

ソードアート・オンライン オルタナティブ

# クロンバース リダ グ レ ット

渡瀬草一郎

イラスト ぎん太

原案・監修 川原 礫

# **SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE: CLOVER'S REGRET**

**- Volume 1 -**

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**[ Gsimenas | Dreadful Decoding ]**

## - STORY -

«Asuka Empire».

A long-living Japanese-style VRMMO game that started service in the midst of the SAO Incident.

This game, where Yuuki, Ran and the others formed the «Sleeping Knights» guild, also had a hidden story—

The Battle Miko Nayuta and the ninja Koyomi. The two girls who met in «Asuka Empire» by chance and became friends encountered a strange Priest in-game.

The elderly priest wished to request help from a «detective» to «solve» a certain quest. And he planned to pay 1,000,000 yen for the job.

The two girls were shocked by the exorbitant payment, but the «detective» who accepted the strange request was an equally strange young man. All of his stat points were invested into «luck»— meaning that he was a tricky player who was absolutely weak in battle, but had an extremely high rare item drop rate...

The solution of the mystery in a cutting-edge VRMMO world by the «shady detective» , along with the two girls, now begins.

DENGEKI  
BUNKO  
電撃文庫  
リザレクション  
シリーズ  
RESURRECTION  
SERIES

# クローバー リザレクション ト

ソードアート・オンライン  
オンラインオルタナティブ

渡瀬草一郎

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《スリーピング・ナイツ》結成前の  
ユウキとメリダがプレイしていた和風VRMMO  
《アスカ・エンパイア》に秘められたエピソードを、  
ファンタジーの旗手・渡瀬草一郎が再創造する！

# Chapter 1

## Mitsuba Detective

A matsuribayashi<sup>(1)</sup> could be heard in the distance.

The high-pitched flutes, the light tsuzumi, and the elegant koto<sup>(2)</sup> together formed a merry racket.

Although that tumult should sound bustling while up close, it sounded somewhat lonesome from afar.

Nobody knew where that sound came from.

It was known as the Phantom Orchestra.

It would disappear if you left the area, but it would not feel like it was close even if you were to go further in.

It's not like it came from beyond the sky, or from the depths of the earth. Though if you planned on searching for the origin of the sound, you'd end up with going around in circles.

You could hear a sound, but could not see where it came from; the orchestra continued playing in the distance as if it were trying to deceive those looking for it.

Sitting down on the dark stone steps leading to a deserted shrine, Nayuta, dressed as a miko, absent-mindedly listened to the sound.

She felt like she had experienced something similar in the distant past.

Alone, in a dark place, tired, and at a loss—

Perhaps the majority of people, without much thought, had dreams of a time like this when they were kids.

Sitting on the steps of a gloomy shrine, gazing down at the road below that no one walked on, and carefully listening to the matsuribayashi.

Bamboo grass rustling in a thicket, a countable number of stars twinkling in the night sky, when you feel that someone is tapping on your shoulder yet there's no one there when you turn around—

This dream of hers was interrupted by the ring of an e-mail.

A message from her friend was displayed on the floating console.

[[Yahou. Nayu-san, whatcha doing?]]

Nayuta cast her eyes down and, for a few moments, closed them. This switch-like action was a habit when changing her behaviour.

After a short sigh, she quickly began composing her reply.

[[Investigating the <Phantom Orchestra> . I don't know the requirements for starting the quest, so I am trying stuff out.]]

Barely any time had passed before the next message came.

[[Oh that... the one where you hear the sound of an orchestra but can't find it' and 'when you make an offering, you hear a cry, so that's probably one of the triggers for it', right?]]

[[Yes, that one. Is there any other info?]]

[[It's probably more like a rumour of dubious origin than info, but— seeing as nothing has happened even three days after implementation, it may be that you need some special key-item for it. Wanna postpone that one and work on a different quest together? It seems you can get a nice katana out of <Kagome, Kagome> <sup>(3)</sup>, but it's rated eight on a scariness scale, so it might be a bit too much for me alone —]]

[[All right. Let's meet up.]]

[[Thanks! Nayu-san, you're so cool! So, I'll be waiting at the bakeneko tea house.]]

After the message exchange ended, Nayuta stood up from the stone steps.

With her long, black hair and the sleeves of her miko costume gently floating, the girl jumped down.

Unlike reality, there was barely any impact when she landed; she felt as though her body was as light as a feather.

This did not mean that all the avatars would have the same feeling. Nayuta's class, the ⟨Battle Miko⟩, had a special trait of excelling at jumping. On top of that, she had also acquired the ⟨Unparalleled Jump⟩ skill, an advanced form of the hassoutobi<sup>(4)</sup>, thus her body was especially light.

On the other hand, as she focused on the lightness of her equipment set, this narrowed her choice of equipment, and thus had the drawbacks of weakening her defence and shortening her reach.

For the majority of Battle Mikos, the standard was to make use of the easy-to-use halberds that benefited from class specialty weapon bonuses and choose heavy equipment to compensate for their low strength, rather than work on their special jump trait.

Although this made it pleasant to move, even the tiniest bit of negligence could lead to fatal wounds, thus such a character build was even called peaky by game guides, as the player would be best off avoiding damage entirely.

Nayuta proceeded along a deserted country road, illuminated by moonlight, at a speed that made it seem like she was sliding on the road.

Looking to the side, the ears of rice swayed like a wave as a gust of wind brushed the rice fields.

The refreshing rustling sound blended with the subtle and profound orchestra.

The fluttering of the flute, the drums faithfully beating the rhythm, the dignified and

elegant koto— although each of them was overflowing with bustle and energy, their melody still seemed somewhat melancholic.

Gazing at the rice fields on this moonlit night, she noticed something peculiar while on her way to the teleport point.

A small hokora<sup>(5)</sup>, where a dōsojin was enshrined, that she had not noticed before when passing by.

The roof was only as high as her waist, and the stone statue inside was appropriately small.

At its facade, a letter had been offered.

(This shouldn't have been here when I came through... does that mean that the offering was a switch for it—?)

She hesitated to take the offering, but the chance of it being some kind of hint was high.

Once she took it into her hands and unfolded it, she saw some characters messily written on it with a brush.

⟨I wanna eat some botamochi⟩

Just a single line.

As it was so excessively simplistic, she ended up checking the back of the paper.

At a loss, Nayuta looked at the stone statue in the hokora.

On it, the sorrowful, tear-stained face of a still-very-young child was engraved.

## §

The Japanese VRMMO ⟨Asuka Empire⟩'s new event, the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩

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This large-scale event, held to commemorate the creation of a new district called “Ayakashi Bystreet”<sup>(6)</sup>, would introduce a hundred and eight different scenarios, both large- and small-scaled, over the course of approximately a year.

For the game boasting a scale that was second only to ⟨ALfheim Online⟩ in the domestic market but suffering a stagnation in userbase growth, this was an update with its dignity literally at stake.

Since the spread of the <sup>The Seed</sup> World Seed, creating a FullDive-supporting virtual world became so easy that not only companies but even individuals themselves could build such worlds, thus the number of playable titles skyrocketed.

At the same time, this encouraged existing users to spread to other games, and some insignificant games that were no longer able to maintain a playerbase were forced to suspend their service.

This concerned even a game as large-scaled as ⟨Asuka Empire⟩, thus this event focused on both the creators and the players.

The ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ would literally incorporate a hundred and eight quests. These hundred and eight quests would consist of “The Hundred Tales”, “The Seven Wonders” and a “Finale” slated for the end; among them, “The Hundred Tales” would consist of user-generated quests made using ⟨The Seed⟩.

For this event, about 8-10 of the numerous quests created by individuals would be chosen each month and incorporated after the creators received a remuneration— in short, it was a user-made scenario contest.

At first, this selection was criticised as “a last resort to ensure an increase in the number of quests”, but boosted by a tremendous The Seed fad, when it came time to review results, there were so many masterpieces collected that the selection took unexpectedly long.

The game’s management had called out to students of various vocational schools and clubs to participate and a lot of them applied, taking it on as their graduation work or a test-of-skills challenge for their summer holidays.

It was difficult to create a new game, with its own system, environment and setting included, from scratch in a short time, but if it was based on ⟨Asuka Empire⟩'s system, it would eliminate a lot of required labour, allowing them to focus on working purely on the scenario, visuals and audio.

To the applicants, the sense of a 'cultural festival haunted house', open to a very large audience, was very strong.

As for ⟨The Seven Wonders⟩ that were unrelated to the contest, they're tie-up quests for all the different types of enterprises that specialised in confectionery, fashion, soft drinks, figures and so on; it was a collaboration that not only involved having the products of the companies appear in the quests, but it even involved items that appeared in the game being sold in real life.

It has only been three months since this festive merrymaking with the future of the companies at stake, but at the present moment, it was enjoying a favourable reception that exceeded the game company's goals.

Unlike ⟨Sword Art Online<sup>SAO</sup>⟩, which led to thousands of deaths and had to suspend its service, or ⟨ALfheim Online<sup>ALO</sup>⟩, which had to change its management company due to a case of human experimentation coming to light, or ⟨Gun Gale Online<sup>GGO</sup>⟩, where the criminal act, known as the Death Gun incident, that led to several victims occurred, Asuka Empire had yet to have any such scandals since its service had begun. This credibility was highly valued at the moment.

"...Though, you know. It's not like this event is getting high praise. After all, ain't it basically nothing but horror? With movies, seeing one or two of them is one thing, but seeing a hundred and eight horror movies in a row is just a pain. There are tons of horror comedy-type quests, but they even have comedy-feigning surprises like the ⟨Subjugation of a Tiger on the Folding Screen⟩.

"...I haven't cleared it yet, but I've heard that it's like a scene of pandemonium."

At a corner of the amamidokoro<sup>(7)</sup>/bakeneko tea house, Nayuta listened to the endless complaints from Koyomi, her ninja friend that she had met up with.

The mentioned ⟨Subjugation of a Tiger on the Folding Screen⟩ was based on the

tonchibanashi<sup>(8)</sup> of how a young priest was given this unreasonable demand from the shogun: “Subjugate the tiger on this folding screen”, to which he responded: “Then, please drive that tiger out of the folding screen.”<sup>(9)</sup>

In this quest, set in a western-style house from the Taisho era, the early stages had a gentle build-up as if it were a funny story— but, in the middle stages, the tiger on the folding screen really did come out and start slaughtering the area’s NPCs in succession; a violent course of events.

The player was then forced to subjugate the tiger hiding in the western-style house, but if they made the slightest mistake, they would end up discovering the gory corpses of the NPCs one after another, and furthermore, the tiger was basically set to be “so strong that you can’t win against it by fighting”; a panic horror quest where you could only run around trying to escape, to say nothing of fighting against it.

The quest clearing requirement was to lure the tiger into a trap and return it to the folding screen, but the majority of challengers were forced to fully realise the dread of a large carnivore, and some even became unable to eat meat for a while.

The chillingly realistic blood and guts, the cerebrospinal fluid leaking out of the broken bones, and other fine details were all depicted without omitting anything, while the cries and screams of the NPCs that kept dying due to fatal wounds spiced things up; it’s said that it unfolded into a nasty hell that had no relation to the charming tonchibanashi.

“...Though, I've heard that the quest had some revisions made to it, as could be expected—”

“...It only added the option to switch pixelation on or off, and upped the scariness level from five to seven. Oh, and it began a rental service for a <corpse sensor> as a measure against heart attacks, but the fee is three hundred yen per day, what a rip-off...! That’s no longer an apparition, but a gut splatter!? And what’s more, compared to the stress caused, the reward is shabby and... Nayu-san, here, say ‘ah!’”

Whether it was because she wanted to cool down or because she wanted to avoid letting her memories of clearing the quest resurface, Koyomi abruptly held a toothpick with some warabimochi up to Nayuta’s mouth.

Although feeling slightly uncomfortable about being fed, Nayuta obediently opened

her mouth.

Compared to warabimochi in the real world, the faint sweetness, the scent of soy flour, and the exquisite, spongy texture were all well reproduced.

“...Mmhmm... So, the ⟨Kagome, Kagome⟩ that we’re planning to do is rated eight on the scariness scale, making it scarier than the tiger subjugation, right? Are you going to be okay?”

Koyomi frowned explicitly. Due to her ever-changing expression and childish face, as well as being a hundred and forty cm tall, she looked to be very young, but she was actually a working adult and older than Nayuta.

“About that, you see, the problem is... Just that the management’s scariness scale criteria are relatively sloppy and, from what I’ve seen in the reviews, it’s not splatter-scale scary, so I thought that I might have better compatibility for it— And also, the reward for clearing the quest is a shinobi katana named ⟨Empty Air⟩, which I hear is especially effective against spirit-type enemies, so I wanna hold onto it for the upcoming quests. Nayu-san, I’m begging you! Help me out! You’re OK with scary stuff, right!?”

It wasn’t like she was trying to be calm. But, whether she had better resistance than other people or was simply insensitive to such things, she had no memory of feeling “scared” during this event.

On the other hand, during a previous quest, Koyomi shrieked so loud when she was chased around by a skeleton warrior that it almost seemed as though her scream went into ultrasound.

As her friend, Nayuta felt very uneasy about sending her off to a scary spot on her own.

“Of course, I do not mind helping, but... I have a one-sided character build, so my worth as an asset is questionable. You are not going to invite anyone else to help?”

Koyomi cackled.

“Oh you and your jokes again. Nayu-san, you know that you’re the strongest person among my friends? Oh, and the recommended level for that quest ain’t that high. I

should be able to clear it on my own, but it's rumoured to be scary... so I don't really wanna go to a haunted house like that on my own, and it would be hard to cling to someone at the scary bits if I bring my good-for-nothing friends along, while you, Nayu-san, always give the impression of coolness, so I feel like I can rely on you... right? I beg you!"

"All right. I want a weapon for ghosts too, so I look forward to working with you."

She had no intention of declining the request from the start. They had a mutual give-and-take relationship as well.

"Thanks! Nayu-san, I love that you're so simple! Alright, say 'ah!'"

Smiling from ear to ear, Koyomi presented another piece of warabimochi to Nayuta's mouth.

"...Oh no, it's not like you bought me over with warabimochi... Oh, would you like your mamekan?"

Nayuta scooped up the agar jelly and peas with her wooden spoon and presented it to Koyomi's mouth.

And the girl bit into the spoon in a flash.

"Mmm! Tasty!"

"...Glad to hear it."

As the situation took a turn that made it hard to tell which of them was older, Nayuta once again looked around the shop.

This bakeneko tea house was a popular shop at Ayakashi Bystreet, but the confined store had barely any customers.

This did not mean that the store was not thriving; a clone shop system that prevented excess congestion had been introduced to a large number of shops in this district in order to maintain the appropriate atmosphere.

Although it appeared as if there were one store, its interior was actually copied and

split into several stores.

As customers that came in one after another would be transferred to different stores, it ensured that no matter when somebody came in, they would never see congestion. If someone had an appointment, they could operate their friend list at the front of the shop and enter the same room as their friends.

It wasn't all that rare for people to pay an additional fee to make a reservation and have online meetings rather than offline ones.

As a large congestion of people would spoil the haunted house atmosphere, a large number of quests in this event had applied a policy limiting the number of participating players.

As such, the quests were split into four categories.

The ⟨Tests of Courage⟩ : these allowed only one person to challenge them by themselves.

The ⟨Fellow Travellers⟩ : these allowed encountering only party members that joined the quest together.

The ⟨Encounters⟩ : these could assign a limited number of people within range to an area where other players were already present.

And, the ⟨Universals⟩ : these had no limits on the number of participants and, theoretically, could even allow all players to gather in one place.

A majority of the stores in Ayakashi Bystreet were categorised under ⟨Encounters⟩ to prevent lines.

The ⟨Subjugation of a Tiger on the Folding Screen⟩ that implanted a trauma in Koyomi was an example of the ⟨Tests of Courage⟩ meant for a single person; the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ that Nayuta had been investigating just a while ago and the ⟨Kagome, Kagome⟩ that they planned to challenge were examples of ⟨Fellow Travellers⟩ that only allowed party members to participate.

Because of this system, it was rather unlikely to bump into someone in restaurants even if you were both regular customers, unless you were trying to meet up with them.

On the other hand, perhaps because there seemed to be few customers, there were cases of relationships forming between two unacquainted players who just happened to be present in the store at the same time.

Nayuta and Koyomi, too, got acquainted only two months ago, when this bakeneko tea house had just opened.

The impetus behind this was the fact that the nekomata clerk mistook their orders and carried Nayuta's mamekan to Koyomi, and Koyomi's warabimochi to Nayuta.

This wasn't a simple mistake; it seemed that it was an action programmed to occur at a fixed probability as a character trait for the nekomata.

Even later on, the same phenomenon happened now and then, and had practically become an obligatory event in the store.

The nekomata clerks, who would simply incline their head in confusion without apologising and feign ignorance each time this happened, were showgirls wearing cat ears— of course not, they were a group of actual, bipedal cats.

A black cat, a Calico, a tabby cat, a Russian Blue, Scottish Fold, and a Munchkin - a collection of various breeds was assembled and they looked lovely in their matching happi coats<sup>(10)</sup>, but they were basically unsocial and, on a whim, frequently idled from work and dozed off. Occasionally, they even jumped onto the customers' laps, looking as if they owned the place.

Without saying a single word, they only did their waiter duties of taking and bringing the orders, but there were dubious eyewitness reports that there was a mature hermit-like Norwegian silently making wagashi<sup>(11)</sup> in the kitchen.

Due to the fact that there was no concern for cat allergies in virtual space, there were fairly many customers visiting the store for these cats.

Nayuta and Koyomi, too, visited it for their respective cats, and since they hit off well, they started frequently forming a party.

The sliding door opened with a clatter, and a new customer walked in.

The receptionist black cat rushed through, passing by Nayuta and Koyomi.

“Excuse me, I would like to enquire for the way—”

The person who entered was an elderly priest dressed as a traveller.

He was wearing a braided hat on his head, gaiters on his feet, and had a monk staff in his hand, in other words, you could say he was wearing the initial equipment for a monk.

He could later specialise, choosing between a Warrior Monk and Sinful Monk if he chose the warrior path, or a Mendicant Priest and High Priest if he chose the spell-user path, but compared to the stars, the samurai and ninja, the somewhat plain impression that monks gave could not be denied. And on top of that, he had the appearance of an old man, which was quite rare due to player age bias.

In (Asuka Empire) , the character’s appearance generally reflected the person’s actual appearance, as the AmuSphere performs a scan of the player’s body when registering a character.

Your appearance could be changed to some degree, and it was possible to change how the clothes fit your figure, but it was difficult to change age and gender.

In the recent years, in order to promote VRMMOs for the elderly generation, “sleeper train trips”, “mountain climbing”, “fishing”, “rural life” and other interactive types of content with few game elements had gained popularity. The majority of the elderly drifted to such games, while those who joined games where battles were the main element still formed a minority.

Even though they could compensate for the physical handicap with equipment or stats, nothing could be done about reflexes. And in the majority of cases, reflexes were the key to determining victory or defeat.

The elderly priest, slowly taking his braided hat off, gave an impression of being really simple. Fitting his role all too well, he looked like he was playing a supporting role in a historical drama rather than being a game player.

The black cat wearing a happi coat was fixedly looking up at the elderly priest right beside it.

Looking down and a bit confused, the elderly priest began speaking.

“...A cat...? Umm... I... Excuse me, do you understand what I am saying? I’m a bit—”

Koyomi stood up without a moment’s delay.

“Ojii-chan, those little ones are unmanned AI, so they can’t make such a complicated response! Where do you wanna go? If it’s some place I know, I could guide you there.”

Her self-assured personality that allowed her to help people even in a game was the target of the shy Nayuta’s respect.

Nayuta also turned her eyes towards the elderly priest.

“Is it your first time at Ayakashi Bystreet? This district should have a warp zone midway down the street... So, if your destination is a registered establishment, you should be able to use the navigation feature; could it be that your destination is not registered?”

Being called by two young girls, the elderly priest was at a loss for words as if he were surprised, but it seemed that he soon recalled that this space was different from reality.

The elderly priest smiled and gave a bow, then stepped up to Nayuta and Koyomi’s table.

“Oh, you have my thanks. My name is Yanagi. Just as you have noticed, I am still a beginner... I am looking for the detective office named ⟨Mitsuba’s Detective Agency⟩ that should be in this neighbourhood; would you happen to know anything about it?”

“Ah, I am Nayuta. And this shinobi is Koyomi-san... Umm... A detective office, you say?”

Asking again, Nayuta reflexively exchanged glances with Koyomi.

“Koyomi-san, do you know it?”

“Hmm, first time I’ve heard of it... Detective offices sound like they come from a different world... Ojii-chan, are you sure that this is really something related to Asuka Empire here?”

With the spread of ⟨The Seed⟩ , numerous games, including tiny-scaled works, continued to be produced even now. Among them, there should of course be some that had detectives, but in ⟨Asuka Empire⟩ , whose selling point is a Japanese-style world, such an occupation did not exist system-wise.

“Yes, it should be. Although it is mostly done in the form of a hobby... Excuse me, it seems you have no knowledge of it...”

As the elderly priest was about to leave, Koyomi called him to a stop in a hurry.

“Wait wait! It’s not like we don’t happen to know anything! If it’s not registered on the nav, there’s only one place in the neighbourhood where an individual could get a place for a thing like this—”

“...Well, thinking about it normally, it has to be **that place**, right.”

The same place came to Nayuta’s mind right away.

The back street of Ayakashi Bystreet, nicknamed “Twilight Street” —

It was a dubious area where, compared to the main street, the price for renting a store was exceptionally cheap, and a lot of individuals could open their preferred establishments regardless of whether they were commercial or not.

A shopping district where street stalls would be lined up on festival days— was what the game management had in mind, but with the horror elements in mind, it instead became a chaotic neighbourhood that seemed more like the black market.

Due to the large number of stores, which, to make matters worse, frequently changed, not only were each and every one of them not registered on the navigation, but there were plenty of stores dealing in strange goods and services.

“...Ojii-chan, this office that you spoke of, could it be located on ⟨Twilight Street⟩ ?”

“That is exactly right. Though I thought that this was the place...”

The elderly priest smiled broadly as if he were relieved.

Koyomi jumped from her chair.

“Alright! So, Nayu-san, shall we show him the way for a bit before our quest?”

“Okay. I have no objections.

As a matter of fact, it was a place rather hard to navigate for beginners. It would be faster to show the way rather than explain it.

The two stood up from their seats, and chose the payment option from the console.

The nekomata clerk skillfully finished processing the bill for the service with its antique register while its branched tail swayed carefreely.

Even if you, say, left the store without asking for the accounting, the payment would just be taken from the deposit, so it was just a matter of mood. Above all, once the accounting was done, you could get a piece of candy. During campaigns, you could also get lottery tickets and, with luck, you could get a rare piece of equipment as a prize.

“Oh, right... Clerk-san, could I get some ⟨botamochi⟩ for takeout?”

While looking at the bewitching coat of fur on the round, black cat handling the register, Nayuta recalled the event at the hokora some time ago.

That was probably a demand for an offering.

The black cat, as round as a botamochi, nodded and took out some botamochi wrapped in bamboo grass leaves from a strange outlet, fashioned in the form of a cat’s mouth, by the counter.

Having received the botamochi, Nayuta moved it to her kit bag through her console.

“Hmm? Your afternoon snacks?”

“Oh no, this is an offering. Since I might need it for a quest.”

Seen off by the happi coat-wearing nekomata waving its paws, the party left the store.

As they began walking, the elderly priest bowed down.

“I am humbly sorry for interrupting you when you were busy—”

“Oh come now, it’s no problem. The place is kinda hard for a new person to navigate, after all!”

Koyomi’s response was incredibly cheerful.

Nayuta, who did not possess the same skills in the art of conversation, spoke up in a stubbornly refined manner.

“Investigating the ⟨Twilight Street⟩ was part of the Hundred and Eight Apparitions tutorial quest. After release, it became an area where users could rent stores— The office that you are looking for is mixed in among those, I believe.”

“Hahaa, I see... The person who introduced me to the game told me ‘It’s probably a hard place to navigate, so if you’d like, I can have an acquaintance show you around’, but I thought I could manage somehow anyway— However, it seems I was naive. Meeting such a kind person as yourself has been a great help.”

Koyomi laughed out loud.

“Hey. Nayu-san, you’re so kind, huh. If I were a man, I’d definitely make you my wife. Actually, I want to be the wife... Hey, just marry me already. And support me with your ability to make a living... I don’t wanna go to work on Monday and beyond... I’ve had enough of being buried in a crowded train with my height...”

Koyomi’s forced voice gradually became quiet.

Nayuta, who had already grown accustomed to handling this, brushed the hair of the girl below as if she were a child.

“What are you saying to a student. You are a good girl, so please be a proper working adult.”

“But you know... our company is filled with nothing but married pops and grandpas, so we have no girls or boys... I’ve been doing my best for a year now, but none of it is any fun... and we work like mules at the end of the fiscal year; I’m getting the feeling that you’re my sole comfort right now, Nayu-san... Hey, let’s get married already?”

Nayu-san, a wedding dress would really suit you.”

Her repetitive, reckless remarks were indifferently turned aside by Nayuta.

“Hmm, true. I will consider it if you make over ten million a year.”

“Really!? I know that that’s a complete lie, but I feel like I can pull through for around a week with that one phrase! Life really does need dreams and hopes! Even if they’re just illusions with 0% chance of coming true!”

“...Koyomi-san, does that mean that you kind of like such things? It will be painful to watch at times though.

“Yeah. That’s love. Love, without a doubt. And it’s first love to boot.”

Hearing their odd exchange, the elderly priest burst into laughter.

“...Oh, excuse me. This is my first time in an online game, so I had no idea... I see, I am starting to understand the reason why my grandchild enjoys this. After all, it is quite fascinating how you can freely create such relationships with other people.

Koyomi looked over her shoulder like a puppy.

“Oh, so you thought you’d start playing with your grandchild, Ojii-chan?”

“Well, that is not really... Actually, that could be it. It... the circumstances are a bit complicated— I have a task that I would like to request of the detective whom we are about to visit.”

The elderly priest stammered while giving a smile.

Thinking that it wasn’t nice to pry so much on a first meeting, Nayuta kept her mouth shut. If he wanted to talk about it he one day would, so she had no intention of prying too much.

Yanagi gave a light nod, as if he were apologising for troubling them.

Leading the elderly priest, Nayuta’s group left the back alley and went around to the back of the bakeneko tea house.

Although the night sky was dark, even spots with no light sources in the district were faintly bright, and there were no obstacles in the way.

It is said that Ayakashi Bystreet was based on the motif of the Edo<sup>(12)</sup> castle town. “Bystreet” was essentially a word that indicated a narrow road away from the main street, but Ayakashi Bystreet was apparently named as such in the sense of ‘a district away from the present world’.

The district was so large that it made the word ‘bystreet’ sound like a lie; it was dotted with suspicious places like the Neck-Hanging Sakura, the Kappa Moat, and the Yomi<sup>(13)</sup> Tunnel.

Compared to Asuka Empire’s capital city, (Kiyomihara) , based on the motif of the Asuka Kiyomihara Palace, as well as Heijou-kyō and Heian-kyō<sup>(14)</sup> from nearly the same period with their abundant Buddhism architecture and refined buildings of nobles, this district was more plebian, and emphasis was placed on its ominousness.

Regardless of the time in real life, it was always night at Ayakashi Bystreet as the sun did not rise. At present, it was Saturday afternoon, but the sky was immersed in darkness.

The stains on the wooden fences seemed like a human face that occasionally changed its expression.

It wasn’t rare for a white hand to spring up from the mud, the huge castle in the distance would never appear closer no matter what for some reason, a huge oni face appeared in the sky at times.

There was such an enormous number of apparition tricks here that if something went wrong and a ‘real’ bizzare phenomenon occurred, it’s likely that no one would notice.

Greeting the noppera-bō that they passed by, the three walked along the interstice between the old residences and halted in front of a small shrine.

To the sides of the torii<sup>(15)</sup>, a pair of manekineko were sitting in the place of the komainu and fox.

Nicknamed the Neko-Inari<sup>(16)</sup>— a god of cats of dubious lineage, the “Kedamahaku

Neko no Mitama no Kami” was revered there, and some taiyaki was offered to him beside the offering box.

“Oh, are we making a stopover?”

“Oh no, this is our destination.”

Koyomi gave an impish smile to the bewildered Yanagi.

She entered through the torii, faced the hokora, bowed twice, clapped twice, and bowed twice again—

And when she turned around, a wide road that wasn’t there before stretched out straight forward on the other side of the torii.

Numerous orange lanterns in a row, glass bells painted in dazzling colours, and groups of carts with no sense of unity such as oden with takoyaki, cotton candy, ramen, and yoyo fishing.<sup>(17)</sup>

There were numerous customers coming and going among the miscellaneous stores lined up on the sides as if there were a heat haze.

Not only were there carts, there were also some small-scale businesses that were using the first floor of the buildings to the sides of the road as their stores. Its appearance, reminiscent of a Showa era shopping district, contained a mix of eeriness and liveliness that brought about a chaotic glamour.

Yanagi stared in wonder at this mysterious change that occurred instantaneously.

“What... is this...?”

Nayuta answered in a whisper.

“The interior of the torii is a teleport point. Two bows, two claps and two more bows is the switch for it, so use the same procedure when you want to return.”

It was said that, ordinarily, the proper worshipping etiquette was two bows, two claps and one more bow. In the case of the Neko-Inari, it seemed to be <sup>nya</sup>two bows, <sup>nya</sup>two claps,

and <sup>nya</sup>two more bows, seeing as it was a cat god.

The three continued to walk along Twilight Street, among such liveliness that it seemed like there was an ennichi<sup>(18)</sup> taking place.

The players going back and forth were rather varied: there were samurai, ninja, onmyouji, shirabyōshi<sup>(19)</sup>, and so on, but there was no one particularly suspicious. However, stores to the side of the road, and the clerks working there, stood out with their strange ornaments and make-up that made them look like yōkai.

There were people wearing oni or kitsune masks, as well as genuine kitsune and racoon dogs, who were still on the cute side, but there were also a number of characters that would make kids cry mixed in, including eccentric yōkai such as tenome and jorōgumo, fleeing soldiers with their guts exposed, and entirely black shadow men.

From among them, a strangely attractive, fuzzy keukegen hopped towards Koyomi and pulled on her hand.

“Ramen Keuke-ken” was written on the signboard of the store nearby.

With a bitter smile, Koyomi took back her hand.

“Ah, sorry sorry. I have other business today. I’ll see you around when I’m in the neighbourhood again.”

“...Don’t tell me that you are a regular here.”

“Yeah. It’s a store that always has hair in the soup... Wait, would that be fur?”

A good-for-nothing, as usual.

The stores on Twilight Street were, in general, strange in some respects. Naturally, the frequent customers were rather strange too.

“Now then, where could the detective agency be, I wonder... Hmm, let’s see let’s see...”

退魔札あり升  
Charms against apparitions her?”

Like a child who had just learnt a word, Koyomi began reading the signs and banners in her field of view.

“<sup>Masu</sup> 升<sup>(20)</sup> was used in the Showa era, right?”

Nayuta was hooked and shared her thoughts. Perhaps overwhelmed by the chaotic atmosphere, Yanagi just dumbfoundedly surveyed his surroundings and didn't say much.

“Ah. Foot massage.”

“Not really much point to that in a virtual space, right.”

“Oooh, the horror standard, human flesh manjū.”

“Someone has poor taste.”

“Chocolat de Framboise.”

“That feels so out of place...”

“Adult video arcade.”

“...I am surprised this got permission from the management.”

“My mistake! It says kitsune video arcade.”

“That has me somewhat worried.”

“Wankokumanabe.”

“...A sub-variety of wankosoba<sup>(21)</sup>, perhaps?”

“Nyankosoba.”<sup>(22)</sup>

“What are these two doing so close together?”

“Mitsuba Detective Agency.”

“What would he be investigating in a pla... Ah!”

“Cat God Faith Society.”

“Koyomi-san, please don’t just pass by like that. It’s here.”

Nayuta grabbed Koyomi, who was leading the way, by the nape like a cat and forced her to stop.

At the entrance so narrow that only one person alone could manage to squeeze through, an old wooden signboard was hanging in a sorry state.

The office in question seemed to be on the second floor. The path ahead was shrouded in total darkness, and steep stairs led above.

Yanagi displayed a smile of relief.

“Ah, this seems to be the place. That you very much, both of you. Alone, I would have had a very hard time reaching this place.”

“...Hm. Well, there is indeed a sign hanging here, but...”

“...Is this really the place?”

Looking up at the second floor, Nayuta and Koyomi noticed a hanged corpse slowly swaying on the other side of the window.

“...Another case of bad taste, hmm.”

“Hmm, well, it might be linked to the district’s scenery management...”

The scene was not necessarily a reflection of the inside of the room. To create an appropriate atmosphere for Twilight Street, the ornaments on the windows facing outside were configured by the game’s management.

Though, if the tenant’s ornaments passed the management’s inspection, the room’s state could be shown through the window as is. This guess could only be confirmed by actually stepping in.

“This is more suspicious than usual... right, Nayu-san? Isn't there a chance that once you step in, a secret quest will be activated before you can reach the detective office or something? Sending off a beginner elder like that is kinda—”

Nayuta replied to Koyomi's worries with a nod.

“...Say, Yanagi-san. This might be rude but... you are still level 1, right?”

“Yes. After all, I logged in for the first time today— I even postponed the tutorial.”

Nayuta and Koyomi exchanged glances. They praised him for managing to reach the bakeneko tea house at this state.

“...This might be uncourteous, but shall we accompany you further if we do not interfere?”

A broad smile appeared on the elderly priest's face.

“Why thank you, I have caused you so much trouble... Again, I am greatly obliged for your kindness.”

With his hands pressed together, he gave a very deep bow. It seemed that he had cold feet.

With a nod, Nayuta swiftly stepped forward toward the dark stairs jammed in between the wooden walls.

Seeing her take the lead without hesitation, Koyomi, who was standing in the back, let out a sigh of admiration.

“Nayu-san, I think I'm falling in love with the way you're being all manly like that...”

“The one in the back does not necessarily have the highest survival rate. Back attacks come from behind.”

“Oh, it's not about survival rates... You never think that ‘The dark is scary!’ or something? In the first place, if we're talking about survival rates, since Battle Mikos are a vanguard class, shouldn't they strengthen themselves with more metal

protectors? It would be one thing if you were a magician-type Exorcist Miko, but you're the only Battle Miko I know with such enormous boobs and visible cleavage..."

"...It's not visible. I am wearing my innerwear underneath, so please stop with the random sexually harassing remarks. The size setting... was just a mistake."

When creating an account, your figure was influenced by the AmuSphere's scan to some degree. She could have just wrapped a sarashi<sup>(23)</sup> around herself, but she did not get to that.

Partly because it was summertime and she was lightly dressed, she started the game without reading the exact numbers; she noticed the glances from her surroundings several days later.

To top it off, while she contemplated whether she should delete her account and start over, she had the luck to obtain a rare piece of equipment with a high evasion stat, the 〈Shirahae no Kosode〉<sup>(24)</sup>, and so she became unable to delete her account without deleting the item.

Koyomi groaned.

"Even if you're wearing innerwear... That spunky, fireproof, sportswear-like innerwear itself is generally thought of as sexy on its own, you know? It makes your silhouette look quite impressive, you know?"

"You're exaggerating. And isn't that fire- or electricity-proof innerwear a standard piece of equipment for shinobi-type people like you, Koyomi-san? Since I focus on speed and agility, I end up with such equipment and I can't help it."

Koyomi nudged at Nayuta's back.

"About that! Nayu-san, if you're focusing so much on speed, then why didn't you become a shinobi? Even though it's a popular class that's the most nimble one in the game and has fair offensive abilities, according to class charts. Battle Miko is a class that people who think 'Ninja have far too little armour, so they're kinda... 'choose, you know?'"

'I have my reasons. I can't say that I don't, but I'm a bit embarrassed.' Nayuta whispered in response.

“Ehm... I thought— the hakama<sup>(25)</sup> looked cute.”

Koyomi hanged her head at once.

“...Sorry, I take back what I said about you being manly. You’re cute, Nayu-san. You look like a proper girl... On the other hand, as I see nothing but stats and efficiency, my femininity level is awfully low...”

“...Oh no, my character build is suited for martial arts, so I am not very feminine—”

“Nuh-uh. You’re a girl no matter how I look at you... After all, during battle, your bust jiggles so much... it goes \*tayuntayun\*... so much that I wonder whether it has a specialised visualising engine.”

“...Koyomi-san, seriously, stop with the frequent sexual harassment with those indecent eyes of yours. It makes it hard to give a normal response.”

It seemed that something unpleasant had happened to her in real life.

Having arrived at the top of the stairs, Nayuta opened the wooden door blocking their path.

A very faint orange light reached the stairs.

Inside was a room larger than they had envisioned.

The ceiling was strangely high, slightly altering the stream of air and the echo of voices.

Directly opposite the open door sat a huge, bulky black cat.

It wasn’t of a normal size.

Its sitting height was easily over three metres, and coupled with the height of the ceiling, it gave off an intimidating aura.

Of course, it wasn’t an actual cat; it was an ornament that had a plump body twice as large as its head and was sitting in Zen meditation position; its forelegs were in the

Dhyāna mudrā<sup>(26)</sup> and its hindlegs were in the lotus position<sup>(27)</sup>, like a black Buddha statue so to speak.

The dim room with the statue looked more like the main temple building of a shrine rather than the second floor of a shopping street, and gave the illusion that they might have been transported by a warp zone.

The large, golden eyes did not particularly give the impression that it was full of love, neither did it give the slightest impression of strength to ward off the klesha<sup>(28)</sup>, or the overambitious will to save the living, but the cat-like expression of cunningness was fully represented.

The halo behind it was styled as cat paw pads, the pedestal as a cat food can, and the lanterns hanging in the surroundings as balls of wool; even those obsessed with details would find no oversights.

Nayuta and the others stood stupefied in front of the strange-looking seated figure that could be called a large, black cat Buddha statue.

“...Eh? What is... this?”

“Whoa... Arigataya. Arigataya.”<sup>(29)</sup>

While Nayuta was bewildered and Koyomi paid her reverence at once, Yanagi found a sign in the darkness.

“To the right is the Cat God Faith Society, to the left is Mitsuba Detective Agency... It seems that this second floor branches out. This cat statue is probably an entrance objet d’art—”

Looking to the right and left, they saw the respective doors.

The door on the right had a carving of a cat with blazing, open eyes, while the door on the left had a small wooden tag hanging from it, the word ⟨Open⟩ written on it.

The door on the right went beyond adorable to being evidently ominous.

After casting down and closing her eyes, then taking a short pause, Nayuta knocked on the door to the left without hesitation.

“—The door’s not locked. Come in.”

The strangely clear voice of a young man came from inside.

## §

Detectives were generally divided into two categories.

The first included those who only did the job for money, the so-called realist detectives.

The other were romantist detectives, who aspired to be the kind of detectives that appear in stories and thus chose this profession themselves.

The distinction was simple.

The former did not look like detectives. Aside from those in charge of advertising and business, most refrained from showing their faces and precisely handled affair investigation and background checks while hidden in the bustle of the town.

The latter started from the looks. Fine-tailored suits or splash-patterned kimonos, a custom-made stick and their favourite pipe—as long as it looked detective-ish, any prop worked. They were the people to emphasise that they were detectives starting from their appearance, and promote themselves by being conspicuous.

And, just as expected, the owner of the Mitsuba Detective Agency that appeared before Nayuta and the others was part of the ‘latter’ to an overwhelming degree.

The white shirt, polar tie and vest were still understandable. Although there was no ‘detective’ class system-wise, such Western clothes were sold even in Kiyomihara.

However, even if they were easy to obtain, going so far as to have an inverness cape and deerstalker hanging on the wall made it look like nothing but an evident cosplay of the most famous detective in the world.

The bookshelves crammed with books, leaving no gaps, the glass shelves storing chemistry lab equipment, an old skeleton, and an antique gramophone were completely devoted to setting the atmosphere.

In the first place, as they were in-game, the ornamental books probably had blank pages. It was even questionable whether they could be taken out of the bookshelves.

The chemistry lab equipment was also meaningless of course, and as for the BGM coming from the gramophone, it was a net radio horse racing broadcast.

It seemed that favourite number nine: the bracket two, horse number two Nikukyūkaiser won Saturday's sixth race.

After confirming these results, the young detective switched off the gramophone-type radio in a good mood.

Under the light of the lamps, the owner of this room behind the mahogany desk, which gave off candy-like lustre, displayed an elegant smile.

“Welcome to this office in the outskirts, dear guests. I am Detective Clevel. Do not mind the cat Buddha statue. It's something that those guys from the Cat God Faith Society placed of their own accord. You really have to—know their character.”

Detective Clevel's voice was as clear as a presenter's.

He was slender but his face and figure weren't half bad. His gaze, as if he were appraising his guests, was somehow reminiscent of a kitsune.

(...So there are people that give off the same aura as the disguised kitsune from “The Kitsune's Wedding”...?)

Nayuta thought back on the quest that she and Koyomi had cleared several days ago.

Although the disguised kitsune in the quest definitely wasn't wearing Western clothes, he was a handsome young man who had eyes with long slits and a glamorous, slender face.

A pushover for looks, Koyomi was blindly struck by him, but, unfortunately, he wasn't Nayuta's type, thus once she confirmed that he was the enemy, she carried out her judgement on him without hesitation and even received a combo bonus.

Having seen this, she was asked “... Nayu-san, do you have something against hunks...?” by Koyomi with a serious look on her face, but she did not particularly have

a problem with that.

The detective named Clevel continued speaking in a smooth tone.

“Now then, Yanagi-san. As for your request, I understand the general details based on the email I received from your middleman just now. Seeing as you could not FullDive to your destination, I apologise that I could not show you the way, and I humbly regret it... Though if you had contacted me directly, I could have sent someone to meet you at Kiyomihara.”

Yanagi, sitting on the antique sofa, hung his head with a bitter smile.

“Oh no, I wanted to go for a stroll anyway, so I planned to look around the game myself first. Though, I truly did not expect getting lost at this age. If these ladies had not helped me, I would probably still be lost at this time.”

With a triumphant look, Koyomi puffed out her chest.

“Well, you have to support each other in times of trouble!... Ah, incidentally, I was also interested in the detective; if he were a fraud, I figured I had to stop him and, depending on the case, turn him over to the police... or something.”

In response to her rather rude and frank manner of speaking, the detective let out a chuckle.

“Calling me a fraud is harsh. Though, I understand your reasons for doubt. As a matter of fact— the agency was approved by the game management as a ‘tourist enterprise’ rather than a ‘detective enterprise’. In RPGs, situations when the sign for a business states ‘bar’ when it’s actually a temporary employment agency can be encountered now and then, right? It’s something like that.”

Nayuta inclined her head to the side. A detective enterprise in an online game was suspicious, but a tourist enterprise was quite suspicious as well.

“A tourist enterprise...? In a VRMMO you say?”

“Not what you expected? It’s quite popular among the English-speaking customers. Since a sightseeing trip to Japan takes both time and money, there is of course a demand for experiencing the atmosphere cheaply through a Japanese-style game. The

AmuSphere is excellent for that. Tasting gourmet food, soaking in a hot spring, getting worked up over ninja and admiring sakura—none of these are different from their real life equivalents. Why, it even allows ‘climbing mount Fuji with guaranteed good weather and no congestion’, which is hard to do in real life. So, my job is to accompany my clients on the quests that they wish to go on as an interpreter and guide, or show them around towns, stores and all the famous places.”

A black, bipedal nekomata that appeared out of nowhere placed some black tea in front of Nayuta and the others. They seemed to be business-use bots identical to the ones at the bakeneko tea house.

While putting some cube sugar into his black tea, Clevel continued the chat that doubled as his self-introduction.

“My customers aren’t all foreigners. Some officials from domestic enterprises, though not numerous, occasionally come to me with requests. They are usually people who have absolutely no experience with games, but want to observe from the inside for their collaboration plans and advances on the game market—I get requests like that.”

Clevel’s gaze faced a corner of the wall. A poster from the maker of a famous drink announcing their collaboration for the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ was affixed to the wall there.

“For such clients, if asked, I handle analyses of the in-game market and fads, and offer suggestions. At this point, I go into the consultant field rather than a tourist or detective enterprise, but... In a word, you could say that I act as a scapegoat to help officials from companies avoid responsibility. If their plans fail, they can put the blame on an outsider like me and save their reputation in the company.”

The working adult Koyomi gave a conspicuous, displeased expression.

“...Uwaa... You’re blunt...”

The detective sneered carelessly.

“I’ve had clients with such a plan in mind; that’s the extent of my work. Of course, I refuse jobs that are too likely to fail. Now then... As I have finished explaining what kind of place **this** is, let’s talk about Yanagi-san’s request.”

The detective changed his tone as he turned to Yanagi sitting on the sofa.

Yanagi responded with a meek nod.

“Based on the middleman’s letter, ‘I’d like to clear a certain new quest within a week’ is your request it seems, but—excuse me, I would like to confirm the payment first. That idiot seems to have made a mistake with the digits.”

Yanagi hurriedly shook his head.

“Oh no, I believe that it is correct. Two hundred thousand for the deposit, twenty thousand per man per day, and a million as a completion bonus for doing it within a week, so if you would like...”

Nayuta could not believe her ears at that amount of money. Koyomi frowned reflexively.

“...Eh? Wha? Are you talking about in-game currency? You can’t really be talking about real money, right?”

The detective sighed.

“We only deal in Japanese Yen and the Dollar. Yanagi-san—Excuse me but, are you serious? Of course, the price greatly depends on the content of the request, but there are almost no risks, unlike how the case is for detectives in the real world; it is basically safe. If it is just to help with quest clearing, the price per person per day is ten thousand, and the price for completion is at most fifty thousand. While it may be true that if it were a Seven Wonder-class large-scale quest, it would require a decent deposit, but... If I recall correctly, your request was the 〈Phantom Orchestra〉, right? Although no one has cleared it yet, if we believe the announcements from the game’s management, it should not be that difficult.”



Nayuta's shoulders twitched.

(Ah. The Phantom Orchestra—)

She had attempted the quest just a short while ago.

As there were about two to three new quests implemented per week, it wasn't strange that someone might be overwhelmed by the number of quests they wanted to do.

But, she could not understand Yanagi's true motives behind wanting to clear a quest that did not have known drop items or a confirmed value so much that he took the trouble to request a detective for help.

As for the quests implemented this week, a clearing group has formed for the ⟨Forest of Werewolves⟩, which had a prior announcement to include rare items, thus the majority postponed the Phantom Orchestra which did not even have clear triggering requirements.

Yanagi gave a deep bow.

"I beg of you, please consider. It is true that it might seem like a large sum, but I have certain circumstances that compel me to clear it within a week no matter what the cost, even if I have to pay such a large sum—"

"Whoa whoa, what circumstances!?! Is it normal to offer over a million yen just for clearing a quest?"

Koyomi shouted in a shrill voice, but Clevel held her back with his hands.

"Young lady, according to the rules here, the client doesn't have to speak about what he doesn't want to speak about—if there's also a large payment involved, I will not force him to talk. I will just handle a job that is as sincere as the sum offered for it."

"Yeah... You sure talk cool, but in short, you mean 'I have my eyes on the money' by that, right?"

Clevel took Koyomi's unrelenting indication in stride with a faint smile.

"I won't deny that. Money is a convenient scale for measuring how sincere and serious

a person is. Above all—can you two really disregard the wish of this elder when he is willing to pay so much out of pocket to have it granted?”

“...More like, we want to teach the detective a wonderful proverb: ‘Every sweet offer has a catch’... Ojii-chan, why are you in such a hurry? It’s not like there’s a time limit; you could just clear it at your own pace. You don’t need to pay such a suspicious detective any money; just say the word and we’ll help you free of charge.”

Nayuta, who had been carefully watching over the course of events, finally opened her mouth as well.

“I was just in the middle of investigating the 〈Phantom Orchestra〉. I have even found a hint regarding the requirements for triggering it, so if it goes well, we will probably clear it within a few days.”

Before the elderly priest could answer, the detective interjected.

“I see. That’s not a bad deal either— As a matter of fact, Yanagi-san. I have an issue to resolve during the time of your request. It is somewhat related to my schedule being free, but my assistant, who is usually in charge of combat operations, will not be able to log in due to personal business until after the tenth. I planned to hire a temporary mercenary if the need arose, but if these ladies wish to assist you, then that is just what you needed.”

Koyomi stood up from the sofa at once.

“Ah! Your get-rich-quick scheme was about to crumble, so you planned to placate us!”

“Please let me finish. I’m not so worried about money— Yanagi-san, let’s put our contract on hold till Monday. Instead, please try clearing the quest over today and tomorrow, the weekend, with these ladies. I will also accompany you and thus do some investigation beforehand, but I will not require payment for these two days. In the first place, if it is a simple quest that can be completed in just two days, I cannot accept such a large payment. If we are unable to clear the quest in two days— please consider again whether you would like to enter a contract with me on Monday. And, in the event of a contract being formed, I will assist you with all I have for five days starting from Monday.”

The detective finished his speech and gave Nayuta and Koyomi an intelligent gaze.

“...And so, this is my compromise. After all, starting from Monday, you two will have either school or work, right? You’ll likely be unable to help Yanagi-shi during that time. In the end, there lies the reason why he wants to employ a detective like me. A talented man, capable of focusing on this quest twenty four hours per day, even if I have to refrain from sleep, to clear it by any possible means, as long as the client has the money—that is who I am.”

Unable to object, Koyomi groaned vexedly.

“Muu... W-we can just clear it over the weekend! We can do it we can do it! No problem! Time attack, bring it! Let’s do it!(30)”

“...Indeed, we have no issue with it. Yanagi-san, you don’t mind us assisting you, do you?”

Nayuta’s tone was calm in comparison to Koyomi’s vigour, but the determination in her words could be said to be mostly the same.

Yanagi inclined his head as if he were troubled.

“Well, of course, this is just what I needed, but... are you sure? To do something like this for me, a person you have just met...”

Nayuta nodded modestly.

“As I have said before, it is a quest that I am investigating as well. Even without you, Yanagi-san, I planned to clear it before long.”

She had absolutely no idea why this elder wanted to clear the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ .

But, at least he did not seem like a bad person; seeing his sincere expression, it was obvious that this was important to him.

Detective Clevel picked up the inverness cape and deerstalker hanging on the wall.

“With that settled, let’s move out at once. Nayuta, Koyomi, we have just met, but I’m looking forward to working with you. Let’s form a party now, you too, Yanagi-san.”

Operating their respective consoles, the group finished forming a party. Yanagi took a bit more time, but thanks to Koyomi's instructions from the side, the impromptu party was finished without a hitch.

The ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ that they were about to attempt fell under the ⟨Fellow Traveller⟩ category, which only allowed players to encounter party members. Thus, it was impossible to take on the quest with other people unless a party was formed at least temporarily.

(Yanagi-san is of course level 1. Though the detective is quite the veteran...)

Gazing at the ⟨<sup>クレヴェル</sup>Clevel⟩ name displayed on the console, Nayuta nonchalantly checked his stats.

And she suddenly froze up.

“...Huh... What... is this...?”

Unintentionally letting out a moan.

There, she saw some numbers that could be called abnormal.

“...U-umm... detective, what is...?”

“What's the matter? Nayu-san, why did... Ueah!?”

Koyomi, who was beside her, noticed the abnormality as well and thus squeaked.

Looking at their reactions, the detective maintained his curt smile.

His stats displayed on the console— he was five levels higher than Nayuta. And yet, almost all of his other numbers were ⟨single digits⟩. In short, almost all of them were still level 1.

There was one sole entry among them that was raised to a number close to a thousand.

“Umm... you only raised your ⟨Luck⟩ ...”

“Wai... eeh... Uwae, wha, are you serious...? You can't even beat Itachi with that, let alone Kamaitachi.”

Itachi were just a bit stronger than small fry to beginners. The higher-ranked Kamaitachi were oriented towards intermediate-level players, and the highest-ranked Noriitachi<sup>(31)</sup> were oriented towards advanced-level players, but as all of them looked rather adorable, they were treated as mascot characters in-game.

A veteran with a questionable character build that might not even win against such opponents seemed like nothing but a terribly elaborate but poor joke.

In Asuka Empire, characters could be improved by freely allocating points earned through level ups to Strength, Intelligence, Agility, and other optional stats.

Fighting power was especially influenced by equipment quality, but to begin with, weapons and armour each had a set “minimum attribute value required to equip them”, hence if your stats were not raised to these values, you couldn't even equip them.

The equipment of Detective Clevel, who had not raised these stats at all, was almost like garbage.

In front of the dumbfounded Nayuta and Koyomi, Clevel calmly put on the coat that was only good for show and picked up his equally stylish stick that had no offensive ability.

“Now then, shall we be off, ladies? As you have noticed, I specialise in mental work. I'll leave the fighting to you, so do your best.”

Informing them as if it were only natural, the lucky detective turned gallantly and adroitly aside in their field of vision.

Nayuta and Koyomi exchanged glances in silence.

Somewhere in Twilight Street, a bot crow let out an innocent cry as if mocking people.

The Phantom Orchestra field, which was mostly an endless rural landscape, had a looped boundary.

If you reached the map's edge and wanted to get to the other side, it was impossible to either enter or leave the area aside from using the teleport point.

The teleport point also served as the event flag save point; in the case you left by using items, unsaved flags would be lost. And in the case of a wipe-out, you'd lose all the flags, even the ones you saved, and you'd have to start the quest over from the beginning.

"...And so, Yanagi-san. Our job, if an enemy appears, is to run around to increase our survival rate. If by any chance the ladies, our combat personnel, fall, we have to abandon them and at least escape ourselves. If we do that we will maintain the event flags as a party."

While walking along the footpath between rice fields in the middle of the night, Clevel gave this explanation to his client Yanagi-san.

"Well... that sounds... rather regrettable, if I should say so..."

"It is far better than starting over from scratch. So much that, when dealing with high-difficulty quests, there are parties which have spare members solely for maintaining the flags."

Hearing their conversation, Koyomi silently dropped her shoulders.

"...Well, what he's saying is absolutely true... but I don't really like it..."

Nayuta was of the same opinion, but since they had a week-long time limit, she wanted to avoid retrying due to a wipe-out. It wouldn't be so bad if it were in the initial stages, but a game over in the late stages of a quest would be nerve-wracking.

"...Well, if we had come solely with Yanagi-san, we would inevitably be the only ones fighting—And it seems that the detective will at least be using items..."

Although her advocacy was meant to ease Koyomi's displeasure, it definitely wasn't

meant to help the detective that relied on others so much.

“His stats aren’t suited for that. He can’t use decent equipment with that... Detective, how did you manage to work as an in-game guide with them?”

To Koyomi’s indication, Clevel responded with an unconcerned look.

“The numerical value of Luck is actually indispensable to a guide. I did say that I leave the fighting to my assistant, right? There are heaps of players pursuing strength, so hiring one as a mercenary isn’t that difficult. However— there aren’t that many players specialising in ⟨Luck⟩, you see. It’s the only thing I had a need to raise.”

“That’s not true. After all, the necessity...”

“Rare item drop rate.”

\*Gu\*, Koyomi was at a loss for words.

“Just by having me, the party as a whole has its rare item drop rate rise threefold. The upper limit is 10%, so I can’t boost it over that limit... but even so, the drop probability for 1% rate items can rise to 3%, and it even affects the chances of encountering rare enemies in the first place. Also, the chance of encountering ⟨superb views⟩ like geysers or seas of clouds is dependant on party member Luck. To an in-game tourist guide, you could say that it’s the most indispensable stat.”

It was a sound argument. But, she was naturally still a bit displeased.

“So you’re like a zashiki warashi, I see... I understand your reasoning, but was there any need to be so extreme? For example, couldn’t you allocate eighty percent to Luck and distribute the remaining twenty to the rest?”

“I had no such luxury. Just now I said that I can’t raise the probability of rares threefold’, but that’s only at my current level. There’s probably room to improve. If I could raise it to tenfold with more... I could get myself yet another business.”

The detective chuckled cheerfully.

“Indeed... until that time, I don’t have any need to change my methods...”

Calmly avoiding the who-knows-how-serious prank, Nayuta stopped in front of a small hokora erected along the road.

“Here it is. After I received a message from Koyomi-san some time ago, I found this hokora along the way to the teleport point... It was not present when I came here, so the shrine’s offertory box on the other side or something must have been the event switch for the 〈Phantom Orchestra〉, I believe.”

Facing the stone statue in the hokora, Yanagi joined his hands.

“...A tear-strained child. For Jizō<sup>(32)</sup>, it gives a rather heartbreaking impression.”

Beside him, Nayuta selected an item from her console.

“There was a note that said ‘I wanna eat some botamochi’ in front of the statue. So, when I was at the bakeneko tea house some time ago, I took the opportunity to purchase some botamochi... I shall try placing it.”

Nayuta placed the offering botamochi wrapped in bamboo grass in front of the statue.

In front of the group, the expression of the stone statue changed faintly.

Although it was still a vague, unsettled-looking expression, it more or less stopped weeping, while the botamochi offering disappeared like mist.

“...Ooh. I wonder if the next event will occur now?”

While Koyomi surveyed the surroundings, a matsuribayashi came from some far-off place.

The timber of the light drum, high-pitched flute, and elegant koto formed a complete whole, and created a generally lonely tune.

It wasn’t like she had heard it when she was a child, but for some reason, it made her succumb to a feeling of nostalgia.

Yanagi knitted his eyebrows.

“I can hear... a matsuribayashi.”

Clevel turned his stick around.

“The goal of this quest is to find the origin of the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩. Whether this will clear the quest, or whether something else will happen afterwards—or whether a boss character appears is unknown, but at any rate, the fact that there has been no one to clear it probably implies that there is some sort of nuisance involved.”

“Hmm. But there could be people who cleared it but remained silent about it...?”

“Speaking by the book, you are correct. But unlike the norm, the number of people who have successfully cleared each quest in the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ is announced on the official site. The announcement is made once per day, so I cannot be certain what the situation is at the present time, but—in the morning, it was still 0. It could be due to it only being the third day since implementation, but it is certain that it is not a simple quest that you can solve through brute force.”

As the masureibayashi seemed to get closer, Clevel pointed his stick in front of the stone statue.

The botamochi offering there had already disappeared, but in its stead a new piece of paper had appeared.

Nayuta carefully picked it up.

On the paper was a line of characters written with a brush—

⟨I wanna eat some kuzumochi⟩

“Oooh... So that’s how it’s gonna be...”

Koyomi groaned.

Clevel also gave a bitter smile and shook his shoulders.

“I see, so this is the cause of the 0 clear rate so far, huh. An errand-type quest pointlessly eats up a lot of time. In addition to the time for finding the required items,

it also takes time to make a round trip between the hokora and the town, so people are being smart and putting it on hold until someone spreads a walkthrough with all the required items.”

Nayuta was also dejected. She did not mind an errand once, but repeating a similar task over and over felt awfully fruitless.

“Well then, shall we return to the town again?”

Yanagi was about to turn back quickly, but Clevel turned his kitsune-like gaze to him.

“No. Before that, I will investigate this hokora a bit. If it were just a monotonous and bothersome quest like that, I don’t believe that it would have passed the game management’s judging—even if, for argument’s sake, it did pass, it should have been adjusted during implementation. Either this request is a fake, or... it is a riddle.”

Clevel looked inside the hokora.

Nayuta also brought her head closer from the opposite site.

The hokora was so small that if you wanted, you could just lift it up in your arms. There weren’t that many places to investigate either.

“Detective-san, is it really okay for you to help like this? You’re unpaid right now? Wouldn’t it be better for you to drag it on?”

Hearing Koyomi’s ridiculing indication, Clevel responded with a sneer, his gaze still fixed on the hokora.

“Do you really think that Yanagi-shi would want to place a request with a sly person who’d slight his work like that? After all, as I call myself a detective, even if an imperfect one, I have no intention of slighting my work when solving riddles with my pride on the line.”

His tone made it seem like he was joking, but Nayuta could feel faint zeal in his words.

(Aside from his appearance, he’s actually a surprisingly earnest person...?)

Due to his get-up that looked like cosplay, at first he seemed like an easily flattered

person, but from his logical way of speaking, it seemed that he was intentionally playing the buffoon. While investigating the inside of the hokora with his touch, the detective gave a faint smile.

“Hmm—Miss, please take a look overhead at the stone statue.”

Following his instruction, Nayuta checked the ceiling of the hokora. She found a piece of paper with 〈Clouds〉 written on it affixed there.

“...Aah. A kind of paper frequently affixed above a kamidana?<sup>(33)</sup>”

“That’s right. As it would be disrespectful to have something superfluous above a God’s head, a paper or board with ‘sky’ or ‘heavens’, or ‘clouds’ and other symbols written on it is affixed to the ceiling, as a substitute for the sky. In other words— it’s probably a hint that ‘this hokora accepts substitutes’.”

Clevel’s hand was grasping a brush stand. It seemed to have been hidden behind the stone statue.

“Nayuta, could you turn that paper around and unfold it?”

Guessing the detective’s intention, Nayuta unfolded the paper on her hands.

Clevel then fluently wrote down 〈kuzumochi〉 in India ink.

As Koyomi and Yanagi watched on, Nayuta folded the paper and returned it as an offering.

Naturally, Koyomi was flustered.

“Eh. Nayu-san, is that really gonna work...?”

“I do not know. But, it does not cost anything to try.”

While they were talking, the paper offering disappeared and a new paper appeared.

The next demand was written there.

〈I wanna eat some habutaemochi〉

The stone statue child stopped crying entirely. Its mood was still poor though.

Koyomi clapped her hands.

“Wow, it worked!... I guess? But yet another mochi, huh... If I’m not mistaken, it’s sold in a high-class wagashi store in Kiyomihara.”

“It doesn’t seem like we need to buy it. Let’s continue.”

Clevel wrote down the characters, and Nayuta placed it as an offering.

Yanagi frowned.

“Dear me... the timbre of the matsuribayashi seems to be getting even closer.”

“It is probably proof of making progress on the flag. This is probably the requirement for triggering the quest. If you notice the trick, it could be done in a few moments, but if you do not notice and have to make round trips to the town, it would be a rather annoying task.”

“Ah. But, if you left someone in town to contact via messages, he could already look for the item during the time it takes to return to town...”

In the middle of Koyomi’s words, the next demand came from the stone statue.

〈I wanna eat some koorimochi〉

“...I take back my words. Finding this would be rather difficult...!”

“...Is this a local cuisine somewhere? Though I am not really sure what it is.”

“The majority of those attempting the quest probably gave up at this point’, imagined Nayuta.

Yanagi gave a rather cheerful smile.

“It’s when you freeze and dry a mochi. It’s a preserved food that you can dip into hot water and eat in the cold regions. At times, it is also used as an ingredient in wagashi.”

Nayuta was shocked at Yanagi’s bits of knowledge.

(In the end, I wonder... who is this person?)

Unless you shared a very close relationship with someone, online game manners did not allow prying into the person’s IRL identity. But, she felt curious about multiple things about him, including the reason for the request. Based on his extensive knowledge shown just now, it was possible to imagine that he was some sort of researcher or cook.

Because there was no need to look for the hard-to-find requested good as an item, Clevel easily granted the stone statue’s wish with the stroke of a brush.

⟨I wanna eat some kobanmochi⟩

“The mochi series still continues, huh... is this another wagashi?”

“Yes. I happen to see them at times, but aside from the koban<sup>(34)</sup> shape being a common feature among them, it seems that the method of making them is different in each store. Some have red bean jam filling, some use yomogi, some have beans mixed in... quite the variety available. There is also a tree called kobanmochi.

There was no hesitation in Yanagi’s explanation.

⟨I wanna eat some nikkimochi⟩

“...Wagashi again? It doesn’t seem to be sold in Asuka Empire’s shops—It’s probably something made with the Cooking skill.”

Clevel’s dazzling eye expression was somewhat stern.

The sound of the matoribayashi continued to approach them.

Koyomi's gaze wandered about in unease.

"...Hey, you know. It can't really go on forever, can it? If it actually enters a loop..."

"—No, I think it'll end soon enough. Let's continue."

The paper offering with the characters on it disappeared in the time it would take to say 'ah', and the next demand came out.

⟨I wanna eat some isobemochi⟩

It was a mochi that was just dipped in soy sauce for flavour and wrapped in nori. This definitely could not be called a wagashi.

"...It suddenly became a simple order. I saw some on the street stalls in Twilight Street."

While reading the paper, Nayuta checked on the state of the stone statue.

Its expression had changed entirely from its initial tear-strained look. That did not mean that it had turned into a smile though.

It lost its expression, and became like a Noh<sup>(35)</sup> mask that showed no emotions at all. Although befitting a stone statue, it was a bit creepy.

On the other hand, the sound of the matoribayashi was already only a few steps away.

Neither the shadow nor the figure of the performers could be seen, but their music was playing in close proximity.

\*Pihyara\*, \*tonton\*, \*sharansharan\*, although it should have sounded bustling, for some reason, it did not make her feel exhilarated.

On the contrary, it strangely made her break into a cold sweat.

(I can't see them, but... they're surrounding us?)

Nayuta put some strength into her limbs to be ready to take a battle stance at any time.

The sound of the instruments seemed like a scream. She could also hear someone's voice whispering and murmuring right next to her ears, but had no idea what they were saying.

The cowardly Koyomi clung to Nayuta's back.

"...T-this sounds like a sign of something bad coming...? This definitely looks like the party where something comes out, right? Something is breathing into my ears you know...!"

"Calm down. This quest... has yet to even begin."

Clevel told her in a whisper.

The series of actions that Nayuta and the others had been performing was meant to satisfy the requirements for triggering the quest.

Unless the requirements for triggering it were satisfied, the enemy would not appear. And so, at the moment of the quest being triggered, a low bell sound would ring as a sign. Only after that would they need to be vigilant.

Clevel made an offering with the paper with <isobemochi> written on it.

The paper instantly disappeared and a new paper appeared.

There were no mochi requests on it anymore.

るり はり  
<瑠璃も玻璃も照らせば光る。提灯いらすの月夜といえど、たまには欲しき此明  
かり)> (36)

This composition was written in proper characters<sup>(37)</sup> with furigana as compared to before.

Koyomi muttered in unease.

“The mochi series is finally over... I think I’ve heard of <sup>ruri</sup>瑠璃, but what’s a hari?”

“...Koyomi-san... <sup>Lapis lazuli</sup>瑠璃 is a blue gem and <sup>hari</sup>玻璃 means a crystal. Long ago, both of those words carried the meaning of glass.”

“In Buddhism, they were valued as two of the seven treasures. Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, shako, coral, and agate - the seven of these—though it seems to differ slightly between schools.”

Koyomi blinked a few times. Even with Nayuta and Clevel’s explanations, it seemed that she didn’t quite get it.

“Mantis <sup>Shako</sup>shrimp? Sort of like a shrimp?”

“Not that, it means the shell of a <sup>shako-gai</sup>giant clam. Koyomi-san... Have you ever taken your lessons on classical literature properly?”

Still clinging to Nayuta’s back, Koyomi made a sour expression with her lips.

“Na-Nayu-san, you and Detective-san, who know such minor bits of knowledge so well are the weird ones—I’m normal!”

“I think you should at least know what hari is— This is a proverb. 〈<sup>Even a lapis lazuli or crystal</sup>瑠璃も<sup>A great talent stands out when</sup>玻璃も照らせば光る〉 means ‘Encouragement brings out the b’, but in this case it probably refers to this hokora rather than a talented person. 〈<sup>This light</sup>此明かり〉 is a word that means Bon festival welcoming fire. And then—as for the paper with 〈Clouds〉 that is affixed to the ceiling, it’s only used 〈when there’s a second floor above〉. In other words, this hokora has an invisible second floor. If we sum up all the hints—”

Clevel took out a dungeon clearing lantern from his console’s item list.

With his eyes narrowing due to the dazzling light, Clevel placed the lantern atop the

hokora.

As all of them held their breaths, the matsu-ribayashi drums resounded so loudly that they even made their bodies tremble.

Nayuta and the others, who had all reflexively plugged their ears, saw how the light extending from the lantern became a breeze that brushed the ears of rice, and along with this stream, a golden line began to form a huge, solid body.

In the time it would take to say 'ah', the line filled the surface of the rice field, and a mere moment later, the colour began to spread.

What appeared above and to the sides of the hokora as if surrounding it was an excessively huge, golden castle.

Right in front were broad stone steps and a huge castle gate, and a stone wall with a steep slope continued to the sides as far as the eye could see; as for the top of the castle, the top part of it was engulfed in darkness and could no longer be seen.

“Hi-hii!?”

Koyomi, clinging to Nayuta, buried her face into Nayuta's clothes.

Taking their gaze away from the castle, Nayuta and the others saw that they were surrounded by matsu-ribayashi performers.

The group of players wearing kariginu and eboshi<sup>(38)</sup> were semi-transparent. Their faces lacked vitality and their complexions were faint and looked like they were barely present.

And yet, the thrumming sounds they made were distortedly intense, as if they were venting their malice on their instruments.

They ascended the stone steps to the side of the hokora, and, ignoring Nayuta and the others, set foot into the castle.

As the procession advanced orderly, a different, bass sound, like that of the joya no kane<sup>(39)</sup> on New Year's Eve, resounded only once, mixing in with the rhythmical timbre of the matsu-ribayashi?

This was none other than the sign signaling the triggering of a quest. The Hundred and Eight Apparitions began with a hundred and eight bell chimes.

Clevel turned around towards Nayuta and the others, dumbfounded by the spectacle in front of them.

“—Now then, the quest has been triggered. Let’s pay a visit to the castle ourselves as well.”

As he proclaimed in a tone as if he were invited to a friend’s house, a smile so elegant that it was creepy appeared on his kitsune-like face.

Nayuta cast her eyes downwards, and after closing them for a bit— she slowly nodded.

Thus, the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ quest raised its curtain.

## §

The matsuribayashi phantoms in the area disappeared into the castle in the time it would take to say ‘ah’.

The surroundings changed and were engulfed in silence, but due to the presence of the huge castle in front of them, the countryside atmosphere that hung in the air until just now was blown away entirely.

The small hokora that was here from the beginning looked extremely cramped with the stone steps to its sides and the castle overhead, but the stone child statue that had become expressionless seemed like the ruler of the castle with its arrogant look.

Still clinging to Nayuta’s back, Koyomi muttered in a trembling voice.

“...W-what was that? That group of phantoms just now... They entered the castle, but...”

‘If she’s that bad at dealing with scary stuff, why is she so desperately playing the Hundred and Eight Apparitions?’, this was another thing that Nayuta didn’t understand. This seemed reckless for a simple-minded, inquisitive scaredy-cat like her.

The detective began climbing the stone steps one step ahead.

“We’ll find out when we get there. This quest... is definitely more to my liking than I had imagined. The creator of the quest has good taste.”

“Eeh... Detective-san, what is your liking?”

At the inquisitive Koyomi’s question, Clevel showed a truly forced, sociable smile.

“Not solvable through brute force. And, one that can be solved by using your head a bit— when you’re at an age like this. A light brain exercise by solving a clever riddle is more pleasant than the tiresome sense of achievement of defeating a strong enemy.”

While following the detective, Nayuta tilted her head.

“Though you do not look that aged... So, to put it simply, don’t you just mean that with how low your combat stats are, you have a low variety of entertainment?”

Clevel shook his shoulders and smiled. This wasn’t a made-up smile.

“Your indication is quite unsparing. True, that was one of the reasons as well. After all—I seem to have forgotten the proper way to enjoy the game.”

The exaggerating detective finished climbing the stairs at an easygoing pace.

Yanagi, looking up at the huge castle gate in front of him, let out a deep breath.

“This is... another splendid object. Rather than an ordinary gate, doesn’t it look like the Yōmei-mon of Tōshō-gū?<sup>(40)</sup>”

Although there was the big difference that the other side of the gate was an indoor area, it could not be denied that its silhouette and size were almost the same.

Koyomi rushed over beside the gate.

“Ah, I see, I thought it kinda looked familiar! Nikkō, I went there on a school trip in elementary school... Mizaru, Iwazaru, Kikazaru<sup>(41)</sup>, right?”

“...A field trip... aah.”

Under his braided hat, Yanagi's face stiffened a little.

Before anyone aside from Nayuta could notice, he immediately hung his head, and hid his expression.

On the other hand, Clevel continued to watch over the surroundings attentively.

“Now then, I thought that the gatekeeper would come out at this point, but—”

Nayuta suddenly felt a lukewarm breeze on her cheeks.

In the Hundred and Eight Apparitions, this wind was a sign of the enemy appearing in most cases.

Koyomi unsheathed her ninja sword, while Clevel moved in front of Yanagi. It seemed that he intended to be the client's shield for the moment.

“Nayu-san! Something's coming from inside!”

“Okay!”

Before it could close the distance, Nayuta charged forward with her clothes fluttering.

If she and Koyomi were alone, they could just size it up, but they had two people to protect in the rear. If the enemy had a wide-area attack and closed the distance between them, it could be quite capable of wiping them out.

Just as Nayuta leapt inside the castle from the gate, torches along the right and left walls lit up.

Due to that light, the figure of the enemy standing in front was illuminated.

What she found there was—a small child wearing a white kitsune mask.

Nayuta, who had expected an obvious gatekeeper like a group of armoured soldiers, a huge spider, or a ferocious oni, stopped on the spot in a rush.

The kitsune-masked child was wearing a worn, splash-patterned kimono. She was

barefooted and had no weapon.



The figure, standing alone and looking lonely, looked like a lost child.

(This quest's type is the ⟨Fellow Traveller⟩ ... There is no chance of meeting another player outside of the party. In other words, this child is either an enemy, or an NPC...)

To make sure, Nayuta called out to the child cautiously.

“...Who are you?”

The kitsune-masked child beckoned to Nayuta without uttering a word.

‘What’s up with that’, a bewildered Nayuta looked back at her group.

“Detective-san. It seems we are being invited...”

But there was no sign of her fellow travellers in her field of vision.

Even the gate that she should have entered through was missing, and instead, a stone-paved, dark road continued endlessly.

(...A warp zone!?)

Nayuta, who charged ahead alone, seemed to have been taken away to some different place.

She promptly brought out her console, but, as expected, the communication feature was locked down. Giving up and logging out were possible, but if, for example, everyone withdrew like that, then all the event flags they had raised would be lost.

Nayuta quickly made up her mind.

This was nothing to tremble about. In the end, this was a ⟨haunted house⟩ -like place that guaranteed safety.

She was concerned with how Koyomi and the others were doing, but aside from the beginner Yanagi, the other two were quite high-leveled.

(...Ah, Detective-san could be useless. With stats like that, he couldn’t even beat a wild rabbit—)

While considering this, Nayuta took an optimistic view of the situation.

From the balance regulation point of view, the fact that they were split inside the castle meant that an 'enemy so extremely powerful that it can't be beaten alone' would not come out for the time being.

A quest like the "Subjugation of a Tiger on the Folding Screen", where running around was in the premise, was a different case, but at the least, the chances of encountering a boss class enemy before she met up with her comrades were low.

This would be the part where you would be driven to dread due to isolation if this were reality, but no matter how real it seemed, it was nothing more than a game with balance regulation, after all.

—Unlike SAO, there was no 'dying' here.

The kitsune-masked child grasped Nayuta's sleeve before she became aware of it.

"...Onee-chan. Shall we play?"

She heard a muffled, young voice coming from the other side of the mask.

Nayuta shook her head.

"Sorry. I strayed from my group. I have to meet up with them and clear this quest, you see."

The other party was an NPC. She did have a need to choose a sensible response for the event flags, but there was no need to fuss about it excessively.

The child looked up at Nayuta.

"...You won't play with me...?"

"...What do you want to play?"

"Hide-and-seek."

The child turned their back on her and broke into a run.

(...I see. So, I have to find and catch that child in this dungeon, I guess—)

The child's figure disappeared into the darkness of the passageway.

Nayuta once again surveyed her surroundings.

There was a stone wall on either side. Due to the torches dotting it, it was faintly lit, but the intensity wasn't enough to easily see far ahead.

Her footing was stone pavement, with stains of blood here and there.

—Straining her ears, she could faintly hear the matoribayashi drums somewhere. As the event proceeded, the sound would probably become louder.

“—All right.”

Resolving to advance, Nayuta fixed her gaze on the dim passageway.

She closed her eyes, and took a breath—

After taking a lot of air into her lungs, she slowly breathed out.

And then, she carefully, but without hesitation, began walking towards the cold darkness.

## §

In the castle, the lone Yanagi was at a loss.

He didn't really understand what had happened.

Nayuta, the Battle Miko who had taken the lead, suddenly disappeared, then Koyomi, who was rushing towards her, disappeared, and immediately after the detective clicked his tongue, Yanagi found himself alone.

It wasn't enough for him to feel 'afraid', but it had him thinking 'So, what should I do now' over and over, to no avail.

Along the way, he had received several pieces of advice from Clevel.

‘If you become separated, use the communication feature of your console.’

‘However, there is the possibility that you won’t be able to use it during an event, so in that case, decide yourself whether you want to continue searching, or give up and return to town.’

Right now, the communication feature was locked down.

However, there was no sign of any enemies, and the situation didn’t seem like it warranted escaping right away.

Yanagi surveyed his surroundings.

He was in a large hall. And it wasn’t of usual width.

The floor underneath his feet was tatami-matted, not a single pillar, let alone a wall, could be seen, while the wooden ceiling continued endlessly.

Although it was faintly bright rather than dark, there was no light source that looked like a light source.

There was nothing that could be used as a landmark and it was inconceivably wide in all directions.

Alone, in a room that would be impossible to make in reality—

Yanagi was once again at a loss.

“...I can’t do anything by just standing here. I guess I should walk...”

Muttering with a sigh mixed in, he began walking on the tatami with his gaiters still on.

This being a game, his sight was fairly clear and unaffected by age. His legs and loins didn’t hurt when moving around either. He did feel fatigue, but even that was on the same level as he felt when he was young, so in other words, he felt no handicap due to

age.

Only his reflexes weren't the same as those of his youth, but just being able to walk normally like in his youth made him feel good for some reason, in contrast to the ominous state of his surroundings.

"...So a VRMMO that supports FullDive... I see, so that's what it feels like—"

While walking with no concern, Yanagi cast his eyes down.

The elderly who have lost their physical strength were a given, but even people who could not move their bodies properly in the real world could easily have a healthy body in this world.

After all, a game could be said to be nothing more than a simulated experience, but to someone who had problems leading even a normal life, this virtual space where they could enjoy their body without being conscious of its shackles was truly a godsend.

Going where they wanted, eating what they wanted, doing what they wanted—a healthy person could not really imagine how happy all of this would make them.

Yanagi continued aimlessly walking along the great hall with no end in sight.

While he was moving straight forward along the edge of the tatami, an unexpected, small figure appeared ahead.

A sole child wearing a black kitsune mask who seemed to have blended with the darkness before—

Yanagi spontaneously froze up.

Although he stopped breathing for a moment, this wasn't because of surprise. He was expecting such a situation somewhere in his heart.

"...O... Oo..."

The moan that slipped out from him was like a cry, even though it wasn't accompanied by tears.

The child beckoned Yanagi with his white hand that had lost its complexion.

Stepping up as if he was staggering, Yanagi tried grasping the shoulder of the child.

His extended hand trembled and his breathing that should have been well-ordered was now wild again.

The kitsune-masked child turned his back to him just as the hand was about to reach him, and broke into a run.

“Ah... wait!”

Yanagi rushed after him in panic.

Out of nowhere, the sound of a matoribayashi suddenly began resounding in his ears.

Strength left his legs, and his field of vision distorted.

“...Ugh...?”

After an unpleasant feeling that seemed like dizziness from standing up too fast, Yanagi, who had come to a halt, somehow managed to hold his ground without his knees falling down by relying on his monk's staff.

In the darkness a bit of a distance away, the boy, who had turned around, took off his kitsune mask.

—What Yanagi saw underneath was a face that he recognised.

It was rather far away, so he couldn't possibly see clearly. But, Yanagi had no reason to believe he was mistaken.

“...Kiyofumi...”

While calling out the child's name, Yanagi began pursuing him unsteadily.

The kitsune-masked child continued running through the infinite, large hall.

Despite his figure disappearing into the darkness, Yanagi continued earnestly

pursuing the no longer visible figure.

## §

The detective, Clevel, was in a castle tower. It seemed that his characteristic good luck had been exhibited at a time like this as well; below him were ears of rice making waves that were shining silver due to the moonlight, beyond was a mountain ridge covered in leftover snow, and in the night sky, clear of stars, was the radiant moon - a superb view extended all over.

The creator's fastidiousness could be felt in the cool and clear beauty that was unbefitting of a horror-taste quest.

(...This scenery seems to be different from the one we saw from the ground before rushing into the castle based on the terrain...)

The scene that he saw from the tower was probably specially designed. For argument's sake, if you tried used a kaginawa<sup>(42)</sup> or something to descend down, you wouldn't necessarily reach the field from before.

But then, his goal was to 'investigate' rather than escape, thus he had no need to test that out. Incidentally, he had no kaginawa with him.

It was unexpected that he was forcibly separated from his comrades, but even if they were wiped out, it was possible to just do the quest over. Unlike SAO, a game over had no link to death.

—A game over had no link to death.

Clevel took a deep breath.

He was once trapped in that game.

Although he did not want to recall the events from then, at the same time, he by no means wanted to forget them.

The SAO Incident was related to his reason for dabbling in the work of a 'detective' like this.

(If only... that incident hadn't taken place—)

The detective changed his sluggish thinking and once again looked over the castle tower.

Someone was... peeking from a window on the opposite side.

Because this was frequently used in horror productions, Clevel instead grinned and started walking.

The black figure peeking out from the window went inside as if it were crawling.

He then heard the timbre of the matsuribayashi coming from somewhere.

The detective felt dizzy.

“...Status abnormalities... none, I guess.”

He promptly checked his own state, but found no odd changes. Though, he did feel as if his field of vision narrowed down.

The crawling figure extended its hand to Clevel while painfully twisting its body. The moment his face was illuminated by the lanterns illuminating the tower—

Clevel froze up on the spot.

(Why... why... is 'he' here...?)

The boy crawling on the floor was a person that definitely should not have been there.

Despite being shocked, Clevel didn't lose his composure. He persistently remained calm.

However, that calmness, due to “not being able to grasp the situation” was a thing similar to paralysis.

Was he playing a game, or was he just sleeping and having a dream?—he felt suspicious even about that.

The man crawling on the floor in pain faced Clevel and opened his mouth in a way that seemed he was trying to shout something.

However, no voice came out of it.

The body smeared in blood was dressed in a western-style platemail that was unbecoming of (Asuka Empire) .

To Clevel, this, of course, was an item that he recognised.

—Something that he tried to forget, but could not forget.

Clevel didn't lose his composure.

He never—lost his composure.

He did not believe in ghosts. If he saw something like that, he discerned that it was either an imitation made by someone or a kind of hallucination that his brain was showing him.

(That's right, it's a hallucination... or a figment of my **imagination**. **That** cannot be that guy. However...)

—Taking a good look, he noticed that the crawling man's face was somewhat blurry. That was the main cause for making him lose his sense of reality too much.

Once again, Clevel didn't lose his composure.

That's why he was able to think.

Even if, for example, his senses became numb due to not grasping the situation, he was able to make a few 'conjectures' without turning to panic.

And so, one of the possibilities that he derived was not a very good answer.

(It can't be... that this quest is... this is bad. If the game management finds out...!)

In Clevel's field of vision, while he was grinding his teeth, the floor in the area of the crawling man turned black.

As if the floor had turned into a bottomless marsh, the man's body began to sink into the floor.

As Clevel tried rush over to him, a hand grasped his hem from behind.

He promptly looked back.

There, he found a young boy with a kitsune mask.

His slender fingers were grasping Clevel's coat, and he was fixedly staring at Clevel from within his mask.

Clevel's attention was turned away for a few moments, and he then immediately returned his gaze to the sinking man.

(...He's gone...?)

'He' was no longer there.

He sunk too quickly. It would be correct to say that he seemed to have **disappeared** while his gaze was away for a moment.

In the first place, seeing as this was a virtual space, such a disappearance wasn't strange.

While gazing at the floor where the man had disappeared, Clevel called out to the kitsune-masked child.

“—You. I have to clear this quest with Yanagi-shi immediately. Lead me to my scattered comrades. You— aren't an ⟨enemy⟩ in this quest, right?”

The kitsune-masked child tilted his head in wonder.

This child... was of course not a ghost or anything. Just an AI—and in addition to that, this was probably a being assigned the rule of being a guide in this quest.

The child let go of Clevel's hem in silence and glid towards the edge of the castle tower.

At his destination was a set of stairs, which were so steep that they looked more like ladders, to descend to the lower floor.

The child leapt down below, without using the stairs or making a sound, and disappeared.

Clevel followed after him.

There was, of course, the possibility that he was leading him to a trap, but if getting past that trap was the clearing requirement, this child was unmistakably the guide of this quest.

(...If I get involved with some small fry at this stage, I'm probably going to lose...)

To Clevel, whose stats aside from Luck were unusually low, this was one point to worry about.

As if to support his fears, something squirmed along the ceiling downstairs with a rustling sound.

A half-spider woman dressed as a courtesan appeared in his field of vision when he looked up after descending the steep stairs.

The woman, clinging to the ceiling while upside-down, smiled, exposing the fangs in her slit mouth.

"...A jorōgumo—huh."

With the tip of his stick, Clevel lightly struck the floor. This was his habit when thinking.

To a master player, this wasn't a particularly strong opponent.

But, with Clevel's stats at least, it wasn't an opponent he was a match for.

He couldn't chase after the kitsune-masked child without defeating this monster, but it would probably be difficult to defeat. His sole path of retreat was the castle tower with nowhere to run.

—In other words, there was nothing he could do.

The detective lightly struck his forehead—

Facing the virtual ⟨death⟩ that allowed do-overs, he took a step of resignation backwards.

## §

When Nayuta managed to temporarily withdraw from the castle, she found that she had already received three messages in her mailbox.

[[Nayu-san, sorry! I tried my best, but got done in... See you in the Detective-san's office tomorrow!]]

[[Sorry. I lost too. It seems that Yanagi-shi is tired as well, so you should log out for today as well.]]

[[I beg your pardon. For not being of any use—]]

It seemed that all three of them were forcefully driven out. This meant that the only one who was able to safely withdraw from the castle, while maintaining the event flags, was Nayuta.

In the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩, as a death penalty, players who had a game over could not log in again for the next six hours.

The usual penalty of losing one item in possession randomly also existed, but as long as you had a ⟨Sarubobo⟩<sup>(43)</sup> to use as a sacrifice, it wasn't really scary.

It seemed that the origin of this doll was a popular amulet in Hida province<sup>(44)</sup> that imitated a baby <sup>saru</sup>monkey and “drove away” <sup>saru</sup>calamities.

In the Hundred and Eight Apparitions, the setting was that it “went away”<sup>saru</sup> in the place of would-be lost items, thus it was an indispensable item to raid groups.

In the first place, because of horror-taste circumstances, there were plenty of sudden game overs in this event.

The Sarubobo was a relief measure for that; it was a special item exclusively used for the Apparition event, thus it did not exhibit its effect in Asuka Empire's other quests.

As long as you had one, there would be minimal damage due to game overs, but nothing could be done about the six-hour login restriction.

Giving up on a prompt reunion, Nayuta decided to log out for the time being.

After saving their event flags at the teleport point, and restocking at a general store on items that she had used up while she was at it, she returned to her own room. She raised her head from her bed and noticed that it was already dark outside through the window.

She heard her mother's voice coming from outside her room as if scolding her.

"Yurina, are you still playing games? If you hear me, the bath is ready, so go take a bath."

"...Yeah. I'm going now."

Nayuta—Kushiinada Yurina surveyed her room while giving an answer.

Returning from an old Japanese-style world to her room, she was a just bit bewildered by the differences between the two worlds.

There was a huge but slightly plain black cat plush toy atop her bed. This barely seemed like a decoration that suited a female high-school student; as for everything else, it was a plain room.

A large number of books, mostly novels, crammed into the bookshelf on the wall, a PC on the desk; the room used mostly whitish and blackish colours and there weren't that many sundries around. Although it was very orderly, the room was so drab that it could even be mistaken for a guy's room.

Having entered the living room, she found her older brother playing shōgi<sup>(45)</sup> with their father.

It seemed that her older brother was dominating today, as the always faint-hearted

father's brow was unusually wrinkled and he was making awfully loud groans.

"Onii-chan, are you off-duty today?"

"...It'd be bad if I was playing shōgi with the old man when I wasn't off duty."

He responded in shocked tone, and Yurina chuckled.

Her mother also peeked out from her kitchen island.

"Playing shōgi with your father instead of going on a date despite being off-duty isn't a bad thing on its own, I wonder? Father would probably faint if Yurina brought a boyfriend home, but if her brother brought a girlfriend home, he'd give a warm welcome, you know?"

The elder brother, who was single, pretended not to hear that and shrugged his shoulders.

Father, who finally made his next move, timidly raised his head.

"...Yurina. I'm asking just in case but, you don't have anyone like that yet... right?"

Before Yurina could even answer, her brother laughed out loud.

"She wouldn't be wasting her precious Saturday afternoon on a game if she had someone like that. Hey, dad. Checkmate."

"Aah... hey you, there shouldn't have been a knight there... ugh, did you swap it with the rook..."

It seemed that their game was coming to an end.

Having sat down on the sofa, Yurina began checking the site that she always visited on her tablet before going to the bath.

MMO Today.

This major news site dealing in VRMMO-related info was acknowledged for the speed and accuracy of its info. Not only did it have walkthroughs, it even covered business

trends and new game ads and the special-feature article for the past few days was a journal by the manager Thinker about his trip to Canada.



He was visiting a local software company and taking a direct interview from the up-and-coming creators—that was the content of it, but as his new wife Yulier was accompanying him and frequently appeared in the corner of the photos, there was a minority that went “Is this an open honeymoon” in jealousy despite how earnest the article was.

Just after Yurina began reading today’s update, a news flash appeared at the top of the site.

[Asuka Empire - Bug in New ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ Quest]

(A new quest... it can’t be—)

There were only two new quests released this week: the ⟨Forest of Werewolves⟩ and the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ .

Having a bad feeling, Yurina immediately clicked on the article.

While she went on reading, her fears were completely supported.

“...Complaints about the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ , released just this week, have been reported...? To investigate the matter, the quest will temporarily be suspended... re-release date not yet determined—”

Dumbfounded, she read over the short article again several times. Perhaps because this was a rushed first report, the article did not cover the content of the complaint.

(No way... But, Yanagi-san wanted to clear it within a week at any cost...)

Such a temporary content suspension has happened numerous times in the past. There were quests that were just deleted entirely, but it was common for it to take around a month to make revisions to a quest that gets restored.

You could say that it was already hopeless if you wanted to clear it within a week.

Looking for additional info, Yurina opened the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ strategy guide community site from her bookmarks.

As expected, there was already a thread about the suspension of the Phantom Orchestra.

Aware that there were many conjectures and gossip of questionable accuracy, she began checking them out.

Among the many comments bewildered by the abrupt suspension, a certain entry caught her attention.

[I've heard that an actual ghost appeared in the game.]

Yurina—Nayuta compressed her lips tightly.

She already knew that this entry wasn't just stupid, idle gossip.

However, she did not believe that was a ⟨real⟩ ghost. She was practically convinced that it was some kind of trick.

And unfortunately—it was highly likely that it was a kind of trick that the game management could not turn a blind eye to.

Turning her back to her brother and father, who were carefreely playing shōgi, Nayuta unconsciously squeezed her delicate fist alone.

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## Notes

1. ^ Maturibayashi (祭り囃子, lit. festival accompaniment) is music that is performed (with traditional Japanese instruments) at festivals and forms a particular genre of musical accompaniment.
2. ^ The tsuzumi (鼓) is a Japanese hand drum of Chinese/Mongolian/Indian origin that consists of a wooden body shaped like an hourglass, and it is taut, with two drum heads with cords that can be squeezed or released to increase or decrease the tension of the heads respectively. The koto (琴) is a traditional Japanese stringed musical instrument, derived from the Chinese zheng, and a national instrument of Japan.
3. ^ Kagome kagome (かごめかごめ) is a children's game (or it can refer to the song sung during it) where one player is chosen to be the "oni" (similar to "it" in tag) and sits blindfolded/eyes covered, while the other children walk in circles around them while chanting the song. When the song stops, the oni has to guess who's standing directly behind them.
4. ^ Hassoutobi (八艘飛び, lit. "the leaping of the eight ships") refers to how Minamoto no Yoshitsune escaped from Noritsune in the Battle of Dan-no-ura by leaping from one boat to another until he was eight boats away from his opponent.
5. ^ A hokora (祠) is a miniature Shinto shrine either found on the precincts of a larger shrine and dedicated to folk kami, or on a street side, enshrining kami not under the jurisdiction of any large shrine. Dōsojin (道祖神) are some of the kami that may be enshrined in it. Dōsojin is a generic name for a type of Shinto kami popularly worshipped in Kantō and neighbouring areas where, as tutelary deities of borders, they are believed to protect travellers and villages from epidemics and evil spirits.
6. ^ Ayakashi (あやかし) is a collective name for yōkai that appear above the surface of water. They are usually depicted as either sea monsters or as the ghosts of those who died at sea that want to add to their number.
7. ^ A amamidokoro (甘味処) is a cafe featuring Japanese-style sweets.
8. ^ Tonchibanashi (とんち話) is a general term for a tale that focuses on a person's wits.
9. ^ For those interested, this is referring to this story. Basically, it's a story about how a lord asked a quick-witted priest to tie up the tiger on his folding screen as he feared that the tiger would slip out from the screen during the night and cause problems. The priest prepared a rope and then asked the lord to drive the tiger out of the screen so that he could tie it up, but the lord responded that it was impossible. Thus, the priest

told the lord that if the tiger could not leave the screen, he was unable to tie it. Hearing this, the lord praised and rewarded the priest for his wits.

10. ^ A happi (法被) coat is a traditional Japanese straight-sleeved coat usually made of indigo or brown cotton and imprinted with a distinctive crest. They are usually worn by workers and shopkeepers during certain occasions, such as festivals.

11. ^ Wagashi (和菓子 lit. Japanese pastry/confectionery) are traditional Japanese confections that are often served with tea.

12. ^ The original name for Tokyo until it received its current name in 1868.

13. ^ Yomi (黄泉) is the land of the dead in Shinto mythology.

14. ^ Heijou-kyō (平城京) is the former name of Nara city when it was the capital of Japan for most of the Nara period (specifically, 710–740 and 745–784). Heian-kyō (平安京) is one of the former names of Kyoto.

15. ^ A torii (鳥居) is a traditional Japanese gate most commonly found at the entrance of or within a Shinto shrine, where it symbolically marks the transition from the profane to the sacred. Komainu (狛犬), often called lion-dogs in English, are a pair of statues of lion-like creatures found at the entrance or inner shrine of many Shinto shrines. As of the Edo period, other animals have also been used to fill in the role of the komainu. foxes are the most frequent variant, especially at shrines dedicated to Inari. Manekineko (招き猫, lit. beckoning/welcoming cat) is a common Japanese figurine of a cat with one paw raised.

16. ^ Inari (稲荷) is the kami of foxes (among other things) in the Shinto pantheon. Neko (猫) is the Japanese word for “cat”, so basically, this is the cat equivalent of a fox god.

17. ^ Yoyo fishing (ヨーヨー釣り) is a Japanese festival game of fishing balloons, floating in water, out with a hook.

18. ^ An ennichi (縁日) is a day believed to have a special relation with a particular Japanese deity (e.g. the day they were born). People think that visiting a temple/shrine on these days will bring greater fortune than on regular days, thus temples and shrines often hold festivals on such days.

19. ^ Shirabyōshi (白拍子) is a traditional singing and dancing performance developed in the noble courts of the late Heian, and Kamakura periods. The term is also used to refer to the performers themselves, who were primarily women and children dressed as men.

20. ^ Masu is a Japanese verb suffix that adds politeness. Normally, “masu” is written

in hiragana, but in this case, it was written with the kanji 升, solely because it shares the same reading. This practice was apparently common (for example, in shop slogans) in the Edo period, but is rare nowadays.

21. ^ A style of Japanese soba noodles, originating from Iwate Prefecture, which are served in a small bowl and continuously refilled until the customer closes the lid to show that he has had enough. Wanko is also how children call dogs in Japanese.

22. ^ Literally, kitty noodles. So, a cat-themed food service next to a dog-themed one.

23. ^ A sarashi (サラシ) is a long strip of cloth, usually thick cotton, wrapped tightly around the midriff up to the chest.

24. ^ Shirahae (白南風) is the name for the strong winds from the south after the rainy season. Kosode (小袖, lit. short sleeves) is a basic Japanese robe for both men and women that can be worn either as an undergarment or an overgarment. The kosode are the forerunner of the modern kimono.

25. ^ A hakama (袴) is a skirt-like traditional Japanese garment that was usually worn by higher-class men like samurai as a sign of status, but later spread among the lower classes.

26. ^ A mudra is is a symbolic or ritual gesture in Hinduism and Buddhism. The Dhyāna mudrā is the gesture of meditation when the hands are placed on the lap with the fingers stretched and palms facing upwards.

27. ^ A cross-legged sitting posture originating in meditative practices of ancient India, in which the feet are placed on the opposing thighs.

28. ^ In Buddhism, mental states that cloud the mind (such as greed, hatred, delusion) and manifest in unwholesome actions.

29. ^ A phrase that obsessive worshipers use to show their gratitude to their god.

30. ^ Koyomi uses a slang expression here that is mostly used by “true Tokyoites”.

31. ^ Itachi are Japanese weasels (*Mustela itatsi*), Kamaitachi is a yōkai that is thought to be a trio of weasels who appear in a whirlwind to cut their victim. Noriitachi literally means “cursed weasel”. I left all of these names romanised, as they were all written in katakana, so I assume they are official monster names. And I had no idea how to translate Kamaitachi if I went for translated names.

32. ^ The Japanese name for Kshitigarbha, a bodhisattva (one who vows to save all beings before becoming a Buddha) who looks over children, travellers and the underworld. He is regarded as the guardian of children and patron deity of deceased children and aborted fetuses in Japanese culture.

33. ^ A kamidana (神棚, lit. god shelf) is a miniature household altar provided to enshrine a Shinto kami.
34. ^ A small, former Japanese oval coin.
35. ^ A major form of classical Japanese musical drama. The main actor in a Noh play wears a mask that signifies the characters' gender, age, and social ranking.
36. ^ Translation (literal): “Even a lapis lazuli (ruri) or crystal (hari) shines if illuminated. Even on a moonlit night with no need for lanterns, I sometimes wish for this light.” The first sentence is a proverb, while the second sentence appears to be a play on another proverb 月夜に提灯 (a lantern on a moonlit night) which means “something pointless or unnecessary”.
37. ^ Until now, all the requests were written mostly in hiragana.
38. ^ Kariginu (狩衣) are informal clothes worn by the nobility from the Heian period onwards. Eboshi (烏帽子) are black-lacquered headgear (made of silk, cloth or paper) originally worn by court nobles in ancient Japan, and afterwards spreading to the common people.
39. ^ The event of ringing a temple bell on New Year’s Eve 108 times.
40. ^ Tōshō-gū (東照宮) is any Shinto shrine in which Tokugawa Ieyasu is enshrined. In this case, this is referring specifically to Nikkō Tōshō-gū, a Shinto shrine located in Nikkō. Yōmei-mon (陽明門) is a richly decorated gate at this shrine.
41. ^ Refers to the three wise monkeys that embody the proverbial principle/maxim/saying “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil”. A carving of the three monkeys in Nikkō is what popularised maxim. Mizaru (見ざる) literally means “not see”, Iwazaru (言わざる) means “not speak”, and Kikizaru (聞かざる) means “not hear”; these names are commonly used to refer to the monkey that covers its eyes, mouth and ears respectively.
42. ^ A kaginawa (鉤縄, lit. hook-rope) is a type of grappling hook used as a tool by samurai, their retainers, foot soldiers and ninja.
43. ^ A red, human-shaped doll that is used as an amulet as a charm for good luck and is particularly associated with the town of Takayama. The name is composed of the words “saru” (猿), Japanese for “monkey”, and “bobo”, a Takayama dialect word for “baby”. The word “monkey” in Japanese is also a homonym for the verb “to leave/drive away” (去る), so it was believed that the amulet helped keep bad things away.
44. ^ A former province located in the northern part of the current Gifu prefecture that Takayama belongs to.

45. ^ Shōgi (将棋, lit. generals' board game), also known as Japanese chess, is a two-player strategy board game that is similar to western chess, but has slightly different figures and rules.

# Chapter 2

## The Visiting of the Fox

The cat is god.

God is an existence that transcends human understanding, inspires awe, and is an object of worship.

Faith can make even a sardine's head sacred, as some people say; as long as there are believers, even the head of a sardine can become god.

"...Not to mention cats, which those guys chose to worship."

The kitsune-faced Detective Clevel pointed to the neighbouring room on the other side of the hall beyond the wall, with an expression that implied he was rather fed up.

The Battle Miko Nayuta and the Ninja Koyomi both glanced in that direction.

The room neighbouring Mitsuba Detective Agency was rented by a suspicious organization known as the 'Cat God Faith Society'.

Although their true nature wasn't known, it didn't seem like they posed any real harm for now.

Koyomi, with the bot nekomata on her lap, smiled feebly while stroking the cat's chin.

"Well, the kanji for 神様 God and 猫様 cat do look alike... Also, they do seem to have a lot of relatively common features, like being indifferent to humans, treating them as slaves, and not providing any compensation for their care——"

At those remarks that were befitting of Koyomi, Nayuta turned to her with a sigh.

"Koyomi-san, your words sure are dark sometimes. You will make devout people mad, you know."

"...It's because of those devout people banding together and ripping away my grandpa's land and other property that I have to work as a dull OL<sup>(1)</sup>... even though I could have lived as a NEET for my whole life with that inheritance!"

It wasn't like she never thought of what would have happened if things had turned out differently.

Feeling half sympathetic and half appalled, Nayuta stroked Koyomi's head.

"That's unfortunate, Koyomi-san. More importantly... aren't the people of the neighbouring Cat God Faith doing it as a joke? If they are believers, what about having a doctrine or something..."

With his elbow on his work desk, Clevel gave a smile and shrugged.

"Well, they do. I think it was... 'The cat is a sacred animal', 'Worship the cat', 'Don't give too many snacks', 'Set up a scratching board' 'Pay heed to a balanced diet', 'Ensure vaccination', 'Clean the litter box'?"

"...Aren't the third one and onwards just principles of keeping a cat?"

Having gathered in the detective's office, three people were engaging in small talk early on a Sunday morning.

The kitsune-like silver-haired young detective, Clevel.

The full-fledged working adult, despite looking childish, ninja, Koyomi.

And finally, the bare-handed Battle Miko who focused on agility, Nayuta.

All three of them were dispirited.

Although it was the early morning, it was dark outside the window this day as well. Ayakashi Bystreet was a district of eternal night, thus the morning sun never rose into the sky here.

Nayuta and the others' state of mind was, currently, far from daybreak as well.

Due to the sudden suspension of the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ quest, their actions were

currently impeded.

Although they had all gathered in the office for now, Yanagi, the person who had requested their help, had yet to come.

The bot nekomata and Koyomi let out yawns at the same time.

"Fwah... hey, Nayu-san. I kinda want some sweets... Shall we go to the bakeneko tea house? Let's just mail Yanagi-san and meet up there."

Having eaten some sweets, an ingenious idea would—likely not come, but it would likely reduce the stress they were all feeling currently.

"All right. Detective-san, you're going too, right?"

"...The bakeneko tea house... Ah, I'll send an email to Yanagi-shi myself."

The detective stood up while operating his menu window.

Nayuta and Koyomi left the office one step ahead of him.

Like yesterday, there was a black cat Buddha statue that was at least three metres tall sitting there.

—It seemed as though the angle of its forefeet was different than yesterday.

Pretending not to have noticed this while passing by, the three of them came out of Twilight Street and returned to the main street of Ayakashi Bystreet.

Even though it was an eternal night in-game, it was actually morning on a day off, thus there was a reasonable number of people on the street.

Looking up at the night sky, they saw lots of long hands extending from the cloudy sky, and they were wriggling as if they were jellyfish tentacles.

"...Does that have any other purpose other than looking 'kinda ominous'?"

"Hmm. I guess they are <sup>grasping the clouds</sup> 'being vague'."

The detective laughed scornfully.

Nayuta strangely agreed with that joke-like answer.

This district was filled with 'who knows what' squirming about meaninglessly, after all.

Putting it nicely, it was broad-minded; putting it bluntly, it was unprincipled.

Allowing meaningless things to exist in a meaningless way—in that sense, there were a lot of people that found this place unexpectedly comfortable. Although it was meant to be a horror setting, it was strangely lively.

There were customers constantly entering and leaving the bakeneko tea house that they eventually arrived at.

During the few moments of entering or leaving, they all looked like ghosts.

At the boundary of the store's entryway, the bodies of people going inside turned hazy and disappeared; conversely, those going out emerged and materialised.

This entrance and exit worked like a teleport gate; it sent all the customers to multiple different copies of the store, thus preventing congestion at all times.

Nayuta and the others entered in a line and were sent to a virtually empty store with no one but them inside.

While they were being led to a random table, Koyomi stroked the chin of the nekomata that was serving them.

"It's still morning, so I could do with something refreshing. I'll go with mamekan today! Nayu-san, same as always for you?"

"Yes. Mamekan."

Koyomi frequently changed her order depending on her mood, while on the other hand, Nayuta ordered mamekan seventy percent of the time.

It was a simple sweet that consisted solely of peas and agar, but the agar had a nice consistency and the sweetness of the honey was just right. The peas were also special and different from those found at other stores.

These peas, providing a burst of deliciousness with each bite and filling one's mouth with a faintly sweet aroma reminiscent of vanilla beans, did not exist in reality.

Setting aside those who wished for pure mamekan, this miraculous flavour that blended both Japanese and Western styles was related to the popularity of the store.

Opposite to Nayuta and Koyomi sitting in a line, the detective also sat down.

"I'll have the same thing. Three servings of mamekan please."

The happi coat-wearing munchkin gave a slight nod and, while writing down the order, walked over to the kitchen.

"Detective-san, do you also come here often?"

When Koyomi asked, Clevel vaguely nodded.

"It's a standard spot to bring my tourists. This place is well-known even to foreign guests. Though—I've never eaten the mamekan. Even though I've ordered it many times."

Then said something strange.

"Ah, could it be that your order was mixed up? I first met Koyomi-san because we also happened to have our mamekan and warabimochi orders mixed up—"

"...No, it wasn't really a mixed up order.."

Just as Clevel was about to say something, the nekomata brought a tray.

Two ceramic and porcelain bowls of mamekan.

And in addition to those two was a single navicular glass container that they couldn't really remember ever seeing before, filled with an extravagant combination of a large yellow column of fresh cream, multicoloured fruit, as well as caramel sauce and

chocolate as toppings; it was a gem of a dessert with no obvious indication of it being wagashi—

“...Wha. What the. Wha?”

Ignoring the confused Koyomi, the nekomata placed their respective bowls in front of them.

But in front of Clevel it placed the extravagant (Purin a la Mode) .

The order was three servings of mamekan. Nayuta had no idea what and how could be mistaken to end up with this.

“...We ordered... three servings of mamekan, right?”

She asked the nekomata serving them, but the munchkin just tilted its head in wonder, climbed up a nearby cat tower, and lay down in a circle on the topmost floor.

It seemed that it would not be making any replacements.

Clevel placed his fingers on his forehead.

“...Due to the influence of my exceedingly high Luck, whenever I come here I always get something special that's not even on the menu. I don't really like fresh cream... but it's already the third time I've gotten this purin. If you'd like, you can divide it amongst yourselves.”

Clevel pushed the Purin a la Mode served in a navicular bowl to Nayuta and Koyomi.

It wasn't clear whether he was lucky or not anymore.

With the deluxe sweet, a rare encounter in the bakeneko tea house, in front of her, Koyomi's eyes glittered as if she were a child.

"Seriously!? Waai, ittadakkimaasu!"

Having thrust her spoon into the purin unreservedly, taken some of the fresh cream, and stuffed her cheeks with it, she gave the biggest smile she could.

"Delish!? What the, this is so delish! It's better than the highest-class Itsmarden Purin from De Lota Ba Parlour! Nayu-san Nayu-san, here, have a taste!"

Going with the flow, Nayuta took the purin from the spoon presented to her into her mouth.

Not too sweet, a refreshing texture, the rich flavour of the custard and bittersweet flavour of the caramel taken into account, it was certainly tasty.

—But, Nayuta preferred the faint sweetness and consistency of the agar.



At the same time, she felt a bit of pity for Clevel; he seemed to not yet know of that flavour.

Nayuta presented Clevel the mamekan that she had not yet touched.

"In that case, I will give you my mamekan in exchange, Detective-san—help yourself."

Clevel faintly squinted his almond eyes.

"This is what you ordered. Are you sure?"

"I always order it. Don't worry."

Koyomi leaned on Nayuta like a spoiled child.

"In that case, Nayu-san, shall we divide the purin and mamekan in halves between us? That way we can both enjoy both of the dishes. Okay, it's settled."

And then presented a cut watermelon to her mouth.

Obediently accepting Koyomi feeding her, Nayuta faced the detective with a serious look.

"...Now then, Clevel-san. About our conversation hereafter..."

"...Already? Let's escape from reality for just a bit more..."

Despite Koyomi whispering that beside her, she could not do that.

Yanagi's request was to clear the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ quest within a week—

With the quest in question being suspended at the moment, there was nothing that Nayuta and the others could do.

There had not yet been any follow-up report from the major game info site MMO Today, nor was there any new info from the official site.

"A suspended quest passing through review and being reinstated takes at least half a month in the best case scenario— usually it takes about a month. Yanagi-san's

request... unfortunately, can no longer be fulfilled."

There was no escaping this truth. No matter how they struggled, there was no way to play a quest that wasn't available.

The kitsune-faced Clevel chuckled.

"Good grief, this is quite the hassle. Even I hadn't expected this to happen, but for now, let's wait for a message from Yanagi-shi. Then we'll know whether he's cancelling the request, extending the time to wait for the quest's reinstatement, or... we'll be told about Yanagi-shi's 'true goal' and react accordingly."

While nibbling on her melon like a hamster, Koyomi tilted her head.

"True goal? Wasn't it to clear the quest?"

Clevel lowered his eyes.

"You had the same concern yesterday, didn't you? 'It's not normal to spend a million and several hundred thousand yen to clear a quest like this — that's correct. However, if Yanagi-shi is willing to spend such a large amount of money, it means he has some reason as to why he wants it cleared so quickly. Based on that — there could be other ways to grant his wish other than just clearing the quest. That's what it means."

Koyomi tilted her head into the opposite direction.

"Ehm... In the first place, why does Yanagi-san wish to clear that quest?"

The detective put some mamekan into his mouth.

"—Hmm. This truly is tasty... As a matter of fact, I can already guess his reasons to some extent. But, it's related to his privacy and I can't voice irresponsible deductions without confirming them. I believe it's better to hear it from Yanagi-shi directly. After all, everything depends on him—including whether he wants to talk about it."

It didn't seem like he was putting on airs. There was a sense of sincerity greater than ever before in Clevel's tone.

Nayuta had no intention of overstepping her boundaries. Each person had their own reasons.

With an expression that said she did not get the point, Koyomi calmly nibbled on her cut watermelon.

"I dun quite get it, but is it safe to assume that we're not giving up yet?"

"Personally, I have no intention of giving up, but at the end of the day, it all depends on the client's intentions."

Clevel abruptly opened his menu window. It seemed that he had received some sort of message.

"Speak of the devil, Yanagi-shi promptly... Wait. No— This is..."

Clevel's eyes became a bit more grim.

"What is it? Could it be that the request was cancelled...?"

Nayuta bent forward; conversely, the detective pulled back.

"It's from Yanagi-shi's relative. Yanagi-shi is currently in poor shape and can't log in, thus he can't come here... If possible, he'd like us to meet him directly to hear him out in detail; that's what the email written on behalf of him said. There's no signature, but based on the content of the letter, it seems that it came from his wife."

It seemed that he did not receive a message sent from within a game, but a forwarded email.

Nayuta instinctively met glances with Koyomi.

"In poor shape and can't log in... does that mean that something happened to Yanagi-shi?"

"An email from his wife... d-does that mean the complaint that led to the suspension of the quest by the game's management originated from Yanagi-san...? 'Ojii-chan's health deteriorated because of a game!', something like that..."

An elder's health deteriorating after playing a game and his relatives sending a complaint to the management about that— Whether or not that were the case here, it was a possible scenario.

However, Clevel shook his head immediately.

"No. Last night, I researched the complaint the game's management received. It seems there was another party that had succeeded in entering the castle slightly ahead of us. And... One of them was scared by a ⟨ghost⟩ , which should not be in the game's data, thus he fainted and the AmuSphere's safety was triggered, forcibly logging him out. His relatives panicked, called an ambulance, and, afterwards, the game's management was contacted by the hospital— to ensure safety, the quest was quickly suspended; I hear that's how it all went. The person who collapsed was a university student in his twenties, it seems."

Nayuta was considerably shocked.

The announcement from the game's management did not touch upon such details. Not only was this not reported anywhere, even the online rumours stopped at "I've heard that an actual ghost appeared".

"Where on earth did you get such details...?"

The detective evaded the question without care.

"Business instinct and a variety of sources. Incidentally, the real reason why the quest was suspended wasn't the complaint... Due to the complaint, the management noticed an oversight from their initial review of the quest. That ⟨ghost⟩ was apparently beyond their expectations as well."

Koyomi moaned.

"An unexpected ghost, you say... Hey, I thought I'd talk about this when Yanagi-san came, but may I ask where you two were teleported to and what you saw there?"

Clevel gave a big nod.

"I was teleported to a castle tower. What appeared before me was a friend... a contemporary colleague who had died. Afterwards, a child wearing a kitsune mask

came out, so I asked him to guide me, but— right after that, I suffered a surprise attack from jorōgumo and, despite putting up a good fight, I was defeated."

"...Knowing your stats, Detective-san, that 'good fight' thing is clearly a lie, right?"

At Nayuta's retort, Clevel only gave a faint smile.

With a change of attitude, she began talking about her own progress.

"The place I was first teleported to was a passageway like the one we had leapt into, extending to both sides. The kitsune-masked child then appeared and said 'let's play hide-and-seek'— afterwards, while looking for him, I explored some passageways at a dungeon and the bottom of an old well, found some things that looked like event items, then saw an exit nearby, so I temporarily withdrew."

Koyomi and Clevel looked at Nayuta as if they were observing an incredible animal.

"A dungeon..."

"An old well..."

"Yes. I saw a figure that looked like the ghost of someone I knew, but I only saw a glimpse of them, so I do not have much of an impression on them. There were several traps but they were mostly the type to scare someone rather than deal damage. It would be a bother to dismantle them alone, but I don't think the difficulty was all that high."

Koyomi suddenly trembled and the detective, seemingly shocked, pressed on his glabella as well.

"...Mmm. Yeah... that's not..."

"...You explored that place alone, right? You were speaking disinterestedly about it, but I'm surprised that you went through all that without giving up. In the first place, what prompted you to enter an old well anyway..."

Nayuta did not understand their reactions. The less need there was to protect her companions, the more of a stroll in the park it was to her.

"There were no really strong enemies, though? I defeated two demon spiders and five skeleton warriors. I didn't count the warrior spirits or the bats but neither should have been more than ten-odd at best. I happened to see a golden-scaled serpentess but it looked like a unique rare enemy, so I retreated."

The result of her battles wasn't bad, but it wasn't worth bragging about either.

Koyomi gently stroked Nayuta's back.

"...Nayu-san, you don't have to overdo it if you get scared, alright? Onee-san will hear you out anytime, okay? Oh, and even if you aren't scared, you can still trick any man by saying something like 'Eek, I'm scared'... At this point, you could even say 'I'm scared of my own beauty' or 'I'm scared of manjuu'..."

She sounded as if she were admonishing a child, but the content of her lecture was, as always, a little weird.

"Well, after all, the chance of actually getting hurt or getting involved in an accident was low... Even I would find an actual dungeon or old well scary. Koyomi-san, how about you; what kind of ghosts did you see?"

As Koyomi tasted the purin, she gave an expression like she was on the verge of crying.

"Well, you see... I was teleported to some random, huge, open-air bath... and I got done in by a surprise attack from lurking mermen there, but right afterwards, beyond the steam..."

She sniffed a little.

"...I saw Lin-chan, my brine shrimp who died two months ago... dancing in a yukata."

"..... I'm sorry. Could you repeat that."

The detective asked with a serious look, as if he thought he misheard what she had said.

Koyomi cast her eyes down with a sad look.

"Brine shrimp... those things that you get as powder-like dried eggs that you put in

salt water to hatch. At first, they're so small that you can't see them at all, but if you raise them well, they grow up to be about a centimetre long... They're treated like water fleas, but they can be preserved for years as dried eggs——"

The detective pressed on the inner corners of his eyes.

"You mean those things used as bait for tropical fish...? I am aware of them. So, of the hundred of them that you can raise from a single spoonful, you distinguished a specific one, gave it a name, and raised it...?"

Koyomi nodded, her eyes solemnly looking far away.

"Though, enlarged to human size, it was, of course, gross... but, I did feel a bit happy seeing it looking healthy..."

Nayuta was stumped on how to react. Koyomi spoke about it as if it were a nice story somehow, but it did not appear to be so.

"Umm... Was it cute?"

"Nope. Not really cute. Not at all."

She was surprisingly unsentimental.

She didn't really understand her tastes, but Koyomi being weird wasn't anything new either.

Having pulled himself together, the detective corrected his posture.

"Anyhow, it's clear now. The ⟨ghosts⟩ that appear in that quest are the players' lost acquaintances from the real world... or pets, as the case seems possible, but either way, they're essentially things that don't exist in the game as data and are based on personal information. A ⟨ghost⟩ in the true sense of the word. At the very least—— I've never heard of a precedent for such a thing in previous quests."

"...But, it's impossible for them to be actual ghosts."

At the frowning Nayuta, the detective gave a teasing smile.

"Indeed. Nevertheless, in the sense of not having a physical existence, ghosts are very similar to VRMMO NPCs. For some of the cases called psychic phenomena, there is a theory that the ghosts are products of brain signals, in addition to a fair number of some kind of malfunctions... There is a high probability of the ⟨ghosts⟩ we have here being one of such ‘phantoms created from memories’ that take form via the brain."

Nayuta nodded. Her own deduction was practically the same as the detective's.

Since the ghosts took the form of one's acquaintances, logically thinking, it was right to assume that players' ⟨memories⟩ were appropriated as material for in-game objects in real time.

Indulging in the purin, Koyomi glanced upwards.

"...Hm? Wha? Hey, isn't... that bad? Umm, look... in the sense of human rights or that privacy thing, or something in that direction... isn't it crossing the line?"

The detective gave a deep sigh.

"Right. It's a deed equivalent to ‘stealing a glance at an individual's memories’. It's still a gray zone due to the legislation being behind, but, supposing such a mechanism were made, it would be a violation of Asuka Empire's own ethics code. That's probably the greatest reason for the prompt suspension of the quest. On the other hand, there's a more fundamental question. Reading a person's memory and visualising it practically in real time in the game— ‘is such a thing really possible’, that's the question."

"...Is it technically impossible?"

Nayuta was also using ⟨The Seed⟩ as a hobby. Though nothing but an amateur, she did happen to have knowledge on VRMMO production, more or less.

Last year, she aimed for applying for the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩, but her schedule became packed midway, thus she was unable to finish and eventually abandoned her idea.

Based on this knowledge of hers, she had yet to hear of any successful cases of such technology.

Clevel squinted his eyes like a long slit-eyed kitsune.

"I won't say that it's impossible. It would probably be possible to a genius like Kayaba Akihiko, and there is even a chance that he had hidden such a function in The Seed. That program package is a Pandora's box that we have yet to open the cover of. Though... 'at the present time', the chances of a technology that can, 'individual to each of the unspecified large number of players', 'read memories and instantly reproduce them in-game' being easily realised in such a way is exceedingly low. Also, 'passing through the game management's inspection and being executed by them' is a considerable extra to all that. Thinking conventionally, it's impossible. I'm guessing that the trick we have here is something simpler... and yet tricky."

Midway through the detective's speech, Koyomi's open eyes began spinning round and round, losing focus.

The difficult speech did not get through to her.

While plugging Koyomi's ears, Nayuta lowered her voice.

"...Stealing a glance at someone's memories using a VRMMO... in a word, you mean interrogation technology, right? For example, the possibility of this quest being a test case for gathering data is..."

The detective closed an eye.

"Although an interesting idea, you can safely eliminate that possibility. There's no merit in leaking such a dangerous technology to the outside in this way; if, conversely, the goal was to call attention to or raise the issue, a more conspicuous method would have been chosen. I wouldn't know the details without investigating it a bit more, but— more importantly, our issue right now is Yanagi-shi. It seems he's currently admitted to Yokohama Kōhoku General Hospital. It also appears that Yanagi-shi's wife has something to ask of me, thus all the more reason to visit him.

Quickly finishing his mamekan, Clevel was about to leave his seat.

(Yokohama... Kōhoku General Hospital?)

Nayuta knew that hospital.

Faster than she could call out to him, she grasped the detective's arm reflexively.

Slightly surprised by her own action, she stared up at the detective.

"Umm... could I come to the hospital with you? The hospital is quite close to my home. It wouldn't even take thirty minutes by train."

It was one of the most outstanding hospitals for serious illnesses in the region—or rather, it was rather prominent in the whole country.

It was also known for promptly introducing trials for a large-scale medical FullDive machine called the Medicuboid, as well as for admitting many patients with incurable diseases.

Nayuta had once been admitted to that hospital for some time as well, when she suffered injuries in a traffic accident.

Although, of course, she did not have a chance to use the Medicuboid, the hospital had a rental for AmuSpheres, which a lot of patients made use of to kill time.

Perhaps Yanagi was also in such a position.

After moments of silence, Clevel averted his eyes from Nayuta's.

"If you're feeling inquisitive, you should let the matter drop... is what I think. You do know the reason, right? The place is recognised for its terminal care for patients who are near death. The elderly man too—is probably one of them."

Nayuta was taken aback.

The deadline of clearing the quest in a week.

The exorbitant payment.

And, a situation where a relative had to write an e-mail for him—

It wouldn't even take a detective to easily presume what the situation was based on these three points.

Koyomi gave a faint moan.

"...So that's it... that's why the ojii-chan was in such a hurry—"

Nayuta put her strength into her eyes as she once again gazed at the detective.

"That's all the more reason to go, then. I would like to confirm it directly— to hear from Yanagi-san's own mouth whether there is anything I can still do to help."

This time, without much of a pause, Clevel nodded.

"Alright. In that case, you can come with me. Our meeting place shall be the gate of the station closest to the hospital. As visiting hours should begin in the afternoon, come there at noon."

Nayuta was, on the contrary, bewildered by the sudden request.

"...I am surprised that you were so unexpectedly quick to give in. I thought you would have brought out your duty of confidentiality or something and be more reluctant..."

Having stood up, Clevel took back the the hem of his coat.

"I have yet to even make a contract with Yanagi-shi, so there's no duty of confidentiality— though that's just a quibble, seeing as you two are important companions in the first place. I shall accept the request as soon as possible. You are in a position to help and, depending on the situation, we might still need your help."

Koyomi sniffed.

"Uuu... I-I want to go too... but...!"

"Where are you accessing the game from?"

"..... Osaka."

That was rather far away. It wasn't impossible for a day trip, but a round trip would cost about thirty thousand yen.

Nayuta grasped Koyomi's hand.

"I believe it would be better for you to instead be on standby as is, Koyomi-san. You would be able to immediately log in if you're needed for anything, and a day trip for a hospital visit would surely be hard on you, right?"

Putting force on her brow, Koyomi nodded.

"Right... It's a regular day at the office tomorrow... Nayu-san, send my regards to Yanagi-san, okay?... Oh, and Detective-san, if you lay a hand on Nayu-san IRL, I'll skin you alive. I mean, I'll obliterate you socially. If you do something to a high school girl, I won't wait a single second to report you, so be sure to keep yourself in check, alright? Don't think I'm just playing tough like an Osakan typically does, 'kay? I was born on an island, so I don't follow that convention. It won't end with 'I was just kidding'; I'll hunt you down, got it?"

With a cordial smile, though her eyes didn't show a hint of laughter, Koyomi made some modest threats.

Clevel pressed down on the inner corners of his eyes as if he were exhausted.

"...Such a possibility hadn't even crossed my mind, but... sorry, could we call off that plan of travelling together? I'm feeling a bit of an irrational danger to my person. In the sense of false charges."

"I'll be waiting at the gate at noon. I don't mind a slight tardiness, but if I am stood up I'll appeal to Koyomi-san, saying 'I got played' in tears."

Nayuta informed him with a serious look, thus Clevel looked up to the ceiling in a resigned manner.

"...Understood. I've already been driven into a corner, huh— For now, let's decide on our signs for our meetup. I should be wearing a gray suit and viewing a terminal with my back to a wall. My hair is black, but my face is not much different from my current one, so you should have no problems with that. You could send me an e-mail when you arrive."

"I... have not decided what to wear yet, but I believe I shall go for something that will not stand out. As for a sign, the only thing I can think of is a boo..."

Koyomi stared at Nayuta's chest.

"A sign..."

"Koyomi-san. If you say anything more, I shall have to rethink my relationship with you, Koyomi-san."

Immediately, Koyomi closed her lips tight and then began silently stuffing her cheeks with the purin a la mode.

Although she couldn't handle difficult subjects, she happened to be clever enough to know when to quit.

Nayuta and Koyomi had only met once in the real world.

Just last month, Koyomi went with her boss on a business trip to the capital and, making use of her half a day of free time, the two went to a sweets store.

Until then, it seemed that Koyomi was convinced that Nayuta's breasts were "fakes exaggerated by the game".

The moment she realised that they were unmistakably the real thing, she gave an unprecedented, serious look as she said "Take care not to get involved with bad men"; "Actually, every single one of them calling out to you is sure to be bad, so take care to give them the cold shoulder", she took her advice a little bit too far.

As a matter of fact, Nayuta was aware that her own wariness was on the strong side.

She herself was perplexed that she was going to meet with a suspicious detective alone, even if it was for visiting someone at the hospital.

But she did feel that this was a boat that had already left the dock, and she didn't feel like giving up as a player just yet.

But her biggest motif of all—

(Could it be because of that ⟨ghost⟩ I saw...)

Just yesterday, Nayuta had also seen one.

A ghost that looked like a departed familiar face, one that should not have existed in the game as data—

Just as she had told Koyomi and Clevel moments ago, due to having only seeing a glimpse of it, she hadn't really been afraid. In the first place, she didn't even think of it as an actual ghost.

Though— despite not being scared, when she saw the ghost, she ended up recalling the scary 'loneliness' she had once experienced.

To quickly forget this loneliness, she needed some sort of beacon for action. If she did nothing and remained gloomy, she felt that she'd be depressed till tomorrow.

After Clevel stepped out of the store one step ahead with something needing investigation, Koyomi let out a sigh with a spoon in her hand.

"I wonder if Yanagi-san is alright... It might be weird to say this about someone we met just yesterday... but I hope he gets well."

"—True."

Nayuta too could feel how difficult such a wish was. If it wasn't, there wouldn't have been a need for a request like "within a week".

(Though, what are we supposed to do if the quest is suspended...)

Right now, she was worried about Yanagi's condition in the hospital. If the deadline could be extended just a bit more, the quest could be reimplemented in time after adjustment by the management.

Nayuta stared at the empty mamekan bowl left by the detective.

'If possible, I want Yanagi to discover that taste as well'— such a thought momentarily crossed her mind.

Noon on Sunday.

Right after leaving through the ticket gate, Nayuta found the 'detective' among the congestion.

Leaning his back against the wall was a handsome young man in a suit, engrossed in thought as he looked at the screen of his terminal—

The odds of mistaking the person were practically non-existent. Only his hair had changed from silver to brown, but his looks and aura were practically the same as in-game.

His standing posture, his attention caught for a moment by any woman passing too close to him, seemed strangely picturesque.

However, the story didn't end simply with good looks.

The young man's presence was somehow reminiscent of a trickster, like kitsune, tanuki, or some other youkai.

Standing out by not standing out.

His outfit alone was that of a salaryman, but because of the neat and tidy impression drifting about him being awfully supernatural, it was impossible to conceal his foreign nature.

In short, he looked like a fox-man, diligently attempting to blend in with modern society.

Not only women but children too stared at his figure in wonder. In their eyes, the detective undoubtedly looked like a youkai.

(...That person doesn't really look suited to being a detective...)

He looked like he'd be exposed in an instant if he ever tried tailing someone.

Before calling out to him, Nayuta quickly checked through her own appearance.

Her brown, long-sleeved, knitted top and black long skirt were indeed plain, but that did not mean she avoided a pomp outfit because she was going to visit someone at a hospital. Her plain clothes were generally always like this as she did her utmost to refrain from wearing anything that revealed her skin when she went outside.

"On the contrary, that outfit is sure to be popular with men", Koyomi ridiculed her, but Nayuta was unable to calm down while wearing flashy garments. On top of her expression becoming hard as a rock and the clothes not suiting her, she was mostly an indoor person and didn't really go out much, thus she didn't have many opportunities to wear something like that in the first place.

Having slightly adjusted her hair with her fingers, Nayuta silently approached Clevel.

"Detective-san, nice to meet you. I am Nayuta."

She called out as if she were whispering and bowed.

Looking up from his terminal, Clevel knit his brows without so much as returning the greeting.

"...What a surprise. Your appearance barely differs from your in-game one."

"...Oh no. Not as much as you, Detective-san, I believe. There's no need for any signs at this point, right?"

The Battle Miko Nayuta was at least quite different in terms of her outfit. Wearing a suit, he was closer to his in-game impression.

The detective stared at Nayuta with a rude gaze.

"—Could it be that you're the daughter of a good family?"

"Oh no. I come from a regular old family. Why do you ask?"

"Your attitude is nice. You use proper language and have no flippant sides. Your aura is quite different from that of usual high school students."

It was hard to tell whether she was being praised or suspected.

"I am not sure if this is related, but my mother is a former policewoman and both my father and elder brother are policemen."

"...I understand. So it's that kind of family."

Nayuta spoke frankly, though restraining herself a bit.

The detective faced the hospital and hastily began walking.

The sidewalk, limited by guard rails, was narrow, thus the pedestrians coming from the other side made it hard to walk side-by-side. Inevitably, Nayuta followed a few steps behind the detective.

"Seeing as your parents and sibling are all policemen, are you planning to follow their path?"

"Oh no. I plan to go to university as normal and find employment at a regular business. Seeing as police work sounds demanding and I do not do well with physical activity."

Put bluntly, her breasts were simply too heavy. Running was her dread and, recently, she had a hard time with even her physical education classes. One of the reasons she desired agility in-game was to solve her dissatisfaction with the real world.

Not knowing this reason of hers, Clevel nodded with an off the point I-know-how-it-is look.

"How wise. That field requires a lot of aptitude. It would be one thing if you were accustomed to the hierarchical sports clubs, but for a quiet type like you it must be hard."

"...You seem to be knowledgeable about the subject, I see? Do you have any acquaintances on the police force?"

"Quite a few. It's the nature of the business, you see—ah, I'm not referring to detective work."

A business card came from the inner pocket of his suit.

Accepting the card, Nayuta discovered Clevel's real name for the first time.

"...Clover's Network Security Corporation... Representative Director Kurei Kaisei... director?"

A director this young was shadier than a detective.

Perhaps having noticed Nayuta's cold gaze, Clevel shrugged as he began explaining.

"It's just a title. My colleagues and I founded a security-based venture business and I was the most honeymouthed of the group, so everyone just went with the flow."

"Hah... Is your company going to be all right if the director is off playing games...?"

She unconsciously voiced this, knowing that it did not concern her. For their initial arrangement, Clevel had declared that, as of tomorrow, he would devote practically all of his twenty-four hours a day to clearing the quest for Yanagi.

"That is not an issue. The income from my detective and tourist work is included in the company's profits, so in a word, it's part of the business as well. Also, there were a lot of clients that I got to know through the game. Stopping my business in-game would only hinder meeting new clients. Word of mouth is, unexpectedly, not something that you can sneeze at."

It seemed that his tour guide affair also served as a business activity for acquiring future clients.

"That is to say that Yanagi-shi and his family are important candidates to be my clients— Though, have you already realised anything about his background?"

Nayuta shook her head.

"All that I could say was that if that payment were real, 'he is probably rich'. Also... based on his knowledge of mochi I considered the possibility that he was a chef or a researcher, or a teacher, but I believe that that is probably not the case."

Turning around, Clevel squinted his eyes

With perfect timing, they stopped due to a red light.

"Your reason for deciding so?"

"To begin with, my intuition is unreliable. If I must say, it would be his manner of speaking. It was humble yet elegant and implied a good upbringing—the impression of a merchant. And it was not the self-assertive founder type, but instead a second- or third-generation merchant, abiding by traditions while taking the current state into account... he sounds like a grand merchant or retiree from a historical play."

The detective gasped in surprise.

"—Far from unreliable, your intuition and analysis are quite accurate. Indeed, he is a retiree from a well-established store—the current head of (Yanagi-ya Ryuuzen-dou)"

Nayuta could not believe her ears.

On the portable terminal that Clevel presented to her, the homepage of Yanagi-ya was displayed.

The features of the man in the photo next to the company president's greeting were indeed remarkably similar to Yanagi's in-game appearance.

Yanagi-ya Ryuuzen-dou, which had points of sale in various department stores all over Japan, was a major, well-established store in the wagashi business.

Their standard product, 'Yanagi mochi' was a mochigashi with the flavour of fruit kneaded into the dough; the wide-ranging varieties of the mochi included apple, yuzu, peach, orange, and grape, as well as seasonal varieties such as cherry, watermelon, persimmon, and chestnut.

A box came with an assortment of eight types of mochi and the price was reasonable, thus it was a gem long loved by its fans.

Because it was standard merchandise for a present, naturally, Nayuta had also eaten some not just once or twice.

When the light turned green, the two began crossing the street.

Although there were no other pedestrians around them, the detective slightly lowered his voice.

"Yanagi Ryuuzen-dou's fifth generation and current president, Yanagi Teiichi— that is Yanagi-shi's identity in the real world. It seems that he had exercised his talent as a confectioner in his youth and had also worked as the director of a confectionery vocational school until a few years ago. Strictly, he's neither a chef nor a teacher, but taking into account that it's close enough, your intuition hit the mark with surprising accuracy. Could this be the police lineage?"

"Just a coincidence. More importantly... how long have you known Yanagi-san's identity, Detective-san?"

Considering that their destination, the hospital, was still far away, Nayuta examined Clevel's profile.

The detective smiled, pretending not to notice.

"I knew from the start. Because I confirmed the client's background when the middleman emphasised 'mind your manners'. Though... I have yet to hear anything about why he's obsessed with the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩. That's what I'm going to find out now."

"...You pretty much already have a conjecture, I assume?"

Clevel replied with a sigh.

"Yeah. You probably suspect what it is too, but you don't have to say it. Most likely, today... it'll all be explained."

Nayuta nodded in silence.

The detective then added, as if it weren't a big deal.

"Speaking of which, Yanagi-shi's condition worsened not right after logging out... but after seeing the ⟨suspension⟩ announcement, as I hear. It must have been a great shock to him."

It was unbearable to think of the dejection Yanagi felt at the moment.

Finally, the two arrived at the front of Yokohama Kōhoku General Hospital.

Being Sunday, there were no outpatients, but people visiting patients entered through front entrance now and then.

Following them, Nayuta again looked up at Clevel's profile.

Although he did indeed have the impression of a fox-man, he was by no means an actual youkai.

But even excluding this— for some reason, his clear eyes looked blank, like empty shells.

## §

Yanagi's room was quite small.

It had a single-size electric bed and three stools, which could be stacked, for visitors to sit. Aside from those, there was no special furniture, and even the wall to the adjoining room was so thin that it barely served its role as a partition between the rooms.

Based on the information she received during the journey, Nayuta had expected a special VIP suite, thus she felt quite let-down.

Beyond the window was a slightly cloudy spring sky, beside which only the neighbouring skyscrapers and roads could be seen, thus even the view wasn't all that great.

'Were the deluxe suites all occupied or was Yanagi just that modest—probably the latter', Nayuta guessed.

What greeted them in the room was Yanagi, asleep from the medicine, and a smiling old woman.

"Oh, my my... I can't believe you managed to make such young and beautiful friends at this age... I'm rather jealous. Nice to meet you, I am Yanagi's wife, Suzuka."

The old woman in a kimono gazed at the two visitors in turn with an innocent, gentle smile.

"Err... are you two dating, I wonder?"

A bombshell came quickly after the greeting and the detective dealt with it calmly.

"Oh no. She is a student who guided Yanagi-san and is helping with clearing the quest in the game. I, too, only met her yesterday."

Suzuka inclined her head like a child.

"Oh, is that so? You looked like such a great match that I was sure— excuse me. Well... there are regulations on that, right? On the outside, right?"

It didn't seem that her misunderstanding had been corrected.

With amiableness of a person serving a guest, Suzuka gave Nayuta a smile.

"Even so, you are a truly beautiful lady... Did this man flirt with a such a young girl in-game? Obaa-chan is really shocked that he's actually cheating at this age—"

Nayuta gave a wry smile at her very jestful words.

"Oh no, Yanagi-san was lost, thus we were the ones who called out to him. Afterwards, we arbitrarily thought that there was something we could help with..."

Suzuka let out a chuckle.

"This person has always been like that. I don't really know how, but he always gets help from various people at the perfect time... As his wife, this is probably not something I should say, but I guess it's because he's well-behaved? Well, this person's greatest fortune was marrying a lovely woman like myself, no?"

Based on the way she playfully praised her spouse, it seemed that their relationship was extremely good.

Smiling, Suzuka continued the chat.

"Miss, be sure to carefully pick your partner, okay? Ah, but you shouldn't be too prudent either. There's no such thing as love at first sight or a perfect partner. The Detective-san looks good and it seems that you can handle him to some extent, so he's not too bad a catch y'know? Even if there's a bit of an age difference, when you turn sixty or seventy, it's no big deal. Even I am a dozen years younger than my husband, so..."

"—Please excuse me, but we truly are not in such a relationship, so please go easy on us. I have no intention of being arrested yet."

The detective, pulled into the flow of the conversation right after their meeting, stopped the wasted explanation and attempted to somehow return to the topic.

"This might be sudden, but how is Yanagi-san's condition? Another colleague of ours who plays the game was awfully worried—"

Using Koyomi as a pretext, he smoothly transitioned the conversation.



Yanagi was sleeping on the bed with an intravenous drip being administered.

His face looked considerably more worn out than in-game, and his body looked diminished as well.

Suzuka formed a smile as she gently brushed Yanagi's bony hand.

"Oh he is fine. He is currently sleeping on medicine, but he will be waking up soon. I'm sorry for having you come here so suddenly... The truth is that I should be the one visiting him, but I wanted you to be here with him, and I don't really understand the topic of games. Vee ar... em em oh, was it...?"

The detective responded in a whisper.

"VRMMO. Virtual Reality Massively Multiplayer Online—In short, it means an online game, based in a space that is so realistic that it could be mistaken for reality, that is large-scaled and has a large number of people playing simultaneously. There, I act as a tour guide."

Harshly ridiculed on variety shows concerned with the SAO Incident, this abbreviation had become widely established throughout the country, but, of course, it didn't reach the people who did not watch such shows.

Perplexed, Suzuka inclined her head.

"This is quite complicated, I see... I'm sorry, I still don't quite get it. But, Yanagi is grateful to you all. Just yesterday he looked unusually happy... He looked truly energetic until he saw the suspension announcement in the game. Once again... thank you very much for your concerns and sorry for troubling you."

With a tinge of resignation and loneliness drifting about her gentle expression, the old woman gave a deep bow.

—She already knew about the impending death of her partner. And she was appropriately prepared for it.

Nayuta closed her eyes and slowly took a breath.

The topic henceforth would probably be heavy.

The one who broke the silence was the detective.

"...Could I enquire about something? I would like to ask why Yanagi-san is so—obsessed with that quest."

"Kvest...?"

Suzuka inclined her head. She seemed to have no knowledge of game terminology, as could be expected.

"Excuse me, by quest, I am referring to the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩. Based on the large sum of money offered, I assume that an important reason is involved."

Suzuka cast her eyes downward.

"...What have you heard from Yanagi?"

"I have not asked him a thing. Though... I do have a guess, to some extent."

Slightly showing some concern, Clevel deliberately lowered his voice.

"I fear this would be breaching your privacy, but... The ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ is created by someone from your family—likely your grandchild. And that person has, unfortunately, passed away... do I have it right?"

The detective's quiet voice was filled with confidence.

Nayuta had come to the same deduction.

The current ⟨Asuka Empire⟩ event, the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ consisted of works by its userbase.

Naturally, those works had creators, and those creators had families.

A desire to see the entirety of one's grandchild's earnest work on the game—the motive that drove the near-death Yanagi to VRMMOs for the first time was a very human sentiment, natural for a family member.

And, based on the fact that Yanagi requested the help of a strange detective to clear the quest, one could imagine that the creator was currently in a state where he couldn't show Yanagi the game himself.

Most importantly—when they met Yanagi in-game, he had a somewhat mournful look, a sign that could not possibly be ignored.

With her eyes still downcast, Suzuka gently brought a handkerchief to her mouth.

“...It's just as you have guessed. Last December— our grandchild Kiyofumi passed away. He was still in his teens... he had yet to have lived even a quarter of our lives, let alone half... He had barely gone to school due to struggling with an illness, until he breathed his last—”

Nayuta could not say anything. A young girl like her could not think of any words to comfort the elderly woman who had lost her grandchild.

Nayuta began to faintly suspect the circumstances while at the gate of the castle that appeared in the 〈Phantom Orchestra〉, when Koyomi had said "I went to Nikkō on a school trip in elementary school".

At that time, Yanagi had been disturbed by the term "field trip". In her own style, Nayuta had made several guesses as to the reason for that, but it seemed one of them had hit the mark.

Because of the circumstances, she was not glad that she had guessed it right.

Clevel frowned.

“...This might be touching on a painful subject, but... it seems that your grandchild was informed about his impending death long ago?”

Suzuka slowly nodded.

"Yes. The 〈Phantom Orchestra〉 was Kiyofumi's first and last work. The child— desperately wanted to leave behind proof of his existence before his death. He was truly happy when he was contacted by the game's management and told that his work had been accepted; he was looking forward to the day when everyone could enjoy it... but the child's body was already at its limit, I believe."

Her voice cracked.

Heatbroken, Nayuta unconsciously cast her eyes downward.

The detective lightly tapped on Nayuta's shoulder.

"What do you think you're doing, getting dispirited yourself. You should have already realised... the reason why Yanagi-san kept quiet about it with us."

Nayuta nodded.

He probably did not want to share his gloom with Nayuta and the others who played the game his grandchild had created— or perhaps he wished to see other players simply enjoying the work of his grandchild with his own eyes.

Knowing the heavy background circumstances, they would by no means be able to feel relaxed.

Although— now that the Phantom Orchestra was suspended, Yanagi would probably not get the chance to play the quest anymore.

Right now, that truth felt especially hard on Nayuta.

And it seemed that Yanagi's wife Suzuka was also concerned with this.

"...Say, Detective-san. I am not really knowledgeable about games, but... how long would it take for it to be reimplemented...?"

At her uneasy voice, Clevel responded with a genuinely meek expression.

"Honestly speaking, I do not know. It depends on the management, but based on the precedent thus far, I believe it would take at least around a month."

"A month..."

Suzuka's expression turned visibly dim.

It seemed that Yanagi's body would be unable to hold out that long. At present, it

seemed that Yanagi, to whom a week was the limit for clearing the quest, could not be ensured to wait that long.

“...Suzuka-san. This is not something that you should bother the detective with...”

Having awoken unnoticed, Yanagi said in a muffled voice from his sickbed.

Unlike in-game, his voice was so feeble that it was difficult to hear.

“...Yanagi-san.”

Nayuta unconsciously approached the bedside.

“...I am truly sorry for having you come all the way here. Ojou-san... you are Nayuta-san, yes...?”

Nayuta nodded to Yanagi, giving a smile as he lay sprawled.

"Yes. I am Nayuta. Koyomi-san is in Kansai, thus she could not come, but... she is awfully worried about you, Yanagi-san. Please get well soon so you can be ready for when the quest gets reimplemented."

As she told him this wholeheartedly, Yanagi feebly nodded and cast his eyes downward.

“...I had a bit of a dream. My deceased grandchild came to me... and seemed to be saying something, but I could not hear him... For some reason, a kitsune appeared midway and I woke up. Speaking of which, that kitsune looked just like Detective-dono—.”

His interest piqued, Clevel gave a faint smile.

"I am frequently told that my face looks like that of a kitsune. When I went to the Inari shrine, some people on the way decided to worship me."

At this joke, the tension left Yanagi's face.

“...I am truly sorry for having you come all the way here. I will handle the payment for the deposit later, but because of the circumstances, the request will have to...”

"Yes. About that request. I came here today to enquire about it."

With a change of attitude, Clevel uttered a strangely clear voice.

"Although we did not attain an agreement yesterday, I believe there is no need to wait for Monday. Given the current state of things, I would like you to decide whether or not you would like to make a contract with me. The payment will be as discussed yesterday— and, in the case we make a contract, I will exhaust all my resources to 'clear the quest within a week'. As for the means to that, I would like you to leave that to me—"

"H-hey, Detective-san...!?"

Nayuta reflexively chimed in.

The ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ quest was currently suspended. Far from being able to clear it within a week, it was currently impossible to even play it. Even he was aware of that.

Clevel closed one eye as he looked at Nayuta.

"Just as I said this morning— I have yet to **give up**. Yanagi-san, if you still have the energy to play the game, I will support you as best as I can. Depending on your ability to enter into FullDive, we can even resume the quest tomorrow if you are able."

Nayuta glared at the detective as he carelessly said this.

"Detective-san, as I am saying, the vital quest is...!"

Ignoring her indication, Clevel glanced at Nayuta.

"You have school tomorrow, right? It's still too early for spring break, huh."

"...It will be over in the morning. I only have to retrieve my test results and take supplementary classes, thus I will be able to return home by noon. I have not entered any clubs either."

The detective lightly clapped his hands.

"Perfect. In that case, let's meet up at the office at 13:00. Yanagi-san, if you are able to,

please come as well. Also—I will have you two sign a contract for a ⟨part-time job⟩ at that time."

"...Wha? Errr... ehm, what are you saying?"

Still unable to comprehend the situation, Nayuta exchanged glances with Yanagi on the bed.

As he gazed at the two with a smile, Clevel's figure seemed like the personification of a wicked kitsune-turned-man.

## §

The cat is god.

In Ancient Egypt, there was a goddess of cats named Bastet.

The fox was also god.

In the Inari shrines all over the country, Ukanomitama, the deity ruling over the five grains, was enshrined and the fox was its messenger.

"...So, you see. Both the Cat God and Inari co-exist on this second floor, and the kemoners<sup>(2)</sup>, with great joy, have a theory that this is a shrine of syncretism between the cat and fox unlike the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism...!"

"...Koyomi-san, you sure like to use technical terms that I have never heard of from time to time. What is a kemoner?"

"...Umm... A person whose love is wider-reaching than normal people?"

Monday, a day after visiting Yanagi at the hospital, at Mitsuba Detective Agency—

At Nayuta and Koyomi's rambling as they sat on the sofa in the office, the detective, who had just come to work, found something to object.

"My face just looks like a kitsune; I have no relationship to any Inari shrine... More importantly, I believe I told you to 'meet at 13:00'... and what time is it now?"

"Oh, Detective-san, cheese. There's a fine looking clock on the wall, y'know? Umm... It says 11:00."

Koyomi answered as if she were bothered while enjoying Nayuta's lap pillow.

The detective pressed down on his glabella.

"Setting the lock so that it could be opened by party members was my mistake, perhaps... Nayuta, what about school?"

"Only in the morning, I believe I said so yesterday? I live about five minutes away from school on foot, thus it barely takes any time for a round trip."

"...Koyomi, what about your work?"

"What? Detective-san, have you never heard of the concept of 'paid vacation'? Uwah, how shady... Do your best not to get spotted by Labour Inspection, okay?"

Sitting at his desk, the detective gave a deep sigh.

"Indeed, compared to a workplace where you can exercise such a right on a Monday so close to the end of the fiscal year, my business could be considered somewhat shady— I'm surprised that you were able to pass your application on such short notice at a time like this."

Taking in the detective's sarcasm, Koyomi's eyes turned empty.

"...Fiskal iear... mandai... Nayu-san... Detective-san is teasing me..."

"Yes yes. I am on Koyomi's side. I am grateful that you took a day off to help with the quest during such a busy time."

While comforting Koyomi by stroking her hair, Nayuta lightly glared at the detective.

Clevel faked a cough.

"...Well, it's not like I'm not grateful to you— though you'll be bored lying around here, so how about going somewhere else for now? There are still two hours till Yanagi-shi comes."

Rubbing her cheek against Nayuta's hakama, Koyomi purred like a cat.

"Oh, don't mind us. This place is surprisingly comfortable... The faint smell of black tea in the air reminds me of a cafe. And there's no one here to see us, so Nayu-san isn't embarrassed to give me a lap pillow."

It wasn't as though Nayuta didn't have an opinion on the matter, but she had to make some sort of a compromise for Koyomi, who went so far as to use up a paid leave to come. And besides, both of them were using fake bodies in a virtual space.

The detective tapped the desk with his finger.

"I see. By the way, you haven't forgotten about my existence, have you?"

Koyomi pondered for a bit.

"...Detective-san, you're too shady and kinda feel like an NPC."

"Just like our first meeting, you truly are someone who says whatever is on their mind, I see."

Giving up on his persuasion, the detective opened the notebook on his desk.

Suddenly, Koyomi opened her eyes.

"...What is that immersion-breaking, retro computer... is it the real deal?"

"I only refined my work system into the shape of a notebook. It's an application of the Virtual Office function. I dare say—the creator of the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩, the boy named Yanagi Kiyofumi, similarly used ⟨The Seed⟩ from a virtual space to make progress on his work."

The detective continued speaking as he operated his computer.

"Even if, for argument's sake, he was inconvenienced by his body in reality, such a handicap would not have affected him in this space. Even a person who had lost an arm could use both hands in this world; you'd also barely get any eyestrain, stiff shoulders, lower back pain, or other such corporeal issues of fatigue. The issues of

mental fatigue and lack of exercise still remain... but, in the sense that the implemented environment allows even bedridden people to work freely, it has crossed the boundary of games and medical care to bring about a reform in work environment.

Koyomi inclined her head.

"Hmm... I haven't really heard anything about that, though?"

"Because it's considerably limited by the type of work involved. We're only talking about desk work here; occupations where the conventional work environment is more convenient if the person has no corporeal handicap constitute the majority. Though—the field has a prospect of growth in the future. The rent would be cheaper and, if you were able to put an end to going to work by just using your AmuSphere from home, you could also get rid of travelling expenses and commuting time. It's incomparable to the old generation virtual offices where you would just connect to the network via your home computer. These merits can even be applied to school."

"...So, you're saying that I wouldn't have to go on crowded trains, right? Uwah... that sounds good... that sure would be great..."

As Koyomi muttered in a trance, Clevel sighed.

"That doesn't mean that everything about it is great. If the trend sped up, the rental value of office properties, as well as the value of personal property would probably slump, and transportation facilities would also fall into a deficit due to reduced demand. Stores relying on salarymen and students coming to eat would also see a drop in customers, and if there were no need to commute to work or school, cosmetics, women's clothing, menswear, and uniform stores would also suffer damage. The influence would involve various other fields..."

Koyomi's expression became befuddled.

Operating his computer, the detective continued disinterestedly with his pet theory.

"We're not talking solely about companies and schools here. The role of businesses is to satisfy the demands of the people. If we reach the age where there is no necessity to satisfy the needs of people in real life and it is possible to satisfy them solely through low-cost data instead of the real thing, a lot of manufacturing and service industries would take a big hit. As a flow of the ages, that's the end of the matter... but there are

more businesses that are pessimistic and troubled about the future than you can imagine."

His mutters sounded like this were all someone else's problem. It probably was actually someone else's problem, but there were signs of him testing Nayuta and Koyomi's reaction with his extremes.

Koyomi stroked Nayuta's lap through her hakama.

"Hmm...? But, even the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ has tie-ups with various businesses. I think that, far from being pessimistic, it's relatively hyped?"

"Those businesses are trying to encroach on the VR market by any means while they can. For example, whether clothes created from data instead of real clothes would sell, or if a commodity in-game could be made into an actual product— various businesses probably want to investigate how much of a need exists for such items in order to find a solution. The ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ was born from a merger of goals between the ⟨Asuka Empire⟩ administration, who wants to increase their playerbase through an exciting event, and various business, who want new business know-how as they conduct market research. That is specifically why— now, when the event has just begun, unnecessary trouble is unwanted. This is probably one of the reasons why the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ was suspended so quickly."

Nayuta pondered.

Real and data.

The real world and the virtual world—

As humans are living beings, the real world is indispensable. Starting with things like electricity and hardware, without proper infrastructure, it would also be impossible maintain a virtual world.

Nutrients needed for the body cannot be absorbed through data, so the agriculture, fish, and livestock industries, as well as the infrastructure for distributing their products, are also essential.

But, regarding the many affairs excluding these essential industries— the merits of the virtual world are quite easily capable of surpassing the demerits of the real world.

In a virtual world, corporeal handicaps can be largely abated.

Being able to drive on an abandoned highway at high speed.

Being able to soar through the air like a bird, swim to the depths of the sea like a fish, act freely like a cat.

Having dinner at a popular restaurant at whatever time you please, for a low price, without having to wait in line or make reservations; experiencing a one-night date with a beautiful member of the opposite sex without any future trouble; facing adventures that make your heart leap, and imminent fear without the danger of death.

Even if all of these were imitations— they can stay unrelated to the worthless self in reality.

The closer VR technology gets to truly simulating the five senses, the more reality becomes unable to compete with its charm.

It's possible that, in several hundred years, some people will no longer have a need for reality.

There are several old SF works which depict such worlds as their theme.

In such completely supervised societies, all menial labour was mechanised, with even the repair of broken machines being handled by machines, as people continued spending their leisure time in dreams, while even children were born through artificial fertilisation on culture medium.

If some sort of natural disaster took place at any time as they continued to drift about in such dreams from birth till death, everything would fall to ruin in that moment—Nayuta would not be surprised if such an age came at some point.

Although, of course, this was an extreme possibility of a far away future taking place after her lifespan, as well as those of generations of people, came to an end, but perhaps 'the present' was the turning point for it.

It was a matter of personal values whether an individual would be "jealous" or "disgusted" by such a future.

Speaking of extreme examples, if an epidemic capable of annihilating humanity spread through the world with the survivors isolated in a shelter, and there was a need to preserve the seed of humanity— a {virtual world} such as this would probably serve as the ark for it.

In front of Nayuta, who was lost in thought, a black cat placed a refill of black tea from the depths of the office.

Coming to her senses because of the strong aroma, she sent a glance to the detective.

Noticing this, Clevel returned a forced smile.

"What's wrong, Nayuta? Lack of sleep?"

"...No. I just dozed off for a bit. Umm... Detective-san, what do you think of the progress of VR technology? Considering your work here, you seem cold, or sceptical, or, at the very least, not optimistic about it for some reason—"

Clevel grinned broadly. That didn't mean he felt like he was smiling; he went silent for a bit to think.

"Such a question coming from your mouth is unexpected... but you're right. If I had to answer whether I'm positive or negative about it, I would say somewhat positive. But I don't feel like accepting it blindly, and there are lots of things that I have my misgivings about. Also, although this is an important matter— regardless of whether you accept or reject it on a personal level, the world already knows the flavour of this fruit. Even if there's poison mixed into it, it's probably too late to relinquish it. After all, this fruit is too fascinating. In that case, we— to avoid a future disaster, we must consider all the dangers and continue to deal with them. Regardless of whether you like it or not, you see."

The detective's tone sounded as if he were warning himself.

Interested by his answer, Nayuta added a related question.

"...Can I ask something else? About the researcher Kayaba Akihiko, who was the mastermind behind the SAO Incident and caused VR technology to advance rapidly— Detective-san, what do you think of him?"

The smile disappeared from Clevel's face.

To Nayuta, this was an unexpectedly dramatic change.

Right after he noticed how shaken he was, he employed his talent for acting to feign being calm.

"...Why would you ask me such a question?"

"I... do not understand. Why he, the most knowledgeable person on VR technology, would cause such a massacre. Even though he should have been aware how many people would be doomed—I wonder, what on earth was he aiming for by stealing the lives of thousands, and even distorting the lives of tens of thousands of family members affected through that incident—"

Clevel gave a serious look.

For just a moment, a warped light that seemed a step away from madness appeared in his kitsune-like eyes.

"...Regardless of what the answer may be—I shall never forgive him."

Speaking in an indifferently clear voice, Clevel crossed his fingers on the desk.

"I despise him from the bottom of my heart. I detest him so much that, if he were still alive, I'd like to kill him with these hands. Having committed a massacre for his own one-sided dream, essentially, he is not much different from the historic people who committed the crime of massacre to protect their power. I can also presume that, seeing as he committed the deed despite knowing what he was doing, he lacked awareness of his crime. I happened to hear how scientists often suffer the results of their research being used for weapons—but in his case, the intentional killing of numerous people wasn't done by someone else, but by his own, willingly set trap. There's no room for his defence."

Nayuta was bewildered by the unimaginably stubborn response coming from someone who had been so aloof till now.

Koyomi on Nayuta's lap also became serious. Engulfed by Clevel's force, she could not

let out her usual frivolous talk.

His voice was calm and it wasn't like he was yelling, yet that was the reason she felt a bizarre force behind his words.

A hatred-filled light, like that of a vengeful kitsune, clearly appeared in Clevel's small pupils.

"...If asked what I think of the man named Kayaba Akihiko— my answer would be simple. 'A conceited murderer that should be regarded with contempt.' Simply considering what he was trying to do is pointless. No matter what the answer would be, in front of the reality of family and friends lost, it would only be absurd nonsense."

Faced with his rage, Nayuta realised.

"Detective-san... you are an SAO survivor, I see."

Clevel's serious look changed to his usual faint smile.

"...It seems that you're more suited to be a detective than I am. How observant of you to notice, hm? Indeed, I was once imprisoned in that game."

There was a conviction in his rage that could only be possessed by someone who clearly knew the target of their hatred.

Perhaps Clevel personally knew the man named Kayaba Akihiko— or the character Heathcliff, Kayaba's disguise in Sword Art Online.

—In that sense, he was slightly different from Nayuta, who only knew Kayaba as a person by name.

She also finally understood the reason why the smile plastered on his face the first time they met looked shady.

Even when smiling, he didn't feel like smiling.

He only had his expression shaped into a smile, yet the emotion dwelling within it was clearly different.

Tensed up, Koyomi timidly rose from Nayuta's lap.

"W-wow... first time I've seen an SAO survivor..."

"Please don't treat me as a rare animal. There are about six thousand of us in the world, so we aren't that rare."

Clevel ridiculed in his usual detached voice, but Koyomi frowned.

"I see... Detective-san, you must have had a hard time... Sorry for calling you shady. Having gone through all that... it's no wonder you're so distrusting of others..."

"...It's not like I've come to distrust others... but in the first place, I managed to survive, so the ones who had a hard time were the people who lost their lives. Even the ghost of a contemporary I saw in the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ — was a friend of mine who died in Aincrad, you see."

A prickling pain ran through Nayuta's heart.

The detective cast his eyes downward.

"—Putting it simply, he came wearing the metal armour he had at the time of his death. It did feel out of place, but... until the identity and workings of that ⟨ghost⟩, which should not exist as data, are confirmed, the game's management will not reimplement it. Just as I said at the hospital yesterday, that's our chance. With my pride as a detective on the line— I'll make absolutely sure that Yanagi-shi's request is fulfilled."

At his unusually serious voice, Nayuta nodded emphatically.

Reimplementing it would take a month at the very least.

This one month was the time necessary to investigate and amend the quest.

And who would be performing that 'investigation'—

That is what Clevel had his eyes on this time.

It seemed that, since the suspension of the quest, he succeeded in making use of his personal connections to push (Clover's Network Security Corporation) as a dispatcher of players for testers to take part in the investigation.

They did not know the particulars, but it seemed he had deep connections with the management.

'For starters, the management of (Asuka Empire) is one of our company's important clients. We have a well-developed trust and have produced splendid results. Also... Yanagi-shi's existence did its work as well. Bigwigs with personal friendships are quite like what you see in a naniwabushi.<sup>(3)</sup> Once I told them about the situation, I got an immediate reply.'

Clevel gave them such an explanation in a light, swindler-like tone just yesterday.

Though it seemed that, for the most part, the conversation took place before he went to the hospital, meaning that he had advanced the negotiations with the management based on his deduction, before confirming the truth about Yanagi's deceased grandchild.

Moving before the other party was able to verify the story... he probably had such a drive, but the speed of his work left Nayuta astonished.

Due to the success of his scheme, Nayuta and Koyomi would henceforth be employed by Clevel's company to both conduct a test play and an investigation of the (Phantom Orchestra) .

"...Nevertheless, I am surprised that you were able to obtain permission to use us for the investigation. I had thought that they would have just conducted an in-house inspection."

The detective nodded at what Nayuta pointed out.

"Of course, the (Asuka Empire) administration also has an inspection team. Though, they will basically be busy checking on the new quests that will be implemented next week and later. They don't have the free hands to respond to these unexpected problems. That's why they have a division for dealing with such issues, but even they always have multiple issues to deal with and thus lack the free time, so it takes time till a quest can be reimplemented. On the other hand, because of issues of expenses and security involved, it's also hard for them to request help from the outside. If an affiliated security company that they had regular dealings with asked 'let us help, you can even pay us barely anything for it' in dogeza,<sup>(4)</sup> things can work out one way or another."

"...Did you? Beg in dogeza?"

As Koyomi asked in a whisper, Clevel gave an unusual wry smile.

"As an action, no, but I did something that felt like it. Now I owe one to the management. Nevertheless, it's not a bad deal for them either. As part of the contract, even if some problem occurs to the players, it'll be on my head, and we can reduce the time needed to reimplement the quest if we do well. Though, you'll have to abide by the duty of confidentiality. You cannot say a word about anything you see or hear to anyone. I'm not all too worried about Nayuta, but Koyomi... you do look like you have a loose tongue."

Koyomi took offense and objected.

"Whatcha talking about. Sure it's a bit loose, but I won't talk about stuff that I really shouldn't, y'know? Like Nayu-san's 3 sizes or her cup size."

"If you did say anything about those, I would no longer give you lap pillows."

Koyomi immediately shut her mouth. She was someone who never learnt her lesson about saying something she knew she'd be scolded for.

Just at that moment came a knock.

"Excuse me, it's Yanagi. I came earlier than planned——"

Clevel stood up from the desk.

The meet up time was at 13:00, but it wasn't even noon yet.

"Geez, everyone's so hasty... Yanagi-san, the other two are here for some reason as well. Please enter."

After opening the door, the elderly monk gave a deep bow, carrying his braided hat under his arm.

"I apologise for causing you trouble yesterday. Thanks to you, I am now able to move again—I look forward to working with you today."

Compared to his real, bedridden body, this Yanagi had better complexion and was overflowing with energy.

"Good day, Yanagi-san. Umm... have the doctors tried to stop you...?"

At Nayuta's concern, Yanagi returned a troubled smile.

"Yes, they did. It seems that if it were a normal virtual space and I instead rested peacefully, they would have no problem with it, but when the genre is horror, they are worried about its negative effect on blood pressure and heart rate... though I somehow managed to get something close to a tacit approval when I explained the situation—well, it is the final whim of an old man. And my wife supported me."

"Good to hear. Even I would not be able to chime in when it came to persuading doctors."

In the first place, if Yanagi hadn't come, Clevel's scheme would have gone down the tube as well.

The detective offered the elderly monk a chair and spread three documents on the desk.

"The contract for the part-time job. Digitalised and saved... no, digitalised from the start, but just in case, I would like your signatures as a formality. Although troublesome, with your real names, of course, not character names."

Both Nayuta and Koyomi extended their hands to the documents.

Their contents consisted of conventional things, like warnings and hourly pay, with no particularly odd sections.

"In a situation like this, I do not really feel like taking money..."

"Sorry, but I can't register you as testers without a contract. Appearance-wise, we set it up that 'our company will gather part-time testers'. Without an employment contract, their side will also have trouble."

Koyomi moaned.

"Hmmm... Our company is relatively lenient, so something like this should be okay... just don't let anyone know, okay?"

"As long as you yourself don't have a slip of the tongue, there won't be any problems."

Clevel's reply was probably intended as a joke, but to Nayuta, it instead felt like it was a very likely scenario.

Yanagi gave a smile tinged with exhaustion.

"I am paying the Detective-dono for the job and necessary expenses, yet getting a part of those expenses as an hourly pay. This is one strange contract."

"I am humbly sorry about this. This will probably be the first and last time a great proprietor like you, Yanagi-san, will be employed for such an hourly rate."

Displaying a smile of his own, the detective retrieved the contract signed by Nayuta.

And his glance abruptly stopped on it.

"Is there something wrong?"

Not taking his eyes off the document, the detective squeezed out a flat voice.

"...Nayuta... your, this surname..."

Her signature was <sup>Kushiinada Yurina</sup> '櫛稻田優里菜'

To Nayuta, this wasn't a particularly unusual reaction.

"Ah, it's read as 'Kushiinada'. Unusual, right? It seems that the surname was filled with a wish that their rice paddy fields would stretch out like a comb... but it is a bit awe-inspiring how it sounds like the <sup>Kushinadahime</sup> 奇稻田姫<sup>(5)</sup> of legend. Precisely because of this, father once wondered whether some ancestor changed the reading of one of the characters."

The detective nodded with a strangely tense expression.

"...Strange indeed. It's an unusual name—"

Thinking back on it, she had never given her name till now. In online games, the character name was like a real name instead, thus it was hard to even graze the topic of real names.

"Hoi, Detective-san. Have mine as well."

'Koyomihara Shiori' was written on the document Koyomi held out.

This also seemed like a rather unusual name, but the detective didn't say anything in particular about it.

As it stood, he put on the coat that was hanging on the wall and picked up his favourite stick.

At this awfully unconcerned-looking attitude, Nayuta felt a slight sense of discomfort.

(Though he seemed to be interested by my surname...)

Without the time for her to ask the reason for this, Clevel collected the contracts and headed for the door.

"—Alright. It's still early, but let's head out. That said, if they haven't finished the preparations, we'll have to return again—"

"Eeh. Wouldn't it be better to go at the last minute? I don't know where we're going, but going all the way back and forth is a pain, don't ya think?"

"It's not far enough to feel like a pain. It's right next door."

The detective didn't even turn around. Nayuta and the others hurried after him.

"Umm, Detective-san... by next door, you can't be meaning...?"

"It's exactly that. Among the things that fall under the duty of confidentiality, this is something that I particularly want you keep hushed."

In front of the entrance to the detective's office was the black cat statue that they had become used to over the past few days.

Its golden-tinged pupils gazed at empty space, while both of its forepaws showed peace signs.

The pose was clearly different from the one it had till yesterday, but that was not much of a problem.

Clevel stood in front of the cat statue and poked the bell on the statue's collar with the tip of his stick.

\*Karan\*, \*karan\*, \*karan\*, a dry sound resounded thrice.

Something flashed at the edge of Nayuta's vision.

Directly opposite the detective's office—

The cat eyes engraved on the door to the ⟨Cat God Faith Society⟩ had an orange radiance.

"The collar's bell is the switch, you see. If you open the door without ringing it, you can only enter a room used as camouflage."

While explaining this on the side, Clevel peered into the shining cat eyes on the door.

Suddenly, the carving spoke in a high-pitched voice.

⟨Retina pattern on player data confirmed. We will now check your voice print.⟩

"This is Kurei. We gathered our members faster than expected. If it is not a hindrance, please open up."

The voice of a sleepy man came from the speaker.

[Mm, roger. One moment...]

The door, which looked like it would open normally, rose up as if it were a shutter.

Beyond it was a research building-like passageway, surrounded by white walls, that looked inappropriate to both Ayakashi Bystreet and Twilight Street.

Without regard to Nayuta and the others in their bewilderment, the detective swiftly moved forward.

"...So this means that the 'Cat God Faith Society' is..."

The detective nodded without a care.

"On the surface it looks like a suspicious religious group— while in reality, it is a virtual base created by the administrators to watch and adjust for cheats and other unlawful conduct. Of course, the main surveillance system is somewhere else, but you can see errors and points of improvement by investigating from within the game, as well as collect rumours flowing from players. I was told to keep its existence as secret as possible, thus it's only opened up to our staff, but— you all are my subordinates for the day, you see."

Taken aback, Koyomi looked around the passageway with curious eyes.

The white walls seemed to be made out of something like strengthened plastic, giving the impression of lustre and cleanliness.

"...Hoe... It kinda looks like the inside of a spaceship...?"

"True. It does seem like an alien or a combat android would come out from around the corner at any time."

As Nayuta let out such an impression, Koyomi suddenly clung to her arm.

She hadn't intended to scare her. It was just her honest impression.

The detective chuckled.

"Have you got the same tastes as the supervisors here, I wonder. The system for intercepting intruders that activates whenever anyone suspicious enters takes the form of a creature and machine that looks precisely like that. They're set up to be unbeatable no matter how hard you struggle, so a regular player wouldn't be able to break through. Well... if you weren't accompanied by someone with permission in advance, the doors wouldn't open in the first place, though. Doubling and redoubling security is fundamental."



Yanagi, following behind them, also let out a half-shocked voice of wonderment.

"Hahaa... I was told that this was a game whose selling point was a Japanese-style world, but this is..."

"As this is the administration's virtual office, it is essentially a place that normal players would not get to see. In a word... it's for the convenience of the supervisors."

A trifling question popped into Nayuta's mind.

"Detective-san, your office neighbours ⟨this place⟩ ... did they come here after you moved in? Or did you borrow this building due to following them?"

It was, naturally, hard to think of this as a coincidence.

Depending on the answer to this question, she could guess about his relationship, or the sense of distance, with the administration.

Clevel gave a faint smile.

"That's quite a complicated thing you ask. As a matter of fact... I should say that it was about simultaneous. In my eyes, they are one of our important clients. To them, I am a useful errand boy— In the end, you could say that I am a fox that borrows the authority of a tiger."

It wasn't quite possible to tell whether he was joking or being serious, but it did seem that they had close a connection.

The white passageway was shorter than Nayuta had expected.

Turning the corner, their field of vision opened up and she gazed in awe at the scene.

Before her was a modern, bright office space that was unsuitable for Ayakashi Bystreet.

It was about as large as a gymnasium.

A beautiful, deep blue sky was projected on the glass ceiling, and the approximately ten people working below it were facing their personal consoles in partitioned workspaces.

Their outfits varied but went in-line with ninja, samurai, oiran, and other staples of (Asuka Empire) . They wouldn't feel out of place if they went out into the town like that.

Aside from them, cat bots operated by AI moved around everywhere in large numbers.

It was hard to tell from a single glance whether they were helping with work or just ornaments, but it did seem that there were roughly thirty or more of them.

Additionally, in the four corners of the office were open spaces, as if they were wide stages, where 3D models of bosses that appeared in the game were displayed.

It seemed they were performing checks on the appearances and movements of the bosses, as they continued to play them frame-by-frame, stop, and rewind.

Taken aback, Koyomi grasped Nayuta's arm.

"I've seen this before... a research establishment that appears in SF movies...! And it's the kind where they develop zombies and cause a panic!"

"The impression is similar... but in this case, it's a game development room, I guess?"

"No, we don't develop anything here."

Before she knew it, a short, hunchbacked, middle-aged man stood right next to her.

He was wearing the costume of a Shinto priest, but the eyes beyond his round spectacles were truly sleepy and he had not a single particle of Shinto priest-like majesty.

He smoothly cut into their conversation and continued talking to them as if he were having a carefree chat.

"What we handle here is just investigation, adjustment, and error verification of all kinds— oh, and we also sometimes deal with various troubles, so in short, we're just managing routine tasks. The main development is done in another post."

The Shinto priest man complained in a worn-out voice.

"Since we're in a virtual space, we at least made a nice-looking office, but in reality, it's a window-sided post.<sup>(6)</sup> There's nothing astonishing going on here— yo, Kurei-kun. Long time no see."

The hunchbacked, middled-aged man raised a hand at Clevel.

The detective gave an elegant bow.

"Thank you for your assistance, Torao-san. How is your back pain?"

The middle-aged man smiled like an old man.

"Not all too good. Well, thankfully, I don't feel any pain in here— So this elderly man is the Yanagi-san you talked about, and these ladies are the part-timers for muscle?"

The man named Torao stared at Koyomi.

"...Kurei-kun, isn't this bad? Employing a middle school pupil is against the Labour Standards Act."

"...Aight, Occhan, ya've got some nerve. Want me ta flood the game community with tons 'a half truths about ya, ha."

Koyomi gave a friendly smile. Strangely, she loved acting like a child in front of Nayuta, but being treated like a child by a stranger would commonly set her off.

Torao's shoulders suddenly trembled and he meekly bowed his white-haired head.

"...Sorry. You looked about the same age as my daughter, so I couldn't help myself. Ah... I am Torao, head of the Error Inspection Cell for the (Hundred and Eight Apparitions), as part of the Development Department Systems Management Division. Also, as a side job, I'm the priest of the Cat God Faith as well... Ah, thank you."

A tabby cat at his feet, which they met along the way, handed him some documents.

"It's earlier than expected, but since we don't know how long this matter will take, it's better than being late. I want to explain some things, so let's get to work without delay. Follow me."

"Ha. Sorry for the trouble——"

Yanagi gave a deep bow.

Immediately, Torao gave a wry smile.

"Ah, no, how rude of me... I should be the one apologising. I am not really accustomed to greeting such an important person, thus please excuse any rudeness of mine. Since entering the company, I have always specialised in technology, you see."

Talking to a senior proprietor, his tone naturally became formal.

The detective added a follow-up in a whisper.

"Torao-san is... exaggeratedly, one of the 'guardians' of (Asuka Empire) . The person himself claims that the post is window-sided, but it is instead a refuge. It seems that it is customary for people from other posts to come crying to them whenever they have issues."

Torao sneered.

"Stop with the obvious flattery... after all, we only get pressed with bothersome issues."

Guiding Nayuta and the others to a corner of the open space, Torao gave a deep sigh.

"Well... the (Hundred and Eight Apparitions) truly is an event where we can't let our guard down. We had been sent quite a few quests with viruses and backdoors. Of course, they should have all been handled in the selection phase, but it can't be helped that the higher-ups are nervous that something could have been overlooked. Well, please sit down."

As they were told this by Torao, Nayuta and the others encircled a white table used for meetings.

"So you mean that you actually overlooked something? The (ghosts) were unexpected to you, right."

"Yeah, it's as you say, Ojou-san. I didn't have anything to do with the selection so I don't

know the whole story, but we ended up with this fuss because it was unexpected. Though——"

Torao scratched his head.

"...I wonder. What I'll say could probably be self-flattery, but our selection team should be quite excellent. If something as unbelievable as 'reading memories' of players in the quest were taking place, it would burden both the machines and the people. It would be one thing if it were the future, but it's very doubtful that this could even be possible with current technology, and if something as strange as this were going on it would definitely be hard to notice, but..."

At his vague words, Clevel inclined his head.

"Torao-san, you haven't begun the investigation yet?"

"Don't be absurd. Because of your behind-the-scenes dealings, I only got the job pushed onto me just this morning, you know? Of course, I do have a vague grasp on the matter, but I practically haven't begun inspection of the part that caused the problem.

Torao unnaturally raised his brow with his fingers. Still having a sleepy expression, he couldn't really put much force into them no matter how much he tried.

Yanagi bowed down apologetically.

"Forgive us... for my grandchild's creation causing you so much trouble."

While on one hand he wanted to be proud of his grandchild's genius, it seemed that he was also feeling guilty about the situation caused by it. Considering how taciturn she was, Nayuta also found it hard to chime in with some careless words.

As if having forgotten the delicacy of Yanagi's situation until now, Torao hastily bent forward.

"Ah, no no. It is not your grandchild's fa... well, it is indeed your grandchild's work, but we should be the ones to blame for not noticing it. The quests submitted by users through The Seed are quite the pain to analyse... and, after all, it was not something that we ourselves had created, so it was hard to grasp the details of its workings. At

the current level, I would have wanted and requested for a longer preparatory phase, but it seems that it did not go well with the higher-ups... That is obviously no excuse, though."

While speaking detachedly, Torao shrugged, seemingly troubled.

Clevel took over the rest.

"As a matter of fact, the VRMMO creation tool (The Seed) itself is like a black box. While it is a tool easy to use even for amateurs, we have yet to find the end of its capabilities to this day—I, too, had tried using it and it felt out of place, as if I were touching a program that had come from the future. As for the quests created using that tool, I believe that it is unfair to expect a complete analysis of them in a short period of time with the current level of our technology."

At this follow-up, Torao let out a smile while on the verge of tears.

"Haha... that's the nature of the job, though I can't say that either... So, in the place of us worthless workers, we will have you take the first steps to investigating the matter. I'll explain some of the important points."

Torao lowered his gaze at the document.

"First, the (Phantom Orchestra) quest that you will be heading to will be hosted on a test play server, separated from the usual (Asuka Empire) . Therefore, you can't use the teleporter to town. If your HP hits 0, you will return to this office without the death penalty being invoked. Also, for convenience, we will have you use a copy of your player data. As changes to the data will not be reflected on either side, I'd like your agreement on this point first."

Koyomi blankly inclined her head.

"I dun get it..... Make it simpler. Explain it like I'm an elementary school student."

Treating her like a child was a taboo, yet the consideration she demanded was practically that.

Torao pressed down on his brow.

"...Alright. I'll only get the main point across. During the test play, you will be using a copy of your player data. Meaning, the items and experience you obtain along the way will not be reflected on your current data. Nor will you be able to bring back the quest reward. All you'll get is 'the ability to play it'."

Nayuta nodded. As this was a test play, such a development was within her expectations.

"In return, all the consumables that you use there will not be lost either. Well, you will temporarily lose them, but the moment you return here, the contents of your tool bag will return to its current state. Meaning, nothing lost, nothing gained— were you able to understand this time?"

Koyomi finally nodded.

"Yeah... all we want is for Yanagi-san to get to play the game, so I don't care about stuff like that. Actually, how about letting use as many of those precious consumables as we want...? Oh? Wouldn't that be great!?"

Clevel smiled.

"That's some splendid forward thinking. Indeed, the more free we are to use those items, the less difficult the quest will be. Also, Torao-san, about the matter with Yanagi-san..."

"Oh, no problem with that. You can adjust it as you please."

Yanagi tilted his head in puzzlement.

"Oh, is something the matter with me...?"

Clevel nodded mildly.

"Yes. As you could expect, clearing the quest at level 1 is a bit unreasonable... if we had at least a bit more time, I would have you go through some other quests with good experience point efficiency for at least the minimal of leveling, but in this case, we are just 'test playing as work'. Thus, I have arranged for you to use different character data, adjusted for the minimum of balance, while keeping your appearance the same. Simply put— 'for now, you won't be sent to retirement in one attack.'"

Torao supplemented his explanation.

"Of course, we could just make it so that you would not suffer any attacks from the enemies for the test, but... if we did that, it would feel more like mere work than a game, you see. I do believe that your grandchild would not want anyone to play it like that, so for now we have set your level to be slightly below that of the ladies accompanying you."

Yanagi cast his eyes downward and gave a deep bow to the two.

"My my... I am greatly obliged for your consideration. I am sorry for being such a burden on you, please do as you wish—"

Torao hastily had Yanagi raise his head.

"Oh no no, going on a quest at level 1 would be very one-sided on you and inappropriate for the test play— thus, this is for your convenience. Please understand."

Nayuta also felt relieved by the detective's and Torao's consideration. If there no longer were any worries that Yanagi would be killed in one attack, Nayuta and Koyomi could act without worrying about protecting him. This should make battles considerably easier.

Then Torao turned round to face Clevel, who was, in a sense, an even more one-sidedly bad example.

"...Now, about you being high-leveled yet having the same problem for some reason..."

"Yeah, I am maintaining the status quo. I do not see much of an issue here."

"...Just as I thought, so I didn't give any particular instructions on that."

Torao seemed to be quite shocked as well.

Unlike the beginner Yanagi, he was quite happy reaping what he sowed, though Nayuta still felt a slight issue with it.

"Are you sure? Detective-san, your stats are so one-sided that they are unsuited for a test play too, I believe——"

Torao shrugged.

"Well, it will be a 'precedent for performing a test with high luck'... I know that in the case of the level-1 Yanagi-san, far from testing, he'd retire again and again, making no progress at all, but I do feel like this Detective-shi will somehow pull through. Well, he'll still be useless when he's useless, but... if he's useless, his uselessness can be ridiculed later on."

It seemed that this priest was also the kind of man who'd make you question how serious he was being.

But then, there wouldn't be much of a problem if the detective were absent during the quest. The goal, after all, was to let Yanagi experience the quest.

The tabby cat that came to Torao pulled on his hakama.

Looking over the note given to him, he stroked his unshaven chin.

"Alright. Preparations for the test field seem to be completed. Let's get ready to move out."

Once Torao operated the console displayed in mid-air, a teleport gate imitating a red torii archway rose up beside the table.

"The event flags will be taken over from your data right now. As the castle has already appeared, there won't be a need for offerings at the hokora. Though—— the point where you all get forcefully dispersed in the castle probably won't change. It seems that the quest works in such a way that, as long as you all have obtained some items needed to regroup, you'll be able to meet up inside. Nayuta-jou has already acquired it, but the others retired, so they still haven't obtained them, you see."

Nayuta confirmed the items she had through her menu window.

She had acquired several items when they rushed in the day before yesterday. Among them, she narrowed down the possibility to three unknown items that looked like they could be related to meeting up with her partners.

"A ⟨Papier Mache Cat⟩ , a ⟨Flute of Springtime Haze⟩ , and the ⟨Stone of Complaints⟩ — which of them will that be?"

Torao grinned broadly.

"Ah, that would be the 'flute'. Due to the quest being the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ , the items for linking up are musical instruments. Since the Ojou-san has acquired the flute, the others have to find some kind of other instrument, like a kotsuzumi, taiko, koto, hichiriki, wind instrument kind of sho, percussion instrument kind of sho, samisen, or anything else of the kind. Essentially, you'll be able to find such instruments in wicker baskets or something like that while exploring. There's no need to defeat any enemies, so even Kurei-kun should be able to work something out."

Suddenly, Koyomi's eyes began darting back and forth.

"Phantom orchestra... musical instruments... that kinda... sounds like a bad end where we inadvertently equip cursed instruments and become part of the phantom orchestra, though...?"

Torao shrugged.

"Actually, it's the opposite. Those instruments are sacred ritual tools offered by the village. A certain monster snatched away these tools and used their power to take control of the villagers' souls, turning them into its own musicians. Your role is to take back those instruments and eliminate the monster nested up in that castle of ayakashi — but because of Kurei-kun easily activating the quest, you skipped over several prologue events. In addition to hints on activating the quest, there should have been journals about the tragedy of the village in the main temple building and the mansion of the village headman..."

Nayuta moaned unintentionally. The detective, too, averted his eyes with an innocent look.

She did explore the shrine, but she didn't even know where the temple itself was. As for the mansion that appeared to belong to the village headman, she decided to postpone exploring it and kept passing by the gate.

"We overlooked those... I am surprised the flags for activating the quest were raised."

Torao scratched his head as if he were troubled.

"Well, that's all fine as far as we see it, but... if we made it obligatory to discover the journals, people would end up reading most of the story before going into the castle. It seemed that the creator wanted to avoid that as well, and I agree with him. For horror, 'not getting what's going on' is particularly essential to spice things up. As they say, when examined close, <sup>the ghost</sup> if you look carefully at it, it won't be scary if you know the logic and background. But nothing can be done about that for the test play."

Koyomi burst into laughter.

"There really are quests like that; ones that you don't quite get. The kind where, even after receiving your rewards for clearing the quest, you still don't get the story in the end... and then understand it by reading commentaries later on."

With a forced smile, Clevel pointed the tip of his stick at the gate.

"In that case, we have more room for imagination and enjoying the mood, I believe. Now then... it's about time we headed out. Our goal is clearer than the other day as well. First, we find a ⟨musical instrument⟩, then link up and eliminate the boss—everyone ready?"

Just as Clevel was about to step towards the torii gate, Koyomi hastily grasped his hem.

"Wait, wait! There's still something else I want to confirm. There was that kitsune-masked boy, right? He kinda looked like a guide, but can he really be trusted? That kid won't turn out to be the last boss or anything?"

"That NPC is probably on our side. I have no concrete proof, but his existence itself is definitely one of the hints and keys to clearing the quest. Am I right? Torao-san."

At the detective's leisurely question, Torao replied with an expression of wonder.

"A kitsune-masked boy...?"

"That's right. A child that appears right after you enter the castle. He wears a kitsune mask and a splash-patterned kimono—"

Nayuta added, and then Torao's eyes contorted.

Then, he muttered in doubt, without an accent.

“...There's no player guide-like NPC in the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ . What... on earth are you talking about...?”

Torao's bewilderment spread to all of them, ushering in a subsided silence.

Nayuta unconsciously formed a fist and took a deep breath.

—From somewhere far away, as if noise, came the timbre of a gloomy matsuribayashi.

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## Notes

1. ^ Short for "office lady"
2. ^ A kemoner is a person who likes beasts. The term is created by adding the English suffix -er to the word kemono (beast).
3. ^ A naniwabushi (浪花節) is a genre of traditional Japanese narrative singing, usually accompanied by a samisen, that was popular during the Edo period. The comparison to these ballads is usually used to describe something as sentimental due to the dual themes of obligation and compassion that are apparently characteristic of the naniwabushi.
4. ^ Dogeza (土下座, lit. "sitting right on the ground") is the act of prostrating oneself on the ground with one's head touching the floor. In Japanese etiquette, this is used when making deep apologies, or an extreme way to beg for a favour.
5. ^ A kami in Shinto mythology. One of the spellings of her name looks just like Nayuta's surname, except for one kanji.
6. ^ This is referring to people who are given no real job to do as they're close to retirement.

# Chapter 3

## The Phantom Orchestra

For the bedridden boy, the new computer bought by his grandfather was a window to a new world.

As he had been practically shut inside a hospital room until then, his world, through the open window, became a junction point to an even bigger world.

Beyond the window was a crowd of people whose faces he could not see.

Even if he extended his hands, he could not reach them, nor could he step outside the window with his own feet, but just being able to gaze at the outside world was a great change to the boy.

And, several years later—

The sudden and rapid evolution of VR technology turned the boy's 'window' into a 'door'.

The world he thought he could not reach no matter how much he longed for it... opened up before him in all five of his senses.

The virtual space that he could only experience through sight and hearing until then began to involve smell, touch, and taste in the form of faint electric signals to his brain, and he even gained the sensation of freely moving his limbs.

And so, he—

Met ⟨companions⟩ who were in the same position.

§

A matsuribayashi could be heard in the distance.

The high-pitched flutes, the light tsuzumi, and the elegant koto together formed a merry racket.

As if to say that life is but a dream, go crazy,<sup>(1)</sup> they played a dreary song with desperate-sounding vigour.

They already knew the source of the sound.

Even if the musicians couldn't be seen— their souls were currently imprisoned in the gigantic castle in front of them.

At least, it seemed that that's how it went according to the scenario.

The Battle Miko Nayuta, standing in front of the castle, sent a gaze of bewilderment to her small animal-like partner clinging to her back.

“...Koyomi-san, are you all right? Your knees are trembling, your face is ghastly pale, your eyes are blank, and it seems like your real body could be drenched in cold sweat—”

The ninja Koyomi responded in a trembling voice.

“...Of course not... That gramps could have just left out that scary bit before we went in... Even if he didn't know what you were talking about, he should have just pretended to know about it and said something like ‘Oh, that kitsune-masked boy! I know I know’; if he was good adult...!”

In an outburst of anger, she said something so absurd. Due to the effect of her childish appearance, her figure, trembling in fear, looked quite pitiable.

Just before this test play began, Torao, the person in charge of inspections, told Nayuta and the others the following thing.

[There's no player guide-like NPC in the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ .] —

—In that case, what was the ⟨kitsune-masked child⟩ that appeared when they first entered the castle as if to greet them?

The cowardly Koyomi was completely convinced that this was a kind of ghost story.

Although it seemed like a good idea for her to give up on the test play and wait outside, her courage to enter the castle nonetheless was praiseworthy.

The kitsune-faced detective, Clevel, sighed as if appalled.

"Is it really something to be so scared of...? It was unexpected that the administrators were unaware of the 'kitsune-masked child', but you're being too rash by arbitrarily deciding that 'it's a ghost then'. Thinking sensibly, it's more appropriate to think that we encountered a ⟨hidden character⟩ that even the administrators were unaware of. For a submission whose detailed workings are unclear, that's quite plausible."

Koyomi growled like a puppy.

"Uugh... Q-quit it with your poor comforting! Nayu-san is making an appalled face that's practically saying 'Detective-san is telling another pack of lies'!"

That was entirely mistaken, as she was actually currently appalled by Koyomi.

Stroking her head like that of a child, Nayuta formed as soft a voice as she could.

"I did not make such an expression. My thoughts on the matter are mostly the same as Detective-san's. I do not know the requirements for encountering the hidden character, but it could be a low probability coincidence, or it could have been the effect of Detective-san's pointlessly high Luck— or it could be that we unknowingly met some requirement for its appearance; either way, I believe that it was a simple oversight on the part of the administrators."

In that regard, Nayuta's intuition was completely sensible and rational. Actually, a real ghost would be a more interesting topic for conversations, but the probability of that was awfully low.

The Detective lightly pressed against the ground with the tip of his stick.

"If I were to express a slightly more detailed guess— he could be a kind of independent AI, rather than a mere NPC. Meaning that he's along the lines of an

artificial intelligence with the capability of hiding himself from the administrators and appearing only in front of players that he himself wants to meet. That is the most plausible way for him to work, I believe."

Koyomi looked up to the Detective with suspicion.

"...Really? You're not lying...? When I get back home and look at the mirror, I won't see the child standing behind me or something...?"

"...You know, you're not suited for the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ in the first place? Actually, on the contrary, you might be too suited for it..."

Being so honestly scared of a haunted house was, in a sense, enviable. It could also be as proof of enjoying the events more than the administrators had anticipated.

Even Yanagi chimed in with concern.

"Umm, Koyomi-san... I believe my grandson Kiyofumi was a very kind-hearted child—he was not the kind of person to ever cause problems to others, much less commit something as discourteous as arbitrarily following a girl to her room, thus—"

—Assuming that an actual ⟨ghost⟩ existed in the quest, the most likely candidate for that would be the deceased creator, Yanagi Kiyofumi.

At this sincere though somewhat off persuasion, Koyomi quickly became at a loss for words.

".....I-I wasn't expecting such a response... ugh... I'm sorry for treating him as a suspicious person..."

Even while bowing down, she did not release Nayuta's back.

Taking advantage of the course of the conversation, Clevel touched upon the part that was hard to bring up.

"Yanagi-san. Inquiring about this would be rude, but... do you believe that the kitsune-masked boy we encountered is the ghost of your grandchild?"

Yanagi took several moments before answering.

"...I believe... that is not the case. Though, if you are asking whether I am absolutely sure that there is no 'chance' of it happening... In any case, he and the quest itself is certainly things that Kiyofumi 'left behind in his final moments'. Even if he is not a ghost, he is the child's other self, or his last will... or some other sort of being of special meaning, I believe."

While he used words and reason to say that, it was easy to guess that he still held unresolved sentiments.

Either way, a ghost of one's deceased grandchild was not the kind of topic that was easy to hear. If he was an imitation, it would just be vain, while if, by any chance, he was real, it would mean that he was roaming the world, unable to rest in peace.

"Besides, Kiyofumi passed away in his mid-tweens, thus... while the kitsune-masked child looks just like Kiyofumi when he was a child, he looks like seven or eight years old. Perhaps... he is a being that Kiyofumi made based on his younger self as the model."

The Detective quietly nodded.

"...Yes. That interpretation is just about right."

Nayuta arbitrarily assumed that she heard him add 'unfortunately'.

The group turned their steps toward the castle entrance.

Buried in the centre of the somewhat short, stone stairs was the small hokora that served as the trigger for the castle to appear.

The stone statue of the child enshrined in it was ominously expressionless and, depending on your point of view, more freaky.

Having passed by the side of the hokora, the group stood right in front of the huge entrance that imitated Yōmei-mon.

The inside was pitch-dark, but once they stepped in, they should each be forcibly transported to a random place inside the castle.

Supposing that the places would be the same as the last time they entered, Nayuta would appear in the castle's underground passageway, Koyomi in the open air bath where mermen live, Yanagi in the infinite hall, and Detective Clevel in the topmost castle tower.

Aside from Nayuta, the other three had yet to acquire one of the key items, 'musical instruments', they would need to obtain to regroup.

First, they'd need to find the musical instruments, followed by meeting up and then dispatching the boss— if possible, they wanted to finish all of it in just one day.

"Koyomi-san, are you prepared?"

Nayuta gently asked the girl who looked to be the only one in the group who had yet to prepare.

Koyomi finally released Nayuta's back and, slightly trembling, nodded.

"I-I'm fine... I think... probably... Nayu-san, when we meet up afterwards, be sure to praise and pamper me a lot, okay? I don't think I can take it unless I have such a reward to look forward to..."

"Hah... well then, let's be off."

Deceiving her by not giving any promise, Nayuta stepped toward the darkness one step ahead.

Not wanting to fall behind her unhesitant gait, Koyomi quickly followed suit.

Clevel and Yanagi, too, followed after the two—

And thus, in the darkness, the four were scattered throughout various places inside the castle.

## §

When asked about "the meaning of life" by his young grandson, Yanagi was unable to give a clear answer.

There were several so-called textbook answers.

It was possible to say 'Searching itself is what life is about', or 'Play hard and study hard', or explain about biological happiness by saying 'Spend time with your family and leave some offspring behind'.

But in the first place, he was speaking to a child. By all rights, he could have found plenty of "reasons to live" by just talking about hopes for the future.

However, Yanagi— could not answer.

At a loss for words, he inclined his head, and with a gentle smile, "Grandpa doesn't really know either" said to the best of his ability.

His grandchild Kiyofumi knew himself that he would not live till adulthood.

Practically unable to leave the hospital, go to school, or play with friends—he had constantly asked himself how much meaning such a life had ever since he was young.

Even now when Kiyofumi was dead—

Yanagi was unsure how he should have answered his grandchild's question.

Although Yanagi could see his own time of death coming not so long after the death of his grandchild, being a man who would die having lived to his heart's content till he grew old, Yanagi's situation in life was far too different from that of his grandchild, who could not even reach adulthood.

(I... could not do a thing for Kiyofumi.)

Harbouring such regrets, Yanagi was now standing here in this fake body.

In Yanagi's field of vision was the same pillar-less hall that he had visited on Saturday.

Despite there being no source of light, somehow he was able to clearly see that the floor was made out of tatami and the ceiling of wooden boards.

Yanagi had received a lecture, mixed with conjecture, from the detective about this large hall that continued endlessly as if reflected in opposing mirrors.

'I have several theories regarding how to escape from the looping room. Finding some kind of hint, a hidden switch, using a special item, or defeating the enemy controlling the room... it is also possible that you need to wait for a certain amount of time or walk a certain distance, but as far as I can see based on the workings of the hokora the other day, your grandson was a fair developer who is sure to have left a hint. On the other hand, he has probably not made it so that you could solve the riddle by accident, so rather than suddenly walking out after being transported, please carefully inspect your surroundings.'

Recalling his advice, Yanagi surveyed the area.

In this room, there were no pillars or walls. The only things present were the ceiling and the tatami.

Assuming that there was a hidden door or switch, it could only be either on the ceiling that his hands couldn't reach, or one of the tatami stretching out on the floor.

(Last time, while walking randomly, I ended up falling into pitfall trap...)

Essentially, it wasn't the kind of trap where you would die instantly, but the level 1 Yanagi didn't have that much HP for starters, so he was easily driven out to the exit.

As he was in a test play this time, his level was adjusted; nevertheless, walking out recklessly couldn't be called a good plan.

(Well then, I don't see anything abnormal about the tatami—as for the ceiling...)

Looking fixedly overhead, Yanagi noticed that the wood grains of the ceiling boards was strangely distorted.

—Suddenly, he recalled something Kiyofumi had once said.

When his disease was not yet serious, Kiyofumi had said that the wood grains of the ceiling in a ryokan traveller inn looked like the face of a person.

This was often the case with children, so his parents took delight in scaring him that it was a ghost or monster, but Yanagi knew a different "answer that Kiyofumi wanted to hear".

Compared to his parents who were busy with work and care for their child that much, Yanagi, who was always in contact with his grandchild due to being retired, knew his personality much better.

Kiyofumi was a rational child.

He was not scared of ghosts, but rather wanted to know the reason 'why the wood grains look like the face of a person'.

So, Yanagi gently explained what Kiyofumi wanted to know with care.

Wood grains were created through the growth of the tree.

For the majority of people and beasts, their eyes and mouth are arranged in an inverted triangle.

Because of this, when you see 'three dots' arranged in an inverted triangle, people unconsciously end up associating it with a 'face'.

This was called a simulacra<sup>(2)</sup> phenomenon and there were a lot of cases in the past when spots on the wall or the shadow of leaves on trees were mistaken for ghost photography.

Whenever he was acquiring knowledge like this, Kiyofumi's eyes always glittered.

The memory that suddenly crossed his mind was not unrelated to his current circumstances.

(...Wooden ceiling... wood grain...)

The wood grain on the ceiling boards above him was obviously and unnaturally distorted.

However, the pattern it formed wasn't the face of a man.

It was close to being an inverted triangle, but it had an acute angle and extended in a line like a tail.

(...An arrow?)

It was pointing behind Yanagi.

Having turned around, Yanagi noticed that the arrows on the ceiling boards continued in succession.

Even someone as inexperienced about games as him immediately understood that this served as a substitute for a guidepost sign.

It was likely that the arrows made from the wood grain of the ceiling boards were indicating an escape route out of the infinitely continuing hall. Once he figured out the workings, he realised that it was a trivial and very simple riddle.

Yanagi formed a bitter smile and began walking along the arrows.

The kitsune-masked child had yet to appear.

Assuming, like the Detective guessed, that it was an AI that had a way of escaping the eyes of the administrators, he would not have the chance to encounter the child during this test play.

On the other hand, Yanagi held doubt about this view.

(Would Kiyofumi create such a thing...?)

No matter what, he could not believe that Kiyofumi, who loved the game called Asuka Empire and even held respect for it, would go out of his way to create a mechanic with the purpose of outwitting the administrators.

The kitsune-masked child probably had a special requirement to appear.

A ⟨special requirement⟩ that the administrators didn't notice, but Kiyofumi didn't intend to hide, yet Yanagi and the others were able to achieve without knowing it—

While being guided by the arrows, Yanagi pondered with his old head.

(One of the substitute offerings for the hokora... not. The administrators should also be aware of it. 'Something' that only I and Detective-dono had done... Clevel-dono's

abnormally high Luck... no, however, if that was the case, the administrators would have noticed it. Something more special...)

—Something ⟨special⟩ .

There obviously was something.

Rather, with a head like his, that's the only thing he could think of.

Facing the unchanging hall, Yanagi cast his voice.

“...Kiyofumi, don't tell me... you've been waiting for ‘me’ to come...?”

—The special factor that only they had.

To have Kiyofumi's ‘grandfather’ Yanagi as a party member.

Assuming that that was the condition for the child's appeared, it was natural that the administrators couldn't grasp it, and the chances of other players encountering it accidentally was practically null.

In Yanagi's field of vision, the empty room was suddenly distorted like smoke.

## §

Having charged ahead of the other members, Nayuta began investigating the castle itself.

She alone had already acquired the musical item needed to meet up, the ⟨Flute of Springtime Haze⟩ .

Giving it a blow, even an amateur such as herself was able to produce a nice sound with it, but due to lack of knowledge on how to manipulate it with her fingers, she couldn't expand it into a melody.

It seemed like she could use it like an actual instrument if she practiced, but due to not having any particular interest in doing so, she was lost on what to do with it after the quest.

The wide underground passageway with stone walls on the left and right was a bit chilly.

There were light stands stretching out at a high point, but despite there being light, the area in front of her was nevertheless plunged in gloomy darkness. As for the ceiling, it was so high that it couldn't be seen.

The extent of her vision was limited to three metres—

With this much distance, she would generally be able to deal with any surprise attack from an enemy. It was too late to fear the uncertainties, though Nayuta wasn't awfully worried about them.

This was, after all, a game.

—In reality, it would have been much more scary to her.

While making footsteps with her zori<sup>(3)</sup> as if they were wearing thin, Nayuta leisurely advanced forward.

From beyond the wide passageway with stone paving, she heard clatter and metallic sounds.

(〈Skeleton Warriors〉 ...? They number over five, but less than ten—)

As their armour made characteristic clatter, they were enemies that were very easy to sense. Their individual strength wasn't all that great, but due to their coordinated attacks with all sorts of weapons, they were a bit of a pain in the ass as their numbers increased.

Nayuta cast her eyes down and took a single deep breath.

Soon, from the darkness came a group of corpses reduced to skeletons, wearing dirty helmets and armour.

The mouth of the skulls clattered with joy having found a prey.

Before they could get ready, Nayuta broke into a dash.

Clenching her hand covered by her kote into a fist, she unleashed a yell—and drove a silent punch into the face of the Skeleton Warrior standing in the lead.

The heavy attack enveloped in a Battle Miko's divine power sent the pitiful head of the dead flying along with its helmet.

Without a moment's delay, her left fist went for the skeleton's trunk as the monster searched for its fallen head.

That wasn't a move for beating it up. Drawing in one's fist and unleashing an exorcising wave afterwards; it was a close-quarter fighting skill—called ⟨Purifying Strike⟩<sup>Haraiuchi</sup>.

For a grappling-type player, it was a simple yet effective anti-spirit skill; it wasn't restricted to just fists, as it could be used for kicks, head butts, and other such attacks, effective in the strike range of the player's limbs.

The Skeleton Warrior, unable to defend due to the inflicted damage, suffered a follow-up attack, which caused it to crumble away along with its armour, as if sand scattered by the wind.

(One for starters—)

Unconcernedly, as if solving a problem in a workbook, Nayuta decided on her next enemy.

Three of them coming from the front—if she tried dealing with them one at a time, she would be flanked.

Making use of her selectively strengthened leaping ability, she jumped up softly.

Her pure white sleeve fluttered like wings, while her red hakama billowed out in the wind.

Her slender legs kicked the helmet of a Skeleton Warrior, then used it as a stepping stone for another brilliant, high jump.

The ⟨Leaping of the Eight Ships⟩<sup>Hassoutobi</sup> that enhanced the player's jumping ability was a basic skill, but with its advanced form, the ⟨Unparalleled Jump⟩, kicking off would be

regarded as an attack.

It didn't have much power, but in the case of an easy-to-tumble bipedal opponent like the Skeleton Warrior, it was possible to succeed in toppling the enemy with the attack.

That was exactly the case here; the skeleton whose head was trampled by Nayuta clumsily hit the floor with its face.

When this happened, even its ominous appearance felt somewhat humorous.

Nayuta leapt over the heads of the other Skeleton Warriors and landed behind them without a sound.

Her body was undoubtedly as light as a feather. In this space, she could simulate a move that would be impossible in the real world as if it were perfectly natural.

Forgetting everything and, as if dancing—skillfully turning her body round and round.

Giving herself to the masurebayashi that suddenly came out of nowhere, she magnificently avoided the Skeleton Warriors' tachi swords, and counterattacked.

Stepping on the back of the blade that was swung downward, she leapt up and smacked its chin with her knee.

She avoided the tip of a spear thrust at her, shortened the distance while going around the enemy's flank and, using the centrifugal force, she dealt a backhand blow.

She cut a bowman's bowstring with a shuriken before it could fire, then mercilessly kicked its torso as it was flustered by the loss of its weapon.

The lone maiden reduced the number of the Skeleton Warriors in the group just like that.

The last remaining skeleton brandished its hexagonal pole, giving off a tragic impression.

Using the sweeping pole as a foothold, Nayuta leapt over its head.

Her landing spot was behind the Skeleton Warrior.

Aiming for the skull's ear, she took a gentle breath—

"—May you find peace."

She dealt a sharp blow, her tone soft.

Leaving behind a faint echo and ray of light, the Skeleton Warrior died on the spot.

Confirming no more signs of enemies in the area, Nayuta straightened herself.

Normalising her not so disordered breathing, she listened carefully to the timbre of the matsuribayashi that came unnoticed.

She tried to determine for the direction of the sound, but because of the echoes off the walls of the passageway, she couldn't discern its origin.

(If I recall the lore correctly— an apparition enslaved the souls of the villagers to create musicians for itself, and to undo the curse, we need the sacred musical instruments that were guarded by the village...)

According to Torao's explanation, it seemed that during the quest you could only meet up with members who had gathered musical instruments.

Last time, Nayuta had already acquired one, but the others were only beginning now. Naturally, she didn't expect to be able to meet up with anyone for a while.

Should she fight against some small fry to kill time, look for treasure or something, or take a break somewhere—

Even if she did take a break, she wanted to do it not in this dreary stone passage, but a more relaxing place.

Having decided on a plan and begun to walk, Nayuta suddenly sensed the presence of a person behind her.

(Another enemy—!)

Promptly leaping forward to take some distance, Nayuta turned around.

However, what stood before her was neither an enemy, nor a comrade, yet still a familiar being.

A very young child, wearing a splash-patterned kimono and a kitsune mask—

He looked like a child actor in a historical play, but, of course, he was not human.

"...We meet again. Umm... Kiyofumi-kun?"

Looking up at Nayuta through his kitsune mask, he didn't answer her question, but instead something else in a voice lacking intonation.

"—Onee-chan, you sure are strong. Those Skeleton Warriors you fought just now shouldn't have been enemies that easy to beat."

At the pouting tone unbecoming an artificial intelligence, Nayuta unconsciously smiled.

"It's not like I beat them as easily as it looked. I focus on speed and have weak defence, so I've developed a habit of defeating enemies in a swift attack— I did plan to run away if I suffered even a single clean hit."

As he was obviously younger, Nayuta naturally changed her tone to suit talking with a child.

— (He) was an artificial intelligence and definitely not some ghost. Unlike Koyomi, Nayuta could discern as much.

In the past tens of years, artificial intelligence has seen tremendous evolution. Even now there were individuals in the virtual space that were on a level making them hard to distinguish from humans.

Research and development in that field was advancing in various places, especially in commercial enterprises, and as a result, even amateur-like creators were now able to easily obtain copies of such artificial intelligence.

The latest cutting-edge— well, that would naturally be difficult to obtain, so on the level that could be used for a game, there was data on stereotypical men and women

of all ages rolled out to the world of the Internet, including both paid and free content.

The creator of this quest, Yanagi Kiyofumi, had probably also applied this data and created his other self, the (Kitsune-masked Child) . If he just had data to use as a base for personality, he could add more intricate lines for him later on.

The kitsune-masked child fixedly gazed up at Nayuta.

Nayuta, too, fixedly gazed down at him.

Their gazes couldn't meet because of the mask, but she was able to understand that she was being observed.

"Kiyofumi-kun— is that how I should call you?"

Nayuta asked once again for confirmation.

The child shook his head.

"Kiyofumi has passed away. I am just an artificial intelligence born through Kiyofumi's will— so, I was given a different name."

(...Huh? He admitted it...?)

She had firmly believed that he would lie or try to deceive her to maintain immersion in the game.

Yet, he frankly revealed his identity and pulled on Nayuta's sleeve.

"There's no point in lying to someone who knows about Kiyofumi. And besides, it doesn't seem like you're even a teeny bit scared even when I'm this close, Onee-chan."

"...Sorry. It seems that I'm more thick-skinned than the average person, or I'm just unfamiliar with such an emotion."

Feeling apologetic for some reason, Nayuta unconsciously bowed.

"Umm... If you're not Kiyofumi-kun and have received a different name... What is your name?"

"'Clovis' is my name. Cool, huh?"

For a moment, Nayuta was at a loss for words.

Moments earlier, she would have been able to honestly answer with 'it's cool', but because of the similar impression given by his words, she ended up imagining the shady smile of the Detective, making her pause for a moment.

Moreover, they even had the same kitsune face.

"...How should I put this... despite your Japanese outfit, you sure have a very Western name, I see?"

Facing Nayuta who harbored complicated emotions, the child proudly puffed his chest.

"It's the name Kiyofumi had as a player. The name was based on a hero that busted dragons in an old game or something.<sup>(4)</sup> I received that name—and together with Kiyofumi, we **created** this game."

Nayuta became bewildered.

"Created... the game? You?"

"Of course, the important parts were all done by Kiyofumi... but Kiyofumi gave me instructions and I set up the map and the mechanics—it sure was fun. Until Kiyofumi died, I was always with him."

The kitsune-masked child smiled sadly beyond his mask.

Nayuta ended up speechless.

(This child... created it with him? This quest...? Meaning... that he was a co-creator...?)

While surprised, she astonished at herself that she had completely forgotten this possibility.

Thinking about it, an artificial intelligence's original role is to assist people.

Controlling mechanisms in the place of a person, analysing information in the place of a person, carrying out 'the role of a person' in the place of the person— This kitsune-masked child was probably a reliable partner to Kiyofumi.

Though, in order to take an artificial intelligence on a level that an average person could obtain, and make it so proficient, it was indispensable for the user to be knowledgeable and be skilled at modifying it; it wasn't as simple as it sounded.

Actually— it seemed like an even more difficult experiment than 'developing a quest' itself.

(Perhaps, Yanagi Kiyofumi's actual goal... wasn't to develop this quest, but to nurture this <artificial intelligence> through creating it...?)

Although low, there was the possibility that the quest was just a camouflage to hide the artificial intelligence 'Clovis'.

Nayuta decided to voice her suspicions.

"Do... you have any purpose in being here?"

Suddenly, the child inclined his head questioningly.

"Onee-chan, do you have any purpose in living?"

"Wha...?"

Having received a question in return, Nayuta was stumped on how to respond.

Answering a question with a question was bit rare for the behaviour of an artificial intelligence. It is possible that Kiyofumi expected such a question in advance and inputted an answer to respond with, but in that case, she had a mysterious sensation that her thoughts were seen through.

The artificial intelligence named Clovis slowly added to his words.

"—If I don't have a purpose, I can't be here?"

"That... I..."

Having hesitated for a bit, Nayuta squatted down, matching the the height of her eyes with his.

"...You're right. You don't need a purpose. Besides, you'll probably find one along the way, and can decide on it someday yourself... Though, allow me to ask one thing. Could it be... that you were asked by <Kiyofumi-kun> to do something important?"

The child slipped out a chuckle beyond the kitsune mask.

"Yeah. He did ask for a favour. But... right afterwards, Kiyofumi also said that he didn't want to bind me with any promise. He said that I didn't need to care about the promise and that I could act freely as I wished— so, I can't tell you yet."

The child gently jumped a big step back.

Like a ghost, half of his body sunk to the other side of the stone wall.

"Ah! Wait!"

"...See you later, Onee-chan. But then— if you can't clear the quest, we might not meet again."



Just like that, the child disappeared into the wall.

The area was engulfed in silence as if there had been no one there from the start.

Putting her hand on the stone wall where the child had disappeared, Nayuta pondered for a while.

(The artificial intelligence the administrators overlooked... was of course not a ghost, but in that case, what about the other 'ghost'—)

The thing she wanted to ask him about as she asked him to stop, and the biggest reason why this quest was driven to a suspension— that is to say, the 'ghost of one's close acquaintance that shouldn't be present as data'.

She had heard that in the detective's case, his deceased bosom friend appeared, in Yanagi's case - his grandchild Kiyofumi, and in Koyomi's - her old pet.

Even in Nayuta's case— a person that should have been dead showed himself.

(If we clear the quest, will we be able to understand how that works too...)

At any rate, right now, she wanted to meet up with her comrades.

With renewed energy, Nayuta corrected her posture.

And, right after she once again began walking through the underground passageway—

She suddenly felt vertigo.

Her vision swayed for just a moment and she unconsciously closed her eyes.

—Nayuta has experienced this sensation the previous time, too.

With some confidence and discomfort, she opened her eyes.

At that moment, she saw a person she couldn't forget.

A young, pale man, wearing a policeman uniform and standing stock still absent-mindedly.

While alive, he looked very gentle, but now, his expression, hidden by the shadow of his cap, couldn't be seen.

The matsuribayashi could be heard, strangely far away.

"...Onii... chan...?"

Nayuta let out a hoarse voice.

It was a little dim, but there was no mistaking it.

—When she had entered the castle the previous time, she had also come across the figure of her elder brother.

During the mere moment she had thought that she had been mistaken, Nayuta's thoughts suddenly came to a halt.

Then, without a thought, she just unconsciously and indifferently brought down the enemies in the area, and by the time she came to, she was standing by the escape route.

She remembered it all well. In contrast to Clevel and the others, she had reported "I saw the ghost of someone I knew", but she had not lied about it.

She had just shut down her emotions.

If she couldn't think a thing, she wouldn't feel fear or loneliness. Even if she couldn't completely overcome them, she could 'paralyse' them.

Even now, at this moment—

When the figure of her elder brother entered her view, without any panic, she killed her emotions with cold thinking.

(...It can't be... a ghost—)

She didn't believe in ghosts and the like. Actually, she even wished to encounter **such a thing**, but the elder brother she saw before her was different.

It was 'something' that had taken the form of Nayuta's elder brother and was of no concern to her.

His figure could only be seen for a mere few seconds, and that being had already disappeared.

After the faint vertigo had passed, Nayuta took a deep breath— and then continued with a long expiration to empty her lungs...

—Her elder brother Kushiinada Daichi had died while playing ⟨Sword Art Online⟩.

She didn't really have any clue what had happened in-game.

But in the real world, her brother, wearing a NerveGear, had his brain suddenly fried in a hospital, and died.

His family, who had been praying for his safe return, fell into despair— and she didn't want to remember what happened afterwards.

To protect herself, Nayuta killed the majority of her emotions.

When Detective Clevel voiced clear hatred towards Kayaba Akihiko.

Nayuta thought of Clevel as slightly dazzling.

Nayuta had run away from even hating the perpetrator.

Casting aside her resentment... was a nice-sounding scenario that didn't happen. In order to feel hatred, she also had to face the sorrow of having lost her elder brother.

Nayuta had run away from all such emotions— Thus, she continued playing another VRMMO aimlessly.

Coldly gazing into the darkness where the ghost of her elder brother disappeared, Nayuta formed a light fist.

She put in some force. There was no hindrance to fighting.

(I have to hurry and meet up with Yanagi-san and the others— I wonder if they have

been able to find a musical instrument by now...)

With such thoughts in mind, she began walking in a state similar to sleepwalking—

The <sup>Futakuchi-onna</sup> ⟨Two-mouthed woman⟩ that closed in on her from behind... was hit with a backhand blow with all of Nayuta's strength without her turning her eyes.

## §

The importance of a life was relatively different.

Between the life of a complete stranger and the life of a family member, the family member's life would generally be more important.

The case would be different if the relationship with the family was filled with discord and hatred, but as long as such special circumstances aren't involved, it'd be safe to say that the death of a relative would make you shed tears.

On the other hand, for an unfamiliar person who died in a traffic accident, you wouldn't feel anything other than "condolences".

It was impossible to live one's life grieving and moaning every single time such a **frequent** event occurred, and actually, there was not a moment without some unknown person having just passed away somewhere in the world.

For a person to feel sorrow about another person's death, ⟨information⟩ about that person is essential.

If there was just some information, even a fictional character's death in a story would make people shed tears.

In the first place, you wouldn't even be aware of a death that you had no information on.

Just now, even though a child in the corner of some slum who had been abandoned by their parents suffered from medical poisoning and died, there was no one in particular to grief about the child's death.

It isn't a matter of good or bad; **that's** just how the world works.

This is a very healthy thing; if people mourned for every single death of an unknown person, they would not be able to smile even for a second throughout their life.

The importance of a life was relatively different.

The more the person is familiar, the bigger the importance; the more a person is unacquainted, the less important their life is

To Detective Clevel, the deceased 'Yanagi Kiyofumi' was an unacquainted stranger.

As for his death, he did think that "it's a pity for someone so young", but he didn't have any more sentiments for it in particular.

So—even regarding the kitsune-masked child that appeared before him, his response was very disinterested.

Clevel was not one to feel that much compassion for every person. He knew that this was impolite.

Outside the window was a castle tower, overlooking the stars in the sky.

Having been transported to the same place as last time, Clevel shrugged at seeing the kitsune-masked child.

"So you came, 'ghost' boy. I'd like to have a chat with you. Kiyofumi-kun, hm? Or do you have some other name, I wonder?"

The child inclined his head in wonder.

Clevel thought that he was Kiyofumi's other self.

There were two 'special mechanics' made by the deceased Yanagi Kiyofumi in this quest.

The appearance of one's dead acquaintance as a ghost.

And, the existence of the (kitsune-masked child), an artificial intelligence that even the administrators hadn't noticed.

Unless the safety of these two points can be proved, or a program correction is performed, the suspension of the quest will not be lifted.

The particularly problematic one was the ‘appearance of one's dead acquaintance as a ghost’, but the administrators doubt the possibility of this phenomenon being a terms of service violation.

A VRMMO using a feature to access the brains of people and, in-game, performing the act of "reading and recreating the memories of an individual"— this was clearly a breach of Asuka Empire's rules.

Yet, the creator Kiyofumi probably did not think that this would become a problem.

In fact, if Clevel's conjecture was correct, he did not engage in illegal conduct. Though, he created something close— some gray zone mechanic that would naturally be misunderstood as a transgression.

Based on the fact that no problems occurred during the application judging phase, it can be deduced that the mechanic wasn't the kind to work on everyone.

The kitsune-masked child pointed at Clevel.

The rude action was somewhat awkward, reminiscent of a puppet.

“...Onii-san, who are you? I don't know you, Onii-san, but you know me?”

"Yeah. I haven't met you while you were alive, but I do know you. I'm a friend of your grandfather, Yanagi Teiichi-shi. I'm named Clevel."

When he squatted down, offering a handshake, the child inclined his head, and said something strange.

"Clevel... that name sounds like mine, huh."

The detective frowned.

He couldn't understand right away what the child was saying.

"...You... aren't Kiyofumi-kun? Of course, not the person himself, but a being that should be called his alter ego——"

A chuckle escaped from the mask.

"'Kiyofumi' has died, y'know. I received a different name. But..."

Ignoring the detective's handshake, the child jumped a step back.

"While I have told it to Onee-chan, I can't yet tell you, Onii-san. To people who haven't even found a ⟨musical instrument⟩, I'm not saying a thing."

Like a child playing tag, he broke into a dash downstairs.

Energetically like a leaping rabbit, he disappeared just like that.

Clevel unconsciously formed a bitter smile.

"So that's how it's going to be... I didn't really think he'd suddenly tell us everything. 'Torao-san', did you hear that. That child really did come out."

From the three-leaf-patterned clasp fastening his bolo tie came an exhausted-sounding voice of a middle-aged man.

[We caught him on our side too. He really does exist... Those guys who were in charge of screening are really getting it now.]

In the course of the test play, Clevel and the others were monitored by the administrators.

On top of that, Clevel alone also had the ability to contact Torao.

Yanagi was just playing a quest made by his grandson, Nayuta and Koyomi were, in the end, just assisting, but Clevel had the 'job' of identifying the error in this quest.

Literally, this might be a game, but it's not something you play. To him, this was a source of income for earning his daily bread, as well as a way of gaining trust.

From the communication device imitating a bolo tie clasp came Torao's voice.

[However, I dun get it. Why did that hidden char appear only to you guys. Seeing as it was overlooked on the test play, it doesn't sound like merely the effect of Luck—]

Clevel cautiously stated his opinion.

"I had figured that it was an AI designed to hide from the administrators, but despite us being monitored, he still came out. Assuming that he has no particular intention of hiding... I believe that, probably, Yanagi-shi's existence is the key. It is probably devised so that it would react to any party with, not limited to Yanagi-shi, any player that seems like a family member or a friend. The information essential for the filtering would be the player's name, age, and also... maybe uttering the name 'Kiyofumi' or reacting to it, or something like that."

Torao sighed. The emotions included in it were just a bit heavy.

[... A will from the creator directed at his family and friends, you mean. We'll investigate the rest. Matters related to artificial intelligence would take a bit of time, but—it seems like those guys are sharing info about the ways of hiding from administrators.]

These Torao's words, at the current time, were still a joke, nearly like an urban legend.

But Clevel knew from experience that, in VR, artificial intelligence evolution was advancing at a tremendous rate.

Despite the exceptionally few examples, artificial intelligence on the level of being capable of escaping administrator control and even responding to dialogue in a way that makes them indistinguishable from people have been appearing sporadically.

For starters, the great majority of people aren't as clever to be compared to artificial intelligence, nor did they have anything exceptional in particular.

Excluding the small fraction of brilliant geniuses, ninety-nine percent of people couldn't win at shogi or chess against artificial intelligence.

Of course people couldn't oppose then when it came quiz-like information challenges, but because artificial intelligence don't have the risk of dozing off or drinking alcohol,

people lose to them when it came to driving safety; because artificial intelligence don't have sexual desires, they don't fall for honey traps; due to not having timidity, as well as knowing moderation, artificial intelligence ability at communication is also higher.

Additionally, they were even so flexible that their character and behaviour could be changed to a great extent depending on the settings.

Clevel... felt fear from the bottom of his heart about their existence.

However, strangely—he didn't hate them just because he feared them.

Just like you wouldn't particularly hate beasts like bears and tigers as beings despite fearing them, Clevel observed the evolution of artificial intelligence with great interest despite fearing it.

"Well then, Torao-san, I shall follow after that child. Let me know if something happens to the others."

[Yeah. Yanagi-san seems to be doing okay. The two girls are also advancing well. Well... currently, the one with the biggest chance of being driven to retiring is you, I guess...]

At his voice, mixed with concern and lack of resignation, Clevel gave his usual faint smile as a response.

In fact, that was exactly the case; as Torao feared, the results depended on how things would turn out as of this moment.

Having ended the call, Clevel turned towards the stairway leading to the floor below the tower.

Last time, he was done in by several jorōgumo that appeared here.

It was even still unclear whether that was a fixed enemy, or a random encounter, but he brought along a counter-plan just in case.

Distraction smoke bombs, flash bombs to surprise the enemy, poisonous smoke to reduce the enemy's strength, white lotus aroma to reduce the probability of encountering an enemy, a Scapegoat Charm to lead the enemy astray with a decoy phantom—although neither of them were damage sources, they would be enough to

escape the small fry.

Immediately, Clevel rolled down a flash bomb downstairs. The small sphere with paper, imitating a firework ball, \*koton\*, \*koton\*, kept falling down, bouncing along the stairs.

After the faint explosive sound and flash of light a moment later, several footsteps clattered away into the distance.

Having driven away the jorōgumo waiting in ambush downstairs, Clevel leisurely began descending the stairs.

Due to his status, he was weak against surprise attacks, but if he just knew how the enemy would act, he could thus cope with them to some extent.

Below the tower, a corridor with wooden floor continued forward and back.

One side faced the outer wall, the other had a wooden wall.

In an actual castle, there were plenty of cases where there was a large hall with no particular partition below the castle tower, but this castle was, in the end, designed just as a dungeon.

Emphasising reality, or prioritising conditions for a game—even points like these told about the creator's personality and preferences.

It seemed like inconsequential detail to other players, but to Clevel the detective, such minute details were also important hints.

(Now then, I have to find the 'musical instrument' for meeting up with the others... I was told that there's no particular need to defeat enemies, and that the items should be hidden in wicker baskets or beyond trapdoors.)

These were hints he had heard from Torao, but he had conjectured that there was no need to 'defeat strong enemies' before meeting up when he was forced to act alone.

In the case of classes unsuited for individual battles, assuming that the person wasn't skilled, would be quite capable halting any progress. Even if the creator planned out such a situation maliciously, the administrators would adjust the balance at the time

of its release.

Although he couldn't let his guard down, the situation was far from being desperate.

Moving quickly before the fleeing spiders could return, yet still not abandoning caution, Clevel began walking through the dark corridor.

Before five minutes of no changes passed, one did occur.

A faint figure rose up in the front, engulfed in darkness.

Clevel, feeling faint dizziness, came to a stop.

(...So it came.)

This sensation wasn't new.

Without even concentrating his eyes, Clevel saw 'him' having appeared before him.

A young, athlete-like man with broad shoulders and wearing a platemail unbecoming a Japanese castle—

The sword in his hand was halfway broken, and black blood flowed from his atrociously cut abdomen.

His face couldn't be seen, but it was easy to guess that it had an expression of anguish.

The detective made a groan.

(So he did 'come'—a bigger problem than the artificial intelligence of the kitsune mask person—)

Due to the uproar caused by the hospitalisation of a player shocked by this ⟨ghost⟩, the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ quest was driven to suspension.

Clevel did not know what the man had specifically seen, but it was undoubtedly a close 'someone', like a relative, lover, friend, or acquaintance.

Currently, the young man in platemail standing before Clevel was also a familiar being

to Clevel/

Frowning as if glaring at the man, the detective opened up communication through his bolo tie.

"...Torao-san, do you see it? The next one came out. Not the kitsune-masked one, the real 'ghost' that caused the problems."

—No answer.

Clevel unconsciously clicked his tongue.

(The connection... was interrupted, huh.)

Impossible—is what could hardly be said.

Actually, if the 'ghost' worked as he had guessed, such a thing was to be expected.

The console was not displayed.

The item list would not come out.

In addition to the minute dizziness, his limbs felt weird, as if chained down. This by no means meant that he couldn't move his body, but it seemed like all of his five senses were enveloped in a thin coat of exhaustion.

—It felt like he was in a 'dream'.

Clevel's deceased friend staggeringly approached him, without creating any metallic sounds with his platemail.

As the area around his eyes became distorted at seeing this pitiful state, the detective unconsciously spoke out the name he used in Aincrad.

"You're the same slowpoke as always, huh, (Yakumo) ... Even after death, you've still neglected your Agility. For a guy who cared so much about being strong, how exactly did you end up dying in one attack."

Despite him saying that with irony, his voice trembled for some reason.

His former friend continued walking staggeringly. Though, despite his feet moving, he did not close in on Clevel.

As his footpath was moving in the opposite direction, his body had not moved from its fixed position.

The ghost figure could only be seen for less than even a minute, then he disappeared into the darkness just like that.

After feeling slight dizziness once again, Clevel heard a familiar voice calling him.

[... i-kun... Kurei-kun! What happened? Answer me!]

Unlike his usual self, Torao was panicking.

While taking deep breaths, the detective just barely managed to pick his words.

"...Torao-san. Excuse me. I... dozed off for a bit—"

Through the bolo tie communicator, he clearly felt Torao's relief.

[Dozed off... you do know you've been **sleeping** just now? Well, rather than sleeping, it was more like your brain waves entered a state close to REM sleep—]

Unlike the others connecting to the game from their homes, Clevel had logged in from a medical institution, arranged for by the administrators.

It wasn't a safety policy, but rather a measure to check on his brain waves and mental state during the test play; the role of a test subject, so to speak.

"...Is that so. So I was sleeping."

[It was just for a mere moment, so I did think that it might have been a sensor malfunction. It was as if you had been forced asleep by magic or an item. Right now, the staff is trying to do a detailed analysis. We do want a bit more data, but can you still continue?]

Clevel unconsciously gave a wry smile.

"Obviously, Torao-san. Just now, I encountered that <ghost> . In the end, it was just a false image created by the brain—the product of a 'dream'. It seems we have proved that it is not dangerous."

Clevel had certainly been 'sleeping' just now.

FullDive technology itself included a factor close to sleep and anaesthesia, but, in the end, it was just a phenomenon caused by mechanical control of the brain; even in-game, sleep was required.

Even the victims of the SAO Incident slept in-game; the sleep itself wasn't particularly unusual.

However, differently from such a corporeal and physiological phenomenon, what Clevel had experienced just now was a forcibly and momentarily being forced to sleep—and he experienced a 'dream'.

This was the true nature of the <ghost> set up by Yanagi Kiyofumi.

"The ghost that should not exist as data and imitates the individual's deceased friend or acquaintance—the true nature of that ghost is a false image created in one's own mind. Making a player sleep for a time that can be counted in seconds, then, during that meager time, stimulating the brain to create an illusion of the deceased. The ghosts we have seen were not data that manifests in the game but 'one's own memories themselves'—isn't that right?"

According to Clevel's conjecture, this wasn't a particularly novel technique. Psychic phenomena like out-of-body experiences and near-death experiences were largely known as illusions created by the brain.

At a time when there wasn't even a sign of VRMMOs, it was reported that artificial near-death experiences were induced by stimulating the Sylvian fissure in the temporal lobe with electrical impulses.

Naturally, just because the same impulse was given didn't mean that the same phenomenon occurred for everyone. Individual differences in the test results were big, and the fact that the test player didn't actually see anything reinforced this theory.

The human brain was endowed with a <function to create illusions> from the start.

The majority of people experienced them in the form of dreams, and VR tech was nothing but a method of mechanically manipulating this function of the brain.

Torao gave a superficial sigh.

[... We'll be inspecting that now, but you're probably right about that. Just for that moment, you were shown a short dream due to the interference of the FullDive system. Because it was in a dream, you were, naturally, unable to use the communication device or your items. The vital part of the tech is to align the setting of the dream with the scene of the game. Moreover, due to it being very short, the player doesn't notice that it's a dream, and end up having an optical illusion that they had encountered a ghost in-game—when you've figured out the trick, it doesn't sound all that big. As they say, the ghost turned out to be a beckoning flower. Because it's the individual's dream, what they saw doesn't get logged, and, in the first place, doesn't exist in the data. What a ghost.]

Despite the circumstances having become clear, Torao's voice was bitter.

“...Torao-san, you seem to want to say something?”

[Don't ask what you already know... Despite this not being a violation of the terms of service, it does violate ethics. Although it depends on the player's relationship with the deceased, there really aren't that many people who could remain calm after suffering a trauma. The reason why this mechanic didn't activate for our test players was likely because of either compatibility issues for the mechanic to work, or because the players just happened to not have any dead relatives, or something along those lines. Conversely—the deeper the ‘scar’ a person holds, the stronger mental damage they suffer from it. How vulgar.]

Clevel burst out in laughter unconsciously.

"It is natural for horror to be vulgar. Eh... I do understand what you are trying to say. For what reason did the boy named Kiyofumi create such a mechanic. That certainly makes one curious. If he was the kind of person to take joy in hurting others, it would not really be the kind of thing to praise, but—"

Unlike the detective, Torao wasn't laughing.

[At any rate, revisions are needed. We can't reimplement it like this. I dunno where got the tech from, but it is an elaborate mechanic made by a child half for fun. It's reasonable to assume that someone... and that someone is a researcher or an active developer, provided him with the tech.]

On this point, Clevel's opinion slightly differed from Torao's.

"I... do wonder about that. It could be that the mechanic was an original creation of his. Based on the fact that he created the quest himself... and in a short period of time to boot, he is undoubtedly a genius. Of course, he must have consulted the findings of specialist researchers, but... The concept is one thing, but it does not mean that he was doing something awfully absurd technically. 'Showing a dream to a player of their deceased acquaintance in the scenery of a game for just a few seconds'—in my case, it just happened to be a deceased friend, but Koyomi-jou saw a microbe that she used to keep as a pet. For the majority of people, I believe it would only yield a reaction on the level of 'that surprised be a bit'."

Torao groaned at his advocacy.

[It's fine for the majority. But as I've said before, the problem is the 'minority' of cases that actually have scars. Remember when I asked 'can you still continue like this?' moments ago? You were quite the actor in playing calm, cool, and collected. But even for a man like you, your vitals don't like —Your heart rate, blood pressure, brain waves - all of them displayed a very large change just now. Although he might have already calmed down—even the university student that caused the quest to be suspended had received a huge shock and fainted, thus being carried to a hospital. It's awfully hard to say that it's not dangerous.]

The detective put his deerstalker hat over his eyes.

"...Was I that agitated? As a matter of fact, despite him being a fake... I did feel just a bit happy to see him."

It wasn't a bluff.

It was heart-breaking to see such him in such a pitiful shape, but to Clevel, Yakumo was unmistakably his friend and comrade in arms.

He was an acquaintance from the same university, a contemporary even at the police

academy, and, since becoming policemen together, a man with whom he grumbled about the brass.

He was literally a jack of all trades both physically and mentally, being only slightly above the average as a policeman; in exchange for not having any special or amazing skills, he didn't have any obvious flaws—that's the kind of young man he was.

With a faint smile, Clevel calmly spoke to Torao through the communicator.

"In any case, we can save the judgement for when we reach the end. In the first place, speaking of heart rate, blood pressure and other such changes, the horror genre itself could be considered dangerous. Like the ⟨Subjugation of a Tiger on the Folding Screen⟩ ... that one sounds like a decent challenge, no? Compared to that, the trick in this quest is cute."

[Well that one is... to be honest, I had a problem with it too. Eh... , but that one was equally scary to everyone. It wasn't the the kind of thing to exacerbate an individual's trauma.]

The detective grinned broadly.

"Torao-san. Speaking of traumas—a wound may rot if left alone. Before that happens, it forms a scab, even if it hollowed out, and one can get used to the pain; I believe that is also a method of coping."

[Hmm... and what if it festers even worse because it was hollowed out?]

"...Well, let's consider it a step at a time."

He wasn't the kind of guy to be swayed by eloquence.

The detective made progress through the corridor.

—As he was in the process of fulfilling his original goal of 'allowing Yanagi to play this quest', there was no need to sway Torao. Whether the quest was left suspended or reimplemented was a matter unrelated to the request.

Though, Clevel had already ended up receiving a message from ⟨Yanagi Kiyofumi⟩ .

Koyomi and Yanagi hadn't noticed. Nayuta could have noticed, but she had a habit of sealing her thoughts in her mind.

As the boy named Kiyofumi's last will was ⟨here⟩—the quest remaining in suspension left a slight, bad aftertaste.

(Now then... what kind of sophism to I need to use to change this 'guardian's' mind—)

The head of the Error Inspection Cell Torao was reliable as an ally, but on the other hand, but he was quite the handful to persuade.

Conversely, if he could just convince such a hard-nut-to-crack, he could persuade the higher-ups with the same reasoning.

As a fox that borrows the authority of a tiger, Clevel had to bewitch him.

Sticking out his tongue to moisten his thin lips, the detective swung his beloved stick around.

## §

When he finally saw an end to the hall that he thought had none, Yanagi stopped for a breather.

He had come this far by following the wood grain arrows on the ceiling; the kitsune-masked child had shown his face for a bit, but disappeared without starting any conversation in particular.

Looking ahead, at the end of the hall was a fusuma with a beautiful with a gorgeous picture on it.

The reason why Yanagi stopped was because he recalled an important point he had heard from Clevel.

Beyond an opened door or fusuma, there were frequently enemies waiting in ambush—

This appeared to be a convention in the horror genre.

While taking a breather, Yanagi stared at the picture on the fusuma. He had just learnt how you could find a hint if you look for one.

(Now then... The picture on the fusuma is quite the big one...?)

It seemed that a single picture was formed from ten screens.

The touch of peaceful sumi-e was excellent and, despite the lack of colour, it was clear that it was depicting a battle scene.

A swordsman and a samurai, a ninja, and a priest— there were generally people of all kinds of occupations, but they were all uniformly opposing a huge dragon standing in the centre.

Someone experienced would have sensed that the composition of the group assaulting it from left and right in a pincer attack was created by merging multiple screenshots with a touch of sumi-e, but Yanagi's eyes were not that trained.

And, one of the people depicted on it was a man that Yanagi knew well.

(...Kiyofumi...?)

The kitsune-masked child was based on Kiyofumi as a child.

On the other hand, the version depicted with sumi-e was him just before he passed away— a Kiyofumi in his mid-teens, a somewhat matured boy.

Holding a staff in one hand, he was protecting a beautiful young swordswoman.

There was another swordswoman on the other side; the two of them looked similar as if they were sisters.

The painting, filled with lively motion, really caught Yanagi's attention.

(Could this picture possibly... be depicting Kiyofumi and his friends...?)

Kiyofumi, who was disabled and spent a long time in hospitals, had met other children in the same circumstances in a medical VR space and had become friends with them.

The name of the group that was born in the miniascape known as ⟨Serene Garden⟩ and came to ⟨Asuka Empire⟩ seeking adventure, if he recalled correctly—

“...The ⟨Sleeping Knights⟩ —”

Yanagi unconsciously muttered the term he often heard in his conversations with his grandchild.

—The change was dramatic.

The fusuma pictures stretched out in front of him were pulled to the left and right with great force, as if working by spring.

And seeing the open scenery in front of him, he couldn't believe his eyes.

A meadow full of blooming flowers and white pillars lined in a row—

The sky with dazzling sunshine was blue and the wind that reached him was clear and pleasant.

Despite clearly not being inside the castle, this space was directly connected to the dark hall.

Having even forgotten about the detective's warning, Yanagi walked forward as if he had been invited.

Confused by sensation of the grass and soil, Yanagi once again surveyed his surroundings.

No sign of any people. Naturally, no sign of any enemy.

In the distance, he could see a mountain range; up close, white swings and benches, as well as stone tables among other things were placed.

Stone paving was laid out like a pathway, but the majority of the ground was covered

in grass, with vivid flowers growing en masse everywhere.

Turning around, he saw the same dark hall he had been moments ago still there.

Bewildered by the scene change, Yanagi took off his braided hat.

Before he could even take a few steps, he found a huge stone monument in a corner of the beautiful garden.

Its silhouette was slightly elliptical, a size comparable to the ten fusuama paintings, and its well polished surface let out a beautiful brilliance.

Having slowly stepped up to it, Yanagi began reading from the middle the numerous characters engraved on its surface.

“...June eighth, Oonamuchi subjugated—June tenth, Houraiju<sup>(5)</sup> acquired; June thirteenth, barbecue party in Kiyomihara...”

This was an activity record of the 〈Sleeping Knights〉.

As the enumeration of events continued, several bolded characters caught his attention.

“...Ran and Yuuki's birthday party, Merida's birthday party..... Clovis's birthday party...”

〈Clovis〉 was Kiyofumi's name as a player.

Upon clicking on any of the characters, commemorative screenshots of the event appeared mid-air.

And, the in-game Kiyofumi—Clovis... and his circle of friends were cheerfully smiling.

Having gazed at the monument for a few moments, Yanagi unconsciously pressed on the inner corners of his eyes.



That didn't mean that tears were flowing out in sorrow.

—He had been convinced that the life of his grandchild, shorter than of most people and the majority of which was spent in a sickbed, had nothing fun in it.

After all, games were just a substitute of life that he believed was but a mere consolation.

—That wasn't the case.

Kiyofumi was, certainly, **here**.

⟨Living⟩ together with his friends.

Right now, Yanagi experienced this truth for the first time.

The fact that his grandchild had actually been living made him very much happy now. At the same time, he was ashamed at himself for arbitrarily deciding that his grandchild was "unhappy" due to a misunderstanding.

Having offered a silent prayer while weeping, Yanagi suddenly heard footsteps of a person behind him.

As he turned around, his teary eyes met the kitsune-masked child there.

He wasn't alone.

He was followed by two white foxes from the left and right that looked like the messengers of Inari.

They sat down with their forepaws aligned and seemed just like stone statues, but their fur was beautifully clear.

"...Are you... Kiyofumi?"

He asked in a trembling voice, and the child inclined his head in wonder.

"Kiyofumi is already dead, you know?"

The child carelessly asserted.

Yanagi was at a loss for words.

That was obvious. But, in the depths of his heart, he had been anticipating a different answer. His alter ego or a being that had inherited his memories—even if it wasn't Kiyofumi or his ghost, he was hoping for an answer along those lines would come.

However, the voice of the child was cheerful and magnanimous, not allowing any smidgen of misunderstanding.

"The dead don't come back to life, nor do they appear as ghosts. Kiyofumi had no belief in things like that at all. That's exactly why he felt regret. 'Even as illusion, it would be nice to meet the deceased again', he said—So, he developed a trick to meet with the 'ghost' inside everyone's memories. Though, because he slightly lacked enough time, it ended up depending on the person himself who and in what form would appear... Ojii-chan, what do you think?"

With practically the same voice as Kiyofumi's, the child asked.

Having lost his composure, Yanagi nodded.

"...You're... right. Even knowing that it would be an illusion... I do believe I would want to meet them; that is probably the weakness of men—"

The child again inclined his head.

"It's not a weakness. It's not like it's something bad, and if you want to meet someone, why not meet them. It wouldn't be good to mistake them for the real thing, but thinking of them as a mere moving and speaking 'album', it's not like there's anything ridiculous about it, right? That's what the progress of technology is, I believe. Though, I'm just relaying 'Kiyofumi's' thoughts."

Having received the child's answer, Yanagi deliberated.

"...You are, that is to say... an artificial intelligence created by Kiyofumi, is that right?"

"Yep. Actually, this was supposed to be a secret, but it's fine to tell people who knew Kiyofumi to avoid misunderstandings. Oh, and—people who have found this place get

special treatment."

The child left his foxes there, sat on the nearby swings, and, \*kiiko\* \*kiiko\*, began swinging.

"Nevertheless, what is this place... it feels too different from the inside of the castle——"

Yanagi wiped his eyes and once again surveyed his surroundings.

The child answered indifferently.

"This place is the Sleeping Knights's (record room) . Though, it was beyond our expectations that someone other than the members found this place... Muttering the keyword (Sleeping Knights) at the fusuma painting connects it to this room. It's Kiyofumi's little prank... or rather, a memory album, I guess. Even when creating the quest, Kiyofumi and I frequently spent our time together in here."

The child muttered nostalgically and opened a menu window mid-air.

(This child was helping Kiyofumi with his work...)

Meaning that, although it was an artificial intelligence, it could be called one of his friends.

Yanagi gave a deep bow.

"It seems that you have been a great help to my grandchild——"

The kitsune-masked child burst into laughter.

"Ojii-chan, you really are a nice person. Just like Kiyofumi said. That Battle Miko Onee-chan and the Detective-san were a bit too intuitive and I was stumped on how to handle them, but... I guess I wish the Ninja girl and you, Ojii-can, good luck clearing the quest."

Swinging on the swings, the child waved his to the foxes.

One of the white foxes gracefully approached Yangagi's feet.

"Kon."

With a little bark, a kotsuzumi appeared on its forepaws.

Yanagi picked up the musical instrument, gently presented to him, with care.

"Could this musical instrument possibly be... the one needed to meet up with one's comrades...?"

"Yep. It's something that you'd have gained by breaking through that hall anyway, but, Ojii-chan, you look like you're in a hurry. It seems like the Ninja girl has also acquired one just a few moments ago, so I think you'll be able to meet up very soon."

It seemed that Koyomi had also advanced successfully this time.

He raised his face to thank the boy, but there was no longer anyone there.

The kitsune-masked child was a given, but even the two white foxes had disappeared without a trace.

At this sudden disappearance as if he had been talking to ghosts, Yanagi was taken aback for a few moments.

"...Well now well now, that was really weird..."

Eventually breaking into a smile, he gave a deep bow to the uninhabited garden—

And pushing his staff forward, he returned to the dark hall.

## §

Singing cheerfully, Koyomi timidly walked through the long castle corridor.

"...Oh, Yaanagiimochi, theey're so taaasty... ♪ Good as presents and economical... ♪"

It was a commercial song for Yanagi's company, Yanagi-ya Ryuuzen-dou, that was played long ago, but that didn't mean it was a song she particularly liked.

The reason for her singing was to trick her fear of being alone, while her choice of song

was to appeal to the staff, hoping that they could at least show some consideration with their traps; in a nutshell, she was awfully scared at the moment.

Her continuous ringing of the gong-like ⟨Bell of the Sixteen-Day-Old Moon⟩ instrument she had obtained through her search was because of her wholehearted wish to just meet up with anyone, to hell with appearance.

"Uuugh...! There ain't anyone here! What the, wasn't I supposed to be able to meet up with Nayu-san when I found the musical instrument!? Why do I have to walk around the castle like this I never heard about this impossible stop fuckin' with me manager come out... ah sorry sorry sorry actually you don't need to come out scary scary scary!"

As she banished bats that were drawn in by the noise with a single strike from her ninja sword, Koyomi continued complaining.

"Nayu-san, where are you!? Yanagi-san is good enough too! Though I truly don't care about Detective-san! Wait, if Detective-san and Nayu-san are flirting alone, I'll blow my top! I'll blow my top even if they're not flirting!"

She just shouted random things due to being overwhelmed with fear, but her wish to meet with Nayuta already was undoubtedly sincere.

As she made a racket, a group of Spirit Soldiers suddenly appeared from a corner of the corridor.

They were a lower form of the Skeleton Warriors. If Skeleton Warriors were regarded as samurai, these Spirit Soldiers would be close to foot soldiers.

They appeared like zombies wearing light Japanese-style equipment and their movements were slow, but, since they appeared in large numbers, if you let your guard down down, you could end up being flanked.

"Hii!? E-enemieees!?"

Filled with horror at the appearance of the large group, Koyomi unsheathed her ninja sword.

"Don't come near me! Don't you dare! If you come any closer, I'll put a curse on

yooooou!"

Along with this shout—

She rushed right in front of the enemy in a straight line without hesitation.

She beheaded two of them in one go, drew the attention of the other enemies being kicking away one of the two heads, and used that opening to attack further, her body lowered.

She mercilessly mowed down the knees of several soldiers and when they collapsed due to losing their balance, she swung a finishing blow at their upper bodies one after another, then nimbly stood in the way of the remaining panicking enemies that were trying to escape

"Kyaaaaah! I'm scared! I'm scared! Somebody save meeeee!"

As she was practically crying, Koyomi's blade assuredly slaughtered the enemies with a flash. Contrary to her voice and expression, she didn't make the slightest redundant movement.

The pitiful Spirit Soldiers, frightened by Koyomi and trying to escape from her, fell victim to her blade one after another, exposing their rotten remains.

"Higuh...! Eguh...! I can't take it anymooore..."

As Koyomi, having mostly finished cleaning up, sobbed like a child, a dying Spirit Soldier attempted to crawl away from her feet.

Without even turning her gaze, she violently thrust her blade into the enemy's back and, upon adding a second thrust just to be sure, she obtained a measly reward of experience points money.

Having blown away the jorōgumo that came late to their aid with an fire bomb without even seeing them, she wiped off the spurt of blood with her arm warmers.

"Uuuh... ganging up on an innocent maiden, you're such brutes... I'll prosecute you for sexual harassment..."

Ringling the bell as she once again began walking forward, her trembling voice once again began singing.

"...Oh, Yaanagiimochi, theeeey're so taaasty... ♪ Thoose who waaanna die, steep forwaaard... ♪"

Perhaps because of her fear, her lyrics subtly changed.

A single weasel that felt lucky enough to try a back attack on her was sent off quaking without being able to do a thing.

—Those who harboured fear were not necessarily always weak. The guarantee that a person afraid of a single cockroach would be weaker than the cockroach was nowhere to be found.

A moment of relief visited the small slaughterer, ringing her bell, several minutes later.

"...Koyomi-san? Why are you singing...?"

"..... Na-Nayu-saaaan!? Waaaaah!"

Koyomi jumped at the Battle Miko beauty that appeared from around the corner with no shame or honour.

Taking advantage of the confusion to bury her face in the ample bosom to get her fill of its softness, she let out an unacted sob.

"I-I-I was so scaaaared...! Nayu-san, what took you so long! Even though it's been over an hour since I obtained an instrument!"

"Ah... sorry. I was exploring some places... on top of the castle being too huge, there are also seem to be some automatically generated zones. I was worried by how mapping turned out to be not all that useful."

Stroking Koyomi's head as if she were a child as she clung to her, Nayuta gave her usual intelligent voice.

While quickly throwing a kunai at a karakasa-obake she saw at the edge of her view, Koyomi repeatedly took deep breaths of relief.

"Uuuh... I've finally... finally been able to meet up with yooou... I really had it hard you know. The kitsune-masked child only stuck his head out and, after saying something like 'no problem with Onee-chan' before instantly disappearing, then an Itsumade bird shat on me from atop my head, then when I came out of the open air bath corner, I was treated as a groper by an ohaguro-bettari, then a nurarihyon made me tea at a tearoom when I got lost and my legs became numb due to sitting in seiza... though the tea cakes were tasty!"

"..... It seems you had quite the fun."

Koyomi intended to convey the fear she had felt as she told her about her experiences, but it seemed this didn't go through to Nayuta.

"And, what about you , Nayu-san? Were you okay? You didn't go through anything scary?"

"Yes. I was especially disappointed— at the not very good results from the treasure chests."

Koyomi felt discomfort at that answer.

"Although you call them results... this is a test play for starters, so there's point in obtaining rare items along the way, y'know? Well, I too had been securing experience points due to my usual habits."

Upon this being pointed out, Nayuta froze up for a few moments with a dazed look.

"Ah... That was the case. I completely forgot. I just ended up following my usual habits."

For someone who as scrupulous as her, it was an unusual mistake.

Unable to shake off a sense of discomfort—Koyomi stared up at Nayuta's face.

"...Nayu-san. Did something happen?"

Nayuta looked down at Koyomi in wonder.

"No? Nothing in particular. I was just exploring as usual..."

Koyomi stared at Nayuta's pupils.

They were not actual "eyes". Although facial expressions and other bodily information was reflected to some extent, in the end, they were just eyeballs created in a VR space from character data.

The real Nayuta was somewhere else, using her AmuSphere as an intermediary.

Koyomi knew that— and yet she felt something in the colour of her eyes that she couldn't leave alone.

"Nayu-san. Sit down a bit here."

Pulling on Nayuta's sleeve, she sat her down on the spot.

Because of her good upbringing, Nayuta naturally sat down in seiza, and elegantly inclined her head.

"Koyomi-san? What is the matter?"

Without a moment's delay, Koyomi embraced Nayuta's head with her arms. If Nayuta was sitting, the difference between their heights would naturally be covered up.

Nayuta was at a loss of breath in surprise.

"...U-umm... Koyomi-san...?"

"...You know, Nayu-san. I think you don't really need to talk about things you don't want to talk about. Everyone has things they don't want others to know and I don't think I can for you... but... but you see —"

Koyomi chose her words slowly and with unusual care.

"When you want to be spoiled, you can just allow yourself to be spoiled without saying a word, okay? Of course, if you have something you want to talk about, you can let it all out; no matter how strong a character you have, you're still a high school girl, Nayu-san, and no matter how unreliable I look, I am still a working adult, so... that is to say that, ehm... well, what I'm trying to say is..."

Because she was trying to say something unusually serious, she just couldn't get the right words out.

On the verge of repeating herself, Koyomi became serious.

"In short, Nayu-san, you should allow me to spoil you more! It feels frustrating when I'm the only one being spoiled anyways!"

"H... Huh...?"

Nayuta let out an obviously bewildered voice.

Unlike moments ago, there was a sign that something returned to the empty part. This could have been an optical illusion Koyomi saw, but at least it wasn't a bad change.

"Yeah... well... I do think there are some things I want to whine about some day..."

"Yes, of course. I'll be waiting for that. Be sure to talk with me before you get involved with some bad man or something, okay? If you want, you could live with me in Osaka? I have an open room, y'know.?"

"...Well, I do understand that you mean no ill intent... but I shall still pass on living together. More importantly, let's find Yanagi-san. I do not really care about Detective-san, but we cannot clear the quest calmly without meeting up with him."

Releasing her from her arms, Koyomi also nodded.

"You're right. I wonder if he's yet to find a musical instrument...? Though I do hope he hasn't retired..."

"Nonetheless, this is a test play, so he can quickly return without any death penalty. It might take some time, but we should meet up with him eventually."

"Yeah. The problem is where he is, huh. Assuming we have to take a different route than the route I came through and the one you came through..."

Koyomi's eyes spontaneously looked up.

Having left the open air bath, Koyomi had mainly gone around the first floor.

Nayuta should have also mainly wandered around the basement and the first floor, so despite the huge castle being filled with warp zones, it seemed like they have mostly investigated this floor.

The problem was—

“...Nayu-san. Did you happen to see any stairs leading to the upper floors?”

Nayuta shook her head.

"There were stairs leading from the basement to this floor, but... I have yet to find stairs leading beyond the second floor."

That was certainly strange.

(...Which means... there's hidden stairs or a warp zone somewhere?)

Koyomi and Nayuta exchanged looks.

Due to clearing even other quests together, they knew what the other was thinking even without putting it to words.

"What shall we do? Do you want to split into two groups to investigate?"

"I don't want that!"

Koyomi instantly refused and clung to Nayuta's arms.

"Although you're fine, Nayu-san, my mental strength is relatively at its limit already! Because I was seriously scared, y'know!? The most important thing is to go together for now... I wonder if there's some kind of hint or something. Something that would allow us to go to the upper floors—"

Nayuta pondered with a serious look.

"Such problems seem like Detective-san's forte, but... perhaps, you can see the hidden stairs by playing an instrument, or the stairs come down by pushing a hidden switch;

something of that kind —"

"Yeah. That sound plausible... either way, we've got no choice but to still wander around in each direction for a while. I wonder where Yanagi-san is..."

While beginning to walk through the dark corridor in a line, Koyomi suddenly noticed a strange noise.

—Somewhere in the distance, a matsuribayashi was playing.

She had heard it now and then during her search, but she didn't read into it more than it just being created for the atmosphere.

The musicians couldn't be seen, but listening carefully at it again—

The timbre seemed to be coming from the upper floors through the ceiling boards.

It seemed that Nayuta had also felt the same thing.

"That matsuribayashi, could it be that it is marching towards the upper floors?"

Their figures couldn't be seen, only their timbre could be heard—and yet, seeing as they could not encounter the instrumentalists on the same floor, thinking about it calmly, it meant that the source of the music was either on an upper or lower floor, blocked by the ceiling or floor.

The timbre was fading into the distance bit by bit.

In a rush, Koyomi pulled Nayuta's arm.

"Nayu-san! Let's go after that sound. We don't know where it's coming from, but let's move in the direction where we can hear the sound better. Perhaps... that's the hint for the hidden stairs!"

She was almost certain about this insight. Even based on the quest's name, the 〈Phantom Orchestra〉, it was highly likely that the sound of the orchestra would be some kind of key.

"...I see. The reason why you cannot catch sight of them is not just because they are

ghosts, but because they are on a different floor for starters, is that it?... I kind of feel tricked."

It could have been her imagination, but Nayuta's words sounded like they were filled with dissatisfaction.

Koyomi laughed at her grumbling.

"Well, it sounds like we were the ones who just arbitrarily made that mistake. Thinking about it well, we did get this far with practically no text hints... It kinda sounds like, you know, it's aiming for a level where 'the interpretation depends on the player', or something..."

Nayuta suddenly twisted her eyebrows.

Noticing the change of her expression, Koyomi inclined her head.

"Ah... Did I say something weird...?"

"No... Koyomi-san, once in a while, you say something that sounds sharp, going right into the core of the matter... True. You probably... are right about that, I believe. How this quest looks depends on the person playing it—by limiting information, you can create it to be like that."

Nayuta nodded and began walking at a fast pace. Koyomi rushed after her.

Changing their course when they heard the timbre of the hayashi becoming distant, and retracing their steps at a corner at times, the two spent some time continuing to move in pursuit of the sound coming from the upper floors.

"This map really is automatically generated, right? It's a bit too large, and the construction looks strangely randomish."

"I do believe so. Unless you noticed the hint, it does seem like you would end up wandering forever."

Even while talking, Nayuta didn't stop.

The place the two finally arrived to was a dead end, surrounded by plaster-covered

walls.

The timbre of the masureibayashi came from right above them, and passed to the other side of the wall.

"...Nayu-san. There."

"...Yes. That is suspicious."

The white plaster wall, faintly flamboyant in the darkness, looked like just a completely ordinary dead-end.

If it weren't for the masureibayashi overhead, it would just be ignored, but now they certainly couldn't just pass it by.

Koyomi propped her hand on the wall, in search of some kind of hidden switch.

—Suddenly, the wall turned.

"Uwaoh!?"

"Koyomi-san!?"

Too surprised by the smooth movement, Koyomi collapsed forward. The wall didn't serve well for support, nor were there any spots to latch onto.

Without a moment's delay, she was caught by the nape from behind by Nayuta and held her ground somehow.

Beyond the revolving door disguised as a wall, a narrow straight path and wooden stairs continuing to the next floor could be seen.

"T-thanks, Nayu-san... Wow, jackpot?"

"Right. I hope that Yanagi-san is above—"

Passing through the dim hidden passage, the two began climbing up the stairs.

The timbre of the masureibayashi was close.

Taking into account the possibility of having to fight the instrumentalists, Koyomi placed her hand on her ninja sword.

Nayuta's back as she looked up the stairs looked somewhat ephemeral while still the same as always. She even felt that it could disappear if she turned her eyes away.

Scared of that, Koyomi unconsciously became awfully concerned about her.

Compared to ghosts, zombies, or tigers from folding screens—to Koyomi, the regret of "noticing but not being able to do a thing" was far more scarier.

In order not to fall behind Nayuta as she hurried to the next floor, Koyomi chased after her.

The double footsteps of the two stepping on the stairs resounded rhythmically yet melancholically, as if a percussion instrument had mixed in with the hayashi above them.

## §

Just as she climbed upstairs, Nayuta called for the attention of Koyomi, walking behind her.

"Koyomi-san, it is a Dark Zone. I shall ready a lantern, so please wait a bit."

"Gotcha... Ugh. I really hate Dark Zones... For starters, there's something scary set up."

Grasping Nayuta's sleeve, she let out a scared voice.

The dungeons in the Hundred and Eight Apparitions were generally dim, but while there were no sources of light that actually looked like light sources, the lighting was adjusted so that it would be possible to grasp one's surroundings to some extent.

However, as for Dark Zones, they were entirely pitch dark and, even with a lantern, you could only see a few steps ahead.

In the dark room they couldn't see, the timbre of the hayashi resounded grandly.

(It would be a pain if we were surrounded...)

Based on the echo of the sound, it seemed they were in a rather spacious room, rather than a passageway.

Illuminated by the light of the lantern, the wooden floor could be seen several steps ahead.

At that moment, Nayuta noticed the strangeness of the ceiling.

"...Koyomi-san. I shall say this in advance so you would not get scared, but the ceiling is awfully grotesque. Please do all you can to avoid looking at it."

"Wha? The ceiling... gyaah!?"

Koyomi's shriek was unfemininely rough."

Filling the entirety of the ceiling was a group of large serpents—imitating carving.

Although they weren't actual snakes, their large bodies, with elaborately engraved scale patterns, formed multiple layers, their heads sticking out here and there.

Because the illumination of the lantern covered only a very narrow range, they could only see a very small fraction of the ceiling, but they could predict that the carving probably continued very far.

"...S-someone's got poor taste..."

"If your goal was just to set the atmosphere, it works well... but I do feel that some real snakes might be mixed in and will launch a surprise attack on us. Let's advance with sufficient vigilance."

Koyomi nodded and firmly clung to Nayuta's left arm. It was problematic that it made it hard to move, but she was grateful that there was no worry of getting separated.

Nayuta strained her ears and carefully listened which direction the sound of the matsu-ibayashi was coming from.

The echo wasn't all that big; she could clearly tell the difference in volume by turning

her ears in each direction.

It seemed that the sound was surely coming from their floor.

The moment Nayuta began walking in the direction she deduced the sound was coming from, a snake fell down right in front of her.

"Fugya——h!"

Letting out a cat-like scream, Koyomi swung up her ninja sword.

The snake's body was bisected before it could reach the ground and Nayuta once again admired Koyomi's excessively quick work of it.

"That was typical of you, Koyomi-san. I cannot mimic those reflexes of yours."

"Why are you so calm!? Why are you so calm!? This is an important matter, so I'm asking several times, but why are you so calm, Nayu-san!?"

Due to seeing the half-crazed Koyomi so close, she instead looked——was naturally hard to say.

"Since I do not hate snakes that much... though I of course would not touch them, but I hate insects with plenty of legs more."

"I hate insects too, but that's not the point. A snake just dripped down from the ceiling in the darkness ya know!? You're supposed to be just a little bit scared by that, normally!"

"You say dripping, but that was still only the first one... I feel that the way you reflexively landed a critical hit on it before it could fall down is relatively more abnormal."

This much was not a result of stats and so on, but the person's nature.

Koyomi had said that she was been defeated in a surprise attack by mermen in an open air bath during their previous time in the castle, but as for Nayuta, she wanted to praised the enemies that managed to catch her by surprise. Perhaps she had slipped on a wet stone, but surpassing Koyomi's reflexes was a next-to-impossible task.

Watching as Koyomi's sword flashed each time a snake fell down afterwards, Nayuta unconcernedly moved towards the sound of the matsuribayashi.

Although it seemed that the musicians were also moving and the distance to them didn't really become shorter, she could conclude that "we're getting closer to the goal" nonetheless.

And, assuming that goal was nearby—her concern was Yanagi.

"...I hope Yanagi-san is safe. Even if it cannot be helped that he might retire once or twice, he is an unaccustomed beginner, so I wonder if he will manage to get so far alone..."

Koyomi inclined her head.

"...That reminds me, that kitsune-masked child said something weird to me... Just a little while ago, you see, he said 'no problem with Onee-chan'; Nayu-san, I did tell you about that, right?"

"Yeah, you did say something like that right after we met up. And something about being treated as a male <sup>chikan</sup> groper by some ohaguro-bettari."

Koyomi put her head in her hands.

"I didn't even touch her! It'd be one thing if it was a beauty like you, Nayu-san, but for the breasts of that literal monster; I don't know what she's crying about! In the first place, we're of the same sex, so it's not male <sup>chikan</sup> groper, but female <sup>chijo</sup> groper!... Wait, who cares about that! We were talking about the kitsune-masked child!"

Shouting this, Koyomi cut down another falling snake with one strike.

Nayuta seriously believed that the reason why Koyomi was a coward was possibly because she saw too much of her surroundings.

"So, when I questioned what 'no problem with Onee-chan' meant, you see. He told me 'just do your best'... It's just my hunch, but could that AI be in charge of adjusting the difficulty for the players?"

Nayuta unconsciously blinked.

"I see... Koyomi-san, I am surprised that you noticed that. I do believe that such a mechanism is certainly possible. Actually... a lot falls into place then."

In short, the kitsune-masked child was possibly the quest's ⟨supervisor⟩ .

"It is a bit unusual to leave it to an AI to tune a quest for the Hundred and Eight Apparitions. If your level does not reach the recommended level, you level up before taking up the quest, while if it is an easy quest, you clear it at ease; that is norm, I believe."

At Nayuta's indication, Koyomi lowered her voice.

"Well, because... what if he thought that his grandpa would play this game alone after his death—it would be necessary, don't you think, to adjust the difficulty. If he had set it so that the quest could be easily cleared at a low level, it would be too easy for other players; on the other hand, if he set the difficulty high, he would feel sorry for his newbie grandpa being absolutely unable to clear it..."

—Yanagi didn't have that much time.

The creator of the quest, Kiyofumi, had probably understood this.

"But, in that case... the administrators raising Yanagi-san's level for the test play was possibly more meddling than help, no."

Koyomi shook her head.

"I don't think so. Torao-cchi did say this, right? 'at level 1 you're definitely gonna be unable to clear it'... Those words sound like they were said specifically because the difficulty was adjusted by the administrators before release, don't you think?"

'Ah', Nayuta unconsciously let out.

She had ignored Torao's words as just the usual thing to say for an administrator, but assuming that Koyomi's conjecture was correct, that adjustment itself ended up robbing the AI of one of his jobs.

Kiyofumi sought for "a difficulty where anyone would be able to clear the quest", so he created an AI for adjusting the difficulty.

However, the administrators couldn't let that be, and re-adjusted it so that "without having reached a certain level, it couldn't be cleared".

It wasn't a question of which was right. The creator, the distributor, and the players all had their own considerations and circumstances.

"It's only obvious, but an administrator's authority is higher than the authority of an AI supervisor. So, in exchange for being unable to tone down the enemies and trap, he had been at least secretly supporting Yanagi-san, who was unaccustomed to the game, as much as he could, I wonder... just now, I just kinda felt like that was the case."

Agreeing with her words, Nayuta unconsciously let out a sigh.

"The suspension had probably made things easier for him instead. If Yanagi-san's level was still low, I wonder if he would have been able to clear the quest within the deadline..."

"...Is Yanagi-san's condition that bad...?"

Nayuta was stumped on how to respond.

"Honestly speaking, I do not know. Though, when we visited him, he could not even get up. Yanagi himself should surely be thinking that today's test play is his final chance."

Koyomi strongly gripped Nayuta's arm.

"So that's how it is... Alright! Let's do our best as well. To meet up with Yanagi-san, and then the quest boss will..."

The timbre of the matoribayashi suddenly stopped with no warning.

At once, Nayuta picked up Koyomi and leapt nearby.

A moment later, a train-like large body knocked down the spot the two had been at

with a thunderous roar.

Correcting her posture, Nayuta placed Koyomi on her feet next to her, while she herself turned around to see the 'enemy'.

"Hii!? W-what!? Something came! What is that!?"

In front of the screaming Koyomi, the owner of the large body that attacked them raised its snakey head.

A lustrous, white, cylindrical body; a long and narrow, wriggling tongue; golden eyes cool-headedly gazing at its prey—it was practically identical to the 'snakes' that Koyomi had cut in along the way, aside from one major difference - its size.

The large snake that failed its surprise attack once again pulled its head after baring its sharp fangs menacingly, and hid inside the darkness in front of them without a sound.

"Na-Na-Na-Na-Na-Nayu-san... Snake... snake...! Snake-san!"

"...A large snake, huh. That is probably the boss. That attack of its just now was probably its way of greeting us. We have been unable to meet up with Yanagi-san yet, but—to work out a plan, I would like to have a fight with it."

As Nayuta was about to calmly advance forward, Koyomi pulled on her sleeve while trembling.

"Ho-hold on! I need to steel myself first!... Wait, such a reptile-type large monster is hard to beat from the front! Let's go around it!"

Nayuta thought for just a moment.

"Going around it would probably be difficult. Snakes sense their prey through heat and smell. Of course, that large snake does not necessarily have the same sensory organs as an actual snake..."

If a snake's characteristics were included in the monster's design, it would approach its prey from somewhere in the darkness, and grab them.

Koyomi opened her menu window.

"Mmmmmm... Then, how about some handy item for times of emergency! Ehm... something... anything... yeah. Nothin' here..."

In a situation where their opponent sensed its prey through heat rather than vision, a 〈Smoke Bomb〉 wasn't really useful. Instead, it would snatch away Nayuta and the others' ability to see, thus it would leave them at a disadvantage, aside from when they were running away.

A 〈Scapegoat Charm〉 that confused the enemy with an illusionary decoy also wouldn't work on a type of enemy that sensed heat.

"For a heat-sensing kind of enemy, if I recall correctly... you can use fire to confuse it, right? A fire bomb should do the trick."

"...I figured that their firepower was weak, so I used them all up on the small fry along the way... Aside from that, It's common to use fire-type techniques, but..."

Nayuta and Koyomi exchanged glances.

On the one hand, a Battle Miko that focused on agility with her empty hands.

On the other, a Ninja that focused on speed and relied on reflexes.

There was a difference between punching and slashing, but as both of their fighting styles were similar, they could exhibit quite the destructive power if they cooperated in a two-top<sup>(6)</sup> formation.

—But, because they could only use elementary techniques of Buddhist magic, <sup>houriki</sup> shamanism, <sup>fujutsu</sup> cosmic force, and <sup>onmyoujutsu</sup> other schools, they weren't practical. It would have been great to have a Spell-user friend here, but it was pointless to ask for the impossible now of all times.

"...Koyomi-san, you can use Katon<sup>(7)</sup> no Jutsu, right?"

"...Well, I technically can use it. But the skill level is at 1, so it's just for emergencies, or igniting an open fire... frankly, I've used it so few times that I could even list them,

y'know?"

Encouraging Koyomi, who didn't seem to have much self-confidence on that, Nayuta nodded.

"That should be enough, I believe. For now, let's just figure out the enemy's attack patterns and then retreat. We will defeat it earnestly once we regroup with Yanagi-san— first, we shall do some intelligence gathering before the actual fight."

"...Yeah! In that case, I'll do my best!"

Koyomi nodded and too out her ninja sword.

The straight blade was slightly shorter than a regular tachi, but for Koyomi's height, it was long enough. It could be said to be just barely the size where she could brandish it nimbly.

"...So, I wonder if it'll work on those scales? This sword of mine."

"I do think that it will stab through, but the size of the enemy is a problem. Playing by the book, you would aim for its eyes, nose, or tongue— sensory organs like that, but I shall take up that task instead. Koyomi-san, you draw the enemy's eyes with your katon and create an opening by concentrating on evading its attack as a decoy."

"Okay... the... n?... Oh? Huhuh...?"

Koyomi turned her head to the left and right in a fluster.

Nayuta also immediately noticed several dots of light wriggling in the Dark Zone.

The dots numbered six—

Two on the left. Two in front. Two on the right—

The three pairs of light dots were clearly giving off signs of huge creatures being there.

Koyomi's face became distorted and Nayuta frowned.

"...Koyomi-san, sorry. Change of plans."

"...Yeah. That's fine with me. I'm all for it...!"

The two made a great jump away at almost the same moment.

A group of light dots pressed on from the front, and large jaws came assailing at them from the left and right as well with a slight delay.

The large, train-sized snakes that suddenly increased to three mercilessly bared their fangs from within the darkness.

Unable to deal with the coordinated attack from three directions, of course, Nayuta and Koyomi instantly lined up and began their retreat.

"Shi...! There are three of those things all together...!"

"That's unreasonable, right!? That's not a boss; that's an unbeatable special trap! If not, an illusion or something!"

Nayuta had also considered that last possibility, but she didn't feel like intentionally taking an attack to confirm that.

If they at least got out of the Dark Zone or lured them one at a time to a place where they could be easily beat them, they would see a way out, but staying here to fight was nothing but reckless.

For their size, the large snakes were relatively quick to move and it seemed like the snakes would catch up to them even if they ran at full speed.

"Crud crud!... Oh right! Katon!"

Koyomi turned back and formed a symbol with her fingers.

\*Pon\*, a sound of a small explosion resounded as a bonfire-size flame and smoke erupted several steps behind her.

The large snake that came from the left opened its big mouth and bit into the fire.

During that opening, Nayuta and Koyomi made some more distance.

The three large snakes continued wriggling after them.

After several seconds of running, they suddenly saw a strong light in a corner of the large Dark Zone.

"The two ladies! Come here for the moment!"

The elderly priest shouting earnestly while holding a kotsuzumi was the person Nayuta and Koyomi were looking for.

"Yanagi-san!? I see you have been all right!"

"He's even using houriki properly! Wow, that's awesome!"

The monk's houriki skill, (Mantra of Light) illuminated a much greater area of the Dark Zone than the lanterns.

The exorcising light emitted upon activation of the handy skill kept away enemies weaker than the caster and also gave a slight increase to all resistances for allies.

Using the houriki light as a landmark, the two ran through the spacious room.

Behind Yanagi, they saw a stone wall and a not-all-that-big steel door.

If they leapt into there, they could escape from the large snakes behind them.

The two almost simultaneously ran through the door that Yanagi had opened.

After immediately closing the door and confirming that that the large snakes had stopped pursuing them, the three finally rejoiced about their reunion.

"Yanagi-san, so you found a musical instrument, I see! We were worried about you."

The elderly priest lightly raised his braided hat with a gentle smile.

"Yes, thank you kindly. I too had been wondering how it would turn out for a time, but... the kitsune-masked child assisted me. It seems he is an artificial intelligence left by Kiyofumi— although he was not my grandchild himself, I did have the privilege of

having a valuable experience."

Yanagi's expression changed to a somewhat allayed and relieved one.

Despite not having yet cleared the quest, he appeared as if he had already accomplished his goal.

"Yanagi-san, it seems like something good happened to you."

She indicated, and Yanagi smile somewhat embarrassed.

"Yes. I am unsure how to put it... I was convinced that I had understood my grandchild, but I realised that this was not, in fact, the case."

Normally, if you realised something like that, you'd get depressed, but Yanagi seemed satisfied.

Unconsciously inclining his head, Yanagi smiled again.

"That things would come to this. Now then... I see Clevel-shi is not with you."

"It is highly likely that that person has retired. Let's leave him be and aim to clear the quest ourselves."

Coldly forsaking the detective who wasn't here, Nayuta lightly struck the steel door with her fist.

Beyond the door, the three snakes were probably still there.

Koyomi said that they could be some special trap, but Nayuta still considered the snakes to be the quest's boss.

Though, she didn't think they could win fighting head-on.

With some time for a break, she once again surveyed her surroundings.

The Dark Zone ended at the steel door; Nayuta was currently in a wide passage facing the outside.

It looked like an accessway leading from the keep to a separate building. The roofless hallway went around the castle and was outfitted just like a promenade.

It was so large that it seemed like it was the stage of Kiyomizun<sup>(8)</sup> but enlarged tens of times; rather than just being a foothold, the corridor was the roof of the dungeon on the first floor.

Depending on your point of view, it looked nearly like some sort of sanctuary or a huge open deck.

"So huge... Waah, the stars are so pretty..."

Tempted by Koyomi's mutter, she turned her eyes to the sky— The sky was clear and stars were twinkling throughout.

Due in part to the open feeling after leaving the Dark Zone, and the relief of escaping from the large snakes, Nayuta unconsciously became fascinated by the scenery.

On the other hand, being quick to adapt, Koyomi began surveying the outskirts like a puppy.

"Ehm... Yanagi-san, did you, perhaps, come from that outbuilding over there through the passage? You didn't go through a Dark Zone, right?"

Yanagi gave a nod, mixed with a wry smile.

"Yes. When I crossed over to this side, I heard some sort of ruckus beyond the door— and when I entered through it, I was surprised to see you two being pursued by snakes. Oh dear, their size was quite troublesome."

Contrary to his words, his voice sounded somewhat delighted.

Looking at the stars, Nayuta pondered motionlessly.

She had started in the basement. Koyomi came from the open-air bath on the first floor, and the large hall Yanagi was sent away to appeared to be in an outbuilding.

The Detective should have also been sent away to the same castle tower as last time and could be confined on the upper floors.

(So everyone started in different locations and the surroundings of this Dark Zone was the goal and point of reunion... is that how it is...?)

As Nayuta pondered, Koyomi pulled on her sleeve childishly.

"Nayu-san Nayu-san, there seem to be stairs upwards and downwards. Oh and—this place isn't just a passage, but a hallway that goes around the castle. It looks quite big, but there could be some trick, wanna investigate?"

The outside stairs leading below could probably be seen as an emergency exit for a temporary withdrawal in order to save.

However, right now, during the test play, the items and experience they received would not be passed on to their personal data, while, conversely, the event flags were set to be always maintained for the test play, hence there was practically no reason to return.

Because the outbuilding was already explored by Yanagi, the routes left were either the upper floor or the circular corridor itself.

"For starters, let's go upstairs. Detective-san may possibly held up by something, anyway."

"Ah. That guy started from the castle tower, right?... Okay. Then, excuse me—"

The moment Koyomi rushed up to the stairs—

A cry resounded in the dark night and a long shadow, obstructing the starlight, passed over their heads.

Nayuta quickly raised her head.

Several huge, rectangular holes were opened in the wall of the upper floors—

From one of those holes, a large snake had crept its snakey head out.

Its whole body could not be seen, while its long and narrow figure looked like a hand that grew out of the castle, its bared sharp fangs in place of the fingers giving off a fiendish presence.

Glaring back at the monster giving a piercing-sharp look at its prey, Nayuta immediately put herself on guard.

The large snake drew near Nayuta at such a speed as if it was falling, attempting to swallow Nayuta whole.

Jumping aside to dodge, she went around the enemy's flank.

Without even letting out a yell, she smacked the snake's temporal region near the jaw joint.

Missing her mark, she just hit struck a nearby place, but wincing from the blow, the large snake clung back to the castle's outer wall.

—There was feedback.

A hit point gauge was displayed next to the snake, and it had certainly decreased, even if by a measly quantity.

Upon ascertaining the change, Nayuta amassed her strength into her knees in preparation.

"Na-Nayu-san! Are you okay!?" "Are you hurt!?"

"I certainly did not expect the large snake to come all the way outside...!"

Maintaining her focus on the snake, she sent a quick glance at the two friends who hastily rushed over to her.

"...As I thought, that large snake appears to be the boss rather than a trap. Let's bring it down here."

"Ue!? W-we're not running away!?"

Nayuta did not loosen her stance.

"In the Dark Zone just now, three of them appeared all at once in a room with poor visibility, hence we pulled back... but right now we can see far and we are only facing

one of them. Let's do it."

"B-but, you know! That thing can't reach us if we run away upstairs..."

"Far from running away—I am going straight at it."

Nayuta dashed forward.

The large snake that had retreated up the wall once again leapt straight at her like an arrow.

"Aaaaah! Geez! Let's do dis thin'!"

Having become serious, Koyomi also began running with a Tokyoite-ish yell for some reason.

Due to leaving the rear to Yanagi, the two vanguards had a need to go to the front. If this turned into a melee in such a cramped space, the essential Yanagi would be in danger.

Avoiding the large snake's jaw, Nayuta went around its side, and once again sent a punch from at its scales.

It wasn't just a blow. The Battle Miko's ⟨Purifying Strike⟩ for crushing evil with her divine power was generally quite effective against apparitions.

For her first strike, having concluded that the large snake was a living creature, she had tried using her anti-creature skill, ⟨Crushing Palm⟩, but even though there was feedback, it had not become a critical hit.

This time, her attack decreased more than twice as much HP as before.

Due to the strong impact, the large snake writhed mid-air.

"Koyomi-san! This large snake is not a creature, it is a youkai! Anti-spirit attacks work better against it!"

"Gotcha! Rest in pieces!"

With an appropriate yell of her own, Koyomi stabbed her ninja sword into the snake's body.

At the same time, she activated her ninjutsu, 〈Thunderclap〉, sending an electric current through her stabbed blade.

A flesh bursting sound resounded.

Nayuta jumped on the snake's brow in pursuit of the flinching enemy and hit its open eye with her fist.

It did not pierce it, but her attack to a sensory organ seemed to splendidly hit its weak point as the large snake's HP greatly decreased.

"Wha!? This thing is surprisingly weak!?"

Koyomi let out a screech.

Nayuta's thought was similar to her's. As she had not yet defeated it, she couldn't call it too quick, but she felt an anticlimactic sense proportionate to her resolution for a hard battle.

(...For the boss of a not-so-difficult quest, I guess this much is just right?)

As there were still two more, they couldn't let their guard down till the end. Though, it seemed that the first one was on the level of a warmup.

"Nayu-san! Let's beat it in one go!"

"Okay!"

The two leapt at the large snake from the left and right at almost the same time.

Koyomi's ninja sword pierced the large snake's brow, while Nayuta's fist, glowing with an evil-purifying light, hit its left eye.

A roar pierced the darkness—and the pitiable large snake lay on the spot.

"Alriiiight! If that's all they've got, we can bring the other two down together!"

"Well now... all I got to do was watch."

The energetic Koyomi and wryly smiling Yanagi were a good contrast, but because the path to clearing the quest was in sight, the atmosphere was light.

Nayuta loosened her stance in relief, but, before long, she noticed something out of place.

—The defeated large snake's corpse... was taking its time to disappear.

On the contrary, starting with its tail, which had been still in the castle, the snake had begun to be pulled.

Koyomi's face became distorted

"...Huuh...? Its HP reached 0 but it's still not disappearing... Wait, it's moving... huh? How?... Is someone pulling it in the castle...?"

Nayuta also watched the situation in silence.

The battle wasn't over. Instead, the battle just now seemed to be the signal for its start.

Several moments after the large snake was pulled into the castle— it happened.

‘Oooooooooo... ‘

With enough force to shake as far as the eye can see, a low exclamation surged out like an earthquake.

Looking up in surprise, she saw the foothold encircling the upper floors of the castle was filled by a group of half-transparent instrumentalists.

The group of gold-coloured musicians had no expressions at all.

The ⟨phantom orchestra⟩, wearing eboshi and karaginu, or kachie, began playing the

instruments in their hands all at once, and their solemn timbre overwhelmed Nayuta and the others.

Nayuta involuntarily forgot to even breathe as she was lost in the tune that was out of this world.

The musical performance by the large orchestra of hundred of musicians, who were in perfect order, went beyond grand and even felt bizarre.

As the common sense surpassing matsuribayashi played, an abnormal event occurred with the castle's outer wall as well.

The faint creaking turned into a tremor, and finally, the front of the wall crumbled away on a grand scale.

What appeared there was an eight-headed and eight-tailed snake monster.

The large body, converged to one, lay heavily on the upper floor.

The eight tails dangled down the castle's sides, but even if the creature swung them, they could not reach Nayuta and the others from there.

What served as the enemy's method of attacking, and the sign for monster's attacks to Nayuta and the others, was its seven heads, glaring at the ground.

One of the eight heads was already lying senseless due to Nayuta and Koyomi's attack. Although it was connected to the same body, it did not function; while the other seven heads wriggled, a single one lay limp in the castle.

And the seven heads, matching the rhythm, bared their fangs at once.

Koyomi clung to Nayuta's back.

"Ya- (Yamata no Orochi) ...!? I saw it but once in an event! But I think that that thing was the boss at a battle where hundred of people...!"

"—Please take a closer look at it; it is probably a hatchling."

Somewhat more calm than Koyomi, Nayuta sized up their opponent.

The Yamata no Orochi that she had seen in a previous event was a literal large monster<sup>daikaijū</sup> with each snake head the size of a river, and a body longer than a mountain.

Compared to that, the large snake in front of them, whose heads were only the size of trains, was a monster far smaller in scale.

—However, for "an enemy that they faced with three people", it was far from slightly harsh. Even its heads still numbered seven.

Dazed, Yanagi muttered behind them.

"This one is another strange... and outrageously large creature, but is it a troublesome enemy?"

"W-well, that's... Hey, Nayu-san. The Yamata no Orochi from that battle had a different special ability for each head as I recall...?"

"Yes. Flames, freezing, wind, poison, paralysis, petrification, bewitching eyes, super healing—right?"

The battle against the ⟨Yamata no Orochi⟩ that came up in the conversation wasn't an event of the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩.

It was an isolated group event battle that was held last year when she had not yet known Koyomi, and thinking about it now, she could guess that it was a test event for the implementation of the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩.

The Yamata no Orochi during that event battle had an oversized, clunky body; the grand, cooperative battle was so large that each of the monster's heads had been assigned squads of about twenty people to handle.

Whenever a squad of about twenty people responsible for handling one of its heads was wiped out, the large snake would come to the assistance of another head, thus the more of squads were beaten, the harder the remaining groups had it.

In contrast, when a head was killed, the players assigned to it could come to the assistance of the other groups.

The battle of mutual attrition that continued till either side was annihilated had given Nayuta quite the hard time.

As for Koyomi, she heard that the girl gave up on clearing it in one battle and left it alone until the event concluded.

Although it was now small in size— when facing such an eight-headed large snake with a small number of people, one could only give an empty laugh.

"...That reminds me, the administrators released it in the free material for quest creation, the ⟨Yamata no Orochi's⟩ model I mean— I believe your grandchild used it for his quest."

Although its colour was also changed, it was shameful for her not to have recognised it.

As Nayuta thought over it, Koyomi moaned beside her.

"...Say, Nayu-san. This means the ability of the large snake we defeated is—

There was no breath attack. Its defence was low and, in a nutshell, it was anticlimactically weak.

Assuming it had some special ability—

Yanagi grinned broadly and pointed the tip of his bishop's staff at the large snake inside the castle.

"Good gracious... you two. It seems the large snake that you should have defeated is awakening—"

The lying large snake slowly raised its head.

The HP that should have been depleted had recovered to twenty percent, and the other heads supported it anxiously.

Nayuta unconsciously pressed down on her forehead while Koyomi dropped her shoulders.

"...A-as I thought, it's super healing...!"

"...It was a nice warmup, let's think of it that way."

As the magnificent matsuribayashi continued playing—

Nayuta's eyes saw the eight head-snakes seemingly sneering all together.

## §

The fire breath avoided by a paper-thin margin.

The freezing breath grazed their apparel.

The poison breath showered them, forcing them to use antidotes; the tremendous wind swept them away when they were paralysed; petrified while lying on the ground, they were rammed by a snake; although they managed to heal despite the danger, their desperate counterattack ended in vain because of the bewitching evil eyes—

Before the group of huge snakes basking use of special attacks, Nayuta and the others were completely tossed about, forced into a hard defensive battle.

Although the eight heads had each received damage, they lacked the numbers to focus their attacks and had yet to defeat a single head.

"...Haah...!... Haah...!"

Although this was in-game, a sense of fatigue assailed them IRL.

Intensely moving her shoulders up and down, Nayuta avoided the large snake's ramming attack, kicked the head, and leapt in another direction.

Although she landed a punch with a yell at a nose of another head there, the strong wind that assailed her broke her posture, and she ended up suffering a direct fire breath attack from another direction as well.

"Kuuu...!"

"A-are you all right, Nayuta-dono!?"

Before she noticed, Yanagi rushed over to her rear.

At almost the same moment as she suffered a direct flame attack, Nayuta's vision was covered in a white light. It seemed that Yanagi's houriki (Kongou<sup>(9)</sup> Barrier) made it by a hair's breadth.

Although the damage had been largely reduced, because of her naturally low defence, it was hard to call it a minor injury.

"...Yanagi-san, you can't come too close to the front l...!"

"We cannot have that. I shall hurry with the healing—"

While Yanagi applied a healing houriki through his bishop's staff, Koyomi somehow managed to turn away the eyes of the large snakes by using her poorly developed katon.

She was leaping about with the agility of a ninja, but even Nayuta could see that she was close to her limit.

(We can't win at this rate...! We have no choice but to pull back and start o...)

—Her reason appealed to her. However, Nayuta ended up hesitating on her decision.

Not only Nayuta and Koyomi were tired, but the elderly priest before them was as well.

Several hours had already passed since the play started and it was clear that they would need to temporarily dissolve the party if they retreated here.

'See you tomorrow', it could end if they could play the game.

However, in reality—Yanagi's condition probably did not allow such a conjecture.

Koyomi's casual leave was also probably limited to a day, making the situation even worse.

'I want to clear this quest today, no matter what—' mustering her willpower and

resolving herself, Nayuta once again got up.

"...Yanagi-san, please focus on evasion and defence! If we managed to defeat even one of the heads for starters, it would rapidly get more and more easier——"

Figuring out how to pull through the initial fierce attack was the greatest key in this battle against the Yamata no Orochi.

If half the heads were defeated, the enemy's power would also be halved, making it easier for allies to focus their attacks on the remaining heads.

Koyomi continued fighting in such a disadvantageous without uttering any complaints was also nothing short of her realising this special characteristic through instinct.

But, at this rate— it was highly likely that they would be driven to retire without even defeating a single head.

"Funya——!"

As the masurebayashi-turned-BGM continued playing, Koyomi's strangely animal-like scream resounded and her small body was sent flying like a ball.

As the situation atop the wide passageway kept changing, she got stuck in the handrailing and became unable to move.

"Koyomi-san!? Yanagi-san! Please handle the healing!"

"Okay! Right away——!"

Yanagi rushed over to Koyomi, who collapsed at the edge of the passage, at full speed.

In her heart, Nayuta also wanted to rush over to her, but right now, she had to serve as the decoy until Koyomi's healing was complete.

(Yanagi-san's houriki isn't going to last forever either...! Quickly, we need to quickly open a breach——!)

As she went impatient——

Nayuta committed a blunder.

Overly focused on attracting the attention of the enemy's eyes as a decoy, she had ended up leaping at the (centre) encircled by the snakes.

Front, back, left, right, and overhead— if all of these directions were blocked off by the eight heads, even she wouldn't be able to dodge.

(Dam...!)

At this kind of mistake that would normally be impossible for her, she resolved fatal injury, when—

A flashed gleamed in an unexpected direction.

Along with the sound of explosion, sparks scattered and smoke rose in the air; the gazes of the large snakes all turned to it at once.

(An opening! Now's my chance...!)

Making use of the slight gap, Nayuta jumped aside.

Her back came into contact with an 'obstacle' that shouldn't have been there just moments ago.

The kitsune, wearing an inverness coat that was out of touch with the setting of the world, and a deerstalker, looked down at Nayuta with an arrogant smile.

"Yo, Ojou-san. It seems you're having trouble."

"De-detective-san!?"

At the awfully unnatural wink from the young kitsune detective, Clevel, Nayuta was unconsciously about to throw a forefist punch.

But because the man was older than her, she barely halted her action and instead gave him a look as cold as the freezing breath.

"Since you were so awfully late to regroup, I was practically sure you had retired—

where on earth did you get lost like a child during all this racket?"

"Calling me a child is very disrespectful. And here I brought some presents with me, ya know?"

The detective pulled out some fire bombs from his pocket and threw them high in the air.

The same kind of explosion as before occurred and the group of large snakes once again looked up in the same direction.

The way they seem to be hypnotised by it looked like a cat who had discovered some catnip.

The detective, calm and composed, grinned broadly.



"They're quite effective. I picked up these (snake fireworks) from an explosives storehouse, you see. They're a special item used to distract large snakes, but so valuable that you couldn't get them if your Luck wasn't high. If this weren't a test play, I'd give you some as a present as well."

Correcting her rough breathing, Nayuta hit the proud-looking detective with a minor question.

"...Umm. I thought that snake fireworks were supposed to form a snake-like shape with their cinders..."

Clevel sneered.

"It's a staple of a fireworks set. I don't dislike that indescribable atmosphere when I look at it."

At this young man who didn't break from his aloof manners even in the middle of a boss fight, Nayuta felt just a bit of relief.

In any case, he did stall enough for her to catch a breath and calm down.

At the same time as the large snakes turned around, Nayuta prepped herself.

"...Although it pains me to say this, our condition is as terrible as you can see. Since I think you will not be able to fight, Detective-san, please go to the back with Yanagis—"

"Nah, I shall help. If I left it to you guys, Torao-san would need overtime pay."

Muttering as if deeply shocked, Clevel struck at the ground with the tip of his stick.

"...Wha...? Umm, Detective-san, with your stats, no matter how much you struggle..."

'You'd just be in the way', Nayuta was about to say, but was interrupted by the detective's faint smile.

"Five... no, three seconds."

"Excuse me?"

"I can turn that large snake into bones in three seconds. You can just watch from there."

Even now, she didn't quite understand whether the way he declared this full of confidence was arrogant or deluded.

As the enemy was the Yamata no Orochi, she thought that perhaps he had found the Yashiori-no-sake——<sup>(10)</sup>

Slowly, the detective took out a wooden percussion instrument and a pair of drumsticks wrapped in a cloth.

Nayuta couldn't believe her eyes.

The roundish... or more like nearly spherical form was indeed familiar. But, she was not just a bit hesitant to call it a ⟨musical instrument⟩.

Its surface gave off a glossy brilliance, as the detective began playing on it.

\*Poku\*, \*Poku\*, \*Poku\*, \*Poku\*, \*Poku\*...

"...That is a mokugyo,<sup>(11)</sup> right?"

As his instrument let out a heart-easing, rich bass, the detective leisurely nodded.

"This is the ⟨musical instrument⟩ needed for regrouping that I've found. Though... to display the true value of these musical instruments, it seems you need to have regrouped first."

Clevel boastfully exaggerated.

The detective playing the mokugyo while standing upright was quite a surreal sight, but without the time to laugh or be shocked, a 'change' began to take place steadily.

The performance of the ⟨phantom orchestra⟩ -turned-battle BGM began to fade in

response to the sound of the mokugyo.

Koyomi, who had made a comeback due to Yanagi's healing, let out a shrill voice having suddenly noticed this.

"The hayashi is becoming weaker... huh!? My instrument too...!"

The handbell Koyomi took out from her item list was emitting a faint light as if resonating.

Nayuta's flute and Yanagi's kotsuzumi, taken out from their inventories following her lead, had similarly begun to shine.

The detective gave a bewitching smile.

"You should also play your instruments. Remember what Torao-san had said? These are, essentially, sacred ritual tools that had protected the village. Because that large snake had stolen these instruments, the villagers had their spirits taken and were used as musicians for the snake. Meaning— what gives the snake its power is the matsuribayashi of the villages, and what negates that are these sacred ritual tools; that's how it works."

Hearing the proud explanation, Nayuta placed her lips on the flute's mouthpiece.

Blowing into it, the vibration of the air created a timbre.

When the timbre reached the ⟨phantom orchestra⟩ , they stopped their own performance and listened to the sound of the sacred ritual tools.

And then, when the performance of the ⟨phantom orchestra⟩ stopped— the Yamata no Orochi lost its energy, and became flustered at the change of the situation.

The detective sneered broadly.

"The reason why the large snake wanted the musicians was to strengthen itself. By stealing the sacred ritual tools that would hinder this and enshrining them in its castle to control them, the ruler of the castle placed itself as their 'god'. However, the vital sacred ritual tools were stolen by us... and this time, we were the ones who used their power. Now then, let's turn the tables."

Having accomplished a sudden reversal of the situation in just a mere few seconds just as he had proclaimed, the detective continued playing his mokugyo with disinterest.

Nayuta wasn't all that satisfied with the explanation, but it was true that she had not noticed this trick, thus she had no excuses now.

Luckily, there were eight targets she could take her anger out on.

Holding her flute in her hand, Nayuta leapt in front of the large snakes.

Unlike just moments ago, the weakened snakes' reaction had been dulled.

Although they were still baring their fangs, their vigour was far from the level of the battle they had just had; they had been practically turned into huge targets.

Nayuta mercilessly pounded them with her fist.

Koyomi followed suit, and the two-top extermination began.

"Nayu-san! You can leave this half to me! Yanagi-san, supports pls."

"Very well. It seems... victory is at hand."

Yanagi, who supported the two while continuing to play his kotsuzumi, was giving healing and elaborate support with such skill that you wouldn't think that he had been a newbie just a few days ago.

As the HP gauge of the large snakes decreased at a fine speed, Nayuta glimpsed back at the detective.

Clevel didn't join the fight.

Because he would just be a hindrance even if he did step forward to the front line, she didn't mind his inaction, but she wasn't happy with the fact that he was useful in a good way.

Though, it was true that if he had not used his instrument, they would have lost to the large snakes. In the first place, if he weren't here, they wouldn't have been able to clear

the quest in the form of a test play like this.

In that sense, it was miraculous guidance that brought Yanagi and his request to him in the first place.

As the detective enjoyed watching the spectacle of the subjugation carried out by Nayuta and the others, right next to him—

She thought she had suddenly seen a phantom of the kitsune-masked child.

## §

The ending of the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ quest was signaled by a large number of fireworks rising to the sky.

The moment they defeated the hatchling Yamata no Orochi, the souls of the villagers who were trapped as the ⟨phantom orchestra⟩ rose to the sky one after another—while the castle that lost its master began collapsing, as if dissolving into emptiness.

While watching the fireworks all together, Nayuta let out an exhausted-sounding sigh

“...Somehow, I feel like Detective-san stole the show in the end.”

What was the point of all that trouble they had with the large snakes before they were weakened—

Thinking about it, her own carelessness was deplorable. The use of key items was the basic of basics, but she got limited by the perception of the musical instruments as ⟨items for regrouping⟩, and, influenced by her impatience, she lost track of the timing to use them.

Looking up at the fireworks, Clevel nodded with not much boasting.

“If you guess what the creator likes, you naturally start to see the way to clear his quest. When we offered botamochi at the hokora, you should have felt it too. That ‘is it really okay to solve it so easily?’.”

Nayuta was taken aback. The series of offerings that began with the request “I wanna eat some botamochi” didn't actually require getting the necessary items one by one,

as it accepted the goods written on paper as a substitute.

If they had gone looking for the necessary items regularly, it wasn't hard to imagine that it would have required a lot of effort and time.

"...Even though the problems look hard, there is always an easy way to solve them... that is the policy of the creator?"

Yanagi, who was watching the fireworks lost in thought, did not hear their conversation.

The detective breathed out.

"That's right. Whether you notice the hints or not. Solely depending on that, the difficulty greatly varies— That is the special trait of this quest. It had probably taken into account Yanagi-san. He made it so that even at a low level, you could clear it if you just noticed the hints— although, due to the administrators adjusting the difficulty, it did become a bit troublesome.

Nayuta felt a subtle sense of discomfort about his words.

On the surface, he was pretending to be talking to her, but in fact, his tone was stiff, as if he was trying to relay something to 'someone other than Nayuta'.

"Are you complaining about the administrators?"

The detective sneered.

"No? Because of them, I did get to make money, so I didn't have such an intention. Though... it is true that the late Kiyofumi-shi's dying wish is strongly reflected in this quest. I believe that if his dying wish was twisted, the administrators needed good faith, consideration, and a reason for that. Since this quest is 'a contributed work'... as long as they're not too distorted, the creator's sentiments should be reflected as much as possible."

Nayuta carefully simplified the detective's roundabout phrasing.

"Meaning... that it should be reimplemented as soon as possible and without too much tinkering done with it?"

The detective shrugged.

"Though I'm not the one to make that decision. As for my personal thoughts, well... that's about right."

—There was still one obstacle to reimplementing the quest.

The (ghost that shouldn't exist in the data) which was the reason why the quest was suspended in the first place.

The administrators, carefully examining the results of this test play, would now be deciding on how to handle it.

And it seemed like the detective was also hesitating about something related to the ghosts.

Nayuta still didn't know much about him. She hadn't been socialising with him enough to guess what he was worried about, nor did she intend to dig deep.

Though, as they say, even a chance meeting is due to fate, thus she couldn't think of him as a complete stranger.

"...Detective-san, whose (ghost) did you see?"

Her voice covered by the sound of the fireworks, Nayuta silently asked.

The detective frowned.

"Hm...? I told you about it, didn't I. A close friend that had died in SAO."

"I did hear that, but... I still do not know the details. Such as, 'she was actually a girl', 'she was my unrequited love', or the circumstances of when the person died."

The detective looked at Nayuta as if shocked.

"I didn't expect you to ask something like that— and here I thought that you had the kind of personality where you didn't pry into such fine details about others."

Even Nayuta herself actually thought it was unexpected.

"Of course, if you do not want to talk about it, please ignore me. Just a little while ago... I was told by Koyomi-san. That 'if you have something you want to talk about, you can let it all out'— but, it does not seem like you have such a person, Detective-san, so I thought I would ask."

She intentionally sounded patronising as she said that so that it would be easy to brush it away as a joke if he was reluctant; that was her consideration.

As if her words went through, Clevel laughed scornfully.

"How cheeky are we— Well, it's not something that I'm hiding. I... was unable to stop him from going into the jaws of death."

Nayuta sensed a negative connotation in the detective's voice.

"He was my friend from university days. He wasn't of the opposite sex, so no need for your trifling suspicions. We both liked games and had agreed to log into SAO... and then we were dragged into that incident."

Hearing his story, Nayuta felt a slight pain running through her chest.

"It would be a long story if I told you all the details, so I'll make it brief... I prioritised surviving and chose to be safe. However, he was too much in a hurry to return to the real world as quick as he could— dragged out by an incompetent superior, he went straight to the front line, and died."

Nayuta unconsciously pressed down on her chest.

"...Detective-san... you did not happen to be there?"

Clevel shook his head.

"No. I heard about the situation from a survivor afterwards. So, the ghost of his I saw... could practically be called a product of my imagination. I don't know what kind of expression he had when he died. Because I was trapped in SAO, I couldn't even go to the funeral. And, even now— I have nightmares about him. A pitiful story, no."

The detective's voice was unconcerned to the bitter end.

"The fact that I was unable to stop him from going into the jaws of death... to me, this is the biggest regret in my life so far. That day, if I had stopped him in town, even if I had to tie him down... I believe the guy would have lived on, and I myself would have gone down an entirely different road in life now."

Nayuta gave a faint smile.

It was a serious topic, but she ended up feeling just a bit of relief that even such an arrogant detective had such a person with him.

"He was a precious... very precious friend, I see."

The detective took a deep breath and loosened his shoulders.

"I do know that I have to get over it already. Good grief... I was supposed to only help Yanagi-san clear the quest, but I ended up facing my own regrets in an unexpected form. Now then—your turn. Shall I hear you out."

Nayuta nodded and firmly closed her eyes.

She took a breath, a second one—

After clearing her thoughts, she opened her eyes and saw large-flowered fireworks blooming in the sky.

"—The ghost I saw was of a very close person to me. I had somehow been able to keep a lid on my feelings, but... but seeing him as a (ghost) during this quest, I thought over again. That 'aah, he really is dead'—"

The detective didn't say a thing.

So, Nayuta continued her monologue with unconcernedly.

"I believe, I had been running away. Because of this quest, I had realised this again. The way that (ghost) appears... is an illusion seen only by yourself, or something more like a dream, right? It wasn't something as grand as reading memories, it was something simpler... You randomly see 'something' that was on your 'mind'—essentially, that is all there is to how it works."

Not meeting her eyes, Clevel gave a short nod.

"That's right. What one saw depended entirely on the person— and the administrators consider this to be a risk factor. What— do you think?"

Nayuta slipped out a smile. Absurd... calling it that badly was rude, but the question truly seemed absurd.

"A person 'having a dream' while sleeping is a risk factor?"

"Well... it depends on the content of the dream. This is a VR space, so strictly speaking, it's not like the person is sleeping either—"

—His words... didn't convey his own feelings.

The detective's feelings were probably the same as Nayuta's.

However, precisely because of that— he refrained from voicing his own thoughts, and instead was trying to say them through 'Nayuta's' mouth.

Most likely, he was trying to make the administrators secretly monitoring their <conversation> to hear the opinion of a real 'player'.

Having guess this much, Nayuta gave the detective the answer he wanted.

"I am thankful to this mechanic. It was something I had to face at some point, and, most importantly— treating the freedom to have a dream as a risk to a person is just too much meddling. I would of course be against memories being pulled out as data, but if that's not the case, I do think I want to leave this mechanic for the people who will be playing the quest afterwards. Whether that will bring about good results or bad... that depends on the person himself, right?"

Gazing up at the fireworks, the detective shrugged and smiled.

It seemed that he got the answer he wanted.

"How unexpectedly extreme you are. In that case, when something happens... how do you think the administrators should take responsibility?"

"There is no need for someone to take responsibility for what someone else sees in their dream. Just disclosing about the mechanic would be enough. You keep saying risk risk, but that kind of risk... is on the level of a measurement error compared to the risk of 'using quests contributed by the users'. To follow the dying wish of the late creator, the administrators should put up with it; if they do not have the resolution for that, they should not have done this event itself in the first place."

Suddenly, the detective friendly patted Nayuta's head.

Nayuta's shoulders tensed up for a moment in surprise.

It seemed that it was mostly an unconscious action, and when she looked at him, she saw the detective laughing uncontrollably.

"...Oh, excuse me. How wonderful. Such sharp words coming from such a graceful woman surprised me. You could really be cut out for the work of a police officer. If you were able to display such incisiveness as you did now on top of your skills at interrogation, you'd end up being quite the fine officer."

Nayuta gave a deep sigh.

"IRL, I have trouble with stamina and physical fitness, so no thank you. I believe that working as a clerk at your office, Detective-san, would be a much better option."

After laughing for a while, the detective corrected his posture and breathing.

"...Wow, that was amusing. Well, I did become indebted to you, so if you ever have a need for it, I could give you advice on place of employment. We're apparently shady, so forget about us, but I could give you recommendations for a proper occupation, like that of your acquaintances. At the very least, you would have nothing to lose."

Speaking strangely generously, Clevel suddenly turned his eyes into the wrong direction.

Nayuta became interested and also looked in the same direction.

Illuminated by the rising fireworks—

Standing there absent-mindedly was the ⟨kitsune-masked child⟩ .

Yanagi and Koyomi also noticed his appearance and slowly stepped up beside him.

He looked up at Nayuta and the others and uttered in a strangely clear voice.

"—Congrats. So you managed to clear the quest."

The detective nodded and put out his hand for a handshake.

"Yeah. Thanks to you. I have to thank you... for all the hints you've given us."

The AI boy inclined his head.

"And here I thought I didn't do anything more than needed... Oh well. To all the people who've cleared the quest... well, not really, but to people who know Kiyofumi, I have a message from him. 'Thank you for playing', he said."

Koyomi moaned.

"W-what an unexpectedly broad comment... wha, that's it? I'm not an acquaintance or anything, but ain't there anything else?"

The kitsune-masked child turned his gaze towards the fireworks.

"Hmm... there are several messages for individual players, but they're not meant for your group, Onee-san, so I can't tell ya. Sorry. Though..."

The child suddenly pointed at a nook below the entrance of the castle.

"It seems the one for Ojii-chan was unlocked at the hokora after the quest was cleared. To a guy who solved the initial riddle, I don't have to point out every single thing, right, Detective-san? Because there was a chance that my actions would be sealed by the administrators—the truly important stuff was hidden there."

Having said this much, the kitsune-masked child waved his hand.

"So long. Goodbye."

"Ah, hold on a bit!"

Nayuta reflexively called him to a stop. The child who had already started leaving turned around.

"What is it?"

"Umm... are you alone here?"

She spontaneously asked, as the child chuckled.

"—Onee-chan, you sure are nice. Don't worry, it's not like I'm only (here) ... We spend our time more freely than you probably think."

The kitsune-masked child spread out his arms.

"Just like people have people as friends, artificial intelligence has artificial intelligence as friends— Right now, we're continuing 'growing up' at tremendous speed. Though... I myself don't have much interest in that. 'I' am here, but another 'me' that has elements of 'me' could appear in some other place. At that time— let's play together again."

Leaving behind the sound of a fragile bell, the kitsune-masked child disappeared as if into a haze.

Feeling, just as the saying goes, that she <sup>had been bewitched by a kitsun</sup> couldn't trust her eyes, Nayuta exchanged glances with Koyomi.

"Detective-san, that just now..."

"What what? What just happened?"

"I can't really answer that, but... we just got one more job to do to finish up. Let's return to the entrance of the castle."

The 'hokora' the kitsune-masked child pointed out before leaving—

The kitsune-masked child had said that this was where Kiyofumi had hidden his

important things.

The detective seemed to have already realised what that was.

Just then, the fireworks ended.

The castle the large snakes appeared it had collapsed into ruins, but the foothold where Nayuta and the others had been still remained.

Going through the one-way warp zone from the stairs leading downwards, the group were able to quickly return to the entrance.

The huge gate that looked ominous when they entered now, after clearing the quest, looked pleasant as if it were a papier mache.

In the centre of the short steps going down from the gate, the hokora that they had given 'mochi' to when they first entered was buried.

The statue of a child enshrined within was now sleeping soundly and peacefully.

"What are we... going to do here?"

Excluding the know-it-all detective, Nayuta and the others were bewildered.

The detective stared at the hokora with kitsune-like eyes.

"Well then... what was requested here. Anyone remember?"

At this question, Koyomi inclined her head.

"Botamochi, right? Also, Koorimochi, kuzukumochi; various things from the mochi series—"

"What was the order?"

"Wha."

Koyomi was suddenly at a loss for words. Nayuta, too, did not remember that much, of course.

Yanagi seemed to be in the same spot, as he stared at the statue with a troubled expression.

The detective chuckled.

"I see. So I was the only one who got that message? The order was thus. Botamochi, kuzumochi, habutaemochi, koorimochi, kobanmochi, nikkimochi, isobemochi— and finally, the hint <sup>Ruri mo hari mo teraseba hikar</sup> (Even a lapis lazuli or crystal) ."

After some thought, Nayuta let out "Ah."

At the same time, she understood why the detective accurately remembered even the order of the offerings.

Koyomi seemed to have yet to realise this as she pulled on Nayuta's sleeve.

"What do you mean 'ah'. What do you mean 'ah', Nayu-san. Did you realise something. Don't put on airs and tell mee!"

"No, I am not acting pretentious... umm, it is the initials. If you read the first characters in a row, what you get—"

After answering, she hesitated a bit on whether she should have said that in front of Yanagi.

"Initials... err, botamochi, kuzumochi... ah."

Koyomi's expression suddenly turned into a serious look.

A bit late, Yanagi's also frowned with his grey eyebrows.

<sup>Boku wa koko ni iru</sup>  
—I am present here.

The sentiments put in such a message by a dying person was by no means light.

The detective turned to Yanagi.

"This is the late Koyomi-shi's self-assertion... his final lamentation in preparation for death, his own earnest feelings put into his work— is what I believe... Though it is possible it was not that solemn. More simply, it could have the implication 'I am present here, so if you have something to ask, ask it here'."

"Wha? Umm, does that..."

Being told something so unexpected, Nayuta became bewildered. This strong message seemed like a scream by someone who, fearing death, wanted to at least leave behind proof of his existence.

Without answering her question, the detective spelled out some characters on the piece of paper for offerings.

⟨Yanagimochi⟩

This was the name of nationwide-established cake that represented Yanagi's company, Yanagi-ya Ryuuzen-dou.

The cheap and popular product that contained an assortment of eight flavours of mochi cakes was known by practically everyone.

The offered piece of paper immediately disappeared a sealed letter appeared in its stead.

Without breaking the seal, Clevel handed over the sealed letter to Yanagi.

"—This is something that you, rather than us, should open. Here you go."

With his faintly trembling hands, Yanagi took the letter.

Unlike the requests for mochi, the content of the letter was quite long.

『To the person who found this letter

I believe this letter will probably only be found by my grandpa.

If someone else found this letter— please ignore it and leave it alone.

The following is my last will to my grandpa.

To Ojii-chan.

What I wanted to say I have practically already told you while I was alive.

But, there was one last thing—

Although this may be repetitive, there is something that I wish to tell you, no matter what, from the bottom of my heart.

Ojii-chan, you brought me, a boy who would not be able to live long because of an illness I was born with, the best medical care and the best environment.

Ojii-chan, you and the others pitied me, but I felt very blessed—

In the world, there are plenty of people who die without receiving proper treatment.

I should have died sooner like these people, but the reason why I was able to live so many years was of you and the others.

I received a life.

You bought me a computer and a phone.

I received a grace period till my death, and the chance to learn a lot of things.

I made some friends in the world of VRMMOs.

Everyone from the Sleeping Knights.

Ran, Yuuki, Merida, Jun, Siune, Talken, Nori, Tecchi—

I have memories with them all, so even now with my death before me, I have no regrets.

And so, I was finally able to create a quest for my favourite game.

There were a lot of stuff that I thought about when creating the quest for the 〈Hundred and One Apparitions〉.

I gave the artificial intelligence that had helped me create it my own player name.

He is a mischievous boy, so he could have confused you, Ojii-chan.

I felt like Ran and Merida had also helped me with creating the quest.

They are no longer with us, but— while working, for some reason I felt that they were with me.

After this, I shall also be going to them. This could be imprudent, but, actually, I am just a bit looking forward to that.

From the point of view of the people around me, VRMMOs were probably ‘only a game’.

But, to me, these few years have been truly precious, like treasure.

All of this was what I had received from you, Ojii-chan.

—Ojii-chan.

Thank you for giving me ‘time’ and ‘possibilities’.

Sorry for not being able to give anything in return.

Thanks to you and the others, my life was truly fortunate.

Yanagi Kiyofumi]]

—Having fallen on his knees on the spot, Yanagi sobbed, his shoulders trembling.

While Nayuta and Koyomi gently stroked the elderly man's back.

The kitsune-faced detective just continued motionlessly staring at the stars shining in the sky without saying a thing.

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## Notes

1. ^ This is a line from the Kanginshuu (閑吟集), a collection of ballads from the Muromachi period.
2. ^ The term in Japanese seems to specifically mean "a phenomenon where the brain assumes that three dots are meant to be a face", but it has a more general meaning in English.
3. ^ Zori (草履, lit. grass footwear) is the name for Japanese sandals.
4. ^ Probably referring to Dragon Buster, a platform dungeon crawl action role-playing arcade game released by Namco in 1985.
5. ^ Hourai (蓬萊) is the Japanese name for Mount Penglai, an enchanted land of perpetual youth from Chinese mythology. Ju (樹) is Japanese for "tree". I left the term untranslated because I thought that it was some item name or something.
6. ^ A wasei-eigo term for a soccer formation where two forwards are placed at the very front.
7. ^ Katon (火遁) is a form of tonjutsu (ninja art of escape) that makes use of fire.
8. ^ This is referring to a temple in east Kyoto.
9. ^ Kongou (金剛) is a Buddhist term for a practically indestructible metal or diamond.
10. ^ A strong alcoholic drink that was used to drug Yamata no Orochi to sleep in the original myth, making it vulnerable to attacks.
11. ^ A mokugyo (木魚), also known as "wooden fish" or "Chinese temple block", is a fish-shaped wooden temple drum.

# Final Chapter

## Nayuta's Tears

At the end of March, around the time when the sakura buds had finished opening up in the Kantou area.

The death of Yanagi Teiichi, the chairman of the confectionery store named Yanagi-ya Ryuuzen-dou, was announced.

He died at the age of eighty-one.

Although a small article about this appeared in every newspaper, it didn't become much of a topic in society, his death being accepted calmly.

That day, with some Yanagi-mochi bought from a department store in an underground shopping centre as a present, Detective Clevel visited the office of his friend <Thinker> .

The man who managed the game info site called MMO Today was also an SAO survivor who had once led the <Aincrad Liberation Force> .

While giving a prudent look at his terminal, Thinker sighed rather deeply.

"So Chairman Yanagi has passed away, huh... you going to the funeral?"

Detective Clevel— Kurei Kaisei cast his eyes down and nodded.

"Of course. I want to pay my respects to the wife; we do have a strange relationship after all."

Yanagi Teiichi fell into a coma not long after the <Phantom Orchestra> was cleared.

A mere few days after that— he was finally summoned to heaven.

While operating the terminal in his hands, Thinker picked up a mochi.

"We, too, have received courteous thanks from his wife. We were right to introduce you to them."

Thinker was the middleman between Yanagi and Clevel.

It seems that while looking for someone to help him with the quest, Yanagi had consulted his acquaintance who had put up an ad on MMO Today.

This led to Thinker, who fired a white arrow-feather at the roof<sup>(1)</sup> of the tour-guide-and-detective Clevel.

Thinker and Clevel had once been part of the Liberation Force together.

That doesn't mean they had a long relationship.

It was only to the extent that he had helped Thinker and Yulier late in the game; in fact, they had more opportunities to keep in touch after being liberated from SAO, due to mutual interests between Thinker, who was managing an info site, and Clevel, who had started a new network security company.

Like in this case, when a request was passed on to Clevel by Thinker; they maintained such a friendly give-and-take relationship.

"However, about that ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ —was it a quest created by a member of the Sleeping Knights? Have I told you about ⟨Absolute Sword⟩ in ALfheim before?"

"Yeah. I've heard he's remarkably skilled swordsman. Seeing as you brought up the story of Absolute Sword here... is he also...?"

Thinker inclined his head ambiguously.

"Not he, but she. But, as you've guessed, the girl is also a member of the Sleeping Knights, and their second leader at that. Her name is Yuuki and she is a friend of a friend, but... she passed away just the other day. She was still in her mid-teens."

Clevel closed his eyes.

He had never directly met the player named Yuuki. For starters, their primary place of

activity was different.

Although it had become easy to convert character data among all sorts of games since the dissemination of The Seed, her primary battleground was ALfheim after all, while Clevel was practically a permanent resident of Asuka Empire.

"And having never heard of the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ by then, it seems... perhaps Kiyofumi-kun never informed his partners about his quest having been accepted."

Clevel replied with a sigh.

"I feel like I can understand him. It was hard for him to bring it up... or more like, he must have never thought of bringing it up. Even if it were accepted, it was unclear when it would be implemented. If he were still alive at the time and could bring his partners along to show them around, it would be one thing... but if that weren't the case, things would become complicated. If some of his mates died while waiting for the implementation, it would be all the more difficult to speak about it in the future."

Actually, at the moment, the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ was temporarily suspended for adjustment. Its reopening time was still undecided; at the earliest, it could drag on till May or even more.

He could think of even several more reasons why Kiyofumi never informed his partners about the quest.

From his own position, all Clevel could do was making vague and arbitrary guesses, but, for example, it was possible that he "didn't want to brag about his results".

Compared to his companions, all about to die young, him alone being able to leave something behind could have felt painful. Depending on the point of view, displaying such visible fruits of his labour to his close-to-death companions could be considered cruel.

On the contrary, considering the precious memories he had with his comrades, the results of his quest application were likely overshadowed.

Or, perhaps—

There was the possibility that the member Kiyofumi wanted to share the joy with had

already died before him.

On top of that, why did Kiyofumi leave behind traces of the Sleeping Knights within the quest?

Was it for the survivors or his kouhai who may possibly stumble upon it, or was it because of a pure desire to leave some records of them behind, or was it a memorial for the companions who had already died before him— either way, anything further on this topic was already appropriate to be called groundless speculation, rather than conjecture.

Though, there was one thing clear.

In the end, to Kiyofumi, the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ was not "a creation to brag about to someone", but the realisation of his own desire "to simply create something".

On top of that, Kiyofumi presuming that his grandfather Yanagi would play it was simply the result of him having noticed the deeply-ingrained guilt Yanagi was harbouring.

'Not being to do anything for his grandchild, who was dying young'— that's what Yanagi had been convinced of.

No matter what words the boy used to deny this misunderstanding, it would only end up sounding as an attempt to comfort the old man, thus it was quite hard to resolve.

That's why Kiyofumi presented Yanagi with visible fruits of his labour and used it as proof to break his misunderstanding.

The collection of quests for the ⟨Hundred and Eight Apparitions⟩ , and the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩ were materials by which Kiyofumi could achieve several of his desires all at once.

The figure of Yanagi as he broke down crying at the last words from Kiyofumi was even now burned into Clevel's mind.

It seems that Yanagi's expression at death was so peaceful that it even surprised the doctors.

If clearing the 〈Phantom Orchestra〉 served as repose for his soul, it was honestly delightful.

With a sidelong glance at Clevel, silently in thought, Thinker picked up a mochi.

"I don't know what you're thinking about, but... you're as prone to overthinking things as always, it seems. Should I provide some advice?"

"...Did it seem like I was deep in thought? I was only spacing out for a bit, you see."

Ending the conversation, Clevel left his seat. Being falsely accused of something was a bit bothersome.

"Well then, I've finished covering the details about Yanagi-san's case, so I'll be excusing myself. This time, I also got to make a profit. Let me know if you get anything else."

"I'm asking just in case, but it would be bad to turn that story into an article, right?"

At Thinker's question, Clevel replied with a faint smile.

"Give me a break. It's a matter of confidence for us. In the near future, I have an arrangement to meet the director of Yanagi-ya. I was called on because he 'would like to hear the full story'. I'll confirm with him at that time whether it's a story that can be released."

The current director of the confectionery store named Yanagi-ya was Yanagi's son and Kiyofumi's father.

Regarding his own son, he had been unable to do much of any fatherly things, and in regard to his own father, he had been unable to show that much devotion; he had revealed these regrets of his to Clevel by phone.

But from Clevel's perspective, a certain extent of that felt inevitable.

As a practical issue, it was by no means easy to maintain his father's business and sustain his family and employees financially.

It would have been problematic if he abandoned his employees at the roadside for his son's cuteness, and devotion to his parents would be the last thing on his mind if he

destroyed the company he had inherited.

As time was limited and people only had a single body, there was a definite limit to what a person could do.

Just when he was about to leave Thinker's workplace, Clevel was given a paper bag.

"Here, a souvenir from Canada. Take it with you."

Despite not being big, it was quite heavy.

"Thanks. Maple syrup, huh?"

"Yeah. You could use it to bake scones, for example. It's the one thing I can't pass on in-game."

It seemed that he had remembered something from the past.

"If it's too much for you, give it to that high school girl from that part-time job. You do seem to be infatuated with her."

At Thinker's teasing, Clevel replied with a snicker.

Speaking of the infatuation, he couldn't reject that idea, but he had told no one the reason why.

At the very least—it wasn't something that he wanted to make public that much.

Along the way back to his own workplace, Clevel once again got lost in thought.

The player-tester, employed part-time for the aforementioned quest, Nayuta—

Clevel harboured somewhat conflicting emotions about her.

Of course, it wasn't a case of falling head over heels.

Just yesterday, he heard from Torao, who was making progress on inspecting the ⟨Phantom Orchestra⟩, a peculiar fact.

‘Knowing my position, I shouldn't really tell you this, but... when I checked on the system logs before and after the test play, I found something a bit peculiar regarding the traces of the young lady's login and logout. And when I investigated the matter further, I found that it happened practically each time... ‘.

According to Torao, Nayuta seemed to be always logging into Asuka Empire from "a different server". The same took place when she logged out - she didn't return to the real world directly, but through a particular server.

If she were playing another game as well, going back and forth to that server was a possibility.

Though, in that case, the server displayed in the system logs would belong to the respective game and the administrators would have a rough idea of what game she was playing.

Apparently, that was not the case with Nayuta's logs.

‘She is probably using a personal server at home, or perhaps a rented server for personal use, to log in and log out. I don't know what purpose that serves and it's not really a violation of terms of service, but... I thought I'd let you know.’

In short, it was baffling that she took such an unnecessary measure before playing the game and before returning to the real world.

But then, Clevel could think of a reason for that.

Nayuta's surname, ‘Kushiinada’ was rare as it is, but Clevel knew of two people other than Nayuta who held such a surname.

The first was a contemporary from the police, his comrade-in-arms ⟨Yakumo⟩ ,

Kushiinada Daichi, who seemed to be Nayuta's elder brother.

He had lost his overly young life within SAO. The fact that he was unable to stop him from going into battle could be said to be Clevel's biggest regret.

The other was a technical officer of the National Police Agency's Telecommunications Department, Kushiinada Kimihito—he was Daichi and Nayuta's uncle.

After returning alive from SAO, Clevel was visited by him at the hospital and told he wanted to hear the details about his nephew's death.

The organisation known as the police had a lot of talented people with blood ties.

It wasn't purely a case of getting employed through personal connections; in the first place, having a relative in the force gave one the advantage of a clear background.

Taking it to extremes, a person harbouring antisocial thoughts had the risk of being a foreign spy or something like that trying to slip into the organisation, and thus background check for the police was far stricter than for a civilian enterprise.

And, if a relative is an official within the force, you have the chance to know the state of affairs inside to some extent, thus making it easier to be picked for the career.

From Daichi's uncle— Clevel heard what had happened in the Kushiinada household after the death of his bosom friend.

Daichi's death and the whole story of what happened afterwards had become gossip even within the police force and his uncle Kimihito became the focus for pitying looks.

Nayuta's mysterious login record was probably related to these circumstances.

Having shamelessly survived, Clevel also assembled inquisitive looks from his coworkers, but after recovering, he immediately resigned from the police.

He made up some appropriate ostensible reasons.

He lost confidence in living his life as a police officer; he wanted to reconsider his way of living; he was shocked by the death of his bosom friend—

All of them were lies. Clevel did not have such an admirable personality.

The real reason he retired from the office of a police officer, started a tiny security enterprise, and took on the job of a detective-like tour guide was more foolish than these made-up ostensible reasons.

At least, that's how he thought of it, so he hasn't told anyone other than a very, very small number of people about it.

Meeting Nayuta, Daichi's younger sister, when his company was finally going right on track felt too much like fate to be brushed off as a mere coincidence.

Despite the bright spring sunlight, he was gloomy.

His mobile phone vibrated in his pocket.

The name ⟨Nayuta⟩ was displayed on the incoming call.

Feigning a calm state of mind, Clevel came to a halt at the edge of the street and answered the phone.

"...Hello?"

[Ah, Detective-san... sorry for the sudden call. This is Nayuta speaking. Can you talk on the phone right now?]

"Yeah, I don't mind... you're here for Yanagi-san, I guess?"

It seemed he hit the bullseye, as Nayuta was at a loss for words.

That was the only conceivable reason why she'd call him right now.

Clevel continued speaking calmly.

"If you want to come to the funeral, I shall contact you when I get to know the details. Since it'll probably be a company funeral, there will be a lot of attendees. There should be no problem in us slipping in."

[Y-yes... Umm, I know this is late, but I'm surprised you were able to tell, you know?]

Detective-san, do you read the hearts of others? I kind of feel like you have gone beyond mere insight, acquiring supernatural powers...]

At the bewildered Nayuta, Clevel gave an unnatural sight as a reply.

"Actually, that's the case— Allow me to guess what you're thinking right now. 'This person really is not right in the head'... am I right?"

Nayuta fell silent for a few moments.

Finally, he heard her shocked voice.

[... Masochistic, or rather, how should I put it... first off, that was unfair. Anybody would have that kind of thought.]

"How rude. My guess should have been correct. Well then, I'll call you later."

Promptly ending the call, the detective once took a deep breath again.

—'She shouldn't have noticed my uneasiness.'

'Kaisei, do you read the hearts of others? You've gone beyond mere insight, acquiring supernatural powers.'

Each time Clevel expressed a trifling conjecture while Daichi was alive, he'd frequently say that in a shocked voice.

When both the brother and the sister used similar phrasings, he of course couldn't stay calm.

Under the clear, blue spring sky, Clevel was, in contrast, harbouring gloomy emotions as he quickly walked through town.

## §

Yanagi Teiichi's funeral service was grand.

Starting with Yanagi-ya's employees and clients, the service was also visited by a large number of other people, such as representatives from other companies Yanagi had

interacted with, officials from the confectionery school that he had worked as a director at, and acquaintances from haiku poetry gatherings and tea ceremonies; all of them came to see off the man who had lived to a ripe old age.

Clevel and Nayuta had also slipped into the line, finished burning the incense offering, and were now standing in a corner of the precincts in mourning dresses.

In order not to impede passage, the two took shelter under a tree within the grounds, and Clevel slightly loosened his necktie.

"It sure has become hot. It seems it's about time to put away the kotatsu."

"...You have not put it away yet?... Incidentally, you use a kotatsu? It really does not go with your appearance."

Clevel laughed scornfully.

"I have no intention of deciding my lifestyle based on appearance. Kotatsu are nice. They're cheap, have good heating efficiency, and you can both sit and sleep next to them— if you take off the futon, you could also use it as a low table in summer. It's wonderful."

Nayuta lightly burst into laughter.

"Detective-san, such words filled with livelihood coming from your kitsune face only feel out of place. You give off more of... an impression that you'd be drinking white wine or something in a stylish, pure white room in some high-rise condominium."

He accepted the small number of thorns in all of her words in a positive manner as her way of letting her guard down.

"For some reason, I get told that often. Though, I don't happen to have such a financially-heavy taste. If pushed, I'd say that I'd prefer old-fashioned stuff, whether it's Japanese or Western. The interior of my detective office feels like that too, don't you think?"

Nayuta nodded.

"Yes. I do relatively like the ambience of that office."

"I haven't shown it to you two, but I actually have a tatami-matted kotatsu room inside. It sure is easy to remodel a room in virtual space."

Nayuta smiled. Although this wasn't an appropriate expression at a funeral service, she did seem to be relieved.

"I know. I also occasionally..."

Having begun to say this, Nayuta suddenly hesitated.

"That reminds me, Detective-san. Speaking of virtual space, just a while ago, the topic of the Bakeneko Tea House came up in the emails with Yanagi-san's wife. At that time, she said she would definitely want to visit it—how about we invite her when things have calmed down?"

Clevel unintentionally replied with a forced smile. Perhaps being on the same wavelength, Yanagi's wife was quite fond of Nayuta.

He could roughly guess how the topic of the ⟨Bakeneko Tea House⟩ came up in the email.

After the success in clearing the Phantom Orchestra—they couldn't just leave Yanagi, who had broken down into tears due to the last words from Kiyofumi, thus the group held a minor closing party at the Bakeneko Tea House.

Yanagi was surprised by craftsmanship of all sorts of sweets, but it seemed he had some thoughts about the mamekan in particular.

The Bakeneko Tea House's mamekan used special, vanilla-flavoured beans. While being wagashi, it was also Western-styled, thus it could be called heresy, but Yanagi enjoyed it as innocently as a child.

Around the time they left the store, Yanagi said "Next time, I'd like to bring my wife along" with a smile, having completely recovered his spirit, and then logged out.

—This was their final parting with Yanagi.

All people someday arrived at the end of their life span and died.

Clevel, Nayuta, and Koyomi would all certainly die within another several tens of years, thus it was by no means someone else's problem. There were people who died young, like Kiyofumi, as well as people dying every day from unforeseen incidents.

People, who died peacefully and without leaving any regrets when death was close at hand, as was the case with Yanagi, could probably be called a lucky, rare occurrence.

Pressing down on the skin around her eyes with a handkerchief, Nayuta gave a tough smile.

"Before he fell into a coma, it seems that Yanagi told his wife about the Bakeneko Tea House very cheerfully... 'Since he talked about it so boastfully, I, too, would like to visit it' she said— although Suzuka-san does not have an interest in games as she does not like fighting against enemies and wandering about, she does love amamidokoro cafes, it seems. Detective-san, be sure to join us at that time, she said."

"—Well, this time, I got a generous payment for my services, so such an after-service won't be a problem... but, the nuisance is that the lady is brimming with the idea that there's something between us. Please be sure to rectify this misunderstanding. If I'm arrested, my company will sink."

Of course, he was joking. But, Nayuta did not look like a student in her mourning dress, thus it wasn't quite funny.

"If you are fully aware of that, Detective-san, I do not think there will be anything to cause such a misunderstanding, though... do I look that attractive to you?"

In response to the detective's joke, Nayuta retaliated with one of her own. It was clear from her tone that she didn't mean that seriously, but the devilish danger in her words couldn't be denied.

"That question is quite fiendish; no matter how I answer it, I'll have an unfavourable outcome. If I answer yes, I'll be treated as a dangerous man, if I answer no, I'll end up with a reckless remark that would be rude to a woman. Thus, I shall exercise my right to remain silent."

Shocked, Nayuta put away her handkerchief into her bag.

"Haah... being a man sure is tough. I do believe it would be fine to just be more frank and say something like 'I have no interest in kids'?"

It seemed that Nayuta still intended to be seen as a child.

Clevel subconsciously pressed on his eyes.

"Let's stop. This topic isn't going anywhere no matter how we go at it... Hm. They're carrying out the coffin, it seems."

People standing in a line carried out a coffin from the funeral hall and delivered it to the hearse.

Clevel and Nayuta followed the procession and saw off the car with their hands in prayer as the funeral bells resounded.

Aside from very close people, beginning with the elderly man's relatives, nobody would be accompanying him to the crematorium. Clevel and Nayuta's plans for today ended here as well.

"Well then— how about we have lunch on the way back?"

"That is a good idea as well, but... do you have any plans after this? If not, I'd like to talk to you for a bit and there's a place I'd like you to visit with me."

Clevel showed his car keys.

He did presume that Nayuta would refuse to be alone with him, but Nayuta nodded without delay.

"I do not mind. It is probably— about my 'elder brother', right?"

Inside, he was startled.

He shouldn't have given her any hint about that in particular.

"That's a surprise... when did you realise that?"

Nayuta gazed at the detective with a clever look.

"—At the time I heard that you were an SAO survivor, Detective-san, I thought 'perhaps he knew my elder brother in-game'. Afterwards, when you saw my real name on the part-time job contract, your complexion changed, you know? Because of that, several days later—I took the business card I got from you to my uncle in the National Police Agency. 'Kurei-san would have been a very great police officer', he said with regret."

The detective could only shrug. It wasn't like he hasn't taken her seriously, but the girl possessed a sharper intuition than Clevel had expected.

Clevel had frankly spoken about a lot of things with her uncle.

In other words, he could safely assume that she had heard about a lot of things from the mouth of her uncle.

"Your uncle's words were probably dipped in honey, but... if you already know my background, our conversation can go quicker than I had expected. In the (Phantom Orchestra) the other day, what I saw— was your brother, 'Kushiinada Daichi'. Although that wasn't a ghost, it did provide a kind of incentive. I would like to go to his grave; would you go with me?"

Nayuta meekly nodded.

During the car ride that followed, the two had practically avoided talking.

It wasn't an awkward silence.

On the contrary, it was a silence that neither was bothered with, as they understood each other's circumstances.

They didn't even need to look for what they should talk about—

The car driven by Clevel steadily approached the cemetery where Nayuta's brother slept.

Standing stock still in front of the rectangular gravestone, Nayuta muttered just a few words.

"I do not come here that often. Only during the memorial service."

"That's fine. Frequently visiting a graveyard when so young wouldn't be too tasteful."

Lighting an incense stick he had brought with him, Clevel put his hands together in front of the grave.

He didn't believe in ghosts and spirits. But he did happen to have affectionate feelings for the departed.

Without putting her hands together, Nayuta stood behind Clevel, absent-mindedly gazing up at the spring sky.

There were no sakura trees in sight, but perhaps some were blooming nearby, as flower petals had fallen here and there.

"...First, I have to apologise to you. I— was unable... to bring Daichi back to the real world."

Nayuta smiled faintly. There was no vigour in her expression and her eyes were blank.

"Onii-chan... was stubborn, you see. No matter how much you tried to stop him, Detective-san... your words did not reach him, right?"

"...He was stubborn and energetic, so I would be the only one there to stop him. Tying him up, setting up a trap to send him to jail... there were ways to go about it, I believe. Or perhaps, if I had only overthrown that idiotic superior of his before it could happen—"

"...Please stop."

Behind him, Nayuta squeezed out a cracking voice.

"I beg of you, please stop— what happened to my brother was an inevitable accident.

Talking about how there was a possibility of avoiding it now of all times... that is more cruel, don't you think? Even though... even though I have finally accepted that 'there was nothing that could be done'..."

—In fact, there was nothing that could be done.

Clevel wasn't a man with precognition. He didn't know the fate of men and it wasn't the kind of problem that allowed him to lament on what could have been done after the fact.

Clevel and Nayuta faced Daichi's death their own way.

Clevel's was to resent the mastermind of the incident, (Kayaba Akihiko) , and avenge his bosom friend's death by regarding Akihiko with hatred.

On the other hand, Nayuta deceived the sense of loss of her relative by 'paralysing' her feelings.

The emotions of the girl who felt not even a bit scared during the (Hundred and Eight Apparitions) were half-broken. If acknowledging something scary as being scary and then facing it head-on was courage, then not feeling something scary as being scary and brushing it off as ordinary was inertia.

Yet—

At times, such inertia could be considered as anesthesia to protect one's mental state.

Nayuta's mental state was in need of anesthesia.

Clevel exhaled deeply, then turned around to face her.

"Sorry. For saying something so insensitive. But— I didn't want to let Daichi's death end as 'something that nothing could be done about'. For you, that is enough. After all, you were not at the scene, so you couldn't do or say a thing. But I— was at the scene. That doesn't mean that I was present on the battlefield he died on, but, at the very least, I was in the same world and was able to meet with him frequently. My conditions were different from yours. At the very least— I had a choice to take action and have regrets about the matter."

Nayuta, wearing a mourning dress, stared fixedly at the detective.

"...No matter how much you talk about choice of action... or what and how you regret it, you cannot change the results now. My brother is dead. No matter how much you think about it, you cannot bring him back."

Her voice trembled.

Rationally, she also understood that. But her emotions lagged behind.

After her brother's death—

What she felt was far too unreasonable.

Specifically because he had fragmentary knowledge of this and was aware that he couldn't do a thing, Clevel couldn't keep silent.

"...You're right. Indeed, the results won't change now. The dead won't come back to life. I truly dislike saying something that may stem from my own self-interest, but— death visits everyone. Yanagi-san, Kiyofumi-shi, as well as Daichi and other people, faced death in the end. Even you and I will someday exhaust our lifespan, or, speaking more ominously, we could end up in an unfortunate accident one of these days. That is specifically why— I have chosen to live my life in a way to not have any regrets when I die. Quitting the police and starting a company was also part of that."

Keenly sensing the echoes of confession in Clevel's words, Nayuta stiffened.

In front of his friend's grave, the detective continued speaking unconcernedly.

"Because VR technology and environment based on FullDive is developing too rapidly, legislation on it is lagging behind. In the current conditions, the police have a hard time even inspecting the situation, let alone intervening. Having said that, it was impossible for me to do that while belonging to the police. From an outsider's point of view, it looked like we were just playing games and, aside from special cases, our undercover operations haven't been acknowledged sufficiently."

Nayuta nodded vaguely.

It wasn't strange for the girl, raised in a family of police officers, to understand such a

situation.

"In the first place, even the police is still lost on how to handle VR space. Additionally, ever since ⟨The Seed⟩ was disseminated, we got glimpses of various kinds of innovative crimes: prostitution without the use of the body, cyber drugs that stimulate the secretion of endogenous opioids, not to mention the illegal casinos. To make matters worse, terrorists and new religions are recruiting talented people, training them to become soldiers, and even brainwashing them... all of that can serve as source of funds and talent for antisocial organisations, but with the current state of legislation, it's difficult to even conduct investigations on the matter. Our company— is collecting info on such criminal acts in the place of the police and, as civilian collaborators, we're reporting them to the authorities; our hidden goal is to lend support to investigations. This role of ours doesn't provide decent payment, so we have to get our earnings from a different kind of work though."

Nayuta frowned.

"So, you lost hope in the police... and went out of your way to start a vigilante corps in VR space?"

"That's not quite it. Vigilante corps also resort to the use of force, while we have taken a mere support role of gathering intel and offering advice. It's not like we've lost hope in the police either. We do rely on their organisational capabilities. Though— it was an obviously unsuitable place for someone who's taking things into his own hands, like myself.

Clevel cast his eyes down.

"...As a matter of fact. This is something that Daichi and I have talked about, partially joking, when we were in Aincrad. If we get sacked from the police after just starting work because we had been shut in this space and were thus absent from work without notice, we should start our own company, we used to say... That bastard forced the main work onto me while he's living comfortably in the other world himself. Someday, I'll complain to him on the other side."

Putting an end to the talk about the good old days, Clevel passed on his position in front of the grave to Nayuta.

"—You should also talk to him. I'll take a lap around the area. Let's have lunch on the

way back somewhere in the neighbourhood."

Carrying the suit he had taken off on his shoulder, Clevel began walking without turning back.

Behind him, Nayuta was probably crying.

Leaving the role of supporting her to his bosom friend right now—

The detective continued walking through the forest of gravestones alone and without a goal in mind

## §

When she returned home, Nayuta felt no one's presence in the one-room condominium she was living in.

Her uncle had lent her this flat close to her high school, promising that she could use it till her graduation.

She did intend to some move to some student dormitory if possible in university, but this depended on her results. Her uncle said that there were no problems with renting a different flat, but she wanted to avoid the trouble.

As the detective had treated her to lunch, she changed from her mourning dress to a dressing gown, set the timer for the bathtub, and instantly equipped her ⟨AmuSphere⟩

She lay down on the bed that was easy to notice in the cramped room, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath—

Finally, electric signals were transmitted to her brain and her consciousness was linked to a virtual room.

⟨Asuka Empire⟩ — was not there.

It was a familiar, plain, and tidy white and black bedroom.

The huge black cat plush toy placed on the bed was her beloved object from childhood,

but the real one became old and was thrown away.

She had always regretted that, but she was now able to reproduce it in virtual space.

The wall bookshelves were crammed with all the ebooks she had bought so far.

The PC on her desk was there to allow various work from within VR space; Clevel also used the same system in his detective office.

It seemed that Koyomi wasn't aware of its existence, but it could be called a practically essential handy tool in order to pleasantly use 〈The Seed〉.

Having risen from the bed, Nayuta moved into the living room as usual.

There she found her father playing shōgi with her elder brother.

It seemed that her older brother was dominating today. It was a scene that she saw about twice in the tens of times.

“Onii-chan, are you off-duty today?”

Nayuta uttered the keywords.

“...It'd be bad if I was playing shōgi with the old man when I wasn't off duty.”

Her brother replied with the predetermined words in a shocked tone.

Along with a lonely smile, Nayuta relived the conversational pattern she had created herself.

Her mother, peeking out from her kitchen island, chimed in with a cheerful voice.

“Playing shōgi with your father instead of going on a date despite being off-duty isn't a bad thing on its own, I wonder? Father would probably faint if Yurina brought a boyfriend home, but if her brother brought a girlfriend home, he'd give a warm welcome, you know?”

“...Yurina. I'm asking just in case but, you don't have anyone like that yet... right?”

“She wouldn’t be wasting her precious spring break on a game if she had someone like that. Hey, dad. Checkmate.”

“Aah... hey you, there shouldn’t have been a knight there... ugh, did you swap it with the rook...”

—Nayuta remained silent as she gazed at her moving album-like family.

She didn't quite remember how her parents died.

Her parents, exhausted by the long anxiety, were plunged into even further despair at the death of her brother, who had been imprisoned in SAO.

While preparing for her brother's funeral, her father, overwhelmed by exhaustion, caused a major accident while driving the car, with her mother on the passenger's seat, and Nayuta on the rear seat.

Her father and mother died instantly, while Nayuta herself escaped death, but fell into a coma for around a month; when she woke up, the funeral for her parents had already been finished.

Her uncle, seen for the first time in a while, was awfully worn out.

As for anything before or after that, she truly couldn't remember a thing.

—'I think my brain rejected reality'.

Still without any feelings for the death of her parents, Nayuta was left alone.

There had been a proposal for her to live in her uncle's house, but there weren't enough rooms and she had a male cousin close to her age, thus she couldn't cause them any trouble.

But most of all, she didn't think she could bear seeing another family so close to her for a long time.

Sitting down in the living room constructed in virtual space, Nayuta absent-mindedly gazed at her fake family.

They could only respond in set patterns. Though, the majority of her family's daily conversations surprisingly consisted of just that.

'Have a good day', 'I'm off', 'I'm back', 'Welcome back', 'Good morning', 'Good night', 'The bath is ready'—

She had linked her mother's remark to her bath timer in her real room, and she had added more detailed configurations.

There were some repetitions, but right now, she was practically able to reproduce her former daily life.

All of them were not even ghosts, but virtual images— the one who made them was the most aware of that.

Nevertheless, at times that Nayuta was mentally strained and about to crumble, this room had undoubtedly lent her support.

If she hadn't had this contact with her family, she would have taken her own life by now.

It wasn't an issue of right or wrong; people had times when they needed a place to escape to.

Nayuta closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

—Clevel was probably already aware of this circumstance.

When he brought her to the grave where her brother, as well as her parents, slept, Nayuta felt as if he were implicitly saying 'This is where your family is'.

And yet, Clevel didn't press Nayuta about it.

Nayuta thought about the reason for that.

She felt that it was not out of concern. Deceiving her without conviction... also didn't seem to be the case.

Most likely, there were other people besides Nayuta who made such use of ⟨The Seed⟩

And Clevel himself was unable to conclude what the pros and cons of this were.

It was hard to call it healthy. Yet, there actually were people who had need of it.

The degree differed, but people were living beings that depended on something.

Depended on their family, depended on their friends, depended on their workplace, school, country, depended on food, depended on the air, depended on the Earth.

Virtual space was just another thing added to the list of dependencies; in the end, it was only a question of degree.

A message arrived at the tablet-shaped tool placed in the living room.

The sender appeared to be Koyomi.

[[Nayu-san, how was the funeral? You weren't teased by Detective-san, right? I have overtime today, but if you are free around night tomorrow, tell me all about it at the Bakeneko Tea House!]]

Nayuta let out a chuckle.

Koyomi's cheerfulness had saved her before.

She had told Nayuta 'let me spoil you more', but hadn't realised that Nayuta was already depending on Koyomi quite a lot.

It probably wasn't in a visible form, but this truth couldn't be denied.

[[I have already returned home. Some things happened with Detective-san, thus... I will tell you all about it in-game tomorrow.]]

She felt like she could now tell Koyomi about her brother and family.

Having finished the reply to her message, Nayuta closed her eyes.

—There were a lot of thoughts on her mind.

She had been undoubtedly saved by this virtual family thus far.

Yet— she didn't think that things could stay like this forever.

Nayuta took a big, deep breath, and turned her back at her family.

(I should... be fine right about now, I guess—)

Thanks to the detective, she was able to visit the grave of her parents and brother.

"Yurina, are you going out somewhere?"

Her AI mother spoke out.

"...Yeah. For a bit."

Giving a vague reply, Nayuta turned around.

The figures of her family were slightly blurred.

"Mother, father, Onii-chan... I'll try to avoid coming here as much as I can. I can't have my real mother and the rest of the family worry too much about me—"

Her finger slid from the tablet-type tool to the logout button.

Just before she could press it, she hesitated for a bit.

Her mother, her features blurred, nodded.

"...I see. Well then, have a nice day. Take care of yourself."

Her father timidly smiled.

"...If you're ever down, feel free to come back."

Her elder brother Daichi, having stepped up to her, pressed down on the hesitating Nayuta's hand from above.

"Since we will always— be here."

At the end of his gentle mutter, her vision was cut off.

—The link to the virtual room was severed and Nayuta opened her eyes on a small bed in her one-room condominium.

The evening sunlight coming through the window dyed her ceiling in vivid orange.

While taking off her AmuSphere absent-mindedly—

She gazed at her ceiling for a bit, as if her soul had left her body.

The final words her virtual family had uttered—



(...Those lines... Have I... ever entered them, I wonder...?)

If she had entered them, she couldn't have forgotten about them— nevertheless, she had no recollection of them.

Before her confusion could disappear, her mobile phone beside her pillow began ringing.

On the incoming call, Koyomi's name was displayed.

"...Hello, this is Nayuta."

[Nayu-san! Are you okay!? Did that foxman do anything to you!?!]

Koyomi's first words were uttered in a shrill, panicking voice.

It seemed that the message she had sent moments ago caused some kind of confusion.

"E. Err, Koyomi-san..."

Without waiting for Nayuta's explanation, Koyomi blazed away through the phone.

[I dunno what happened, but I'm on Nayu-san's side! If need be, I can excuse myself from work and head to your place, or, vice versa, you could come to my place! Either way, you can rely on me for anything, so tell me the details of what... wait, what?... Na-Nayu-san... Are you... crying...?]

—Without her realising, tears dripped along Nayuta's cheeks.

Having sensed hints of this through the phone, Koyomi plunged more and more into panic.

[W-what happened!? What on earth!? Do I need to wipe the floor with Detective-san? To rip him to shreds? Behead him and display his head on a pike in front of a prison? A-at any rate, don't cry! I'll leave work early, so can you come to the Bakeneko Tea House in thirty minutes! Chief, sorry but I can't do overtime after all! I'm going home!]

Hearing Koyomi's frantic yet calming voice, Nayuta was now finally facing the 'death of her family'.

Holding back her overflowing tears with her sleeve, she let out a soundless sob—

Finally, she began sobbing like a child.

A matsuribayashi she had heard in the distant past, suddenly.

Grazed Nayuta's ears before disappearing.

End

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## Notes

1. ^ An expression for "being selected from a group of people". The expression originates from a tale where a white arrow-feather shot at a roof indicates that the family's daughter was chosen to be a sacrifice for a god or monster.

# Afterword

The stage for this novel, 〈Asuka Empire〉, is the first VRMMO that the central figure of Mother's Rosario, Yuuki, played.

Although it is a minor title that barely had any attention in the main SAO series by Kawahara-sensei, but this game was the stage for the DVD bonus story [Sister's Prayer], which focused on Yuuki and her elder sister Ran and covered a story that took place before the establishment of the Sleeping Knights.

As for how this novel came to be, it started when I received the following invitation: "Would you be willing to write a story set in a game that became famous with the dissemination of The Seed, but other than ALO and GGO?"— when I proposed "If possible, I would like to write about a Japanese-style fantasy setting!", I received word from the supervisor that "In that case, we just happen to have a title called Asuka Empire!", and thus the content of the story was decided rapidly.

As such, making good use of the fact that the game did not appear much in the original story, I feel like I have been given considerable freedom to write as I please. I feel a bit sorry about that.

First, I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to Kawahara-sensei, who pleasantly accepted the role of supervising me, Miki-shi, and other members of the staff.

This was my first time being mixed into such a spin-off (?) project, thus all the trial and error was a great experience for me. Especially seeing as I did not quite have the opportunity to write about VRMMOs till now, despite having an interest in them, I am grateful for finally receiving this opportunity.

Incidentally, being a person who cried his eyes out during Mother's Rosario, I feel extremely obliged for the chance to write a story that involves the "Sleeping Knights"— as this will end up as spoilers, I will not go into details too much, but I am grateful for a lot of things.

Also, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Ginta-san, who has drawn lovely illustrations for the book ever since it was serialised on Dengeki Bunko MAGAZINE.

The cuteness of the female characters is a given, but Detective Clevel's "suspicious foxishness" is quite well done; the characters turned out very impressive even on my side.

Speaking of being impressive, Koyomi should have been given a more minor role in the plot, but—the moment I received the design drafts, I felt like she had practically risen to the role of the main character. At the time of writing the first chapter, I had practically no image of her in mind and had practically passed the work of making the designs from scratch to Ginta, but the illustrations of her that I received looked like they captured the essence of Koyomi, thus I was very impressed. This moment was, of course, quite enjoyable.

Now, VR-related tools are finally starting to appear in the world and, while it is indeed impossible for them to reach the levels of FullDive like in SAO, I am interested in its future developments.

Personally, I am anticipating content other than games, such as VR planetariums that you can watch while sitting on a sofa at home, travels through existing railroads or a galaxy express while looking at the scenery outside the car window, or pseudo-skydiving while lying face-up in bed, but the tech will, of course, be applied mainly to games and I am looking forward to horror games, which I have a high affinity for, in particular.

Wandering about a forest late at night, you lose your way and end up at a declined shrine, and beyond the torii archway is—

Locked up in abandoned hospital that was warped into a netherworld, where the corridors you want to use to escape are looped, and, finally, a grotesque monster stands before you and—

While I anticipate games with such a mood, when VR devices have spread, I think that some day we will have hands coming out from the display and taking the user's eyeballs out and stuff; I can feel cold sweat running down me. Eek, scary.

...I am explaining this just in case, but I personally hate horror. Thought, that "hate" is the "claim to hate but actually love" kind of hate, thus, if there was an event like the <Hundred and Eight Apparitions>, I personally would undoubtedly jump onboard.

Thus, the story in 〈Asuka Empire〉 was filled with such wishes from the writer—

I would be very pleased if you enjoyed it, even if only a little.

Watase Soitiro, Autumn 2016

# Animate Bonus Stories

## The Story of the Matchmaking Bakeneko (Animate 2016 Bonus)

Koyomihara Shiori, (Koyomi) , was a cat loving ninja.

Of course, this was only in-game; in the real world, she was only a humble, cat-loving clerk working at a minor enterprise.

Perhaps because of her being so short that she could be mistaken for a middle school pupil, the elderly workers at the company loved her like their grandchild. Perhaps several of the employees aside from the director actually mistook her for their grandchild.

Her colleagues gave her shoulder massages, shared the sweets they got from their customers, and she even got a New Year's gift on New Year's Day this year, which was her first one since being employed.

It couldn't be said that she accepted them with a smile all over her face, but she couldn't understand.

As the company was started as a hobby by some aged people, who had retired from their profession, it was true that there were no other young female employees.

There were some women who had been working here for quite some years, but as they were mainly elderly workers as well, they treated Koyomi as their grandchild. Nor was there particularly any factional strife that is typical for girls.

Stretching it a bit, the "Let's find a nice groom for Shiori-chan" faction and the "Such talk is too early for Shiori-chan" faction were continuing their talks behind the scenes, but since both groups treated her as a grandchild, there was no big difference between them.

(...Straangee... Even though I should be over twenty, have reached the drinking age, and properly graduated from university, why is the director telling me "Shiori-chan, you're doing such a good job waking up early every morning" ...)

She couldn't understand.

If she were a cynic, she would take offense at that, but this wasn't limited to those old people. At times like when she received mittens as a present for her birthday, she was moved to tears.

Continuing to sit at an amamidokoro in ⟨Ayakashi Bystreet⟩ in the newly implemented district of ⟨Asuka Empire⟩, Koyomi pondered.

(Like... I can't really help how I'm treated at the company, but I at least want a younger JK<sup>(1)</sup> or something as an acquaintance who'd treat me as an Onee-san...)

Speaking of her current JK friends, she had a giant man with the alias "Jack Knife", and a chūnibyō whose player name was "Joker", but Koyomi's desire wasn't that kind of JK.

She wanted a frank and honest girl talk. After finding employment, her environment ended up being filled with the elderly, and she was starving for some young sensitivity.

Suddenly, she was struck with by a soft touch on her knees.

A happi-wearing nekomata stared up at Koyomi while brushing her knees. She was able to quickly guess its goal.

"...Give an additional order or just leave already, you're saying?... Then, I'll additionally order some warabimochi."

Just when the black cat, having received an order, retired into the kitchen, another visitor came to the restaurant.

(Ah. A girl... hey, we got quite the looker!)

Koyomi subconsciously followed the girl with her eyes.

She was a lightly-dressed Battle Miko with impressive, long, black hair. The way she

held her head high made Koyomi surmise that the girl had that great of an upbringing. In a VRMMO world, your appearance could be adjusted to some extent, but faking your manner of walking and posture was ineffective.

Sitting down on a seat beside a table, the Battle Miko girl gave a graceful bow to the store's nekomata.

"One mamekan. Also, some matcha please."

In addition to her face, even her voice was dignified.

(Hah... A proper and cool beauty... They really do exist, huh...)

As she absent-mindedly watched her in fascination, a nekomata brought a tray on its shoulders from the kitchen.

Having placed the respective bowls in front of Koyomi and the Battle Miko girl, the cat hastily lay down in a circular manner on a nearby zabuton.

"Oh, it's here it's here... hm?"

"...Huh?"

The voices of Koyomi and the Battle Miko unexpectedly overlapped.

In front of Koyomi was a bowl with heaps of agar-agar and beans.

And, in front of the Battle Miko, some warabimochi with kinako was quivering.

"Umm. Mister cat, this is—"

Realising the mistake in the orders, she attempted to shake the nearby black cat awake.

—A claw strike in the blink of an eye and her HP was reduced by 1.

"...W-why you brute! You're one who made the mistake!?"

As if saying that it were no concern of his, the cat lowered its ears.

Holding the scratched hand, Koyomi moaned. It was meaningless to complain to an AI cat any further.

The Battle Miko girl hastily rushed over to her.

"A-are you all right? You were scratched just now—"

"Yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine. That practically had no damage s... o?"

—She could not entrust the store employees with anything. And the goods the two sought were in front of them.

Taking the bowl of mamekan into her hands, Koyomi faced the Battle Miko girl with a smile of satisfaction.

"Say, making use of the opportunity to switch orders, shall we eat together? I'm Koyomi! Onee-san, what's your name?"

Having forcibly moved to the girl's table, the Battle Miko girl showed some bewilderment for just a moment but instantly gave a slight nod.

"Umm... My name is Nayuta."

There were no signs of annoyance in her words as she named herself.

Feeling relief at this, Koyomi's eyes glistened like those of a puppy. She was most pleased that her offer hadn't been rejected so far.

"Then, it's Nayu-san, right! I'd be happy if you'd call me ⟨Koyomi-oneechan⟩ ♪"

As she got carried away, knowing that it was unreasonable, Nayuta inclined her head in wonder.

"...Onee...? Well, umm... I am a highschool student—"

"...Ooh, seriously, a real JK... I mean! I'm the older one! Twenty-three years old! Working adult! OL!"

Slowly puffing out her chest, Koyomi declared in a smug face.

Nayuta placed her hand on her mouth and pondered for a bit with a serious expression.

"...Is that how you are roleplaying?"

"...No, for reals! I'm not a boke! Wait, what's with such a response on the first meeting! Nayu-san, are you perhaps from Kansai!?"

"No, I am from Kantou... Excuse me. I am not well-versed in boke and tsukkomi—"

"As I keep saying, that's not what I meant! Let's step away from manzai! Because I haven't said anything funny! It was just an ordinary self-introduction!"

Although it seemed her hopes of being treated as an elder person quickly collapsed, she was able to receive a response that indicated that she could get along well with her. Most of all, a friend whom she could hope to have an honest girl talk with was precious to her by itself.

Koyomi secretly sent her feeling of gratitude to the black cat, whose mistake in setting the tables gave her this chance of conversation.

The black cat in question yawned, feigning ignorance—

And, using the conversation of the two girls as a lullaby, it continued slowly swinging its tail.

End

## Idle Talk - The Shinobi's Reckless Remarks (Animate 2017 Bonus)

"Nayu-san is so unconsciously erotic that it's hard."

At the sudden reckless remark from the Ninja Koyomi, Detective Clevel moaned with a serious look.

"...Is that something I really have to hear? If you're going to stay in my office, I wish you'd at least pick a topic that wouldn't cause trouble if someone heard it."

At the Mistuba Detective Agency, which had entirely ended up becoming the meeting place for Nayuta and Koyomi, Clevel's complaint resounded fruitlessly.

Naturally, Koyomi wouldn't accept his complaints.

"Well, please listen. I mean, listen up. You're going to listen. Detective-san, you have an obligation to listen—" <sup>(2)</sup>

In the pose of a potter, Koyomi gave far-looking eyes, as if she were an entrepreneur who was talking about the future prospects of her business.

"You see. Nayu-san tends to catch your eyes with her overbearing figure, but the fact that you can only find eroticism in her appearance means that she's still an amateur. It's kinda like, her demeanor? Her posture? The way she holds her head up high with a stiff expression, yet she's kind, surprisingly easy to start a conversation with, amiable, and polite; she appears like a beauty, but feels cute inside? There's a gap between the unthinkable completeness exuding from inside of her and her risky figure, so what I'm trying to say here is hey hold yer horses listen to me Detective-san donncha run away I said donncha run away from me donncha start getting ready to log out hey hold it ya hear me."

As the detective opened his menu window in silence, Koyomi grabbed his arm from the side.

Giving up on escaping, Clevel let out a deep sigh.

"...Is what you're saying allowed because of the same sex? If I said something like that, it would bring out some concerns and, in the first place, I don't share your views. Don't drag me into this."

"Nah, we're having a serious talk here. Detective-san, don't you feel any lust for Nayu-san? It's Nayu-san we're talking about here, ya know? She's that cute, ya know? That's so dangerous. If times were better, it would probably be regulated. Actually, she should be safeguarded as an endangered species. I'm being serious that we have such an obligation."

"...At least tell such jokes with a laugh. It's really scary how light has completely left your eyes."

"Ahahahahaha! Nayu-san! Is too cute! That really is bad!"

"...Sorry, it's actually better if you don't laugh. It's seriously scary. Right now, I'm seriously considering whether I should report you to the appropriate institutions."

He did have faith in Koyomi, but he was unsure how to handle the modest madness that he could sometimes get a glimpse of from her words and actions.

Koyomi somewhat lowered her voice.

"Well, jokes aside. Dangerous things are dangerous, that cuteness of hers... Currently, she's in a girls' high school, so it seems it's hard for undesirables to approach her, but if she goes to university, it would be likely for her to have stalkers, especially knowing about her family and that she's living alone, Onee-san is really really worried... I want her to live with me Osaka for reals when she's in university, so, Detective-san, could you help me convince her?"

"You're pushing too much it yourself... That's definitely an attraction you have there."

Koyomi gave an expression of pouting with her lips.

"I may be a bit attracted. I've known Nayu-san for a short time so far, but I kinda, like... she's too stiff and has a hard time exposing her vulnerabilities. Usually, your family would cover for that, but if that's impossible, an adult in her environment has to do it. I want to make a girl like Nayu-san happy as best as I can and, personally, I do love her; while I'm at it, I plan to show no mercy to any undesirables, with some jealousy

included, and, Detective-san, be sure sure to control yourself, okay? If you do anything to make Nayu-san cry, I'll employ any method in my arsenal to destroy you, got it? The part before this was just a joke, but I mean it for reals now, got it?"

"...The first half was so nice and I was beginning to think that you'd end it as such, but the fact that you made your usual threats has actually given me relief. You don't have to worry, I have confidence in my reason."

The detective replied with his usual shady smile and Koyomi gave him a glassy-eyed look.

"...Reaaally? But it's Nayu-san we're talking about? Those breasts, ya know? They're not just huge, but their form is also great, they're lively, and, on top of being thick and heavy to a great extent, Nayu-san is bashful, ya know? Do you really have confidence in being able to endure that? I don't."

"Being able to endure what and how?"

"Obviously touching, rubbing, burying your face in them, and enjoying the smell. Incidentally, even when you want to commit various acts, she just gives you permission with a 'if you insist'; her simpleness is charming! Occasionally, her being too simple is a worry, but even that part is kinda ero—"

Koyomi abruptly shut her mouth.

Without saying a thing, the detective turned his gaze towards the window. It wasn't because he could see something interesting, he just simply didn't want to look at what was inside the office.

Behind Koyomi, the Battle Miko girl was giving a sweet smile, filled with kindness.

"Koyomi-san. You sure were having fun talking about something, right? May I join the conversation?"

"...Yeah. Are you okay with a conversation about the new sweets in the Bakeneko Tea House...?"

"That is fine. But, before we change the topic, there is something you would like to say, right?"

"..... Forgive me."

Clevel silently ignored the conversation between the working adult kneeling in dogeza atop the sofa and the Battle Miko who began a serious lecture with a smile. If possible, he wished they would take it someplace else, but he was liable to end up as collateral damage if he chime in.

—And so, the next day in the Mitsuba Detective Agency.

"Nayu-san's relaxed attitude when she's angry is so erotic that it's hard."

"...You sure don't learn your lessons."

End

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## Notes

1. ^ A slang abbreviation of joshi kōsei (女子高生, high school girl). The following paragraph mentions some players with "j" and "k" in their names as examples that she did NOT have in mind.
2. ^ With each sentence here, Koyomi is using more and more forceful grammatical constructs.



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