained it to Tohka, who put a thoughtful hand to her chin and groaned.

“This is a problem.” Now he heard Kotori's voice in his right ear. *“No one can get near Yoshino like this.”*

She would normally have been right about that.

Shido swallowed hard. “No.”

There was still something bothering him.

“We won’t know unless we try...but that might not necessarily be the case.”

“What?”

And the scene ahead changed.

Origami floated up into the sky, ripped off the top of a nearby building, and carried it over to Yoshino’s barrier.

“Wh—?”

“*Tch! So she’s going to try and break up the barrier with that?*” Kotori cried venomously. “*That’s some really off-the-cuff stuff there.*”

“Wh-what should we—?” he stammered.

“Mm,” she said from his side. “Shido, you got an idea about what to do with Yoshino or whatever her name is, right?”

“Uh, it’s... I don’t know if it’s poss—,” he started and then gritted his teeth. “No, I do. I *will* do something.”

“Yeah?” Tohka said, and the corners of her mouth slid up.

“Tohka...?”

“Then I’ll leave her to you. I’ll take care of that AST or whatever. I will not let them get in your way.” She ran to the front of Sandalphon to grab the hilt peeking out of the chair back and yanked it free with a flourish. And then she kicked at the chair back and flew off into the sky, toward Origami and the building.

“Wh—? That girl...!” He opened his eyes wide, stunned, as he crouched down on the speeding Angel.

He clenched his jaw and turned his eyes forward. Now was not the time for him to be shouting that it was dangerous or that she was reckless.

Tohka the Spirit. The girl who had finally pulled free of the cycle of fighting. To save Yoshino—and probably to support Shido—she was leaping into battle once more. All he could do now was repay her for that!

He stayed low, crouched down on Sandalphon, and charged toward Yoshino’s barrier. Along the way, he asked his commander/sister a question as a final confirmation. “Kotori. I want to check on one thing.”

“What?”

“There’s just so much going on, I forgot to ask about one thing. That day I sealed Tohka’s power...I was *shot by Origami*, right?”

If his memory was accurate, Origami had mistakenly fired on him that day. And he had suffered a wound that a normal person could not have survived.

After a moment of silence, Kotori replied, “*Yes. That’s a fact.*”

“What exactly...was that? Is it another one of my mysterious powers?”

“...*You’re half-right.*”

“Meaning?” he asked.

Kotori groaned, slightly troubled, before continuing. “*It’s related to your powers. When your body takes lethal damage, flames consume you and you regenerate. A hack of a skill on par with undead monsters. But this one didn’t just come from nowhere.*”

His eyes grew wide. But he was out of time.

“I’ll refrain from asking you to tell me its origin story. But tell me one more thing. I can recover even if I’m mortally wounded. There’s no mistake there, right?”

“*Yes, that’s affirmative,*” Kotori said.

He let out a sigh. “That’s a relief. If that had been all in my mind, I’d be about to actually die.”

“...*Shido! Don’t tell me you’re—*,” Kotori started to say, as the building in the sky above was diced by Tohka, becoming chunks of concrete that slammed to the ground around him.

The AST members in the area quickly shifted their target to Tohka and floated up into the air.

As if to take their place, Sandalphon and Shido arrived at Yoshino’s barrier. Or rather, with their momentum, they crashed into it.

“Eek...?!” He started to shake all over. He couldn’t sit there in shock forever. The part of Sandalphon that was touching the barrier was squealing as it froze over. The barrier was no doubt reacting to Sandalphon’s Spirit power.

“Crap...!” He hurriedly jumped down from the throne-surfboard and stood in front of the dome-shaped snowstorm—the barrier of the raging ice pellets. The force was a magnitude greater now that he was standing in front of it.

“So Yoshino’s inside,” he muttered before pulling the puppet out of his pocket and moving it inside his jacket. He hunched over as if to shield it with his body, and then he put one foot forward.

“Shido, wait. What are you planning to do?”

He didn't stop moving.

“You're going into the barrier? Counting on your ability to recover? It's reckless. You have to stop.” Kotori very much did not sound like she was in commander mode.

“Hey, whoa.” He grinned wryly. “I heard you weren't upset at all when I got shot.”

“The situation was different. The barrier is over five meters out. Five meters, okay? You'll be advancing while being pelted with a barrage of bullets? And if any Spirit power is detected in that range, you'll be frozen solid like Tohka's Sandalphon.”

Kotori kept going.

“Do you understand what I'm telling you? I'm saying that while you're in the barrier wall, your wounds won't heal. This is totally different from taking a single bullet from a gun. If you lose power halfway in, you'll die!”

“...Spirit power. Is my ability to regenerate Spirit power?”

“...”

He heard Kotori gulp, but he didn't stop pushing forward. This might indeed have been a stupid move. But he couldn't quit. After all, he had made a promise. To save Yoshino. To be Yoshino's hero.

He took a deep breath and stepped into the barrier.

“Shido! Shido! Stop right now!” Kotori shouted, more desperate than he'd ever heard her before. *“Stop...! Big Br—”*

All he heard was the gusting snowstorm.



“Unh...! Waah...!” Inside the barrier, Yoshino was crouched down on Zadkiel's back, crying by herself.

The space was so quiet, it was hard to believe it was surrounded by storming ice pellets. There was no sound except for the strange echoes of her sobs.

She was so scared that she couldn't go outside. But in here, she was very lonely.

“Yo-shi-non...!” she squeaked out in a tear-soaked voice. She knew she

wouldn't get a response. But she couldn't not—

“*You called?*”

“...?!” Her shoulders twitched, and she lifted her face with a gasp.

And then she wiped away her tears and opened her eyes wide.

There it was, her familiar puppet on the border of the barrier.

“! Yoshinon...?!” she shouted and jumped off Zadkiel's back to run over to the puppet. She wasn't seeing things. This was without a doubt Yoshinon, her beloved friend who had disappeared a few days earlier.

But...

“...Ee...!”

Thud! Someone collapsed behind Yoshinon, and Yoshino froze in place.

Actually, the boy hadn't collapsed behind the puppet. He was wearing Yoshinon on his hand. She couldn't really tell what he looked like because he had fallen facedown, covered in blood.

“...!” Her eyebrows shot up.

He had likely forced his way through her barrier. Blood pooled on the spot where the boy had collapsed.

It was apparent even to Yoshino's eyes. This was closer to a corpse than a person now.

Then she became less sure of her assessment. Because, suddenly, the body of this half-dead person began to shine faintly, and before she knew it, flames licked along his skin as if lapping at the many wounds he'd suffered.

While she sat there stunned, the boy was healed completely. And then she was finally able to see his face.

“...?! Shido...!” she cried out in shock.

That was right. The battered and beaten boy on the ground was none other than Shido Itsuka.

He flopped over onto his back and let out a long sigh. “I—I thought I was a dead man...”

Having just barely made it inside the barrier, he took some deep breaths, chest heaving, and once his nearly stopped heart had regained its usual tempo, he sat up.

Even though the outside was a wild snowstorm of machine gun strafing,

the inside was quite quiet. It was a curious space. Shido was somehow reminded of an igloo. Inside it were a massive puppet and a girl whose eyes had bright-red rings around them like a rabbit's.

"Yoshino!" He stood up, brandishing the rabbit puppet. "I came to save you just like I promised...!"

She stared in amazement. "Unh..." Tears welled up in her eyes, and she started to sob.

"Whoa...! Hey! D-don't cry!" He waved his hands back and forth in a panic. "D-did I do something wrong...?"

She shook her head. "No...I'm...just...happy you...came...!" she managed to say before beginning to wail once again.

Smiling slightly, he stroked her hair with one hand. And then he made the puppet on his other move.

"Heyooo, it's been a minute. You good?"

He tried not to move his mouth very much, practicing what ventriloquism he'd picked up from watching Yoshino. His attempt was awkward, but Yoshino happily bobbed her head up and down.

Perhaps it was an odd sight. After all, Yoshinon was the puppet Yoshino made speak and move herself. However, Shido recalled what Reine had said to him earlier.

"...After investigating, I discovered there was another extremely small signal underneath the graph of her mental state."

"Umm... So then, that means..."

"...Basically, it means there's another personality inside of Yoshino. But only when she's wearing the puppet."

"! ...D-does Yoshino know this?"

"...Hard to say. The only thing that's certain is when she was talking with you in the department store, it wasn't her but the other personality that manifests through the rabbit doll. Yoshino herself left all the reacting to Yoshinon and deliberately shut down her mind, or something very similar to that. That's why you couldn't seal her powers with a kiss."

"...Oh."

"...And one more thing. There's something really fascinating about

Yoshinon."

"Fascinating?"

"...Mm-hmm. There are a number of reasons why a person produces a second personality. But one of the most likely explanations is to escape from serious pain or stress like abuse. Basically, you create another self to convince yourself that it's not you suffering, it's someone else."

"... So Yoshinon's a part of her because it's so traumatic to have the AST trying to kill her?"

"...No. It's hard to believe, but it's possible she produced a personality that would keep her power in check. Not to keep herself from being hurt, but to keep from hurting other people."

"__"

"...Shin. I know you can save her. I mean, a girl this kind... You gotta."

That had been the extent of their conversation.

"..."

Yoshino suddenly bowed her head. "Th...ank...you."

"Huh?" He was jolted back to the present.

"...For...saving...Yoshinon."

Shido fidgeted in embarrassment for a second and then nodded. "Next is you, Yoshino. I'll save you."

"What...?" she replied.

He got to his knees so that he could be at eye level with her. Nothing came through his earpiece. It had probably been smashed when he came through the barrier.

It hurt him not to know Yoshino's mental state, but he couldn't do anything about that now. Wherever she was at, he had to just do it. To reach out to Yoshino, who had lost her puppet, to have this conversation now. He needed to have faith that he would be able to earn some of her trust in this brief time.

"Umm, so, uh, Yoshino? To save you...uh, there's one thing I gotta do."

"What...is it?"

"...So don't think I'm a weirdo or anything." He swallowed to wet his mouth, which was dry from nerves. "You remember what a kiss is?"

She stared at him blankly for a moment before shaking her head.

“Y-you don’t? Umm. So we have to do that to save you... Oh, and not in a weird way! It’s—” He stopped speaking.

“—Huh?”

The reason was simple. Yoshino had lowered her eyes, suddenly...and pecked him with pursed lips.

Instantly, he was filled with the sensation of something warm flowing into his body.

“...?! Y-Yoshino...?”

“...?” She cocked her head to one side. “Did...I...do it...wrong...?”

“N-no... It wasn’t wrong, but...,” he said.

She nodded. “If it’s you...Shido. I trust you.”

Then Zadkiel behind her and her dress under her coat turned into particles of light and melted into the air. The snowstorm barrier enclosing them suddenly lost its strength and vanished with a wink.

Yoshino jumped up in surprise. “...Sh-Shido... Is this...?!” She looked all around, not understanding what was happening, and then crouched down as if to hide her now half-naked body.

“Uh, oh.” Shido was embarrassed all over again. “Right. Umm. I have a lot I want to tell you! B-but for now anyway—”

“Mm...” She narrowed her eyes, blinded by the dazzling light shining through a gap in the clouds. “It’s...so...warm...” She gasped with wonder, like she’d never seen the sun before.

Actually, maybe she hadn’t. He didn’t know the true nature of Yoshino or how she manipulated water and ice, but he was pretty sure that it had been raining every time she’d appeared in this world.

“So...pretty...,” she murmured, looking up at the sky.

He followed her lead and lifted his own face and quickly found what Yoshino was staring at.

Now free from the heavy rainclouds, the sky was colored with a magnificent rainbow.

They didn’t get to bask for long. A strange buoyancy wrapped around Shido and Yoshino.

“Whoa!” he cried, while Yoshino looked at him in confusion.

“...?!”

He was familiar with this sensation. It was the transporter on *Fraxinus*. Kotori had no doubt confirmed that Yoshino’s power was sealed and had come to recover them.

“...Hup!” A second later, the familiar bridge replaced the frozen streets in his field of view.

“...?! ...?!” Yoshino was understandably panicked.

Shido sensed another presence arrive at the same time and looked back with a gasp.

“Aah... You’re okay, Shido?” Tohka was standing there, her Raizen High School uniform singed in places. Apparently, she’d been recovered from the middle of battle at the same time as Shido and Yoshino.

“Tohka! A-are you okay?!” he cried.

She let out a sigh of relief, and the sword in her hand and the patchwork film of light covering her uniform melted into the air. “Mm. Not a big deal... You look much worse than me.”

“Oh...” He tousled the hair at the back of his head. His clothes were red with his own blood and riddled with holes.

“Eep...!” Yoshino cried out and hid behind Shido. She was apparently not ready to see Tohka again.

He smiled by reflex. “It’s okay, Yoshino. This is Tohka. She helped me save you.”

Yoshino very timidly looked at Tohka. “Toh...ka...”

“Mm.” Tohka stared at Yoshino with a complicated look on her face for some reason.

“Hmm?” He raised an eyebrow.

He could hear feet loudly trotting in from the hallway. Then the door to the transfer space slammed open, letting a panting Kotori tumble inside.

“K-Kotori...?” Shido was surprised by the sudden intrusion.

She stared at him as though she were examining him carefully. “You idiot...!” She held an arm up high and launched a fierce punch at his solar plexus. And with an exquisite twist to it. A magnificent corkscrew.

“Hngh...?! Wh-what are you doing?!”

“That was so stupid! You should have just listened to me!”

“What—?” He started to reproach her, but he was stopped before he could

get anything out. The little sister who had only just sucker punched him was pressing her face to his chest and wrapping her arms around him to squeeze tightly.



“...We calculated the recovery limit to the decimal...!” she cried. “As long as you do what I say, you’ll be safe...!”

“Koto...ri...” He sighed and stroked her hair. “Sorry. I was reckless.”

“You never think. I mean, an amoeba is a deeper thinker. You half-celled animal.” Her face still pressed against him, Kotori blew her nose and then finally pulled away from him.

With snot all over the front of his shirt, Shido chuckled wryly.

Kotori made a show of paying him no mind. The instant she pulled her face away from his chest, she returned to her usual self as the cool commander.

“Honestly, going off on your own...” She shook her head, turned away, and stepped out into the hallway. “Head-to-toe exams for all of you. Come with me.”

“Ha-ha.” He laughed lifelessly and turned to Tohka and Yoshino. “Okay. So let’s go... Wait. Huh?”

For some reason, Tohka looked unhappy.

“Tohka...? Something wrong?”

“Nothing! Let’s go already!” she said and stormed away.

“What is with her?” he wondered before starting after her with Yoshino.

Final Chapter

Activated Past

“Wh-what is thiiiiiiis?!”

Two days after Yoshino’s power was sealed, Shido and Tohka were finally allowed to go home, having been thoroughly examined by the Ratatoskr crew. When he woke up that morning, an apartment building was standing beside the Itsuka house...in the space that had been an empty lot two days earlier. *Bam!* Almost like a trickster fox or conniving tanuki spirit had conjured it up.

“What? I didn’t tell you? That we’re building a special housing unit for the Spirits?” Kotori said from behind, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

“...! Don’t tell me that’s it...”

“Yup. It looks like just a regular apartment building, but it’s several hundred times stronger than normal. Plus, there’s a Realizer there, too, so its Spirit power resistance is bar none. Even if things get a little wild inside, nothing will leak to the outside.”

“No, that’s not what I’m asking about here...!” he shouted. “Exactly when did you even build it...?! You can’t build something like this in a day or two...!”

“Oh, come on,” she sniffed. “I mean, the disaster relief corps repair buildings in a single night, don’t they?”

“Wh—?”

Now that she mentioned it, they did. So Ratatoskr must have made use of Realizers or something here, too.

“So then, that whole thing about how we had to house Tohka until the

special housing was complete was a smoke screen," he accused.

"Ouch. I told you it was also a test period for Tohka living outside the ship."

"Ngh..." More than one thing was not clicking into place here, but he knew it was pointless to argue.

"So anyway." Kotori turned and walked toward the house. "Tohka's moving next door tomorrow. I already told her. I guess she's busy packing right about now?"

"O-oh. Yeah. I guess so..." He picked at his face. Well, they were only supposed to live together until the residence was built anyway. And it seemed that Tohka's mood had finally stabilized. Now that the day had come, he was kind of sad.

"Goodness, what is it, Shido?" Kotori feigned surprise. "Did you want to keep living with Tohka?"

"N-no, it's not that..." He hurried to deny the accusation.

She merely shrugged. "Well, if you want to have an entanglement with her, today's your last chance."

"D-do you even hear yourself...?!" he growled, his face turning red.

"Ooh, scary. Gotta go. Bye!" She bounced away back into the house.

"...Geez, Kotori." He sighed, exasperated, and then turned toward the house himself. "Hmm...?"

A girl wearing a cute dress and a cap on her head, hiding her face, came half jumping, half running toward him.

"Yoshino?!" he called out. She wasn't clad in the Astral Dress, but there was no mistake. The girl was wearing a rabbit puppet on her left hand.

"*Heyooo, Shido!*" The puppet's mouth flapped open and closed as a shrill voice rang out. "*Aah, we meet again at last! Sorry I couldn't come sooner to say thanks for rescuing me.*"

"Oh, uh...no, that's fine. What are you doing here? Are you done with your tests?"

"*Mm, just the first one. I guess there are some more, but I wanted to come thank you. They made an exception and let me out for just a little bit,*" the puppet explained and then turned its face to the sky like it was looking at *Fraxinus*. "*So once the tests are done, let's go on another date.*"

"O-oh... Sure."

"*Heh-heh. Okay. See ya!*" The puppet waved a small hand.

Yoshino shuddered, and she turned her face hesitantly toward Shido.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“Uh. Mm.”

Hearing this, he twitched. This was not Yoshinon but Yoshino’s own voice.

“Can I...come to...your house...again...sometime...?” she asked, timidly turning her gaze on him.

“S-sure. Anytime!” he replied, and Yoshino’s face lit up before she bowed her head and trotted away.

“*Heh-heh! Look at you! Way to go!*” congratulated the puppet.

“...Uh-huh!” Yoshino exclaimed.

He let out a short sigh, but a smile tugged on the corners of his lips. Now that he was thinking about it, that was maybe the first time Yoshino had spoken when the puppet was there. He didn’t really know why, but it made him kind of happy.

“Okay, then...” He stretched before going into the house. He climbed the stairs and headed for his room. “Ah!”

The door to the guest room at the end of the hallway was open slightly, and Tohka was peeking her face out halfway, looking at him.

“...Wh-what?” he said, furrowing his brow.

“...” She stuck a hand out through the gap without a word, beckoning him to come over.

“Y-you want me to come over there?”

She nodded her head and then retreated back into the room.

“Umm...” He stood there for a moment, a perplexed look on his face, before slowly walking over. He knocked at any rate before opening the door.

Tohka was standing in front of the dresser up against the wall on the left side. He moved forward into the middle of the room to face her.

“Did you need something?” he asked.

She bit her lip before lifting her face. “...Mm. Maybe Kotori told you already, but I’m going to live next door starting tomorrow.”

“O-oh. I heard.”

“And... Mm, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about first.”

“To me?”

“...Mm-hmm.” She averted her eyes slightly, as if whatever it was would be hard for her to talk about. “During the exams yesterday, Kotori and Reine

told me some stuff.”

“Uh, um. So by stuff, you mean...?”

“Mm. They said they’re trying to save us Spirits...and that you’re helping them.” She took a deep breath as if to slow her racing pulse and turned back to him. “What I want to talk about is related to that. Shido. Please. If more Spirits like me and Yoshino show up, I want you to help them.”

“Huh...” His eyes opened wide.

“From what Kotori said, I guess they know of a few Spirits so far. And I just know some of them are being yanked into a fight they don’t want, like we were. And that’s so awful, isn’t it?” She smiled sadly somehow. “So I’m asking you. Help Spirits with your power... Just like you saved me then.”

“...” He swallowed hard and looked at her again. “So, um, right. Mm.” He poked himself in the forehead. He’d already made up his mind after everything with Tohka and Yoshino, so why was he stammering when asked to put it into words? He shook his head slightly and opened his mouth. “Yeah. I plan on it.”

“...” Tohka had gotten the response she’d been hoping for, yet her smile was complicated. “Mm... I owe you. And...is one more thing okay?”

“Sure, what is it? Go ahead and tell me.”

“Mm...” She mumbled something and hung her head.

“Huh? What did you say?” He couldn’t catch what she was saying. He listened hard and took a step toward her.

“...” She suddenly lifted her face and pressed in close to him, making him gasp. She wound her arms around his neck and pushed him down onto the nearby bed.

“Hngh...?!” he groaned, utterly confused.

After a brief flash of hesitation, Tohka pressed her lips against his.

Was he still dreaming? And if he was, what was this dream a metaphor for, Dr. Freud? Useless thoughts raced through his mind, but he didn’t need to pinch his cheek and check if he was dreaming. Every sensory organ in his body was screaming that this was reality.

The scent of a girl in his nostrils. The sight of Tohka’s face closing in on his. The comfortable weight pressing down on him. The soft body he unconsciously wanted to embrace. The indescribable feeling on his lips. The taste of saliva that wasn’t his own. All these sensations mixed together and put his brain in overdrive.

A minute passed with him unable to resist or adapt. And then finally, Tohka pulled her lips away and lifted her face.

“Pwah...!” She had apparently been holding her breath during the kiss. Still on top of him, she stared into his eyes.

“T-Tohka,” he stammered. “What...?”

She kept staring. “...Now we’ve made up.”

“Huh...?” he replied like an idiot.

“...I don’t know why.” She averted her eyes now, embarrassed. “It’s just the act of making lips touch. But it’s not a bad feeling. And weirdly, I don’t want to do it with any human besides you... I don’t know...if this is related, but... I kind of...hated it when you kissed Yoshino in the building.”

When he was unable to respond, she continued awkwardly. “So. Like... don’t do it with anyone but me again.”

“Uh. Umm.”

Apparently, she hadn’t been told how a Spirit’s power was sealed. She was asking the impossible. Her two requests of him were mutually exclusive.

“Answer me!” she barked.

“O-okay...!” he yelped, overwhelmed.



In the briefing room in one corner of the Tengu Garrison for the Self-Defense Forces, the AST members were lined up, including the non-enlisted fighters. Ryouko had brought them together there for a briefing on the previous day’s mission and a strategy meeting on the new Spirit signal measured in the neighboring area.

Among them, in the standard uniform, Origami silently stared at her hands on the table, as if to hold back her bad mood.

Two days earlier, Hermit had gotten away from them due to the interference from Princess. On top of that, Princess herself disappeared suddenly in the middle of battle, leaving a signal behind that was different from the usual Lost one. The team members who had been frozen with their Territories were all okay, but the AST had been forced to return to base without any real results at all, much less victory over a Spirit. It was only natural she’d be in a bad mood.

Plus, she didn't know why Shido had gone out into the city with the alarm going off, when he was supposed to have been at her house. And for some reason, the rabbit puppet she'd found the other day had disappeared at the same time. She had kind of liked that thing. Of course, she couldn't suspect Shido. Or rather, even if he had stolen one of her personal effects, well, she didn't really mind, and she had no intention of making an issue of it.

The door to the room opened, and the face of their AST squad leader, Ryouko, popped in. Everyone in the briefing room stood up and bowed.

"Oh, no need for that. Sit, sit," Ryouko instructed, annoyed, and stood in front of them all. "Now, you're all here? Okay, I'd like to get started then. But first, I have good and extremely bad news for you."

"...?" Everyone looked at her, puzzled, and Ryouko sighed.

"Despite the large number of Spirit appearances in Tengu, we haven't made real progress, okay? So we've been allocated extra personnel."

"Extra personnel?" asked a team member.

"Yes. A star in the ranks, a real hard worker," Ryouko replied. "Probably fifth in the world in terms of Realizer handling. She's apparently actually *killed* a Spirit solo."

"...?!" Gasps and whispers filled the room instantly. And rightly so. A Spirit was too much for ten AST elite members to handle, and this soldier had taken one down all by herself.

Ryouko shrugged as if to say that this was exactly the reaction she'd been expecting before glancing at the door she'd just walked through. "Come in."

"Yes, ma'am!" The voice that responded was fairly cute. The door swung open once more, and a girl stepped into the room.

The AST members in the briefing room all frowned. An expected response. After all, the girl looked to be of junior high age at best.

Origami's eyebrow twitched. She felt like she'd seen this girl before.

"Second Lieutenant Mana Takamiya. A pleasure." She flipped back the standard uniform and took a bow. It was so ridiculous on her, it looked like she was in cosplay.

"Lieutenant Kusakabe, who's this?" asked one of the AST.

The look on Ryouko's face said that she'd been expecting that very question. "This is the star I told you about."

"Wha...?!" Everyone on the team frowned in surprise.

Mana's head tilted, as if she were puzzling over this reaction. "Is there

something the matter?" she asked, awkwardly polite.

"S-something...? Y-you're a child—," stammered one team member.

Mana sighed through her nose. "Is there any sort of problem there? Age has nothing to do with my qualifications. Or is there one among you who might defeat me?" she asked, without any particular disdain, as if her superiority was simply a fact.

"Wh—?" The team member's eyes widened.

"Yes, indeed. Out of all of you"—Mana turned her gaze toward Origami—"perhaps you are the only one whose future prospects are even worth considering."

"..." Origami didn't reply but simply faced the girl silently.

Ryouko flicked Mana on the head. "Don't go mouthing off. I want to play the video from the other day. Sit down in one of the empty chairs."

"Yes, ma'am," Mana replied, and moved on graceful feet to the chair next to Origami.

"Now, then." Ryouko pressed a button on the wall, and a screen descended from the ceiling as the lights faded. She poked at the terminal in her hand, and the fight from two days earlier was displayed on the screen. It was the part where Hermit had built a barrier and Origami was trying to break through it.

"This is where we were interrupted," Ryouko said, annoyed, as Princess appeared on-screen. She zoomed in to reveal a boy in front of the barrier.

Origami gasped. There was no mistake. It was Shido.

"...Nn," Mana groaned beside her, abruptly pressing her hands to the sides of her head as though trying to push back a headache before lifting her face and jumping to her feet.

"Hmm? Something wrong?" Ryouko asked.

But Mana only stared at Shido on-screen. "Brother...?"

Origami frowned and looked at Mana's profile...and finally understood why she'd felt like something was off.

This girl had the same air to her as Shido Itsuka.

Afterword

It's been a while. I'm Koushi Tachibana.

If you're one of few who skipped the first volume and dived right into this one, then it's nice to meet you. I'm Koushi Tachibana.

If you're one of those people who bought both volumes together and you only just finished reading the afterword of Volume 1, then I raise a glass to you with a daring smile. Oh-ho, so we meet again, hmm? I'm Koushi Tachibana.

How did you like the second volume of *Date A Live*? I do hope you enjoyed it.

The heroine of this story is the second Spirit, Yoshino. I struggle with a lot of the character names in this series, but I feel like I settled on Yoshino's relatively easily. In contrast, I went back and forth and back and forth for Shido and Reine, and when it came to Tohka, I left her name blank until right before the book was finished. What kind of heroine is that?

But with Yoshino, when I told my editor about her design, I was told, "I see, so she dresses like a forest girl," and I was dumbfounded.

"Forest girl."

...Hmm? That did change the image of Yoshino. Some kind of brawny Amazon. Yoshino does have a Japanese-sounding pronunciation, but in the local language, I bet it'd be something like "Yosheenoh Lelevre Pocahontas." Enemy tribes would fear her as "Crazy Storm," the wildest and fiercest in all the forest. Her likes include bear meat.

Just when I was getting all carried away with the wrong idea, I found out

that a *forest girl* is the name of an alternative fashion style for girls who dress like sprites that might live in the woods.

You have to admit that it sounds like a sniper hiding in the bushes in camouflage.

And so one announcement here. As of the current schedule, the next volume to be published will be *Date A Live*, Vol. 3. *Blue Sky Karma*, Vol. 8, is scheduled to come out after that. All of you readers who have been reading me since *Karma*, I would appreciate your patience. And those of you who have never read *Blue Sky Karma*, well, now's the perfect time to start!

Also, it seems that *Date A Live* will be turned into a manga. Whoo-hoo. Please wait a little longer for the details.

Once again, this volume was put together through the fierce efforts of so many people, including Tsunako, who is in charge of the illustrations, my editor, and the designer. They all do first-rate work every time. I really am constantly in their debt.

In *Date A Live*, Vol. 3, I plan to have an evil Spirit, unlike Tohka and Yoshino, make an appearance. I do hope you will look forward to that.

I pray we will meet again.

Koushi Tachibana

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