

Chapter 3: And now, twintails

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

I started that morning with a scream.

I wasn't surprised to see the members of the Ultima Guil on television anymore, but now strange things were happening even in the news. They had put together a special about me, transformed. The picture that stood proudly beside the newscaster was much more vivid than the ones from two days ago. I knew it, they must have sent in the photos from yesterday...!!

<<Your name! Please tell me your name!!>>

<<Uh... It's Tail, TailRed... whoa, wait!!>>

<<You're amazing! Let me call you oneesama, please!!>>

<<She's obviously an imouto! Haah haah, why don't we play dress-up!!>>

<<Whooa, I'm leavi~ng, let me through--!!>>

A shot of me being crushed by schoolgirls. A young twintailed girl with tears in her eyes, and her hands and feet flailing. A sight mixed with a tinge of madness, not appropriate for morning in the living room.

“They were even taking videos, whyy...”

I only said it in public for the first time yesterday, but the captions already said “TailRed.”

She had already finished breakfast at her own home, but Aika was chewing on another piece of toast in my living room, as the look on her face became slowly more grim.

“...Souji, yesterday they were doing that stuff to you... your face was buried in schoolgirls' boobs... you aren't resisting at all, and... you were pretty happy...!!”

“That's what happens when they grab me, because of the height difference! I can hardly shake them off with my full strength when I have the Tailgear on, right!? What's going on, boys and girls both like me so much!!”

“There are boobs... and over here are boobs... you're kidding me, not a single one of them has a small chest! Listen, this is some trick of the Ultima Guil, right!?”

The anger rising in Aika was outside of my understanding as a guy. And precisely because I am a guy, I encouraged her in a manly way.

“Don’t think of other people’s breasts as your enemy, Aika! You have to fight yourself!!”

“Speaking of which, here’s my fist!!”

I gurgled.

Of course my meaning wouldn’t get through to her at all, and it’s a refreshing dance of bloody spit starting at breakfast.

And the scene on the TV was also enough to make the one who was in it bleed from the mouth.

The majority of them were just poking at me and touching me and things, but there were girls with seriously dangerous expressions on their faces in there too. Even through the screen, I still feel like they’re about to jump out and grab me. It might be a girl’s school, but it’s still bad when you look that way at someone who looks like she’s in the lower grades of elementary school.

The video was probably taken by a bystander on their cellphone, and you can see the camera shake of an amateur on it, but it’s very clear. I took modern phones too lightly.

I thought I could clean it all up in one shot, so it wouldn’t matter even if there were spectators, but that naive plan has gone off the mark already.

It looks like they put them together as a set: the fight and, after that, the video of the schoolgirls playing with me. They’re starting to get comfortable with the mysterious hero TailRed, in both a good and bad sense.

“Personally, I got a lot of respect for that little girl.”

They were interviewing a man in a suit with sunglasses and dreadlocks. It said he was a staff member of the girls’ school. There was no one like that there yesterday, and even considering that he is a fake, make the quality just a little higher, please.

“The Metropolitan Police are continuing to gather information regarding this girl, and they --”

“Why! Leave me alone! Investigate the Ultima Guil!!”

It’s amazing how carefree you can be when war was declared on Earth yesterday!

“You’re very cute, TailRed-chan ♪”

“Shut uu—————p!!”

Mom relaxed on the sofa and drank tea with a light heart. It's an hour of glory for her son and *daughter*. She must be having strong feelings as a parent.

Another notch on the meter to the start of my rebellious years.

“Souji-sama, Souji-sama, look at this, please, there are collection blogs and wikis, fan sites and speculation pages for TailRed! It is a hot topic on the net too!”

Twoearle ran over to me holding a notebook PC in one hand, with a smile on her face.

“I've only transformed twice! What? What's with this lineup!!”

What are they collecting, what are they wiki-ing. All I can do is cry.

I wanted to do all of this quietly, but Japan, the whole world, is dragging me onto the stage. The topic's coming into full bloom on foreign websites too. They're already making translation pages for them, and there are comments like “The Japanese are living in the future, aren't they.”

...If possible, I want to return to the past.

Twoearle was waiting respectfully on my mother, who had thrown her apron aside like a cape.

“.....Twoearle-chan. Sou-chan still appears to be a virgin, but...”

“It shames me but to show my face, lord.”

“I am very lenient, but I do not have the compassion to forgive three or four failures in a row...”

“Haa.....! It will be done tonight, without fail!!”

What, I can't hear them that well, but are they pretending to be some evil organization...?

I'm happy that your dream finally came true after fifteen years, mom.

The two embracing in high spirits. Hot tears ran down a woman's, no, a man's cheeks.

“Aaah...”

“Are, are you okay, Souji?”

With all of this, I was completely worn out by the time we were heading for school.

“I was prepared for some of this, but I can’t believe the amount of force behind it... I don’t know what’s going to happen to me anymore.”

Anxieties about the future, different from yesterday.

“Well, it’s a world-class news scoop. It’s fine, it’s better than nothing but tedious news like politicians screwing around or someone being arrested.”

“Sure, maybe, but they were clearly putting most of the attention on TailRed!”

I can’t understand why their eyes are on the hero alone and not on the invaders. And she’s a little girl, too. ...No, maybe it’s because she’s a little girl...

It’s a silver lining on this dark cloud that the scale of the invasion is relatively mild, but aren’t you being way too complacent about the peace of this country?

“You know, that secret base she made has an amazing stench of chuuni. It really feels like a crystal of super-science. Like there’s pointless dials stuck on the walls and stuff.”

“Oh, yeah. And for some reason she built the elevator entrance inside the cafe...”

The grand opening of the secret underground base had been later that night. Mom’s excitement had been terrible, but even Aika seemed to have been pulled in while she was insulting it.

The main room would be the foundation of battle, with a satellite monitoring system. And she had installed a spaceleap catapult (there was a long English name but I’m shortening it) so that we could reach the battle in a split second.

The limit of the transfer pen is a few tens of kilometers at most, but this one covers almost the whole surface of the Earth. She really made it in just one night...

“Well, last night even Twoearle stayed docile, and that base is there to protect the Earth, so I guess there’s not much we can do.”

By the way, I don’t think Aika saw it, but I snuck a look at the base’s innermost room and trembled with fear.

Tables with construction plans scattered on them. Machines in the process of being built. It was the arms development room.

And among uncountable formulae and letters on the room's monitor, I was barely able to make out the dreadful words, "ANTI-AIKA SYSTEM---"

Aika, it looks like the grudge against you is steadily growing...!

I was ragged even on my way to school and wanted to take a nice rest at home, but —

"----Why do you keep faithfully showing up every single day one at a time, you bastaaards!!"

Just as I reached home, the message came that an Elemerian had appeared, and I jumped out from the underground base. The timing was so exquisite that it made me wonder if they were watching me. I felt a little afraid at how they had perfected the villain template in just three days.

If this is part of their strategy, it's working like a charm.

"Aaah... at last we meet, TailRed!!"

Yet another monster is standing before me in an irritating pose.

I was already worried about simultaneous dispatch to multiple locations. But I didn't expect small forces at regular intervals to be this painful. And the total number of enemies is still totally unclear. There's no mental torture like this endless marathon.

"Shit, anyway, I have to do it, don't I?"

I hit the ribbon to try and get out the Blazer Blade, and the monster began to happily introduce himself when he saw that.

"I am Fox Guildy, he who is enchanted by ribbons. I beg your remembrance, beautiful goddess."

"Who wants to remember you!"

A sharp appearance that put you in mind of a fox. You could draw a clear line between him and the muscular Elemerians so far.

"Heh... lovely as you are, you're strong, a wonderful ribbon. My heart is melting just to see it."

Another irritating thing was that good voice like a voice actor.

I'm glad he arrived in the tranquil suburbs. There isn't a peanut gallery yet. But even so, when I think about what happened yesterday, I want to decide this fight as fast as I can.

But he didn't assert himself the way the others did. He came quietly to this place with no sign of life. I don't think those two battles were a waste of time. He must want to work quietly, cautious of my power.

There's no use in talking any more. I put strength into the Blazer Blade.

But even with inevitable death staring him in the face, Fox Guildy was eerily calm.

"The sword that defeated my brawny comrades, born from a ribbon? I feel the work of fate."

With a bewitching smile floating on his face, he produced a ribbon cord from nowhere, and after gazing at it with solemn over-importance, he spun around for no reason and threw it into the air.

The ribbon came flying in a coil as if it were in a rhythmic gymnastics performance, but it didn't come close enough for me to hit it and drop it with the sword. It just circled my body several times and went back to him again.

"...What was that?"

"Ohh... s, so much... ghuk"

Fox Guildy coughed up blood and went down on his knees. An overreaction out of a very old shojo manga. What's this guy doing? Nobody is going to mind if I kill him now, right?

"Hah, haaah...! Crystallize —— my love!!"

The Elemara radiating out of his body poured into the ribbon. It had been drifting in the air, but it suddenly froze in place and, breaking out in confused spikes and dips like a magnetic fluid, began to change shape.

"...Oh!?"

I was coming to the limits of my patience, but when the ribbon broke in two, and took the same shape as the Force Ryon, interest took the lead over caution. And then twintails suddenly came out of the ribbons, like a magician producing a dove from his hat.

"Ohh!?"

Without thinking I almost began to applaud. I'd already lost the chance to stop his magic trick. From the twintails the head, from the head the body, they appeared one after the other and finally even the hands and feet were all there, in the shape of a person.

“What’s this about... wait, taking a good look, that’s me!!”

It was surely a figure of me... of TailRed, life-sized.

“The ribbons set off what they tie so well... the twintails, especially. It is peerless. That divine Twintail Element of yours, although it is presumptuous, I have *tied it up* with my Elemera.”

“You, you’re saying that you are copying my power?”

“Hardly, it’s nothing more than a reflection. It’s a simple doll, just a simulation. And I, who do not have a powerful Doll Element like Lizad Guildy, cannot make it move on its own.”

Now that you mention it, Twoearle said a single person can have more than one element. The Elemerians crystallize around a core of Elemera, but they can have multiple Elemera too?

He has the Ribbon Element, but on top of that he’s using it in combination with a Doll...!

“However... the appearance is, as you see, very faithful.”

Fox Guildy gently touched the doll’s Force Rion like precious, fragile glass, with the eyes of love of an old man watching his grandchildren frolicking in the garden. It was too tender, which for the one being touched...

“Hi, i, i...”

...was a sight that made my blood run cold. Goosebumps rose on my skin. I took an unconscious step back.

The merciless crimes continued.

“Ha—h!!”

A battle cry flashed and I thought he was about to do a spin on tiptoes. But he reverently took the hands of the figure and began to dance.

When I first saw the student council president, I wasn’t surprised to learn that dance and twintails went very well with each other. This time, it was a monster playing with a figurine, but the overwhelming power of the scene seemed to change the surroundings. It’s so real that it doesn’t seem like a hallucination - I can see a dance hall behind them.

“Uggyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

My twintails dance with the scream. No, that’s only a doll, a doll...

I desperately tried to reason with myself, but it was useless. The doll with my face continued to dance hand in hand with the enemy. I broke out in an odd sweat.

“Whew...”

The dance was over, but the nightmare wasn't.

His mind sharpened, Fox Guildy crossed his arms in front of his face and exhaled passionately, as if to force his heart to dissolve into the fight.

But.

“Fuu... One must not hurry. I haven't finished drying myself off yet, I'm still chilly after the bath!”

In harmony with his true nature that mustn't dissolve. The nature with the name 'fantasy.'

“What are you doing to me in your head, you bastaaaaaaaaaaaaaaard!!”

I am definitely not wearing clothes in there. Just thinking of it is disgusting.

This is the first time that I've ever felt like I was about to leak from an emotion other than fear.

...Eh, in the part of the Tailgear's functions that I deleted from my memory, wasn't there kind of a really convenient function for that?

“Oh, please wait!”

Once again Fox Guildy was talking to the figure.

“Even though we just took a bath, now you've gotten yourself so sticky with that popsicle! Oh, you're a hopeless kid, heh heh (handsome voice)”

“Nga—————ah!!”

I grabbed my head and rolled on the ground.

<<Souji-sama! A fake thing like that, you can just smash it!!>>

A signal from Twoearle as if she couldn't just watch anymore. Aika was also screaming something like 'creepy!' in the background. She means Fox Guildy. She's not talking about me.

“A, ah, that's right... true, right...”

<<Now is the perfect time to use the Tailgear's Elemeletion system!!>>

"Elemeletion... uh, you said that I can use the power of an Elemera Orb..."

<<That object he made from Elemera is a doll. That being the case, the Doll element that you collected from the first fight should work against it!!>>

That's right, if I can destroy that doll and the imaginary god inside it, I can come back alive from this living hell. Just like the monster said himself, Lizad Guildy's Doll should have a particularly strong influence on puppets.

"...De, stroy..."

He's still lost in delusions, just as before. It would be conceited for him even to call this an opening, he's completely defenseless. But when I look straight at him, it starts to corrode my spirit. I'll have to use the Doll Element, aim for the doll, and render that bastard powerless.

"Hh, ha..."

My breathing was becoming wild.

The appearance was perfect. And that alone meant that the twintails were reproduced very well. They couldn't have the mysterious radiance of the real thing, I guess, but I would give them a more than passing grade considering that they were being worn by a doll.

The twintails burned into my eyes, agitated and fluttering with Fox Guildy's fighting spirit.

"Ugh..."

My legs were shaking. They clung to the earth and I couldn't pull them off as though I were walking on birdlime.

I should be able to destroy a doll like that with my little finger. What am I hesitating for?

If I don't destroy it, he is going to get me, but...

"Aaaaaaah, I can't! I can't do it, how can I hurt twintaaaails!!"

but there are still some things that I can't let go of. They might be a fake, they might be filled with evil, but there is no sin in twintails.

How can I judge them with my own two hands, can such arrogance ever be forgiven...!?

“You’re the real thing, aren’t you.”

“What!?”

“This is only a doll. But even so you cannot break it. You who love twintails... you who possess the strongest Twintail Element could never bring twintails to ruin!!”

“Ngh...!!”

<<Souji-sama!?!>>

It was just as if my body was rebelling against my mind. My outstretched hand fell back feebly to my side, and finally I sank to the ground.

And the reward for the unsightly figure that had lost its will to fight. A deadly theater of delusion rushed down without mercy—



The two people watching the scene on the monitor in the main room of the base underneath the Mitsuka household were turning colors and panicking.

“That idiot, no matter how much they’re twintails, you’re fighting a doll!!!”

Aika was running back and forth, holding her head.

<<Waaaaah... Sto, stop — at least let me keep my clothes on—>>

A scream rang through the speakers that made you want to plug your ears (in several ways).

“What should I do, Souji is—! Souji is—!! Hey, we have a missile or something we can fire from here, don’t we!?”

“.....Now that this has happened, I...”

Twoearle was gripping the top of the console, and trembling. Blood ran down the lips like carefully preserved works of art.

“T, Twoearle...”

Some bitter decision was being made. Even Aika could see that.

“-----Aika... I want you to do something.”

“Is there something I can do!? If it can help Souji, I'll do anything!”

“Then, could you transform?”

“I understand, I just have to transform!”

Although she had replied instantly, once she had swallowed the meaning of it, the natural reaction burst out of her. It was probably the only thing anyone could say in Aika's place.

“-----Huh?”

“I believe I said earlier that there was one more candidate.”

“No, bu... wha...!?”

“And so, Aika, it is you... The one other person in the world... who can wear the Tailgear.”

Aika stared at her open-mouthed.

“You're lying.”

“I am not lying.”

It didn't seem like one of her usual jokes.

“But there were only two people in this world who can use it, right!? ...There's something too good to be true about that...”

“You are fellow holders of the Twintail Element. One might even imagine you were led to each other, drawn to each other.”

“...Twintail... Element...”

Fate.

That was when she first started to believe in those four letters.

“...Souji.”

They weren't ordinary childhood friends — the two of them had been led to meet by fate.

Aika turned red to the tips of her ears, holding back her beating heart.

“But, wait a second.”

Unfortunately, Tsube Aika’s body did not contain more than thirty seconds of romance.

“...I’m sure you said that that other person was a wild beast, and that if you handed it over the world would collapse...”

“What, it is true, right!?”

Into the pale white cheeks of the girl who drew that conclusion with a serious look out of a dramatic manga exploded the techniques developed since the first strike.

Twoearle gurgled with little bubbles.

“That’s right, sure, I might be a barbarian... but I can save Souji!!”

Aika clenched her fist and spoke with resolution.

“A, Aika, you are... the worst kind of person, but you said something kind of cool just now...”

“You know, I don’t like fighting with perverts like that either. But it’s better for us to have more firepower, isn’t it!? Why were you so obstinate about letting me join!?”

Twoearle quietly lowered the hand she held on her cheek, and, hesitating, spoke her heart.

“I did not want to get you involved in danger... I have nearly been killed several times in the few days I have been here, but... y-you are one of the precious friends... I have made in this world...!!”

She shook her hair into disarray, letting a tear glitter in her eye.

“...And, the real reason?”

“Afterwards, it will be necessary to input my bodily data into Souji’s internal biology to keep up the power of the Tailgear — or I thought I would tell him something like that and indulge in a few indecent activities, hehehe... but if I give you a Tailgear also then we would have to pile your body on too to keep things consistent, right?”

“This total pervert -----!!”

“Aaaah, I said it without thinking, I hate this cursed constitution!!”

“Why are you always, always thinking about sex!!”

“What is wrong with a female being in heat for a male!!”

“Even if it is an argument, choose your words better!!”

Certainly humans are animals with a mating season that lasts all year but Twoearle, whose instinct was as strong as an animal’s also, was frightening. Although with the lamented decline in the birth rate recently, maybe in the end she should be welcomed as an outstanding talent.

TailRed continued screaming as the two of them acted like idiots.

<<Stoooooop, don’t hold my twintails in your hands and skip — don’t hum in that handsome voice — aaaaaa>>

The cries were clearly getting weaker. Aika loosened little by little with impatience, and

“I know very well that you hate me!! But right now I want to save Souji! Please, allow me to fight!! I’ll get down on my knees in front of you, I’ll do anything!!”

Twoearle smiled bitterly and looked straight into Aika’s eyes.

“...I do not hate you. You are my friend -- that was not a lie.”

“...What.”

Once again, Aika’s cheeks were tinged with red.

Quiet and tender words.

Why? She cursed in her heart that it was probably acting, on the one hand, but... it made her feel a little bit happy, and that was frustrating.

“I may be doing it to save the world, but still, this is my own revenge. I feel a pain in my heart like my chest will break open making Souji-sama alone fight, when he has no direct connection to any of this. To drag his close friend into it too...”

It was the same for Aika. All she’d done was irresponsibly stop Souji from trying to protect the world, she hadn’t tried to lift a finger on her own.

“I am sure Souji-sama will come to hate me if I allow you to fight... This is really the kinder way.”

...That was probably closer to what she really thought.

"I have twintails too, you know. I'm a target too! So it's safer for me if I can fight myself. Although I don't think I can be as earnest as Souji is about protecting strangers..."

"Unlike Souji-sama... your Twintail Element is for your own sake, isn't it...? You are going to gamble the twintails you have come to love as if they were your very life? There is no going back once you put on the bracelet!"

She was not used to it, but maybe for the first time Aika felt concern for herself, and blew through her nose, hmpf.

"I am not such a kid that I can't take responsibility for my own decisions, Twoearle."

Twoearle nodded her head hard and produced a bracelet from her pocket, shining with blue light.

They would live or die together. Twoearle seemed to be ready for that too.

"Aika, please promise me, no matter what happens --"

Aika nodded with a serious look.

"-- you'll let me be the first one Souji-sama makes into a woman."

"Hey."

"We have no time now! It is all right, just say yes!! I cannot give you this if you do not promise! Or are you, who are trying to be a hero, going to knock me down by brute force and steal it!!"

"..."

"You are not a person like that, Aika-san....."

Aika smiled sweetly --

What is a hero?

A fighter for the weak, an emissary of justice.

They fight for those who are not strong. They would not take a weak young girl who was putting up no resistance and use a dangerous throw technique that looks as though it's about to be forbidden in modern martial arts, would they.

They would not drop her head-first into the ground so that she couldn't land safely. That is not something a human being would do.

What is a hero?

Twoearle threw a piece of difficult philosophy like a child's pure questions at the thin air as she tried to stop the beating of her heart.

Her head was buried in the ground, so the "thin air" was under the floor, however.

"Wait for me, Souji..."

Aika ran through the base hallway with the hair that was her pride flying behind her. And she put the bracelet Twoearle had entrusted to her on her right wrist.

"-- Tail,... on!!"

She'd heard the startup word as she listened to the explanation, and then she had complained it was embarrassing, but now she shouted them without self-consciousness.

A belt of blue light circled Aika's body, answering the words spun without hesitation. A decision too small to notice in a moment torn out of time. And then, the proof.

Aika's arms and legs began to glow as a huge number of specks of light flooded out and took the shape of a cocoon. She shut her eyes to focus her heart. At the same instant, her body was covered by a blue suit. Compared to Red it was a little more exposed, but the aggressive design that was suggestive of a soldier suited Aika well.

[page 181 illustration]

In the cage set up at the very front of the underground base, the space leap catapult unfolded, and flicked Aika out like a shell from a cannon.

A permanent setup of the overtechnology she'd seen on the first day with the penlight device.

Her field of vision was covered with richly coloured light.

“High...!!”

The transfer point was just over a clump of buildings near the scene of the fight.

As the space transfer finished, Aika kicked the concrete of the building's rooftop hard.

“Whoa, it really is amazing. It feels like I could reach the clouds.”

Not a leap but flight.

As if she wanted to recover the time they'd wasted on pointless comedy, Aika begged time to go faster, just to go faster.

“So I'm part of the weird people too now, huh... But you know, what else could I do?”

She cut the air with speed you might see from a fighter jet. Those twintails that were fluttering in the wind were just like two wings ruling the blue sky.

“It's just going to keep being this dangerous, so... I have to be by his side, right!”

Abandoning the little doubts about whether she could or couldn't fly -- she became a shooting star, a flash of light leaving a trail behind it.



“Why don't I read a picture book for you. ...Oh, my, you're such a spoiled little kid ----”

The mental attack in a sweet voice that could make women melt was holding back from the climax. A terrifying foe, Fox Guildy.

It was a fake, after all... no matter how many times I told myself that, I couldn't push those twintails supported by his tremendous willpower down into the realm of imitation.

And the other terrifying thing was his self-control. He kept pulling out things that would have been impossible unless his mind were completely broken to fantasies about his little girl doll.

This is the power of the heart.

To me, who had been under the delusion that destructive force was strength, the bastard was on the other side of a wall.

“I, is this as far as I go... Are my twintails going to lose to a guy like this...!!”

On my knees, my breathing was getting faint, I couldn't even stand up.

And then suddenly an ear-splitting sound rang like lightning had struck.

"Stop right there! Pervert!!"

"Hmm!?"

"Huh!?"

Damn it, I turned and looked too. I thought they might be talking to me.

Blue light, still tied up with the sky, stood before me and Fox Guildy.

"...can't be..."

It looked like there were a few differences in how Imagine Chaff worked, with both strong and weak points. On the first day Twoearle had used something that blanked out your existence itself, but that made it easy to notice you if you shouted or something.

The one built into the Tailgear was specialized to deceive the senses and protect the true identity of the wearer. It couldn't be used for stealth, but it kept others from tying the person wearing the Tailgear to anyone else with an equal sign. And that meant you could safely show your face.

...But this version didn't seem to work on people who knew you from the start.

In other words, although for anyone else this would be a new and unknown warrior, for me ---

"Ai..... ka.....?"

I muttered in a hoarse voice.

The warrior whose body was clad in a blue suit was the girl I knew well, my childhood friend Tsube Aika.

"Who art thou!?"

"I am..."

"It was here! There they are!"

“!”

The fight had gone on much too long.

They sniffed it out from somewhere, as I thought. We were surrounded at a distance by reporters and staff from TV programs, and ringed by several cameras.

But Aika shouted as if she were talking to herself, without paying the slightest attention to those strange eyes.

“I am --- TailBlue!!”

Aika took that codename that even I am a little unsure about and spoke it in front of me, her enemy, and the world.

Strong, heroic.

Like a rite of passage she had to go through to be accepted as a hero.

An amazing look on her face without a single shred of doubt.

And an overwhelming power that seemed to reach up from her body to touch the heavens.

As if she'd taken someone who she hadn't known a few days ago and slammed them head-first through the floor without a single hesitation ---

“Oohhh... This is still more wonderful --- I can't believe she had comrades...! Haha, this is a crisis... why is it that I'm cornered and in danger of my life but I still can't keep my heart from pounding fast!!”

“...Man, this creepy doll really is the spitting image of you... but!”

Aika took a stone with a faint green glow out of the piece installed on the back of her hand.

“Elemelation!!”

A hollow glowing an even brighter blue was exposed with a slide motion, and the Elemera Orb that had floated into the air was automatically mounted on it. When the cover closed, Aika's whole body began to give off the same green light.

“Elemera Orb -- Doll!”

With those words she engaged the Elemeletion system of the Tailgear. A special piece of equipment to let us control the power of the crystallized Elemera Orbs.

The Tailgear use a shared subspace for storage, so the orbs I recover can be used even by other gear. But... I had decided to fight alone, so that feature was useless to me. I'd been shoving it into a corner of my mind until I saw it with my eyes right now.

Yeah. It should have stayed a useless feature.

"That is... That's Lizard Guildy's!!"

"Well, now, be nice, little doll."

The doll that had been made in my shape was wrapped in the light of the Doll Element, and the sense of presence suddenly vanished.

I had thought it was so real before, but now it was as unnatural as a picture of my face pasted onto a mannequin, and Fox Guildy's delusions, so powerful that I could see them myself, also vanished without a trace.

"Aah!?"

"A strategic mistake, isn't that? If you're going to use a doll to lead us astray, you should have a stronger Doll Element, or it's meaningless."

No, there's no way these guys could know I can use the power of the Elemera Orbs I've recovered. And this doll with a pulse as though it's alive, as though it's about to start moving even now, was an incredible trump card at least against me. If they made a mistake -- it was not predicting the existence of an irregular.

I had it explained directly to me, but I didn't even try it once. This power that might be the true strength of the Tailgear -- Aika, who had just been listening on the side, was the first one to use it.

"Hoitto"

Aika aimed at the nose of the unresisting doll, and, in intense contrast, with a yell and a full swing of her arm, visited it with her fist. The impact shot through its whole body and it crumbled apart like spun sugar.

"What have you done!?"

I saw it happen as if in slow motion. The sight of my own face folding in and breaking stayed in my mind -- and would probably give me nightmares for a few days.

"I can't believe it! You destroyed it without hesitating! Hey, that thing's a model of your precious comrade!!"

"My comrade? He's right here. Right?"

With a fearless smile, Aika winked at me.

"...Comrade..."

At the realization that my precious childhood friend had been caught up in the fight, my face went pure white. But concerns like that were above my reach right now.

I staggered to my feet as though a magic spell had been broken. I didn't have to say anything. The trust without a speck of cloud, the days we'd piled up between us, were bonds that couldn't have been strengthened with ten thousand words.

And now, watching over her more carefully than heaven, the "friend" that she had overcome to get here — Twoearle floated behind her like an aura, wearing a noble expression. What's this feeling that I've been having, I can't put it into words.

It's okay, right.

Twoearle is still alive, right.

"Y... you... but in any case your Twintail Element is weaker than TailRed's...! Then you are going to give me your Elemera! First, those wonderful huge ribbons, I'll take them now!"

"That's a joke!"

The ribbons as sharp as antennae that gathered her hair to left and right — she crushed them with her fists, and light burst into the sky like drops of water.

In an instant, the light took the shape of a spear and collected in Aika's hands.

All Aika had done with Twoearle until now was fight, but she'd listened to each one of the things she'd said carefully, and now she put them into faithful practice. And so she didn't have a second of hesitation. The Tailgear answered to her will. Equipment you could call your own body, with no need for a manual.

"Ohh...!"

A weapon that held within it the brilliance of a star. A rich and infinitely deep sapphire as if the blue of the Earth had condensed to form it. Not a hair of difference from the water god Poseidon, the great trident <<Wave Lance>> —

So that was the weapon of TailBlue. I'm glad, it wasn't a hammer or an axe or something.

"I'm a newcomer to the fight, but...!"

All the way open. Brake Release.

Currents of water in a column — Blue's Aura Pillar wrapped around the body Fox Guildy.

"Ugh, uuuuuuu...!!"

"If it's twintails then... I've been wearing them for much longer than... you!!"

A mighty thrust that seemed as if it could drill between dimensions. <<Execute Wave>> pierced Fox Guildy.

"Gwaaaaaaah...!! A... a dream... at the end...! — you're going out without your clothes again... you're going to catch a cold... o, oh, I see! You can use ribbons that way tooooooooooo...!!"

Fox Guildy laughed in satisfaction and exploded, scattering into the air. And the TailRed in his heart probably never put on any clothes.

"...Twoearle... I did it!"

TailBlue's smile filled with accomplishment was absorbed into the clear blue sky.

I hope you don't mean you're confessing to her murder...

The lance vanished as if it were dissolving into the air, and TailBlue, now empty-handed, stretched grandly.

"Alright, start filming! TailRed... wait, there's someone else!?"

The instant the fight ended, the press corps brazenly crowded in. I backed away unconsciously, but TailBlue leaped out in front of them with a three-fingered peace sign and smiled as they were setting up their cameras.

"I'll be fighting too from now on~, nice to meet you all! The two of us together are the Twintails!"

"H, hey!!"

"It's fine, I'm just letting them have a picture."

TailBlue's Elemeletion system activated again.

Elemera Orb -- Ribbon.

She had just gotten the power a second ago in the fight, but she used it the instant she had her hands on it. Two still sharper pieces extended from the Tailgear's ribbons, and became huge wings to release us from the force of gravity.

"Oh, we can use this --!! It's like they're flying!!"

At an altitude so high I could see clouds beneath us, a smile came onto Aika's face, totally different from the fake one she had given the cameras earlier .

My eyes couldn't help but be stolen.

The twintails I'd always seen close to me, holding the blue of the sky, shining brighter than anything.

"Hm? What's up?"

"No... um."

I'm an idiot.

That skillful exit, like a performer. I'm sure that even in that small time they took all the pictures and videos they wanted. Why did Aika take that course of action? I don't even have to ask.

She did it so that I wouldn't have to bear all of the burden and the strange eyes — I'd go so far as to say that was the reason. She was remembering my complaints this morning...

"Aika... I'm sorry I've been so undependable all the time."

"Don't misunderstand. I made my own decision to transform. ...Those perverts just make the stress build up in me. Hey, listen, you know, I'm a hasty person."

My chest felt warm at the thoughtfulness of my childhood friend.

-- Chest...

As that word crossed my mind and I moved my line of sight, I was hit again by self-reproach.

TailBlue's gear has a lot of chest exposure.

I have a drastic transformation that goes even as far as my sex, but Aika stays the same.

Her modest chest, her even chest, is the least suited to that exposure. What kind of punishment game is this? She's wearing a suit set up for someone with huge breasts. She has no cleavage but there's an opening to show you her cleavage. Is there anything so tragic?

I'm sorry, Aika --

I've been so useless that you had to wear such an embarrassing costume...

".....Hey."

Maybe TailBlue noticed the gaze of pity that was being poured on the single point of her chest, but the powerful arms that had been supporting me loosened all of a sudden.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Skydiving without a parachute.

Really a very thrilling and exciting experience——

You don't see it outside of cartoons from the good old days, but I came out alive from the comedy of a human silhouette sunk into the asphalt. But what met my eyes when I returned home was a woman half-dead and half-alive, in much worse shape than me.

"...Awawawawa."

I shuddered with fear.

Human life is not shown in points, but if someone innocently asked what in the world HP 1/9999 would look like, I think Twoearle right now would function as a perfect sample... such a state.

"What happened to you!? Twoearle! My God... Souji, an Ultima Guil assassin might have penetrated the base!! Twoearle... we'll take revenge!!"

Even Aika has... Aika's a hasty person, but the honesty that makes her bad at lying used to be her saving grace. But now even she has mastered Seek Time=Zero...

"So, Souji-sama... watch yourself, please. This world has in it... evil bandits who cheat their childhood friends... They even say cool lines they're not used to and put on a moving show, but then without letting you say yes or no they rob you and smash you to dust, terrible... villains..."

Bam, a sharp noise. Twoearle's eyes peeled back and she let go of consciousness.

As she displayed such savage valour, she looked at her wrist and mine as if she had remembered something... she compared red and blue together, and blushed with the softness of fluff on a dandelion.

I was lured in too, looking at her wrist together with mine... and then my face jerked into a bitter smile as hard as the floor that Twoearle's head was casually resting on.

What is this... the world might really perish. Overtechnology far beyond that of Earth has fallen into the hands of the one person who should not obtain power.

The world seems to have found a saviour, but in fact it has brought down a god of destruction----



"What is this, whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!"

From early morning, the howls of the god of destruction echoed through the streets.

Aika came running into my house without a word of greeting and sunk her teeth into the television.

"I'm the one that wants to know... Uuuh, they're giving me another weird introduction..."

The vast majority of the special features on the news, on the net, and on all kinds of media were about a young girl being tormented by a monster and collapsing to the ground. Messages of encouragement, "We will spare no effort to support that girl," were coming in one after another from leaders across the country,

TailBlue, who had appeared like a nova and defeated the enemy, was treated like a footnote.

It wasn't a lack of material. All my shots were taken by surprise, and Blue had made a special effort to be photographed, so compared to me, her footage should have been a lot easier to use.

Despite that —

<<I see... In summary, we don't know whether this blue girl is an ally of hers or not?>>

<<Yes, I believe it would be rash to pass judgment at this stage. As much as she might be smiling, my concern is the terrible violence in her eyes.>>

Occasionally they took her up, but even then, that is what it was like. A totally serious debate.

But, against all expectations for commentators on a news program aimed at the general public, their powers of observation were surprisingly sharp.

They're exactly right about TailBlue, aren't they?

-- As I thought that, all of a sudden it turned into a closeup of TailRed with tears in her eyes, and a smiling newscaster appeared on a corner wipe screen.

<<Waa~ah!!>>

I took a long, hard look at the blown-up picture of (a crying) TailRed.

...They are magnificent twintails.

There's nothing special that I'd praise about my own body, and I don't really care either, but just the way I look when I'm transformed, just those twintails, even though I know they're mine, I'm drawn to them.

And TailBlue's twintails were beautiful enough to beat or equal them, but even then...

Twintails can cover all other faults and weak points for me, but maybe that doesn't work for regular people.

<<Ohh, but you know, TailRed was very sweet today too, heehee>>

Hey, watch what you're saying, old man with such an impressive title on your nameplate.

I made appropriate use of the remote control, but TailRed was anywhere and everywhere, all over. All channels had been captured, like special election broadcasts. I rested my agonized head in my hands.

"Aaah..."

Love and hate on two sides of the same coin — exactly that.

If things stay like this, it might not be long until my mind itself crumbles.

But there is one person with worries on the opposite vector from mine.

"I'm the one whose head hurts! It's nothing but Red on every channel, why!? On TV or the net, Blue is being left out everywhere!!"

".....The net? You checked the net?"

I thought you had given yourself awfully deep rings under your eyes, Aika, but those are the product of all-night net surfing? I was afraid that it would be like this, so I've been staying away from my PC. In this situation, checking out rumors on the net takes courage.

"I was angry at the net, but on television... that's what I was thinking! I thought of course there would be a lot of people insulting me on the net, but... and then this!!"

"I think they said quite a lot on TV already... is there worse than this on the net?"

"It's terrible. When I went on a bulletin board and posted a comment praising Blue, they replied at the speed of sound, 'jien otsu!'" [Thanks for your hard work writing and starring in your own production / nice sockpuppet, faggot]

"What kind of bulletin board are you hanging around?"

"And they said things like 'honnin-san, chiisu'..." [Person in question, say cheese / TailBlue pls go]

"It's the truth, right?"

"In the end someone even recommended my ID for a ban! It's terrible, isn't it!?"

You've gone through a fierce war in just one night, Aika.

"You don't really have to force things like that, do you? And I mean, you didn't start fighting because you wanted to be popular."

"You're a huge hit, you can say that! I don't know why, but this... They're leaving me out even when I exposed myself to the media, it makes me sad!!"

"I feel like maybe I understand, maybe not."

I look at Aika's wild eyes and another bitter smile comes onto my face. People have all kinds of troubles, I guess.

"Oh, my, Aika-san, are you thinking to yourself, 'I'm the cuter one, screech!'"

Wearing a neck brace that was also painful to look at, Twoearle came into the living room with a malevolent smile. On the notebook that she was holding to her chest like a portrait of a dead man, you could plainly see TailBlue's gallant figure in the maximised browser window.

"I don't think there can be any question that TailBlue is also very popular, look."

Running her finger over the touch panel, she moved the window.

On the other window was a token picture of TailBlue from the side and a massive amount of text beneath it.

- Wearing a suit with the chest open when she's completely flat. Is she a masochist? Is this a masochist?
- For a second, I thought she was erotic. I was wrong.
- Tiny breasts but that sexy outfit and face, lololololol

...and other warm messages of support.

So many such comments had been made that you couldn't reach the bottom even if you scrolled and scrolled. Just like enthusiastic encouragement for people running all night.

"Twoearle, tell me exactly who wrote these and where, in the whole country. You'd be able to do it, couldn't you! Do it! I'm going to run a mission on them right now!!"

"Personal information has to be protected!"

"Protect my worries about my body too! Why does Souji become a little girl when he transforms but I stay the same! The chest is open, isn't the premise of the suit that your breasts grow!?"

".....It is very possible that your 'flat chest' Elemera is overcoming the strength of the Tailgear.
...Pfff, hehe."

"Having a small chest is Elemera?"

"If Aika-san is troubled by it, naturally it is very possible."

Clothing and accessories can exist as Elemers, but even special features of a girl's body that are difficult for her to appreciate are defined as Elemers? The subject is deep.

"...Yo, u..."

"Aa~h! Aika-san, are you going to put your hands on me again! Even though the whole world can see through you and your dangerous eyes!"

"Nggh"

Aika's clenched fists were trembling over her head.

As if she were clearing away the grudge up to now, Twoearle kept nibbling at her.

"The people of the world can see through to that unjust part of you. If you are mad about it, then first, you need to do something about your habit of hitting people whenever something happens. Once you have fixed that, I'm sure everyone will start to appreciate Blue as well. ...As someone who makes Red look good. Hee hee hee~"

Aika smiled and gave Twoearle a peace sign.

...Or so I thought but she stuck those two fingers into Twoearle's beautiful eyes.

"Gnyaaaaaahh!!"

"Hey, listen! What did she just say!!"

"But... When I heard that, before the electrical signals from my brain arrived at my hands and feet, there was a chemical reaction!!"

"Electrical signals, chemical reactions, that isn't biology anymore!"

"...I... I'm surprised, but Aika may be a killer robot from the future. She has been sent back to the present day to kill the two of us who are trying to protect the world!!"

Don't say such crazy stuff, is what I thought, but the reality is that she could say almost anything at this point.

"...Hey. That PC--"

Aika grabbed Twoearle's notebook as if a premonition had hit her, almost a divine revelation.

"Ah—"

She pinned her with her right hand as she tried desperately to grab it back, set it on the table, and operated the keyboard and trackpad skillfully with her left hand.

I saw that "ji" had been typed into the browser's search bar.

After hitting the space bar just once, the first thing that appeared in the text prediction was -- "jien otsu." [nice sockpuppet, faggot]

...Eh.

"....."

"....."

I leaned in closer without thinking.

Aika minimized the browser, and clicked the "blue.txt" file on the desktop. It looked a lot like an itemized list of drafts of comments about TailBlue.

The "is she a masochist?" paragraph, that was there too.

"...It was yo—————ou!!"

"Eeek~~~ found out at the speed of sound!?"

"You have science that soars beyond worlds, don't do this petty little net strong man stuff!!"

"Aika-san could not understand! The net is the last refuge for the hearts of those without strength, and you come and stick your nose in, this is why I hate people with fulfilling real lives!!"

No, that's too misleading, it's not fulfilling, it's just overflowing with brute strength.

"Don't make libel the last refuge of your heart, you idiot!"

"Then I will use slander¹--!!"

Bald². This pointless feud is too crude to be called information warfare. It's bald. It's just bald.

¹ Another pun

² Souji says "fruitless," but I think he likes using this word because the kanji for it is "without hair."

I thought I heard a dull crunch sound, so I was afraid and could not turn my eyes.

“...I have been noticing this little by little, but Souji-sama, although you scold Aika-san, you do not do anything practical to help me, do you...”

Dead eyes that might appear in a dream, accusing me of something.

“Huh!? No, you kind of look like you’re having fun, so no matter what happens I always stand my ground, or something...”

“Ha, haha, Souji-sama, you most likely enjoy the sight of me being knocked around... So you are in possession of that Elemera as well.”

“Wro—ng!!”

“If that is so, then I will also kill my heart and bear this treatment. These days of penance that would have choked the life out of an ordinary woman long ago.”

She was trying to make her voice brave and charming, but as you might expect she could not shut out the intense, utter pain and burst out in a scream like cloth tearing.

“All right, all right! Aika, cut it out! There is such a thing as a limit!!”

“She made a fool out of me on the net, even if I break one or two of her arms no one can accuse me of doing anything wrong!!”

“If everyone used that kind of logic the whole country would be dead tomorrow...”



On my way to school I was discussing future plans with Aika, who I had coaxed and soothed and finally gotten back into a good mood.

“Hey... is there a need to shout ‘Brake Release’ or ‘Aura Pillar’?”

“We don’t want this pet treatment to escalate, do we? I want to act like a hero as much as I can. Even if it is probably an exaggeration.”

“Does it have any effect...”

Of course, it has an effect. The heroic act aside, we’re talking about the Tailgear that turns spirit into power, so putting it into words is more useful than you would think.

The startup key. The on-off code of power. The concentration of consciousness becomes more efficient by using a word as the trigger.

“You were really into it from the first battle, though, Aika. Why ask now?”

“B, back then I was just desperate, and part of it was me talking myself into doing it! I was just trying to get as close as I could to you!”

She finished talking, and for some reason suddenly jumped and turned away from me.

“The fighting is fine. And I mean, you decided it yourself. But you could be a little more distant, right? I think a proud and aloof hero, you know, that’s a possibility too.”

“Umm, yeah...”

The scene on our way to school, as our conversations proceeded on slightly different tracks. And I took notice of a slight variation.

The number of girls with twintails had gone up.

“Why are you only looking at girls, what’s up?”

I finally calmed her down, but right away discontent is born on another vector.

“No.... I’m worried. I think the influence of the Twintails is making more students wear twintails. They were fanning the flames on the morning news too, right.”

“...I need to hurry too. Why are there so many more...!”

“Eh? Hurry? What for?”

“Nothing at all. But you know, that’s just the usual thing, isn’t it? Like when an indie band breaks into the major leagues and somehow it stops being interesting.”

“Noo — I think this is different from that. I can’t really say why, though.”

When I came back to myself I realized I was holding onto one of Aika’s twintails as usual.

What is this uneasiness?

Even though twintails are spreading. Even though I should be happy enough to jump into the air. Why?

“Come to think of it, I wonder if President Shindou has started wearing twintails recently too?”

“Why are you talking about the president all of a sudden!?”

“No, but I’m sure I would have noticed someone with those amazing twintails in middle school.”

“Apparently the president transferred here at the start of high school. But in less than half a year she’s become something like the face of the school.”

“Wow~”

Of course she did. With twintails like that, they’d hand you the president’s office on your first day of school.

“But think about that. A person who is incredibly good often has a surprisingly wicked heart. Even those twintails may be calculated, or part of a strategy. Although I personally like that young body.”

“What do you mean, calculated? Who would wear twintails to make someone like them?”

“N-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-no one would do something like that!”

“Pupupu— just your cheeks are TailRed, Aika-san.”

The two of us halted in our tracks simultaneously.

She mixed in too naturally, so I didn’t notice but—

“I will be transferring to your class today, Souji-sama! And now, Aika-san, can you please scream ‘Y— you—’ like the underdog you are. I will take the seat next to Souji-sama without listening to the teacher and say ‘We’ll be together even at school now, Souji-sama!’ and then the boys in the class will start saying ‘T—that bastard, what’s his relationship with that girl,’ so—”

“Go back to the house, you mangy cur—————!!”

Wearing a school uniform as if it were natural, blending into the school morning scene as if it were natural — Aika kicked Twoearle into the air. Her scream ‘gyaaaaaa...’ faded into the distance, subject to the Doppler effect.

She really flew in an arc in the direction of my house. I surely can’t be seeing these laws of physics that don’t exist outside of gag manga.

“Good morning! It’s a beautiful day today, isn’t it!!”

The voice burst out suddenly and I turned around, surprised.

Speaking of the president... it was President Shindou, with a smile that covered her whole face. You didn’t see our action movie starlet’s act of brutality, then.

We were just passing students and she probably didn’t even know our names, but she greeted us without putting any distance between us... this is the reason everyone likes her, isn’t it.

Or maybe she noticed this damp atmosphere and decided to encourage us.

“Good morning, President, you seem quite happy today!”

“Yes! I’m very happy to learn that TailRed has a comrade!”

“! That’s right, that’s right, Blue is t...”

Although I went quiet mixed with cold sweat at the thought that the president might have heard what we were saying earlier, the mood had changed completely. Aika’s shining eyes said, You understand, don’t you! as she tried to get closer to the president.

It’s going to be a while before that stops bothering you, isn’t it? The roots of it run deep.

“—It really is a good thing. It’s good that she doesn’t have to keep fighting alone.”

“...Eh?”

At the words thick with emotion that I hadn’t even imagined, Aika stopped walking.

“No matter how strong she is, I’m sure it would be hard alone. But if she has a comrade, they can support each other. We can cheer them on as much as we like, but we can’t support them in any real sense... so I’m really happy that TailRed has someone else helping her.”

“...Yeah.”

I nodded hard in agreement.

In place of Aika, who was looking down, lost for words.

“You are really a supporter of the Twintails, aren’t you, President.”

When I said it the president looked down as if she were embarrassed and pulled on one side of her twintails. “You might think it’s weird at this age, but... I look up to heroes. I still watch tokusatsu shows for kids and buy figures and things like that.”

“I see...”

You look like a kid, so I don’t see anything childish about it — I’m sure she’d get mad at me if I said that, but instead a feeling of affinity with the president welled up in me.

“And on that day too, the truth is that I was stolen while I was attending a hero event that I had slipped away from the maids to see.”

I found it out myself later, but there seems to have been an event with tokusatsu heroes and anime heroines. Absolutely aimed at kids, but... the president probably blended in perfectly.

“So I felt it was fate. Meeting TailRed, and being saved by her.”

“Fate...”

“Haha, sorry. ...Why am I talking about this...”

An instant of shock. The president had seen TailRed up close and talked to her, even if it had only been one or two words.

I don’t see how she could recognize me in my real body, but.....

But I have to throw away those doubts and convey my thanks properly. For her support and her true and pure feelings — to my first fan, President Shindou.

“President. I’m sure TailRed is... and TailBlue also, they are both very thankful that someone is cheering them on like you are. I think it will make them feel better in tough times.”

“Thank you. I think you’re... first-year A class, Mitsuka Souji-kun. ...Oh.”

The president blinked her eyes, and brought her face close as if she were looking up at me.

At a distance close enough that I might have kissed her.

“P - president?”

Seeing me flustered, she shook her head in understanding and fell back half a step as if she were dancing. Her twintails shook in a light motion, and my heart also shook.

"It's just my imagination... probably... hehehe, well, then."

We said goodbye to the president mumbling to herself with some strange enthusiasm in her voice, and for a little while stood still.

"That's amazing. Has she memorized every single one of the students' names?"

Aika had been silent the whole time. Now she shook herself off as if she were bored and breathed a deep sigh.

"...The president really is a good person. I feel like I was an idiot for worrying about the criticism on the net."

"Yeah, like I said, she's just a normal good person. Twoearle just had some weird misunderstanding."

"...That's why I'm worried. Stupid."

"Huh? Did I say something?"

"Shut up, let's get going."

Aika shoved my side with her satchel, and the two of us headed toward the school gate at a half-run.

A fan, cheering us on with true and pure feelings. It was an inspiring thought that made my back straighten up, but... at the den of thieves spreading before my eyes, I slumped back down again like high-speed reverse playback.

"Ah, TailRed smiled for me!!"

"Hmph, you always think so small... You know I've printed TailRed on my trunks with a thermal transfer printer! I can't even do my schoolwork properly anymore unless we're together!!"

"You bastard, you made a TailRed bot! I made one before you, you know!!"

"Shut up, mine has more followers! Anyway, there are already around 3000 TailRed bot accounts!! It's a little late, isn't it!!"

"Ok, all right, then we'll go to the movie theatre after school, TailRed-tan." (an unconnected conversation with his phone)

This was the scene as we entered our high school. Loud conversations right in front of the gate as if they were natural.

“Aika. I’m not being sarcastic at all. If you can change places with me then please change. Seriously. They can call me a sockpuppet or a masochist or anything and I’ll happily agree.”

I spoke quietly to Aika’s back, as she hesitated in front of the gate as if she were on a bridge trying to decide whether or not to jump.

“...I’ve cooled off a little.”

We each had our own reasons why it was getting hard to stand this any longer, and both of our heads dropped down at the same time.



A human-shaped hole in the ground was shining with moonlight.

Something had fallen on the road in front of the Mitsuka household, and something had left tracks as it crawled out. Still boiling with the resentment of the girl that had not been able to penetrate the garden of youth bursting with light.

2 am—. ³

Souji had the farthest back of the three rooms on the second floor of the Mitsuka household. And to that place went a shadow on tiptoe. The soft silhouette told you that it was a woman — a girl.

Even though you might be a thin girl, climbing the stairs would make the wooden flooring creak, but perhaps because it was one of the foundational skills of a stalker, or perhaps because of the effort she was making to keep her centre of gravity low, she climbed the stairs with a surprising degree of quiet.

She crossed the hallway without a single sound at all and stopped in front of Souji’s room.

“...Hee hee.”

She inserted something like a knife into the gap between the door and the wall.

³ The third part of the Hour of the Ox, “when even the grass and trees are sleeping and the eaves of the houses curl down three inches.” Considered an appropriate time for demons to appear. Aka 2 am.

If you had looked closer at the thing as thin as a razor and strained your eyes, you could have confirmed that it was vibrating delicately. However, naturally the noise of the vibration had been made nearly inaudible.

Once she had put it in about five centimetres, she moved it slowly down until it reached the position of the lock. In the instant when the blade touched the lock, it made an extraordinarily small “click” sound, and went through it without the slightest difficulty after that.

And it was easy to guess that the invader was no ordinary person from the fact that the lock was not a wooden bolt but a metal latch.

The strange shadow stole into the room.

Twoearle’s face appeared for an instant in the sliver of moonlight shining in from the window.

But was it really her? From the look in her eyes she was not in her right mind.

Softly, softly.

Holding her breath she moved to the middle of the room.

The expression “holding her breath” may not be accurate.

She seemed to be inhuman, not breathing at all.

Calmly and quickly.

Her movements had so little waste in them that it made one think of a ninja.

Twoearle was wearing something like tights over her whole body. Her movements aside, even though she blended perfectly into the dark there was still something glamorous about her, and a more suitable word than ninja might have been—phantom thief. That was the most favourable comparison. If you wanted to be insulting she looked like a comic character in a play.

A belt was wrapped around her hips, and various types of tools were stuck in it.

From it, she took out a carpet roller⁴.

“Hee, hee.”

⁴ Shaped like a paint roller with a sheet of rolled-up tape, sticky on one side, that picks up random trash on the ground. The same idea as a lint roller, but for the floor.

She rolled it on the floor carefully and, paying close attention to the trash that had stuck to it, picked out a body hair. With incredibly practiced movements, she separated it with tweezers into one of the plastic bags that she held between her fingers.

Labels with writing on it were stuck to the bags. "Head hair," and it was hard to make sure because of the shadow of her finger but as you would expect "— hair" was written on another.

She pinched the zipper with thumb and finger and quickly closed it and put it in a back pocket.

No matter how she acted, no one would believe this was her first offense.

The system was so practiced that it stood by itself as a finished product.

Twoearle's next target was the closet.

She touched the hinged door with a finger, checking the slight noise of the pulley.

What should be done about that.

Without hesitation, she pulled the doors open in a single movement. Thanks to her special technique, that reduced thinking time to almost nothing. There was a creak, but it was the matter of a moment.

Right away she glanced behind her at the sleeping Souji, but he showed no sign at all of waking.

Satisfied with that, she found the blazer of his school uniform and took it out of the closet.

"Hee.....mm.....sffffffffffffff"

Hoping for the warmth and scent of the man she had given her heart to, she brought the clothes he had taken off up to her cheek... such a scene fitting for twilight hours, it was nothing like that.

She replaced all the gas in her body with air strained using the blazer as a filter.

So it seemed. In a demonstration of lung capacity beyond normal for a woman, she kept inhaling without a break or a sign when she would stop.

Like a round pink lifeform that enters humming a jaunty drawing song.

And finally she stood there with a drunk look on her face.

The look in her eyes was still not normal, and the synergy doubled the eerie feeling.

“Hah, hah.”

Although up until now she had kept everything absolutely secret, perhaps at last she couldn’t muffle herself any longer. Rough breathing began to leak out.

“Uhehe.”

Or one would prefer that a girl’s voice didn’t get into that area.

“N... nuh.”

“!”

Two earle froze in the middle of the trip at the sound of Souji’s voice.

She strained her neck and turned to look behind her again.

Moving on tiptoe, one foot after the other.

She swiftly approached the bed and checked the situation.

The healthy sleeping face was just the same. A sigh of relief.

“...Souji-sama.”

For a moment the smile on her face was filled with motherly affection, but—

“Uhehehe.”

It went right back to evil.

[page 217 illustration]

The feeling of something tepid touching his cheek.

At the uncomfortable feeling, Souji’s mind was brought back out of sleep.

“Nuh...”

His eyes opened dimly.

(A dream...?)

He began to come back to consciousness, and the blurry world focused into an image.

Someone was smiling at him...

(———An angel...)

...a devil like an angel... or not even that but just a grinning devil.

“Uhehe... aah.”

“Ugyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

What was touching his cheek was Twoearle’s drool.

With her mouth wide open and drool hanging out, she gave him the strong impression of an evil extraterrestrial lifeform.

He began to want to drive the power loader in the hold of the spaceship into the side of her face and throw her into outer space.

“Finally... the time has come—”

Her son’s pained screaming reached the ears of the mother sleeping in the bedroom down the hall, and her mouth twisted into a grin—



“Uuuuuu~h! I, I am sorry, if such a creepy woman appears by your bedside all of a sudden in the middle of the night, naturally you would pull away from her!!”

The lights were now on in my room. Twoearle had been kneeling down on the floor the whole time without even trying to raise her head.

“Being creepy doesn’t have anything to do with it! —or rather...”

It’s not the way you look but the way you act that’s creepy, I was about to say, but held my tongue. I am deeply aware that I am not qualified to criticize someone else for that.

“Anyway, why did you suddenly show up in my room in the middle of the night!”

“T, that is, uh... I found an error in my calculations for the fit of the Tailgear, so I thought you might let me redo the measurement of the circumference of your face. ...But I thought it would also be bad to wake you up.”

“In the middle of night all of a sudden... you’re a hurry? I don’t mind if you just come wake me up normally, that’s better for my mental health.”

Eh, but the Tailgear doesn’t have the face covered. ...What is this, my head is fuzzy. If I were a detective, I think I could probably use this warm liquid on my cheek as a clue and work my way to the truth, but I’m not.

“Anyway look...”

“——! U... ghkk... no, not now...!”

All of a sudden Twoearle grabbed her chest and collapsed.

“Twoearle!?”

“Haah, haah, aa...nh, a, aa...”

Her seductive voice threw me off balance once again.

“Hey, are you sick!?”

“No, Souji-sama, if you get close...”

This is not something minor. ...Could it be...

“Twoearle—... that thing about adjustment was a lie, wasn’t it!? What’s wrong!?”

Holding her shoulder, I lifted her up. Twoearle rested her head on my chest.

“M, my body is hot... Can you help... me... Souji-sama...”

Pierced by her bewitching eyes, my heart began to ring alarm bells. What, this girl is so erotic even though she doesn’t have twintails.

“W, what do you mean, help you... How do I...”

“.....”

Twoearle's cheeks turned red, and she hesitated to speak. If it makes even Twoearle hesitate it must be something amazing.

"...If there's anything that I can do then I'll do it! Please, don't hold back, tell me!!"

She saved the world, she saved twintails. I will do anything she asks.

...I thought I saw her smile just now, but it must be my imagination. And even in a drama, if you cut a single frame out of a painful scene it can look like the actors are laughing.

"...There is something I need to stay for a long time in a parallel world."

"Something you need?"

"Foreign matter to this universe, like people from another universe are... a, nh... naturally eliminated by the universe's self-cleaning process... There is something like a virus in people's bodies that... makes my body hurt like this...! Haah, hah... to protect me... I need a human from this world... to donate their genetic data... (Seek Time=Zero)"

"Genetic..."

"Souji-sama, I think you may have come to believe I am a shameless woman, but... there is a reason why I've been acting this way... b, because I'm a woman..."

Could this be the reason for all her many eccentricities?

I'm not so much of a kid that I don't understand the meaning of her words.

I realized that my cheeks were... that I was blushing all the way to my ears.

"I beg you, Souji-sama. Give me... the strength to survive in this world..."

I certainly decided that I would do anything she told me to. But this is—

"Aura Pillar—!!"

"What?"

A current of water blew upward from Twoearle's feet... or rather from the bed, throwing me up into the air.

“Agaah!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeit’s coooold!!”

“For you to lead Souji astray with your ridiculous acting, you chuunibyou patient...! You were so hesitant, but after I became TailBlue, you changed course pretty easily, didn’t you!!”

Aika as TailBlue broke through the window with her lance and dropped into my room.

Crushing the question of why these people were in my room as easily as blowing her nose. And I wasn’t surprised to see that, as casually as knocking, she had also crushed the lock.

“A, acting... Twoearle, that was acting just now? You were making fun of me!?”

“No! I, I’m in pa... a, aa~nh”

Maybe because she was hurrying, her wheezing voice was not convincing.

“...Did someone call me?”

I don’t know if her instincts had responded to ‘chuunibyou,’ but now even mom had showed up in my room.

“What are you here for, come on!!”

She didn’t listen to my objection but slid over to Aika with foot motion smooth as a hovercraft.

“My! My my my! Aren’t you the rumoured TailBlue!? You’re Aika-chan, aren’t you!? Finally we meet face to face!!”

“We let the one person who shouldn’t find out see us agaaain!!”

Paying no attention to me and my desperation, the celebrity of rumor peeled back both her canines and her thirst for blood and let out a scream.

“Aunt Miharuru, please already, lock this woman up underground and don’t let her out!!”

“...Aika-chan~ you will take responsibility, will you~”

“...Huh?”

“What you’re interfering with right now... is that, isn’t it? So would it be all right to interpret this as saying, you can forget about me?”

This chuuni-mom seemed to have been watching the whole thing from the middle with an indecent smile on her face.

“N, no... I was only...”

What, come on, Aika, now suddenly your face is turning red and you’re flapping your hands.

“—Hey, don’t wave your hands when you’re still holding the spear—————!!”

My room would have been cut into chunks like ingredients for a stewpot if I’d stayed quiet.

Really, what, what is this, this is a situation where I need to think about something but every single thought I have is being cut off in the middle, can I just not think, I have all kinds of different doubts even now, but can I just throw them all out the window.

“By the way, I think I am about to be torn to pieces, how much longer will I be here...”

“You might as well get torn apart once!! It’ll be good medicine!!”

“There will be no second time... Your medicine is putting me to eternal sleep... gh-cough.”

You might be going easy on her but that’s the Aura Pillar that restrains the monsters.

Twoearle was floating with her body folded back into a C, and this time for sure, when she looked like she was about to die, she didn’t seem to be acting.

(p. 223, end of chapter 3)