

First Passage — Awakening the Star-Reader

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1. Normally, when you get reincarnated, you end up as a beautiful girl, right?

Ever since ancient times, persisting as a common language past the era of the Tower of Babel, this phrase has existing in dialog and thought: "A world entirely of cute girls sounds nice, doesn't it?"

There is nothing better than becoming a beautiful girl.

And for that very reason, I, facing my oncoming death, made a prayer.

In that minuscule instant, shorter than a second, as a truck barreling through a red light reduced my body to shreds of meat, I prayed:

"Please, god, make me in my next life a beautiful girl a beautiful girl a beautiful girl a beautiful girl a beautiful girl—"

Cycle of reincarnation! Set up a payment plan where you can pay any cost to be reborn as a beautiful girl!!!

"Even though I was banking on that..."

I sigh, adding to who-knows-how-many I'd let out since being reborn in this world.

Let's skip to the main issue: I didn't get reincarnated as a beautiful girl. Would you like to hear the bad news first? Or maybe we start with the bad news instead?

OK, got it. Then, starting with the bad news: I was reborn as a guy. Well, that's slightly incorrect. I should say: *When I came to, I was a guy.*

Next, the bad news.

"You mean to tell me I'm this *loser!*?"

It would seem that I had been placed in the body of an one-off jobber-role character. And to add insult to injury, only after he had served his purpose.

■

I have been reincarnated, into the body of a boy named Narō Kei. You might guess from his name that he's exactly the type of protagonist-level guy you'd see wish fulfillment novels written about, with a life full of glory and renown, but you'd be way off the mark. He is the introductory foil character you can guess the fate of just from the promo posts on social media.

"I've seen this face before."

There's a manga I'd been reading, called *Mirror-Edge Lutra*^[1]. One of those stories with the modern-day dungeons. The writing itself was at the level of your average webnovel, but what got me hooked was how good the art was. I found myself looking forward to its weekly updates, and got so into the series that I even bought a few volumes of its spin-off novel series.

The story goes, in simplest terms, like so:

The protagonist, exiled from a certain renowned family, finds in a modern-day dungeon a peculiar girl who can shift into the form of a weapon, makes a contract with her, and rises to fame. It's a very fluffy and lighthearted adventure story.

And as for me,

Kei is the loser rich kid (♂) of a different large family, who is the entire reason the protagonist finds that girl in the first place. This kid tries to kill off the protagonist by shoving him into a dungeon when he can't fight well—the very dungeon the girl had been sealed away in. He makes a contract with her, and the two of them clear the dungeon in spectacular fashion. Kei challenges the protagonist to a duel after the protagonist makes it out of the dungeon. Not only is his defeat extremely embarrassing, all of his other foul deeds in the academy come to light.

Verdict? Guilty.

The jobber's family stops supporting him, and he basically loses everything he ever had.

Redemption arc? Forget about it.

"And my account balance is... 1300 yen."

I toss my passbook away.

It's been 3 days since I've reincarnated.

After processing the impact from that truck, I found myself standing here, in this body. This room, presumably his place, was about as tidy as the wake of a tornado. I could easily deduce the likely culprit: he lost to the protagonist, and went on a tear from corner to corner.

I have spent the past 3 days repairing the damages to the best of my ability, and also catching up on common knowledge for the setting, which brings us all the way back around to the conclusion we started at.

"Gosh, it's almost beyond saving..."

These sorts of stories at least bother to start you out at birth... If you hear the starting signal call right as everything's fallen apart, what can you even think to do about that... What are you doing! Handing me someone else's save after they've locked in a bad ending!

And, more important than any of that.

"Why couldn't you at least let me be a girl!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Now *I'm* the one crashing out.

I can manage being thrown a loser's lot.

I can tolerate these post-jobbing circumstances.

However.

WHY must I be consigned to a male body in this fantastic world!

"I wanted to be a girl...! To join some sort of eccentric club, experience my own Kirara Jump...!"

Just that. That's all I had wished for.

"Shit! Goddamnit! Why must I of all people have to suffer this!"

Of course, saying something like that is exceedingly fitting for my current appearance as a third-rate heel. That at least brings a smile to my face, right? Like hell it would.

"Ugh... The actual protagonist has it nice, doesn't he? He might not be a girl, but harems seem fun... I can't even be jealous of him, since he actually pulls his weight in the plot."

Gatō Touraku-kun. The protagonist of the series. Not only is he a hard worker, and handsome, but he genuinely accepts and returns the love the heroines give him. I can't bring myself to direct any negative emotions to someone as saintly and virtuous as he is. Be happy, Touraku-kun.

"With Kei and therefore myself just having been condemned by the world, it would be in the first year of high school, around May... This is where the story begins in earnest, huh? Lots of events. Lots of *fun* events."

I found the plot points coming to mind all of a sudden:

Combat in a secret biological-weapon sort of dungeon.

A school-vs-school competition arc, with the rights to clear an S-rank dungeon as the prize.

Fighting with creatures carrying the names of angels.

All-out war against a dungeon that replicated the entire academy-city, and even more past that.

As a reader, all of them are events that are rather enjoyable to read.

For Touraku-kun, well, every time he seems to end up on the verge of death, doesn't he? To the point that fans find it noteworthy on the rare occasion he doesn't end up at least *wounded*.

"And that's before we even get to what he lucks into with his harem. In fact, Touraku-kun himself turns into a girl one time—oh."

The words leaving my mouth send a shock through me. This is what it must feel like to be struck by lightning.

"Tha- That's it! I still have one chance left...!"

I had found my snowball's chance in this hell.

And I only have to wait one year.

"The one-of-a-kind gender-changing dungeon should appear. In a year, in this story!"

Of course, in the plot of the series, it's written off for comedy.

For me?

"With this... I think I can make it work."

I don't need to rise to the top of this world, and I could care less about clearing my name.

There's only one thing that matters: fulfilling my dream, nay, humanity's dream of becoming a beautiful girl. And thanks to this dungeon meant as a joke, it actually feels viable.

"My life as a student starts now. My career path: Aiming for transition!"

My fists are clenched tight with excitement and adrenaline.

My lifelong dream is now within a year's reach.

Nothing left to do but give it my all!

"First order of business! I'm transferring out!"

It didn't take me long to put together a plan.

The academy-city I'm currently standing in is named Hinotsuchi, a massive artificial landmass resting atop the Pacific Ocean. It's comprised of over a thousand individual academies and places of research, and it also serves as a training grounds for the divers, the people who explore and clear the settings' dungeons. It isn't quite a city-state, but the self-governance it does have is by-and-large enacted and managed by the students themselves. They keep the city running, and even deal with external companies and corporations as needed.

And, within that myriad of academies, the one I (by way of Narō Kei) have been attending is named Mikage. One of the Four Big Schools within Hinotsuchi, both in popular perception and its actual campus size, it houses over 500,000 students. Honestly, it's enough to pass for a small city on its own. It's acceptance policy is quite strict on adventuring skill and academic marks, though... Kei of course paid his way in. Not to say he's *weak*...for the first volume. Since he would go on to not bother to train himself later in the story, you can count on one hand the amount of times he'd win a fight.

"And this bastard didn't even qualify for any scholarships... He's actually only here because his family could foot the bill."

Narō Kei, after his downfall and losing the funds that would pay for his tuition, gets expelled and joins up with a gang of other delinquents. He also happens to get killed later on, trying to get some sort of "revenge" on Touraku, but, well. I'm here now, so that's hardly worth mentioning even as a possibility. Same with the idea of my remaining as a guy.

"Is there any corner of this city with super cheap tuition, anywhere at all..."

The academy listings whiz by on my smartphone.

First, as mentioned, is transferring schools.

With as many options as there are locations in this academy-city, students transfer schools all the time. It's to the level that you could consider each academy just a large club or circle of creators with temporarily aligned interests, rather than separate high schools. In this melting pot of school cultures and individual institutions, it's not actually that difficult to find ones that choose to carve their niche via sheer affordability.

"Oh! The cheapest option possible! Free dormitory accommodations, tuition waived, all other fees waived, it would only cost me a grand total of zero yen! ...Zero yen!?!?!?"

The hell are *their* circumstances?

"It's not a scam, right? They won't get my signature and force me to buy expensive vases or something ridiculous?"

Internet, show me their information.

It would appear... nearly all their students have left, and the academy itself has basically given up.

However.

If it lets me hold out for the year I need to wait for the Transgendering Dungeon, that's enough for me. To attempt to clear a dungeon, you need to be actively enrolled at *an* academy. It doesn't actually matter if the school's credentials are any good or not, just that they exist.

"Fectom Comprehensive Academy... Never heard of it."

It's not a school was ever named in the series, so of course. That doesn't really factor in to my decision, though.

"Fectom Comprehensive, here we go!"

I'll do my best, all for the sake of my transition.

2. A transfer student should be a mysterious beautiful girl, obviously.

A rumor spreads across the academy district like a flash flood—*A student is transferring into Fectom Comprehensive Academy*. Terujou Mizuhi rushes to the principal's office at a similar speed, throwing the door open without so much as a knock.

"Oi, Miroku! It's real, aye? We got transfer students incoming!?"

She hops over to the other girl, her red hair bouncing along behind her in a ponytail. The blue-haired Miroku gives her a brief glance in acknowledgement of her dramatic entry, and immediately resumes working on her stack of paperwork.

"Toa-chan told you already, then? Haa. I was planning to be the one to let you know, so you wouldn't make a fuss about it."

"It'd be weirder if I *didn't*, 'specially with how *big* this is for us! I mean, c'mon! Fectom Comprehensive Academy swells its ranks to *four* students enrolled!"

"It is just the one transferee, being this boisterous just makes our situation look all the more depressing."

With that, Miroku folds the paper she had on hand into an airplane, and sends it gently sailing over to Mizuhi. The redhead catches and unfolds it, finding it to be the transfer request form for one singular student.

"Narō Kei, first year... A dude, huh."

"Would that pose a problem?"

"Oh, no, this is actually pretty convenient. It's just us three at the moment, so it wouldn't be weird if someone thought of it as an all-girls academy, which just makes a lack of applicants *worse*."

"I highly doubt it's concerns about gender restrictions that keep people from submitting applications. What student wants to join an academy that's on it's way out?"

Miroku turns to look out the window to the garden. It still shows some remnants of its former beauty, but it's even clearer that it hadn't been tended to in a long time. The roof tiles, too, have

stains and cracks scouring their pristine white. The other Western Gothic-style buildings dotting the campus are so run-down and dotted full of holes, the place looks nearly ransacked.

"For someone to transfer here, they would either have to have some very odd preferences, or...perhaps there's something they're hoping to find or do at the academy."

"...Say, this 'Narō' wouldn't happen to be *that* 'Narō', would it?"

"It would indeed."

Mirokou affirms her suspicions without moving her gaze back inside.

"The very same Narō family that was one of the three pioneers of dungeon exploration in Japan. The very same Narō family that, even today, holds incredible influence within our academy-city."

"In that case, this guy's gotta be cream of the crop! Goddamn, I can almost see us throwing parties within a year."

"That *would* be nice, if it can come to pass."

"Hey, why're you being such a downer right now? We finally get a new kid moving in, and from *the* Narō... Don't tell me, you have a bad history with 'em?"

"No, nothing so heavy as that. It's just..."

She spoke as if she meant to dismiss any worries, but her expression belies she still held a lot of reservations about the boy.

"That gaze of his. I can't quite stop thinking about it."

"Gaze?"

"One shining with a firm conviction, like something had set his spirit aflame, or still continues to push him forward. Eyes unafraid of death, even rushing toward it. ...In that, he reminds me of our instructor."

Mizuhi narrows her own gaze to a glare as soon as she hears those words spoken.

"...That. Was an accident. Our instructor would never attempt *anything* like suicide."

"...You're right, Mizuhi. I'm sorry. I'm just as confused as you are about it. But, in any case, this is the first transfer student on our records in ten whole years."

Mizuho laughs darkly as she comments on that blank history. Mizuhi, as her childhood friend, knows that she's hiding something else behind that smile, but returns one of her own, accepting the change of topic.

"I'm looking forward to meeting him. Speaking of, when's he scheduled to get here?"

"Today."

"Today!? I didn't even know he took our entrance exam!?"

"I conducted it together with Toa-chan, as a matter of fact."

"I'm the only one out of the loop here!?"

Miroku continues attempting to placate Mizuhi's long string of complaints, her head full of quiet sighs and still fresh with the memory of meeting that boy.

Let's rewind a little bit with her, to the day of the interview.

"—And you are Mr. Narō Kei, correct?"

"Yes."

The interview was taking place in one of Fectom's cleaner classrooms, where sat 2 girls and 1 boy across from each other.

"*Then, without further ado, let us begin the interview.* A statement purely for formality's sake, so feel free to take this casually. Ah, and let me introduce my fellow interviewer, Tsukimiya Toa-chan."

"A-a pleasure to meet you! M-my name is Toa-chan!"

"Toa-chan, calm down, you aren't the one being interviewed today."

"Y-yes!"

The blonde girl, Toa, took a deep breath to steady herself. Miroku briefly had the thought, seeing how tense she was, that she had made a mistake in selecting *Toa* to participate in this interview, but she didn't bother to entertain that. After all, if she'd picked Mizuhi, that girl would have somehow managed to turn this into a practical test to fit her own preferences.

(Though, I must say, he has a very *elegant* air to him.)

Miroku observed the applicant across from her.

Silver hair that glints blue, and a relaxed demeanor that hints at how his intelligence must similarly sparkle.

Narō Kei.

He had been attending Mikage Academy, and for reasons cited as "*problematic behavior*", was now looking to transfer to a different academy.

While those were the facts Miroku was aware of, she was even more aware, sharing a space so closely with him, that the manner in which he carried himself was far too different from that of a delinquent.

(Is it possible someone else set him up to get expelled? Or is he so good at acting that he can even fool my judge of character?)

While she held those two possibilities in mind, Miroku showed Kei himself the smile you would expect from an interviewer as they talked.

"Shall we actually begin the interview, then?"

"Yes, please. Thank you for your time."

To restate, Kei was practically exuding the aura of high society, just sitting there. Even his small movements showed refinement, no doubt from his upbringing.

"I'll cut to the chase. Why have you selected our academy? It pains me to be the one to say it, but we as a academy have *nothing*. Nearly all territory outside our immediate campus grounds has been ceded to other academies, and there are only 3 students enrolled right now. By next year, we all expect this academy to *be* nothing."

"Mi-Miroku-chan."

"I'm only stating facts. If he's somehow mistaken about the state our academy is currently in, it's better to find out now than later."

Kei simply shook his head to indicate he had known already, then lowered his gaze for a moment, expression clearly showing he was picking his next words carefully.

"There is a mission I must see through."

"A mission?"

"Yes. One that I must prioritize over my own life, if need be."

"Are you able to provide us with any additional details on the *nature* of your mission?"

"I am..."

Kei returned to a short period of silence, managing to eke out after:

"...not at liberty to say. However, joining this academy is something that I myself want, or more accurately, that I need to do."

"What makes this so important?"

"...Because I'm running out of time."

He seemed startled by his own words, and quickly closed his mouth firmly again. That last sentence was likely not something he should have divulged.

"I understand."

Miroku's answer was simple, and her mind anything but. It was the specific words that Kei had used that caught her attention so much: *I'm running out of time*.

(...instructor said the exact same thing shortly before her death. It couldn't be...)

She decided to pose a single question to him.

"Are you perchance familiar with an instructor by the name of Sakuraba Rakka?"

"!? ...Miroku-chan."

Out of all the names Miroku could have asked about, Sakuraba Rakka was by far the most known and respected one the academy held on to. The woman herself, instructor to both Miroku and Mizuhi, had unfortunately already left this world. Kei's eyes widened when he heard it, and in them shimmered an ardor like the last moments of a candle, vibrant as it reaches for one last moment of greatness before burning out completely.

"...Yes. I do know that name."

"I see."

Again Miroku returned a simple acknowledgement of his answer, but she immediately stood up from her seat.

"Beginning tomorrow, you will be a student of this academy. I look forward to seeing you around, Narō Kei-kun."

"Eh? Miroku-chan, is that it already? Or more like, why was I even here..."

Miroku ignored Toa's confusion, and moved to open the door.

"Toa-chan, I'll leave it to you to see him out for today."

"What???"

Miroku flashed her a smile and left the room, leaving Toa's cries of distress to echo to her ears down the hallway. She wasn't heading for any particular room, rather, she just needed to walk *somewhere* in order to settle her excitement.

"Our instructor's spirit is still alive...!"

Putting that into words let her finally understand just what that meant.

"Fectom Comprehensive Academy's long hibernation is finally over."

The words of that girl who once stood at the forefront of the academy's progress echoed in her head.

"One day, this academy *will* return to greatness. So please, believe in me... in *us*."

That had not been mere consolation nor encouragement, no, that had always been the truth.

Miroku clenched her fists tightly.

Those eyes, too, shone with determination.

■

Yippie! Enrolled!

It was so stupidly easy! What do you mean I passed the interview like that!!!

Obviously, there'd have been all sorts of questions if I put down my reason for transferring as the truth ("I want to become a beautiful girl"), so I couched that behind things like "cause" and "mission". It seems like they didn't catch on that those don't really exist. They *did* suddenly throw out a character name from the original series, which caught me off guard, but I was able to give an acceptable answer.

Incidentally, "Sakuraba Rakka" is a character that appears in *Mirror-Edge Lutra*'s mobile spinoff title. I haven't played that game myself, so I don't really know anything about her first-hand, but I've seen her called such incredibly important-sounding things as "Immortality's Sourcefont", "Agent of Mythsea", and "Guardian of the Tree of Stars", so she seems to be some sort of cornerstone for the plot. I wonder if she's also actually famous in this world, too... What if she also got her start at this very Fectom?

...Hahaha. There's no way, right?

"Well, not like it affects me~"

By now, a week had passed since I'd come to Fectom. As soon as I got confirmation of acceptance, I left my former apartment and beelined it straight to Fectom's Autonomous Region—though, while its title is in line with the other academies, Fectom doesn't have a small city attached to it, just the small dormitories within its grounds. Two stories, 16 total rooms, each originally intended for 2 students to share each...but I of course am the sole resident of mine. Apparently, there are 20 such dormitories, and most of them are even emptier than the one I'm staying in.

Forget "low student count", this is basically abandoned!

All the students besides myself are currently staying in one of the other dorms. Of course, being that they're all girls, and for a male student to intrude on such a space would be the gravest sin imaginable, I did decline the offer to room with them.

Wait for me, beautiful girls! Once I join your ranks, I won't hesitate to move in!

"...Well, I guess I'll head out to work."

At this point in time, I had of course thrown myself into getting a job on the side. Day and night don't matter, all that does is that I'm finally saving up some money. And, I may make that sound drastic, but it wasn't like there's anything else for me to be doing.

Fectom Comprehensive Academy has no ability to function as a place of learning. There are no faculty left, and the only remaining body of governance by now was the student council, comprised of the three remaining girls at this academy and barely existing in more than the title. Up until two years ago, word is that the upperclassmen would step into the instructors' shoes and handle classes, but all of that has vanished.

Basically, my class schedule is pretty nonexistent, so I've got time to kill.

There's no places around the campus open for work, so I need to go all the way to the central city, but... Even if you add all that time in, I've still got plenty.

"Kei, heading out for work again today?"

"Ah, Mizuhi-senpai. Good morning."

She called out to me right as I was reaching the exit of the autonomous region. Red ponytail, loves sparring, but also rather caring for her juniors. She'd helped me clean the place up when I was moving in.

"I always catch you heading to the center for work, but what say we head in together and get you signed up for rescue operations? As a Narō, you've gotta have at least some good skills on you by now, right?"

"Rescue operations, hmm..."

In cases where divers are unable to clear a dungeon, there's a system set up for them to request aid from the outside. There's two different services for them to get that help, too: call in available students from their own academy, or send the distress signal to the pool of every other person who has listed themselves available for rescue requests. The latter, of course, is easier on the wallet. The academies have reason enough to fight each other, and compensation is just another opportunity for that to happen.

"It pays better than a regular position, and you can even happen on relics in the dungeons you visit. Those are basically bonus pay once you sell them."

"Right. As a way to make money, it's certainly the superior option..."

If I am to be honest here, I don't think I can actually do any fighting. Narō Kei is already a pretty small fry by this city's standards, since he *paid* his way into a good academy. That's not to say he didn't have any potential, but with me taking over, he'd only be better than the most novice divers.

"I'll have to pass on the invitation. I'd like to properly look around the academy-city, for now."

"That so. I'm looking forward to when we can go exploring together, then."

"Same here."

"Let's both do our best!"

With those words, Mizuhi-senpai steps through the Gate out of Fectom's autonomous region. Her and her red ponytail vanish into the giant mechanical contraption, and I follow right after.

In an instant, the run-down academy buildings surrounding me are replaced by a clusters of different building stretching out in front of me.

"...It really is sick, every time."

I look up at the Gate that I just passed through. These things connect the central part of Hinotsuchi with the various Dungeons. Each academy's autonomous region is also within one of these Dungeons, allowing for the vast areas available to them, sometimes approaching the size of a small country. This floating island in the Pacific is just the visible tip of that iceberg, and serves as a hub for tourism and exchanges between academys. My part-time job, a small convenience store, is located out here.

"Once again, today, I'll do my best working the till!"

It's a very beautiful, sunny day.

3. Crossdressing is, in its own way, beautifulgirlification.

Shift over! Good job, everyone.

At 9 in the evening, I clocked out of my third part-time. I'm pretty worn out, but even then, my steps are light as I retrace the path back to Fectom Comprehensive Academy. Today's the day a certain delivery I've been awaiting finally arrives.

"Yes, it's no exaggeration to say that this is the real reason to have thrown myself so desperately into working society. To think that I'm even allowed to pay after delivery, I'm so grateful...!"

Immediately after entering Fectom Comprehensive Academy, I had made a particular purchase. It was slated to cost over a hundred thousand yen, but, I was in no mind to hesitate over things like that.

I cheerfully strolled back through the Gate to the academy. Earlier I said it looked run-down, but on my way back in, has a bit of a sparkle to it... Your mental state really does affect how you see the world, huh?

"I'm back...and that seems to be it."

A small pile of cardboard boxes had formed in front of the dorm that I had all to myself. No one else could have been around to peek at it, no sign of damage to the packaging, good. After all, if anyone found out about this, I'd explode into a million pieces on the spot.

"Let's get you inside."

Quickly, before anyone can notice!

The boxes are deposited in the next room over...if you can even call it that, with the wall dividing them completely gone. You can actually just walk between them like it's the same living space.

"And now, the grand unveiling!"

I didn't even bother to eat dinner before moving to unpack my purchase, and soon, an array of various clothing items and cosmetic products had spread out from the boxes to the rest of the room. Of particular beauty was a monochrome Gothic Lolita outfit, with all its frills.

"Indeed."

I give a deep nod to express my satisfaction with this purchase, and then sit myself down in front of the room's cracked mirror and lined up the various items.

You already know where this is going.

"Crossdressing, here we go...!"

If I can't currently become a beautiful girl in the truest sense, then what I must do is reach as close a form to that ideal as possible. "Crossdressing is an effective therapy method for those who desire to be beautiful girls" is something I barely have to say myself, with how widespread that knowledge must be. In Japan's Azuchi-Momoyama period, there was the saying: "Those who wish to be beautiful girls, first hone yourself by mastering their attire!" Our ancestors really did have some things figured out...

This is actually the first time I'm putting makeup on myself. However, in preparation for this day, I've been asking around at my different jobs for advice, and some of my coworkers even helped me practice! You have my gratitude, Shift Leader...

"...So this is my potential."

Your average Joe would probably only be able to achieve the level of "crossdressing". I get to benefit from being Narō Kei, who was blessed with a good facial structure, a fair complexion, and even a rather slim figure. I often saw illustrations and fanart of Kei dressed in women's clothing back before I ended up here, and once again, our ancestors really did have some things figured out...

"This...is 'a beautiful girl'."

And so long as my groin remains unobserved, I maintain my status as such.

I had obviously adorned myself with the black-and-white frilly Gothic Lolita outfit, and from there finished the transformation with a wig, in the same blue-ish silver as Kei's hair and with length and a wavy texture that obfuscated my facial features, making me appear like a genuine beauty.

"Ohhhh, ooohhhhhhHH...!"

I'm moved to tears... Right there, on the other side of my mirror, is a beautiful girl. This is me! This is the most beautiful girl me I can present you with right now...!

"She's cute. ...Yeah, it's better if she acts cold or aloof. She seems like the type of character to be carrying some sort of inner darkness with her."

A broken mirror in a run-down dorm room.
In the middle of it all stands a mysterious, beautiful girl.
It couldn't be more perfect.

"Hehe."

The scene makes me so happy, I can't help but smile and chuckle like someone from an Edo-period piece.^[2] But that's a misstep; this type of girl wouldn't make those sorts of sounds.

I need to lock in more.

"Let's take a stroll."

I've dressed myself in girl's clothes, so as a matter of course, next is to head out somewhere like this. And also of course, it's not just about leaving the room.

"Let's take a stroll through a dungeon."

I've never been in one before. And while I certainly know a lot about this world from the original series, I'm also not used to fighting at all. On top of that, there's the entirely foreign concept to my brain of how mana is used here.

In this world, mana is essentially a way to buff your physical prowess using magic. Spells like those a witch or sorceress would use don't exist, so there's thankfully no need to get deep into theory over it.

Anyway, that's why I've been visiting a starter dungeon every night after I'm off work, to learn how to use my body better. It's a requirement for every academy to maintain one for their students, and even Fectom Comprehensive Academy here has its own. With this as my third visit, I think I'm ready to start hunting for the dungeon boss.

"Mizuhi-senpai mentioned she'd be handling rescue requests until tomorrow, Miroku-senpai always goes to sleep by 8PM, and Toa-san is scared of the dark so she typically holes up in her room at night. In short: right now is the specific time in which the dungeon is completely empty! It's peak girl outfit hours!"

Can anyone blame my heart for its pounding?

After gearing up for the dungeon, I come to a stop just before stepping out.

"...There's exactly one chance in a million I get recognized, and you can never be too safe."

I additionally put on the gas mask I'd ordered. It's purely for fashion, it doesn't cover anything but my mouth, and it also has those meaningless flashy aspects that all "Gaming" accessories share, but hey. I like girls who look good in these things, so I got this for the me that I am right now. Are there any objections?

"*Hiss... Shhh...* Wait, it doesn't even impede my breathing."

Again, it's an item with no functional purpose.

"Alright, from the top, let's! go!"

Crossdress Dungeon Raid: Start!

4. Beautiful girls are allowed to sell anything they find lying around, and you can't get mad at them.

Divers must always equip a wristband device known as DiveGear to explore dungeons. The formal title of what we call a dungeon is "Different Dimensional Depth", and these Dive Gear are essential for keeping a person's self stable within one of those spaces. If you don't have one, you run the risk of turning into a monster yourself, or so the warnings go. Scary stuff.

The DiveGear doesn't just keep your existence safe, though, it also lets you manifest weapons using mana. The appearance of these weapons depends entirely on the caster, and there's a lot of different types of enchantments or spell-like effects that weapons can carry. As you'd expect, Narō Kei has one of these unique weapons, and its effect is... The poison spilling off the tip of his dagger can paralyze any opponent. It's pretty lame. But, it does work well as a villain's gimmick. This thing is what he would have used to stab the protagonist, kicking him into a dungeon while he was paralyzed from the poison.

"For *me*, though, it's basically a trash weapon! There's no way to space with a dagger!"

I slash at the targets lazily floating in the air while I make my way through this starter dungeon. This space was made to resemble a large forest, and Mizuhi-senpai informed me that it's quite possible to get lost in here.

"And, like, paralysis won't even do anything to a virtual creature. Dammit, I wish I had my own personal weapon..."

Each DiveGear can register exactly one weapon. And since Narō Kei has already registered this piece of garbage to his, I can't possibly call out a new one from it. A new DiveGear would easily run me a million yen, even for the cheaper models, and I can't afford that kind of luxury item right now.

What's that? I spent that much on what I'm wearing right now? Shut up!

"If I do start participating in dungeon rescue ops, I can definitely earn a lot more than what I make now, but to do *that* I need to get stronger."

My ultimate goal is still the transgender dungeon, one year in my future. By defeating a dungeon's boss and claiming its core, you obtain ownership of the entire dungeon. And to be able to do that for my goal dungeon, I need a new DiveGear, and enough strength as a diver.

"This outfit sure lives up to its listing as 'combat-ready gothic lolita'. The mask is comparatively pretty hard to breathe in."

Each time I swing my dagger, I'm delighted by how my outfit flutters in my peripheral vision. A graceful way of fighting, with her skirt flowing after her... Yes. This is a beautiful girl.

"I don't have the time to waste on small fry like you!—is that the vibe!? Yes!"

I cut down my target, and then strike a pose to deliver my line. By default, this body's voice is rather androgynous, so if I put in the effort to force my larynx up, it comes out rather adorable. No, wait. Perhaps this girl wants a *gloomy* voice, instead. Hmm, yeah, I do feel the most alive when I'm thinking about these details.

"I feel like I'm able to give it my all today; my soul shines brighter than it ever has!"

The invisible root of an diver's ability is their mana, and that seems to be connected to the soul in some way. And with that explanation, you understand why my mana is suddenly overflowing.

As I mentioned, this world has no real sense of "magic" in the way of spells and sorcery; mana is used for physical enhancement. If cross-dressing provides a buff like this so easily, it's a very small price to pay.

"Slice, sever, and cut them down!"

Targets fall, one after the other. There's no way for me to stop now that I'm this into it. My body, an unpolished stepping stone. My soul, challenging the sun. With these, I think I might be able to take down the boss.

"The boss is, according to Mizuhi-senpai, a rather creepy, *humanoid* grunt. Let's quickly cut him down, and then let this beautiful girl party over his remains. That sounds like a fun plan."

There's not a single thing odd about it, even.

With that plan settled on, I began searching for the boss in earnest, even though I only had his large build to go off of. You'd think that would make him easy to spot even in the forest, but after searching and searching, I still hadn't turned up anything.

"I can't find it... Don't tell me he doesn't spawn at night, or something."

Right as I started to run through possible weird dungeon mechanics that might apply here, I caught sight of a cave out of the corner of my eye. It was a strange spot, a large rock outcropping in the middle of this forest with an opening right in its center.

I, being the extreme genius that I am, immediately realized:

"This is the boss' lair...!"

A dungeon's virtual creatures don't have any major differences from living ones, aside from requiring mana to sustain their existence. The handbook even says that there are ones that sleep at night. Simple logical deduction: the boss should be sleeping right now. I'll go make his rest an eternal one.

"If I just cut his head off, that's an instant kill for sure! ...But wait. If I do that, it won't really be practice."

I softly step into the cave with my dagger raised...

And in under 10 seconds, find myself at a complete dead end.

"Nothing. How needlessly confusing...hm?"

It wasn't a dead end, it's a massive door. I use my DiveGear's built-in torch to get a better look at it. It's certainly covered in dirt and rust, but this is unmistakably a massive, mechanically-operated double-leaf door.

"The heck is this?"

Just to see what would happen if I tried to open it, I give the door a push. It obviously isn't going to budge—

"Oh, it's open."

Well, rather than 'open', 'destroyed' is probably the correct adjective. The area around where I had pushed it crumbled away, creating a hole about the right size for me to pass through.

"Well, pardon my intrusion..."

I push myself forward through the opening. There was no doubt that this was not anything related to the boss room I was searching for, but of course I'm interested in the contents of this secret area now that I'm here.

Inside proved to be a spacious semicircle. The ceiling appeared to be designed to let natural light in, and the stars were visible through the massive skylight. Right in the center of all this, illuminated by the dungeon's moonlight, there was... A large black scythe, which aside from its color looked like something you would find in a farmer's shed. It looked about my height, and had been placed within a pedestal.

"Now what is this... Nothing like it ever showed up in the story."

I move up toward the scythe, avoiding all the tubes running between its pedestal and the corners of the room. No matter how I try to look at it, this situation is bizarre.

"This would have to be a relic, wouldn't it?"

Treasures with that classification are formed every now and then from the ambient mana inside a dungeon. There are about as many different types as you could think of, and Touraku-kun himself picked up a handful during the series, but... This one is certainly new to me.

"Relic weapons tend to be pretty rare, but it's not impossible for one to show up in a starter dungeon."

I had already thought of the possibility that this was something important to Fectom Comprehensive Academy, and immediately dropped that line of thought. There's no way the academy would have held on to something this valuable given how strapped for cash they are in every other aspect. Plus, a door like that crumbling to dust shows that nobody has been here

to take care of it in a very long time, so there's probably nobody who even knows this thing exists.

So,

"Free money☆"

This thing will sell very well, I'm sure Mizuhi-senpai will be thankful for the cash. The three of them basically just eat bean sprouts right now. I just joined their academy to make it to the transgender dungeon, but they turned out to be surprisingly good people, so I might as well help them out if I'm given such a good opportunity. And then, once I become a beautiful girl myself, I want them to let me join them for real. Transgender Yuri is real (radical viewpoint)!

"Alright, let's get to it!"

I rub my hands in anticipation and close in on the scythe. It's not something I'd want to touch with my bare hands, but the clothes I'm wearing do include a pair of black lace gloves.

"Starting tomorrow, I think we'll have some good meat~!"

As soon as those gloved hands lift the scythe,

"Kuh!? What, is...!"

I'm overcome with the feeling of my insides revolting, a mix of nausea and pain, 0.5 times as much as the pain of getting hit with a truck!!!

...Wait, that's entirely manageable.

"Ugh! Urrrrrrhhhhhhhh!!!!!"^[3]

The waves of pain continue, as if the scythe itself was rejecting my attempt to take it. But I'm not about to let it go. I'm going to sell this thing! Turn it into cash, get praised by my seniors, and then join the Yuri Party!

Either my noble intentions got through to it, or whatever that all was could only push back for so long, but the pain suddenly vanishes. Good. Good scythe. I'll take good care of you, before selling you off.

"Yeahh! Rare Item Get!"

I pull the scythe fully away from the pedestal, and raise it high. I'm elated.

"Well! The boss doesn't seem to be around here, so let's hurry up and...hm?"

There's more structure further in. A doorless hallway beckoned me to enter its maw.

"...head in there!"

There might be even more relics in there, which is enough to make my decision for me.

"Ow?"

The moment I hefted the scythe onto my shoulder, the weight of it suddenly disappeared. At the same time, another shot of pain ran through my left arm, like someone had just given it a hard flick. By the time I process what had happened, the scythe had vanished, and a crimson bracelet had found its way onto my wrist.

"Eh..."

I stared at the bracelet for a moment, and then it *also* disappears, seeming to get sucked into my wrist.

"Huh!?"

There's a faint remnant glow of red, but those two items had fully vanished.

"It, it, it's gone!? I ate it!?"

There's no way the relic was edible, but I had just seen it turn into a bracelet and then vanish inside my body. Even shaking or squeezing my wrist didn't result in any changes, so there's nothing else I can do about it. I'm sorry, seniors...

"There's nothing to do but get the other relics hidden away in here."

Experiencing wealth getting stolen away from me like this has just made it more clear how much I have to try to get more. So, I take another step forward, into what is looking like some sort of abandoned hospital ward's hallway.

"—Wha!?"

The ground gives way beneath me. *Ah, the corridor must also have worn away*, the rational part of my mind remembers to chime in.

5. Mysterious Beauties are guaranteed to have a certain power level.

My body follows the remnants of the collapsed floor as everything falls.

Fortunately for me, at least, even a novice diver's reflexes are impressive enough to right your body in midair. And honestly, with the power of gothic lolita fashion on my side, I can even alight on the ground as if the frills were wings, landing silently, more like an aerial hunter than a cat.

Yes, there we go!

I make my gentle touchdown, like an angel sent down from the heavens!

"—miss, excuse me, who are you!?"

"Whuh."

There's someone else here!? I turn to find that there's another girl that I've never seen before. Short blonde hair, with purple highlights in it. Uniform... That black fabric means Kisō Academy, I think? That academy ended up at odds with Touraku-kun and the girls he'll pick up, and basically, I can only think of it as some sort of domain of evil machinations.

"She just, randomly fell from the ceiling...? Miss, sorry, could I get your name?"

"Miss...?"

Of course. I'm wearing girl's clothes, and it's dark in here, so since there's nothing visible to give me away, she made the obvious assumption. It's honestly a bit frightening how good my disguise as a beautiful girl is, but this is also the exact time one must put everything they have into making that fiction a fact.

There can't be anything wrong with continuing to trick a single student hailing from such a malicious place of learning as Kisō, right?

I'll have her play along with my fantasy.

"I also don't ever recall meeting *you*, young lady. Unless I'm horribly mistaken, this is the starter dungeon at Fectom Comprehensive Academy, no?"

Upon receiving my harsh tone and gaze, the girl looked away.

"I, I'm here to delve, or more like stream? a dungeon that was only rumored to exist..."

"Stream?"

"M-more importantly!"

She rushes over toward me. Wait hold up what are you doing she's going to figure out I'm a crossdresser what am I going to—

"Something's after me! I think it's, probably, a defense mechanism set up for this area, but..."

The girl frantically gesticulates back toward where she had presumably been running from while she explains, pointing back at a door.

Oh, there goes the door, through the air. Guess that's just a doorway now.

"Ahhh!"

I found myself starting to get affected by how scared she was acting. Still, it'd be lame if she found out I was scared, since the beautiful girl that I am currently (acting as) isn't the type to feel fear, so I grit my teeth and keep up a poker face.

A humanoid shadow emerges from beyond the door that had just been sent flying.

...Wait, *humanoid*?

"Tha, that's the thing after me! Please, help!"

"I see."

This thing is the boss Mizuhi-senpai described, huh? Humanoid, over 3 meters in height, covered in sores and swollen flesh. Very disgusting. It matches everything I was told.

So this thing's my target anyway. Might as well take the time to show off some beautiful knifeplay, since I have an audience.

"You don't mind if I take that thing out entirely, do you?"

"You, you mean you can kill it!? I haven't even been able to put a dent in the thing..."

Ahh, a fellow novice, eh? This is where you end up without proper practice. And without proper crossdressing.

"Something like this isn't any trouble at all, though."

I wave her off to the side, and stride out in front of the boss as I summon my dagger.

Or, I should say, *tried* to summon my dagger.

"A black, scythe?"

The girl's voice echoes behind me. Indeed, I held in my hands a scythe. Whaaaaaat? And the crimson bracelet too, all of a sudden, what's this about! DiveGear, talk to me!

"Ahhh! It's coming!"

"Nothing to worry about."

There's everything to worry about! But I can't back down now! I've never used a scythe in my life! And I'm going to fight with one! Starter dungeons won't let you die, so it lets you give various different things a go, but this form is one that I absolutely won't accept defeat in.

I dodge the opening attack: a wide swing, clearly telegraphed. No, more clear than that. Isn't this *too* slow?

"What is this, a Saturday show villain?"

If things are like this, then even a scythe is no issue. What might be is that girl's timidity. There's no way you can be a delver if you're this easy to spook, you know?

I weave an attack of my own in between dodges and the boss's swings. This is delightful. I'm in a gothic lolita outfit, fighting some *thing* off with a giant scythe, and I have a girl watching me. In this moment, I am experiencing pure bliss.

Yes! This is what I've always wanted to pull off!!!

The boss itself turns out to be as meager an existence as I'd expected. It takes about two minutes for me to completely dismember it across the floor here. All that remains is to pick the best way to finish it off. I mean, I say "pick", but it's gotta be his heart, right? ...Where's the heart at on one of these?

"It has an unbelievable ability to reform! It doesn't matter how much you take out, it keeps repairing itself!"

"Cute."

Thank you for the tactical readout. ...Wait, you sound like you've had to watch it do that a lot by now. Could you actually be a fairly strong delver? Well, that doesn't matter too much. I'm still the strongest here, seeing as I'm the one who's finished it off.

While the various finisher ideas were running through my head,

<<■■■■■>>

I received something between an electrical impulse and a voice in my brain. It delivered the understanding of how to use this scythe, as well as its name.

Star-Reader Staff
"Sorcière."^[4]

So that's your name. ...Wait, no, that's nice, but please don't beam info into someone's mind without asking permission first. Anyway, let me make some preparations now that I have this information. The handle of the scythe becomes a rifle barrel, and its blade is thrust into the ground behind me to brace it. A grip and trigger emerge from the side for me to grasp at, forming an even more unique silhouette.

So... All I need to do now is grip this and pull the trigger, right? The boss is started to put itself back together, just like that girl told me, but it's far too late for that.

"Have you ever been a witness to starlight?"

The fact that I can pull lines like that out goes to show how absolutely un-stressed I am about all this. A mysterious beautiful girl who wields unfathomable powers. Yes, yes, yes, yes! This is perfect.

At the peak of my excitement, I pull the trigger. And for one brilliant moment, it is as if a star manifests itself in the center of the room.

I only process after that brilliance faded that it had all been a beam produced by the barrel of my scythe-gun. It probably hadn't even lasted a full 3 seconds, in reality. I finally flinch, pulling my hand off the trigger, and observe what I had just wrought.

The boss: totally vaporized. Or maybe I should say, the spot where it had been laying. The floors, the walls of this room, and even walls further off into the darkness had all been carved through by my attack.

...Well, *shit*.

"Hooh."

Okay. Take a deep breath to steady yourself, and—

"Wo, woah... What was that?"

Oh right, my audience member. I don't mind the praise normally, but could you keep it to yourself for a minute? I think I just blew up the starter dungeon of the academy I transferred to the other day.

"I heard 'Sorcière', is that the name of your weapon? Or, like, which academy are you from!? Wait first can I get your diver rank—"

"What makes you think I have any obligation to answer those questions?"

I decide to cut off her lines of questioning. Likely sensing my agitation, the scythe and bracelet both sink back inside me somewhere. Hey. Don't just do that spontaneously. It's fine to stay out for a while.

Speaking of, staying *here* isn't wise for me. I need to get going!

"I'll be taking my leave here. Young lady, I suggest you also hurry along back home. Nothing remains here, for anyone."

The boss is gone, which means so is my reason to stick around! Bye-bye! The other girl gets completely ignored as I make my exit.

...Come to think of it, why was a Kisō Academy student here, of all places? Eh, well. They're overflowing with students anyway, I guess it's not so strange to find one anywhere.

6. If you're a beautiful girl, you're can intervene in anything, anywhere, in any way you like.

Kisō Academy was one of the very first schools to be set up since Hinotsuchi came into being, and thanks to all of its various ties to and backing from external corporate entities, it had maintained a large amount of influence over the island.

Kirara Kuramu, one of its students, was not particularly fond of where Kisō was at as an institution. Crimes and vice were rampant, theft and plunder were considered normal, and it had a general culture of "might makes right". She couldn't stomach the twisted "meritocracy" that had wormed its way into the entire academy, and so it was rather inevitable she would decide to try and take some sort of action against it.

She chose to stream.

Many students had taken up streaming to record and show off the flow of dungeon delving; for the average person, the dungeons were still a completely foreign domain, so video recording was more than enough to draw in views.

"Here to blast away the evil in your hearts! llliiits ^{Jōka} Purge-chan!"^[5]

Kuramu took up a pose in front of her camera. The autonomous drone, fitted for dungeon streaming and designed to stay out of the way in any combat scenarios, blankly captured her energy.

She was once again doing her exclusive exposé streaming, targeting Kisō Academy. And in a matter of moments, comments began scrolling across a small translucent panel projected from her DiveGear.

: you kept us waiting

: There she is, The Fugitive

: Kon-Jōka!^[6]

"Oh, you're all just raring to go today aren't you? Well, like I said the other day in a post, today we're going to be uncovering Kisō Academy's dark secrets~! Yay! Oh President of the Student Council, ya watching? ...One of these days, I'll pull you right out of that chair."

: eep

: how have they still not caught this idiot?

: the absolute lunacy of trying to expose Kisō, while still attending Kisō

The overall vibe of the comments was that Kuramu had some good reasons to be worried, but the Kuramu in question didn't particularly seem bothered by anything.

"Today is the fourth episode in the *Bring Down Kisō Plan* series, and I swear, this is the day we get through it, okay? Every time it's either the disciplinary committee or the Enforcer trying to lock me down, and we barely miss out on nabbing any evidence."

: we're so close! (1 exploded illegal research facility)

: Honestly, it's impressive you can outrun the Enforcer like that

"And since that's always been our problem, I got myself thinking: *What if we just went someplace the academy's guard dogs couldn't follow us?*"

: clever idea

"Right? So, that's all to say I'm currently doing a bit of trespassing on another academy's grounds. Ah, I won't tell you even if you ask, okay? They'd just start sending *their* committee after me."

: oh my god she actually broke in

: Yes, Disciplinary Committee? Get this girl.

: go go go go!

: wonder if she'll come to my place next...

All of the chat members were as boisterous as usual. Kuramu waited for her view count to cross 10,000 before she actually started moving, and then made her way through a dense forest. She was able to follow the directions she'd been given without getting lost in the trees, and eventually arrived in front of some sort of facility.

Incidentally, that facility's location was at the northernmost tip of Fectom Comprehensive Academy's starter dungeon, and the structure was what used to manage the dungeon itself.

"Up until about 10 years back, this was the management facility for this dungeon. Buuut it got destroyed in an accident. It's a pretty bog-standard way to cover up evidence, isn't it?"

While narrating her presumed version of history, Kuramu circled the perimeter, eventually spotting something in an area on the ground.

"Sweet! Blast it, ^{Man-Eating} ^{Frog} Murder Frog!"

Yes. The DiveGear equipment Kuramu wielded was a frog-shaped machine she created. This one hopped to her marker, immediately detonating itself upon reaching it.

"Whew! Great work as always, Mā-chan."

: Weapon of Mass Destruction

: yyep. she's a Kisō student alright.

She thrust her finger out as soon as the dust cleared, pointing at a large staircase within the hole that explosion had just torn open in the ground.

"Look! An entrance to a hidden research facility, right here! With this, I think today's stream is guaranteed to be a big one! Oh, but Kisō is almost definitely going to get the VOD taken down, so remember to save it yourselves to share later, mkay~?"

: hop to it everyone!

: which academy's dungeon is this tho, actually

: every time you say that and every time you can't bring anything back

: It's gotta be pitch-black in there, be carefulll

Kuramu let the comments flow by while she started descending the stairs. The inner walls of this place were covered in dust and grime, which gave more credit to the idea that this had been abandoned together with the management facility a decade back. Even so, there must have still been some electricity supplied here, keeping the emergency lights along the corridors as a sole remaining source of light.

She continued deeper in, with just the emergency lights and that of her DiveGear to illuminate her path.

"A rather strange number of cages here, no? ...As I suspected, this is where they were performing those experiments."

: "those experiments"?

: share the experiment details with us tooo

Kuramu rummaged around in one of the cages while she answered the comments she saw come in.

"A company somewhere abroad came up with a plan to develop DiveGear more advanced than the ones divers currently use. The story goes that Kisō Academy provided a lot of funding, personnel, and even facilities for that project."

Kuramu had heard two things further: The plan had already fallen through, and several completed units from the project were rumored to be out there somewhere.

"The Gear, which the project named DemonGear, used at least one girl with the necessary aptitude as a base. By treating the the soul itself as code, the user of such a Gear can reach a much higher level of performance than conventional DiveGear."

: I've heard about this a bit in urban legends

: no way that could actually exist

: terrifying

: How can you even set your sights on something that dangerous?

Her chat split into three types of responses, but Kuramu just silently continued her exploration as she watched them scroll by. Several of her frogs hopped around her like a security detail.

About half an hour had passed since Kuramu entered the research facility. With nothing else in particular to catch her eye, she had ended up accidentally exploring all the way in.

"You'd think they'd at least have left a few research notes or material lying around... This is a bit disappointing."

: it's not good enough evidence that the place exists at all?

"Well, it's good evidence for the project itself, but there's nothing here that I can trace back to Kisō Academy."

Kuramu's goal was complete eradication of Kisō Academy's corruption. She didn't seem to care all that much about anything not directly related to that.

"Okay, this is the final room left to break into. The door looks pretty bulky... Mā-chans, you're up!"

: her Calling Card!

: A woman who knows nothing but the path of explosions.

: this is why you set off every alarm that exists

"Oh, would you all quit it with that? This place is years out of commission. If any alarms *do* go off, I can just ignore them!"

Kuramu sent the frogs flying at the door together with her declaration. Once several of them piled on, they exploded with a loud bang. She gave the scattering dust cloud and new hole in the door an approving nod.

"I *knew* that would do it."

: it's the only way to do it you know

: she's cute when she's smug

Without even letting the smoke clear, Kuramu then threw herself through the opening and into the next room. Unlike the rest of the facility, this one had a proper supply of power to it. It was still quite dark, but there was at least a low level of light coming from the various monitors and the massive supercomputer embedded in the wall.

"...Well, *this* does look promising."

The object that drew her gaze was the giant cylinder of glass in the center of the room. Inside it was an orange liquid, and within that liquid was a *girl*, floating in a fetal position.

She had no logical reason to assume anything more, but her intuition strongly told her *That is a living being*.

"The appearance of a young girl... No way, could this be the DemonGear?"

: in the flesh!?

: this stream is peak!

: Purge-chan, well done!

: Let's find that evidence that this is Kisō Academy's work!

"R-right. Let's look around for some evidence. ...To be honest, I never expected the actual product to be here still... What should we do? I didn't plan anything around this—ah!?"

An explosion sounded from behind her, and she immediately recognized that her security detail of Gear had self-destructed to protect her from...something.

"Mā-chan took independent action!?! That only happens when someone's expressing hostility toward me, so someone must be outside."

Through the door she had just "entered" the room by, just large enough for one human, Kuramu could make out a mass of skin-colored flesh. A section of it has been charred, but that hadn't seemed to do anything to the whole.

"They trapped me in here...? What, death to anyone who dares enter here, or something?"

Her only exit was sealed. She thought over the situation for just a moment before finding her answer.

"Cool. Let's just blow everything up and run away."

: the Escape Sequence has started

: so the usual

: again?!

: she's a walking liability

: Girls like blowing things up too?

"Hey, even I wouldn't blow up *this* room, okay? I went through all this trouble and finally found a DemonGear—with this in my hands, I can drag in other schools under the pretext of recovering it from Kisō Academy! This is an absolutely priceless opportunity."

After saying that, Kuramu started sending countless frogs through the hole in the door. Each of them passed through, then jumped out and grabbed hold of the flesh-colored shape on the other side and detonated. But, even with all of that output, whatever it is didn't seem to be worse for wear.

"The blast force on these can turn a 50-centimeter plate of steel to shrapnel... I guess with that in mind."

Kuramu instead attaches frogs to the door, and with their explosions, it's reduced to mere fragments, leaving the hole in the center large enough for the flesh-colored thing outside to finally enter. And enter it does, slowly.

: Gross!

: the hell is THAT!?

: absolutely not a human

: Dungeon Boss? though, I can't say I've seen any like this one...

The chat, much like the door, suddenly exploded with activity seeing the humanoid monster. It had no face, and looked rather like someone fashioned it out of flesh-colored clay. But it obviously had a will of its own, and that had it walking in here at Kuramu.

"What even is this thing? —Behind m—!?"

The monster suddenly disappeared, and Kuramu immediately flung herself forward on pure instinct informed by all her previous experiences. The space where she just was echoed with the sound of a high-speed impact.

"Guh, so you're the type of boss that plays dumb and catches people off guard with high-speed combat? I don't hate a good bluff, but I can't afford to go down just yet. Mā-chans!"

An even greater swarm of frogs emerged from her DiveGear, which she threw as they appeared and used to explode her way to the other side of the door.

"Yeesh! That was really really really close just now!"

: doesn't this also destroy the rest of the room?

: she blew it all up

: Nooo the girl!

"Oh, don't worry about that. My Murder Frogs can act as directed explosive charges, so only that monster is getting roasted."

: She says the most terrifying things...

: did you kill it?

Kuramu shook her head.

"No. It shrugged off the first few explosions so easily, I can't imagine any amount of them will be enough to kill it. So instead of taking it down, let's get... Oh it's already back up!"

The monster re-emerged from the smoke. Kuramu may have been taken off guard again, but she began running off together with her frogs.

"I'll keep slowing it down with these explosions, and we'll gun it right for the exit!"

: Are you more scared of this thing, or the Enforcer?

"Obviously the Enforcer, it isn't even close!!"

: okay you're still pretty chill about this lol

: yay, looks like another clean getaway this time

Her chat continued joking about the situation, in stark contrast to how desperate she felt. She threw a few mental curses at them, but continues running.

It's going to outpace me...! The Murder Frogs have definitely blown off its limbs more than a few times, but...

She stole another glance behind her. The monster's left leg, which should have just been exploded off it, had already regenerated itself from the stump. Which begged the question:

This level of regeneration is far too strong for something meant to defend a facility. Is it really something made to capture intruders?

Noticing one inconsistency immediately started prompting other second-guessing on the night's events, but Kuramu shook her head again to try and avoid thinking them for now.

"For now I just gotta get out of here!"

The chase sequence between her and the monster had already lasted for 20 minutes. And even with a diver's enhanced physique, constantly running full tilt away from something trying to kill you is going to do a number on your stamina. If it were someone less used to escaping pursuers than Kuramu, they'd have long since been caught.

"Haa. Haa. Just a bit more—"

She'd run dry on Murder Frogs.

It completely repairs itself within about 2 seconds after each Murder Frog goes off. My last one went out 5 seconds ago. I'm going to be cutting this really close...!

: isn't this really bad?

: Get out of there, Jōka-chan!

: We should call the Enforcer. You can't afford to get grabbed by this thing

: even if we want to call them in on her, she hasn't said which academy's dungeon she's at!

By now, even the chat had realized how much danger Kuramu is in, and they tried to prompt her to reveal which school she's at, but she refused to say.

"This time more than any other I can't afford to. If the scum within Kisō Academy learn where I am, then this has all been for nothing!"

She was determined to bring down Kisō Academy, so she didn't even think twice about staking her life on this scoop.

"Just one more room left!"

Right as her feet landed in the last room before her way back out, the ceiling suddenly collapsed.

"!?!? And what is it *this* time!?"

Behind her was a monster, therefore the obvious assumption was there's another that managed to cut her off. But what her eyes saw next was far removed from the thing that'd been chasing her.

"That's—"

Moonlight scattered from the debris and its source, granting this room a dim light. In the middle of it all was a *girl*, in an outfit you might expect to find at a soirée. Her hair, a bluish silver, shimmering in the fractured moonlight and the gust from her fall. Her eyes betrayed melancholy, deep as the ocean.

Within another moment, she alighted in the room with a cat's grace. Her beauty was so striking, so entrancing, almost as if the entire world's favor belongs to her.

"—miss, excuse me, who are you?"

The question slipped out without Kuramu realizing, and the mysterious girl turned around, seemingly unaware of her presence until just now. A queer tension came over Kuramu, the monster chasing her completely forgotten.

"She just, randomly fell from the ceiling...? Miss, sorry, could I get your name?"

"Miss...?"

The gaze returning to Kuramu held a returned question, *Are you talking about me?* The girl seemed listless and indifferent to her, just letting out a sigh of boredom.

7. The face of a beautiful girl means the rhetoric of a beautiful girl, among other things.

"I also don't ever recall meeting *you*, young lady. Unless I'm horribly mistaken, this is the starter dungeon at Fectom Comprehensive Academy, no?"

The girl finally answered, in a rather muffled voice. Kuramu had been so caught up in the girl's beauty, but finally noticed on a closer look that she had a rather rugged mask over her mouth. It resembled a gas mask, and the lights coming off of it would indicate that whatever its function is, it is still in use.

She also noticed something else.

"Ah. The academy's name..."

: Fectom Comprehensive Academy?

: the evidence got doxxed Imao

: fectom? where even is that

: Oh, I sorta remember hearing that school was strong, back in the day, maybe.

: That's my mom's alma mater, lol

Kuramu managed to keep a lid on her emotions despite having her location exposed, and continued the conversation.

"I, I'm here to dive, or more like stream? a dungeon that was only rumored to exist..."

"Stream?"

The girl frowned, clearly displeased by her response. Kuramu, operating mostly on her instincts warning her, quickly closed her projected chat window and moved her camera drone out of the girl's line of sight. She spoke up to keep the girl's attention on her.

"M-more importantly!"

She approached while thinking of anything she could say to possibly get the girl to forget about her admission to streaming, and was met with an impossibly cold stare.

"Something's after me! I think it's, probably, a defense mechanism set up for this area, but..."

Right as she was about to explain in more detail, the sound of the door flying off its hinges echoed behind her. It would seem the monster had finally caught up to her.

"Ahhh!"

Even with that sudden re-appearance and Kuramu's own screaming, the girl's expression remained ice-cold as she looked over at the monster.

"Tha, that's the thing after me! Please, help!"

"I see."

She couldn't have come off as less interested if she had been trying.

Staring down the monster of an opponent that had tanked and shrugged off every single attack Kuramu had been able to throw at it, the girl stuck out her pointer finger and asked in the cadence of someone talking about garbage:

"You don't mind if I take that thing out entirely, do you?"

"You, you mean you can kill it!? I haven't even been able to put a dent in the thing..."

The girl didn't nod, nor shake her head, but stepped in front of Kuramu and holds out her left hand as if in a gesture of protection. As she did so, Kuramu couldn't help but notice what the girl has on her arm.

A crimson DiveGear? I've never seen one like it before.

The bracelet sparkled like blood over rust, an interplay of vibrant and dull reds that dazzle the eye, with a slight glow to it besides.

"Something like this isn't any trouble at all, though."

A massive scythe emerged from the bracelet to complement the girl's statement.

"A black, scythe?"

Pitch-black, and larger than either girl here. The material seemed organic in some way, with that red light seeping through cracks in its surface. Its appearance perhaps struck as much fear into the monster as it does fascination into Kuramu, and the monster suddenly lurched into a charge forward. Kuramu simply screamed, given no time to process anything at all.

"Ahhh! It's coming!"

"Nothing to worry about."

Precise movements following a curt reply. The monster swung with greater speed and ferocity than it ever had at Kuramu, but the girl stepped around each of them as if she's dancing, or drawing on a well-rehearsed piece of choreography.

"What is this, a Saturday show villain?"

She dismissed its very existence as a foe, and swung her scythe up with one hand to tear apart an arm as it approached her. Dodging the blood spray as a mere annoyance, she then brought the scythe around to cleave both legs off the creature. With its source of balance removed, both it and the limbs dropped to the floor with a dull noise.

The girl stepped back, observing the creature's next actions as she shook blood off of her weapon. Kuramu quickly chimed in:

"It has an unbelievable ability to reform! It doesn't matter how much you take out, it keeps repairing itself!"

"Cute."

She probably already knew that (and was just humoring Kuramu for the information), because she showed no hint of surprise, and simply thrust the tip of her scythe deep into the floor. She pointed the end of the handle, now a muzzle or barrel of some kind and stylized or engraved like entwined snakes, at the monster, and grabbed hold of a grip emerging from the midpoint, placing a finger on the trigger.

Star-Reader Staff

"Sorcière."

That scythe was undoubtedly "alive". Nothing artificial could possibly be channeling such an absurd amount of mana, concentrating it densely at the barrel the way this was.

A Convergence Bombardment!?^[7] *And in such an impossibly short time, too; just a few seconds, without even a visible Convergence Formula.*

Common knowledge was that Convergence Bombardments are all lengthy processes to accumulate and discharge, but this girl was operating on a level completely beyond anyone else Kuramu had ever seen. She was trembling, not from her exhaustion or even the tension of the night's events, but from an overwhelming fear of the girl responsible for what was happening in front of her.

"Have you ever been a witness to starlight?"

The question and devastation blossomed forth together, a beautiful delivery of a final despair.

"Whuh."

Kuramu let out a small vocalization as the energy of that magic ripples backward. The world was dominated by silver light, and the expressionless girl pumped more into it as its heart.

3 seconds. No more, no less, and yet Kuramu couldn't help but feel she had been graced with that view for so much longer.

That... Just what...?

"Hooh."

The girl in front of her let out a sigh. Kuramu's head is full of questions, and while she spoke up again, that action was prompted by the thought that if she didn't right now, the girl would vanish

completely.

"Wo, woah... What was that?"

Her streaming camera was, even with all that just happened, still running, and her brain defaulted to information-gathering.

"I heard 'Sorcière', is that the name of your weapon? Or, like, which academy are you from!? Wait first can I get your diver rank—"

"What makes you think I have any obligation to answer those questions?"

An immediate shutdown from the girl, plus her frigid stare. She sent the scythe off into the air, where it vanished, and began walking past the walls she just removed.

"I'll be taking my leave here. Young lady, I suggest you also hurry along back home. Nothing remains here, for anyone."

Kuramu understood that she was talking about the DemonGear. And while she wanted to follow after to keep asking, she couldn't even take a single step forward.

"Ah. My legs. Won't stop shaking."

She collapsed to the floor as her body is finally allowed to react to everything that had just occurred. In an effort to regain some composure, she flicked back open the chat panel with one of her trembling hands, and as you'd expect, they were all abuzz wondering about that girl.

: What just happened!?

: damn, i wonder what rank she is

: S, I'd bet. She'd make it 8 people total in that rank, right?

: never heard of a Sorcière, tho

: Purge-chan's as strong as you can get in B rank without moving up to A, and this girl completely demolished a monster that was giving her trouble. So S rank makes sense to me.

: chat, if she was really an S rank, the Apis Umbrella^[8] would have made an announcement about her. she prob just had an insanely good matchup here

: how is she not already famous, even if she's at an otherwise super weak school?

: She's really pretty... Imagine if she started streaming.

"That was amazing, wasn't it chat? It's a miracle we had the camera rolling to capture that. That student isn't someone I'm familiar with, so if anyone watching has any information on her, my DMs are always open~"

The streamer personality switcheed back on properly.

"The only other question is, *what now?*"

Kirara Kuramu was a singular girl working to undermine the entirety of Kisō Academy, so there's no way one other singular girl could scare her off just like that. She was still thinking about following after the enigmatic beauty when her eye caught a particularly topical comment out of the flood of discussion about the stranger.

: With your location doxxed, I'd suggest more running away.

"...Ah."

Kuramu swiftly changes gears back to "panicked escape".

"Um, I think I'll end stream here for tonight! I think there's still enough evidence around to work with, so let's count this as one more step toward bringing Kisō Academy down! I need to run like hell before security can find out where exactly I am, so byebye everyone~!"

Currently, she was completely spent on energy and weapons, so there's no way she could keep the stream up. She quickly shut off the stream before the chat could all type out their reactions, and kicked off running to the stairs.

"I should try doing a proper street interview for that girl, next time we run into each other."

She looked very happy, thinking about what her next stream would be.

8. "Beautiful Girl" is a skill with an indiscriminate blast radius, so please take care using it in public.

Good morning, beautiful world! It's Narou Kei, once again,
a great example of the masculine form!

I hate it here.

My latest morning ritual has been to check my crotch immediately after waking up, for the sole and obvious reason that I might miraculously have become a girl overnight.

"Dammit, another day of being stuck as a dude."

The countenance reflected in my mirror is, as always, the same loser (♂). It's so bothersome.

But! I do recognize that having this face at least makes makeup and general beautification pretty easy. Really, last night's excursion was the best. And for some reason my skin looks particularly vibrant now?

I was freaking out a bit after I sort-of-blew-up the dungeon last night, but after sleeping on it, I remembered something obvious: the starter dungeons self-reset. It'd have been a different story if this was an unclaimed dungeon elsewhere, but since the academy is in control of it, there's no

way it'd remain in that state. Even if you tear them to pieces, they can be put back together... Or, well, I hope they can.

It's best to stay hopeful in times like this.

"I got seen, and she didn't even catch on... I must be cracked at crossdressing, huh."

I find myself also thinking back to that Kisō Academy student who I ran into last night. *What was she up to?*, is what someone else might think, but as an individual who wants to stay uninvolved until the transition dungeon, *Who the hell cares?* Everyone can do whatever they want, as long as that includes witnessing my female form!

"Since I've finally cleared the starter dungeon, might as well shadow Mizuhi-senpai around for dungeon rescues."

Dungeon rescues are not as profitable as *clearing* a dungeon, but we have neither the manpower to find one nor the existing capital to buy the rights to one to clear it. Therefore: Whichever SOS dungeon rescues we can pick up.

"Alright, let's get rescuing."

My single same-year colleague, Toa-chan, usually spends her school days in the student council room with our two upperclasswomen. With no council duties, they all either devote themselves to their studies, or Mizuhi-senpai will pick up a rescue request and head out for a bit.

I change into Fectom Comprehensive Academy's navy blue uniform, and make my way over to that room.

"Good morning every—Oh, something the matter?"

Miroku-senpai and Toa-chan are both there, but, they both look rather tired. I wonder what that's about, first thing in the morning? I might as well hear out their woes.

"Phone calls keep coming in..."

"Phone calls?"

Miroku-senpai points at two rather *antique*-looking landline phones. They probably haven't had the funds to even replace those.

One of them starts ringing, and in a very rehearsed sequence, she picks it up and recites the following line like a ward against evil:

"Fectom Comprehensive Academy had no involvement with the video broadcast yesterday. Any further details can be obtained from what the Apis Umbrella^[9] releases. Also, the girl named

Sorcière is *not* one of our students."

Without caring for the person on the other end, she hangs up the phone as soon as she's finished. Toa-chan is next to her on the other phone, reciting essentially the same thing, though nearly in tears.

"Uh. What happened?"

"A student from another school apparently was streaming from inside Fectom's starter dungeon yesterday. A lot happened while the broadcast was live, so that's why we've found ourselves so deep in the spotlight..."

"The starter dungeon?"

"Yes. Oh, speaking of, you were there too, weren't you? Did you get caught up in anything?"

I puffed myself to reassure Miroku-senpai, who seemed quite worried about me.

"No problems here. Yesterday I took down a rather distasteful boss monster, but other than that... Oh, I guess there was also that student from Kisō Academy."

"Haah... That's exactly who was streaming."

"...Did she do something wrong?"

I knew that all of Kisō Academy's students were trash! To think they've caused so much trouble for this school that's been gracious enough to take me in! Unconscionable.

"No, not quite. There was another female student, currently unidentified and with an unauthorized type of DiveGear on her, that ended up on her stream."

"Oh, wow." (Feigning indifference)

Sorry, Kisō Students! I guess there are still some good eggs among you all! And all I've been doing is defeating a dungeon boss and showing off my womanly wardrobe to someone from that school.

Wait, didn't Miroku-senpai mention this student was streaming? I feel like that other student last night also mentioned something like that—

"This is the unidentified female student, incidentally."

"Ah."

Miroku-senpai's smartphone screen, which she holds out to show me, displays a clip from a live stream. There's a very cute girl in Gothic Lolita and a gas mask in the frame, fighting very gracefully.

In other words, there's me.

I'm the problem student here!

"It seems the girl streaming is fairly strong, and this person defeated something the streamer couldn't even leave a scratch on, which is why everything's such a hot topic right now."

"...What rank is she, then? The streamer."

"She's registered as B rank."

Divers are given a rank starting at D and ending at S, with the higher ranks given more priority for challenging the more difficult dungeons. B rank is around the peak level most students can aim for, and represents the peak of ordinary effort within the original series. Basically, pretty damn strong. But even then, the real monsters in the story are all A and S rank, and B ranks lose all the time, so what's everyone acting all amazed for?

"Oh, that's just her rank in the database, though. She's been unable to take the promotional exam due to her history of disorderly conduct, but reports place her actual strength at A rank."

"Woah!"

Suddenly things look pretty amazing! (Unrelated party speaking)

"The rumor mill also suggests this mysterious new student is S rank."

"Hahaha, there's no way."

"Do you know anything about either of them?"

"Eh!? No, nothing at all. But there's absolutely no reason an S rank student would bother to come all the way out to a starter dungeon like ours."

Miroku-senpai shakes her head in disagreement with that claim, and then says something that utterly shocks me, as a reader of the original series.

"From the broadcast and rumors, it seems she came here looking to destroy some sort of experimental facility involved with something called 'DemonGear'. So she did have a specific reason to be here."

De. De-de-de-DemonGear!?

Someone please praise me for not just screaming aloud in surprise.

I manage to remain calm on the outside, but inside, my heart is beating a mile a minute. The DemonGear are directly or indirectly responsible for nearly everything Touraku-kun gets

involved in in the original story. They usually take the form of a girl, resembling the various test subjects, and in combat they can transform into different weapons.

For the attentive reader, yes, the dungeon that Narou Kei would have tossed Touraku-kun into is one where he makes his initial contract with one of those DemonGear!

All of this also means that getting involved with a DemonGear is likely to have some sort of knock-on effect for the ensuing series of events here.

Well, shit.

It's way too soon for the world to learn about them. That was supposed to happen a bit later than this, when the protagonist fights a stupidly strong guy in league with Kisō that they call "The Enforcer". If that gets rolling early, what happens to everything after? It's such a terrifying thing to think about, I can't even imagine how it would all change.

"Kei-kun?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"I didn't quite catch that, did you just say 'It's way too soon'?"

"Eh?"

Oh dear, did one of my thoughts slip out? How teeeerrible☆.
...I need to be more careful going forward.

"Maybe you imagined it? ...Right, I actually came here looking for Mizuhi-senpai."

"For Mizuhi?"

"Yeah. Now that I've cleared the starter dungeon, I was thinking I'd try and assist with her rescues some."

Miroku-senpai doesn't raise any other questions at my incredibly brute-force change of topic, and just gives a wry smile when I ask about Mizuhi-senpai's location. She's so nice.

"Mizuhi actually went to that starter dungeon herself. She said she wanted to try and recover the DemonGear."

"Eh."

I've already completely screwed over the plot progression, haven't I.

The DemonGear can only be wielded by those who they've contracted, and the only criteria for that contract is if someone is compatible with the girl inside a particular DemonGear. What I

mean by that is, even Miuzhi's objectively high strength as a diver doesn't particularly matter for this.

To complicate this issue even further, I have no clue who the girl is who the clips show floating in the tank. The series mentioned six DemonGear exist, but of the four revealed, none match this one.

Basically, this DemonGear would have remained asleep, and this question of compatibility wouldn't even have had a chance to appear. And, by the way, if you try to wield one by force, your brain is blasted with aggressive telepathy, and you become a vegetable. It's really scary.

...Wait, so Mizuhi-senpai's in danger, then!?

"I'll, uh, head out for now then!"

"Kei-kun, just what exactly—"

"I'm deathly interested in the DemonGear myself!"

And with those words, I scurry off in the direction of the starter dungeon. Mizuhi-senpai is the largest source of income for the academy, so losing her would cause a lot of trouble. And more important than her crucial importance, I hate seeing a girl's lovely face clouded with sorrow!

"There he goes..."

Toa comments, with a troubled expression. It's anyone's guess if that stems from the phone calls now, or the way in which Kei seemed strangely rushed on the way out just now.

Miroku sighs, depositing herself back in her chair while she stares at where Kei had just been standing.

"It's clear that he at least knows *something*."

During the conversation, Narou Kei had muttered "*It's way too soon for the world to learn about them.*" And Miroku was quickly able to figure out what he was referring to by that, given the context.

"Kei-kun most likely already knew about the DemonGear that was just discovered."

"Eh!? Wha, how? How could he, when we've lived here for so long and didn't know a thing about it?"

Miroku gives a very quick reply.

"Sakuraba Rakka."

"Wh, Rakka-chan? Why's her name coming up..."

"I believe she also knew that DemonGear was here, and she kept that secret very safe... until the bitter end."

The image of that person's cherry-pink hair flowing in the sunset is even now seared into her mind. Miroku knew that she had fought something, alone, to protect the academy, despite being a mere two years their senior.

And in fact, that is *all* she knew.

(At the time, I was powerless and completely ignorant. Not someone who was in any way capable of assisting her. However...)

Miroku stares down at her own DiveGear. The scratches covering its surface reflect its history of use, as well as its base azure in the morning sunlight, seemingly responding to what runs through her head.

"...Let's go, Toa-chan."

"Hm? Where?"

"We'll be joining them at the starter dungeon."

"Ah, but the phone lines... Wait you pulled out the cords!?"

"It's not like we'll ever have anything new to tell them."

And with that, she tosses the cords down and walks out. Toa spends a moment looking back and forth between her and the phones, and then, tears welling up, follows her.

"Wai, wait for me!"

"Don't worry, I won't leave you. We should all go together... This time, for sure."

Miroku makes a mental declaration. She will make sure this boy, who bears the inherited will of Sakuraba Rakka, will not face the same tragedy she did.

■

After about 10 minutes of rushing over to Mizuhi-senpai's location, I find myself confronted with... a certain existence.

"Hey, hey... You're telling me there are *two* interesting folk at a no-name school like Fectom?"

The man smiles. His hair is a red similar to Mizuhi-senpai's, and his eyes have the ferocity of a bird of prey. On the left shoulder of his Kisō Academy uniform hangs a red cape—proof of his status as *Enforcer*, and both hands carry a sword as if they're just props in a play.

Mizuhi and myself ready our weapons as we face him.

"Keep your guard up, Kei. This man is a monster."

"...Got it, Mizuhi-senpai."

I clench my dagger even more firmly as I break out into a cold sweat. Mentally, I'm screaming.

Why is one of the series' strongest characters in front of me right now!?

9. beautiful girl (n.) 1 a device that leads to ruin if used too easily, or relied on too often.

Hello everyone! Welcome back to another episode of me reducing the original plot to tatters! I'm not even a beautiful girl yet, and I've already sent things completely off the rails, so my existence is in jeopardy! Someone, please, drop me a lifeline! Or instant full-body HRT!

"Well, that kid looks like he's too busy shaking in his boots to move, ah?"

The red-haired man in front of me tries to rile me up. And he's damn right!

I'd hurried over here immediately once I heard Mizuhi-senpai had gone to the starter dungeon to find the experimental facility, because it'd be incredibly problematic if she tried to pick up the DemonGear and bring it back with her, but instead, I found her fighting someone! I assumed her opponents were just some normal students from another school weak-ass mobs, so I joined up with her excited to help, and then, I recognized the guy's face.

"...Apis Umbrella's Enforcer, 'Oscillate Rokuhara'."

"Well! I'm impressed you went to the trouble of remembering my whole title, but I ain't that interested in you, man."

Nor I in you! Dumbass!

This dude's name is Rokuhara, but most fans will prefix a "Mr." to that. He makes his debut toward the tail end of the first volume, and since then, all the way until the latest one I've read, he's *always* been considered among the strongest in the cast. His name always shows up when those discussions happen. Like our protagonist, Touraku-kun, he possesses a DemonGear. And he spends his time harassing Touraku, because he also possesses a DemonGear. The story paints Mr. Rokuhara as both a wall for Touraku to surpass, and also a rival, in a way.

Consider: A DemonGear contractor gains access to some ridiculous strength. Mr. Rokuhara here is already one of the academy-city's 7 S rank divers, so he's strong on his own. That level of opponent, *also has a DemonGear*.

In other words, *we're screwed*.

"Mizuhi-senpai, we should pull back."

"You think he'll let that happen?"

"...No chance of that, huh."

Rokuhara-san's Terrifying Aspects, the first: If he finds out you're "an interesting guy" to him, whatever that means exactly, he'll start harassing you to fight with a tenacity rivaling old grease stains! Yeah! Just like what happens to our original protagonist!

"Hey, hey. Don't tell me you're looking to leave me here. I'm already mad enough, seeing as what I'm looking for ain't here."

"Yipe!"

Rokuhara-san's Terrifying Aspects, the second: He's as stupidly self-centered as he is stupidly strong. Whatever he wants to do, however he wants to "handle" a situation, he will. Why the hell did they make *this* guy Enforcer????

"Kei, I'll pull his attention for a moment so you can contact Miroku. With a few of us together, we'll have a chance, I think."

I think *not*!

An S rank is an entire cut above any other rank of diver here. To get officially certified as one, a diver must possess two qualifications. First, they have to have enough ability to clear dungeons of the highest difficulty entirely on their own. Second, they need to be capable of *single-handedly wiping the floor with an entire academy*. Other S ranks are excluded from that second evaluation, but a diver needs to have enough power that taking on every other student in a school and winning is a foregone conclusion.

In other words.

Fectom Comprehensive Academy, as it stands now, has exactly a 0% chance of winning against this guy. No matter what we do.

"Oh, looks like one of ya has realized you're both cooked now. All ya gotta do now is sandbag for me a bit, that'll do well!"

"...Here he comes!"

"Aye!"

Mizuhi-senpai gives me a warning, but Rokuhara-san's in front of me before I can process it.

Wait, he's going for me!?

"Heeere we go, one down."

"!? Kei!"

I hear Mizuhi-senpai scream out again.

I see Rokuhara-san's paired blades bearing down on me. His favorite weapon.

I parse the attack I'm confronted with—and throw myself out of the way.

The space one human body can fit in is torn asunder, and the ground responds with a cloud of dust as it's hit.

"...Heh, so ya can dodge that. Very nice."

"...Thank you, for the compliment."

Not good. I can feel him locking on to me.

"Well, how about this one!?"

Rokuhara-san bursts into a flurry of strikes from his blades, all aimed at me. While it would probably look random to an onlooker, each swing flows into the next in a way that avoids forming any openings. Any one of these attacks, had they hit, would have spelled the end for me immediately, but somehow I keep *dodging* them. ...How the hell am I dodging all this???

"Woah, woah, what's the principle behind that, huh? How're ya making all this work, spill the beans!"

I'm just about to respond with a *Why the hell should I know!* when my eyes catch sight of the crimson bracelet on my left arm. It's this thing's doing, I just know it! This is the only thing that could be elevating my dynamic vision and responses to the ridiculous level we're operating on. And as soon as I make that judgement, it starts begging and pleading in my head.

«■■■■■»

A sensation I'd never felt before, like it's pouring sparkling water into my synapses, and it wants me to speak aloud the name Sorcière.

"I absolutely refuse to."

"Oh, 's'that so! It stops working once I know the trick to it!"

I wasn't talking to you!

The bracelet remains on standby this whole time, basically advertising itself like "Hey! I'm ready to go whenever you need me!", but I keep it hidden in my sleeve as I continue dodging, being extra careful so he doesn't notice it.

"Hey, hey! If all you can do is dodge, this'll kill ya sooner or later, y'know?"

"That so."

Star-Reader Staff

But like, what are you telling me to do about it then? Sure, if I reveal Sorcière here, I can at least run away. But the instant I do that, I'd also reveal that I am the Mysterious, Transcendental, Powerhouse, Unrivaled, Ultimate Beautiful Girl that showed up on stream last night.

And that, I would like to avoid.

It's not even that it'd drag me solidly into the main plot! It's that I wouldn't be able to enjoy my female clothing anymore!

"I can't give in here."

Precisely! I can't possibly give up this perfect opportunity to partake in some Mysterious Beautiful Girl Roleplay! A beautiful girl shrouded in mystery who becomes the talk of the entire academy-city (future plans). She appears nightly in Dungeons, but disappears like a bubble on the surface after an encounter. Her melancholic countenance, and the occasional glimpse of a deeper sorrow! Phrasing that hints at deeper machinations and activities, and an otherworldly beauty! Someone who keeps the world at arm's length, but to whom all eyes are drawn, like the full moon! I want to have that sort of façade you'd see from the heroine in one of those turn-of-the-millennium eroge! And if it comes out that I'm just some *third-rate guy*!? Then the whole thing's down the damn drain!

"Sorry, but I can't afford to take the bait here."

"Huh!?"

If I fight seriously, my Pretty Girl Narikiri Life^[10] dies in my place.
But I can't *not* fight seriously, because he'll just switch targets to Mizuhi-senpai.
So I decide to make just a tiny use of the original plot's structure here.

"You said you were here looking for something. DemonGear?"

"Yeah. The look in your eyes tells me ya know something, too."

"Well, I don't know about that."

I manage to carry a conversation with Rokuhara-san in the middle of dancing around his blades, and do my absolute best to make it *sound* like we're on equal footing.

"Don't tell me, you're already holding onto it? Gives me an extra reason to take you down, two birds in one."

Rokuhara-san himself continues wearing his savage smile, not giving the slightest hint that he might be starting to lose steam through all these attacks.

"No, I don't have it. Either another school ran off with it first, or the thing sprouted legs or flew off on its own already."

I spin myself fully away from his paired blades in the next dodge, and point my finger back at them.

"Ask Eina there. That DemonGear ought to possess higher perceptive faculties than the others. It^[11] should be able to sense the locations of other DemonGear."

Instantly, the blades bearing down on my temples stop. Hey wait, were you about to split open the skull of a person clearly stanced up to give you information?

"...Bastard, just how much *do* you know?"

"An inquiry I ought not answer. Things tend to run smoother when those in the dark remain as such."

"Tch. Alright, Eina! 's what he just said real?"

Rokuhara-san tosses a glare at me before lowering his paired blades, and calling out to them. It's a development that would seem bizarre, but as someone familiar with the plot already, I understand what he's up to: speaking to Eina in her weapon form. From the looks of it, their conversation continues for a short while, but Rokuhara-san caps it off with the loudest shout I've heard from him all day.

"...Huh? What excuses are you making now, you! Show your face a sec."

He tosses both of his blades down, and they begin reverting to their humanoid form. Unraveling from the tips of the blades appears a girl with two braided pigtails, looking rather on edge.

"Le, Leader, I'm sorry. I didn't *mean* to keep quiet about it!"

"Shut it! Eina, we came all the way out here to recover that DemonGear, right? After those shitty wake-up calls from the Council *and* Kisō Academy, first thing in the morning!"

"Ye, yes!"

Eina enters seiza as she responds, and Rokuhara towers over her in a wide stance.

"Before now, I had not heard a *single* time! That you, had such a convenient feature to ya! Hah?"

"Eep. W, well, Leader, that was so you wouldn't end up in more trouble, you know? L-like a sort of, ignorance is bliss? Right? If you'd end up dying to something, you'd choose to have fun with that, right?"

"You're one to talk. Okay, starting right now, find that DemonGear that was *supposed* to be right here. Don't, and you find yer own meals for the next month."

"Eeeh!? U-understood. Please wait one moment..."

Eina places her palms to the ground, muttering complaints all the while. Rokuhara, seeing that she's begun to do her thing, turns back to me.

"That's a lifesaver, honestly. Good thing you talked before I killed ya."

"Right."

"But, at the same time, my pile of questions for you is just growing. Who the hell *are* you? You know about the DemonGears existing, and even Eina's abilities."

Rokuhara raises his left arm, and in response his DiveGear produces a sword. Not the form of a DemonGear, but rather the weapon he would have possessed since before that. This one's blade is as if two swords were twisted together to form a single weapon, and he points the tip directly at me.

"Well now, I'd say we've got ourselves a reason to scrap, there..."

Wha, Whaaaaat?

You can track down the DemonGear, so shouldn't you be off prioritizing *that*!? I've got to find a way out of this guillotine, I need to start pleading for my life!

"Don't get ahead of yourself."

"Ah?"

"A proper day for our confrontation will come soon enough. Brawling and feasting both have days that suit them best, wouldn't you agree?"

That's what you said in the original story, isn't it, Rokuhara-san!? Even if you beat up Touraku-kun until nobody could recognize him, you didn't *kill* him, and you even saved his life a couple times! So leave me alone to enjoy my crossdressing and my dreams of becoming a beautiful girl and go have fun with the actual plot!

"It is not yet time for the final confrontation." (Trembling voice)

I choke those words out while holding back tears.

Rokuhara-san looks about to say something in response, but a flash of light splits the space between us. When I look to its source, I see Miroku-senpai and Toa-chan brandishing their own weapons.

They came to support me! ...No, wait, won't this just lead to more casualties!?

"...That's how it is, huh?"

Rokuhara-san looks back and forth between Miroku-senpai and me, and nods his head. "Ya manage to pry Eina off me, and secretly get your own backup in here. Hahaha. Ya must hear from a lot of people you've got a nasty streak of your own, huh?"

"I got that at my previous school so much that I got sick of it, in fact."

Though, technically speaking, rather than myself it was my body's previous owner, a certain jobber♂.

"This sure would turn the tides normally, but I'm an S rank, remember? You should all know what that means. I can still kill you all without breaking a sweat."

All of us bring our guards back up as Rokuhara-san says that. But seeing our reaction, he just let out an exasperated chuckle and dispelled his weapon.

"That one was a joke. You, what's your name?"

"...Narō Kei."

"Mm. Kei, it ain't fair that you're the only one here walking around studded with weak points. Can't have any fun with that. You've still got something else up your sleeve, don't ya?"

"????"

"Don't give me that stupid expression."

No, but I really don't know what you're talking about.

«■■■■■!»

No no, Star-Reader Staff, you don't count as something up my sleeve. You're an item I can cash in later.

I get the distinct impression that the crimson bracelet starts piling up protests, but I act like I can't hear any of that.

"Okay, Kei, you played every single card you had. And thanks to all that, you managed to drag your chances of winning—which, need I remind you, were 0%—up by a few measly points. I have to respect the grit it takes to do that, so I'm gonna spare you all for the time being."

"I see."

Thank you so much! Thank you ever so much!

"So then, shouldn't you have somewhere else to run off to?"

C'mon, hurry! Go chase down that DemonGear! Forget me and this school exist! I'm begging you!

"Alright, alright, I'll play to your tune for now. Eina!! You finished searching yet!?"

"Ye, yes! The southwestern part of the central ward!"

"Aight, let's get going. Be a real pain in the ass if another school steals it after all this."

Rokuhara-san scoops Eina onto his shoulder with one swift motion, and vanishes at a brisk pace. Goodbye! Don't come back!

"Hooh."

I let go of the breath I was holding. I'm tired as shit first thing in the morning! As I'd already been planning to, the only way to maintain any semblance of a healthy lifestyle is to stay completely out of the way of the original cast!

"Kei, you..."

I turn my eyes toward where Mizuhi-senpai's voice is, and see her, together with the other two who had finally joined up, fixing me with fairly complicated expressions.

"Ah,"

Oh god, right. I'd spend all my energy desperately getting Rokuhara-san to leave me alone that I hadn't left any to spare for thinking about my own side of things! Right now, I'm the guy who had out of nowhere started yapping about random bullshit terms (that also happen to be top-secret information). There's a clearance on suspicions today, come one come all! And I was doing so good at pretending to be a normal student until now...!

"Well, you see, that was..."

Just what *sort* of excuse should I put together, is the only question. *I was just lying to Rokuhara-san to get him to leave* wouldn't fly, not when the part with Eina is there to confirm I only spoke the truth. Maybe an *Oh, I'm actually involved with the DemonGear myself?* ...Yeah, no, no way that ends well for me.

As I'm running through my options, Miroku-senpai takes a step forward, and with a smile, says:

"Let's head back."

"Eh?"

With just those words, she says the same to Toa-chan and Mizuhi-senpai and begins to leave herself. Mizuhi-senpai follows suit.

"Ah, well, might as well."

"Miroku-chan!? Mizuhi-chan!?"

Toa-chan hurries after.

The words slip from my mouth before I have a chance to consider them.

"Um! Am I not a walking blob of suspiciousness right now?"

"Well, you are. But... You rushed over here to protect us, didn't you?"

Us? You, certainly, as I'd come over to prevent Mizuhi-senpai from getting involved with or picking up the DemonGear... Though, considering if she were gone, Fectom Comprehensive Academy would effectively also be no more, it's a fair point to say it helped everyone.

"That. Yeah. I did."

"Then for now, that's enough for me."

Miroku-senpai turns back to look at me.

"Though, if you ever need help yourself, be sure to say something, to any of us. We can all help you out."

"...Sure thing."

I don't know why, but it makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside...! This school has such good people in it, it makes me look a bit stupid, going around crossdressing just to pass myself off as a beautiful girl!

"Come along, Kei, let's head back."

"Alright."

I follow my upperclasswomen back to our school.

I'm so glad we didn't end on any weird misunderstandings.

10. The Pale-Blue Star and the Beautiful Girl^[12]

One week.

That is the length of time I, Aohoshi Miroku, had spent sharing a school with a boy named Narō

Kei.

My first impression of him was that he was rather earnest type of person. However, it was in the process of conducting the school transfer interview with him that I realized there was something more he had, lying beneath the surface.

"There is a mission I must see through."

A mission.

For him, that is something to pour everything he has into. It is the sole reason he exists, and something he will not hesitate to throw away his life for.

Just like the instructor that was my role model.

So, this time will be different.

If I can ensure he remains alive, then that will surely allow myself to finally move forward, from that day I've remained frozen in without being able to progress or let go.

...Or at least, that was the hope that I gave myself.

This would be my atonement, this was my hypocrisy, these were my pretenses.

I, through the avenue of the boy named Narō Kei, was attempting to save the tomorrow of a day that would never return.

And that was my mistake.

■

"Toa-chan, do you think you can manage shooting at *that thing*?"

We, following Kei-kun, had arrived at Fectom Comprehensive Academy's singular starter dungeon. Or, more specifically, a research facility located in its depths.

The building had already crumbled to bits before we had arrived, and sunlight shone in through the now-open ceiling onto a place that would normally be full of shadows and gloom. In the middle of all this were two students fully immersed in a fight.

One of those students being Narō Kei, and the other...

"That thing being the Enforcer over there!? N, Not possible. I could land a hit for sure, but there's no way I can do anything to take him down!"

Toa-chan lifts her face away from the scope on her personal weapon—a field gun^[13]—and shakes her head rapidly in denial.

"That would indeed be the problem..."

The highest rank of power within the academy-city, symbolic of their absolute victory over others.

S rank.

Rokuhara, one of the scarce few to have achieved that rank. She knew of his existence, of course—it'd likely be stranger for a diver to *not* know who the S ranks are.

"Why is that man here... No, it's clearly for the DemonGear. Most likely."

We are currently observing the situation through the collapsed ceiling. The space the two of them were fighting in looks to be the very one shown on that livestream last night, where the DemonGear had been sleeping. The only difference I can point to is that the tank the girl was sleeping in in the footage is now shattered, with nothing left inside it.

"Miroku-chan, what should we do? Mizuhi-chan looks like she can't step in either, and it's just a matter of time before Kei-kun...!"

Honestly, just what led to Kei-kun being the one fighting down there, I have no way of knowing. Perhaps it's related to the DemonGear, or simply to try and protect Mizuhi. He is putting all of his efforts into defense and evasion, most likely to avoid giving Rokuhara more reasons to get heated. And just as much, to keep him away from Mizuhi as much as possible. Still... Though he *is* only dodging and doing nothing to swing back, his movements doing so were *are* so elegant that I find myself impressed by that.

"Wow... I can barely follow the attacks, and he's dodging them all without so much as a stretch."

Not just that. On top of those precise movements, Kei-kun also seems to be having some sort of discussion with Rokuhara at the same time. It isn't something we can make out from where we stand, but his expression reflects that it was something serious.

"Should we regroup with Mizuhi-chan and then retreat?"

Toa-chan murmurs that option.

It certainly is one thing we can consider. With the situation as it stands, Mizuhi isn't being considered one of the combatants—Kei-kun's movements are the proof of that. But just as I start to think, *Maybe we ought to do as Toa-chan suggests, and fall back—*

Rokuhara stops his assault. He seemed to have another short conversation with Kei-kun, then, irritated by something, threw aside his two weapons. Right after he did so, the blades transform into the form of a girl.

""Eh!?"

Toa-chan and I raise our voices together in surprise, and then exchange a glance.

"Toa-chan, you saw that just now?"

"Yeah. I, to think that the rumors about DemonGear were partly true..."

Several rumors had sprung up once the existence of DemonGear was revealed to the world. One of them had claimed that a DemonGear could take the form of a girl. I had assumed that the girl seen floating in a tank in this research facility was merely someone of importance *related* to the DemonGear, but it seems I had been mistaken. That itself *was* the DemonGear.

"We...may have become involved with something a bit more out of the ordinary than I had imagined..."

"Uuu..."

Returning to the scene in front of us, Rokuhara had given the girl some sort of command. The girl takes a small amount of distance and then, touching the floor, begins to do...something.

But just as I think this means the fight had fully concluded, Rokuhara summons a new weapon.

"Toa-chan."

"Mm."

Toa-chan and I realize in the same moment that the strange pressure surrounding Rokuhara had vanished. If that is because he just let go of the DemonGear he had been wielding...

This new sword is nothing more than the construct produced by his regular DiveGear, which opened up the smallest chance of victory for us. Mizuhi seems to realize this as well, bringing up her own personal weapons—a set of twin pistols—and aiming them at Rokuhara.

"Fire on my signal."

Rokuhara takes a stance with his sword and leapt forward. The remaining distance is about 10 meters. 5. 4. 3. 2—

"Now."

A howl of air tears past me, together with a ball of mana condensed like a model star rushing from the corner of my eye to the center of the room. It impacts, without the slightest error, directly between Rokuhara and Kei-kun.

With a gap in their calculations made, I scoop Toa-chan up and bring us both down into the research facility itself.

"...That's how it is, huh?"

As Rokuhara recognizes us approaching, he nods as if in satisfaction.

"Ya manage to pry Eina off me, and secretly get your own backup in here. Hahaha. Ya must hear from a lot of people you've got a nasty streak of your own, huh?"

"I got that at my previous school so much that I got sick of it, in fact."

Kei says that with a hint of self-deprecation, and his expression looks rather bitter.

"This sure would turn the tides normally, but I'm an S rank, remember? You should all know what that means. I can still kill you all without breaking a sweat."

Bloodlust forces itself upon the entire area. It's of a kind entirely distinct from the sensation earlier that felt meant to suppress—This is a well-honed killing intent.

I raise my rapier, my personal weapon, and exchange a glance with Toa-chan. She nods, and moves her cannon's aim from Rokuhara to the girl standing just a ways off.

Despite that, Rokuhara doesn't seem any more bothered. In fact, quite the contrary, he stares us down, and as if to mock our efforts, says:

"That one was a joke. You, what's your name?"

"...Narō Kei."

"Mm. Kei, it ain't fair that you're the only one here walking around studded with weak points. Can't have any fun with that. You've still got something else up your sleeve, don't ya?"

Kei-kun doesn't answer.

Weak points...can only possibly be referring to the three of us. Essentially, if he has to fight while making sure we're safe, then he won't be able to fight at his best. The fact that there is nothing we can do about that sparks a deep anger in me.

"Okay, Kei, you played every single card you had. And thanks to all that, you managed to drag your chances of winning—which, need I remind you, were 0%—up by a few measly points."

Rokuhara applauds him, as if giving out an award, but the only response any of us can have to that was remaining on our guard. Of course, we all understand that if we make any moves, our defeat will be swift and decisive. Yet there is no world where running away is an option, so we keep our weapons ready and our stances firm.

"I have to respect the grit it takes to do that, so I'm gonna spare you all for the time being."

Rokuhara, I am certain, glances at us as he said that.

"I see."

Kei-kun responds tersely. It's with a tone—that I couldn't have imagined coming from someone as deferential and warmly spoken as him—that chilled to the bone.

If things had played out differently, if we had not been here, then perhaps even against Rokuhara, Kei-kun might have been able to—

That is the sort of thoughts that tone gives rise to.

"So then, shouldn't you have somewhere else to run off to?"

Kei-kun speaks as if spitting those words out.

Rokuhara shrugs, and calls out the girl's name. Then, with an "Aight, let's get going", the two of them leave the area.

Toa-chan lets out a large breath from beside me, and lowers her artillery.

The time spent in tension has finally seen its end.

"Hooh."

Kei-kun breathes out. In an instant, he returns to the same him I had always seen. The serious, normal boy. But we had already recognized him to be something else.

"Kei, you..."

Right in front of me, Mizuzhi speaks up. She is a girl who always approaches the truth head-on, no matter what it may be. It's a virtue I can be proud of as her childhood friend, and something I greatly respect about her.

But this is one time it seemed it isn't something to praise.

"Ah."

A very small voice.

Neither Mizuhi nor Toa-chan notice it—their attention caught up in how abnormal he had just been. I am the only one who catches the vocalization he lets slip. Something like the noise a small child makes when something they were hiding comes to light, or when someone understands they've completely lost.

It's a pitiful appearance, one that nearly brought me to tears as I recognize it.

"Well, you see, that was..."

Kei-kun is desperately searching for the words. The feelings of bloodlust and intimidation from moments prior are nowhere to be found. How could anyone believe this boy here had just gone up against an S rank opponent, and even made it out unscathed?

So I say, before I really realized: "Let's head back."

"...Eh?"

Kei-kun lets out a stunned reply. To ensure Mizuhi wouldn't say anything further on the matter, I give her a knowing glance and begin to walk back. Those two girls I can be sure would follow.

"Ah, well, might as well."

"Miroku-chan!? Mizuhi-chan!?"

With the sound of footsteps, a turbulent mood expands around me to dispel the tension. Mizuhi had understood my intentions, and Toa-chan empathizes and matches both of us.

"Um!"

We hear a voice from behind, and pause our footsteps to wait for the words.

"Am I not a walking blob of suspiciousness right now?"

They are pretty silly words.

"Well, you are. But... You rushed over here to protect us, didn't you?"

"That. Yeah. I did."

"Then for now, that's enough for me."

Yes. Just that is what this should be remembered as.

Saving one's friends and colleagues.

That is how this particular story should come to an end.

I turn back to look at Kei.

He has very blue eyes.

The kind of blue that remind me of the endless depths of the ocean, as if his eyes are a direct reflection of his heart.

If nobody were to reach out to him, then he will surely sink into that ocean itself.

It's perhaps strange to think that, but that is a certainty I feel.

Therefore,

"...If you ever need help yourself, be sure to say something, to any of us. We can all help you out."

"...Sure thing."

I wonder what he's thinking as he replies. It's not something I have any way of knowing, though, as we've only known each other for a week before now.

Still, there is one thing. One thing that I *do* know.

I have been massively mistaken.

The expression he had shown for mere moments, that I could still nearly cry over, that appearance like an abandoned child?

That was me.

That was the me of that day, powerless as I was left behind by our instructor.

That was me, a complete failure, unable to even shed tears.

I had understood, in that moment, what it was that I had seen in him.

It was not my instructor.

It was myself, how I must have looked chasing after her, striving to be what she was.

"Fufu."

"...Miroku-chan?"

"It's nothing."

A smile of self-deprecation sneaks out onto my lips.

I do understand.

He as well was unable to save that person.

His strength is surely built atop the regret he carries from that tragedy.

I am the same.

He and I are the mirror image of each other.

So, I have no choice but to accept it: I, through the boy Narō Kei, had been trying to save the future of a day that would never come again.

But I had been mistaken.

He, like myself, is someone who deserves to *be* saved.

Here is when I, in the truest sense of the word, considered him as one of my companions.

We are cowards, who couldn't do anything.

We are the scattered, who could not be rescued.

We, despite all that, fight on, believing the day will come when we can save ourselves.

I suddenly look over at Kei. There is a fiery emotion in my chest that I have never felt before.

"Come along, Kei, let's head back."

It isn't something as ridiculous as falling in love. This is a far baser and far more tragic connection—a twisted bond of loss between us two losers.

11. You shouldn't assume someone is crucial to the plot just because she's a beautiful girl.

Wow, everyone's being so nice suddenly.

It must be because I gave it my all fighting against Rokuhara-san.

Well, if we trace this back to the root cause we'd find me standing there, so that makes this seem a bit self-serving. ...No, hold on! That livestream is even *more* the root cause, isn't it! If that girl hadn't been streaming, this never would have turned into anything!

Next time I see her I'm gonna beat her up.

"Well then, everyone's safely returned, so it seems we get to start another fun day of our lives here at school."

Miroku-senpai says that with a smile as she makes a succinct rap on the door of the student council room. The phone cords, answering in advance that it was fine to not pick up anymore, had already been pulled out. ...Sorry for all the trouble.

"I get the feeling that we've already done a day's work for today... But you know, I actually can't recall accomplishing a single thing. The main objective—that DemonGear—was never found."

Mizuhi-senpai mutters as such while she cleans up her DiveGear, looking rather peeved. Though honestly, if we *had* found it that would be a straight shot to a Bad End, so I hope it remains un-found. Rokuhara-san is still a much better outcome.

"That reminds me, Kei-kun mentioned wanting to register for dungeon rescue."

"Wha? For real?"

Perhaps by complete coincidence, perhaps sensing that Mizuhi-senpai might end up heading back to that research facility, Miroku-senpai speaks up.

And now that she mentions it, I did say that. I had wanted to make more money by doing rescues.

"That's right. I've gotten a good handle on how to use my body now, so if I could accompany you the next time you're heading out for that..."

"Really! Well, let's get right to it then."

"Huh?"

I still haven't eaten breakfast, though.

Maybe Mizuhi-senpai caught that thought from my gaze, as she nods heartily.

"Don't worry. Breakfast is still packed up in the plastics. We'll eat on the other side."

"...Bean sprouts again, I take it?"

"That's correct?"

You fight so well on just that as your daily rations.

The central ward of the academy-city, Hinotsuchi. A tower spirals into its sky like a massive helix of DNA. People call this structure "Arianhrod", and it is where the Apis Umbrella operates from, the central point where they manage and control the entire body of students and schools. The dungeon rescue system was an invention of the Apis Umbrella, and that body has continued to operate it to this day.

"So this is Arianhrod..."

"Strictly speaking, no. Arianrhod is 10 floors further up."

Mizuhi-senpai flatly dispels my wonder as I look around inside the building.

"While it is actually possible for us to set foot in Arianrhod, to my knowledge that requires a permit from the Apis Umbrella itself."

"You don't say..."

I never knew. It had never been portrayed in the novels, after all.

Actually, I get the sense that Touraku-kun visits Arianhrod pretty early on. I am once again astounded by how abnormal he is.

"Hurry up, let's get you registered. Rescue requests come in at any time, from anywhere."

"Ah, yes."

I find myself standing in front of the device that Mizuhi-senpai led me to.

It looks like what you'd buy tickets from at the theater. Kinda.

Operating this thing is pretty straightforward. Or like, since a DiveGear stores an amount of personal information that would send you spiraling if you were to ever manage to lose it, using it to communicate with the device completed things almost on the spot. The joys of near-futurism~!

...Incidentally, smartphones *do* exist, but divers can't really walk around with something that basically begs to be crushed to bits in a fight. And then the Stamina caps in your mobile games,

and *then* what?

"With this, your DiveGear is ready to receive incoming rescue requests. It'll tell you what dungeon the students are in, and their precise coordinates."

Hearing that, I bring up the DiveGear interface. And sure enough, there's a new icon there.

Loading that program up displays a map of the entire academy-city—red circles pepper the map to represent active rescue requests, with student names and school badges next to them.

Honestly quite incredible.

The fact that I can display a tablet-sized translucent datascreen using my DiveGear for this is a big surprise for *me*, but this is the normal level of engineering in this world.

"Let's get going. It's probably faster to explain once we're at the rescue site."

"Alright."

Mizuzhi-senpai and I look over the open requests and pick one suitable for us, and then she starts heading out.

But as I take a step after her,

"—Kei-kun?"

I hear a voice from behind me that I'm quite familiar with.

This, this main-character timbre!

I unconsciously swing my head around to see a youth standing there: black hair, black irises, the epitome of what you'd expect from a protagonist.

"Gatō Touraku...!"

Holy shit it's the real article! The guy himself! D'you think he'd let me shake his hand!? Maybe I can get his autograph, or have him write something on my DiveGear!!

...Now that I'm seeing him in person, he's actually pretty tall. 180cm, was it? A hell of a growth spurt for a first-year student!

To think you were bullying someone taller than yourself, you jobber (♂). That's already beyond having the guts; it's scary. That's like going to a savannah and pushing the lions around.

"—ey, are you listening? Kei-kun."

"Mm? Ah."

Whoops. Looks like Touraku-kun was saying something while I was lost in my thoughts. Sorry. But, like, I'm already the heel (♫), so it's normal to be rude.

I'm aware that I'm getting totally carried away, here! If a little squirt ran into one of his heroes for real instead of just on stage or television, this is how it would turn out for him too. That's just how much of a fan of Touraku-kun I am.

I really want to find a way to shake his hand!

"Kei-kun, I heard you suddenly transferred schools. I... had been wondering if I went too far in that duel."

What a good kid~! He has such sympathy toward the guy who spent so long bullying him. He's got a massive, immense heart.

These are things I have a grasp on because I've read the original story, but Touraku-kun feels a debt towards Narō Kei, who had invited him to a party when no one else would. He didn't even deride Narō Kei once during his time trapped in that dungeon.

Well. This mostly happened because his familial situation ripped his self-esteem and self-confidence to shreds, so he's a little bit caught up in only blaming himself. But still, what a good kid.

And now I need to respond to him as Narō Kei. Suddenly changing Kei's attitude would, in its own way, be pretty uncomfortable.

The bets are still on, so let's play the cur! Yip, yip, woof!

"Heh, don't go thinking you were the cause of that, you third-rate! I left Mikage Academy of my own free will!"

"But, still,"

"Tenacious as always. And what's with that look, huh? Why's it look like you're pitying me? Since when were you in such a good place to do that from?"

"Ah, er, sorry."

I'm the one who should be apologizing...

"I don't have the time to get caught up in a conversation with you."

There's no scene like this in the original series, so I shouldn't get too chatty. I've already thrown Rokuhara-san off the narrative—it'd be dangerous to keep interfering in the plot.

And just as I was thinking that, someone else cuts in to stand between me and Touraku-kun. The bounce of half-up, pale-blue twintails prompts a clear memory, and indeed: this is none other than Touraku-kun's Main Heroine.

"You've been taking a hell of an attitude with Touraku for a while now, you know!"

"Futaba Mihaya..."

I'm so happy I could cry.

I've met not only the protagonist, but also the main heroine.

With the sheer speed I had transferred schools at after possessing this body, there was no chance of me ever meeting the original series' characters. So, today is the first time I'm seeing them in person.

And from the latest volume (that I know of), these two had safely started going out! Congratulations!

Futaba Mihaya.

This wonderful individual, despite being burdened with the death knell of heroine traits—the protagonist's childhood friend, tsundere, *and* twintails—has become the undisputed main heroine of the story.

Also, she's in the "reliable partner" role as someone who becomes a very strong A rank diver.

Also also, her special ability of "lethal strike if you let her act first" is wild. If you make an enemy out of her, it's your funeral for sure.

"What, you have a problem with what I said?"

"No, not really. You're just getting on my nerves, so I'd like it if you got lost."

"Haaah!? Touraku, challenge him to another duel! And beat him up even more! And if you don't want to, I'll duel him for you!"

"Ah, Mihaya please don't!"

"Haa. Still such a noisy girl."

Which is one of her strong points. Whenever the protagonist is frustrated or disheartened, she's there next to him to offer her hand and pull him forward again. She's just that wonderful of a girl. I'd especially recommend her Wedding Dress appearance in the bonuses of Volume 6 of the manga—

"Pardon me, did our student here do something?"

"Ah, Mizuhi-senpai."

You know, that had totally slipped my mind. I'm sorry, senpai. My heart had wandered off to the land of the readers again.

...Senpai? What has you staring down these two so harshly? Senpai!?

"What's with you?"

"My name is Terugami Mizuhi, Vice President of Fectom Comprehensive Academy's Student Council. If you'd like to have a duel with one of our students, that discussion will have to go through me first. Though, that said, there's no chance either of you lot would stand a chance against Kei."

"Hah? What's with that."

"Oh, would you rather I duel you myself?"

"Ah, hold on, Mihaya!"

"Mizuhi-senpai, please restrain yourself. I'm not particularly bothered."

I and Touraku-kun do our best to pacify our respective representatives. Sorry about my senpai here; she's not usually like this you know? She only really likes using her words to make find reasons to fight. ...wait, no, that's business as usual then. We sure both have it rough, don't we! Hahaha...huh? I just noticed this group is one person short.

"Touraku."

"Wh, what's up?"

"What's up with Lutra?"

The strongest DemonGear, Lutra, with which Touraku-kun had formed a contract, is nowhere to be seen. She's a young girl with pure-white hair and blue eyes. It's sort of fundamental to things that she's together with Touraku, but I wonder what happened? I can't see her anywhere. She's part of the regular routine in scraps like this where she goes "Touraku, can I slice them up?" and Touraku has to stop her.

"Ah, well, she's at Mikage Academy. The stuff about DemonGear has spread around the academy-city a lot, so just to be safe our own student council president said she shouldn't go out too much."

"Oh, I see."

Well then, isn't that my fault?

And to be precise, isn't it my *and* that streamer's fault?

Really sorry about all this, Lutra-chan. I know you really like getting to head out. And to think that I ruined your first chance to walk around... I'm so sorry.

"...Kei-kun, why do you know about Lutra?"

"Hm? Well of *course* I.... Ah."

Crap!

That's not something I should know!

In the duel he had with Narō Kei, he only had a provisional contract with Lutra. So he didn't know her name, or anything at all. Much less should the existence known as Narō Kei, of all people, know she can take the form of a girl.

What should I do about this... I got too excited and said something unnecessary, I think.

"That doesn't concern you. I don't have to answer."

"...!? No way, did you push me into that dungeon on purpose—"

"I can pretty much guess what you're thinking, but... For it to be like that would be impossible."

For real, it's literally impossible. Narō Kei was just some dumb trash. The kind of stepping-stone that would lick a knife to show off.

"...Kei, we should be going. A rescue request came in."

"Right."

Thanks for the lifeboat, Mizuhi-senpai! I'll sell off Sorcière later and treat you to some meat. Look forward to that.

"Wai, hold on a second."

I want to!

But I can't.

Touraku-kun, I'll be cheering you on! Secretly! From the shadows and sidelines!

And so I left that place, the voice of a protagonist behind me, calling for me to stop.

■

"He, he really just left..."

"Hmph, you should just drop a guy like that! And that girl, Mizuhi or whatever, if she doesn't figure out she's being strung along, she'll suffer for it too, I tell you."

Mihaya voiced her displeasure with another *hmph*.

However, Touraku had been following a different train of thought.

"Kei-kun... Was he not actually a terrible guy after all?"

"Huh!? You, did you somehow forget what he did to you!? Abandoned you in a dungeon, that's what! Without even your DiveGear. I shudder to think what would have happened if Lutra hadn't —"

"—Right. But Lutra *was* there. And what I'm wondering is: What if he knew that?"

"...What?"

Kei's gaze was still fresh in Touraku's mind from when he had first run into Kei today. Kei had seemingly ignored him calling out, and instead focused on his body as if confirming something about him.

"He also knew Lutra's name."

"He must have heard it somewhere else, by chance."

"If that was the case, he wouldn't have just replied *Oh, I see*. I told him I left Lutra behind because she's a DemonGear. If Kei had known of her in her form as a girl, he ought to have been surprised hearing that."

And yet, Kei's response had been calm. Far from showing any surprise, he accepted it without even showing an indication he had to think about the statement. That is definite proof that he knows what DemonGear are.

"I suppose, now that you've said as much... Wait, the other student named Mizuhi! If I'm not mistaken, she said Fectom Comprehensive Academy!?"

"Hm? Yes, that's right."

"That livestream from before, the school where the DemonGear was discovered was that Fectom Comprehensive Academy. It couldn't be; did they know about that as well?"

Touraku nodded.

"Kei-kun's attitude toward that person was incredibly polite. Or, rather, his attitude toward us was far too frank. It's like he was *trying* to be disliked, actively... Was there no need to beat around the bush like that at Mikage Academy? And in the first place the fact that he made

contact with me is itself odd. Is it normal to pick on someone with no prior relationship just to bully them? No, the entire premise has to be rethought—"

As he was on the verge of delving even deeper into his own thoughts, Touraku received a light tap on his forehead.

Looking up, Mihaya stood there, in the same posture she had just flicked him from.

"There's no point in thinking about that right now, really. No matter what that guy's got in his own head, we can do the things that we can do. And today, isn't that heading to Arianhrod?"

"Ahh. Yeah. Right, thanks for reminding me."

While expressing his thanks, Touraku began heading for the sole elevator that connects to Arianhrod.

Kei-kun, just what sort of goal do you have?

That question would remain unanswered, for now.

12. Even beautiful girls have to deal with the cost of living.

Pleasant day to you all! I'm Kei, now registered for dungeon rescues! I'm biased toward saving girls! It's a pleasure to be working with you!

Today is my third day since starting dungeon rescues, as I just mentioned.

At first, I was anxious that I—who had really become a diver on a whim—wouldn't be able to provide any help to the other divers out there, but that turned out to be a groundless anxiety.

I can't believe myself! My condition after picking up Star-Reader Staff Sorcière is so nice... What a scythe. Or is it actually a staff? I can't figure that out.

"—Kei, visual confirmation of the rescue targets and the dungeon's boss. Let's rendezvous."

"Will do."

I nod my head in response to Mizuhi-senpai's update.

To be perfectly clear, Mizuhi-senpai here is a very strong rescue operative. I really wonder why such a strong character never had a debut in the story. She said her rank is B, and that's already plenty proof of her ability...

She moves in with her twin pistols against the boss. Something that looks like it failed to become a dragon is faced with the output from each barrel—one spouts flame, the other fires

water. Each of them, gathered into the shape of a bullet, rush toward the dragon. The dragon notices them, but beyond noticing them, there's not a whole lot that it can do about them.

And besides, those bullets are mainly a distraction.

"Let's move!"

I break into a run. The bullets converge in front of the dragon at the same time, filling the area with steam and water vapor. Right now, that thing's vision ought to be filled with pure white.

My rush takes me right into the mist myself, approaching the boss that can only thrash about with its vision sealed off. Through my boosted status wearing this crimson bracelet, though, avoiding those attacks is as simple as the running itself. And as I pass right by its face, I swing my personal weapon, my dagger, at it.

With that, my role is accomplished.

"Mizuhi-senpai!"

"Mm."

The mist clears, and the area comes back into view, revealing also that the dragon is paralyzed on the ground, unable to move its body from that position of submission.

Mizuhi-senpai directs the muzzles at it.

"Humu, it's got MA crystals^[14] besides its core... Nothing for it but splash erosion."

She thinks aloud, lowering one of her pistols. Water shortly erupts again from the muzzle that remained up.

...The weapon she's using certainly *looks* like a pistol, but it releases bullets far beyond what anyone could imagine one holding. The bullets quite literally *rain down* on the dragon's body, stripping it away layer by layer, reducing it to nothing but the core and a few MA crystals.

Mizuhi-senpai nods at her handiwork after confirming that the boss is dead.

"That's the end of it. Good work, Kei."

Time since we first approached the boss: a mere 1 minute. That's the level of these rescue operations with myself and Mizuhi-senpai cooperating.

...Or, like, that's just how ridiculous Mizuhi-senpai's ability is. She could absolutely earn enough from doing rescues on her own to get Fectom Comprehensive Academy out of its financial hole.

I just have paralysis and an insane amount of dynamic vision that I use to zap a boss's muscles. There's no real firepower there, so the rest is up to Mizuhi-senpai to pick whichever

gun works best and shoot it down.

Mizuhi-senpai has a pair of twin pistols as her registered weapon. On top of that, she can manipulate both fire and water bullets with her ability. It's incredibly straightforward, and because of that, stupidly strong.

"Good work out there yourself, Mizuhi-senpai."

"Mhm. ...Also, sorry to have kept you waiting. We're here on dungeon rescue. I'm Terugami Mizuhi, from Fectom Comprehensive Academy."

Mizuhi-senpai approaches the student who had collapsed in front of that dragon, and helped them up. Relief washed over their face, and they let out a breath, finally able to relax their body.

"Thank you so much! This dungeon was so much more challenging than I could have thought...!"

"What matters is you're safe. Now, we should discuss remuneration."

And so Mizuhi-senpai begins that discussion with the rescued student.

There's no set price for a dungeon rescue, but if MA crystals drop, they're usually handed over to the rescuers. If not, something agreed upon as an appropriate compensation is given instead, or so I've heard. This doesn't include the core of the dungeon itself, except in rare cases—even though it *can* be in theory, Mizuhi-senpai never asks for it. According to her, it's because "if an academy with no real presence demands something as valuable as a core for rescue, requests will stop coming in."

It makes sense; there isn't likely to be anyone who would even offer the core as remuneration in the first place, to a school with no confirmed ability.

"Kei, talk's done. Let's start heading back."

"Ah, sure thing."

I leave negotiations to her. After all, that stuff's pretty far outside my skillset.

As the student we rescued had already left the dungeon, we also leave.

"Incidentally, what did we get for it?"

"All the MA crystals they had. Easily ten times as many as I'd asked for."

"Oh wow, how generous of them."

"That's a fairly high-rank dungeon, after all. Even returning with just the core is more than plenty for them, or so they told me."

Dungeons are graded in difficulty starting from E and going all the way up to A. C is about where most divers are expected to be able to clear; for a B rank dungeon, you either need a good affinity or to be (or have) an A rank diver. And as for A rank, dungeons, there's no chance anyone gets permitted to one without an S rank diver accompanying them.

I'll also say it here: there are no S rank dungeons. Such a thing would bring the world to ruin easily.

...One does show up in the story, though! And stupidly large, to boot!

Also, while we're on the topic, the Transgender Dungeon I'm aiming for is B rank. Classed as such because of its characteristics; clearing it is not actually that difficult objectively speaking. As long as you're ignoring the drawback that you become a girl. And to me, that part is a bonus.

"Kei, let's pick up some meat on our way back for our meal today."

"Yippie. Speaking of, I saw some flyers earlier that they're running a sale on meat in the special district!"

"What!? For real!"

Mizuhi-senpai is far more locked in for these sort of circumstances than in dungeons.

And so, with the entire dungeon dealt with, we head back.

Dungeons appear within zones designated for them within the academy-city of Hinotsuchi. This is thanks to the Apis Umbrella, who with some incredible machination have made it so that the dungeons that randomly appeared across Japan show up instead in an orderly and predictable manner. Thanks to that, the place we are in now (close to the central parts of the city) is full of small craters, ruined buildings, and roots protruding out from nearby massive trees. Most of these are from fights between sister schools over dungeon clearing rights. What happened to law and order!

"...Kei, thank you. You made things a lot easier for me."

"Again with such high praise? Even I can get tired of hearing that, you know. All I did was rush in and swing my dagger a bit. It's you who dealt the finishing blow, right, Mizuhi-senpai?"

"All I did was strike down an enemy who wasn't moving. Up until now I've had to worry about fighting and rescuing students at the same time. Taking down any boss right off the bat like this was unthinkable."

She is earnest about her thoughts.

"Because Miroku is the student council president, she has no reason to spend so much time away from the school, and Toa is pretty timid. That, and her weapon is not particularly suited for

rescues."

As she describes Toa-chan, her weapon appears in my mind. It's a rather ridiculously sized field gun, double her own height. The image of her walking in with that under one arm to save someone is...certainly not quite correct.

"I'm really glad you ended up coming to our school."

"I'm just happy I can be of some help."

"Ah, right, I had something I wanted to ask you."

"Yes?"

"Your uniform; isn't it the wrong size?"

"Eh?"

Mizuhi-senpai points at my coat as she asks her question.

Incidentally, it *is* the wrong size. I deliberately went one size up from my usual so that the sleeve would hide the crimson bracelet manifest on my left arm. Thanks to that thing, I'll be looking like this even through summer.

Star-Reader Staff

Sorcière-san, if you could please have some consideration for other people's circumstances...

"You really think so? I haven't had any problems with it."

"Really? Well, then it's fine."

She looked very ready to continue saying something, but instead says nothing further as if she's reached an understanding.

Around 5 minutes after our conversation about the meat, Mizuhi-senpai's DiveGear chimes with an incoming signal.

"Hm? Senpai, was that yours just now?"

"Mm, this is...A rescue request?"

She brings up the window, and it displays a map.

But that's not all.

"Oh thank the stars, it connected! Terugami Mizuhi-san, there's an dungeon rescue request I'd like you to handle!"

With this call now, they also threw in the frantic voice of the operator.

13. Even if a beautiful girl is counterfeit, so long as she is cute, she is worthy of that role.

Dungeons manifest around the clock. While many clears succeed, so too do many fail and prompt rescue requests. And while it's not typical to end up with back-to-back rescue requests, from the sound of it, things aren't typical in general.

"Every one of the five students involved in this capture has disappeared since the rescue request came through. And on top of that, the students who went to help them have also gone missing."

An operator typically isn't assigned to rescue operations—there's a very real need to judge things based on the facts of each situation.

"Due to the two failed rescues, the Apis board has updated this dungeon's designation to B rank. As such, the request turns to one of our B rank divers: Terugami Mizuhi, yourself."

"Well, that'd explain that. I don't suppose you mind if my school claims the dungeon core for the trouble?"

"I can authorize that. Even assuming the rescue targets are still all alive, the core ownership will be transferred to you, miss."

"Got it. And, that's the situation. Kei, do you think I can get you to accompany me a bit longer?"

"I'd be happy to. We can even get some meat at full price later instead of the bargain stuff."

And to think we're still running on bean sprouts. Still, if it comes to it, I always have the "Sorcière... What on earth is this?" Strategy locked and loaded.

"I can always count on you, huh. Let's get going, then."

"Yes!"

Meat! Meat! Good fresh meat!

A bit of trivia about dungeons.

Dungeons are split into three broad categories: Dungeons with naturalistic living conditions that imitate nature (Organic), Dungeons that mimic technology and scientific details (Inorganic), and Dungeons that form around the basis of myth and folklore (Cultural).

For a dungeon to appear in this world, it will always manifest with one of these themes or core motifs. There's a lot of reasons for this, but that should cover it enough for right now.

Also, while we're on the topic, the dungeons that are the most troublesome most often fall into that third category of Cultural. And in that sense, one could say this time isn't really all that bad.

"—Inorganic type, huh."

"Sure seems like it."

We had just arrived at the dungeon in the request. We'd entered on our guards for any incoming attacks or hostility, but there had been nothing of the sort.

With this first glance, it seems to be a long hallway in a hospital ward, pure white.

"Same formation as always. However, if we can't get a takedown immediately, be ready to pull out instead."

"Got it."

And so we push inward, cautiously, a camera drone following us behind. The operator is using it to confirm the situation.

Yay~, you watching?

"Conscious of being on camera?"

"I can't exactly calm down when I'm being stared at, you know?"

"Haha, I get that. But I doubt we'll have the spare energy to worry about that soon."

She speaks lightly, but her expression is firmly set.

I'm glad I didn't decide to throw the camera a peace sign.

We proceed down the corridor without encountering a single construct^[15], soon arriving at where the request signal had been sent from.

"...Just past here, then."

"It looks like an operating room, doesn't it?"

And in fact, there's a plate stuck up next to the door just like the ones in hospitals. But there's no way this is an actual operating room.

"Let's go."

"Right."

Mizuhi-senpai kicks in the door, and I send myself inside with my dagger at the ready.

In there I see three operating tables, and sleeping girls atop two of them.

"—Miroku-senpai and, Toa-chan?"

Why wherefore and how???

Well, I don't have any way to know the reason, but Miroku-senpai and Toa-chan are certainly sleeping there, in medical gowns.

...Wait, but the two of them are supposed to be back at the school by now?

No, no time to worry about that.

"You two, are you okay?"

I immediately set my pace in their direction,
but a bullet of flame splashes into the ground right in front of me, halting my steps.

"Hold it, Kei. Those are fakes."

"Eh?"

While my mouth hangs open in confusion, Mizuhi-senpai points her pistols at the two of them without any sign of hesitation.

"Neither of them would go dungeon diving without prior notice or permission. At the very least, not without telling me directly."

Together with her strong declaration, she also readies to loose more bullets; aligning the muzzles at one each and pulling the triggers. The bullets fly true, clean through the heads of the two over there.

She's got bloodlust to spare, huh.

"How's that? No blood came out of 'em, right?"

"...Indeed."

The heads were certainly pierced, but that only revealed they're hollow inside.

Mizuhi-senpai blows off some air as if bored by the situation.

"Most likely, this trick is what got all the other divers before us. A dungeon that uses the divers' memories to create facades of their friends or acquaintances... Certainly, that would put it at B rank."

"However, now that you've nipped the problem in the bud, I imagine it should be possible to clear the rest of it..."

Though, right as the operator tries to endorse moving forward, the Miroku-senpai-construct gets up from the operating table, and stands itself on the floor.

I raise my dagger up, and yell.

"Mizuhi-senpai, let's go with the usual!"

"Mm."

I kick myself forward, flourishing my weapon toward the construct with no intent or ability to respond in kind.

Into it I send my paralytic poison, formed of mana, a half-conceptual agent...

At least, I try to.

As the blade makes contact with its arm, it shatters like pottery, the imposter's arm crumbling with a light sensation.

"Huh!?"

It moves past me without any sign the paralytic had any effect, striding toward Mizuhi-senpai. It wasn't as if there was no change at all, but all those changes are something it does to itself.

"—ä, á, aaa, Ahh— ...There, *this seems right*."

The pale blue hair alters entirely, rewritten in real time, a pink like cherry blossoms now draped all the way down to its hips. And its eyes now shine like jade.

This is, of course, no longer Miroku-senpai.

"...Instructor?"

A dumbfounded voice spills from Mizuhi-senpai's mouth.

I see. This must be the "Instructor" person she mentioned before.

...Hm? Wait, but isn't this Sakuraba Rakka?

"Instructor" == "Sakuraba Rakka", then? What's going on here? Mizuhi-senpai aside for a moment, I can feel my own head filling up with question marks. However, that also aside, I raise my dagger again and bring it around for another go, as it has continued to approach Mizuhi-senpai.

It's a stab from its blind spot, to the left side of the face. It stops it, so gently, like you'd clasp a child's hand to stop a tantrum.

Hah?

"Oh— I see, I see. Yeah, that one might be a bit dangerous—"

With those words, it palms away my dagger, and flicks it into the ceiling.

Nooo, my precious weapon!

"Well, then. It's been a while, hasn't it, Mizuhi? Have you been keeping the school well-guarded in my absence?"

"Mn."

Mizuhi-senpai pulls her triggers.

Again, fire and water fly out of the muzzles.

However, this time, they scatter like falling flowers around that thing, it with a pike spinning and spinning around, it laughing all the while.

"I know that you excel at killing with those weapons. But you really do rely on them too much... Or did I already tell you that, before?"

Its conducts, words—it's like it actually *does* know Mizuhi-senpai.

This ought to just be something that has taken the shape of the instructor. This ought to be something that just had its head blasted open.

But right now, as I stare at it—no, as I stare at *her*, I can only see her as one thing.

"Sakuraba Rakka, in the flesh...!?"

"Ohh, I see the conversation will go quite smoothly with the new face. So, why don't you die for me now?"

"!?"

Faster than a blink, the pike is thrust at my face. Teleportation? Attack Vector Omission?^[16] I'm familiar with a lot of possibilities from the original story, but this seems to be none of them.

I can't see any indication that she used *any* type of ability. This is purely her physical prowess, putting it closer to a type of martial art.

I twist my body, dodging the attack. A beat later, more bullets fly in at Sakuraba Rakka.

"Oh, that's quite the danger."

She delivers that line without any real sense that she *is* in danger, and takes some distance as she dodges the bullets.

Mizuhi-senpai steps in front of me, covering me now that I've lost my weapon. Her expression is, of all the ones I've ever caught sight of, the most grimly set it's ever been.

"Operator. Put in to the Apis board to raise this dungeon's rank to A."

"A!? But, it's just one that can change its form"

"Does that thing look like it's just changing its form to you?"

Mizuhi-senpai continues, as if devouring the operator's entire sentence with her own.

"The imitations of Miroku and Toa were just the initial stage of this, to allow it to get closer to me. I can tell you, because I was there together with our instructor herself: That is almost entirely the exact same as the real one, now. So, this dungeon's true nature is—"

"To reproduce the strongest figure in a target's memory, yep. You've got a good pair eyes."

A response as if she really is talking to a student of hers.

"Well, shall we get back to killing each other, then?"

"...Be careful, Kei. I know you already know this, but our instructor^[17] was strong. I, Miroku, and Toa together couldn't win against her, couldn't even touch her—she's the strongest diver there is."

"Right....eh?"

Eh?

I don't know... that's scary...

14. Whenever a Beautiful Girl enters play, she may flip the table.

This is a bit abrupt, but let's review all the information we have about Sakuraba Rakka.

- She appears in story content original to the mobile game spin-off of *Mirror-Edge Lutra*.

...

That's it!

"Just how damn str—!?"

【Live Reporting】 Rakka-san: Incredibly Strong.

I, with my Crimson Bracelet Buff, am somehow managing to keep the pike from hitting me, but it's not like I have any openings to exploit in the meanwhile. Honestly, I think this person is on par with Rokuhara-san!!

"Mizuhi-senpai, ah, could I bother you to buy me some time while I get my dagger back from the ceiling!"

"Leave it to me."

I swap places with Mizuhi-senpai as I dodge away from the pike again. As she slides into that space, bullets sling out once more from her muzzles without a moment's hesitation.

"Hahaha, it's pointless, girl. Not with an attack like that. You *know* how it goes; it's like, with the three powers of Mizuhi, Miroku, and Toa combined, they could *finally* accomplish something."

The pike cuts down the rain of gunfire.

Normally, this fire and water isn't something that *can* be dealt with like that. But you would never get that impression from looking at this woman, shrugging it off with no trouble at all, a smile set on her face as she stares down Mizuhi-senpai.

"Cut it out with your disgusting mimicry, already."

"Ahh, how cruel. I'm the real deal. Look, let's talk about the day you first cleared a dungeon. You remember too, don't you? I never would have expected to see you crying that much from just the emotion of it, really."

"Shut, your mouth."

Bullets fire with the rebuttal, to cut her off.

"Woah there."

And with the air that she's still just playing around, Sakuraba Rakka steps out of their way.

At that same moment, I grasp my dagger back from the ceiling, and in that same motion, I bring it and myself down at her.

A "combination attack" improvised off of the momentary stiffening the body performs after dodging.

It was perfect, an exact alignment of circumstance, a syzygy of Sakuraba Rakka's downfall.

And yet.

"Haah. Not going to work. In the first place, that isn't something that can take me down."

"Wha—"

She responds to it all as if she has full vision of the room and grabs my wrist slinging me around and into one of the walls.

What the hell are you meant to do about that, exactly.

"Kgh!"

"Kei!?"

"Keep your eyes on me, girl. You're so full of care for other people, but that's exactly why you'll get taken advantage of someday."

"...Tch."

And in line with her poking at Mizuhi-senpai's weaknesses in words, the pike had started swinging over at her the moment her gaze had followed me into the wall. It looked like she had started to dodge in response, but it was a bit late, and the pistol in her left hand is sent flying.

"One down. Though... Guns aren't really *my* specialty, so I'll just leave that lying around instead, 'kay?"

Cracking her smile a bit wider for a moment, she kicks away the pistol that had yet to come to rest on the ground.

...Isn't she a *bit* too strong?

Because she understands Mizuhi-senpai, or knows her, whichever is going on here, she's not just read her like a book, she's read her like a book *she wrote herself*. That aspect makes her even nastier than Rokuhara-san was to deal with. And if that wasn't enough, she is legitimately out to kill. The dungeon's boss really only exists here as that state of bloodlust, with the *how* of everything else given over to the individual's skills and personality.

Also, in any other circumstance, Mizuhi-senpai would not have chosen to fight her. That's something I picked up on from her expression the moment our opponent took on the shape of Sakuraba Rakka.

"Come now, Mizuhi, don't lose all your braincells on me. I *will* stab you, you know?"

"Kh..."

Mizuhi-senpai desperately throws herself out of the way again.

That moveset does indeed seem to be the exact same as Sakuraba Rakka's. While Mizuhi-senpai isn't landing any good hits, she at least also isn't taking any major injuries herself.

And yet, if this drags on, she's still going to lose. A human with physical limits will always be at a disadvantage against a construct that's merely taking on a human shape.

The only one who can tip the scales here is me.

...No, the only one who can tip the scales here is Sorcière!

«■■■■■!!!»

That's not your cue, get back off stage. I'm talking about me, as a girl!

«■?»

Now why do I feel like that just pissed you off even more.

Anyway, no time to worry about that!

I peel my body off the wall and stand up. Then, I make another rush at Sakuraba Rakka.

"Uoooooooooh!!!"

"My, my, that desperate?"

I press the flat of my dagger against the incoming pike, so that I'd receive the *force* of the blow but not actually get stabbed by it.

"U— Uwaaaa—!"

"Kei!?"

Riding the blow of the pike, I sail back through the operating room and crash open the wall.

But I'm not done yet! The force I added by jumping backwards as the blow connected sends me through another 3 walls past that.

"Are you alright!? Hey, say something!"

"I'm, *cough*, I think I'm alright!"

I yell back through the cloud of dust and debris in response to her worry.

Speaking of the cloud, besides that swirling around in this final room, there's nothing else. And *nobody* else. And the drone is still outside, too! Perfect!

"Senpai, I'm on my way...!"

I stand, channeling my resolve—
and I strip off my uniform.

Then, from the spatial compartment of my DiveGear, I retrieve the specific items I had stored in there earlier. The function is generally intended for carrying any relic items that show up in a dungeon, but I quickly deduced that it has one, much truer purpose.

Yes.

Carrying my outfit pieces!

"Uh, let's see. Wig, and then secure *that*..."

Through the power beautifulgirlification imparts me, I'm able to finish changing into my female clothes in under ten seconds. I finish by fastening on the gas mask.

After all, I couldn't even do my makeup down here. And you've gotta mask your lips with *something*.

«■■■■■»

Right after I put the finishing touches on, information is delivered directly to my brain.

Ahh, yes, yes, I understand.

Star-Reader Staff
"Sorcière."

My hand moves to grasp the large scythe as it materializes from my crimson bracelet.

Under the glint of her trademark scythe, stands a goth-loli girl.

Perfection.

"Well then, let's be on our way."

I adjust my larynx so it produces a female voice. And after that, well.

It's time to have some fun.

■

To restate the premise, Sakurabba Rakka is dead.

This is something that constitutes part of Terugami Mizuhi's common sense. That woman had already died.

While she had not seen the body herself, all available information she *did* have pointed to the same conclusion she had already arrived at.

Everything had remained in that stable way until now, but what does that make *this*, right in front of her?

"That boy, he's weaker than I thought. Not really a good match for you, Mizuhi."

"Again with your nonsense."

She still holds one pistol in her grasp of her pair, using it to try and keep her opponent in check, but it is all-too-easily repelled.

As it should be.

Next, she quickly closes the distance between her and Sakuraba Rakka, disregarding her ranged advantage and firing in close-quarters instead. The other woman simply tilts her head to dodge what she ought to have been unable to see coming.

As it should be.

"You're letting your bloodlust out too freely, girl. It's far too easy to tell where you're going to aim your shots. Sheesh."

The bullet that had just flown past her blossoms into a large orb of flame. An explosion of that size is *guaranteed* to catch a person off guard, from behind.

However, Sakuraba Rakka flourishes her pike around without looking at it, dispersing the flame.

This, too, is as it should be.

It's the normal course of events for Mizuhi to be unable to see a path to victory against Sakuraba Rakka.

"Could it be that you had forgotten what my ability was?"

"Of course not. Wind manipulation."

"Yes, exactly. That's what lets me wear the wind as armor, and use it to hide the length of my pike."

Something she knows. Something Terugami Mizuhi knows all too well.

And yet, all she has is that knowledge of it.

"That boy looked like he was still alive, so maybe I should go kill him first after all?"

"You think I'd let you?"

"You know you can't stop me. Besides, you can't even focus on me because you're so worried about him."

She cracks another smile, and spins and spins her weapon around.

It's a smile that glows like the sun. It's a smile that should never be present in a fight to the death, like theirs is.

"Though, well. It's not like there's a need for you to die in any specific order. So if you are dying here, why not be the first yourself?"

"Tch."

Sakuraba Rakka kicks off the floor, the impact ringing behind her. No, rather, she simply steps forward. One step, at maximum speed. The pike rides that momentum, stabbing forward, its destination firmly set at the head of Terugami Mizuhi.

Evading won't get me out of the way. Counterattacking...is still impossible.

She completely understands her situation. She completely understands her situation, and yet she can't do anything about it. Nothing she does will accomplish anything. It's the same sort of terrible feeling you get watching someone's bad ending approach them in a movie.

Sometimes, reality is more cruel and torturous than a nightmare.

"Hahaha, I finally caught you."

The innocence in her smile hadn't faded one bit since that day. The only thing that had, was that now it is her on the receiving end of the blade.

I guess... That's it for me, then.

The end of that pike's arc will also draw the closure to everything she is.

But, not just her. After her death, the weapon will turn to Narou Kei, and soon after Fectom Comprehensive Academy will crumble. Visions of the end and epilogue come all too simply to her mind.

It will end.

All of it will be ended, thanks to the actions of one imitation.

In such a one-sided tragedy.

In such a cruel story, with no redemption afforded it.

In such a, such a, such a... Such a thing.

There's no way I could ever accept such a thing!

Her will to fight has not yet left her.

She immediately turns the muzzle of her remaining gun onto herself. She can pierce herself with a bullet faster than the spear can arrive, and together with that, place an explosion that will

engulf even Sakuraba Rakka as her attack arrives.

This is...the best that I can do.

She understands that there is no possible future where everyone is saved. And because of that, this is the final, best option left to the girl named Terugami Mizuhi.

"It's your loss and mine. You damn impostor."

She lets her finger rest on the trigger for just a moment.

And in that moment, as she prepares to carry out her resolve, to bet her life on this...

"—Well, you two seem to be enjoying yourselves."

...the wind blows.

It's a gust the likes of which you can only feel on the quietest of nights, soundless, one that makes its presence known despite the silence and yet steeps none in it despite its presence.

That is the sort of thing that appears, cutting between Mizuhi and Sakuraba Rakka, wedging their deaths back apart.

Black frills drift effortlessly as if caught in a dance, and silver blue hair flowing along with it. That figure had scooped away the pike thrust at Mizuhi with a massive scythe, with the precision of removing a splinter. The tip flies past her head, and embeds itself in the wall behind her.

"...Well well well what's *this*, another challenger?"

Sakuraba Rakka, for the first time, had shown surprise, with how her attack had been turned away.

"If you don't mind, I'll have you play along with me from here on."

"Heeeh. Nice. You look strong. What's your name?"

The girl responds to her question as she softly caresses her blade.

"...Sorcière. So you may refer to me."

15. No two beautiful girls are ever the same.

Now, let us briefly discuss what constitutes "the strongest" for Terugami Mizuhi.

At the time she had been asked that directly, she had replied, without needing to think, "Sakuraba Rakka". Blessed with innate talent, and refined through relentless training. She

believed that that woman, who had stepped into the domain of humanity's very limits, well and truly deserved to be called the strongest.

So, if that was truly correct.

If it was *true* that Sakuraba Rakka is the strongest.

Then who does that make this girl, in front of her, who is actively overturning that understanding of strength?

"—Hahaha, you're *interesting*, girl!"

"Is that so? I'm glad that you think I'm worthy of your notice."

Their conversation glints with the clashes of their weapons. A large scythe and a pike are swung and spun around, clashing freely like there is no weight behind them.

...Though, with that said, the scale sits all too in favor of one side.

The girl who named herself Sorcière is whittling Sakuraba Rakka into a corner, as if it is the most natural thing in the world.

"I'd thought you might be Sakuraba Rakka herself, the person, but it seems you're actually not that much of an opponent."

"Well, that's just mean!"

Deflecting both insult with humor and scythe with speartip, Sakuraba Rakka stabs forward with her weapon. Wreathed in wind, it delivers a strikingly fast, surefire stab.

And to that, Sorcière adjusts her position ever so slightly, so that the attack breezes past her instead.

"You're not predicting me, you're dodging *after you see the attack*, I see. That's an irrational level of acuity."

"You really think so? The attack seemed so very slow to me, though."

The scythe shimmers, disappearing into the darkness. And a moment later, it comes cleaving down.

Sakuraba Rakka's right arm had been severed from her, clean at the shoulder.

"Oh my, goodness."

She makes distance, retreating into the shadows herself and placing her left hand on the wall. Her right hand regenerates, as if nothing had even happened to it.

"I dare say that's the tenth time you've done that. I don't suppose you'd call yourself invincible?"

"No, I have to admit damage is being done. ...Yeah, I might actually be in trouble, here?"

Sakuraba Rakka shrugs as she says that, and her eyes finally show no merriment.

"I've been focusing on trying to access whoever you see as the strongest, in your subconscious. But it's just not working. The only thing I can think of is that you have some sort of protective mental barrier up."

"I see."

Sorcière essentially sighs out her reply. And as she once again repels the incoming pike with her scythe, she continues.

"Of the stars that exist in the sky, no two ever shine with the same brilliance. And so, your presumptions are nothing but drivel. You mark yourself as a failure, worse even than counterfeit."

"Eugh, you can certainly run your mouth."

"Indeed. Though, Sakuraba Rakka wouldn't... the woman herself, at least, wouldn't present in such a manner."

"Oh, oh, so *that's* it, we've met before! In that case, it's so good to see you!"

"As if. It's our first time meeting, miss imitation."

Sorcière categorically declares what she faces to be fake, and within the fakes eyes smolders a small anger.

And as it does,

"—And what will your^[18] response be?"

Mizuhi finds that she has been tossed something physical by the other girl, in tandem with the question just now.

She quickly processes that it is her other pistol, that had been sent flying by Sakuraba Rakka earlier, and grips it firmly.

Sorcière, seeing that, says with a small hint of amazement,

"Are you sure you want to recast yourself from the role of wallflower?"

"...Yeah."

Miuzhi steps forward, to stand beside Sorcière.

Shrouded in mystery though she may be, Mizuhi decides that, at least for now, she will believe in this girl.

'Of the stars that exist in the sky, no two ever shine with the same brilliance', is it? She's right. That may be my instructor, but it isn't the pinnacle I'm aiming for.

The thirst for victory, which she had fully cast aside, rumbles again through her. Her thoughts are infinitely far from sacrificing herself—instead, all she can imagine is the ways in which they will triumph over this impostor.

"Hahaha, Mizuhi, you're still raring to fight? I think it's about time you threw in the towel, actually. Just sit back, let the grown-ups duke it out, and keep your eyes on us. The rest of you won't be able to keep up, after all."

"I wonder if that's really the case. I quite think she's already caught up to you, from what I can see."

"Eh?"

Sakuraba Rakka finds Sorcière's large scythe suddenly right in front of her eyes.

As a being created by the dungeon, there is no need for her body to blink, and thus there is only the fundamental delay of vision that remains. ...Or at least, that's how things ought to be, and yet she hadn't even seen the beginning of Sorcière's movement forward.

"Dammit!"

She draws up the wind around her to form armor. As it catches the incoming scythe, in that instant, she thrusts her pike forward again in a counter...

But the tip is blasted aside by bullets.

"I've seen that move of yours so many times, I'm sick of it."

Mizuhi complains from behind, flame spouting from the muzzle of her pistol.

"Bold of you to say that when you're a good-for-nothing who couldn't do anything against me a minute ago!"

"Oh, my, already calling it quits on your playing at Sakuraba Rakka roleplay? That's not very proper of you... You really have to see these things through to their end."

The scythe digs into the construct's body, and tears through her midsection.

"—!"

As she possesses no sense for pain, she jumps backward with a wound that normally wouldn't even let someone move, and touches the floor of the dungeon. At that gesture, her body is once again restored to what it had been before being torn asunder.

"It's pointless, no matter how many times you try. I'm not someone who can lose. After all, I'm the strongest being you can imagine."

"That's wrong. You're not my instructor. And in the end, you're bound by the limits of my imagination just as much as I am. If it were her, if it were Sakuraba Rakka, she'd show me a strength surpassing even my expectations."

"...Then, surpass them I shall!"

She grasps her pike tightly, and rushes forward.

It's an attack drawn from the memory of Terugami Mizuhi, the strongest single attack she knows of.

It's an attack that does not leave that realm, a figment of the imagination.

"That's the level you're at, as I thought."

The bullets roar forth.

Fire and water flow together up in front of her face, where they draw to each other and erupt, spreading mist and vapor in a billowing cloud.

Within that small world created around her, Sakuraba Rakka processes and responds mechanically.

"A very *functional* response."

With herself as the source, she unravels wind to disperse the curtain of fog from around her.

It barely takes her a second to accomplish.

And at the same time, she is still someone who took that full second to accomplish that.

"Indeed, very faithful to your function."

Sorcière stands right in front of her.

Evasion, counter-attacking—she runs through various other ways to deal with this situation, but all of the evidence shows that she has no way of escaping from Sorcière.

"Match me, Terugami Mizuhi."

"Mm."

Sorcière swings her scythe down, cleaving Sakuraba Rakka in two vertically. She aims to stab back with her pike while the girl is recovering her posture, but water bullets flare through and chip away her hand.

With her response and hand now gone, Sorcière brings around the handle of her scythe, knocking the woman's gaze upwards with a firm blow. Sakuraba Rakka's eyes are blessed with another cloud of fiery bullets bursting.

"!? Trying to seal my vision, are you. I see."

Her eyes are seared by the fire, dropping her into darkness. At the same time, there's the sensation that her right foot *also* drops.

"This might be bad."

Using her remaining leg and her wind, she makes a large leap backward. Without her sense of distance thanks to being blind, she can't place herself precisely and instead slams her entire body into a wall, but that isn't a problem for her.

"Well, I can always fix myself right back up."

She says that more to herself than the other two, as if it's reassurance. Her opponents simply stand at their distance, with no sign of closing the gap again.

It's the sort of nonchalance that you only see when someone's confident they've already won.

"—Do you still remain bound by the delusion that your self is Sakuraba Rakka?"

A voice rings from within the darkness. It's a clear voice. It's Sorcière's.

"...I *am* Sakuraba Rakka."

"Self-suggestion, is it? I feel sorry for you."

"How long do you plan to let this drag on? You ought to realize by now, in a war of attrition, I'm guaranteed to win, right?"

"I've long since grasped the logic of your restorations."

It's a strong, confident voice.

As that statement settles in, she finds something off about her situation.

Namely, why has her vision not returned to normal?

And her wounds—the cuts aside, the system that allows her to regenerate even her limbs isn't working, leaving her with just the one arm. Just the one leg. And a form scratched and carved.

"...What have you done."

She shifts focus from general recovery to just her eyes, prioritizing regaining her vision over all else. Slowly, from hazy to gradually clearing again, her vision returns, and she can perceive the scene in front of her.

"Ah—"

The small shriek she lets out slips by her own notice, as she doesn't have the capacity to process that information on top of everything else right now.

"—and my trigger will follow your timing. You can handle that, I presume?"

"Leave it to me."

Sorcière's scythe handle, and Terugami Mizuhi's two pistols—all three muzzles are pointed in her direction.

And a dense flow of magic converges into each.

"Mana Convergence...! No wonder; you've been siphoning away all the mana that constitutes this dungeon!?"

"You've been stealing away bits and pieces of this place as a resource to restore your condition, over and over—surely, it's fine for the two of us to do the same?"

"You...monster."

"If you're Sakuraba Rakka, you ought to show a warm smile instead."

Sorcière whispers that comment.

"Counters or diversions...don't exist for this, yeah."

The mana had already completed its convergence into the large scythe, and now, it also completes converging into Terugami Mizuhi's twin pistols.

"This power...! It's the first time I've felt anything near this amount of mana running wild inside me."

"You can still handle that?"

"Mhm. Even if I have to force myself here, I'll make it mine."

"Then all remains well."

Mizuhi rests her fingers on the triggers. The muzzles of her gun flare up in anticipation, bullets of fire and water ready to rush forth.

Sorcière places her hand around the grip of her weapon. The weapon shivers silently, awaiting the time seconds around the corner.

"Let's do this."

Star-Reader Staff
"As you say. *Sorcière*."

As she calls out the name, the triggers are pulled. A silver light streams forth, enwrapped by spiraling red and blue. This convergence, the density of the mana holding the power to obliterate any average dungeon construct or monster in under a single second, rapidly encroaches on Sakuraba Rakka.

"You think this could get me to admit defeat!?"

She screams out, and summons her wind ability to the utmost she ever has. It surpasses her previous limits, and draws out the dungeon as a resource from directly around her, forming a strong barrier around her.

"!! I am Sakuraba Rakka! Which makes me the strongest!"

Only one moment remains before the Convergence Bombardment makes contact with the barrier.

Both of these moves, in their own right, surpass theoretical output.

However, it does not even take a tenth of a second for the blast to obliterate the barrier, and pierce past it.

"...Ah, man."

An offhand comment—that is the only aspect in which she was able to perfectly replicate Sakuraba Rakka.

"Well done, you two."

And just like that, the form of Sakuraba Rakka disappears completely, washed away by the light of their magic.

The only thing that remains in the wake is the burned, slashed, melted remains of the operating rooms, the dungeon's core, and a pile of MA crystals.

Every trace of what had templated itself from Sakuraba Rakka has entirely vanished.

"It's...over."

"Indeed."

With a nod of affirmation, Sorcière lets out a small breath, and takes a small step, moving the exact opposite direction of the core—the exit from these operation rooms.

"The core... You don't need it?"

"Not in the slightest. ...Oh, though don't misunderstand me. It was not I who saved you, young lady."

She gestures at Mizuhi with her massive scythe.

"The stars aligned, as did our purposes here. This dungeon was quite the anomaly, as you can plainly see."

"...You. What else do you know?"

"Everything. I know of all calamities that have yet to occur, and many things that you will never have need of knowing."

So saying, she gathers a small amount of mana back into her scythe.

Mizuhi matches her gaze, and does not raise her weapons, simply facing that head-on.

A small amount of mana flies between the two of them.

It was Sorcière who diverted first. She makes a light huff of boredom at Mizuhi's response, and, turning on her heel, swiftly departs.

Mizuhi stands and stares in her direction until her form fades away back into the darkness.

"...There she goes."

She subconsciously sinks to the floor. Perhaps it was because she can finally relax, but she feels just how much she had been sweating.

"...Are you doing alright, Mizuhi-san?"

"Oh, I totally forgot you were with us."

"You have my deepest apologies I couldn't be of assistance. There was an urgent communication from the board to gather information on Sorcière, so I engaged visual camouflage."

"The board? Makes sense; that girl clearly has something special about her."

"Yes. In fact, the moment she appeared, the depth of the ambient mana fell sharply. I was able to confirm numbers that in most circumstances simply aren't possible."

Mizuhi shivers with the sudden fright of knowing the girl she fought besides is that type of individual.

"There is also the matter of the Convergence Bombardment you fired at the end, Mizuhi-san. Generally speaking, a diver's DiveGear is responsible for proxying the calculations that make such large-scale attacks possible. However, Sorcière shouldered the calculations for the both of you at once, which is what enabled the Convergence Bombardment that you released in tandem."

"That explains it, then. I did wonder how I was able to fire off something like that."

The operator continues on in a somber tone from the other side of the drone's camera.

"She has shown she has the ability to unilaterally interfere with another diver's mana use, and a transcendent control over mana in general. In light of these two points, and the ability she has shown in combat, the Apis Umbrella has decided to provisionally elevate her diver status to S rank, and will officially recognize her as an outlier with that status."

"...Quite the reckless decision, isn't it?"

She refers, of course to the board's decision.

It retroactively places their stamp of approval on her actions, with the implication that what she did here was something they had requested all along.

Very different from how the Apis Umbrella usually acts.

"It's clear how much they want her."

"They have no reason to pass up the opportunity, after all. Also, now that I've explained the situation, we'll have to trouble you to visit Arianhrod later on to discuss things."

"It's no trouble at all. I'm well aware just how precious my personal account will be for the board, as someone who has fought next to her."

Mizuhi picks up the dungeon's core and the MA crystals as she replies.

As she inspects them, a small sound from a portion of the wall crumbling is heard.

She turns to see what caused the sound, and standing there is Kei, holding to the wall to support himself, looking extremely beat up.

"Mizuhi-senpai... Sorry, I'm a bit late, aren't I."

"Don't worry too much about it. The dungeon is already cleared... Mostly thanks to Sorcière, though."

"Sorcière!?"

Kei raises his voice in shock.

"Sorcière, like, 'Appeared on a livestream and went viral for her mysterious air and peerless beauty'—*that* Sorcière!?"

"Mm? Ye, yeah."

He runs over to Mizuhi, with a strange way of describing the other girl.

"And Mizuhi-senpai, you aren't hurt at all!? We didn't even know if Sorcière was on our side or not, right?"

Mizuhi puts on a smile to reassure Kei.

"At the very least, she isn't an enemy for us to worry about."

"That, I see. Wait hold on, is that the dungeon core you have there!? And a ton of MA crystals, too."

"Mm. These are all the ones that dropped; Sorcière didn't even bother to take one as a souvenir."

"Just fighting to fight, and not for any reward, then? ...It leaves a weird taste in the mouth, huh."

Kei's expression curls up in thought, and he moves to help pick up the rest of the MA crystals.

"If you're still feeling hurt, don't push yourself."

"I'm fine. Sorcière did so much of the work already; I can't really stand to just sit around and contribute nothing."

"...No, you've already done a great deal, for me at least."

Mizuhi gives Kei a pat on the head as she reassures him.

He seems surprised at the sudden gesture, and while it embarrasses him a little, he doesn't stop her.

Though, perhaps it's because it embarrasses him, that, after a short while, he says,

"Sorcière... Just what sort of person is she?"

16. Sorcière Information Compiling (part 5)

Sorcière Information Compiling (part 5)

1 : Anonymous Diver ID : koby/ufi643

A thread to gather the info we have on Sorcière.

(We are still looking for: Eyewitness accounts, any direct information regarding which student she might be.)

What we currently know:

- Silver hair, goth-loli outfit.
- A DiveGear that nobody has ever seen anywhere else.
- Uses a giant scythe as her weapon.
- Estimated to be S rank.
- Cute.

[...]

268 : Anonymous Diver ID:e1/Jrl7NT

This is the fifth thread for this, and there's still no proper info listed.

It's basically just a chatroom.

279 : Anonymous Diver ID:W0qp2xRSy

>>268 Can't blame 'em. I mean, Purge-chan's the only one so far who's managed to catch her in person.

300 : Anonymous Diver ID:eiKGkWgNy

Our student council pres has been on fire trying to find (and poach) Sorcière...

No two ways about it, she's *someone's* top student, is the thing

301 : Anonymous Diver ID:QOAl78+yn

In the first place, how much information do we even know about Sorcière at all?

>>1 hasn't even updated the template since the start of this

303 : Anonymous Diver ID:f0j9VanwM

There's been no other firsthand accounts since the stream, after all

344 : Anonymous Diver ID:Gld48PbH

Breaking News!!!

The Apis Umbrella just announed that they're officially recognizing Sorcière as an S rank!

358 : Anonymous Diver ID:I3x/N7Qh7

Just went to check myself: It's real.

376 : Anonymous Diver ID:l6VH1wcJL

S rank!? What the hell school is she at?

If it's one of the Big Four schools then nobody stands a chance at the Domain Tournament

378 : Anonymous Diver ID:/NDKU+31l

From the sound of it, even Apis doesn't know...

379 : Anonymous Diver ID:zjigIRSVT

What?

381 : Anonymous Diver ID:bmoRdkVXn

That's one hell of a claim there

385 : Anonymous Diver ID:xui8KneUt

>>378 if even Apis doesn't know I'm gonna laugh

Wait, no, I'm not. Some boondocks of a school just having an S rank student chilling there is Not Good

387 : Anonymous Diver ID:2iBLN8adb

well, goodbye to the balance of power

Purge-chan, you did it! It's your chance to finally take down Kisō for reals!

389 : Anonymous Diver ID:KyPObGvfa

Normally, a school would just make the announcement, though...

There's not even any reason you'd want to hide something like this

391 : Anonymous Diver ID:MxOg2ND38

>>389 Hide your ace until the Tournament starts, no?

402 : Anonymous Diver ID:X/mHnaBeq

Hey, the board just published a video of Sorcière clearing a dungeon

405 : Anonymous Diver ID:pRP8hPSSQ

saw it, but which one's the S rank?

406 : Anonymous Diver ID:+Yu6CzNa/

The one that fired off that unreal Convergence Bombardment at the end

408 : Anonymous Diver ID:MI0cxmRDG

Yeah, but which one of them!!? They both fired off Bombardments so strong it makes no sense to me!

One's Sorcière, sure, but then who the heck is standing next to her there!?

411 : Anonymous Diver ID:eOx2h9xDn

Ah. I see what's going on.

I get why they declared Sorcière to be S rank.

That's just straight up cheating.

413 : Anonymous Diver ID:LBMm8RbOb

>>411 sure she's strong, but is it really to that level?

Sure the Bombardment is strong, but if one attack was enough for S rank then the Heavenly Sword would be up there too.

415 : Anonymous Diver ID:eOx2h9xDn

I know a lot of y'all aren't going to get it from the video, so let me break it down for you.

Sorcière is, in that clip, running Convergence Bombardments **in parallel**.

Her own, and for the red-haired student next to her too.

You get what that means, at least, right?

417 : Anonymous Diver ID:GpdixnBml

That shit's impossible and everyone knows it.

Have you not read the research from Zirnius Academy's Sciences Department on Convergence Bombardment Theory?

It took them 10 years just to make a Convergence Formula that can produce a Bombardment within 10 seconds.

And that's even with the DiveGear users from that time putting everything they had into it!

Processing multiple is just not possible!

And producing a Convergence Bombardment by messing with someone **else's** mana is even **more** not possible!

419 : Anonymous Graduate Student ID:sLoCecEGf

Exactly!!! That's why everyone's making such a fuss over here!

Everyone from the student council president to the freshmen has been rounded up to try and recreate that Convergence Bombardment! It's all so stupid!

423 : Anonymous Diver ID:t91zbuJo9

Yo, one of the real nerds is out here tonight. How's it hanging?

426 : Anonymous Graduate Student ID:sLoCecEGf

I'm at the end of my rope, is how!

I wanna call it quits and go home!

It's so obvious that Sorcière's own ability is responsible for that thing; there's no way in hell we're going to be able to recreate it ourselves!

428 : Anonymous Diver ID:pTJWil9gN

Is it really that difficult to pull off?

430 : Anonymous Graduate Student ID:sLoCecEGf

>>428 It's not even in the same ballpark as "Difficult to pull off".

It's something that literally shouldn't be possible.

...Also, just to be clear, I'm only losing my mind over how she let the other person use a Convergence Bombardment with her. We actually did figure out how her Convergence Formula works.

431 : Anonymous Diver ID:0+0Jj9FgL

Ehhhh...

432 : Anonymous Diver ID:rHA9TCtHm

wait so, doesn't this mean all the zirnius students this year are gonna be using that convergence bombardment?

literally impossible to win against. what are the rest of us supposed to do?

435 : Anonymous Graduate Student ID:sLoCecEGf

Don't worry, it's not gonna come to that.

We pooled our stuff together to make a DiveGear with the right specs for it, but it crumbled to pieces with just one use.

And then the users also all crumbled to pieces.

Our Student Council... I'll miss them dearly.

437 : Anonymous Diver ID:NVVXTwYvY

The cream of the crop is as deranged as ever, huh. Running the experiment themselves...

439 : Anonymous Diver ID:GVi3cNi+K

So what this means for us is—Convergence Bombardment: Can Replicate. Anything else: Shit out of luck.

That other girl showed no sign of discomfort letting all that happen to her.

Which, honestly, I think we ought to be more scared of her mana control and her interference ability than the CB itself. Just looking at that makes me wonder what else she can pull off we haven't seen yet.

442 : Anonymous Diver ID:lpRHJhVRX

uh, in plainer terms pls?

443 : Anonymous Diver ID:sLoCecEGf

If Sorcière wants to, she can temporarily raise anyone else to the equivalent of S rank, basically.

Oh, also. I was around when that red-haired student was in for her examination. She was an average B rank at the time.

In any normal circumstances, there's no way she's able to fire off something like that.

446 : Anonymous Diver ID:E+az+cLyz

An ability to drag any diver up to S rank, regardless of their limits... Yeah, that's S rank for you.

Strong firepower, and a strong buff to boot.

448 : Anonymous Diver ID:fwEU+fWWc^[19]

...This makes her a Must-Have character, right?

449 : Anonymous Diver ID:39/NR+jts

A Must-Have that nobody has, yeah (confused)

453 : Anonymous Diver ID:u8htk4gCV

Hey, she at least has herself, right?!

455 : Anonymous Diver ID:MeSjOBd/W

Can I manifest that she's been a student at my school this whole time...

Well, actually, her hair color and how cute she is would give her away in an instant.

457 : Anonymous Diver ID:T4zIKCj7D

RGB gas mask, on a goth loli, with a huge scythe.

any one of those is eye-catching enough on its own, and yet we don't have a single sighting of her, how

459 : Anonymous Diver ID:NcUi2lhJI

If it were just the hair color, she'd fit right in with the Narō family. That silver with hints of blue is just like them.

462 : Anonymous Diver ID:jjKVRbEPf

But if she were a Narō, it'd be so simple to confirm...

465 : Anonymous Diver ID:lvcyckNny

That could also be a wig, maybe. Maybe she's got reasons she needs to hide herself.

But, anyway. She's cute this time, too...

466 : Anonymous Diver ID:Okbggpr1M

Alright, I've decided.

This year, I'm bringing a Sorcière book of my own to the Hinotsuchi Culture Festival. My schedule's already way too full, but I'm gonna keep drawing!!

468 : Anonymous Diver ID:skFJtX25z

And so another brain is overclocked by Sorcière.

470 : Anonymous Diver ID:tS315tststs

Sorcière... Just who the hell are you...!

17. Even a beautiful girl has one or two flaws.

Sorcière... Just who the hell are you...!

It's me!!!

Me, me!

That Mysterious Beautiful Girl!

That officially-recognized-as-an-S-rank Beautiful Girl!

Is! Me!

Yeeeeeay, Sorcière here!

«■■—■!»

Again, I didn't call on you, sit back down.

«■!?»

Opposition blasts in my mind, but I let it go in one mental ear and out the other.

Fuhaha, what are you capable of without a physical form, huh?

Current location: School.

Since we had finally gotten to eat a proper meal again after yesterday's events, I'm almost overflowing with energy. And I'd also been able to enjoy acting as Sorcière, I'd been able to help out Mizuhi-senpai, and I'd had some meat.

Let's give it our best in dungeon rescue again today!

"And let's get meat again today... And if we can the good stuff... Hm? Mizuhi-senpai?"

"!?—Oh, Kei, hey there."

I had just run into Mizuhi-senpai again on the way to the Student Council room. She beckoned me a bit closer, continually checking our surroundings for something.

"Are you already in the middle of something, so early?"

"Oh, no. It's nothing. We're going out for dungeon rescue, right? Let's get to that. C'mon. You ready?"

"Uh, okay."

I nod my head, as she rattles off a bunch of thoughts in some sort of fluster.

"Right, cool. Then let's hit the rear exit "The rear exit, and then where to?" —Mi, Miroku!?"

"Oh, good morning Miroku-senpai."

"Yes, it's a lovely one, Kei-kun. And now I've caught you, Mizuhi."

Miroku-senpai smiles sweetly as she moves up to grasp Mizuhi's hand.

"Wha, let me go! We've got to get going for the dungeon rescue."

"With your body in that state?"

And Miroku pokes her in the back, sending a wordless shriek out of her mouth as she crumples to the ground.

"Mizuhi-senpai!?"

"K, Kei. Let's. Get rescuing..."

"Yes, hello, dungeon rescue? I have confirmed visual on a colleague who needs assistance!"

Miroku-senpai lifts up the trembling Mizuhi-senpai, still with her sweet smile on.

"I'll have to bench you for today, Mizuhi. You really did push yourself too much yesterday, in that A rank dungeon."

"I'm totally fine. There's just a whole lot of pain stuck in my body right now."

"That's what we call 'not being fine', Mizuhi. It's alright, there, there."

"Igyu!? Hey, cut it—"

What a terrible fate she's fallen into. I don't see a single way out for her... Miroku-senpai has her completely at her mercy with a few pokes.

I get the feeling Miroku-senpai might be the type of person to have fun with someone when their foot falls asleep.

"Kei-kun, what about you? I hope you're not also pushing yourself, or I'll have to toss you in the infirmary as well."

"Oh, I'm totally fine. ...For real, though. Even if you stab at me, I don't feel anything out of the ordinary."

"You don't seem to be lying, at least. ...I wonder if this is an appropriate place to say 'as expected of you'."

Now, that's a bit of an oversell, I must say. It's not really *me* that's the strong one here. We should be thanking the venerable Star-Reader Staff for my resilience.

«■■■■»

Who I am still selling off at the first chance I get. I know a source of trouble when I see one.

«!?»

Anyway, while we let the Star Reader Staff filibuster into the part of my brain I'm ignoring on this fine morning, I tilt my neck to the side.

"Honestly, I think it's mostly since I dropped out of the fight partway through, so there wasn't much opportunity to push myself. And then right after, the ones fighting were Mizuhi-senpai here, and..."

"—Sorcière, hm."

The smile drops from Miroku-senpai's face.

I think, out of all the people I know, she might have the scariest expression when she turns serious.

"Mhm. If not for that mysterious diver, I can only imagine how that would have ended for us."

"Truly. Still, it's also part of the reason Mizuhi's been put in such a state, so I can't be entirely grateful about this..."

"Eh, really?"

Like, really? Put me on trial for my war crimes, please.

"Thanks to Sorcière interfering with her, Mizuhi was able to fire that Convergence Bombardment beyond her normal limits. And while the burden from doing such a thing was drastically lessened, it was only that—not zeroed out. The state she's in is her body rebounding from that."

"Is she, is that not dangerous then?"

In response to my spoken anxiety, Mizuhi just raises me a thumbs-up.

That's not good enough...

"Sorry, I should have done better..."

"Eh, how do you figure?"

Oh, snap.

".....I just couldn't help but think, if I'd been able to stay in the fight, that sort of attack wouldn't have been necessary to win, or something."

"Ah, I understand. But it's not something you need to worry much over. This is just the adverse reaction that comes from being around extremely dense magic like she was. And generally having sore muscles."

"Y, yep. And besides, that even dragged my limits, higyu!?"

"Quiet down, please, and settle down too."

That was way too close! I got so apologetic the apology just came out on its own.

"Still, I have to say it's striking that this is the second time Sorcière has gotten involved with what we're doing... And she's been officially recognized as an S rank, as well."

"The ability to temporarily raise other divers up to S rank, was it? It's a rather frightening ability. Just what sort of person is she...!"

I am also aware of the announcement the Apis Umbrella made. They stuck a classification of an ability / don't even know about, and it really sent me for a loop. Like hell I can actually do that. There'd be nothing to worry about if I could set loose other S ranks willy-nilly like that!

«■■■■»

Hell, I can actually do that?

So, I actually did temporarily raise Mizuhi-senpai up to S rank?

I was fully convinced that my Beautiful Girl Synergy with Mizuhi-senpai had caused a resonance, blooming out into a beautiful display of power... You know, like The Power of Friendship, or a secret move where, ignoring the rules of efficiency, two people combine into one for a finishing move...

«■■■■»

Oh, so that's real too, but it's different from what we did.

...Anything goes with you, huh. Seriously, I'm 100% sure I'll get dragged into something or other if I don't palm you off on someone else.

In a brilliant example of escapism from the reality of what this relic is capable of, I change the topic.

"Right, if Mizuhi-senpai won't be able to do dungeon rescue today, am I fine to head out by myself?"

"Ah, on that topic, I've already prepared a new partner for you."

"Partner?"

Miroku-senpai nods.

"She ought to already be eating breakfast in the Student Council room. Would you like to join us for a quick meal? It's stir-fry vegetables with the meat from yesterday."

"It'd be a pleasure!"

"Ah, my portion..."

Mizuhi-senpai reaches out toward the room, still carried over Miroku-senpai's shoulder. Miroku-senpai just turns another soft smile to her.

"Your organs still need to rest, I'm sorry to say. I've made you a jelly drink instead."

"More, more expensive than bean sprouts, and yet nowhere near as filling...!"

"Sorry again, Mizuhi-senpai..."

"Mm, no, I'm, I'll be fine. Just means my body was too weak to handle this. I'll get back on training real—m'gyah!?"

"And there you go again, always sneaking yourself off to train. ...I don't have to remind you what will happen if I catch you doing that again, do I?"

"...No."

You have my deepest apologies, Mizuhi-senpai. It's taking a lot of effort to not just drop to a dogeza right here and now.

While it's fact that Sorcière was necessary to win, having her also participate in the fight was entirely optional.

And yet, reaching out her hand on a whim is something that mysterious beautiful girls do! Plus, being acknowledged as another enemy there would have made things altogether way too complicated, so really, my only choice at the time was to pull the "Oh she's actually not a bad person" strat!

Yeah! It's all self-centered motivations! I'll apologize for it all once I've managed to turn myself into a beautiful girl!

"Alright, let's not waste any more time here."

Miroku-senpai takes me along to the Student Council Room.

If Miroku-senpai is not the one to join me this time, then that does just leave the only other student here at Fectom Comprehensive. And just beyond the door of the Student Council Room, a blonde girl sits, happily munching away at some meat.

"And so, it is my great pleasure to present you with your partner for today's rescue operations: Toa-chaaaaan!"

Said Toa-chan freezes at the declaration, her cheeks still stuffed with breakfast. Her gaze darts to and away from mine repeatedly as she gets up and bows her head several times.

"Look, looking forward to working with you today! I'll do my best to not slow you down!"

"Ah, same here."

She says that, but she's got a much longer track record with dungeon rescues than I do. And also, she's got enough ability to step in for Mizuhi-senpai being out of commission.

Basically, she's also probably really quite strong herself.

"Mi-, Miroku-chan, I don't suppose even now we could trade... No, yeah, right, that's right. Sorry. I'll, I'll do it. Yeah."

...I'm a little worried.

18. Each beautiful girl always bears the weight of someone's expectations.

Tsukimiya Toa.

I also call her Toa-chan, though only in my thoughts.

She's a timid first-year with the key character trait of blonde hair. And yes, that means she's in the same year as me, and my sole classmate here. Once Mizuhi-senpai and Miroku-senpai graduate, it'd leave just the two of us here by ourselves. ...That's kind of concerning!

"Let's, let's give it our best today!"

"Ah, yes."

I think Toa-chan is still not used to me being around. Even just sitting here, she has a reaction to every move I make.

...Though, I mean, I can't really blame her for any of that considering what I am. I'm a ^{piece of garbage} monster that suddenly appeared in a lovely garden of yuri. It's only natural that the severing of those yuri bonds would lay a heavy karma upon my shoulder.

Dammit. If only I had been a beautiful girl as well, it wouldn't have come to this...!

"What sort of approach have you, usually been taking for the, dungeon rescue?"

"I'd say I've mostly been following Mizuhi-senpai to requests that come in for her, if anything."

"I see...! I also would follow her lead in the times that I've assisted before, or, that's how it, seemed. So then, um, for today."

"...For now, how about we take a walk through the special district?"

"Su, sure thing!"

Late afternoon. Unlike when working with Mizuhi-senpai, there's a lot of time to kill. She's well-known enough that she gets direct requests, but I'm still a greenhorn in the roster. It puts me in a position where I can only track requests that get posted to the map, but today there are so few dungeons at all that nothing's coming in.

At least, nothing that it looks like we can handle.

"I, it'd be nice if we could manage to get one rescue done today. If we come back with no results, I imagine Mizuhi-chan is going to push herself too far again."

"Same here. One rescue, or honestly, even just one dungeon?"

Even the district we were walking around had the possibility of dungeons appearing near it, after all. And thought the chances of finding a fresh dungeon are small, it'd give us the rights to clear it, and if we clear it ourselves, that's a core for us right there. Umazing!^[20]

"A dungeon... I rarely see those around here. Plus, it, it's basically the frontline for a lot of other schools nearby."

Toa-chan puts her dismay on full display.

What she comments on is the large number of school buildings dotting the perimeter of the district we're currently in. Though, they're just school buildings in name and nothing more; they serve as lookout posts for the different schools to leap out from to lay claim to dungeons that appear. There's no way anyone's holding classes inside. The outside could sure fool you, since it's gotta be pretty good cover to not be blown at a glance.

But I already know what the insides are like.

Each and very one of these across the small horizon here is build to military standard. You could drop a vacuum bomb bomb here and they'd all shrug it off completely.

"Well, even if we did find one, with all these other students around we may find ourselves having to scrap for it."

And if it comes to that, our chances are quite slim.

If I, as Sorcière, had Mizuhi-senpai as my companion^[21], then we could take on anyone outside the students of the 4 big schools here, but today there is just me out of crossdress and Toa-chan.

It'd be like tossing two Maltese dogs into a savannah. Auuu...

"Ah, scrapping is, no good. ...Duels, too."

"Duels, huh? Though I have to say, I feel you'd have better chances if it came down to it. Plus, then they couldn't swarm you."

Fights over dungeon clear rights get more intense the higher grade a dungeon is. If it's B rank, it's something that could pull in most of the academy-city for an all-out brawl. But if it's just D rank, making a huge fuss out of it isn't worth the time it would take to clear, so it usually comes

down to a duel between the parties who happen on it first. And for us, the latter is a much more reasonable happenstance.

"Hahaha. If only it were that easy to stumble across a dungeon."

"R, right? Ahahaha."

""Hahaha.....?????""

Our voices overlap.

In this damn heat too early for spring, with the sun bearing down on us from above, we had just found it.

A space within a vortex.

A distortion of spacetime, and a hole that demarcates the beginning of the erosion of our world.

Yes, this is

""A dungeon!?"""

■

While the two of them were on their patrol, Mizuhi had been laid out on a bed.

Well, perhaps "had been put under house arrest" is more correct.

Miroku, nearby the door, was sorting through documents while keeping an eye on her.

"Are you worried about them?"

She murmurs the question, leaving her eyes on the documents.

"Mm."

Mizuhi responds with barely more than a noise as she stares out the window.

Under a sky fixed firmly clear and blue, a blue mood of its own has begun to spread.

Soon, summer will pay its early visit to Fectom again.

"The two of us will eventually leave Kei and Toa all on their own, when we graduate. ...Though I suppose the school might just go under first anyway."

"I wouldn't be so certain."

Miroku suddenly smiles.

"Ever since Kei transferred in, our debt repayment has sped up. And, if it's with the four of us together, we might actually be able to win the Domain Tournament."

"Even if we win, I have to wonder if *those guys* will keep their promise."

"I'll make sure they do. And, should I not be able to, there are any number of corporations out there that would be happy to help out a campus that managed to bring home victory in a Domain Tournament."

"...You've been happier, lately."

Mizuhi says that looking at her, and Miroku simply tilts her head, the rest of her keeping her posture.

"Is that so?"

"Mm. You smile a lot. Like how you used to."

"Well, I could say the same for you. Hadn't you noticed?"

"...Can't say I have."

Mizuhi starts feeling her own cheeks, and then clears her throat as if to distract both of them.

"Anyway, one day it'll be up to them to keep Fectom afloat. Kei's paralysis and Toa's firepower make a good match. It's good for both of them to get some experience together."

"And yet, you can't seem to calm yourself down."

"They should have gotten used to things in training, first. Toa hasn't had much live practice, and while Kei can certainly hold his own against anything a dungeon creates, he isn't good at landing hits on another person. He hasn't had to get that experience before."

That is the evaluation she had formed from watching them. Even comparing them to Mizuhi's own year of students, the two have very high potential.

But they just hadn't been able to turn that potential into its maximum output.

...No, perhaps it is that the environment that would prompt them to do so doesn't exist within Fectom's grounds.

"You certainly do a lot of worrying."

"Yeah? What about you."

"I do a little. ...But, I think that we can safely leave Toa in Kei's hands."

"Yeah. ...Yeah."

The ridiculously serious face of that male student comes to mind. Blue-silver hair, and blue eyes that always seem to have something locked firmly away inside them.

She realizes that having him around has, somehow, given her a sense of security.

"I suppose we should put that pair into regular rotation for dungeon rescue."

She returns a "That's a good idea" at a volume barely above a whisper.

Her determination shines anew, to see the two of them grow into divers that can even surpass herself, that she has to do her best to ensure this school can continue to exist for them.

Fectom Comprehensive Academy is, as it has so long been, in desperate times. Yet still, Terugami Mizuhi must fight against that. And, to that end—

The sensation I got from that Convergence Bombardment. If only I could read that moment again.

A higher stage of being, that originally she would never have stood on.

I must get stronger.

The flame certainly burns atop it.

19. It is a stipulation of being a beautiful girl that you do not allow for brain-destruction.

The two of us are stood completely shocked in front of the dungeon.

"We seem...to have found a dungeon."

"We sure have."

Hm? Is it fine to just go in and clear it?

Just the two of us?

A write-off villain without his buffs, and the frightful Toa?

"Ah, the mana depth is showing D rank. It might not be all that hard to clear."

"I see..."

Toa-chan is smiling a bit as she reports the mana analysis from her DiveGear. And, certainly, if she went and said it was something like B rank, I'd be at even more of a loss. If I were alone, I could dress up and take care of it easily, but Toa-chan is right here, and...

Now that I think about it, someone else is around just behind us. A fellow diver?

But as I turn my head to look, my vision is suddenly filled with straight swords^[22]

"!?"

The crimson bracelet manifests underneath my long sleeves, and my DVA spikes. I move out of the path of the sword, bringing my own dagger out and down on the hand of the other person, but they evade as well just before the hit would land.

"Ah, man, I missed my shot."

"...That's a hell of a greeting."

I adjust my grip, and step in front of Toa-chan.

In front of us stand 3 other students. I don't recognize their uniforms, which means they probably didn't show up in the original story.

What should I do? Beat them up?

"Could ya do us a favor and hand over that dungeon? We've got a quota to meet."

"I've got no reason to care about your quotas. I wouldn't mind selling it off and walking away, though."

"If you had the rights for clearing it already, then sure, I'd be down. But you haven't even set up the beacon for it, have you."

The beacon that represents clearing rights is something that gets mentioned all the time in the story. It provides which school has the rights to a dungeon, where it is, depending on the setup also reports the interior, and is also responsible for communication with the outside world and relaying rescue requests. Setting one up in the entrance of a dungeon means you get the clearing rights officially.

But in the first place, I don't even have a beacon for Fectom.

Those things cost money.

"...Toa-san, I don't suppose you have one on you."

"Ah, I do. Though, this situation..."

There's no way they'd let us set it up.

Thus, our two choices are scrapping it out here, or hitting the bricks about it.

"I've never seen you two around before, and you look pretty weak. It'd be better for you to just peacefully run along than bother fighting the three of us."

"Haha, Yuu-kun, don't scare them so much. This guy's pretty strong. You'd better call it quits while you're ahead, no?"

Right out of the universal script for mob characters...!

Since it's come to this, should I just rush in and get sent flying? I could Sorcière that way. However...

"Uu..."

There's a Toa-chan trembling in the shadows behind me. I can't just leave her to her own devices. She's not as strong as Mizuhi-senpai.

Handing it over here is probably the safer choice. The dungeon only read as D, so we wouldn't be getting much for it, anyway. I mean, it'd be a handsome amount for Fectom Comprehensive, but looking at it on the whole, it's not something we can't find again somewhere.

"...Alright, I got it."

"Good. I like people who can see reason. Though, I'm not interested in guys, so run off."

"Ha?"

Excuse me? My heart is that of a beautiful girl, I'll have you know.

"This group is nothing but guys, so it'd be nice to have even one flower to pretty up the place. If that girl comes along with us, I'll give you a nice MA crystal. Whaddaya say?"

"Hahaha, same as always, Yuu-kun! Make the girl cry!"

"Hey, woah! Those other times were just because they randomly decided to think Yuu-kun dumped them, right? It wasn't his fault!"

"Oh, you're right. Ahahaha!"

Hahaha. I see. These guys are mob enemies, *and* they go about stealing girls away^[23].

So it's fine for me to kill them.

"..."

"!? What's with this guy!? Suddenly swinging around a weapon like that!"

"Shit, I can't land a hit!?"

I will not forgive those who destroy yuri. I'll kill you all, and then my boy self at the end of it all.

Either that, or I'll make you all girls as well.

"You definitely cannot be allowed to exist."

"Why the hell would you go that far!?"

"Yuu-kun, this guy's bad news!"

I simply swing my dagger, direct at their throats. My specialty is evasion, so I have no skill with the blade, but I *do* have the determination to keep going until I get a hit in.

"This, this guy's strong! Yuu-kun, it's fine to use your ability!"

"Heard!"

The area around the leader-looking guy distorts in heat. A moment after, and fire spews from every part of his body.

I leap backward, bringing my weapon up again.

"Hahahaha. Now that I've used my ability, it's over, buddy! As long as these flames coil around me, you can't get close!"

I'll admit, that's a bit troublesome.

«■■■■■»

Sure, if I let you go wild, that's certainly a win. But I can't manage to crossdress right now, so it really puts me in a bind...

"And that's not all! I have a connection with *The* Kisō Academy! Just by defying me... your life as a diver is over, man."

"That so."

That very Kisō Academy which is going to be taken down a few pegs by the next Domain Tournament (spoilers)?

Touraku-kun is such a protag, crossing blades with Kisō before a year is out.

"You're just piling up fire. There's no way it'll stop my blade from reaching you."

"True. But, what about *this*!"

The leader-guy launches into a charge at me.

Hahaha. What a noob. To me, who has already dodged so many attacks from Rokuhara-san, this is like dodging an actual toddler.

As I'm thinking about that, he suddenly lurches to the side.

"Idiot. My target wasn't you at all!"

"...Huh?"

He continues without slowing down, toward where Toa is standing.

"Toa-chan!? Shit!"

You coward! How dare you be such an exemplary mook...

I try and chase after him, but the other two stand in my way.

"You think we'd let you?"

"Yuu-kun's hugs are pretty passionate. She might get burned."

"...Ah?"

Toa-chan? Get burned?

I refuse to let that happen.

«■■■■■»

No room to change. No time to, either. But that doesn't mean I can just ignore these boiling emotions.

«■■■■■»

I know.

I don't know how much I'll be able to get away with this, but at the very least, I'll cut them all to shreds.

"—Hooh."

I breathe out.

One mere second passes.

I open my mouth again.

"Sorci "Hold it right theeeeeereeeeeee!" ...è?"

«■?»

At that other voice, both me and the other two students stop. But, the leader-guy is approaching Toa-chan and—

"Ribbit."

A mechanical replica of a frog's croak is heard.

And, yeah, there's one small mechanical frog sitting right in front of Toa-chan.

"Hahaha, victory is mine!!"

He doesn't notice the frog, and the moment he attempts to move past it, it bursts in a flashy explosion.

As the smoke and flame swirl out from the explosion, we hear a scream.

"Gyaaaaaaaaah!!!"

""Yuu-kun!?"""

The leader-guy had been bowled over by the explosion, rolling around on the ground. Judging by the distance it sent him, it must have been pretty powerful.

"Toa-chan!"

I slip past the other two students while they're still stunned, and rush over to Toa-chan.

"*Cough, cough...*Kei-kun."

Even though she ought to have been right there in the explosion as well, she only has some dust on her, and not a single scratch.

Even though I swear she was standing right next to it when it went off...

"My Mā-chans aren't so indiscriminate. Their directionality makes them unique among the path of explosions."

A girl's voice answers the unspoken question.

Someone else appears within the special ward's wilderness. Kisō Academy's black uniform and her blonde hair with purple highlights make for a very bright entrance.

This girl, both I and Toa know of her.

"Appearing wherever the echo of Kisō Academy's name can be heard! Hard-focused on exposing Kisō, that daring streamer, yes, it is !! Purge-chan!"

The one responsible for Fectom Comprehensive's current circumstances, and the one to whom I own my thanks for getting Sorcière so popular, is standing right there.

20. Each beautiful girl is granted two things from the gods.

While dungeon livestreaming was not mentioned *that* much in the original story, it did still show up. Mostly at the start, since as the story shifted from the usual wish-fulfillment tropes into more hardcore ability-based combat, the streaming aspects stopped being written in.

Anyway, that's why I don't know all that much about the streaming culture, or the streamers themselves.

"Alright, you two, come on over here, come on! The camera's over there, so just give everyone a peace sign!"

So says Purge-chan, placing her hands around our shoulders and cozying up for a photo. Toa-chan is completely out of her element meeting an existence diametrically opposed to hers.

"Come on, Tsukimiya Toa-san, like this!"

"??? Y...yay?"

"Kyaaa socute!"

I know, right?!

"...So, what business do you have with us?"

"Let's cut a deal."

So says Purge-chan, blunt as you can be in front of a camera drone. Chat messages from her viewers scroll past on the window she has near her, but from my position the characters are all reversed, so I can't make anything out.

Oh, there's some "lol"s, though.

"You two are from Fectom Comprehensive Academy, a place that I dearly wish to learn a lot more about. So, this time, I'd love to be able to do some *official* reporting. As for the compensation—"

More frogs appear, surrounding her. It's a number that you'd be better off giving up on counting. And, since I know exactly how much power just one of them has loaded, I also know just what she's getting at.

"I'll lend you my help to get rid of these nuisances. They were using the name of Kisō to enact even more evil, too... It's two birds, one stone."

"...I'll inform our student council president about your coverage."

"Mn, mn, connection established! Alright, chat, looks like we've locked in Fectom as our next stream!"

She starts bouncing around, overflowing with excitement and energy.

Fire flies past her.

"...Tch. Missed."

The guy had formed the flames from his body into something like a ball, and had thrown it this way.

Is that supposed to be strong? It's kind of unclear, honestly.

"I've seen your face around before. You're that girl the morals committee and the Enforcer are always chasing after. I'll crush you all together, and I'll get a reward on top of it all!"

Dude, did you already forget what happened to you? You blew up, and not in the good way.

Besides the one who's hyped up on proclaiming our demises, there's Tagalong A and Tagalong B. Looking at them, I have to suppress an audible sigh.

Yeahh, we need to give these few a good beating.

"Well, Purge-chan-san, we'll be counting on—you?"

"...Haaah."

Turning to reconfirm that Purge-chan would be helping us here, I notice that she's sending an awfully cold glare at the other students. That plus the tongue clicking makes me wonder just where that joy she was showing a moment ago ran off to.

She seems to sense me staring at her, and quickly flips back around to a smile and nod.

"Yep, let's give it our all! Alright, to deal with these pieces of shit as quickly as possible: How about dueling them?"

"Dueling?"

"Uhm, as in, us, dueling?"

A duel is what they call it when there's only a few people fighting over the clear rights for a dungeon. With over 5 people involved, it's a little closer to what people call inter-school skirmishes.

"3v3. Dungeon in use will be the phantasm city. Fight until surrender, or annihilation... That should be fine, right?"

The casual declaration Purge-chan runs through is the standard rules for duels these days. A section of the city is replicated, about 50 meters of distance, and inside that space the

participants have a simulated fight to the death. Its most notable feature is that, after the duel concludes, everything is reset to its former state.

Which means, dying in the duel doesn't mean you die in real life.

In this modern era of dungeons, death has slowly become less necessary to avoid. Fear of death comes from the eternity of end that follows dying, but that preliminary step into death has become nothing more than a defeat condition for duels.

"That's fine with us, yeah. Since you're bringing it up, it means the fugitive has a dungeon core of her own, huh?"

"Of course. This one was pre~tty pricey."

Dungeons used for duels are regulated by the Apis Umbrella. Use of other dungeons is prohibited, and in cases where they happen anyway, revival after loss is difficult.

Also, these cores don't come cheap. Even if you do go for the cheaper end, that's still easily 10 million yen. Normally, it's something that several students pool together for and share ownership of, but all the signs point to this girl having one of her own.

You've got some savings to work with, miss streamer.

"Alright, dungeon going up~!"

Purge-chan tosses out a cubical, mechanical box. In a blink, our surroundings are replaced by a nondescript city. We're standing in the middle of a large crossing, on a wide road, the paint boxing in both us and the other three. A traffic light of sorts hangs in the blue sky, counting us down to the duel one light at a time.

As that all starts, Purge-chan looks over at us.

"This duel is just a minor act in the show, so let's get it over with quickly. I'll sow chaos with my explosions. You find what chances you can get to swing your dagger. And Tsukimiya Toa-san, cleanup we'll leave to you, m'kay? Your firepower ought to be good enough, I'd think."

"...Got it."

"Ah, mm, I'll do my best."

Toa-chan brings up the field cannon that's larger than she is. I can't help but think of it as something stolen off a massive robot or mecha and that she then picked up, with how incongruous an image she and it cut.

I've only seen it fire the deterrent shot at Rokuhara-san, so I wonder how much power it really holds.

...No, actually, this student calling herself Purge-chan knows way too much about us. Why would she have had the need to look into us?

Still, the countdown didn't leave me enough time to ask that question. The final light blinks on red, and a buzzer blasts sound into the dungeon.

"This is barely going to fill one clip."

With a relaxed tone, and still streaming all the while, Purge-chan kicks off, and her entourage of frogs follows her. I myself fall in line just behind those.

"To think you'd just run straight at us!"

"Mā-chans."

She ignores the fired-up fellow's statements, and dispassionately vocalizes an order. The wave of frogs swells around her, and descends upon the three of them. It only takes a moment before they surround the trio, and detonate.

"Gyaaah!"

"Yuu-kun, this could be bad!"

"I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die!!"

Knowing that death here isn't permanent, I send myself into the barrage of explosions. The billowing flames warp themselves around me, opening up a safe path.

"Woah."

Through the flames I go, rushing in right to where the three of them are.

"!? This bast—"

By the time even one of them notices, it's already too late. I drop one, then another, and quickly clean up with the third, all paralyzed.

And the smoke and flames seem to clear just at the right time.

One singular frog jumps in, right in front of where I'm standing.

"!?"

With my speed of thought still accelerated from the crimson bracelet, I order my body to move. It, through the mana flowing through me, on top of a diver's already elevated status, jumps out of the way just as the frog detonates.

"Ah! Sorryyyy, are you alright!?"

"...Hooh. Just fine."

Purge-chan comes running over to where the impact sent me, quickly brushing debris and dust off my uniform.

"That uniform, like I thought, it's oversized."

"Eh?"

Is this really the time? It is oversized, though.

"Ah, I think it's time for the finisher!"

She raises her hand as a signal before I can get the doubts to turn into words.

Toa-chan nods at the sign, and aims her cannon at the paralyzed trio. The mechanical frame of it begins gathering light. In fact, all of the light from her surroundings is being drawn inside the cannon.

On seeing that, Purge-chan says:

"Now that, is a proper Convergence Bombardment."

Eh? Toa-chan's Convergence Bombarding!? Even though so few characters in the entire story got to? Just like Miroku-senpai, she's weirdly a stand-out in the cast... Is there a pattern to Fectom's students?

"The absorption of the ambient mana in one go. The user's DiveGear processes it according to a formula, and makes it available for the user to control. It's bundled up, and shot out in one glorious moment, Convergence and Bombardment."

Just as she says, the process is happening right here. Several magic circuits have begun turning like a set of gears around Toa-chan. The artillery, which was stunning in its clean condition, is groaning and straining against the light gathering in its bore. Toa-chan herself, bathed in the particularized light and wielding that giant weapon steadily, looks so beautiful I'll have to take that aesthetic into consideration for myself later.

Before long, Toa-chan lets out one large breath, and says:

"Firing."

The *boom* of the shockwave rushes over us all together with the wind in its wake. Golden light plunges through the dungeon, scarring asphalt into shards as the windows of the nearby buildings burst and glisten.

It doesn't even take a second to swallow up the other students.

Breathtaking.

That's all I can think of the sight.

I've always been on the side firing the Bombardment, but to think that it's something with this amount of presence to it.

No, honestly, this one might have outright eclipsed even the output of Star-Reader Staff.

"So this... is a Convergence Bombardment."

"It's awe-inspiring, isn't it~ One of the strongest solution we've inherited from the very dawn of diving. An offensive use of mana that, from then to now, no one has been able to surpass. ...Dreadfully lovely, isn't it?"

"Yeah, for sure."

I answer, still in a state of shock.

Above our heads, the buzzer rings out again in the clear blue sky, indicating the end of the duel.

21. Beautiful girls are permitted anything, even falsehood.

The duel had ended in under a minute.

The three students we had reduced to nothing more than ash were revived at the same time the dungeon was packed back away. They come to rather vacantly, maybe from taking an entire Convergence Bombardment to the face.

"Alright, will the losers kindly turn tail and head back now?"

"...Tch. Let's go."

The other students have an air of resentment to them at her words, but they do in fact turn tail without bothering to hide that.

I formally thank her this time.

"Thank you so much for your help."

"Think nothing of it. That's the relationship we have, right?"

She hugs both me and Toa-chan in her overly friendly way.

Man, girls smell nice...

"With, that, done, I've got a little question for the two of you."

With both of us firmly in hand, she continues.

"Sorcière is a student of Fectom Comprehensive Academy, isn't she. ...Just which student might she be?"

"..."

"Oh, what's wrong, Narō Kei-san? Not used to having a girl so close to you? Tehe."

Our eyes certainly meet as she says that. Her gaze is penetrating and cold, despite her smile. Ones that, as soon as you see them, you understand that the rest is just a projection, a facade.

"All you divers out there! Did ya see that duel just now? I dare say that was some evidence, I do!"

She returns to firing up the chat through her drone's camera.

She must have deduced Sorcière's true identity already, to be able to speak so confidently on it.

"That day, I stood right next to Sorcière when she fired off her Convergence Bombardment. Thus, I remember it well, her power."

She draws up her memories and lists off information, with no hesitation to be seen. Eventually, in the loudest voice she's used today, she declares:

"The true identity of the girl called Sorcière—is you, Tsukimiya Toa-san!!!"

A moment of silence is held.

Toa's trembling voice finally breaks the pause.

"I, incorrect..."

"Huh?!"

Hahaha, she's a bit foolish after all.

"That level of output ought to be hard proof of being Sorcière, though... Eh hh..."

Clearly not being able to accept things immediately, she keeps running her gaze over Toa-chan.

Well, until it gets to her chest, where the eyes pause.

"...Certainly, they weren't that big."

"Uu..."

Don't bully her like that!

"Purge-chan-san, if you keep pushing this it's going to be troublesome."

"Ah, right, sorry. My disposition pushes me to find something out by any means necessary once it's caught my interest... I went a bit too far there. Sorry, Tsukimiya Toa-san."

She bows her head with a penitent expression. Toa-chan must have realized there was no ill intent in the first place, so she hasn't even gotten angry.

Indeed, fellow beautiful girls get along well.

"Well, I suppose we can close today's case at rebuffing some villains, and not being able to find Sorcière out. ...Anything else?"

She's wrapping up her stream by curating a summary herself.

"Alright, then we'll meet again at Fectom Comprehensive Academy! Otsu-Jōka~!"

She starts waving her goodbye to the drone, and as I hear in my ear "Wave at them with me, would you?", both me and Toa-chan join her.

Yaaaay, senpais, are you watching?

"—aaand, done. Thank you."

She releases us finally after confirming the stream properly ended.

"Oh, thank you as well, for all the help earlier."

"Think nothing of it. That was an evil birthed by the atrocity of Kisō Academy; dealing with them is my duty."

She gets so serious talking about that subject.

"And once again, my apologies, Tsukimya Toa-san. I got lost in the thought that I had managed to sneak up on Sorcière."

"Ah, no, um, thanks for the help anyway."

"Now before anything e/se happens, quick, let's set up that beacon."

"Ah, mm."

Toa-chan produces a mechanical stake, around 50cm long, from her DiveGear, and drives it into the ground just in front of the dungeon's entrance. And then starts fiddling with some settings.

I see. So that's the sort of item that one is meant to keep in their DiveGear's extended storage. But then, where would I keep my crossdressing kit?

"Alright, while she gets that set up for us, mind if I pull you aside to work out the details for my next stream?"

"Eh? Wait I thought we were waiting for the student council to clear that first—"

She pulls me aside with a strength you could hardly believe she has, and moves us quite a bit away from where Toa-chan is working.

This person's kinda scary.

"Sorryy, I just *had* to confirm things where I can, right, *Sorcière*?"

"...Of all the things I thought you'd open with."

I've b-b-b-been f-f-f-found out!?

What!? How!?

"It's because I was convinced you were *Sorcière* that I turned off the stream, *miss*^[24]. From here, it's talk between us two girls."

"I'm really not *Sorcière*, though, is what I'm saying."

"I wonder."

Purge-chan turns her gaze to my head.

"Hair color and height match up. More damningly, you dodged my Mā-chan's surprise explosion."

"Ugh, that last frog wasn't a mistake, then."

"Hahaha, of course not."

That very last attack from her was fully intentional, it would seem!

Isn't this girl kind of actually dangerous?

"I had already made the assumption from our conversation at that experimental facility that *Sorcière* was actually one of Fectom's students. The question left was, which one? Terugami Mizuhi fought alongside *Sorcière*, and with her appearance listed on the Umbrella's records, it couldn't be her. Aohoshi Miroku, for similar reasons and also her output level, impossible. The only other possible girls it could be were then the Tsukuyami Toa who can fire a Convergence Bombardment, and yourself."

She directs a finger at me, a smile full of confidence flowing onto her face.

"The reason for making things a duel was so I could see that Convergence Bombardment for myself. If it was just wiping the floor with them, I could do that all on my own."

"...Well, that certainly explains why you came so prepared for everything."

The frogs she used in the duel were specced way past the power necessary for this duel. The reason she pulled us Fectom students into things was just to see what our kits look like. I can understand that.

Wait, no. This might also mean that the strangely convenient circumstances themselves are something she somehow put together.

"As you've seen for yourself, my registered gear is this dagger. I don't have anything even close to that iconic scythe."

"That's something a person can hide any number of ways. What I was looking at, was your eyes—"

And she suddenly throws a punch at me, in the middle of her sentence. While she's both a girl and a student, those labels don't mean much in light of her diver status, and her fist is literally tearing through air as it approaches me.

The crimson bracelet manifests, raising my acuity, and with that elevation in perception, I have no issues cleanly dodging.

...Oh.

"Just like I thought, *those* eyes. Just like Sorcière's. It's not dodging based on experience, but observation through eyesight and then reactive motion. You've got a marvelous pair of eyes on you, and it's no use trying to hide from me any longer."

"I..."

Shit.

How did I lose to the exposé streamer!?

Purge-chan closes in on me as my hands grow sweaty with concern.

"It was a blind spot for me. To think, Sorcière was *pretending to be a guy*."

"...Weh?"^[25]

"Still playing coy? The androgynous voice, and a uniform one size too large to conceal your figure—no matter how you look at it, you're a girl in the first place, right?"

She's still staring intently at me. Her gaze makes clear I have no more outs here, and all I can do in response is let out a small sigh.

Let's get things in order real quick.

Purge-chan knows that I am Sorcière.

However, she does *not* know that I crossdress for that.

The mysterious beautiful girl has not been outed as a cringe crossdressing guy.

The mysterious beautiful girl has instead been outed as a girl who crossdresses as a guy.

This is a big difference. It's massive!

Actually, this might even mean we have a chance here.

...Toa-chan is going to take a bit longer, on her side.

Alright.

"...Haah."

I shift my line of sight downward, listless or melancholic. The gaze of the decadent and corrupt.

It's good if it also reads as a bit sleepy.

I purse my lips together, to appear more curt.

And, finally, bringing my larynx up, I speak with a higher voice than usual.

"Yours is a tenacity I can't say I'm fond of, miss stalker."

^{misunderstanding}
The big wave has rolled in, and I've no choice but to ride it out.

22. Beautiful girls (Violation of the Act against Unjustifiable Premiums and Misleading Representations) can still not be regulated by the legal system

"Narō Kei", the character, is one who's features really suit dressing femme, and I am not the first to think that.

Outside of the story, there were illustrations where some particular minds drew illustrations of Kei being forcefemmed, and in general the community treats the pushover quite nicely.

But still, I never realized just how suited he was.

Hello. I'm the resident (boy dressed as a) girl who's dressed as a guy.

At some point, I've ended up in a nesting doll of character traits.

"You've used the assumption well that Narō Kei is male, but that hasn't gotten past me. Did you even have your school records changed?"

"...You've got a good head on your shoulders."

Forget 'getting past', if you go *anywhere* past your assumptions, it's all chaos anyway at this point.

Although, maybe I'm the odd one for thinking it's logical to crossdress and do what I do.

"So? What manner of business do you have with me? And I'd quite appreciate if you'd keep it brief."

"Right, that makes sense. Then, to get right to it—Please help me take down Kisō Academy."

"I don't want to."

You're asking me to do something as stupid as blowing the original plot to smithereens.

"...You know as well as I do that Kisō conducts illegal experiments. I believe the DemonGear that you're chasing is one of those."

"Indeed."

Is that true?

I, am chasing after a DemonGear?

Is that the story we're going with?

"Kisō Academy, through the arm of Rokuhara, has gotten their hands on a new DemonGear. It's the same specimen that was in the facility within Fectom's grounds."

Now that you mention it, yeah, Rokuhara-san was certainly looking for something like that. I figured he'd be capable of finding it, and wouldn't you know it, he's gone and did it.

That's nice, no I guess that's not nice at all.

"...And, with that, Kisō Academy becomes the proud owner of a second DemonGear."

"Right. If they find a person suited to wield the second one, Kisō is certain to point both of them in war against all the other schools. They need to be stopped before that happens."

I get what you're saying.

But! Touraku-kun will do something if that comes to pass, so everything's hunky-dory!

Besides. Rokuhara-san is going to find himself interested in Touraku-kun, and end up betraying Kisō (spoilers). There's essentially just the one DemonGear to worry about. And just one stands no chance against Eina and Lutra.

Still, such is the optimism of someone who's already read ahead from where we are. For someone like Purge-chan here, it's actually quite the messed up situation, I imagine.

I want to put her at ease, somehow.

"Currently, I cannot myself take action."

"But why? You know the terror of the DemonGear yourself, don't you!?"

Hmmm, let's just trick her with something insubstantial.

"...The time has simply not come, yet."

"Sorcière... What do you know?"

"I know all of what you do not, and I know of the calamities to befall the future."

While saying that, I turn my eyes to the sky, for precisely no reason whatsoever.

Such movements are the essence of the beautiful girl.

"The time for movement has not arrived. Everything follows in the revolution of the stars. If the chance comes, understanding will arrive with it."

"...Are you telling me to accept that reasoning?"

"It's fine even if you don't. But, do try to understand it. Right now, you cannot win against them in the domain you move in right now."

Rokuhara-san in particular is trouble. If you don't wait for him to switch to Touraku-kun's side, you're in for some pain for sure. Definitely do not make him your enemy. It's a warning you can trust because I'm the one giving it.

"But, if you were there with me..."

Aren't you praising Sorcière a little too much? Sure, I'll grant that she is the Mysterious, Transcendental, Powerhouse, Unrivalled, Ultimate Beautiful Girl, but if it comes down to fighting Rokuhara-san, he's on equal footing or maybe even a bit stronger, you know? And if we're unlucky enough to come across Kisō's student council, for example, I'm pretty confident we'd lose.

"Truly, one must wonder if you conceive the threat to be just that which you see. / see a girl so caught up in brushstrokes, she can't discern the larger painting."

"..."

Purge-chan is silent, biting at her lip. Why do you find this so vexing? Antis^[26] are far scarier than I'm being.

Still, if I just leave it there, she's likely to try and do something herself anyway.

"...When the time does arrive, I will call upon you. Will that suffice?"

She raises her head again at those words.

There's a good girl, just hand me your leash of your own accord.

"You mean that?"

"Indeed. It's not as if the previous statements will forever hold water against the incoming tides. At least, when it comes to seeing Kisō Academy wash away."

According to the plot, it holds one of the early major bosses, so it truly won't be long before it comes crumbling down.

Until then, Purge-chan can help me hold her back.

"No way, you already have a plan laid out for Kisō to...!?"

"That's correct."

And I think it's good to leave those matters at that.

So, play along with me, would you?

"They mean to use the DemonGear to ends far distant than what was intended. Those exist for humanity itself. It is only in using them as they were meant that their true value can be seen."

"Just, how much do you actually know about the DemonGear...!?"

To her question, I set on my absolute coolest expression.

"Everything."

"..."

She falls silent, perhaps from the shock.

Ahhhahahaha, this person is so *fun*. She has a reaction for every single thing I say.

Alright. Let's get a few more Mysterious Girl Moves in while we can!

"Their origin lies in opposition to one certain phenomenon, forged relics given form. The original hope that this world has brought forth."

Plot knowledge has such unbelievably good affinity with Mysterious Girl Moves. I'm literally just reciting the most egregious of all spoilers there are to choose from, but to someone inside that very story it can only be recognized as omniscience, or nearly that.

I focus my gaze onto hers.

"That is why me *and mine*^[27] have always kept close eye on the DemonGear."

"You...and yours?"

"As I said. Me and mine—No, I ought to stop there. Your part is just to destroy Kisō Academy. Isn't that right?"

I softly stroke her hair.

It's fine because she thinks I'm a beautiful girl!

It's just barely fine, because she thinks I'm a beautiful girl!

Then, I show an abrupt but soft smile.

"There is no need for a girl such as you to peek further into the abyss."

P.F.C.

True beauty...

If one were to somehow dispassionately observe this scene, then I'd look like nothing more than a nutcase who crammed declaration after declaration into my words, with none of this blabbing even asked for, but for Purge-chan, fully swallowed up in the ambience, there's no way she would notice that.

God, playing the Mysterious Beauty is so *fun*!

"Sorcière, you... you all—Just what exactly are you planning for?"

"Our goal has been one and the same from the very start of everything—the salvation of humanity."

With those words, I bring my hand up to *my own long hair* and, with a sweep, hit another post.

...Hm!?!?!?!?

My hair!?!? Is long!?!?

"That form..."

"My, does it come as a surprise?"

It does to me too, for the record. My uniform itself hasn't changed, but everything aside from that is the appearance of when I am Sorcière-ing about.

I just have one question: Why!?

«■■■i!»^[28]

It was you!

...Wait, I still don't get what you actually did. Stage magic? I get that you're paying close attention to the mood, but there's no way to explain the situation to Toa-chan now. She takes her eyes off me for a second, and then the male student she was just on patrol with now has long hair.

She's just gonna be plain perplexed.

«■■■■»

Oh, you can reverse it? You're more flexible than I thought.

...I guess I don't need the wig anymore, in that case. I have to admit, you are pretty useful after all.

«■■■■■!»

But it's kind of scary, though. It means you're meddling with my body, right?

Isn't that, like, dangerous?

"....."

Hey, don't just clam up.

Hey!

"Haah."

A physical sigh slips out before I can stop it. Look, if you're going to grow out my hair, the least you can do is also make me a girl while you're at it.

...Hm, actually, never mind. I think using you to do that is still too dangerous a call.

"—|..."

Hm?

"I don't care. I don't care if I have to use the abyss, or whatever it might be, as long as Kisō Academy will no longer stand. ...No, even just as long as I can have my revenge."

Purge-chan is making declarations with a pretty resolved expression.

What is she on about?

Can we please not progress things I don't understand both inside and outside of my headspace?

"Is that so. It seems you may be a girl I can have expectations for, then."

But confusion will not stop me from continuing to Mysterious Beautiful Girl.

Because it's too fun not to.

I also transmit my contact address to Purge-chan through the DiveGear.

"This..."

"When the time is right, I will let you know."

You're really interesting, so I'm going to tease you from time to time. Also, I want this connection so I can put a muzzle on you, as the only person who knows my real identity.

Just then, a voice calls out to us both.

"Beacon calibration, is, complete now!"

Faster than her sentence can finish, my hair shimmers and shifts. Woah, instant! And touching it to check, it's back to exactly its previous length. Yeah, this is real convenient!

«■■■■■»

However, that doesn't mean I've fully decided to not sell you.

«■!?»

I quickly mumur to Purge-chan, while she turns her attention to Toa.

"With that, our conversation shall conclude."

"...Yes."

She nods, ever so slightly.

"S-so sorry about that! It's the first time I've ever found a dungeon myself, so I got lost running through the configuration...!"

"Ah, no worries. It's something I ought to have been doing, so it's my fault for leaving it all on your shoulders."

"No, no, you've got nothing to apologize for! Ah, um, it seems the two of you reached an agreement on the talk about streaming, I think?"

Purge-chan and I exchange glances.

"...Well, it does seem like I'll have to run it by your student council after all, so I can't say much has been decided on. It kinda ended up as just a chatting session for a bit."

"Yeah, it kinda did."

"Ah, mm, I see."

Purge-chan walks a bit closer to Toa-chan and gives her a swift little bow.

"And with that, I'm afraid I have to be going now! I wish you luck on the dungeon clear!"

"Th, thank you so much!"

"You really helped us out there, Purge-chan-san."

We wave her off, and she returns a small wave of her own. I get the feeling that she also slightly nods in my direction, but really, that's probably just my imagination.

"Well, shall we go clear this dugeon, then?"

"Uuu, I'll do my best..."

"So will I. To think our patrol became this big of a trip..."

I look at her, and she looks at me.

We set our minds to the task, and enter the dungeon.

Please, be a small fry. *Please*, be a pushover—

23. Stare into the Beautiful Girl, and the Beautiful Girl stares back.

"Yours is a tenacity I can't say I'm fond of, miss stalker."

The girl in front of her let out a sigh of exasperation. The true face behind the mask, behind the boy "Narō Kei", who had been acting right and proper just moments prior.

There stood this city's one abnormality. The one placed within S rank as an exception—
Sorcière.

"You've used the assumption well that Narō Kei is male, but that hasn't gotten past me. Did you even have your school records changed?"

"...You've got a good head on your shoulders."

Contrary to her words, her mood belied that she held no interest. It was as if she was saying without words that being found out was within her expectations.

I've finally forced my way to confirming her identity. I can't let this chance slip...!

To Kirara Kuramu, this was a chance that she couldn't imagine coming more than once in her lifetime. The other girl here was *the* talk of the entire academy-city, an S rank, and even stood opposed to the DemonGear project. If she could just make her an ally, it would be reassuring beyond belief.

"So? What manner of business do you have with me? And I'd quite appreciate if you'd keep it brief."

Sorcière showed the type of expression that one would make looking around and seeing a flying insect about.

"Right, that makes sense. Then, to get right to it—Please help me take down Kisō Academy."

"I don't want to."

A curt reply. Such is long enough to contain the emotions of a girl with no sky above her own.

Yet Kuramu would not back down from just that.

"...You know as well as I do that Kisō conducts illegal experiments. I believe the DemonGear that you're chasing is one of those."

"Indeed."

"Kisō Academy, through the arm of Rokuhara, has gotten their hands on a new DemonGear. It's the same specimen that was in the facility within Fectom's grounds."

Sorcière nodded at her words.

"...And, with that, Kisō Academy becomes the proud owner of a second DemonGear."

"Right. If they find a person suited to wield the second one, Kisō is certain to point both of them in war against all the other schools. They need to be stopped before that happens."

A short moment, devoid of noise, passed. Sorcière sank into silence, seemingly in thought, and eventually surfaced herself while still sounding like it was nothing more than letting out a breath.

"Currently, I cannot myself take action."

"But why? You know the terror of the DemonGear yourself, don't you!?"

She could not understand.

She was able to grasp that Sorcière knew much about the truth of the DemonGear. But with that premise, she ought also to have known that Kisō Academy, a stain on the map of the academy-city, could not be allowed to come into possession of two DemonGear.

From where Kuramu stood, there was no conceivable reason to refuse her here.

"...The time has simply not come, yet."

"Sorcière... What do you know?"

"I know all of what you do not, and I know of the calamities to befall the future."

With her declaration, Sorcière's gaze drifted up, to the open sky. Kuramu found herself with no right to ask her what drove her to put those thoughts to spoken word.

"The time for movement has not arrived. Everything follows in the revolution of the stars. If the chance comes, understanding will arrive with it."

"...Are you telling me to accept that reasoning?"

"It's fine even if you don't. But, do try to understand it. Right now, you cannot win against them in the domain you move in right now."

She replied without meeting her gaze.

And yet, Kuramu still hung on.

"But, if you were there with me..."

At those words, emotion seemed to stir within Sorcière for the first time. Her eyes, frozen over by despair and doldrum, turned themselves to point at Kuramu.

"Truly, one must wonder if you conceive the threat to be just that which you see. / see a girl so caught up in brushstrokes, she can't discern the larger painting."

This, she already knows about me, too? Just how deep does her knowledge run...

Sorcière's words pointed out she knew what Kuramu's true goal was, somehow. The true goal Kuramu had hidden in the shadows of her slogan of crushing Kisō.

She had seen through it all.

And she can get away with doing that because my words are hollow to their core.

Her great cause, protecting public order within the academy-city, was just a convenient framing, and Sorcière knew that.

So, then, just what had her words sounded like from the other side, up until now?

"..."

The frustration mixed in with the embarrassment of a plan being foiled before her eyes, and the resulting rage swirled within her, with no target. Before she noticed it, she was clenching her fists tightly.

Sorcière, seeing that, let out her voice again as if this were something that also was inevitable.

"...When the time does arrive, I will call upon you. Will that suffice?"

"...You mean that?"

Salvation.

Sorcière had seen through every lie, and yet still decided to indulge Kuramu's words. And Kuramu also understood that even being allowed into this small fold was something Sorcière had planned for.

"Indeed. It's not as if the previous statements will forever hold water against the incoming tides. At least, when it comes to seeing Kisō Academy wash away."

"No way, you already have a plan laid out for Kisō to...!?"

"That's correct."

Sorcière's nod of assent carried no hesitation; this, as well, she saw as obvious.

"They mean to use the DemonGear to ends far distant than what was intended. Those exist for humanity itself. It is only in using them as they were meant that their true value can be seen."

"Just, how much do you actually know about the DemonGear...!?"

To her question, Sorcière aligned their gazes once more, and says:

"Everything."

"..."

Those frigid eyes shone more lucid than ever before. Their sharpness a blade of their own, the tip held just below her neck; their depth equal to the ocean's, oppressive just to exist near. Just being glanced at was enough for her soul to contemplate leaving her here.

"Their origin lies in opposition to one certain phenomenon, forged relics given form. The original hope that this world has brought forth."

Sorcière's words continued to piled up. No hesitation, no lack of clarity—she seemed to know everything there was to know about this world.

"That is why me and mine have always kept close eye on the DemonGear."

"You...and yours?"

"As I said. Me and mine."

After a moment of consideration, Sorcière shook her head slightly.

"No, I ought to stop there. Your part is just to destroy Kisō Academy. Isn't that right?"

Sorcière softly ran her hand through Kuramu's hair. Her touch, which ought to have been icy and terrible to receive, carried with it a strange sense of comfort and understanding.

Then, the girl smiled. An expression so kind, it seemed almost incongruous with what she had shown up until this point.

"There is no need for a girl such as you to peek further into the abyss."

"Sorcière, you... you all—Just what exactly are you planning for?"

The girl took one step back. In the next instant, the ambient depth of magic dropped, sharply.

!? What is this!?

She could feel that Sorcière's magic was swelling. Divers are typically unable to emit their mana outside their own bodies, thus, for a long time the meaning of one's individual strength has been the use and control of ambient mana instead.

One's own capacity for mana is a much more eloquent descriptor of an individual's true strength than any spoken word. And it was because of that, that Sorcière disclosed her mana to Kuramu here.

She has complete control over all of this...!? The student council president can't even compare. This is something far more powerful, far more terrifying...!

What might "the abyss" be? Kuramu, at least, understood. This girl here was the abyss herself, and the oblivion of the academy-city.

"Our goal has been one and the same from the very start of everything—the salvation of humanity."

She declared their slogan, and flung her hair out, like marking the end of the first act of a legend on a theatre stage, before the curtain would fall. Her hair, quite short only a single moment prior, flowed out now in waves of blue and silver.

"That form..."

Kuramu bit back a breath. That form was, as an older text might put it, both beautiful and terrible.

Forcing a change of her own body through the use of mana? Sure, I've heard it's possibly in theory, but doing it in practice, and without changing the color of a single strand... A frightening level of mana control; I can see how she can interfere with the people around her, now.

Kuramu internally had to update her evaluation of Sorcière, from temporary S rank to someone in a tier above even that. From someone she wanted to make an ally, to a different type of life that she ought to never incur the anger of.

"My, does it come as a surprise?"

Kuramu had so many words fighting to escape her, and yet none of them would align to form any proper sentence. She was simply overwhelmed.

An overwhelming amount of mana, and the skill to freely weave it. Her own past self rejoicing that she had discovered Sorcière's true identity, now miniscule in comparison.

I had assumed I could talk to her as an equal, but... I couldn't have been more wrong.

"Haah."

A disappointed sigh.

Disappointed.

Disappointed at what?

She rewound her thoughts, to why Sorcière had spoken in the first place.

Normally, if you unmask someone like this, you get erased. She had plenty of chances to kill me.

And yet, she hadn't. Kuramu discovering her true identity was not worth more than a second of her concern.

Therefore, why?

Why had she talked at length about the DemonGear?

Why had she alluded to a larger organization, hiding in the shadows?

Why, even now, did those eyes belie her waiting for something?

She saw through everything I had. Then, she taught me about so much more. So... There's no point in keeping up appearances, then.

As long as it was not her egotism. As long as it was not her misunderstanding.

Sorcière must have seen something within the girl named Kirara Kuramu.

Kuramu herself had no qualities she could take pride in when dealing with others. Yet, she did still have that dusk-colored zeal smoldering in her to spur her onward.

"—I..."

Thus, there was only to put that zeal to word.

"I don't care. I don't care if I have to use the abyss, or whatever it might be, as long as Kisō Academy will no longer stand. ...No, even just as long as I can have my revenge."

Her great cause was, at the end of it all, just the facade. Everything she did was for the sake of her revenge.

She stood here for the sake of only one girl: Kuramu herself.

"Is that so. It seems you may be a girl I can have expectations for, then."

Their eyes met again. Not as the one-sided gazes from prior to now—in this moment alone, they stood as equals.

She was left to wonder what that might mean.

The reverie broke as a single contact address was transmitted to her DiveGear.

"This..."

"When the time is right, I will let you know."

There were no more words that could be spoken.

Before long, a timid voice could be heard. With a glance to her side, the long hair receded to its previous length, and there stood Narō Kei, in her usual appearance.

So this is Sorcière...

The warm smile that appeared looking back at Tsukimiya Toa seemed completely sincere.

24. Even beautiful girls sometimes find things unforeseen.

We'd gotten tangled up with an odd sort of streamer, but the consequences were pretty fun.

I still can hardly believe that Purge-chan was willing to take all of my words at face value...

"Ah, we have vision."

Toa-chan points her finger to the sky. A snake can be seen swimming through the air above the devastation on the ground.

Going by the era this dungeon is set in, this must be this area's kami^[29].

"Looks like that's the boss this time."

"Mm, it seems so."

Currently, the two of us are inside a dungeon that seems to be D rank. While we are technically exploring, the entire surface inside is in a rather destroyed state, and we haven't gone much of anywhere at all, yet. Since we went through all that trouble of winning the duel for the rights to this place, I'd love to also clear it, but, I'm getting ahead of myself.

"...It being airborne means I can't really hit the thing, huh."

"Y, yeah... Hmm, this is really quite the predicament..."

Just for the hell of it, I fling my dagger through the air at the snake. It flies much faster than the average person would be able to throw it, but ultimately still falls quite short of reaching its target.

I walk over to where it fell back to earth, pick it up, and look back to the sky. The snake doesn't seem it's even noticed the throw in the first place, and is cheerfully swimming through the air.

What the hell.

"...Um, if, if you'd like, I could try shooting it down instead?"

"Ah, yeah. Could you give it a go?"

"S, sure!"

She nods her head repeatedly.

"E, even in the duel just earlier, I'm always the one being saved by someone else, so, this time, I'm definitely going to be useful...!"

That's strange, I could have sworn you were the one who turned the three of them into charcoal at the end there. You're doing just fine. In fact, I'm a bit worried I'm the one who's a dead weight

here. Like, I've just been playing around while (dressing up as a girl who is) dressing up as a boy...

"Al, alright. Firing soon, so please stand back a bit."

"Oh, yep."

I step a small bit away from Toa-chan, dagger still out just in case.

There's no other beings around, besides the snake.

It really does seem like an absurdly easy dungeon to clear. And dungeons like this do not go for very much on the market.

The rain hasn't stopped falling once, either, and I'm a bit tired of how dismal it is here.

Toa-chan raises her field gun to point at the snake, and breathes deeply.

"—Mechanism 1, free. Raising output to level 'Artemis'."

The sound of her device activating reverberates around, mixing in with the raindrops. Where the water falls around her turns to steam, evaporating from the heat of her weapon.

Her surroundings quickly become shrouded in mist.

"Mechanism 2, coupling. Removing limits on 3 through 5. Commencing Convergence."

The weapon's drone rises. As it does, a magic circuit deploys at her location. This is the thing that is necessary for Convergence Bombardment, the system that conducts vast amounts of calculations, that offloads much of the burden from the caster.

Looking at it from the outside, this is certainly different from my CB as Sorcière.

...It's probably cooler to have the circles, and all that.

◀▶

Oh, you can do them too? Then let's add that to the repertoire. When we're casting stuff, we can toss out a bunch of them just to be flashy.

<<■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ >>

Oh, really, the design is personal? What should I do about that, then...

...Are you coming up with bribes so I don't sell you off?

“ ”

Get back here, you.

...Oh well, fine. Now what should I do about those magic circuits. The color ought to be purple, or... Man, it's really hard to give up on a deep blue.

"Firing."

"Woah!"

The gold light rising up into the sky steals away my thoughts. Rain turns to steam in its path, piercing straight on to the core of the snake's body.

It flies, faster than a bullet, without deviating, and all-too-swiftly reduces its target to cinders. It flies, not knowing fatigue, on and upward still, and punches a hole right through the rain clouds, letting the sun through.

It's just plain strange. Her attack power is just plain strange.

"I, I tried my best to, keep it to a level where the MA crystals would survive, but... Did it work?"

A handful of the crystals are certainly making their way down, together with the rain that remains.

"...Eh, just like that?"

"Oh, ah... No good, I see."

"No, not no good, all good! For real, thanks!"

I immediately put my all into thanking Toa-chan, since it looks like she's about to cry.

Seriously, this is her *holding back*? I mean, sure, in the original story she'd end up blowing away the entrance to a dungeon that appeared on the moon itself after a lot of other shenanigans happened, but still.

Convergence Bombardments are crazy.

So then what about my Sorcière? I thought that I could just use Convergence Combardment because the damage output is really good, but I feel like another possibility just unlocked itself.

"...Kei-kun, is something the matter?"

"Oh, no, sorry. Let's get to recovering the core and those crystals."

I begin leading the way across the ground to where they dropped. I didn't do anything else this clear—I just stood around thinking about magic circuits—so let met at least put in this much work.

"I'll, help as well!"

What a good girl she is.

After collecting all the crystals and the core together, all that will remain is Mission: Deliver this to Miroku-senpai.

"I think we'll be able to afford meat again today, looking at this."

"Two-day-combo, meat...!"

Toa-chan's eyes sparkle as she agrees.

I feel at peace...

While gazing fondly at my source of peace, Toa-chan, suddenly both our DiveGear ring.

It's the notification sound for dungeon rescue.

This sound only gets used when the student(s) needing rescue are in real danger, and also close by.

"Toa-san, do you have it in you to do one more job today?"

"Yes. I'll, do my best!"

She quickly picks up her artillery from the ground. Grab the core and crystals, store them, and then we can rush off for rescue.

"...What? The coordinates say they're right here."

My head tilts to the side slightly.

Apparently, a person who needs rescuing, is right around here. And yet no matter which direction I look, I just can't seem to find anyone who seems to look like her.

And, speaking of, her name is—

"Futaba Mihaya...!?"

Hello!? Main Heroine-sama!?

This does change things a bit. If I'm aiming to avoid getting caught up in the flow of the plot events, I ought to just leave.

Let's just leave.

"Toa-san, another diver—"

Just as I start to speak, the surroundings and my view distort and twist. Another world paints over this one, as if the vast deserted area and the rainfall were never even there.

"Wha, what's happening now!?"

"Corrosion, by a different dungeon. It's rare, but stronger dungeons sometimes swallow up weaker ones into themselves."

It's not exactly related to where their entrances are positioned, since space means different things on the inside. There's no guarantee they'll mix together even if they seem to be neighbors on the outside, and there's no guarantee they *won't* if they seem to be super far apart.

Our dungeon, going by the location data, seems like it was pretty close to the one where Main Heroine-sama was in the original story. Clearing ours took away its natural deterrent forces against corrosion, and thus, we've ended up in this whole situation.

"This, this is what corrosion looks like?"

"Seems so. At least the crystals in the area have some light, so we can see where we're going."

Indeed, just like that, we had gone from well-lit wasteland to some sort of cavern.

...I definitely remember this from the story. Pretty sure this is where Touraku-kun pushed himself a lot, still not having a good grasp on using Lutra, and lost. Then, on some sort of whim, Rokuhara-san (his senior in wielding DemonGear) saved them.

Speaking of, it wasn't mentioned in the novels, but they sent out a rescue signal. Neat. And since Rokuhara-san will show up, everything's fine.

...Is there a chance that he *won't* come, and everything's *not* fine? Kisō has two DemonGear, and isn't it possible that work priorities are different compared to the original route?

Isn't this maybe bad?

"...Let's get going, Toa-san."

"Ah, yes."

Just to be sure.

Just to be absolutely sure, let's at least confirm things.

It's probably fine.

Rokuhara-san is probably there already (Unfounded hope).

And just like that, and I with sweat starting to run down my back, we proceed further into the cave.

25. As a beautiful girl, sometimes you'll have to play the understudy.

Rokuhara-san isn't there!!!

Elements that disprove my previous hypothesis: Touraku-kun, wounded and on the ground. Mihaya-chan, squaring off with the dungeon boss and covering him.

He most certainly did not get beat up this badly, originally.

Currently, we are all in the depths of the cave, a hollow formed within it that makes up the boss' usual resting place. Though, I say that, but myself and Toa-chan are in one of the numerous side tunnels that lead into this place, looking down from up above.

The boss evokes the image of a praying mantis, with its only method of attack seeming to be two large scythes. But because Touraku-kun still hasn't gotten a grasp on using Lutra at this point, and Mihaya-chan as well hasn't had her awakening moment yet, it's bad timing for this matchup. Our protagonist here would end up getting pulled out of this predicament by Rokuhara-san's arrival...

...Or, so it went, originally.

As we can see, things are not going the same way.

This is *really* bad. The story is going to end here. Without Touraku-kun, this world all comes crumbling down!

This isn't the time to be standing around!

"Kei-kun!?"

"Sorry taking point!"

I drop myself down a short distance from the protagonist. Then, I wedge myself between Mihaya-chan and the incoming scythe blade as it swings down.

"!? You, why are you!?"

No time to talk, sadly. My thoughts accelerate, and the world slows to a crawl for just a moment.

The scythe descends upon us.

Evasion, and counterattacking, is currently not an option.

Thus, my decision has already been made.

"—!"

I concentrate all of my mana into my right arm, thrusting it out to intercept the scythe's path.

Defense, and nothing more!

This is a given, to protect my OTP!

"Kgh, ah!"

The scythe sinks into the flesh of my strengthened right arm, and I can feel my bones grate.

Blood spurts from the wound in a way that seems all too comical, but I have certainly managed to stop the attack.

Which means, it's my win.

With my left arm, I swing my dagger over at the boss. At point of incision, the paralytic inside begins coursing through it, in under a second.

"Toa-san!"

I call for her, nearly screaming her name, and as if returning signals, golden light pours down from above. The dungeon boss, without any ability to contest her decision, is reduced to ash, and disappears.

Our true combo has done it again. Paralysis into instant kill. Nothing faster than that.

"Haaah, haaah..."

I'm so glad we made it in time. By the skin of our teeth. It's no laughing matter if the story ends here.

The venerable protagonist turns his head around, to make sure there is nothing else around here.

"Narō Kei..."

Nice to meet you, for the second time! And Mihaya-chan, hello!

"Heh, I didn't expect to see either of your faces again. Today seems determined to ruin my mood."

"You, again, with your talk...!"

Sorry~! It's just, I am Narō Kei, after all. We can get along once I've beautiful girl'd myself. Though, of course, Touraku-kun is all yours. I'll be putting together a yuri harem of my own.

On that note, student council president, what say we change the name of the school to Fectom Yuri Academy?

"Hey now, that's what you have to say, after I saved your ass? Is that the attitude you take with the third son of the Narō family?"

"Hmph, you can't fool me. I know you were kicked out of the family. You're not one of them anymore, are you?"

Now that you mention it, yeah, I guess I'm not.

It's not really relevant to transitioning, so I just forgot about all that.

"And that guy who was kicked out just saved *who*, huh?"

"..."

Hm, with Rokuhara-san missing from the party today, who's going to teach Touraku-kun about Lutra? That's pretty important for him for some approaching bosses.

Don't tell me, I have to do that as well?

It'll throw my lot in with the main plot, though...

Wait, is Touraku-kun even in a state to listen? Shouldn't we take him to get patched up?

"Hey, you, step away from Touraku!"

"Just shut up a sec."

I look over the the guy, slumped down on the ground.

Hmm, he looks alright to me. Mana exhaustion, just like it ought to be, as far as I can tell.

"...You... Kei-kun?"

Oh, he's up.

"Sup, Touraku. You're back from death's doors. How ya feel?"

"I see. You, saved me huh? Thanks."

"Ahh, quit that. I don't care about getting thanks from other guys."

That's a lie, I'm so happy right now.

Okay, well, looks like I do have to step in for Rokuhara-san here after all and teach him how to use Lutra.

Can I be honest? I don't think a stepping stone should be put under this much weight. I guess if I borrow a few things from Rokuhara-san himself, it ought to get us back on track enough, though.

Alright, sure. I'll just take his lines and attitude, and do what he was meant to.

Sorry they've got the third-rate as a backup!

"—But like, I saw a bit of your fight there, and what the heck was the way you were moving?"

I make sure to glare at him, and as he starts responding, I ignore him and grab him by the lapel.

Aaah, it looks like it hurts! And it hurts me to do this, too!

"You have no clue in hell how to use a DemonGear, do you? Any weapon is useless if the hand guiding it is garbage."

"Guah..."

"Get your hands off Touraku at once!"

I listen to her words, exactly, and drop him. In his place, I pick up the Japanese sword^[30] from underfoot.

Nice. Just like I thought, once a DemonGear has made a contract, others can touch it without issue.

"This thing isn't just a shiny physical enhancement. It's something else, completely different."

"...Eh?"

"You can talk to Lutra here, can't you? Ask her, what it is she can do. Oh, unless she's been silent this whole time. Does she not trust you yet? Haha."

"...I..."

Touraku-kun grows gloomy. Of course, so do I. But, forgive me. This is how Rokuhara-san would have done it...

Hey, my right arm really hurts. Is that okay? I'm not the one in danger here, am I?

«■■■■»

What's up I'm busy right now talk to me later.

«■■■■■!»

Eh, you're interested in Lutra? That's no good, letting something that draws misfortune so close to her. Look! Here! I'm returning Lutra to Touraku-kun!

God! I swear, you make a racket in my head at the drop of a pin.

"If you hadn't made the contract, I'd have probably made off with her, but... Ah, well. Once you kick the bucket, I'll just inherit Lutra then."

I toss Lutra back to Touraku-kun, and he catches it, just as I expected.

Yeah! Let's go, the story's back on the rails!

"See ya. If you stay alive, we'll probably run into each other again at some point."

Let's leave. Let's get out of here. Toa-chan's waiting for me just above, and... Oh, at some point, she let herself down here as well.

Is that safe? No injuries? Beautiful girls aren't supposed to do things that might scratch their skin, you know?

"Kei-kun..."

"Let's go, Toa-san."

Come on, let's head back.

My arm hurts like hell.

"Wait right there!"

"...What is it."

Mihaya-chan, I'm so sorry. Oh, she looks absolutely furious.

"Just what are you up to!? What sort of nonsense have you gotten Touraku wrapped up in!?"

"Ha! Hell if I know."

Just call it the mandate of the original plot, or something...

"Youuuuu!"

Mihaya-chan steps after me, her finger already on the trigger of her gun. Wait, you're not seriously ready to pull that, are you!?

"Tell me everything you know. If you don't..."

Well I'll be, she's got the eyes for it.

In the time it takes to run my mind through what options I have here, I notice Toa-chan is standing between me and her.

"Please stop this."

"Move. You aren't involved here."

"Yes I am. I am, Kei-kun's partner^[31]."

"Then, you ought to know just what he's up to, what he knows, what he was trying to do, right?"

Toa-chan shakes her head at the question, but then looks straight at her, and replies.

"Kei-kun pushes himself too far, and surely knows the same things Rakka-chan did, I'm quite certain. But it's also a fact that he's been of great help to me, and to all of us."

Toa-chan...

"What's happened between you three in the past, what Kei-kun has done, that doesn't matter to me! I wish to believe in him!"

I'm so grateful, my heart could explode. I'll accept that belief once I'm a beautiful girl, so just hold tight...!

"Toa-san..."

"Let's go, Kei-kun."

Toa-chan takes my left hand, and begins walking. She pulls me along until we've left that place behind.

On a whim, I turn back, and see Mihaya-chan looking our way with a conflicted expression.

Just like I thought, sticking my nose in doesn't lead to any sort of good outcome!!!

"...Kei-kun."

"Yes?"

The voice that calls my name just before the exit doesn't have its usual tremor.

"I understand that you took that attitude with the two of them for some specific reason. I, if no one else, I trust you."

"Thank you for that."

"...At the very least, please, don't push yourself too hard."

Her hand grips mine just slightly harder.

General education states that to grab the hand of a beautiful girl, one must also be a beautiful girl yourself. Thus, I have been trying to break free, but her grip is too strong, and I can't.

Is she upset because I took action by myself? ...I guess I ought to apologize, just to be sure.

"...Sorry."

"..."

This girl has such strong feelings for her friends. For Toa-chan's sake as well, I must become a beautiful girl as soon as possible.

26. There are pleasures that one cannot access without being a beautiful girl.

Hi everyone! It's me, Fectom Comprehensive Academy's second comprehensively wounded individual!

I showed my arm to the doctor, was told "Ah, yeah, yeah," and got it all wrapped up right!

It makes me look chuuni as hell, which is incredibly cool! Oh but maybe it'd be even better if the bandages were wrapped loosely, so they could sway about...

"*You* ending up here was not something I'd have guessed."

"Me neither."

I give Mizuhi-senpai a wry smile. The two of us have been peacefully sequestered in the infirmary.

A larger school would have students with restorative abilities, or at least ones that can heal wounds, but this is Fectom. There's no point in asking if we have one of those, because we still don't have anything at all.

This is really just a modest room with cleaner beds and a first-aid kit.

That's where the two of us are, right now.

Even though I only have one injured arm...

"I heard you did a lot of good work yesterday. Thanks for stepping in for me."

"Oh, no no, it really was Toa-san doing all the work. I just ended up like this."

I wave my bandaged arm around a bit, to emphasize.

"Doesn't that still hurt?"

"It's honestly totally fine. The doctor even said, for a diver, give it a week and there won't even be a scar left."

"Oh, wow... It really seemed like it was serious, the way Toa came back sobbing last night."

"And even Miroku-senpai's expression changed for once, too..."

Yesterday, we went straight off to see a doctor after we had finished saving Touraku-kun and Mihaya-chan. Toa-chan had been mostly fine until then, but after seeing just how much they wrapped my arm up, she cried a lot of tears by the time we got back to the school.

Making a beautiful girl cry is something that no one dreaming to transition ought ever to do.

"I really do think they could have just let me head back to the dorms..."

"Hahaha, they're just worried about you. And they want to be able to keep an eye on you, so you don't overdo it before it heals, right?"

"Same goes for you, yeah?"

"Correct. To be honest, could you help me out? Just cut me free from these handcuffs."

She shows me what's keeping her tied to her own bed, at the right arm. Just what did you already do that they had to go that far?

"No can do. I don't want Miroku-senpai mad at me."

"Hmph. Nothing for it. I guess I'll just practice working my mana, since I don't even have my own DiveGear."

They even had to confiscate her DiveGear... She's probably still going to try and sneak out after this, too.

"Thoughts on the option of just staying here and relaxing?"

"It's 7 am. If I relax from dawn to dusk, I'm going to lose my mind."

Thoughts on the option of studying, since you're a student?

Well, I'm also pretty lacking in things to do myself. My DiveGear is still with me, and I'm not cuffed myself, but I don't have any plans to make an impractical escape.

A prime example of what happens if I'd try is right over there.

"My stomach's so empty, too... They better let me eat solid food again soon."

"I imagine they'll have some today."

"You think? That'd be a nice change."

She taps despondently on her stomach.

I don't think I've ever seen Mizuhi-senpai this dispirited...

The sound of the door opening strikes my ears, and as I look over, Miroku-senpai is standing there with two trays and a smile on her face.

"Good morning to the both of you."

"Good morning, Miroku-senpai."

"Miroku, morning. For the love of god, please tell me that isn't more jelly. Give me meat. Or at least bean sprouts again."

She considers meat and bean sprouts equivalent...

"Huhu, I expected you'd say that. Today we have bean sprouts, as well as pork for you."

"...! Thank you so much...!"

It earns that much appreciation? I get the feeling my dietary habits have still not adjusted to Fectom's norms.

"And some for you too, Kei-kun."

"Thank you very much."

A tray is placed before me. It holds a slice of bread, and a stir-fry of bean sprouts and pork. What an interesting combination of food.

"I was allowed to take home the bread that was past its date at where I work!"

I add even more thanks to my thanks for Miroku-senpai, as she speaks with an upbeat tone. From what I've heard, she does a lot of part-time work in the mornings. The city has a ton of schools, which contributes to a lower threshold for when one starts picking up work, and there's quite a number of students who have jobs here. Very few manage to get by on *just* their payouts from diving.

Just hold on tight, once I become a beautiful girl, I'll clean up a ton of dungeons one-sidedly (ones unrelated to the main plot). And with that fortune amassed, I can make for us a Yuri Academy.^[32] I'm quite serious. Quite serious indeed.

"Oh, Kei, are you unable to eat like that?"

"Ah."

Oops, I got so lost in the dazzling vision of our futures that I forgot about the food. I should eat that before it gets cold.

"Ahh, I should have realized! It is your dominant arm injured, after all."

"Eh? No, that's "I really should have realized. It's probably easier to have someone feed you here, right?" Eh, huh?"

What? Is some sort of event trying to start? I can still use my palm just fine, so chopsticks are totally doable. It's actually a problem if bandages are too tight for movement, right?

"Kei."

Mizuhi-senpai speaks my name just as I'm attempting to formulate all those thoughts into a response. I look over at her, and she's munching away, but points at the door with her chin. I look over at the door, and there stands Toa-chan, trembling a noticeable amount.

"If, if you can't feed yourself, it's, it can't be helped! I, I'll have to, I'll do it for you!"

Are you chewing on marshmallows, or cotton? It's a technique that surpasses biting your tongue while speaking.

"Oh, what good timing. Toa-chan just happened to show up holding chopsticks. You're in luck then, Kei-kun, you can eat now!"

"I don't think 'luck' generally manifests this way???"

It does, sometimes.

No the hell it doesn't.

"...She's still pretty torn up about yesterday. Sorry to force this on you, Kei-kun, but could you bear this for Toa-chan, just for a bit?"

She says that just in my ear, not aloud. And, well, if you're saying it can't be helped, it can't be helped! I'd *always* lend a hand to ease beautiful girls from their worries!

"Woah, it really is my lucky day, huh. I'm so glad Toa-san happened to come by just now!"

"Then, I, beg your pardon...!"

She sits herself on the edge of my cot. Then, she picks up the bread, and holds it out to me.

So we're not actually using the chopsticks after all, I see.

"He, here you go."

"Toa-chan, you say 'Aaahn' in times like these, instead."

"I see...! Thank you, Miroku-chan. Then, aaahn."

"Ah, aaahn."

What's happening right now? Where did the couple's roleplay come from? There's nothing on the bread I'm being fed, and it hasn't even been toasted.

Yeah! It's just plain bread!

"Um, might I be allowed some of the bean sprouts...?"

"Got it! He, here, aaahn!"

"Aaahn."

Isn't it going to be tiring for both of us to do this one bean sprout at a time? Are you good there?

Incidentally, I'm certainly not good over here. I'm being fed by a beautiful girl who's telling me to go "Aaahn."

That's a cardinal sin.

Only beautiful girls themselves can receive that from other beautiful girls. That's something children are aware of from as early as they're aware of anything in life. Anyone who violates that basic principle will have to explain themselves to their fellow ghosts in the depths of hell after they die.

If I was a beautiful girl in this current situation, then I would be able to enjoy this for sure, and hell I would even be returning the favor, but for now I'm just a filthy opening act villain. There's no way I should be surrounded the way I am right now.

Thus! I need to become a beautiful girl myself, as quickly as possible!

«■■■■■»

I already said I wouldn't be using you to do that! It's definitely got strings attached, doesn't it?

"..."

The thing nesting in my headspace is quite feisty again, today. Is that a good position for you?

"Is, how does it taste?"

"It's very good. Thank you."

"That's good..."

Toa-chan's facial muscles finally let go of their tension.

Like I thought, she was feeling guilty about yesterday.

As the closest person to being a beautiful girl, who clearly understands the psychology of all beautiful girls, I get it.

Only a novice would misunderstand that she caught feelings for me. If you're one of them, go read some Man■ Time Ki■ra. And then go clear any galge 100 times.

This is just Toa-chan's way of accepting me, as a fellow existence. This isn't the time for me to misunderstand and try and grow closer to her.

"Ah, um!"

"Hm?"

"We, uh, we're in the same year, so, could we maybe be less formal with each other?"

See?

This how introverted girls who haven't made any friends besides the ones they've known since childhood carefully try and close some distance with someone else.

And the one on the other end, is supposed to be a chill and standoffish beautiful girl!

Some sort of reason as the inciting incident pushes Toa-chan and the mysterious transfer student Sorcière, who she was initially quite scared of, together rapidly!

That's the good stuff!

«■...»*

And why are *you* cringing!? It's introvert x cold personality! Comprehend!

"Kei-kun, how about it?"

"...Got it. I'll adjust that going forward, then. Here's to it, Toa-san."

"Mhm! Then, um, can you also drop the '-san'?"

For real? I can't just call you by name, I'm not a beautiful girl yet.

"Is 'Toa-chan' okay with you, then?"

"And I'll use 'Kei-kun', so—Ah, I guess, nothing's changed there, then."

She gives me a smile, and of course, I return one.

I've really got a lot of sins piling up today.

■

It can't be helped that I've sinned. The second time is no different than the first.

So, I'm thinking I might add the sin of sneaking out to my charges.

The "Aaahn"s of morning, noon, and evening basically mean I'm a heinous criminal, so a simple escape is essentially a given.

"Mizuhi-senpai, are you awake?"

"...Yeah."

Mizuhi-senpai's bed is right next to mine, so I'd be found out immediately.

What to do?

I find it quite simple, actually. Just get her on my side.

"Well then, let's get started."

I arise, and summon my weapon. Tonight, my dagger glitters sly in the moonlight. Wielding that firmly, I cleave in two the bindings that tie Mizuhi-senpai down.

She quickly gets up herself, and gives me a thumbs up.

"Thanks, Kei. You're a junior with ambition I can be proud of."

"Ah, don't mention it. I look up to you, after all."

We both softly escape through the infirmary window, still clad in our gowns. It's the first floor, so once we're through there, we've basically escaped to anywhere.

"Alright, I'm off to do some late night training. Without my DiveGear, it's basically just mana drills."

"I'm also off to practice. I don't want to cause that much worry again."

"That's a good attitude."

"Bye for now, then."

"Yep."

We nod in mutual agreement, and then make our own dashes to our respective locations.

Mizuhi-senpai is off to the training grounds. And I, to Fectom's rear gates.

Indeed. I'm heading outside after this.

"Chances like this don't come often, and I'd be a fool to pass up using this bandaged arm!"

Commencing! Operation Midnight Crossdressing ~Girl Who Bears the Scars of Battle~!

27. A beautiful girl is beautiful even wounded.

The academy-city has a a bit of a packed night life to it. Students freed of their responsibilities to study drink deeply from the spring of their adolescence.

The special dungeon ward is no exception. By day students stare daggers at their notes, and by night they wander the area, weapon in hand.

One silhouette looks down on them from above, atop a deserted building.

Myself.

"The nighttime of this city is rather loud, isn't it. I find myself missing nights when no sound can be heard."

It is none other than myself, reciting such things.

Hi, hello, I'm dressed up again~!

Yaaaaay!

«■a■■■!»

Yoo, Sorcière's all fired up too!

Have you finally come around to understanding the joys of crossdressing? You can lengthen my hair easily, and if you're willing to become part of my Complete Beautifulgirlification Gear then I think we can get along.

As mentioned, we are currently situated atop one of the abandoned structures that dot the edges of the special ward. Some school or other constructed it for monitoring long ago, and then discarded it. And, it technically looks like a building, but one that's adorned a bit like a security outpost. There's remnants of barbed wire, spent casings, pockmarks of former battles fought that give it its character.

I've got one leg resting on an old artillery installation, the other supporting me from the ground, and from that vantage point am observing the city below me.

"This city is all too blinding to my eyes..."

It's so much fun.

With the serendipity of my right arm being injured, I'm using it to bolster my scene of a beautiful girl haunted by darkness. Gothloli x bandages. A practically divine pairing.

If only I had also grabbed an eyepatch...!

Also, I went and redid the wrappings so the bandages would suit my tastes. Properly fastened, no waste of framing, set so they linger in the breeze.

This is a rooftop, after all. Hair and bandages should flutter as much as they want.

My left hand pins my hair out of my face upwind, and thus, the living CG is complete.

Though, for some reason, when I go to try and save the image to my DiveGear interface, it doesn't seem to have such a function.

Is this thing bugged?

"Haah..."

Setting that aside, my arm really does still hurt. It was fine earlier, but the wound opened up again while I was busy getting fully into the staging for the bandages. And a bit worse than before, I think.

The blood's showing through on the outside now.

But hey, a bit of blood on the bandages really helps sell the image better, so it's fine.

I have known the truth of the world to be that sorrowful expressions don't suit beautiful girls, but I've also come to realize the beauty of the wounded beautiful girl as well.

The girls of Fectom Comprehensive Academy ought to always be smiling. More specifically, doing things that fit in a 4koma series.

But still, the sight of a girl bruised and bloodied, her face twisting in anguish, that is also something I love. How is one meant to reconcile these two opposed emotions?

It's all too simple.

I become the one who gets hurt.

"...It seems I overspent myself, this time."

I gently brush my right arm where it's bandaged. The pitch-black scythe stands to my side.

This, too, is a wonderfully beautiful girl.

«■■■■, ■■■■?»

Woah, you already finished the magic circuit design? Nice! Has anyone ever told you you're quite talented?

Alright, so, just put out one past my arm when I reach out. I'll play with that.

«■■»

With Star-Reader Staff's spirited agreement, I stretch my right arm over the city. As my fingers splay open, a magic circuit deploys from them in a meter-wide circle. Deep blue and purple devour each other and dance about, the balance of colors constantly in flux. The formulas and character strings carry no meaning or direction, but they fit the vibe, which means they're correct.

I let it linger there, and channel a voice so small it seems the wind might steal it away entirely.

"—The world will still not grace me with a response, even now."

Yesss, this is it! A girl who opened her heart once and now finds herself mired in codependency with the darkness! This, is the best possible character to play!

"Yet even now, I must continue this fight."

I fit the lower part of my gas mask back on, and, grasping the scythe again, I bring myself back up.

I just stand there.

I do nothing else. I just wanted to do something that looked like it was something.

My skirt ripples as I turn around, to close out the scene, or something like that—

Ah.

"...Um, it's Sorcière, right?"

A girl stands in front of me.

Our eyes align perfectly.

Her hair in twintails like water, with no danger of ever being subsumed into the colors of the night. Her eyes belying wisdom beyond her peers. Her uniform, that of Mikage Academy.

Yep, it's Main Heroine-sama again!

That's not good.

■

Futaba Mihaya was alone that night, for once.

Her dungeon partner, brave enough to get wounded, Touraku, was still resting in the infirmary. The physical damage was already healing well, but his mana pool had been drained dry, and he needed time and rest for it to refill.

"Haah."

That night, she sighed again and again to herself.

There was not much different, besides her being alone. She had still attended her classes, and after school spent time searching for dungeons. For her, it was a day without much substance to it at all, just being carried along by her habits.

And perhaps it was that small difference that brought her somewhere else, for a change.

"...I didn't realize there was a building over here."

The world, which had served as just a backdrop to his presence in her life, rapidly recolored itself to fill the absence. Mihaya started walking toward it before she even realized she was.

And so,

"—The world will still not grace me with a response, even now."

She met that girl.

Her hair seemed like the stars themselves, the blue-silver flashing in the night sky. Her clothes evoked old ghost tales and legends, a romantic monochrome. She stared out across the city through a magic circuit like the zodiac itself.

Mihaya knew who she was.

"...Sorcière?"

Talk of the girl had spread through Mikage Academy. The academy-city's either S rank diver, allegiance and identity unknown. Mihaya had seen one of the videos of her fighting, and the way she moved lit a fire under her. It was a truly frightening amount of self-conviction.

"...I must continue this fight."

As Mihaya kept gazing on, Sorcière muttered that line and arose from her spot. She grabbed her scythe from beside her, turning it to its normal stance.

"Ah"

That small noise had escaped from Mihaya herself, but she was left unable to recognize that fact.

Their eyes had met. Hers, and those across the rooftop, cold as ice, ready to stare through her very being.

Both of those eyes had caught her in their domain.

It did not seem like Sorcière was going to speak first, or even at all. There was just the distant howl of the wind.

Eventually, Mihaya wrung out a question from that vice.

"...Um, it's Sorcière, right?"

Of course, both of them knew that she was right, but those were the only words that she could produce.

On one side of the roof, Mihaya immediately regretted not having a better line for First Contact, and on the other, Sorcière simply replied "Indeed it is."

"I wonder, what has brought you to seek me out?"

"Ah, um..."

Sorcière's response was guarded, and it's no wonder why. Everyone knew she's been officially recognized, and she herself obviously knows many schools want to scout her. From her point of view, Mihaya might just have been another reflection of the infinite mass of students wanting to track her down.

"I, I'm not—"

Sorcière's right arm caught her eye, and her words in her throat, as she attempted to preemptively deny the assumption. Perhaps it stood out so much because of how it swayed in a large gust of wind, just then. Bandages wrapped with a roughness that seemed to represent how little she cared if they'd stain with blood.

"Are you, are you injured?"

"...Ah, this was just from some slight trouble in a dungeon earlier. An abnormality had manifested."

Even though it was her own arm, she spoke as if it was completely irrelevant to her. She continued using that right arm without hesitation, to hold her hair away from her eyes in the rooftop gusts.

Just how much blood had already been shed into those bandages?

"Miss, the blood...!"

"It's not as big a deal as you're thinking."

Mihaya couldn't help but burst out in response to her serenity.

"Okay well at least show me your arm. The way you have it wrapped is ridiculous, I can fix it up."

She may have been talking to Sorcière herself, but she still walked over to her like it was most anyone else.

"It's just as fine if you don't."

"You can't even believe that lie yourself. If someone's in front front of you injured, would you just ignore them?"

The question echoes as self-deprecation in her head. What a noble thing of her to say, isn't it?

Even though I do just ignore people...

A young man's face comes to mind.

His right arm had also been injured, come to think of it. But no, that's all the more reason that she can't leave Sorcière to her own devices right now.

Sorcière and someone else who needed help overlapped in her mind.

"Come now, sit down."

"Haah... I can't fight a kind nature."

She very reluctantly listened. Mihaya took out a first-aid kit from her DiveGear's expanded storage, and opened it up.

"I'll have to peel off the old bandages first. It shouldn't hurt much, but if it does, just let me know."

"I don't think I'd even notice if it does. ...No pain these days can faze me like it once did."

Sorcière replied entirely offhand, as Mihaya began to unravel the bandages. The blood had partially coagulated, and removing them proved to be a bit difficult, but with some persistence, she managed it.

"...That's a nasty wound."

"Is it now?"

Mihaya found herself hurt by just how much she couldn't understand this girl's calm demeanor. Red painted over porcelain, was the image that she saw looking on that wound in her skin. She forced herself to keep her eyes open and on the area as she applied antiseptic.

"This'll sting a bit."

"If you say so."

Sorcière's expression was still composed, even through the pain that ought to have been there. That cast a strange sort of silence over the place, sinking it all into silence by connection.

It was for her own satisfaction that she was doing this, and yet, she still had to break that silence eventually.

"Did you wrap these on yourself?"

"Indeed. It's not something I've ever done before, so I can't say I did it very well."

"They're stained with blood, and the wound itself is open still... You must have tried more than just a few times."

"Marvelous. You've quite the eye for detail."

For the first time, she felt she could see some amount of emotion in Sorcière.

She...wouldn't go to a doctor for this, huh. A wound like this is something she can handle, or so she says.

Certainly, a diver's body repairs itself much better than the average human. But even still, a wound like that would continue to hurt until it heals.

Mihaya pulled out a fresh roll of bandages from the medical kit, and quickly applied it so that the night wind wouldn't bite into the wound any more than it had already.

"Alright. Done."

"...You have my thanks."

Sorcière responded while gazing at her freshly bandaged arm.

"You've quite the arm, too, for such a good job done."

"I've done it off and on since I was a kid, is all."

Mihaya smiled at the compliment, still.

"I see. One who finds themselves at your side must live a happy life, no?"

"...I wonder about that."

The words slipped from her mouth before she could stop them, but she still left that smile pasted up on her face.

Sorcière met that with a soft smile of her own, and tapped next to her with a finger.

"Have a seat. The least I can offer a girl for such treatment is to listen to her worries."

"But..."

"We have no connections whatsoever, and that is what makes it possible to talk about things you could not with close friends. Now."

Mihaya sat down next to her, trying to take up as little space as possible.

Sorcière looked away from her, and instead back out over the city, simply saying: "Speak of your reasons."

And so, Mihaya began to lay out the pieces of her situation, one by one.

28. A beautiful girl is a beacon unto others.

Mihaya confessed, above the lights of the special ward.

"—I failed, yesterday, in a dungeon. In so many different ways."

Sorcière did not respond, but Mihaya understood she was listening still.

"The person I love greatly was there, as was the one I detest just as much. ...But I couldn't bring myself to face either of them."

She clasped her arms around her legs, shrinking further into herself, as if she was trying to disappear altogether.

"The person I love... His name is Touraku. I wonder if you've heard of him. A first-year at Mikage Academy, in their student council."

"Can't say that I have. Worldly intricacies are not my ken."

"I see. But, I think that one day, you'll definitely come to know of him. He's, he's really strong. He's gotten so strong... And I don't know if I'm strong enough to stand next to him, anymore."

To Futaba Mihaya, Gatō Touraku was both a childhood friend and someone she ought to protect. He would put himself on the line for anyone else, but not stop to consider his own body.

So, someone had to protect him, then.

At least, that's what she had thought.

"He'd stick his own neck out to get bullied in someone else's place. That's the kind of guy he is."

"Quite the troublesome disposition, that one."

"It really is. And this time it looks like he's gotten himself dragged into something even bigger than usual. He didn't refuse it, he didn't hesitate when he was told it was something only he could accomplish."

Mihaya had become intimately familiar with Touraku's nature, self-sacrifice to a perhaps twisted degree, so this time again, she thought she could protect him.

"He overdid things again. He keeled over inside the dungeon, and I can't help but wonder if it was partly from how he always wears himself out. He's always busy with student council work, on top of all this."

She had, until now, prevented his story from becoming a tragedy. That protection was the best she could offer.

She had spotted him in training to make sure he wouldn't overdo things.

She had accompanied him on his student council activities.

She had made sure that he was still eating properly.

She had protected him, until now...

But that was where it ended.

"...When he fell over, I felt all the blood drain from my face. I was facing the boss of the dungeon, but I couldn't do anything. I could only think about what I should do, about where I had gone wrong."

Perhaps if she had been in perfect condition, she could have still dealt with the boss. But she wasn't. Gatō Touraku collapsed, and Mihaya's train of thought stopped right there.

"And then, he showed up."

"He'?"

"Yeah. That awful, arrogant guy who you can never understand what he's thinking. ...Even if I name him, it's not like you'd know who Kei is."

"...I certainly don't. But from the way you describe him, he certainly doesn't seem like a decent human being."

Mihaya let out a dry laugh at those words.

"I, I thought the same, until just a while ago, but now I don't know. That guy, Kei, he saved both me and Touraku, is the thing. He stepped between us and the boss, and gave up his arm to stop it."

The events of yesterday had been firmly engraved in her memory.

He'd had an expression of desperation on that she'd never have even imagined him capable of. She'd never seen anything like the way he poured his all into protecting them.

"Kei was always pushing Touraku around. There's probably something in the history between their families, but I don't know the details. Bullying, locking him in dungeons to try and get him killed—and then he comes back and saves his life."

At some point, the boy named Narō Kei must have completely changed his thoughts. That's how Mihaya had come to think about it.

"It wasn't as deep a wound as yours is, but he still hurt his own right arm a lot. ...I should have done this for him, afterward."

She knew she should have.

Someone who had put her in danger before nevertheless had ended up saving her.

"I've lost sight of what's the right thing to do anymore. I don't know what I have left I can do for Touraku, and I don't have any idea *what* Kei is thinking. I, they're both, I'm getting left behind in both directions."

She noticed she had started crying, and that made her feel all the more pitiful.

"I, I had always been keeping Touraku safe from Kei's actions! I'd at least told I had! Even though I knew the truth, or part of it. I couldn't handle it. My world, my reason for living, I didn't want to accept it was disappearing...!"

She stifled her own cries, and curled up even further, trying to hide herself even from no one looking.

"I... Where do I even go from here?"

She found herself doubting the basis of her self-confidence that she'd fostered all this time. She found herself questioning just who the girl named Mihaya even was, in the first place.

Sorcière drew in a breath, and looked up to the stars before forming it into words.

"For whom do you think the stars shine?"

"...Eh?"

"They are simply vast nuclear furnaces, which we see as glimmering stars. And yet, we have always given meaning to their lights and patterns. Even though all they do themselves is shine on and on."

At Sorcière's words, Mihaya raised her head.

Two eyes in azure gazed upon her.

"I pray you don't think too hard on such things."

And with a kind smile, Sorcière stroked her hair.

"The only matter of importance is what a girl wants to do herself. Why is it, you wanted to protect Touraku? Why is it, you came to hate Kei?"

"I..."

She understood immediately the answer to that question.

"It's because I love Touraku. That's why I...!"

"And I think that's plenty reason enough."

Sorcière spun the words together before her.

"You love that person, yes? Is there really any qualification that can exist to bar someone from standing beside the ones they love? Meaning and significance, leave that drivel aside. You're both students. It's stranger to think that you're searching high and low for justification just to be with who you love."

"I, I suppose it is?"

"It truly is. I pray again, think not too hard on this all. Just do what you find yourself wishing to do. And if you still find yourself anxious—"

Suddenly, Sorcière arose again, and a large magic circuit deployed beneath her.

"This...!?"

Sorcière turned to stare at Mihaya, standing in the center of the magic circuit and lit by its glow.

"In the very near future, great calamities will bear down upon this academy-city. That is an unescapable fate."

"That. Are you certain?"

"Very. And your power will be necessary and indispensable to overturn that fate, Futaba Mihaya."

"...How do you know my name?"

Sorcière smiled again, and pointed directly at her.

"You, my dear girl, already walk within the grand design. The organization of me and mine has great expectations of you, Futaba Mihaya. And so I gift those expectations to you, as your *meaning*."

The azure eyes observe her closely. A passion stronger than any she had held before now dwelled inside her.

"Hear my declaration. You, girl, are a gem yet unpolished. If you refine yourself, you can grow far stronger than you are now."

"...You mean that?"

"There are no lies within me."

"I, see. ...I see. Thank you."

Mihaya bowed her head, and when she raised it again, it showed her doubts had flown away.

"I think I've found something of an answer."

"Lovely to hear so."

"...By the way, I am a little curious what that magic circuit's effect is."

".....It is one to meddle with your mana, and allow for the awakening of new potential. The organization is not fond of acting directly, but this much is within the acceptable limits."

At those words, Sorcière also dispelled the circuit itself.

"Awakening ability...? Such a power, I'd never heard of anything capable of doing that. But no, there was also..."

One's ability was fixed within a metric personal to each individual, such was the rule of life. Thus, the ability to interfere with another was already outside that rule.

One's limit of power is their status and roof in this world, but if the skill or technology to change that did truly exist, it would be an incredibly terrifying thing to wield.

I've never seen anything like that magic circuit she just used. It's not something any school would have developed. A completely new formula, not connected to any of the existing schools of formulation...!

Her gaze had been captured by Sorcière, and she had only been able to gaze at the magic circuit for a very small instant. Still, she had understood that there were no structural problems present in it.

Mihaya was no genius, but a prodigy nonetheless. Just observing any magic circuit in use within the academy-city was enough for her to understand their workings. And it was because of that talent of hers that she could fully believe Sorcière's claims. It was a flawless implementation that had *some sort of continuous effect*.

"If you spend all night with your brow furrowed, it's a waste of your good looks, you know."

Sorcière turned away from her, that gesture stating she considered their business done.

"You have my thanks for the bandages. I will be sure to repay this debt to you, one day. A good night to you."

Her light steps carried her up and over the edge of the structure's roof, and she descended beyond it. Mihaya rushed to look for her, but by the time she poked her own head over the edge, the other girl's figure had vanished.

"...I'm the one with the greater debt here. Thank you."

Strangely, it felt as if the night wind itself cupped her cheeks. She hadn't known it until now, but the wind tonight was a kind one.

She looked to the sky, just as the girl next to her moment prior had done.

A truly innumerable host of stars gleamed back down at her.

"...Alright."

The time for her grumbling and standing still had come to an end.

■

Mihaya-chan looked like she'd die of her worries, so I desperately gave her some tips... But, yeah, the jobber villain was responsible for about half of the cause, so it was my responsibility to treat anyway!

I, as a Lifelong Honorary Beautiful Girl (self-recognized), am a beautiful girl that doesn't just clean up after my own mistakes, but leaves the situation better than it was before!

"As expected, yapping too much is not good. I'll take that into consideration moving forward."

I just wanted to have some nice girls' talk as fellow beautiful girls of this world. I shouldn't be interfering with the plot, not one bit.

But, you know?

If I can be helpful to Mihaya-chan, you know?

I was able to lift her spirits with my magic circuits, so I think it's fine. And it was just designed to look cool, so there wasn't even any deeper meaning in it to be found. I'm glad it helped her cheer up.

And besides! By the end of summer, the event that *actually* awakens her will show up, so she only has to keep trying for a bit longer!

I'll be crossdressed and cheering you on from the other half of the world...!

"I think that's a good note to end on for tonight."

I'm quite satisfied with my nighttime activities tonight. I hadn't ever imagined that I could pull the Mysterious and Strange Beautiful Girl Roleplay with Mihaya-chan involved.

I pack my outfit back into my DiveGear, and make a beeline back to Fectom. Just need to pick up Mizuhi-senpai and then hop in bed again.

At least, that was the plan half an hour ago.

On skulking my way over to the rear gate, I encounter something wrapped up and rolling in front of me.

It's Mizuhi-senpai, in a futon.

"Mizuhi-senpai...?"

"Kei, sorry. We lost."

She informed me of our defeat with a crisp expression.

"—As I thought, you'd come back in this way, hm~ Should I applaud you for your prudence, sneaking outside to do your training?"

A voice speaks from behind me. I raise both hands in surrender. I'm so glad I didn't try and return while still dressed up...!

"...Yeah, sorry about that."

"Huhuhu, is that so? I'm also sorry to say I'm quite angry with you two, so prepare yourselves."

The following day, I had a handcuff of my own on my left hand.

29. If a beautiful girl pats you on the head, your brain will likely melt away.

Wow, that week being chained up was pretty hellish, let me tell you what!

I couldn't do *anything* besides the absolute basics of living! And I obviously couldn't properly dress up, either.

But at the end of it all, I was freed from those chains on the same day my arm was from its bindings.

"Yep, things look alright now. No scarring left."

"Yeah. Sorry for all the trouble."

"If you really mean that, please don't go running off on your own again, m'kay? Especially not to go train and make your injuries worse."

"Ah, of course."

Miroku-senpai's bright and cheery smile is quite the scary one.

Incidentally, Mizuhi-senpai was let out a whole three days earlier than I was. It seems she went out on rescue rotation with Toa-chan, which leaves me here to watch the place.

"Then, how about we get right to sorting documents?"

In the student council room, there is Miroku-senpai, smiling, myself, and a large amount of documents. This is typically what the day consists of for students here who don't go out on rescue ops. This is one reason Mizuhi-senpai always puts herself in for the field work. She's surprisingly bad with stuff like this, huh...

That said, it's not like it's a *difficult* task to sort them. The contents of the files and documents here are the same thing.

They're all about this school's debt.

"..."

"Is something the matter, Kei-kun? Your brow is awfully furrowed."

"Our school is, well, pretty deep in the red, isn't it."

"It sure is. It's a number of zeroes you have to laugh at, huhu."

No, I don't think I'll be laughing today. Wow that's a cute laugh you have for such a topic. Beautiful girls sure are cute, huh.

"Previously, it seems that we would pay in dungeon cores. When the academy ran out of those, it switched over to monetary transactions. Though, this is all information from 15 years ago, at

least."

Fectom Comprehensive Academy is, as she says, truly embedded in the Hell of Finance. If circumstances were normal, the school could receive financial support in agreement with companies and corporations outside the academy-city, but that doesn't exist in this world. 25 years ago, every company simultaneously withdrew.

What happened back then?

There are intermediaries that still continue the tradition today, that much I'm aware of. They all seem to have asked for the cores of high-rank dungeons as remuneration. Even if what we instead get asked for is money, it's the same sort of deal.

Of course, you're already well aware of the one singular school that engages in such activities.

If you guessed: Kisō Academy, then congratulations! You're correct! It's that same goddamn school! It better not have been their doing that all the companies pulled out, too!

"There's no real hope that a company might appear at this late a point to support us, with the school so far in debt already, after all. You'll grow accustomed to the numbers soon enough."

"Respectfully, I don't think I want to get accustomed to them."

"Huhu. Well, you never know, this year's Domain Tournament might give us something to work with. A business could happen to take interest."

"Hmm~, do you have a plan in mind for that?"

At that question, Miroku-senpai paused her writing, and said with a smile "It's you." Knock it off, I'm gonna fall for you...

"You are our precious vanguard, and a quite capable diver. You fit well with both Mizuhi and Toa-chan. I can't see you losing to an average other diver out there."

Her expectations are so high. All I do is crossdress. The pressure, there's so much pressure.

"You're really overestimating me, I think. ...Oh, right, Miroku-senpai, your weapon is that thin blade you have, right? The one that looks like a rapier?"

"It is. Though, to be ve~ry precise, it's not a rapier at all."

She brings out her armament to show me. It's an incredibly thin sword; it practically looks like it'd shatter if we traded blows.

"This isn't really meant for wartimes. I'm not confident I can be of much help in the Domain Tournament."

"Oh, really?"

"I'm afraid so. Physical prowess isn't something I'm particularly good at, either... Thanks to all that, I've become our expert on document filing instead."

She lightly shrugs her shoulders.

"But, thanks to all that, it also means that Mizuhi-senpai and Toa-chan are able to head out on rescues so often."

"...I can't help but notice that I'm the one always left in a place of safety, though~"

Her voice lost a bit of its warmth. She spoke like she was the only one she who had no expectations held of her. Cut that out! From the moment you started being a beautiful girl, the world already revolved around you!

Alright, I'll just have to cheer her up myself! I did it for Mihaya-chan, so I can do it for Miroku-senpai, too!

"Miroku-senpai, th— "Ah yes, Kei, are you free to accompany me somewhere the day after tomorrow?" ...ah, of course."

Failure before even starting!

Her mood from before did seem to have departed for now, at least, and it was her usual smile that she turned to me again with the confirmation.

"Alright then, it'll be a date."

"....Eh?"

Eh?

■

Seeing Kei-kun have a bit of a blank stare to that, I can't help but smile a bit more. It's a rather dumb expression that you wouldn't normally expect he can make, and seeing him a bit more plainly gives a somehow pleasant feeling.

"I was only joking. It's not a date, it's part-time work. My workplace wanted me to see if I could get one more person to help out."

"Ah, ahhh, I see, that makes sense. Please don't surprise me like that."

He lets out a small sigh of relief. I also mind myself slightly relieved that he has that sort of reaction in the first place. He always has this serious air despite being in a school with just three

girls running about, and doesn't seem to have any of the habits of typical male students. Any normal male student would have already fallen for how cute Toa-chan is.

Perhaps, the explanation is that Kei is also a girl...or something outlandish like that.

Honestly, he's got very androgynous features, and if someone showed him to me in our female uniform and told me he *was* a girl, I might very well believe it.

"So, just so I know, where is this job?"

"It's at the amusement park. They set up a dungeon specially for sightseeing purposes. The work would be things like handing out balloons, or... I imagine that they'd put you in a mascot uniform."

"Hmm, that sounds neat. I've never been in one before."

I'm glad he's more excited for this than I expected he'd be. Though, notably, he's always on board with all of our proposals.

I don't think I've ever seen him even consider turning us down.

Right now, he's handling the documents that send Mizuhi into a rage as if they're just another day in his life. He's covered Toa-chan well, and he works nicely with Mizuhi in the field, too.

I'm struck again with just how directly important he's become to us at Fectom since arriving.

"Something up, Miroku-senpai? You keep staring this way."

"Oh, don't mind me. Just a bit of bed hair that caught my eye, is all."

"Eh? Where? Aaah, I can't believe myself! Is it this bit? Over here?"

A laugh escapes me, seeing him jump to straighten out his hair. I stand up, and move to behind where he's sitting.

"I'll get it for you."

"Oh, thank you so much."

"No trouble at all."

I began making the movements of fixing it, running my hands through his hair. It's a resplendent blue-silver. Far brighter than my own pale blue. And the feel of it, it's so smooth it once again makes me doubt that this is a boy sitting in front of me.

"Um... Miroku-senpai?"

"I'm fixing it right now, hold still~"

"Ah, got it."

At some point, I had started patting his head.

Our instructor used to do that for me, often, in much the same way.

I wonder if this is how she felt, when she did.

"I hope you can keep helping me take care of Toa-chan and Mizuhi."

"Huh? Well, of course. I would have thought I was still in the position to be getting taken care of, or, I guess it feels like I'm still not really doing enough to be helpful, or something."

"No more humility out of you. I have quite a lot of faith in you already, you know."

"...Thank you."

He glanced downward a little bit, and said nothing else, just letting me continue to stroke his hair.

A peaceful time flows in this room.

There is only the sound of the ticking clock, and a faint breeze through the window.

Today seems like it will be another splendid day.

"I really do believe in you."

And I hope that this place can become one that offers his heart some comfort.

30. It is a prerequisite that one also be a beautiful girl, if one is to accompany a beautiful girl to an amusement park.

Good day to you all! It's me again, the Part-Time Beautiful Girl (Counterfeit)! I'm still in my training period, but I'll be doing my best! Sir, yes sir!

"Kei-kun, do you have it on now?"

"Yep. This thing's surprisingly easy to move in."

I am, currently, fully immersing myself in the joys of work.

That's right, I'm inside a mascot kigurumi at an amusement park.

"It seems that's the norm for a diver's body. Ordinary people find them rather difficult to pilot, I'm told."

"Wow. It's just the shape of a bear, too, that's surprising."

I make some moves to the left and the right. Playing the role of a bear mascot is nothing to someone like me, who's used to playing the beautiful girl.

And right now, I'm making a bunch of cute and exaggerated motions nearby Miroku-senpai as she hands out balloons. Once we had stepped out and into view, the kids had immediately started gathering around.

Come one, come all, you future beautiful girls! ^^

"Thanks, onee-chan!"

"Huhu, have yourselves a good visit~"

Miroku-senpai of course has her million dollar smile on for the kids as she hands out the balloons. Hey, wait, that might be overkill for the boys, they're gonna think about that encounter forever. Can we get the weapon codename Beautiful Girl Smile to turn down its output by half, maybe?

"Kuma-saaaaan!"

"Welcome to Waku-Waku Hinotsuchi Land, hino! We hope you have a ton of fun, hino!"

And on that topic, I'm just a bear, hino! I don't have to worry about imparting the kids with any lasting preferences, hino!

Now, come on. Get the boys over here, and the girls over with Miroku-senpai.

Though, I gotta say, divers are looking surprisingly suited to contend with an ever-advancing flood of small children. And Miroku-senpai looks surprisingly suited by the staff outfit she has on.

...I see. Black tights. Yeah. That might lead me to another type of Mysterious Beautiful Girl.

<■■■■>

No, see, if we go with white ones, then it clashes with her image. Sorcière's still a girl who's shouldering the darkness of the world. We'd need to give her at least two separate "filling the holes in her heart" events for her to start wearing white tights.

They're *definitely* not an outfit piece you go with from the start.

"...Kei-kun?"

Miroku-senpai calls out to me during a lull in the tide. Oh, crap. I got too caught up in my conversation with Star-Reader Staff.

"It's nothing hino!"

"You've really settled into the character, wow. This kind of thing might suit you better than I thought~"

"Leave it to me hino!"

If it's roleplay you need, I'm your guy.

"Though, you aren't pushing yourself somehow, are you? There's other areas still to go, after all."

"I'm still in it, hino!"

Today, our shift runs until dusk. After that, others will switch in, though I haven't met them yet.

But it's fine, we won't be sticking around in this sort of dangerous place until nightfall.

I know the truth of this place. I know that, beneath this lovely Waku-Waku Hinotsuchi Land, lies an experimental facility for the combination of human and dungeon, the Sublimation-Fusion Form, alias Ouroboros. By day, it plays the cheerful amusement park. By night, it siphons mana from visitors to advance its illegal activities.

And, of course, it's one stop in Touraku-kun's long itinerary.

It'd be a lie to say I'm not a bit worried at Miroku-senpai's working here for close to three months now, but strictly speaking, it's harder to find a place in this entire academy-city that's actually free of some catch like this is so there's not much one can do.

Hell, my own part time had a secret menu for trading dungeon cores, even.

Thus, what I *can* actually do is just keep an eye out so she doesn't get dragged into anything.

And most certainly not get myself involved with the plot.

This is because being involved with the plot inherently means that danger is just around the corner.

I need to do my best to protect Miroku-senpai here, as someone who knows what's going to happen.

"That reminds me, I was told that we can go around however we please once the sun sets. I suppose it's to commemorate your first day working with us."

"Wow, I'm very grateful hino!"

Well, that complicates things.

I love amusement parks, and I'm incapable of turning her down. But what really does it is this vibe, the feeling surrounding Miroku-senpai.

A beautiful girl at the amusement park?

Ought not her companion also be a beautiful girl?

The scene's just *ruined* if you put a guy in there instead! If such a guy dares to step up to the plate, I'll beat him up with my own bear hands!

Hang on, I've found one already! There's no way a guy and a girl will pair well together, hino! And what's worse, it's 2 girls and 1 guy!? The only harems I approve of are fully yuri, hino!

"—Can you give this one a balloon too, please?"

"Of course! Here you go~"

The group approaches Miroku-senpai and requests a balloon for one of them. Miroku offers one with her trademark smile.

Hm??????

Now that I'm seeing them more closely, this trio looks familiar.... A refreshing cut of black hair, blue hair tied halfway up, and a grey-haired little girl...

"Thank you. This... Is this one something I can cut?"

"Not this one, Lutra."

Gyaaaaaaaaah! It's the protagonist's itineraryyyy!

For why... The plot's approaching *me* now! Isn't this too fast!? Like, chronologically, the events are set a bit after now, aren't they!?

"Then, what about that bear?"

"Not that one, even more so!?"

"...Welcome to Waku-Waku Hinotsuchi Land, hino! There's nothing here for a young lady to slice, hino! Seriously."

".....I do suppose I shouldn't cut a girl like you."

I crouch down to Lutra's level. Please, don't go cutting things up. Please don't start a fight. If you get into a fight with something, that means that it's connected to the rest of the plot here.

Anyhow, that aside... It's so nice to meet you Lutra-chan! You're so small and cute in person! As your older sister here, let me present you with a commemorative candy.

"For being a good kid, you get a candy, hino!"

"Can I cut this?"

"Sure, hino!"

"...Thanks."

Lutra's thanks was delivered without a change in her expression. But she just has some trouble making expressions, and she's probably fully happy about it internally.

I already understand, you see!

"Ah, you're still doing the candies? I remember getting one when I was younger, too."

"I don't think I've ever heard of that before, actually."

Mihaya-chan and Touraku-kun's impressions make me realize just how long this tradition has been going on. No wonder this outfit has such a large pocket in it.

"One for each of you as well, hino."

"Eh, really? Thank you."

"Well, I suppose I'll take one."

I pass them each a candy as well, while I continue my cute gestures.

"Are you on an outing together today, hino?"

"...Yeah, we are. Lutra said she wanted to visit the amusement park."

Ah, thank god, it's just a normal outing. Lutra does love walking around places, after all.

"I see, hino! Well, I hope you all enjoy the place, hino! Hiiinohinohino!"

"Was that really how the laugh went?"

Well, what the hell. And here I thought that today was "The day the experimental facility gets obliterated"!

What a relief this is.

"Have fun, hino~!"

Just while I'm on the topic, this event is also where one of the sub-heroines that had betrayed the evil organization is fused with Ouroboros to make an example out of her.

If it *had* been today, not only would we lose our part-time positions, I'd have to run around carrying Miroku-senpai while still in this suit.

But it's fine, since it's just a normal outing today. So, let's return to our usual hours of dreaming of better, beautiful-er, girl-er days to come, hino ^^

■

Mihaya brought the candy she had been given in front of her DiveGear with a natural motion.

"...It seems fine."

"Eh? Something's inside this thing."

Touraku held a hand out to stop her, with the candy already in his mouth.

"This really couldn't be the root cause, don't worry. Though, I suppose it could also be a part of their handiwork, to help enable their absorption of mana overall?"

"Good point..."

Touraku thought back on the bear they had met at the entrance. It and its cheerful activity seemed popular with the children.

"I don't really like to think about either the girl *or* the bear being evil."

"If it's any help, they're likely just normal people who were hired for the park."

And Mihaya popped the candy into her mouth.

"Let's hurry up and bring Rinka back with us. I still have words for her, leaving a farewell letter for us like that."

"...Yeah. Yeah, let's."

Touraku nodded at her words.

Mihaya seems like she's become even more reliable lately.

Ever since the day Touraku collapsed, Mihaya had grown swiftly both physically and mentally. They trained together, so Touraku knew that better than anyone else.

"...What are you staring at, huh?"

"Eh? Ah, just thinking about how glad I am that you're by my side."

"Mm, I see. Well, fear not, I plan to remain at your side forever."

She grabbed his hand tightly and started walking forward with him again. Touraku showed in his expression that he was used to this sequence, and Lutra still seemed to have no change in expression at all as Touraku pulled her along.

I also need to get a lot stronger.

Following Kei's advice, Touraku had slowly approached the level necessary to wield Lutra's true ability. And perhaps, the coming fight would be enough to finally reach that point.

His awakening was merely a matter of time.

"Touraku, Mihaya."

Unexpectedly, it was Lutra who spoke next. The other two stopped, hearing her raise her voice for the first time since receiving the candy.

"What's up, Lutra?"

"In the coming fight, put your lives on the line. Act as if the worst outcome is already predetermined."

Lutra's voice was rather monotonous, as it always was. But Touraku and Mihaya both sensed that there was still restlessness and panic mixed in there.

"...What are you feeling?"

Lutra shook her head.

"Not feeling. I've already run across the one existence I wished to avoid the most."

She looked back at the path the three of them had taken that day. Her gaze fell on the plaza where the person in that kigurumi had been prancing around. Visitors were now congregating there for commemorative photos.

Lutra's brows furrowed.

"If we happen to fight with her tonight. That will be a fight to the death."

The mascot seemed to have long since vanished from the area.

31. A beautiful girl can be understood as such even when her form is obscured.

The job went pretty well. I had no issue dealing with so many different kids, and even more than that I was able to help Miroku-senpai out a whole lot.

"Alright then, I'm going to go grab a bite to eat."

"Okaaay."

Three hours after the encounter with Touraku and co., I had been awarded my afternoon break. Miroku-senpai is just returning from her own.

We had been told that there will be someone to trade out with, so I need to go contact the replacement mascot person. They ought to be another diver like me, on standby somewhere around here.

"Uuuuh, let's see. Staff Only, here we go."

I open the door to the staff area, still wearing the outfit.

It's pretty dimly lit in here. My replacement is... Ah, right there.

I make my way over to another kigurumi that sits right toward the corner of the hallway. It's a pretty strange place for someone to be just waiting around to swap in. The break room's just around the corner...

"Excuse me... No, hold one moment."

A flash of inspiration strikes. It is not just in appearance that one is a beautiful girl. One's accomplishments as such encompass also her voice. Thus: I, with body disguised by this costume, ought to be able to become someone recognizable as a beautiful girl just by my voice.

Honestly, this job is just for one day, and they can't recognize me after the fact, so I might as well let them think I'm a beautiful girl while I have the chance!

"—It's time to swap over, I believe."

"!? ...You are?"

Perhaps my beautiful girl voice was a surprise, but either way the other suit in front of me bounds up. More importantly, though, that voice... You too are a beautiful girl, I see! And, with a refreshing voice that stands out from the crowd, she must also be a named character!

Thus, I must put my all into my own beautiful girling.

"You seem quite a bit jumpy. All I did was just call out for you."

I tie an exaggerated pose in with that, and she seems to let out a sigh of relief. Well now, what's been happening back here?

"...Haah, don't surprise me like that."

The lack of energy seeing a costumed beautiful girl.
Motions that lack spirit.

And the way she jumped just now.

I see, I see! You must also be on your first day here, right? And likely the same as Toa-chan, dragged along by the payout but being very bad with standing in front of people.

This must be her nerves getting to her from her turn coming up. ...Alright, I'll give her a bit of a pep talk. I'm a pro at streaming in crossdress! The least I can do is give someone a push when she needs it!

"It's scary, isn't it."

"..."

"I understand those feelings well."

"You... Don't tell me..."

I nod.

"I was much the same as you, at first."

The worries of if I could really become a beautiful girl. The hesitations I've had. My current days, chasing after just what it is that beautiful girls are.

I understand it all, but all the more, you can never stop moving forward.

"...Then, you understand, too, that I can't, after all this. Even right now, I want to throw it all away and start running."

"And you think that will be your salvation?"

You won't get paid for it if you do. This is a cash allowance, not direct transfer.

"Salvation? Even after tricking everyone, for so long!? There's no path to salvation left for someone like me!"

Ehh, what's that all of a sudden that's scary talk... Is this the type of person who thinks talking to the people inside the costumes is a breach of the social contract? Is she this intense even outside of the job? Hardcore hobbyist? Are you one of those folk?

"And if you're the same as me, then why are you also in here!? Despite all that talk, you're here because you couldn't stand the fear either, aren't you!"

"...I arrived here because it was my duty to do so."

The kigurumi-wearing beautiful girl stands up, and approaches closer to me to signal her to calm down a bit.

Seriously, calm down. And give me a minute to think.

Just who *is* this assumed beautiful girl? Star-Reader Staff-kun, your thoughts?

«■■?»

Yeahhh, you wouldn't know either, would you. Her voice is pretty muffled, so I can't get a good grasp on who it might be. All we can know for sure is that she's a hardcore enthusiast who feels like playing the mascot is tricking all the kids that visit the amusement park.

How intense... Really, is this what the average beautiful girl student is like here?

"I suggest you take a moment to calm yourself."

"...Sorry. I know that even if I throw my anger at you, it won't solve anything."

"Truly. After all, I am not the one with solutions here. It is your decision to make, young lady."

You're the one who has to decide how to work through your own emotions. And, honestly, if it troubles you so much, might I suggest just not taking jobs like this in the future? You have a cute voice, you'd make it far as a streamer. I'm fairly certain one of the schools in this city specializes in training divers for the entertainment sphere.

"My decision to make..."

"Yes, yours and yours alone."

Really, if it's that hard to swallow, I do think you ought to quit. Look at me, I've been on bean sprouts for so long that I would be fine without lunch. I am 100% fine picking up your shift here too.

"Think not of what you *should*, but what you *want to* do. What's the harm in following your beliefs?"

"...Is something so simple really fine?"

What, walking out on the job? It's fine, it's totally fine! I'd cover for any beautiful girl playing hooky any day of the week.

I'd drag any guy back in, though, kicking and screaming. Don't underestimate the workforce.

"It's perfectly fine with me. Now, go listen to what your heart tells you."

I lift her hand, and point her toward the door.

"It will be fine. The world is far more tender and brilliant than you can imagine."

A few years down the line, and this will be something you can laugh about.

Such is not the case for guys, though! No matter how many years pass, the resentment will still fester against you for skipping on your promises.

"...Thank you. I think I've started to understand what it is I want to do."

"I'm happy to hear that."

The kigurumi-wearing beautiful girl heads for the door, and only turns back to look at me just at the threshold.

"I forgot to ask for your name."

Can't give that to you, I'm afraid. I'm a pile of falsehoods over here right now.

"...Right. Sorry, yeah. Yeah. Okay, I'll go do my best!"

She went and convinced herself! I'm fine with that development though.

"Yes, have a good time."

She gives me a small bow of thanks, and departs through that door.

...

Hold on. She ran off without even taking off the costume!? Or does she just bring that with her, maybe?

Well, alright then. Looks like I don't get a break today, so I'll just head back to Miroku-senpai's spot.

After hydrating.

I quickly head through the door just before the corner that led to my encounter. Water, water.

"Ah, you're on break?"

"Eh?"

As I enter, there's a male student just in the middle of putting his own mascot uniform on.

What?

"Then it looks like it's my turn to swap in. It's right in front of the fountain in block D, right?"

"Yes."

"Then, heading out!"

"...Much obliged?"

I see the mascot out.

What?

He was my replacement?

Then who was the girl?

Did I conjure up a hallucination from fatigue?

«■■■■■■■■»

Right, yeah! You saw her too! What the hell...

".....I guess I'll just eat here."

Today's a bentō of bean sprouts Toa-chan put together! (Abandonment of thought)

Yay!

32. A beautiful girl always stands at the forefront of liberty.

Agiri Rinka never knew the faces of her own parents. She had been born and raised within the same facility. Twilit Silver, one of the many different organizations within the academy-city, was not only her home, but also the only place she could call by such a name.

Her parents were researchers, and her lullabies were digital.

All of her life was artificial, but that artificial life was all that she had.

All of that she had, she betrayed.

"Haah, haah."

Rinka hid herself after shaking off her pursuers. The place she was in seemed to front as a staff area, a dim hallway running past several different doors.

She quieted her breathing, and moved inside. And she found a box left in front of a supply closet.

Inside was a single mascot kigurumi, slated for disposal.

"...Perfect timing."

She immediately put it on. Her face was already known, and this would lower the risk of her being caught on sight.

"Alright, there we go, now things are..."

One doubt floated to her mind, stifling the word "alright".

Just where should I go from here...

Rinka had betrayed her organization. She had abandoned the function granted to her: To kill the DemonGear contractor Gatō Touraku, and reclaim Lutra.

And it even started off alright...

Getting close to him as a friend was easy enough. His personality, like they'd confirmed in advance, was naturally inclined to virtue, and he was overall a very honest young man. And so it was that they captivated her, both he and the people around him, by what they showed her.

"I couldn't. I could never kill those people, they look so happy..."

The girl named Rinka had never killed anyone. This mission she had been granted was something meant to push her to completion. Thus, as she had abandoned that purpose midway, she was now nothing beyond a failed product.

Touraku and them found me out, and then the organization discarded me... Haah, I really don't have anywhere left to go, do I?

As the thought struck her, her legs practically gave out. She'd been on the move ever since she fled the facility and her punishment, and her feet had reached their limit. Her willpower had sustained her this long, but that too had now abandoned her.

I should just try and find a hole-in-the-wall school somewhere out there to start all over. ...No, even if I did, the organization will still find me.

Twilit Silver held a lot of power within the academy-city. The Apis Umbrella tacitly approved their continued existence, and with that power they would have very little trouble disposing of a single girl who ran away from them.

"Haah. What sort of life have I been living, I wonder."

Objectively, from this far outside it now, Rinka could easily see it as one where her purpose was always set. Everything for the sake of the organization, herself as just one of countless tools.

Even when she was enjoying her time with Touraku, that too was following a manual. She had never had any freedom, in anything.

"—It's time to swap over, I believe."

Suddenly, a voice called out from behind her. She spun around, ready to keep running, but this person was wearing the same sort of outfit she had on.

"!? ...You are?"

For the first moment, she thought that it might have been someone here for one of the part-time positions at the park, but she immediately realized that was incorrect. She had been forged for her purpose from childhood, and so she understood well just what was standing in front of her.

This person is strong. Even if I give it my all, there's no chance of me winning here.

The way this person stood was casual, but still decidedly intimidating. She knew that this was someone from her side of the world.

"You seem quite a bit jumpy. All I did was just call out for you."

The girl in front of her seemed a bit astounded at her response. Somehow, it seemed this was not someone who had come here to chase Rinka down.

"...Haah, don't surprise me like that."

The underworld of this facility was very well known. It made sense that operatives from other organizations might be sent over.

But the girl's next words disagreed with that assumption.

"It's scary, isn't it."

"..."

"I understand those feelings well."

Understanding, sympathy for her circumstances. This could not possibly be another operative.

"You... Don't tell me..."

"I was much the same as you, at first."

That was an answer to everything.

Twilit Silver would never forgive betrayal. But there were still the stories of a small number of people who did truly escape their grasp.

The reasons they had done that were never clear; perhaps distaste for the organization's methods, perhaps just dreaming of a more resplendent future. But it was a fact that those people had in fact broken away from Twilit Silver. And now, she could tell that those girls had put together an entirely new organization from that splinter corps.

If this person is really from an organization that stands against Twilit Silver, then I can see why she is here. This is one of their key facilities.

The bearing of someone with true strength, and words that implicitly referred to Twilit Silver's existence. Indeed, this was one of the divers that escaped the organization.

At the same time, she found that this was also evidence that, with the strength she had here, she would *not* be able to escape Twilit Silver. Rinka was not as strong an individual as this other girl.

"...Then, you understand, too, that I can't, after all this. Even right now, I want to throw it all away and start running."

She cracked a self-deprecating laugh. After all, where would she even run *to*?

But the girl in front of her did not laugh in return.

"And you think that will be your salvation?"

It was a question that pierced Rinka to her core, like this girl had seen right through to her soul, her essence. She felt a meaningless resentment swell within her.

"Salvation? Even after tricking everyone, for so long!? There's no path to salvation left for someone like me!"

She had used Touraku for his kind nature.

She had trampled on Mihaya's compassion.

She had treated Lutra as nothing more than a tool.

Rinka had betrayed all of them, when they had given her a warm place to be. They had given her something real, and she had made it fake again.

"And if you're the same as me, then why are you also in here!? Despite all that talk, you're here because you couldn't stand the fear either, aren't you!"

The rational part of her mind realized that she was way off the mark. She knew the girl was here either to destroy the facility outright, or just to make away with their information.

But still, the darker parts of her heart had convinced themselves that this girl was here to surrender, to turn herself in.

She wanted them to be the same, both losing to Twilit Silver.

She didn't want to have to think of only herself as the pitiful one.

The girl in front of her lightly admonished her, understanding her true feelings.

"...I arrived here because it was my duty to do so."

The other girl raised a hand so incredibly calmly as Rinka closed in on her.

Even that exchange dug into her, so clearly showing that she could never be the better person here.

"I suggest you take a moment to calm yourself."

"...Sorry. I know that even if I throw my anger at you, it won't solve anything."

"Truly. After all, I am not the one with solutions here."

The girl agreed with Rinka, but continued.

"It is your decision to make, young lady."

Her autonomy was recognized. That was the root of what she was doing. She reached into the machine named Rinka that the organization had put together with orders and training, and offered her freedom.

"My decision to make..."

"Yes, yours and yours alone."

The girl nodded, and again continued speaking. Offering Rinka a path.

"Think not of what you *should*, but what you *want to* do. What's the harm in following your beliefs?"

"...Is something so simple really fine?"

Rinka had always operated by logic. All of her actions had been calculated to bring the most benefit to the organization.

Today, that was no longer the case.

"It's perfectly fine with me. Now, go listen to what your heart tells you."

The girl took her hand. Kigurumi have fixed expressions, but Rinka could tell from the tone of her voice that she was smiling.

"It will be fine. The world is far more tender and brilliant than you can imagine."

She had to wonder, just how much sacrifice, how much suffering, formed the foundation for such a statement? She would not be able to understand yet, tied as she still was by her time with the organization, but still, she was able to see a part of an answer.

"...Thank you. I think I've started to understand what it is I want to do."

"I'm happy to hear that."

Rinka paused at the doorway, and looked back.

"I forgot to ask for your name."

That girl had given her a push forward when she couldn't take a single step.

That girl had taken on a risk she couldn't understand just for this happenstance encounter.

That girl, inside her own kigurumi, did not answer.

That girl continued standing, just as she was. The words were understood though unspoken—that girl's duty here was now complete.

"...Right. Sorry, yeah. Yeah. Okay, I'll go do my best!"

"Yes, have a good time."

Rinka bowed to her once. That was all she could do as thanks for now. And then, she stepped outside.

The organization is searching for me, but they're searching for me in the crowd. So I should be able to—

Rinka began heading back along the way she had escaped from. Her goal had shifted to the underground facility.

This time, she entered not as Rinka of Twilit Silver. She did not approach to submit, nor to surrender.

She went to battle, as Rinka of Mikage Academy.

33. Even if a beautiful girl's wish is to take on another's sin, that should be acceptable for her to do.

I feel like I triggered a very strange sort of event, but... Well, that must be my imagination.

I'm no blockheaded protagonist, after all. I'm incredibly prudent, always thinking of the future when I act; I'm a beautiful girl of the newer generation.

And that's why I can say with certainty, this is absolutely a day for the main plot event to go through...

If you think about it for a second, there's no way the protagonist would swing by an amusement park just to play around, is there!

"Oh? Kei-kun, did something happen?"

"Nothing at all."

I flash a smile with my reply.

I spent so much extra energy being careful and aware during our job today, I'm unnecessarily worn out now.

That person in the other kigurumi was most certainly a staff member involved with the plot. But I don't remember anyone going around like that, especially with such an intense personality, so I'm still at a loss for just who it really was.

"Alright. Though, I have to say, you were a great help today. Thanks to you, we got through the day without incident."

"I'm glad to hear that."

The day will be having an incident soon enough, just so you know, Miroku-senpai.

The setting sun begins to stretch orange over everything as evening arrives. Within the hour, this place will become a battleground.

Following the original plot, this is the place where the being Ouroboros is first unveiled. The Sublimation-Fusion Form of dungeon and person together. It's a pretty shitty boss, since it possesses regeneration that encroaches on immortality and can continue using the particular abilities of the human it fused with.

Within the glorious first volume itself, the person involved was Rinka-chan, a sub-heroine. She betrayed the organization behind this all, and attempted to kill the ones producing Ouroboros, but lost. They then shoved her into Ouroboros herself, and she started rampaging around the amusement park. Rinka-chan didn't have any abilities manifested or realized at the time, so there was only the regeneration to deal with, but it was still a strong opponent. Thanks to Lutra, they were able to do something about it, but it's not something you'd normally be able to just butt heads with like that.

"Well, it's getting a bit late. Shall we start heading back?"

As for myself, what I can do here is bring Miroku-senpai back home with me.

We shouldn't stick around here much longer.

"Ah, please wait a moment. There's, can we get on one ride before we leave?"

"...I hate to say it, but I am pretty worn out after all that. I'm not sure if I have the energy for a ride."

Her good nature is backfiring on us...!

One must not refuse a beautiful girl her wish. But at the same time, one must not allowed a beautiful girl to perish.

While caught in thought, I also find my hand caught by her. Eh, what's this, you have something you want to ride that badly?

"Please. I understand I'm being selfish, but please. There's just one last place that I want to visit today."

"I don't suppose it's something you can come back for another day?"

"...Please. It won't work if it's not today."

She lowers her head.

Does she really like the amusement park that much? Hmm, I mean, if it's just one, then I think we have time...

Alright, and then we just full-speed book it out of the park afterwards. And if worst comes to worst, I can always Sorcière.

«■■■■■»

Hey, quit getting fired up in there! I'm not pulling you out unless I have to.

"I understand. I'll accompany you for one ride. I can't deny that I am a little bit interested in what the attractions here are actually like."

Miroku-senpai shows an expression of relief.

"Thank you very much. Now, let's be along. My greatest recommendation for you is the Ferris wheel. It gives a viewpoint over the entire park, and the setting sun from inside those seats is truly spectacular."

While she describes it, she leads me along in the direction of the wheel.

Another beautiful girl has grabbed my hand, what a sinful life I live.

The Ferris wheel is rather free when we arrive.

Considering that we live in a time where dungeons, the new wonders of the world, are commonplace, it's hard to say that a Ferris wheel still has a lot of entertainment value. While it was normal fare in my previous world, here in this amusement park it is no more than one of the numerous different attractions.

Thanks to all that, it's the furthest one from the park gates. Thinking about escape routes, that's sort of the worst possible spot for it to be.

"Alright, let's get on."

"Ah, okay."

Our turn arrives very quickly, and we enter the ornament-like cute capsule, sitting across from each other. Yep, this is the gravest of all sins I'm committing!

As I mentioned earlier, of course only beautiful girls should be getting into a Ferris wheel with beautiful girls. That much is common knowledge. And, I hadn't been able to remember to realize it before with all of the main plot happening today, but being in an amusement park with a beautiful girl is, in fact, a date.

These sins I bear are so heavy...

My next life is going to put me in the ballpark of a wharf roach or some other isopod, I bet. How sad.

"Once again, thank you very much for today."

Miroku-senpai speaks with her usual smiling face. Steeped in the orange of the setting sun, she's even more beautiful than usual.

"Oh, please, don't mention it. I'm just glad I was able to help you out. Working at an amusement park was a lot of fun. Feel free to call on me if you end up doing this again."

"...Yes. If there is a next time at all."

"...Miroku-senpai?"

Was the job too tiring for her, perhaps? I suppose I can see some fatigue that's snuck its way onto her face, but... No, all that I can see is just a beautiful girl.

"Oh, look over there. It's the water fountain we started off at earlier. It looks ever so small from up here."

"It really does. Oh, and there's still a mascot around down there. That's a different one than I was wearing."

"This one's a hare, it seems."

A hare, huh? I thought it was just a rabbit.

"—Kei-kun, let me sit next to you for a moment."

It is as we arrived at the peak of our rotation that she moves over to my side.

Oh, guilty again.

At this rate, I'll be able to visit the depths of the underworld just by getting recognized.

"Today, I had a lot of fun. Thank you."

And she smiles again as she says that.

Hm, it's not my imagination, she really does smell good. This is the fragrance of a true beautiful girl... Later on, I should get some perfume just for Sorcière use.

"Thank you as well."

I lower my head.

Inside it, I imagine for a moment the orange sunset dying a CG of vibrant sepia, two beautiful girls in a capsule. The illustration to cap off their individual routes.

Thank you, for giving me a moment like this when I have still so much to learn as a beautiful girl myself.

One day, I will absolutely join your side!

"Kei-kun, do you enjoy Fectom Academy?"

"I do."

There's three whole beautiful girls. Of course I enjoy it.

And once I become one as well, the enjoyment will increase.

I look forward to us living life like a 4koma.

"I'm glad to hear that."

Miroku-senpai settles into the backrest of the seat, and looks at the roof of the capsule.

"I find myself very lucky to have met you. And I'm sure Mizuhi and Toa-chan feel the same."

"I wonder, sometimes. I feel like I have a lot farther to go in order to help out."

I'm so sorry for barging in despite not being a beautiful girl...

"There you go again, always putting yourself down. There are people here who believe in you, you know. And it goes without saying, but I'm one of them."

Perhaps it's because of the sunset, but her face is a bit red.

I wonder what mine is like right now.

"Kei-kun."

"Ah."

Miroku-senpai suddenly moves close enough for us to feel each other's breath, and hugs me.

Aaaah... My brain destroys and creates itself anew as overwhelming guilt and happiness cycle through it.

"You've helped out with odd jobs for the student council. Mizuhi has told me that she thinks of you as a fully fledged diver. Toa-chan has told me that you're someone she can believe in. You've long since become a member of our Fectom Academy."

She hugs me even tighter.

She's such a nice person, as always. Like an embodiment of human virtue.

Wait, but more importantly—Her hair! Her fragrance! Her skin!

"The rest is up to you, Kei-kun."

She whispers her request into my ear. Well, shit, I have no idea what it is she's asking me to do, but I'll sure do whatever she tells me to!!

"Mhm."

She ends the hug after I reply.

I wasn't even a beautiful girl just now, and I got it in my head to be happy... I really am the worst...!

"Don't cry so much, Kei-kun."

It's only at her mentioning that I realize I've started leaking tears. I suppose this too comes from the guilt I bear after the events of today...

"...I'm not crying. It's just your imagination."

"Huhu, I see. Well, we can say that's the case."

She doesn't try to press further.

Our conversation continues with trifling topics until we get off the ride. For some reason, it feels like a lot of it deals with the past...

"Alright, let's start heading home."

She yawns wide as we disembark. She looks strangely refreshed, or maybe that she somehow had some doubts dispelled.

I get how she feels. That feeling you get clocking out is unbelievable sometimes, isn't it?

With night beginning to creep over from one horizon, the lights in the park finally switch on to keep the place illuminated.

Shit, we gotta go!

"Miroku-senpai—"

The entire park shakes, suddenly. The sound of an alarm climbs in pitch, as smoke does to the sky.

"Just what is...!?"

I begin locking down a plan of escape for Miroku-senpai and I.

Main Event: Amusement Slaughterhouse is now live.

34. It won't do for a beautiful girl's final moments to be anything less than joyful.

This is punishment meant for me.

"Miroku-senpai, this way!"

The amusement park we were just enjoying a short time prior has instantly transformed into a hell on earth. Rubble is raining down across the various park attractions, and the asphalt beneath us is shaking violently.

"We need to get out of here before the gates close! The Apis Umbrella will be sending in an Enforcer soon, no doubt."

He grabs my hand hurriedly.

Just minutes ago, I saw him smiling. I saw him crying, for me.

How great the contrast is to right now.

"Tch, the damage is larger than I'd thought. I think it's better to circle around. Are you still able to run?"

"Yes, I'll be fine."

His face looks like the embodiment of desperation as it's lit by the flames that have begun to spread through the area.

This isn't what I wanted for him at all.

If I had listened to him, and we had just returned to the academy... The regret from considering that is unending.

"..."

This is my punishment, for daring to be selfish. For trying to leave something behind for the two after us, for wanting myself to be remembered.

"Miroku-senpai!"

"Ah."

His voice breaks my reverie. In front of us, there is something like a tendril of shadow.

Kei carves into it as it descends on us, splitting it into pieces with his dagger.

"The paralysis won't go through to the main body. I guess they've got some level of independence, so they'd be considered separate lifeforms...?"

Even at a time like this, Kei-kun protects me while rationally analyzing his opponent. That finally reminds me to bring out my own weapon.

It often gets called a rapier, but that's wrong. It's just a failure of a straight sword.

"I can cover for myself. From here, we should rescue what civilians we can while we escape."

"...Alright."

There was a moment of indecision before he nodded. It seems I've already been counted in the ones he needs to protect.

If it were Mizuhi or Toa-chan in my place, I'm sure he would have had the leeway of other options.

"Though, I suppose there are already plenty evacuating. As expected of a park within the academy city, should I say?"

Scuffles are commonplace within the academy-city. So many incidents occur every year where tourists get dragged into inter-school battles. Thanks to that, there are emergency manuals for practically every different location.

However, there are still a considerable number of people who can't escape.

"...Miroku-senpai, over there."

"Yes, let's move."

A place just slightly off the evacuation route. A child, crouching within a restaurant with a squashed roof.

It isn't just us who've noticed him, though. The tendrils also move in his direction, aiming to steal his life.

"Taking point; I'll clear your way. Miroku-senpai, handle custody of the kid."

"Understood."

Kei-kun takes a short breath and sends himself forward. In an instant, he shatters the shadows to nothing and makes a clear path from me to the child. I head through its center and quickly arrive at where the child is.

"It's alright now."

"Uu, uwaaaah!"

The child is halfway to panic from the fear, and I scoop him into a hug.

"It's okay. You're alright now. The two of us are veeery strong divers, okay? No need to worry anymore."

"Miroku-senpai, let's keep moving. I've secured a route for now."

Kei-kun declares our status, breathing heavily. When I look back, some large number of tendrils lie scattered in fragments across the ground. He must have fought off the ones that were heading for me, as well.

"Can you stand? We'll bring you outside with us."

"M, mm."

The child's eyes are still red from crying, but they were calm enough to grab my hand and start running with us. I wish I could pick him up and carry him, but this situation is not one where I can afford to give up my fighting arm.

"Where's mom and dad at?"

The child suddenly asks that while we run. He must have had enough time to parse the situation and realize it was only them in that place. Any possible response I have dies in my throat before I can decide what to say, but Kei answers from beside me.

"They're alive. Everyone else ran ahead of us. So keep your chin up and your legs moving."

It's a lie.

But it's one that seems to give the child the energy to keep going.

"Mm! I will!"

"Alright, good mentality!"

We keep up our sprint through the park. As the grounds are created as part of a dungeon, it's a very large area. Keeping pace with the child, it does look like we're going to be late to get out.

I wonder if it would be worth it after all to put away my weapon and carry the child, with Kei-kun here to fight for us.

But right as that thought strikes me, we catch sight of the being within the innermost area of the park.

"That..."

We don't stop, but it steals my attention.

The center of the park has a building used as a hotel, but now it also holds a monstrous, massive, pure-black creature. It reminds me at once of both a flower and an octopus.

Though, I wonder if it can really be called a creature at all. I find myself rejecting the thought that such a thing has any life within it.

"...Ouroboros."

Kei-kun aggressively mutters a name. And it seems unconsciously, at that, because he doesn't seem to realize that he spoke it aloud.

Just like I suspected, he's been in a fight of his own.

I can't be of help to him.

...No, now isn't the time to think like that.

"Miroku-senpai!"

"Eh?"

Just as I start recollecting my train of thought, I'm made to realize that there's another tendril of shadow right in front of me.

And as I do, I also realize: these things can manifest wherever there is shadow for them to use. They're scattered about because of the shadows cast at random by the flames in the area. It makes it seem pretty unrealistic to be able to run through while avoiding them all.

Also, we had until now been just dealing with the ones we came across. Our approach was permitted because all of this was unpredictable.

In a mere instant, one single fraction of a second, I make the decision of who to prioritize here.

"!"

I shove the child in Kei-kun's direction, and cleave the tendril in front of me with my sword.

One of them.

I certainly cleave one of them.

But one of them is all that I can manage.

"Ah—"

Another one suddenly appearing skewers me easily.

Strangely, there's no pain, just heat.

"Guh....Aaah!"

I slice into the second tendril, cleaving it apart as well.

Perhaps because one had already dealt a fatal wound, any others vanish back into the shadows. Shadow lurking and assassin-type. The viciousness would put them in B rank, roughly.

Something that strong would have taken me out eventually regardless, even if it wasn't here.

"Kei-ku, n."

The best I can manage now is calling out a name. I've already fallen over to the ground, all the power having left my limbs. I can already feel my body beginning to lose heat.

"__"

I can hear his voice calling out to me. But my hearing is already failing me, and I can't tell what he's saying.

My torso was skewered. There's no chance I can survive that wound, but I find myself thinking pretty rationally about that.

After all, there's still things I'll be leaving undone. When I do perish here, *either Mizuhi or Toa-chan will be chosen in my stead.*

There I lay, complaining.
There I lay, so many of me, brought to death's door.
And all of me are swallowed up by the darkness.
And at the end of it all, I—

■

Death appears right next to me.
Death arrives, right in front of me.

"Miroku-senpai!"

I rush over to her as she collapses. The shadows cast by the fire wriggle as if in laughter.

"Miroku-senpai, hey, Miroku-senpai!"

There's no response. No, even worse, her breathing is weak.

This is because I didn't turn her down.
I should have told her I couldn't, and gotten us out of here.
It's my fault now that she's like this.

"..."

Right before she collapsed, she called my name. I wonder what she was thinking when she did.

There's no way to know now.

There's nothing left for me now except despair, and to cry and scream.

...

As if I'll ever let it end like that!!!

Star! Reader! Staff!
"Sorciè—re!"

There's no time to waste on doubts. The reason is simple: this is to save a beautiful girl.

Several of the tendrils sense me staring at Miroku-senpai, and take it as a chance to fling themselves at me. All of them are reduced to nothingness by just the emanations of mana.

Star-Reader Staff's hella strong, damn. Or, I guess I am, in my usual form.

"I won't let you die. I absolutely will not let you die...! Young man, come here. I'll give you a magic shield!"

"M, mm!"

The kid gives an earnest nod. Great. I'll give you a candy later as a reward.

Extempore, I set up an area of absolute safety. This way, the tendrils won't be able to get in my way. The cost I pay in return is giving up my escape routes.

And Miroku-senpai is still bleeding out.

"I won't let you die."

I spin up my mental processes, accelerating my thoughts.

With my knowledge of the story, I'm already aware that there are ways to revive someone from near-death or even death itself. Of those, the strongest is a technique privy to the DemonGear—the ability named "Shiyaku".^[33] This technique can revive someone even shortly after death.

Besides that, there's also the restorative nanomachines that the Zirnias Research Institute^[34] makes use of. They adjusted it for medical use and made a dungeon that heals just by being in it.

Currently, my actual options are limited. And thinking about it even just a little, there's just one answer for me to arrive at.

No, the answer has already been calling to me.

«■■■■■»

I hear a voice speak to me. Clear, unobstructed, strong. Tired of these circumstances, overflowing with delight.

«■■■■■»

It is looking forward to our contract.

Something that I know not the nature of, even with all I know of the story. However, I do understand entirely that it is capable of reversing this situation.

It one-sidedly altered the length of my hair by interfering with my body.
It allowed me to meddle with Mizuhi-senpai's mana.

With an interference ability that borders on the absolute, it might even be able to overclock Miroku-senpai's self-restorative potential.

No, it *can*. Definitely.

Isn't that right, Star-Reader Staff?

«■■■■»

Understood.

Then, let's make that contract.

«■■■?»

The voice becomes slightly baffled. Confused that I earnestly mean to make this contract.

Sure, up until now I've treated you pretty bluntly, and refused to make a contract entirely. I've even been planning to sell you off.

But right now is different.

Star-Reader Staff. As you will enter my life in a real sense going forward, let me teach you something.

«?»

Beautiful girls alone must never be allowed to die.

It won't do for a beautiful girl's final moments to be anything less than joyful.

«???»

I give you all that I am. And to me, I ask that you give me the power to save every beautiful girl there is.

Give me all that you are, too.

"Sorcière."

I call out the name.

The same way as always.

And quietude descends anon.

Sound disappears from our surroundings, as does color with it. The fire, Miroku-senpai, the kid, everything comes to an end.

In a world beset by the gray beyond a lack of color, my eyes alight on a crimson casket. A decoration as red as that is obviously stands out in a world with only one other color at best.

It's a deep red, iron thing.

«Rejoice.»

The casket opens itself. I experience the conviction that it will never close again.

«Her Majesty's casket has here been accessed. Today is born a new Star-Reader.»

Within the casket sits a singular massive scythe. It quickens as if alive, and I pause there for just a moment.

"...Let's do this."

I bear the scythe to hand. As I touch it, a sense of near-omnipotence rushes through my entire being. An unending torrent of power overflowing. Within it all, I am still certainly there.

"—Hooh."

I descend the scythe in one smooth motion. The frozen time is shattered, and we return to the waking world once more.

"Eh, o, onii-chan?"

I leave dealing with the kid for another moment, and set myself down beside Miroku-senpai. Then, I begin my intervention at the midpoint of her torso.

I grant her recovery process the ability to go beyond its normal limits, allowing it to bring her back from death where otherwise it would be impossible. Then, I pour in all the mana I can, speeding up the process itself.

"Miroku-senpai... I still haven't repaid her in the slightest."

The wound weaves itself shut, and the outpouring of blood ceases. I let her body bathe in my mana to supplement what blood she's already lost.

"I absolutely, definitely will not let you die."

Three seconds pass.

Miroku-senpai starts breathing again.

"__"

She doesn't come to immediately, but her breathing is stable, and with her expression softening again I think it's safe to say we've made it through the worst of it all.

Hell yeah!!! Add it to your calendar, everyone! Today's the day Miroku-senpai came back to life!!

"Alright then."

I get back on my feet. My hair slides along the ground as well with a light noise. This... Star-Reader Staff has done it again, I see.

«My congratulations! Today marks the start of our partnership!»

Oh, shut up. I can certainly hear you a lot better than before, though.

«Now, now, what *shall* we do now? Ah, but you needn't reply. I already understand you. Thou and I art two and the same: thoughts are quite immediately transmitted.»

A lively voice resounds inside my head.

Well, if you know what I want, then that's fine. I want to twist the bastard creature that put Miroku-senpai in such a state into an entire Gordian Knot.

Yes! It's Mysterious Beautiful Girl Time!

«Ah, but it's a crying shame, isn't it? Crossdress is beyond your means, right now, you see.»

Hah?

Alright, how do I get you to enter your cooldown period. You saved Miroku-senpai already, so the skill should have finished proccing, right?

«That really is one of your worse qualities, I must say. ...Wait, no, that's my mistake. To be more accurate, there's no need for you currently to crossdress, you see.»

"Eh?"

A magic circuit deploys underfoot.

What the hell?

As the circuit rises, it passes softly over my body. And as it rises, my uniform becomes my usual goth-loli attire.

This...! An instant wardrobe change...!

«No, you're getting hyped up at the wrong bits. Do you truly wish to be a beautiful girl?»

Do the stars shine at night? I spent the last moments of my life reciting a mantra to become one instead of making a farewell poem, even.

«Then, be joyful. Place a hand to your breast.»

Hand to chest... Like this?

My hand meets a squishy sensation.

This...! This is...!

«My congratulations, Kei. In this moment, you are a beautiful girl yourself.»

"..."

As it's pointed out, I feel the strange differences. No, the omnipotence. The Beautiful Girlic Energy that only beautiful girls can access, I can feel resonate with my heart.

I can feel the certainty that the world revolves around me.

I can feel the certainty, that I have become a beautiful girl.

Thus, my next action is predetermined.

It's Super Mysterious Beautiful Girl Time!!

"—I suppose that must have shocked you."

I turn my gaze back to the young boy. From his perspective, it must look like I suddenly turned into a beautiful girl.

You're well and wide awake, I'll have you know.

"Can I leave this person to you?"

He blankly nods.

"Wonderful. You have my praise."

I give him a warm smile, and a pat on the head.

At the same time, I've probably given him some sort of fetish or preference. From now on, it'll only be putting normal boys in girls' clothing that gets him going...!

"Now then."

I clasp a candy in the kid's hand, and call forth a magic shield. I also strengthen it, so that even once I'm far away it will still hold strong.

"YEAHHHHH!!! Let's *gooo!*"

«The phrasing change...»

"Let's be off, Star-Reader Staff. The world calls to us."

«I've wondered this before, but is this really the worldview you live under?»

I'll give you a long, thorough lesson on things later ♥

«Hieeh...»

As I give Star-Reader Staff a fright, I ascend to a nearby roof and begin moving in. My target location is where the beast lurks. My goal is the zone of the plot's current operations.

Let's go show them what we look like.

Let's make them understand that today is born a new beautiful girl.

Tearing the plot to shreds is a taboo, but allow me this today. For I, am a beautiful girl!!!!

■

At that time, but in a hideout separate from Kisō Academy's autonomous ward.

"—Ah."

Eina drops the cup she was holding in hand. She looks down at her trembling hands, and then the floor covered in glass shards and water.

An irritated voice rings out from further within the place.

"Einaaa! Girl, quit making a mess in here! Who the hell do ya think has to clean up after you, huh?"

"Ah, aaaa..."

Rokuhara tilts his head in Eina's direction, just like usual.

And if it were in fact just like usual, she'd give some excuse or other, but today, she didn't even respond to him.

He stares at her with some suspicion, and finally realizes something's off about her.

"Eina. What's wrong."

He walks over to her and peers into her face. Finally, their eyes meet.

"Haah, haah. Lea, leader..."

"Calm down. I'm right here with ya."

Rokuhara holds her tight, patting her head like he's soothing a child. But it doesn't do anything for her state.

"Tell me what's going on, Eina."

"It's, it's over. For all, of us."

Eina's remaining rationality frantically assembles the words. The fact that she understands faster than any other DemonGear could, as the one among them all who excels in perception.

"—Our, our eldest sister, has awoken."

35. A beautiful girl will arrive in time to prevent any sort of tragedy.

When Rinka next opened her eyes, she was already within the inferno. Flames blazed on from each horizon to the other. Corpses distorted and twisted by the heat and their own paths to demise littered the area.

There was a large amount of death, there.

«This...»

Rinka attempted to move her body.

What moved instead was the massive feeler that filled her vision. It swung as easy as lifting a finger, and sent various buildings across the amusement park toppling sideways.

«Ah, no!»

It finally stopped after sweeping away a number of the corpses around.

She finally realized that this was Twilit Silver's Ouroboros, its full form.

She finally realized that she had become Ouroboros herself.

«I, I remember.»

She remembered her loss.

The determination of one girl is a trifling thing, laughed her memories of defeat at her in mockery.

«I lost, to the Professor...and then...»

With the encouragement from that mysterious girl, Rinka had returned to the facility. She had found her determination to kill, even if only trading her life.

Yet neither of those outcomes had come to pass. Her professor had already considered her betrayal in their calculations.

«Right, what about Touraku and the others!?»

Even just making a slight movement, the tendrils destroyed their surroundings again. Yet she had no effort to spare on that right now.

«If the Professor wasn't lying to me, then those three should be heading for me... There they are.»

Rinka pivoted the monstrous eye and quickly caught sight of Touraku and Mihaya. So much smaller than herself at this moment, and holding their respective weapons as they stared back at her.

Their gazes held none of the warmth that they offered a companion.

«...Yeah. After all, I'm really a monster now.»

Because she was a person of the organization, she understood exactly what she looked like from the outside. She had been reduced to a being that absorbs human bodies into a dungeon.

Yet still, she faced herself forward.

«I, what I want to do...!»

Ouroboros was another plan in response to the impending calamities, separate from the Demons. She knew that there was a degree of influence one could have over this body of a deus ex machina.

Thus, Rinka did not waver.

«If I hold it back here, I can end this with just one final casualty!»

She'd have Touraku and his companions kill her. That was the answer she had found for what she wanted to do, a devotion overflowing with heartbreak. This was the most optimal solution she had for this situation.

■

«—Touraku, it's movements have dulled.»

Lutra spoke to Touraku from her form as a weapon. And indeed, just as she said, Ouroboros had become more sluggish compared to just a bit earlier. The tendrils still poked out from various shadows, but the largest of them all and their direct source, Ouroboros, had ceased its attacks after one large swipe.

"I suppose something must have happened."

Mihaya made a comment as she pierced through more of the shadows.

"It's hard to say for sure. The only thing below it is the underground facility, which"

"We definitely should have gone back afterward and killed that one they called 'Professor'. It seemed like he knew where Rinka was, too."

The Professor was a middle-aged man they had run into previously. He was within the upper echelons of Twilit Silver, quite shady, and had run away mocking them. Being able to

successfully escape from a DemonGear contractor spoke to just how much he was actually capable of.

"Rinka, please be safe...!"

Despite the scene unfolded before him, Touraku still held that earnest wish. He prayed that, among the bodies strewn throughout the park, none of them were his friend.

"She wasn't in the facility after all. It's possible she might already have exacuated herself, though."

Mihaya made sure to say something as she sensed Touraku was feeling impatient. It was mostly just saying it to say it, but it was still better than not saying anything at all.

"...yeah. I'm sure she has."

The three of them had infiltrated the facility underground to chase after Rinka, and one could say from a certain perspective that they had accomplished that.

However, would they be able to realize that they had found her, or what remained of her now?

"Let's take this monster down quickly and keep searching for her."

"Mhm. Lutra, we're up."

«Got it.»

In time with another round of attacks by the tendrils, Touraku and Mihaya kicked off. They avoided most of the attacks, and drove their weapons through the rest as they moved forward. Lutra's ability to seal off regeneration made her even more effective against the tendrils than normal attacks were.

And in addition to that, Ouroboros' attacks were also half-hearted.

Thus, the humans and the DemonGear quickly claimed the advantage.

Something's odd. It feels like its movement pattern changed entirely just now. As if it actually would rather we do kill it...

It was a definite discomfort, one he recognized, like when his former teacher lost to his blade on purpose. From his lived experience and discernment, he could tell there was a visible gap between what this was capable of and what it was actually doing.

But he did not have the time to sit and ponder what that might be from. He knew that the longer he hesitated, the more casualties would pile up.

"...Is now our best chance, then?"

«Touraku, I'm good whenever.»

Lutra bolstered her contractor's power as a response. Hers was a headwater of mana, and a power just shy of materializing. Its essence was the ability to interfere with and sever any sort of concept.

"Mihaya, stand clear."

"Understood."

Mihaya quickly stepped behind Touraku, as he took on an iai stance, Lutra having become a white tachi, preparing to unleash something.

"Sss——"

A deep breath marked the start, as his consciousness and Lutra's intermingled.

In that moment, the two of them were one blade, and they swung that blade as one.

"!!"

The blade was drawn faster than the speed of sound. One strike at the highest theoretical speed, made possible through the ceaseless inheritance and refinement of the essence of swordplay and the apex of current power in the existence of a DemonGear.

The slash, enwrapped by the concept of severance, shot forward like it had been fired from a gun. A glint of pure white, straight at Ouroboros.

Countless other tendrils flung themselves from the shadows to try and use themselves as a shield, but each and every one was also severed on its way.

The strike would not pause for even a second on its way to the main body.

And Ouroboros, looking at that...

«Haha. That's Touraku for you.»

Laughing innocently, it opened up its tendrils to accept the strike. With full understanding that this would sever its existence from the world, and with no opposition.

«Thank you, for giving me a place to belong.»

As Rinka had already abandoned a human form, human speech was similarly impossible now. In its place, a piercing shriek rose and resounded throughout the park.

The strike flew toward the thing that emitted that noise.

And then,

"—How utterly insipid."

the chalk-white strike was crushed from above. Silver light poured down from the sky onto it. It was a light like a meteor intent on reaching the ground, still sparkling even now, and just as impactful.

"!? That, what!?"

Touraku's surroundings were swallowed by the silver light. When he opened his eyes again, there stood just Ouroboros, unharmed.

"Our attack, it blocked it...?"

"Touraku, above!"

He looked up, hearing just how panicked Lutra was.

There, a single girl was. Blue-silver hair, flowing in the wind. Clothes out of a fairy tail. A scythe, blacker than the night sky itself.

A truly massive magic circuit, she had deployed in the center of the sky.

The magic circuit, a design he had never seen before, flowed with a deep blue and purple intermingling, covering the entirety of the park.

"...Sorcière."

Mihaya spoke her name from beside him, and he had the thought that he had indeed heard that name spoken before.

The chalk-colored tachi in his hands trembled.

«Touraku, no more. Let's run.»

"Lutra?"

«We can't fight that. It's stronger than any of the data I have inside me. That... Our oldest sister is our natural predator.»

"Oldest sister...?"

Faster than the question could be asked, the silver light arrived before them. The ground in front of them melted and bore away before they could even think about dodging it. The asphalt bubbled and frothed, red from the heat.

Touraku understood immediately. If that had hit him, he would have no way of avoiding death. And that this was a warning to them, a deliberate near-miss.

"—I cannot afford to let you walk that path."

Sorcière declared as if singing, and pointed her scythe at Touraku.

"The stars have made their selection."

36. As a beautiful girl, you can overturn a fate or two, no problem.

A remarkably strong wind blew through the area.

The atmospheric mana had been greatly disturbed, throwing the flow of air entirely into chaos, and the wind swirled and whirlpooled around.

Interference with nature itself through just her mana. The only one who was capable of such, the star of bad omen herself, shone above Touraku and the others.

Her name was Sorcière.

Her rank was S, the eight among those reigning in power over the academy-city.

Her ability was uncontested and unilateral manipulation of all things.

"The stars have always been closely observing you."

Rubble and debris swirled about in the vortexes she had caused.

Touraku, finally able to open his eyes again, held Lutra at the ready.

But Sorcière, not seeming to even act to stop him if he tried anything, instead looked down upon Ouroboros.

"...That form truly does not suit you."

The magic circuit shone even stronger. Others, too, all of them sparkling with strange words and aligned like a constellation, surrounded Ouroboros.

"Be bound."

The circuits all release chains, again in silver. They seem to move with intent, snaking around and binding the entire being in under a second.

That which had rampaged so much until now, here made powerless by the actions of just one person.

"...Lutra, how many of our swings would it take to defeat her?"

«We can't. I've already calculated 10,000 different attacks. I can give you 5 good attacks, but no more than that.»

"I see."

At the words of a girl who he shared half of his being with, Touraku changed his line of thought.

We should retreat from here first, then. We don't have the time to fight with that monster.

The tables had turned. They were no longer here to subjugate a monster, but to survive an act of the heavens.

"Mihaya, it looks like I have 5 strikes left in me. Use that time to find an opening and pull back. You have a simple gate back to the academy-city, right?"

A tool originally meant for immediate escape on recovering Rinka. A tool capable of opening a gate to anywhere with the right coordinates cost a lot of money, and they could only afford a singular one. Still, Touraku did not hesitate to pick this time to use it. His intuition screamed at him that the threat here was just that formidable.

"I have it, yes. ...But, now's not the time to use it."

Mihaya stepped in front of Touraku, and looked up above her, with a smile.

"Hi, Sorcière. It's been a while."

Touraku jumped a bit, seeing Mihaya call out to her in such a strange way. He glanced back and forth between the two girls, and then asked Lutra a question.

"...Is she someone we know?"

"Don't know. Don't want to know, either."

Lutra, for her part, was clearly in a foul mood. But, and perhaps Sorcière sensed her will there, she was in front of Touraku in the next instant.

"!? ...When did you..."

No preparatory movements, no sound, not even the wind stirred. It was almost like the world itself had shortened to bring her here.

Sorcière stepped onto the ground, with a cold expression, and opened her mouth again.

"You look spirited, Mihaya."

"Mhm. Thanks to your help. ...Really. I've been wanting to thank you for a while."

"It's really nothing to worry yourself over. Everything is as the stars align for. In a true sense, there's nothing that I myself can do."

Her attitude is one that rejects familiarity. However, Mihaya knew that it was her way of showing kindness. She knew that the smile she saw their previous meeting was her true appearance.

"Sorcière, lend us a hand. We want to defeat that monster."

But Sorcière shook her head, ever so slightly.

"It is not right that that one should be killed. It is to correct the alignment that I am here."

Behind her, Ouroboros strained against the chains she had placed on it. It cried out, again and again.

No matter how Mihaya looked at it, that was the appearance of a monster that ought to be killed. But she still calmly responded to the question.

"...Is that a decision made by your organization?"

"Incorrect. Mine merely commanded the elimination of Ouroboros. Anything in addition to that outcome is my own decision."

Sorcière deployed another magic circuit in front of Touraku. He reflexively grasped Lutra in readiness, but immediately after his eyes flew open.

"...Rinka?"

The magic circuit displayed the monster. Yet it also showed the form of a girl that he knew well.

Sorcière spoke to both Touraku and Mihaya.

"That is Ouroboros. The Sublimation-Fusion Form of human and dungeon together. Its essence is the controlled erosion of the world, and a weapon of humanity against the... Well, that part isn't really relevant for you. What is, is"

"Rinka has been put inside that Ouroboros, right?"

Sorcière nodded in confirmation, and then laid a pointer finger on Lutra which he still carried in hand.

"Success Number 4, Lutra, is necessary from here."

"Lutra is?"

"Touraku, no, absolutely no. She's going to scrap me. I'm boycotting this."

Sorcière released Lutra, who was feeling an immense amount of revulsion, and continued speaking.

"Currently, there are two fates laid before you."

Her cold, azure eyes gazed upon Touraku. They sparkled with an insight that would not suffer anything hiding from them.

"The first. Hand Lutra to me, and leave this place. If you do, the being Ouroboros will be completely slain, and the girl you call Rinka will be returned safely. This I promise you."

It was the path of a powerless child, pushing all of the responsibility onto Sorcière herself. A fate so incredibly safe, and so incredibly tepid.

"The second. Fight beside me, as Lutra's contractor. With a lesser-trained arm, there is the possibility that Rinka may be killed. For the sake of yourself and your own egoism, wager her life, if you will."

It was the path of a Shura, taking everything onto himself to bear. Tragedy, misfortune, and hardship; the duty of one body to clear prune it all. Strength would be necessary above all.

And precisely because of that,

"Then, I will swing my sword as Lutra's contractor."

it was the fate that represented the human Touraku the most.

"Have you the resolution?"

"I do. I want to help people, so many people, with these hands. It's not because it's something that only I can do, but because it's something that I *want* to do. I want to save Rinka, and then truly become her friend. That is why I will fight."

He stood firm and stared fixedly back at Sorcière.

After a moment of silence, she spoke again.

"...Haah. You truly are a kind soul."

She made a slightly tired smile and asked Mihaya, "Is this what he always is like?", to which Mihaya replied almost like she was being complimented herself, "Yes. Isn't he so charming?"

"I understand. Then, from here we run on this battlefield as friends and allies. I won't brook complaint."

She pointed a finger at the group, and her scythe at Ouroboros.

Mihaya and Touraku exchanged a glance, nodded, and then moved to stand by her.

"Alright. What do you want me to do?"

"Use Lutra, and sever Rinka from Ouroboros."

«With a direct strike to the exposed core, I think we can.»

Touraku and Lutra's target was set. This would not be a long-ranged attack like they had used before, but a direct, point-blank strike after evasion. The difficulty of it was fundamentally different. With Touraku's own fighting experience, this was likely impossible.

But he had next to him an existence that would make it possible for him.

"Mihaya and myself will create a path. The stage will be set for you."

"You're getting two girls to escort you. Just be aware that's a big privilege."

Mihaya brought up her gun, and Sorcière her scythe.

It was a scene normally quite impossible. A girl famed as an unknowable monster, fighting beside them.

"Then, without further ado."

With Sorcière's words as the starting pistol, the chains entangling Ouroboros dissolved. It began rampaging anew, more violently than before.

In that, there was no trace of the girl's rationality.

"...We're coming to save you now."

Touraku declared his determination aloud.

The curtain rose on the strangest of casts.

■

Yeahh, the chains crumbled at just the right time!

«It would have been perfectly fine to *not* crumble them, need it be said...»

Silence from the peanut gallery! Tell me, just which world would have one of the bosses quietly fall while still wrapped up in chains? Doing it this way is staying faithful to the ancestral Beautiful Girl Style!

«I wonder if I can bring this contractor in for an exchange.»

Leaving Star-Reader Staff to regret something for the moment, I run forward. I alone play at double speed within the shot, the large scythe slicing through tendrils as I take point.

Look, look! A beautiful girl is gracefully spinning her scythe!

How cute, isn't she?

«Cute...? Have you ever heard of the word 'objective'?»

Are you going to be hung up on my thought patterns forever?

Objectively, I am a beautiful girl who is standing out as much as someone possibly can, swinging a scythe around. And also supporting Touraku-kun and Mihaya-chan.

It'd be terrible if the main party got injured here. I'll protect them, me as this beautiful girl... No, my beautiful girl self will!^[35]

«Did I get ahead of myself, changing your sex so quickly? ...But no, doing that has increased your mana capacity explosively.»

Shush! Right now, I'm fighting a beautiful girl, as a beautiful girl, with the protagonist's party! Can you even call yourself a beautiful girl's partner if you can't even understand that!?

«Beautiful girl *this*, beautiful girl *that*, pipe down yourself! Besides, what was with the things you've been saying, all this about the stars, and some organization or other. I know absolutely nothing about these.»

As if I'd have any answers for any of that!!

«Ehhhhh...»

I was just using stuff that sounded like it might be something to be respected as a beautiful girl! And then I want to make out with another beautiful girl! If at all possible, we should be locked in a grapple from morning until night.

Thus! To that end, we save Rinka-chan. No matter what else, we save her. Even though it ruins the main plot completely!!

«And there you go again, another non-sequitur...»

Agiri Rinka is a character who would be the first named character to die in the span of the story. She appears from the very start, and is a pretty upbeat and popular character, but according to the direction of the work as a whole, she gets killed off. From there, since one regularly-appearing character had just been offed like that, me and all the other readers lived in fear for when a new volume would drop.

I love this story.

This is a world for Touraku-kun to save, and because of all this, I'd prefer to avoid interfering with the plot at all. Even Rinka-chan dying was something written in to become a motivation for him to get stronger.

From that standpoint, I ought to have left her to die like normal.

However.

Since I became a beautiful girl...

Because anything a beautiful girl does is forgivable...

I'm going to save the beautiful girl that would have died according to the original flow of things!

"Touraku, the way is open. The rest, rests on your shoulders."

"Go, Touraku, quickly!"

"Right!"

The Beautiful Girl Combo of Mihaya and me have already cut open both the tendrils and a straight path to the core for Touraku to use.

Gosh, I'm nervous again.

He can really get this done with just Lutra, right?

«They'll be just fine. Lutra can sever whatever it is she wishes. Besides for the two of us, that is.»

As expected of the Mysterious Beautiful Girl! We're fine even against Lutra! Yaaay!

«Yaaay!»

If Star-Reader Staff says so, it must be fine!

Irrespective of my little worries, Touraku-kun surges forward into Ouroboros, Lutra at the ready. Give 'em heaven, Touraku-kun...!

Truth be told, I do quite adore the face of despair you made in the original work when you realized you had just cut down Rinka-chan with your own hands, but I can still prepare a substitute scenario for that, alright? ♥

We can play that out with Sorcière, alright? ♥

«Hey, what are you dragging me into this time?»

Yaaay!

«Oi!»

Setting aside the Star-Reader Staff who has gotten loud again, I float into the air.

It's a bit late to comment on this, but yes, I can float.

...Hm, that's not actually safe to do unless I get underwear that's fine for someone to see from below, is it.

«That wasn't included in the crossdressing set, so I left it as it was. It took you quite a while to think about that, didn't it?»

Yes... Sorry about that. My self-awareness as a beautiful girl still has a long way to go...

«It truly is only in times like these you get genuinely apologetic.»

I let the thoughts of what sort of panties to fit with Sorcière run in parallel with moving to prepare for my next Mysterious Beautiful Girl Move.

Let's get loud with it!

«Ah, you really mean to fire that thing off at full force, do you? Well, that's fine with me.»

37. The beauty of a beautiful girl destroys all.

—I wanted to have a friend.

The moment I finally realize that is one of the last I'll have. It's only in the throes of my death that I'm finally able to face my own feelings.

«This, this was for the best.»

A slash from Gatō Touraku sidles through the air toward me.

I have no reason to turn this down.

That slash will set me free from this unsightly form, and so, there is nothing for me to fear from it.

«A~ah. I hope in my next life, I can just be a normal girl.»

My ideal is just to have an ordinary life.

To do homework with Touraku.

To listen to Mihaya talk about her romance, and give her advice.

To make lunch for Lutra.

Daily life like that is all too far away from me.

The chalk-white draws closer.

The pure and unadulterated white, refusing to be dyed any color at all, cleaves right through all the tendrils that Ouroboros draws up defensively to protect itself.

I silently shut my eyes. I let out a breath, and prepare to accept death.

And just as I am about to receive that into my embrace,

That star appears.

"—How utterly insipid."

Its voice denies both my determination and prayer.

In the sky above the amusement park, a massive magic circuit unfolds. In the center, as it expands, ready to slice into time itself, blue-silver hair steals my attention.

«That...»

The S rank diver designated for special caution by Twilit Silver, Sorcière. Ever since her first appearance, her allegiance and goals had been shrouded in mystery, just making an appearance like a bolt from the blue.

That same girl is who I notice in front of me.

Though, I guess, to be precise, it's the mana that she's honed that I'm perceiving.

«Could it be... Was the girl I met in the other kigurumi, her?»

This eye of mine was given an aberrant level of observation ability by Twilit Silver. It is because of that that I'm able to parse things this quickly, that this girl in front of me is the same one that gave me a push forward earlier.

What I can't figure out is *why*.

What caused her to appear now?

I'm doing exactly what it is that I want to do.

I'm just dying for the sake of my friends.

«Don't get in my way. This is what I want to do.»

I reach out tendrils toward Sorcière. A thousand and more arms, stretching to the star to try and devour its brilliance whole.

But it is not enough. All of it is bound by chains sprouting from new magic circuits she releases.

I try and shake free, but this massive frame is unable to move at all.

Sorcière leaves me like that, and fires off a Convergence Bombardment toward Touraku and the others. It seems... she means to stop their attacks.

Nobody asked her to.

«Are you trying to keep them from killing me?»

For a while, Sorcière talks to the others at a distance I cannot hear them. All I can do is watch them as they speak, back and forth.

Eventually, Touraku's expression changes greatly, looking through one of the magic circuits Sorcière offers him. I watch as his eyes change from ones ready to kill, to ones nearly grieving.

And I understand why they do.

Thanks to whatever she did, Touraku has realized that this monster and I are one and the same.

«You got it. You figured it out. So, you know what you need to do next, right?»

Perhaps it was just the passing of time, but Sorcière's chains finally weaken, and they quickly crumble and fall away.

As they do, Ouroboros' self-preservation instincts bellow a roar from deep within it.

Perfect timing.

Kill me now, while I can't be sensed within this even in the slightest portion.

Kill me now, because I'm entirely a monster.

That is my wish.

And yet.

Why do Touraku's eyes gleam with hope?

«What exactly are you trying to do?»

He dodges the tendrils, and step after step he moves closer to me.

That, out of everything, is an unfit action for this scenario.

The best way to deal with Ouroboros is a close-range full bombardment to achieve total annihilation. Usually, that would make a Convergence Bombardment ideal. But Lutra's slashes ought to be plenty. There should be no need to get close to me.

«Stay away!»

Death is only a risk for them if they're close to me. These tendrils move as they see fit, and aim for lethal strikes; put simply, it's a nest of deadly weapons.

They should all be fully aware of that.

But they keep moving forward, dodging, intercepting, one after another.

It strikes me just why this is the case.

«Sorcière—!!»

She must have put something into their heads. That's why they're risking their lives right now.

Maybe my anger is misplaced once again, but I have no plans to stifle it this time.

The Hero defeats The Monster, and the story ends.

That's how it always goes.

That's what I wished for.

«This is all I can do! I'm powerless! Why can't you understand that!?»

Sorcière dances past my screams and attacks, laughing it all off as her scythe whirls through the air and the tendrils. And, insult to injury, she remains free enough to look out for any danger to Mihaya and Touraku.

I'm not even allowed to worry, here. She has dominion over everything. The direction the bullets fly, the timing of their dodges, and even every single attack I could possibly make.

We're all just dancing in the palm of her hands.

Without adding another second to the fight, she approaches me, her brilliance still unmarred by anything. Some part of me understood this as her stepping on my determination itself, and it's already howling again.

The sound echoes throughout the entire amusement park. The tendrils thrash about as pure emotion given form. Such a thing could easily do Touraku in, but I would have to have the freedom to process that.

All that fills my head is the want to throw off Sorcière's predictions.

I just don't want to drown in this brilliant starlight.

But all I can manage is to ruffle her bangs, ever so slightly.

As that realization falls, so does another: a path has been carved open, direct to me. And a third: even my rampaging could not break me free from her predictions.

«I've found what I want, after so long... Don't stop me now.»

My wish is to die.

Sorcière has to know that by now.

She reaches out her hand because she does.

Our eyes meet.

A deep blue captures me in place, though I had abandoned my body already. An azure like the bottom of the sea itself, darkened by that depth.

A slight smile blossoms onto her face, and I hear a voice.

"Rinkaaa!"

It's Touraku, calling for me. I look over to see him approaching, clutching a white straight sword.

I try to push him away with more tendrils, but Mihaya guns them down from behind him.

"Let's be friends, one more time. Let's start over fresh. All of us, we've been waiting for you! So!"

He slips past the tendrils again, and jumps above some, using them as a springboard to send himself up.

Seeing him like that, here, the emotions I'd locked away spill out again. The ones I'd kept hidden deep inside myself, knowing that I'd regret them if I ever spoke them out loud.

«...Touraku, Touraku!»

I call for him.

I want him to find me.

Here I am.

Look, look at me.

«Save me, Touraku. Get me out of here!»

"I'm getting you out of there right now."

Surely, it was just a coincidence. But he still answered me.

A crisp noise sounds as he kicks off of another tendril. And then he kicks off in midair, facing directly at the core of Ouroboros' form. A *blue-purple magic circuit* placed behind him moves forward as well, its effect pushing him even faster, sending him at me like a star itself is falling.

"Lutra. One cut will do it."

He holds the blade at the ready. I put down my tendrils, fully accepting.

The star falls upon me, and—

"Do you think we can be friends again?"

«...Mm. Yeah. Nice to meet you, Touraku.»

—I make a friend.

■

Ouroboros was cleaved in two. With half its core missing, it began disintegrating—a safety installed by Twilit Silver. The tendrils unfurled like rope coming undone, and all that was left in the center was a boy and a girl.

Touraku leapt clear out of what had been the center of Ouroboros, carrying Rinka with him.

"...You good?"

"Mhm."

"Nice. That's a relief."

Seeing Touraku so exhausted, Rinka truly began to process that she was still alive.

Mihaya joined them there not long after. As soon as she saw Rinka, she stole her out of Touraku's arms and hugged her tight.

"Idiot."

"...Sorry."

"I'll forgive you, but only once. If you pull this again, that's it."

Rinka nodded, hearing Mihaya's trembling voice.

"Once again, would... I'm Agiri Rinka. Would you like to be my friend?"

The other two exchanged a glance, and said together:

""Of course.""

And so, Rinka had obtained not just one friend, but two. She found herself unbelievably overjoyed by that simple fact.

It's fine for me to keep living.

Mihaya started patting her head, as tears had started forming without her realizing.

Touraku noticed suddenly that Lutra had still not returned to her human appearance.

"Lutra, what's up?"

«The fight hasn't ended yet. That was just the prelude.»

The sword shuddered in his hands. Her dread and fighting instinct slowly flowed over into Touraku.

"...Sorcière, yeah?"

"That, is DemonGear Success Number 0. The DemonGear made to slay DemonGear."

Hearing that, Touraku suddenly also noticed something else. Sorcière was no longer there. He had felt her presence the entire time while fighting, but suddenly she was just not around anymore.

"Where did she... Wait, what's that?"

He looked around the area for a moment, and then sensing something bright, suddenly looked to the sky.

There Sorcière was.

Just as when she had first appeared, a magic circuit flared its light as it covered the sky, pulsing like a heartbeat.

"What is she trying to do?"

«Touraku, she's converting matter from her surroundings into mana.»

Touraku finally noticed, seeing it pointed out. Pale blue particles rising from throughout the area. Trash, fire, the tendrils, all of it seemed to be melting away back into the world.

And all of the particles were headed directly to Sorcière's magic circuit.

"Mana convergence?"

Suddenly, he remembered what it is that she was famous for. What she had debuted with, so long ago.

"It can't be, a Convergence Bombardment...!?"

«Touraku, 5 strikes. That will stop her.»

Mihaya also called out to him, having noticed the oddity happening to the area.

"Touraku, this..."

"It's Sorcière. She's gathering mana by converting matter around here, she's going to fire off a CB!"

«Touraku, let's go. We can't give over the first move.»

"Got it."

Hey, don't tell me, you're going to go *fight* her!? You can't!"

«Touraku, hurry.»

The push and pull of Mihaya and Lutra spawned enough hesitation in Touraku to bind him for a moment. Because of that momentary pause, he was then bound down physically, as silver chains sprouted from a magic circuit beneath him, tying him and the sword he held.

"Kgh! What!?"

«We were too slow. I'll have to signal another DemonGear now to—»

Touraku looked to the sky again in defiance, as Lutra seemed to half have given up already. Sorcière was still there, as ever.

She spared him a glance.

"Stay out of the way. I have no more need of you."

She did not waste any more time on speaking, but pointed a finger out. In its direction was Ouroboros, disintegrating after being separated from Rinka. As it collapsed, it was in the middle of swallowing its tendrils into itself again.

"...It's absorbing itself."

Rinka was the first to understand what it was doing. A way to prolong its existence through its self-regeneration. Even having lost Rinka, its former core, if it could recover the matter that made it up, it could easily regain its complete form again.

"If it doesn't have a human to control it, it really will just be a monster!"

Previously, she had been able to keep it under control to a degree. It was because she had, that it was in this condition now. It was easy to figure out what could happen without any rationality behind it.

"No way, did Sorcière already know that this...!?"

From the time Sorcière had first released the magic circuit, she and it had been in the air. Now, with the convergence focused, it began to show its effect.

The light rising upward ceased. The magic circuit shone even brighter.

"Oh most pitiable of souls. I shall release you from this world."

Sorcière spoke in condolence to Ouroboros, as she swung around her large scythe and faced the patterned barrel at it. A vast number of blue-purple vessels stretched from the magic circuit to the body of the scythe. With pulse after pulse, they pumped the mana from one side to the other, transmitting it to the weapon.

Looking at that scythe was much like seeing the nova of a star's birth, concentrated as it was with the convergence of mana from the entire area and its material.

Several further magic circuits deployed before the mouth of the barrel. They itself seemed like a barrel extension, all the more as they rapidly began to revolve.

Sorcière sang, holding something far to fearsome and awesome for one girl to possess.

"—Hear of the brilliance of starlight."

She pulled the trigger.

That was the last movement that Touraku and the other two could parse.

They could not observe or track anything besides the dazzlingly beautiful silver that engulfed the entire area.

"!! Both of you, get behind me!"

Touraku instantly called out to the others, stepping in front of them and holding Lutra up. He poured in all the mana he himself had left, forming a shield in front of them.

Everything besides themselves was pure and pristine silver.

"*This* is a Convergence Bombardment!? There's no way! What the hell were the Umbrella looking at when they called this something as puny as one of those!?"

Mihaya shouted back at him, still holding Rinka tight.

I'd certainly heard it was different from existing Convergence Bombardments. But that's not something that exists on the same level, even. This must be what Twilit Silver had mentioned, then.

Standing just outside the light, Rinka truly understood just what it was that her former organization had meant. It wasn't that she was *irregular*. Her reference point for regularity was simply in a different dimension from the outset.

"Lutra, how are you holding up?"

«The aftershocks are nothing I can't handle. But if she points that at me, it's over. Only Eina or Torim would be able to make this a shootout.»

Lutra dissected their situation bluntly.

"...This is her true power."

The downpouring continued for around 10 seconds further, and then ceased.

There was nothing left around them.

Where Ouroboros had been, the very ground itself had been shorn away, to say nothing of the building that he remembered seeing.

Touraku dispelled the shield.

A cold wind blew through a place where nothing existed.

A spectacle of ruin, brought about in silver light. Looking down on it, the queen of the stars.

"Gatō Touraku."

She called his name. He could not even bring up his weapon again in defiance.

"Reach the place I currently stand. If you cannot... You will end up losing everything."

Leaving only those words behind, Sorcière stepped into a final magic circuit to her side, and vanished to somewhere unknown.

Lutra slipped from Touraku's dazed grasp, and returned to the form of a girl. She had already been sweating.

"She let us go. No, I suppose I wasn't even her aim today. ...Did one of the other DemonGear throw a wrench in something?"

Though she mumbled her thoughts, her expression still showed not much change from her usual.

"...This is not the place to be spacing out, I suppose."

Mihaya was the first to find her energy again, as the one among them who had met Sorcière previously. She lightly bapped Touraku's head.

"You did well today. You saved Rinka, and thanks to all that, Ouroboros isn't around anymore. Isn't that good enough for one day?"

"...Yeah."

Mihaya sighed, seeing Touraku still at a loss. She grabbed his face with both hands and made him look at her.

"Leave those thoughts behind for now. Sorcière's left already. What do we, ourselves, need to do right now?"

Touraku finally came back to himself.

"...Confirm other survivors."

"Yes. You *do* remember. Come on, Rinka, work with us."

She tapped Rinka on the shoulder, who jumped a bit and then quickly nodded.

"Ah, yeah, I should, mhm."

"For starters, we should head back toward the Ferris wheel and look around there."

With the other two in agreement, Touraku and party began walking again.

Today, the stars were very visible.

38. Even a beautiful girl must not let things get to her head.

Hi, yes, I have a question~!

Like, out of the S ranks in this academy-city. The one that's being talked about the most~ The strongest, absolute perfect beautiful girl!!!

Whoooo might she be?

«Quit that.»

Yes, that's, meeeee! It's me, Sorcière!!

«Do you know *how* to be quiet?»

Even if I do shut up, it turns me into the cool archetype of beautiful girl!

«What the hell, there's no winning!?»

Precisely. Right now, I am invincible. Any combination of bosses from the original story could come at me, and I'd *still* win!

Yet, this complete and ultimate me still must face one large problem.

"...How should I go about telling everyone I've transitioned?"

In order for the three within Fectom Comprehensive Academy to accept me as a beautiful girl, I must first *tell* them that I am a beautiful girl in body.

If it were just the act of explaining, I could strip nude as proof, but that isn't particularly interesting.

I would rather set up the sequence where they all go, "You, you were a girl this whole time!?"

After all, I'm a beautiful girl.

«It is 100% fine to just explain it to them, you have my word. And even before that, isn't it *not necessary yet* to have that sort of worry?»

There's no way that's the case. Are you actually smart enough to run calculations?

«...Tch.»

So even things like you still click your tongues... And really seriously, at that.

Well, I shouldn't sour your mood *too* much. Would it help for this beautiful girl to listen to your worries?

Okay, fine.

From my perspective, the biggest question is how to reveal that I'm a girl. The one after that would be, what to do about the existence called Sorcière. It wouldn't be fine to just drop an S rank on Fectom like that, right? Wouldn't other school just start wars over recruiting me?

...Have I become such a high level of beautiful girl that my mere existence fans the flames of war!?

«It'd simply be because you're that strong, no? And on that note, *I* am the one who is strong. You're just getting aroused on your own again.»

So... Me and Star-Reader Staff, two souls in one body?

«You're not listening one bit, are you.»

I am, I am.

To be serious for a moment, no matter how I think about it, you're a source of misfortune, Sorcière went and became S rank on her own, and there's no way we can reveal her identity at this point anyway.

Let's just crossdress, but in the other direction for now.

«Ahh, yes, yes. I'll return your uniform to you.»

With my uniform returning, I become Narō Kei once again.

Mm. This appearance is deeply moving, at this point.

I've made it back to Miroku-senpai and the kid. I became a beautiful girl, I Mysterious Beautiful Girled it up, and I return to them as my strongest self ever.

Yo, kid. Doing well?

"Onee-chan!"

"...Shhh. Right now, it's 'onii-chan', mokay? That, will be yours and my little secret, got it?"

I flash him a smile, and bring a finger over my mouth. The kid turns bright red, and nods repeatedly.

Well now he can't fall in love with someone his own age, can he...

"Alright, now just to wake Miroku-senpai up and carry her back."

She's still unconscious, by the way.

Is she really okay?

«She's fine, totally fine. With my power injected like it was, there's no chance of dying on these grounds.»

Eh, something sounds strange about that.

«No, it's my power. There's nothing odd about at all.»

I'm telling you there is! Let's not do that anymore, I don't want to magically restructure Miroku-senpai like that. She's a nice and tidy person as is.

«All it's doing is helping her circulation, removing her stiff neck and shoulders, and relieving lower back pain, though...»

What are you, a hot spring?

Well, I guess that's fine.

After a while more of that headspace conference, eventually, someone else shows up.

It's the Umbrella-associated divers, finally rushing over.

You're really late.

One splits off from the mass and heads over to us.

"You there, are you alright!?"

"Yep. We managed to avoid any serious harm. But it did look like there was a big fight that happened over that way."

If anyone asks, I was right here weathering the storm the whole time.

"That matches... We did get a reading of the area's mana depth dropping abnormally around there. Though, it's still under investigation whether that was because of the monster that showed up, or because of Sorcière."

"Sorcière!? The mysterious S rank girl who nobody knows who she really is actually showed up here!?"

"Ah, yes, she did. We had a report come in from some students at Mikage Academy."

"There's nothing we could see from over here... Sorcière, just who is she...!"

As always, I make sure to play the astonished heel. As expected of the Mysterious Beautiful Girl. You show up in any topic at all...

"But, anyway, let's carry that person on the ground there. They've set up a tent just outside the park to help divers' self-regeneration run smoother."

He makes a considerate proposal to us, but I softly shake my head. Instead, I point to the kid.

"Rather than us, can you take care of the kid? He got separated from his parents."

"Onee—Onii-chan?"

He looks up at me, a bit askew.

Sorry, kid, this is farewell. I doubt we'll ever meet again.

"The two of us are both divers. I can at least get us both outside if I have to."

"...I understand. Then, I'll do what I can for the kid. ...Can you still walk?"

"Mm."

The two of them head hand-in-hand to the exit. The kid looks back at us a number of times on the way out, but I just wave them off.

Thanks, kid.

Now that I think about it, I had him also play along with my lust for living as a beautiful girl. And he also helped a lot in getting that other diver to leave Miroku-senpai alone.

"After all, only a beautiful girl can touch another beautiful girl."

It's just common knowledge.

If the diver there had been a beautiful girl, I would have actually asked her to help out, but it was unfortunately a bit of a musclebro.

In such a case, the right falls instead to me, as a beautiful girl myself, to carry her.

"Pardon me, Miroku-senpai."

With the two of us together, we're probably already emitting a crazy scary beautiful girl pair field.

«You decidedly are not. Also—»

I've decidedly said that we are!

Now, the Tactless Staff-kun aside, let's head back, shall we?

It's a bit of work, but I get us moving. Alright. Back to the academy, and then we can put those 4koma together. That sounds nice.

"...Kei-kun?"

That's odd. I could swear I just heard a voice from behind me. A protagonistic one, at that.

I turn around, and catch sight of none other than the protagonist party themselves.

«Oh, snap. Time to disappear~!»

With those final words, Sorcière's presence vanishes. Good work see you next time and all that.

"What are you all doing here, huh?"

"That's what we'd like to ask you. Wait, no, are you okay!? The person you're carrying, and also yourself..."

"Hah? Who do you think you're talking to? I'm not as soft as you guys."

The follow-up act to Mysterious Beautiful Girl is Third-Rate Villain. The performer is the same, and I hope to prove that I can play both roles perfectly no matter the occasion.

Ah, but wait, if we get into a verbal spar again, we'll wake up Miroku-senpai. I'd rather she sleep until the birds warble outside her window.

My wish proves fruitless, as Touraku-kun instead approaches bit by bit. Hey, wait, quit that stop looking at me.

Oh, right! Hi Rinka-chan, it's nice to meet you! Or, I guess we already met, I was just Sorcière when we did. Wahaha.

"Your uniform is a total mess! You were pushing yourself too, I know it."

"I wasn't pushing anything. ...This is, you know, I just fell in a bad spot."

I look down at my own uniform as he mentions it. I mean, Shadow Tendril-san was rather formidable, no...?

"But"

"God, you're so pushy sometimes!"

I summon up a sincere glare of distaste toward Touraku-kun. His hand stops before reaching me.

Sorry, Touraku-kun. Really.

"—Ahhh, this is going to get us nowhere. Move."

Mihaya-chan pulls Touraku aside, approaches me instead, and then also plunders Miroku-senpai from me.

Ah! The beautiful girl has been stolen by another beautiful girl!

"Rinka, can you handle this perso... Rinka?"

"Eh, ah, yes! I, yes leave it to me."

Rinka jumps in surprise at Mihaya-chan's words, but allows her to put Miroku-senpai on her back.

And the succession of the beautiful girl continues...

Actually, isn't Rinka-chan staring at me a bit? Is that just in my head?

"Here, give me your coat, too."

"Eh?"

With my mind on Rinka-chan, I don't even notice Mihaya-chan approaching me until she's already stripped off my coat.

And I realize something.

I'm not wearing a bra! Uwaah, what do I do!? This is bad, this is bad!

No, more importantly, they'll find out I'm a beautiful girl! Why did it have to happen this wayyy!

"Oi, hey, you, what, don't just grab me like "Shut up!" Eeehhh..."

Mihaya-chan's eyes are scary...

She next pops the buttons open on my uniform's shirt, one by one.

I can't believe this is how my true form gets revealed...

"...Hmm, certainly no major external injuries. It looks like you got slapped a few different ways, but that shouldn't be a problem for any diver anyway."

"Eh?"

"What?"

Mihaya-chan simply and calmly puts my clothes back the way they were.

Why??? She didn't get surprised by my Beautiful Girl Body???

A small voice mentally whispers to me.

«...That was a limited-time transformation...Partner, you're male again...»

Fueh?

«I tried to tell you several times...You were too busy to pay me any heed...My deepest apologies for getting your hopes up. For now, we may speak again once Lutra is not right next to us.»

Once again, leaving just those words, Star-Reader Staff's presence vanishes.

I... I'm a guy...?

When the realization hits, suddenly, all the power leaves my body and I crumple to the ground. I'm left on my knees with how big the shock was.

"Kei-kun!"

"I knew it, you *were* pushing yourself! From the looks of it, mana exhaustion too..."

"I, it's not like that, alright? Quit, quit wasting your energy on me like that."

I've also got a headache from the shock. And a weird sense of nausea, and a huge amount of fatigue attacking my entire body.

It's the most I've ever gone through in my life! Knocked from my pedestal right when I thought my dreams had been granted...!

"But, clearly, you look unwell!"

"What's unwell is the state of this world...!"

"Eh?"

If someone becomes a beautiful girl, let her stay that way...! Make it irreversible, please...!

I guess it's fine if it's the variable type of gender-swapping, but you've got to make that clear from the onset. If we were overseas, I could take this world to court over unclear advertising.

"Tch, now I feel like shit."

I somehow get back on my feet.

Haha. My knees are laughing at me.

"—Will you give it and yourself a rest, already!"

Mihaya-chan suddenly gets angry again. I'm sorry... It's because I'm not a beautiful girl... Really, I'm sorry...

"There's not a single good reason for you to act all tough like that! This person here, wouldn't she also be worried about you? If something happened to you, I can tell you for sure that at least she would be sad about it."

She points a finger at Miroku-senpai as she speaks.

"Miroku-senpai..."

Oh, and I even went and put her on my own back.

Even though I'm not a beautiful girl.

I had her really stuck on to me.

Aaah, the guilt stacking up is giving me vertigo...

"I, that... I'm, sorr—"

"Kei-kun!"

My warping vision, and the sound of Touraku-kun calling my name. Those are the last things I notice as my consciousness flies away, and I feel my body caught by someone.

The sin of carrying a beautiful girl on your back sure is a heavy one.

39. Interlude, or, A Record of Proceedings.

Within the academy-city Hinotsuchi, there exists a tower named Arianhrod. Only those approved by the Apis Umbrella itself are allowed to set foot inside it. The tower, spiraling upward like in a double helix and higher than the tenth floor, is unknown and out of reach to ordinary students.

The inside of it has become something of a planetarium. Reflected on its ceiling are lights, flickering and whirling faster than the stars.

That they were the observable potentials of dungeon cores that had not yet manifested in this world was a fact that seemed of no interest to anyone here.

"—Well, with all the members present, let's begin."

The speaker was one man sat deeply in the back of his chair, observing the cores gleam above them.

Rokuhara raised a sullen voice, looking at him.

"Mister Board Chairman, we're still missing a few heads here, aren't we?"

"Weeeelll, it was such short notice, you here are the only ones to show up. Plus, the ones who aren't here really are busy."

"That would mean that us here are just too free. Hmmm. ...Can you *sell* a brawl?"

Someone else spoke from slightly further away. The Board Chairman laughed without turning his head.

"I think not. No S rank student here could ever possibly have free time. You're here just because you're currently Enforcers. I won't waste what time you *do* have any more, though. Let's get down to business."

The imagery on the ceiling changed as he spoke. Replacing what was there before was the image of a girl with long, blue-silver hair.

"You know about her already, yes? An S rank like, or even different and above yourselves. Sorcière."

Immediately, Eina let out a scream from where she was sitting, next to Rokuhara.

"Uwaaah there she is..."

"Eina-kun, thank you for your report yesterday. This girl is one who has contracted a DemonGear that ought to not exist."

"Umm, I don't really know anything about DemonGear in the first place, myself."

A girl with no real distinguishing qualities timidly raised her hand.

"That's something that I'm not at liberty to explain more on to anyone including the contractors, yourself included, Ryuuko-kun. However, it's fine if you think of the DemonGear as allies of humanity. ...Besides Sorcière, of course. But I'll let Eina explain more on that front."

"Eh—"

Eina glanced at Rokuhara.

Rokuhara said "C'mon, hurry up," and flicked his chin.

There didn't seem to be anyone else around to help her out of this, and Ryuuko who had just answered had put on a wry smile.

"Ah, well, then."

Eina stood up, cleared her throat, and began her explanation.

"We are, well, not exactly created for the sake of humanity, which... Basically, there's no guarantee that any one of us will ally with the others. Say a contractor isn't exactly a good person, or our circuits fry a bit and we act irregularly, or things like that."

On that point, it was questionable still if Eina had gotten a contractor on the better or worse side of things. He had some rough edges still, but at least he didn't seem like he would become the enemy of humanity himself.

"Thus, we're more of a set of safeties made for when an enemy of humanity is determined, sorta, or an external type of rationality. There's also a DemonGear in place who awakens when she senses that we've betrayed our purpose. That's what Sorcière is."

"Then, at some point one of the DemonGear had already become our enemy?"

The Chairman shook his head.

"No, we weren't able to identify any existing DemonGear that had taken hostile actions toward humanity at this time. This evaluation stands for both contracted and uncontracted ones. Eina-kun, thank you. You can sit down again."

"Ah, thank you."

The Chairman continued after Eina was back in her seat.

"The reason for Sorcière's appearance is still unclear. We haven't even been able to identify who she's contracted with. This time, it seems that she appeared because of the Ouroboros

facility, which implies that she has some sort of information network of her own. As well, there is likely some organization behind her with enough influence to conceal her existence."

Rokuhara raised his hand lazily at those words.

"You know I don't like all this beating around the bush. What exactly is it you want us to do?"

"Exaaactly. I also reaaally want to know. What you want us to do with, or tooo, this girl. And if it's fine if I eat herrr~"

"Hahaha, it's good to see you never change, Rokuhara-kun, Tatari-kun."

The Chairman laughed, and once again changed the projection. It now showed an ancient school, and a giant tree.

"I want you to capture her. As a combative asset, she's priceless. I'd just prefer to have the Umbrella put a collar on her."

Both Rokuhara and Tatari furrowed their brows.

"Aah? You want me to just go rat-catching?"

"I also don't feel up to it, if I can't eat herr..."

"Eh? Eh? Ah, um. I'll do it if I get paid! Ryuuko will do her best!"

"You're very reliable, Ryuuko-kun."

The Chairman renewed his usual rating, that there are always so many self-centered students around.

"Of course, to the other two of you, I'm not asking you to do this for free. A fitting reward will be prepared."

"...Leave it to me."

"Consider my interest piiiiked."

Rokuhara and Tatari both finally showed some life in their eyes.

"That...Well, before that I suppose we should wake up Kirika-kun. Sayaka-kun?"

To the Chairman's self-correction, the girl he called Sayaka lightly slapped the cheek of the girl next to her.

"Nee-san, wake up. It's time for business."

"Nnya? Fuaah.... mrng."

"Yes, good morning. Chairman, she's up now, so please continue."

"I see, thank you."

The Chairman nodded. It might seem like the sleepyhead girl hadn't been listening at all to anything, but that was not much of a problem at all. He was confident that the remuneration would catch her attention regardless.

"The one who captures Sorcière will be granted the rights to become Guardian of the Tree of Stars."

The atmosphere shifted as soon as those words fell on everyone's ears. It was disordered and pressed down on skin like one had ended up in a battlefield.

"Chairman-san, those words better not be a lie, y'hear?"

"There's no worry of that."

"...How much can I release Eina?"

"Hmm, with paperwork in advance, I'd say fifty percent for sure."

Rokuhara grabbed Eina by the scruff and stood up.

"Eh, Leader?"

"We're moving, Eina. Rat-catching can be fun sometimes, ya know."

"Leader!? I told you I wanted to sit out this time, didn't I!? Onee-sama is extremely incredibly bad news, I... The last time Lutra acted out, she had her handled in seconds...!"

"Don't care."

"Nyooooooooo..."

Rokuhara brought himself and Eina's pathetic screams out of the tower with him.

The next one to stand up was a girl with beautiful black hair, the one named Tatari.

"Welll then, I'll be going along too~. I'd rather the barbarian not steal this away from meeee."

And then she also vanished, together with a puff of black smoke.

"Say, say, Chairman. You're serious, we can become the Guardian, right!?"

Kirika had run up to the Chairman to confirm. The Chairman looked back at her, gleaming with anticipation like a kid on Christmas morning, and simply said "Of course."

"Uwaaah! Then, I can fight with the *instructor*!"

"...Nee-san, if you become Guardian, you *will* be fighting around the clock."

Kirika swiveled her head back around. Her pure eyes sparkled.

"Yeah! That's the best!"

"...Haah. Sure, that's fine then. Let's head out too. And since it's such a rare thing, let's get some bodyguards."

"Mm!"

Once the childlike and the silent footsteps faded out of earshot, there was a bit of silence within the chamber.

"As for you? What will you do, Ryuuko-kun."

The Chairman called out to the only other one remaining in the chamber, the girl with no notable characteristics. She seemed incredibly apologetic.

"I'm... I'm fine without such a thing. All I need is my wages."

"...You really are an S rank yourself."

The conference of fellow peaks of the academy-city came to a close.

40. Sorcière Information Compiling (part 32)

Sorcière Information Compiling (part 32)

1 : Anonymous Diver ID:fF9Efm8PY

A thread to gather the info we have on Sorcière.

(We are still looking for: Eyewitness accounts, any direct information regarding which student she might be.)

What we currently know:

- Silver hair, goth-loli outfit.
- A DiveGear that nobody has ever seen anywhere else.
- Uses a giant scythe as her weapon.
- Estimated to be S rank.
- Cute.
- DemonGear contractor.
- Capture order issued for her.
- Yep, still cute.

47 : Anonymous Diver ID:JQcUUL0uE

what's with the regular capture order?
when did our sorciere-chan start to get treated like this?

49 : Anonymous Diver ID:qRTV80vgb

>>47 when she blew apart hintsuchi land 2 days ago, no?

her assessment musta gone up a lot after that. no wonder apis wants her so much, i would too

65 : Anonymous Diver ID:UfR2M187m

There's CC footage from a camera that happened to survive. For those who haven't seen it yet, I highly recommend. Sorcière-chan shows up.

69 : Anonymous Diver ID:g2wPLC3vt

It's real.

She's as beautiful as always

70 : Anonymous Diver ID:y2Qt5ZU3Y

Her power's gone way up since last time, right? Or am I crazy

71 : Anonymous Diver ID:ZypH7Lflg

Honestly, I feel like she's just been holding back before now. That monster's rank feels like it would be pretty high, too...

73 : Anonymous Diver ID:36TG94pP9

real! like, just talking about the boss for a second, what rank was that, actually

84 : Anonymous Diver ID:1uiHUp7vG

ok so there's a capture order, but how do you reward something like that?

87 : Anonymous Diver ID:ETed6aLud

The order seems to just have gone out for the other S ranks

It's not something for us to deal with anyway

88 : Anonymous Diver ID:as/rFmtF/

ALL THE S RANKS!?

apis is serious about this then damn

99 : Anonymous Art Student ID:VabBWP/r1

serious is as serious calls for, i guess.

thanks to all those never-before-seen magic circuits zirnius is in pretty bad shape actually lately...

103 : Anonymous Diver ID:59MWudoff

>>99 a. thanks for all your overtime...

104 : Anonymous Art Student ID:VabBWP/r1

Formula For Conversion of Matter Into Mana...what am i looking at? how would anything compute and logic that out, especially to make it work for just one person solo...?

also s.c.p get back here

what kind of trash calls it a field study and runs off to galavant around at a theme park

112 : Anonymous Diver ID:DLgNUAlnj

Seeing just one person flip out like that is always crazy lol

Well, Sorcière-chan is cute, and at the end of the day isn't that all that matters?

123 : Anonymous Diver ID:L6C88XVs0

>>112 but that girl is a demongear contractor, you know
she's in the same genre as kisō's rokuhara if you think about it

124 : Anonymous Diver ID:bx2lh+Uow

roku x sor?

125 : Anonymous Diver ID:xx9RWYFZl^[36]

?? no it'd be sor x roku

126 : Anonymous Diver ID:+Y9B2l2u4

They're fighting over an impossible pairing...

127 : Anonymous Diver ID:gQeb2XRSi

the hinotsuchi culture festival this year is gonna go craaazy

129 : Anonymous Diver ID:LDdQKtQuL

I feel like we have enough momentum to make it Sorcière Island instead

■

175 : Anonymous Diver ID:dlvpZMC1U

Since she's being targeted by the S ranks, do you think we'd have a chance with her if we gave her a place to hide?

177 : Anonymous Diver ID:qJiliN8zk

no way in hell

180 : Anonymous Diver ID:bQ2eE2nsA

>>175 if you can deal with 7 other s ranks then yes you got a chance

182 : Anonymous Diver ID:zM3HywCmn

it's doomed from the point rokuhara shows up ain't it
that guy crushed my entire school alone last year

186 : Anonymous Diver ID:WL6Ellndp

Oh hey, me too!

Until he showed up, everything was going according to plan, and then he flipped the script all on his own.

Can we please get the S rank students banned from participating in the Domain Tournament?

189 : Anonymous Diver ID:/H5rF2YcA

yep, s ranks are strong

i'm worried for sorciere-chan

192 : Anonymous Diver ID:qoFL1atxR

all the s ranks should just get along...

195 : Anonymous Diver ID:LCFGCc+ms

If we can just get a shot of Ryuuko-chan and Sorcière-chan together, I can die happy

197 : Anonymous Diver ID:FFhbqMxnw

oh, then one with tatari-chan for me...

200 : Anonymous Diver ID:dCRddUx33

>>197 that person tries to eat everything so not happening

actually, that person tries to eat everything so they'd probably also try and eat sorciere physically

201 : Anonymous Diver ID:2YYpvlGCa

consider: a Tatari who tries to each Sorcière sexually!?

203 : Anonymous Diver ID:YvfdBSyWT

are the only ones that remain here all perverts?

206 : Anonymous Diver ID:4IBCJ9/I3

We're becoming the same as all the other S rank fan social sites!

209 : Anonymous Diver ID:3iqcP67rt

we don't have a fanclub like the rest of them do, after all... i think this is just the way things go

211 : Anonymous Diver ID:wOonGc+o2

Ryuuko-chan doesn't have one either!

It's been 2 years since she became an S rank!

213 : Anonymous Diver ID:Vah7zJmGz

Ryuuko seems like she has a lot of these really passionate fans, now that I think about it.

I wonder if it's a sort of elite council

216 : Anonymous Diver ID:PBIUqmhQ8

if you look down on her like that though, you're in for some pain in the domain tournament (1 loss)

219 : Anonymous Diver ID:jAm9u/Z2m

She is an S rank herself, yeah

228 : Anonymous Diver ID:uQwZmq9ME

Realistically, how long do we think it'll take for them to catch her?

234 : Anonymous Diver ID:EGvNpDH8R

about a week? maybe
really depends on how serious the hunters are

235 : Anonymous Diver ID:tS3i5TSS/sS

She's a Mysterious Beautiful Girl, there's no way she gets caught easily!

236 : Anonymous Diver ID:bfzlsJKws

one of sorciere's troublesome fans has showed up...

242 : Anonymous Diver ID:bj83aIT6l

ok but looking at the footage we have of her, i do think a week is selling her short.

i feel like she can run for a month before things get dicey

250 : Anonymous Diver ID:ibwiF0P75

Plus we still don't have any idea which school she's actually at in the first place

262 : Anonymous Diver ID:EzvobbJ8v

i hope she can get caught before the domain festival.
and then sets up an official fan club.
and then releases a profile write up.
and then she participates in the festival.

and then we can dance and sing together at kromer college of music

275 : Anonymous Diver ID:TAJpBdAXm

I want some blank expression fanservice, personally

281 : Anonymous Diver ID:5+V86+mpc

If she did that I'd die on the spot.

282 : Anonymous Diver ID:g/IJmSOZQ

all this is gonna make sorciere cringe btw

283 : Anonymous Diver ID:gSAn9fCQ4

BTW if a normal diver captures her they can also turn her in for a reward, I've been told.

A rank dungeon cores, hundred million yen, stuff on that level.

293 : Anonymous Diver ID:Bn0PLaMMu

No kidding? I should keep my eyes peeled

297 : Anonymous Diver ID:Bt3aisn7D

I don't want to be a nuisance to her, so I'll pass on that tho

302 : Anonymous Diver ID:tS3i5TSS/sS

that reward talk is real!? ah shit, what do i do now

i gotta go for it

313 : Anonymous Diver ID:kid49LkSt

>>302 If you're hung up on it already, better stop now. You'll just get yourself hurt

1. "鏡界のルトラ". I would in some ways like to tie this to the nature of the dungeons, but this works considering her ability. ↩
2. "江戸っ子". I believe this is referring to the depictions of people from Edo, given her previous references to historical eras, but it could also be a way of saying "like an old man"? ↩
3. Translating the random noises she makes is difficult. ↩
4. Normally, ruby text is used to display the reading of a specific phrase that differs from the usual. It makes more sense to me to place these in reverse in English, since "Sorcière" is the sounds she's actually speaking. ↩
5. Slightly different from Sorcière's case here, I'm including the reading over her name for clarity, since there are times when it's going to be rendered as both. Most names remain as written in the original, but her streamer name is one that I have a good translation for compared to the complexity of most of the other names in the series. ↩
6. Live chat comments! These are going to be played very loose, but I'm establishing 3 things here: Little punctuation, media references, and maintaining community phrases like a greeting. ↩
7. I did a bit of digging around to see if there were any other translations (look, I just have an inherent distrust of flavor translation taken from an MTL), and this one is actually quite nice. "収束" is a mathematical term, which slots very nicely into the programmatic or algorithmic nature of how mana is usually used in this setting. "プログラム" similarly becomes Formula, since rather than a broad algorithm this is a specified use case for one person and one output. ↩
8. "エイピス統括理事会". There's a number of different ways to translate this one, and while I am not super confident, the main deciding factor is that this is still within a live chat. I might use a more lengthy version for someone speaking it aloud later, if it makes more sense, but it's very clunky to use other versions of the term. ↩
9. "Board of Directors" is *probably* the more objectively *correct* phrasing for this, but I can't find a way to fit that into general use in a way that flows well to me, so it'll stick as Umbrella moving forward. ↩
10. "美少女なりきりライフ" *seems* like a reference to a PreCure game for the 3DS: "Doki Doki! Pretty Cure Nariki Life!" which was only released in Japan. Kei is too much of the otaku type for the wording to be a coincidence. ↩
11. Went back and forth on this for a while, may revise to "She" later on depending on one interaction with Sorcière that I'm aware of from MTL but haven't dug into. All the DemonGear are templated from girls (or maybe they *are* still girls, I'm not really sure on the details because I think that's #plot), but as a piece of gear as Kei is referring to Eina here is a weird case. Also, Eina would then technically she/they because of being a pair of weapons. ↩
12. This is a play on words with Miroku's family name, Aohoshi, which uses 蒼 instead of 青. ↩
13. Listed as 重砲, or the "heavy artillery" classification. Of the options, this is either a howitzer-type or a field-gun-type of artillery, or perhaps a more sci-fi weapon like a large rocket launcher. From descriptions here, it seems to be shoulder-mounted, so going with field gun. ↩
14. 魔石 has a rather high appearance rate as a term and plot device in SFF media—I'm not fond of using "magic crystal" nor "magic stone" here because magic, as a class of ability, doesn't exist within this story as stated in an earlier chapter. Mana is used to power technology, and "magic"-like effects are achieved through calculations. "Mana crystal" is an equally valid translation of the term as it stands, but I've elected to use "MA crystal" to echo "ma-seki" while also landing closer to the vibe of the setting. ↩
15. Earlier translated as "monster" for the forested dungeon in Fectom's grounds. 魔物 is another SFF staple term, but at least as far as the different dungeon types go, I plan to use different terms for each one. ↩

16. It's tempting to term this one (攻撃過程の省略) as "Animation Cancelling", but this is still a reality setting rather than digitized. It's possible this could be simplified down to just "Vector Omission", but the wording implies this is only for combat actions. ←
17. A minor elaboration on honorifics. In most cases, I'm translating them as-spoken, meaning they remain as -san and -chan and so forth. 先生 is an interesting position, and I've made the decision to render her name as Sakuraba (Rakka)-sensei when the name is attached, and some variant of (our/the) instructor when there is no name next to it. ←
18. A digression on "you"s. 貴女 is a commonly-used vocabulary in dialog targeted at female characters within this story, and appears many times both before and after this line. It carries the connotation of, for lack of a better phrase, "lady/young lady", as a slightly upper-class setting might make use of the phrase. And yet, it is entirely inscrutable for translating well in most instances. I have had to make the decision to diffuse it into the rest of the sentence, because where honorifics can be preserved and titles can be translated, the English language *really* does not have much support for alternate registers of "you"s in ways that do not become incredibly awkward incredibly quickly. I do not consider Sorcière (Kei) to speak with the equivalents to *thines* and *thous*, especially as 貴女 is used by many other characters as regular vocabulary, but there are no other directions to take it besides finding spaces to add respectful verbosity. ←
19. A comment on 448-453: This originally is a sequence involving the phrase "人権キャラ", with the third response riffing that "At least Sorcière has human rights (人権) herself!" It's not incredibly important to touch on all of the puns that English loses, but this one has a lot of mobile game roots that I wanted to highlight being here. ←
20. While "ウマウマである" isn't really an Umamusume reference, it's a straightforward translation of the shift in speaking compared to the rest of the paragraph (and we know Kei is at least aware of mobile games enough to joke about their systems). ←
21. "相方", *not* 相棒 (partner) as earlier. This is either "manzai half" or "overnight companion", and I am inclined to see this as Kei combat-shipping Sorcière with Mizuhi. ←
22. "直剣". Not the Japanese single-edged straight sword 直刀, but a double-edged blade (as denoted by 剣). A lot of what comes up in research is antiques on auction, and FromSoft title weapons. ←
23. Specifically, 脳破壊要因 (main cause of brain destruction) is used. 脳破壊, as in the chapter title, is a slang term with direct connections to NTR—the one who's brain is destroyed is the one who gets NTR'd. This is a difficult topic to succinctly and accurately translate (especially as the English term "mindbreak" has a completely different implication), so I am preserving the original in this footnote. ←
24. We return to the discussion of gendered pronouns. Here, Purge-chan/Kuramu begins using 貴女 as a deliberate change of address to Kei/Sorcière. I can't preserve every instance in a way that still flows well with the rest of her dialog, so I'm making note of it here. ←
25. Kei specifically vocalizes "𪛗", a kana that sees very little use (in current times, it is generally read the same as え (e), but there is some record of it being read differently in the past, and it belongs to the Wa series of the 五十音). I am unsure if there is additional depth to this stylization beyond being a sound slightly different than the usual "Eh?" of confusion, so I am leaning into its older reading. ←
26. I considered filling this out to "anti-fans" for her streaming career, but there's just as much reason to believe this is Kei speaking from a broader experience online. ←
27. Surprise! More pronoun usage notes. This is "私たち", emphasized group but vague. Common modern English doesn't have a lot of ways to make this work, which is why it's actually really helpful that Sorcière speaks so fancily. The extra available vocabulary helps a lot with playing into her character, but also for keeping how vague and mysterious she acts about everything. ←

28. Star-Reader Staff here speaks mostly in these blocks for now, and until she changes that a bit later, I'm just going to take the phonetic reading of the characters that aren't blocks. ↩
29. When it comes to the definition of "kami" vs "god" vs "deity" vs all the other options, in many cases I would choose to translate 神様 as "god", since the modern use of the phrases are similar enough on both sides. However, given the comment on era, and because Kei specifically uses a word about enshrinement and worship, "kami" seems more correct to me here. One could also just as easily settle on "deity" instead, but... I just don't really like that term enough to pick it over other options. ↩
30. Currently, no additional description, just 日本刀. A one-sided blade that could be some form of katana or tachi. ↩
31. 仲間, just to be clear. Companion, colleague? It's hard to find a word that stays as vague as it needs to for this context. ↩
32. This and the following two sentences have わよ as their finishers. Kei is mentally putting on the affect of an Ojou-sama archetype to talk about the yuri school. ↩
33. "シヤク". Possible kanji renditions of those sounds are 試薬 (Reagent) and 試訳 (Tentative translation). From every other name in this series, it is incredibly likely that it is at least the latter, and most likely that it is *both*. Thus, a transliteration is I think most fitting. ↩
34. "ジルニアス学術院". I heavily suspect that this is a fusion of the wasei-eigo for "genius" and a reference to the pokemon Xerneas. ↩
35. Here, Kei switches to using 私, but just once for this correction. ↩
36. Starting at 125, the first part of the tag changes from 無名 to 名無し. I'm not really sure why, but I figured I'd make a note of it. ↩