

Puppet Skin

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Upon receiving a scholarship to Ouran, Fukuda Iiyo meets Nekozaawa Umehito, a creepy guy who intends to get her to whole-heartedly commit herself into his Black Magic Club, but she doesn't want to be within a few feet of him-until she sees his collection of occult books. Now that she's in the club, she's going to stick with Nekozaawa until the last page is turned.
NekozaawaOC

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Chapter 1

Hilo, this is a brand new story that I may or may not keep up with. Please look through my profile to know why, if I haven't updated in a long time. On a side-note, just letting you know, that the three dots in bold are my substitute for line-breaks since they don't always work. They are usually used to separate the author-notes from the story, but I also use them to distinguish that some time had been skipped without a transition, I hope you enjoy this; we all know that Umehito needs more love.

"I was thinking that being a demon and a ghost must be very difficult, even for Charles; if he ever forgot, or let his disguise drop for a minute, he would be recognized at once and driven away; he must be extremely careful to use the same voice every time, and present the same face and the same manner without a slip; he must be constantly on guard against betraying himself. I wondered if he would turn back to his true form when he was dead." - Shirley Jackson (We Have Always Lived in the Castle)

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The bells on liyo's alarm clock rang with a vengeance for the third time that morning, finally waking the girl up. When she realized how late it was, she panicked, throwing off the blankets and rummaging through her drawers and closet. 'Just ten more minutes' of writing turned out to be two hours, but she thought four hours would still be enough sleep for her to function.

liyo jumped into her black jeans, and tried to button her black blouse at the same time as brushing her teeth, which wasn't successful at all, and was forced to do one task at a time. The first day of a new school year was always stressful for the young teen, especially when she had just moved to an almost foreign area. She didn't have enough time to fix breakfast, so she just slipped on her sneakers and an oversized dark grey sweatshirt, and shrugged on her backpack,

hoping she would make it to the transit station on time. It was going to be liyo's first year at the high-esteemed Ouran High School as a first-year student. Because of the high fees for just attending there, she had successfully earned a Creative Writing scholarship; just so long as she enter in their held contests and earn a placement along with receiving top marks in her Creative Writing class, the scholarship was her golden ticket. It was a weird scholarship, but liyo didn't care. She was just thankful to be away from *him* .

She was planning on arriving on the school grounds two hours early so she would have plenty of time to figure out where her classes were before the crowd came, but had woken up late. Like she thought, it was crowded with the welcoming committee and the ceremony. She secluded herself to the edge of the mass of people until she was close enough to a building, it didn't matter which, and rushed in. Relief tided over her to see that no one, was around, but it didn't take long for her to find out that she wasn't in the right building to where her classes would be, with only ten minutes to spare until the bell rang. She groaned at her ill luck, and the thought of actually asking one of those prissy snobs to show her the way.

"Hello there," someone with a deep creepy voice greeted liyo from behind, sending shivers crawling down her spine. She turned around, startled that someone was able to sneak up on her, and saw an even creepier appearance. He was a full head taller than liyo with a black hooded cloak, and black hair that obscured his face. In addition to his creepiness, he had a yellow hand-puppet, which had an evil glint in its eyes, on his right hand. "Would you like to join the Black Magic Club?" His smile seemed to get wicked, and he loomed even closer to her. "You get a free wooden Beelzenef doll-!"

He had gotten way too close, so liyo pushed him with her sleeve covered hands. "I'm sorry," she hesitated in speaking, "but please keep your distance." She kept her hands up for a few seconds to make sure he got the message clearly, and to be as respectful as she could so he wouldn't harm her. There was a bout of an awkward silence before she said in a softer tone, "Hi." It was all she could

think of since he had scared the common sense of asking where her classes were out. She was never easily startled, so she was wondering why she hadn't sensed him at all, and when she actually thought about it, the guy's normal aura was enshrouded by a black mist.

"Pardon me for startling you, but with your attire, I thought you might have been interested in my club," he said rather calmly. "You're obviously new, so I thought I had a chance for a new accomplice."

He had noted that she wasn't wearing the uniform dress, since she wasn't wealthy enough to afford it, but he still didn't seem to care, and an even more of a surprised that he approved of it. During the entrance exams, the other students had already snickered at her clothes, so he couldn't be too bad, she had hoped. "Would you mind showing me where my classrooms are?" She asked, purposely avoiding his club as the subject. It wasn't as if she was uninterested, she just wasn't into the whole rituals and curse-casting. Okay, she really didn't want to join because she would rather be reading and writing.

"Will you join my club?" He asked, suddenly looming over her with a creepy grin and a glint from beneath his bangs, giving her chills again. He was about to touch her shoulder with his left, but liyo shoved him back harder, but not enough for him to fall.

"OK, OK, I'll join!" She yelled. It was a good thing no one was around at the moment. She calmed down before continuing. "Just, just don't touch me. Please." She started to fidget with her hands, hoping that he wouldn't ask, or act too excited that she was joining his occult club. What am I about to get myself into? She thought.

His eager smile turned into a grin, so he was obviously happy, but the black mist surrounding him still wouldn't let liyo see his aura, to let her know if he was really happy, or if he was scheming something. She didn't know if this was a bad or a 'normal' thing, so she was getting a little nervous. liyo couldn't tell if she was nervous of him or what was happening. In a creepy tone, he said, "Welcome.

I'm Nekozaawa Umehito, the Black Magic Club President. What is your name?" His hair parted just enough to see his left blue eye, showing an eagerness towards me.

"Fukuda liyo," she replied softly. "Can you please just show me where my classes are?" The sooner he showed her around, the sooner she could get away. Thinking of a way out of the club, however, was going to be a problem to think of for another time.

Umehito's smile shrunk down as he wondered about something. "'Fukuda'?" He said aloud, as if testing her family name on his tongue. "You'll definitely be a good addition to the club." He reached in his cloak and pulled out a wooden cat doll. "If you write the name of a person you hate, he will be showered with misfortune."

"Fascinating," liyo said, with sarcasm thick in her tone. She didn't take the cat, but she took out her schedule and held it out towards him. It seemed to her that asking him wasn't going to work.

He seemed disappointed that she had wanted something else that didn't involve his club. Umehito took her schedule, not coming into contact with liyo, and looked at it. His smile returned, and liyo grew worried again. "Excellent. We have the same homeroom together."

Damn it! liyo cursed. What were the chances?

The bell rang, which disappointed liyo greatly. She was hoping to be in her seat well before the bell rang. "At lunch, I can show you where your elective and home-ec classes are since those are the only classes we don't have together," Nekozaawa said as he walked towards where she hoped was class, and not down some dark creepy corridor where there was a hidden dungeon miles beneath the surface.

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Hilo again! Just a bit more on this story; I already know what will happen, it's just getting the energy to write it. I'm keeping the

chapters between 1000 - 1300 words because there'll be more of a chance that I'll write the chapters. I have other stories from other series, so please keep that in mind when I haven't gotten to this story in a while. This will probably be between ten or fifteen chapters long, so not that long at all. In case you were wondering, I like putting quotes before and after each chapter, so look forward to seeing them.

"And since, in our passage through this world, painful circumstances occur more frequently than pleasing ones, and since our sense of evil is, I fear, is more acute than our sense of good, we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them." - Anne Radcliffe

Chapter 2

"The old ways are dead. And you need people around you who concur. That means hanging out more with the creative people, the freaks, the real visionaries, than you're already doing. Thinking more about what their needs are, and responding accordingly. Avoid the dullards; avoid the folk who play it safe. They can't help you any more. Their stability. They are extinct, they are extinction." - Hugh Macleod

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Iiyo imagined that she would hear more snickering at her low income status, but it seemed that everyone was too busy keeping their distance from the hooded figure walking in front of her, who she still thought was creepy, than to pay attention to her. During the few minutes stroll to homeroom, all Umehito talked about was his esteem for his club and how he couldn't wait to teach her rituals and the knowledge required in black magic. She only agreed at the spur of the moment so he wouldn't touch her, so she was still thinking of a way out of his club.

In class, he sat in the back corner with a berth of empty seats around him. Iiyo understood that the guy was weird, but felt that it wasn't a reason to completely shun him, but she took advantage of the extra seats and sat next to him because of his people repellent power.

"Fukuda-san, why don't you sit in front of me?" Umehito politely offered, with his Beelzenef gesturing to the seat. He wanted her to sit in front of him so it would be easier to pass notes. Nekozawa remembered when he first arrived at Ouran, he had lots of questions, so he thought that she might have some. Being at Ouran Middle School with no one to talk to often left him bored, especially in class when he didn't have anyone to look forward to. He was pleasantly surprised that Iiyo agreed to join his club, but he wouldn't be

surprised if she left later, so he just had to convince her somehow to stay in the club.

"No, I don't like it when people sit behind me," liyo explained.

Umehito was slightly disappointed, but she was at least sitting by him, and that was still good.

The teacher was late so people just talked until he came, apologizing and immediately told everyone to sit down. The students were avoiding the pair in the back (Umehito mostly) so when a student was forced to sit in front of liyo, she confirmed it. The student's aura showed disdain, fear and slight disgust, while she felt the slight buzz of his presence. She looked at Nekozaawa's aura, and there was only a black mist. The fact that she couldn't see his aura or feel his presence at all made her skin crawl with dread. liyo didn't know what was going to happen, and she always hated surprises.

Just as Umehito promised, he showed liyo where her remaining classes were when lunch rolled around. By then, after several reminders of not touching her or getting too close, he got the message, but even his face showed curiosity as to what the reason was. He didn't ask, because he thought that it would be rude, and liyo was grateful for that.

"Thank you for showing me around, Nekozaawa-san," liyo said formally. "Now I'll be outside to eat lunch, and I'll see you at class." She was about to turn around until she saw from the corner of her eye his hand reach out, and froze.

He had almost forgotten her no touching rule, and saw a bit of anxiety in her eyes. "Why don't we eat in the Black Magic Club room? It's always empty, and it'll give me time to teach you a few-."

"Wait," liyo interrupted. "No one goes into your club room?"

"Yes, that's right."

"How many people are in your club?" liyo thought that if a club was actually established, there ought to be people in the club room, even if it was for lunch.

"Besides us? None." Umehito deadpanned disappointedly.

liyo finally understood why he was so excited to have a member of his club, and felt sorry for him because she also understood why no one was interested in joining. However, an empty room was always a good thing to her. "Alright, let's go there."

Umehito was surprised. He knew that she had been skittish about his club, and seemed to want to avoid it at all costs, but it was an unexpected change, so he didn't hesitate in leading the way.

When they arrived, seeing as the room was nearly pitch black, liyo was nervous. They were finally in the club room, the one thing that seemed to excite the black odd-ball more than anything, and she was worried that he might forget that she didn't like touching. At any moment, he could go into his creepy frenzy with his creepy grin and hug her for all she knew. The only thing that kept her with the occult president is the thought of having the privilege of having a space of solitude (one other person didn't count). A safe place where no one would bother her. No snickering, judgment, but most of all, skin. No one would be able to get too close to her.

Umehito lit a few candles and led the way further into the dark. He had a grin on his face, but he seemed to have some control of his self-restraint. "Here's the table where we can eat lunch, and where I can explain further about the club." It was the first time he would eat lunch with someone else in his club room, so he was genuinely excited.

"Aren't there any lights?"

"No!" Umehito yelled. He fidgeted with his cloak, almost ashamed at his outburst. "I mean, there are lights, but I can't stand them. It hurts."

liyo didn't know what he meant, but she decided to roll with it and eat via candlelight. Hearing him yell had startled her a bit, but as she thought about it, she did notice that he stuck to the shadows, and kept away from the windows. They both sat at the table with her taking on end, and him taking the adjacent end. Having him sit close by made her nervous again, but she didn't speak upon it, trying to trust that he remembered. Before he could dive into the various descriptions of Black Magic and its origins, liyo suggested, "Why don't we just get to know each other a bit?"

He looked almost confused by the notion.

"I'm not going to stay in the club if I don't know about the people-person in it."

"Ah, that's a good point. I guess I went overboard with my recruiting methods. For all I know you could have had a flashlight in your hand."

liyo was confused on what the flashlight's relevance was, but had no choice but to moved on.

Umehito started it off. "Due to your clothing and behavior, I'm assuming that you had gotten a scholarship into Ouran, so what is your scholarship about?"

In liyo's mind, assumptions were never a good thing, but since he was correct she didn't mind it too much. At least he didn't say 'I'm assuming you're not wealthy enough.' "It's a Creative Writing Scholarship. It's nothing special, but I'm still glad I got accepted." She took slow bites, trying to come up with questions to ask him. "Why are you so interested in black magic?"

There was no mystery behind the reason why he grinned again. "I was born into the world of darkness. Black magic is my salvation, my reason, and my path to discover the mysteries in which the darkness surrounds. Black magic isn't just spells and witchcraft, it has a

culture of its own and I love thriving in it. It's become who I am, and who I will be."

liyo had only one thought in her head. Wow, what a weirdo.

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"The boundaries which divide life and death are best shadowy and vague, who shall say where one ends and the other begins." - Edgar Allan Poe

Chapter 3

Hilo everyone! You guys are totally awesome, and I'm glad you're liking it so far and responding with questions and comments. I forgot to mention this before, in case it wasn't obvious, the story takes place in the first year of high school, so one year before the show/manga started. I have watched the anime and read the entire manga, so I know what goes on in both versions which are quite different in the Nekozawa aspect, allowing me plenty of room to improvise and develop Nekozawa and Iiyo more before the arrival of more canon characters. So for now, just sit back and enjoy the future chapters.

"I will love the light for it shows me the way, yet I will endure the darkness for it shows me the stars." - Og Mandino

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By the time lunch ended, Iiyo was at odds with herself. Umehito was a nice guy, in a weird way, and she felt kind of sorry that he didn't have any members, but she also thought he was creepy and seemed to only care about his Black Magic Club. In addition, it still freaked her out that she couldn't sense his presence at all, no matter how much she concentrated. There wasn't even a light hum. She didn't mind that she couldn't see his aura because he seemed to only have two kinds of feelings: a happy-calm, and an excitedly-creepy kind of happy. She wanted him as a friend, whom was more to say than the other students at the school, but she didn't want his club.

She thought that maybe if she kept her mind off of him and his club, an answer from the divine might just appear in front of her. Luckily he wasn't in her Creative Writing or Home Economics class, so it would be much easier to keep her mind off of the guy clad in black. All she wanted was a couple of hours to herself.

The writing course wasn't too bad, and the schedule for the semester seemed fair. Overall, it looked like it was going to be a lot of fun. The contests were also a great opportunity to show off her prized talent since the media seemed to be all over it. Iiyo definitely had something to look forward to in the class, and could tell she could learn a lot.

The cooking class, however, was an entirely different story. She was assigned a partner. That wasn't a half-bad idea for the class, but it meant that she had to be constantly on guard, and all the buzzing made her a bit light-headed. They didn't cook anything since it was just the first day. They went over class rules, etiquette, safety regulations and clean-up regulations so nothing super-exciting happened. The fact that they hadn't started cooking and she was still tense made the situation worse for Iiyo. What would happen once they did start cooking?

Once the last bell rang, Iiyo realized that she had to go to the club room and face whatever horrors that hid in the candlelight dimness, imagining that there would be sacrificial virgin blood in a golden goblet in the center of a pentagram. She still didn't receive any answers as to what to do about Umehito and his club, and it was appointed to every Mondays, Thursdays, and every bi-Saturdays, so that meant two or three days a week of who knew what.

She waited for everyone to exit the room before she carried her hand-me-down satchel and headed out the door, only to be greeted up close and personal by Umehito himself, scaring Iiyo by the sudden appearance. "I thought you might still be here," he said, with an obvious smile of excitement. "Let's hurry to the club meeting."

Meeting? There are only two people! Iiyo thought, but followed suit. She was afraid that if she didn't start walking, he would have dragged her. If she was planning on leaving the club, she may as well go to a couple of meetings to come up with a fool-proof excuse. What did she know? It might have been better than Home Economics class at least.

He led the way by candle-light and started off by giving me an official tour along with weaving in ancient mysticisms and history. The altar had a few candles, incense, but liyo was more concerned about the human and animal skulls. They were bleached so he could have bought them, right? He showed off some of the macabre art and Victorian furniture which held her interest for quite a bit. She tried wasting time by asking what the paintings were about, but hearing about the Plague, witch-hunts, and dark deity worshipping overloaded her brain with too much information. It was strikingly good stuff for a possible future story.

And then Umehito showed liyo his mass collection of books ranging from history, to sorcery, to holy books of different religions. To liyo, it was the mother-load of inspiration just sitting on the shelves. It was her one golden gateway to the kind of research she had been begging for, but her mother was protective, claiming that her mind was too susceptible and too easily influenced. Boy, if her mother knew where she was then, there was going to be another threat to move.

Umehito saw liyo's dazed happy face as she gently traced the spine of an old leather-bound book. He had found a way to convince her to stay in his club. He figured that she may not have liked the ritual part, it was evident by her wanting to avoid that subject, but he knew there was more to the Black Magic Club than just casting curses. It was fine if she stayed only for the books. At least she was staying in the club with him. However, he could hardly wait until the comforting darkness got a stronger hold of her, then she would grow to like the club and all the aspects of it even more. He wondered what her first curse would be. Normally, simplicity was better, but he had a feeling she liked flare. All he had to do was get her to reveal her side that allowed her to feel hatred, and that would open the door of her inner sanctum for the darkness to influence her.

Umehito looked around the shelves and pulled out a thick book and held it out to liyo. "I think you should start with this one, Fukuda-san."

She narrowed her eyes to read the title aloud in the candlelight. "
The History of the Occults ."

"This will provide a light background of where the idea of black magic comes from through religion, superstitions, myths and the likes. It's a good starter point if you want to be able to understand all the other books."

He was basically giving liyo a free pass to the realm of the unknown with books to guide her. What more could she ask for? She smiled, showing him that she was really happy, and gently took the book from him.

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"Unless a man or woman has experienced the darkness of the soul he or she can know nothing of that transforming laughter without which no hint of the ultimate reality of the opposites can be faintly intuited." - Helen Luke

Chapter 4

Hilo everyone! This chapter is just a short scene but it has a bit of information on Black Magic that I thought you might find intriguing.

"No one holds command over me. No man. No prince. No god. What is a claim of age for ones who are immortal? What is a claim of power for ones who defy death? Call your damnable hunt. We shall see who I drag screaming to hell with me." - Gunter Dorn

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"Do you have any more books that I should read before the other books?" liyo asked the President, who was at his alter preparing for a ritual. It was toward the end of the Black Magic Club meeting on Thursday, and liyo had just finished the first book Umehito had recommended. She had extensive notes to prove it.

Umehito had seen that she took the book to class with her to read during the teacher's lectures, and even went to the club room everyday at break, lunch and a couple hours after school which she put the book back before she went home, but was still amazed she had finished so quickly. His eagerness was buzzing in his gut for all of the possibilities liyo could provide. "Of course I do," he said, with a grin that still sent shivers down liyo's back.

She still thought Umehito was weird in a creepy way, but she hadn't had any fun or felt so relaxed in a long time. Learning about the occults was absolutely nothing like she assumed it would be. There were several kinds of rituals, which some were risqué for the more famous and advanced occultists, but there were no use of blood or sacrifices, and even alcohol was strictly an option if it was wanted by everyone. While ancient occultists did worship certain deities (that weren't evil), the spells they used were mainly for protection against enemies, or fertility spells and spells for luck. In fact, according to a reference to the LaVey Satanic Bible, there was no such thing as

"black" or "white" magic; it depends solely on the person's intent during the ritual. There were several different theories on the difference, if there was one, between 'white' and 'black' magic. According to the club's name, she assumed that Umehito meant that the club would be practicing the ancient rituals which outsiders considered evil, hence 'black magic.' When liyo was half way done with the book, she knew she had to have an open-mind and forget everything that she thought she knew.

Umehito handed her the candleholder while he searched through his library for more books. He brought down several and carried about twenty to the table liyo was reading at. "If you want, you could take these books home. I don't mind as long as you bring them back."

She thought about the tempting offer, but had to decline. "If my mom caught me studying this, she would freak out. I'm afraid to find out if she believes in book burning."

"Ah. I forget that parents don't normally approve of these kinds of things."

"Your parents approve of this?"

"I told you I was born of the darkness, but what I didn't tell you was that it happens every hundred or so generations, so my family had to prepare for my lifestyle."

"Do they practice black magic too?" liyo was getting a little worried that Umehito was a psycho from a psychotic family.

"No, only I do."

liyo was relieved, but confused because absolutely nothing he said made sense to her.

"How much luck do you think you have?"

There he went again with the cryptic nonsense. "What do you mean?"

"Your family name means 'lucky rice field,' doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. Why does it matter?" She remembered he had taken note of her family name the first time they met, so it was starting to feel a bit of alarm. She only read about the short references to some spells in the book, and one of which was a name spell that said if the wielder knew the full name of someone, he or she could control the person.

"Family names are just as ancient as the belief in magic, and say a lot about our family. So how much luck do you think you have?" His head was slightly tilted to the side as he asked. It was times like that where Iiyo wished she could see his aura just so she could get a hint if he was scheming something.

"We don't have a rice farm. We buy rice just like most of the population."

"Yes, but that luck must still run in your family, right?"

"I guess," Iiyo answered with hesitation. "Even so, my luck has to have run out by now."

"What makes you say that? I found you by chance didn't I?"

"You found me because I'm not very good at sneaking around, and that I'm not wearing the proper school uniform."

"You enjoy being in this club don't you?"

Iiyo couldn't argue against that, but she still didn't believe that it was luck. "Doesn't this club believe more along the lines of destiny, than luck?"

Umehito noted that she avoided the question. He still wasn't sure if she would stay after she read all of the books, and that worried him,

especially if she kept plowing through one book after the other. "No. Here, destiny can be changed with the use of magic, luck-bad or good-is everywhere. I'm asking you if you think you have any good luck because I think you could be a great asset to the club if you perhaps apply yourself in the rituals."

liyo looked terrified of the idea, so Umehito had to revise.

"When you think you've read enough books, of course. There are some group rituals I had been dying to try, but had no members."

"And that has anything to do with luck because?"

"Because I think there will be more of a chance for success if someone has more luck than the average person helps me perform the ritual."

Finally, something that had made some sense to liyo. "Sorry, my good luck has been drained. I'd be lucky if I'm able to stay here for even a year or two."

"What do you mean?"

liyo didn't want to tell him too much because she didn't want to scare him off for a change. "I just don't want someone to find me. It would be very bad if he did." With that, Umehito's grandfather clock chimed, letting them both know that club hours were over. She began packing her journals and was about to leave before Nekozaawa stopped her.

"Here." Nekozaawa handed her a book with its covers covered in paper with 'Poetry' written on the front. "You can now safely take this satanic bible home to read and your parents won't know."

liyo carefully grasped the book. She thought the book would be a lot thicker for it being a bible, but she didn't complain. "Does Satanism have anything to do with Black Magic?"

"Not directly, but it has some good information and a philosophy I thought you might find interesting. You don't have to read about the rituals themselves, but the materials that are needed are rather important since it will be very similar to the materials that we will use here."

"Ah, OK. Thanks for this Nekozaawa-san." liyo should have thought about the paper-cover a long time ago, but now she would get some serious researching done.

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"All the commercials on TV today are for antidepressants, for Prozac or Paxil. And they get you right away, 'Are you sad? Do you get stressed? Do you have anxiety?' 'Yes, I have all of those things. I'm alive!'" - Ellen DeGeneres

Chapter 5

Hilo everyone. Yay, more Umehito love! Just in case anyone notices, and decides to comment via review, I did change from Nekozawa to Umehito because even though Nekozawa is most often used in the anime/manga, it's his family name. Because this is in third person I can personally address the character by his first name, but liyo will use his family name until such a time comes when she has permission to use his first name. Anyway, I did edit the previous chapters to use Umehito instead of Nekozawa so it won't seem sudden to new readers. Just wanted to let you know because I have no other news.

"The important thing is this: To be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become." - Charles DuBois

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By the time the early break ended, liyo had finished the book, and chose another book from the stack. It was hard reading it in front of her parents-especially her mother who kept asking which poet she was reading from. liyo claimed she was reading Bansho's haikus and produced a strange fact that he had hidden out in the mountains, and when someone had found him, the haiku artist was sitting under a banana tree, hence his penname 'Bansho.' It was too strange not to believe so liyo's mother left her alone, despite the guilty look.

"You finished?" Umehito asked from behind, sending violent spasms down liyo's spine.

"Would you stop coming up from behind, please?" liyo harshly asked.

"I apologize." He looked at liyo's new book, and smiled. "I was just going to recommend that book next. You have a good eye."

liyo didn't say anything, only nodded her head. She wasn't sure if it was a compliment, or just a comment of approval. liyo took a piece of paper and covered the book just Umehito had done with the previous book, and put 'Poetry' on the front. She would come up with something else later.

The bell rang, so they both went off to class, with Umehito dispersing the crowds ahead effortlessly, and liyo following closely behind. During the two classes they had left together, Umehito requested to see the notes she had taken. He was rather curious as to what she wrote. liyo hesitantly put her journal on his desk, more embarrassed that she had written possible story ideas and plot twists, than accidentally bumping hands during the pass; Umehito was careful about the skin contact and was getting better at remembering.

The other reason he wanted to look at her notes was to analyze her handwriting, which was tiny and extremely neat, perfect for interpreting her mood at the time of writing. He found it hard to predict how she would react to certain aspects of the club (besides the curse-casting part). With her journal he would be able to figure out which parts to lay off for a while, and which parts was OK to possibly try out soon. Her notes were very extensive and caught the tiniest details, so it would take some time. Umehito passed liyo a note asking if he could look at it until after school, which liyo nodded to. After the class and lunch were over, she wouldn't have a chance to read anyway.

liyo was dreading her cooking class because they would finally be cooking with their partners. Her partner was a snobby girl who was too afraid to even touch the flour because she didn't want to get her apron stained. Why there were silk aprons with delicate lace in the first place, liyo would never know, but at least the girl wasn't wearing all black where even the tiniest grain of flour would show up. All the buzzing, and tingling was making liyo light-headed, so it made her mood worse.

The girl was not only pushy verbally, she was a take charge girl, and ended up grazing liyo's hand, making liyo drop the timer jumping

away from her partner, and screamed. Her skin not only hurt, but it burned. Everyone stopped what they were doing to look at liyo with widened eyes, shocked that the quiet girl could scream that loud. The teacher wasn't pleased at all, and asked what happened.

"I didn't do anything to her. I barely grazed her hand reaching for the cinnamon-sugar," her partner said harshly.

Even when the teacher looked at liyo, wanting an explanation, she just looked at her hand, cradling it. There weren't any bruises or physical marks, but it continued to ache. She knew it was the brain giving false signals, like an allergy sending out the immune system army for a dust of harmless pollen, but she couldn't control the pain. How would she be able to explain what had happened to a teacher who had to interact with over fifty students? How would she be able to explain all that had transpired during the past three years? No one would have believed her. No one would understand. No one did before, not even her ex-best friends, so why would a school for rich kids give her a chance at all?

liyo started to suddenly sob when the teacher asked again for an explanation as to why she had overreacted. The teacher felt sorry for her, so he let her go to the washroom for a few minutes. She was thankful for the

pass and privacy to get a hold of herself. She took her time to cry out a few more tears, take a few deep breaths, and clean her face before coming out. By then, there was only five minutes until the bell rang, and she still didn't feel well. Her hand was tingling uncomfortably and the muscles kept twitching.

When she made it back to her seat, she saw that the cookies were slightly burned, and people were staring. Her partner gave her a narrowed glare probably because of the less-than stellar marks for the burnt sweets. liyo waited in her seat until everyone left and then got up to talk to the teacher, requesting that she work without a partner.

He wasn't pleased with her request. "Part of your grade is to work as a team," he said.

"However you do grade every student separately. I saw you mark a zero under my name because I had a panic attack and couldn't continue." She saw she wasn't doing a good job with arguing against the teacher, so she made a suggestion. "All I'm asking is that we don't share trays. We can cook in the same area, even the same oven, just not on the same tray."

The teacher sighed and tapped his finger on his desk, thinking if my suggestion would work. "Fine, we'll see if this arrangement will work. If it doesn't I'm going to have to request you transfer out of this class because you're being too disruptive."

That wasn't exactly happy news, but she was still glad he took her suggestion. "Thank you," Iiyo said, before leaving the classroom, nearly colliding with Umehito who had come in a hurry.

"Are you alright Fukuda-san? I heard what happened," he said in a rush.

Word travels too fast in this school, Iiyo thought. "I'm fine. I overreacted, that's all."

"But she touched you, right?" On his way to Iiyo's cooking class, he had heard some cruel gossip that Iiyo had been hurt. Apparently, the one who had started it was her partner, and that she had accidentally touched her. Umehito had often wondered what would happen, but now didn't want to see for himself if it did hurt her.

"She only grazed me, and I panicked. That's all. I'm all right now. The teacher and I just arranged something so I can stay in the class."

"Really?" He was a little skeptical when noticing that the edges of her eyes were pink from crying.

"Yes."

Umehito was genuinely relieved. If Iiyo wasn't fine then he would have cast a curse on her partner; maybe he would do that anyway, just a smaller jinx. "If you're still up to it, we can go to the club room."

Iiyo found herself smiling at that proposal, and realized that the club had become her safe-place. It was a strange place to consider safe, but she liked being in the Black Magic Club, even with the eccentric president Nekozaawa Umehito. When they were inside the club with the doors closed, Iiyo lightly pulled on his sleeve, gaining his attention. "Thank you, for checking up on me Nekozaawa-san."

Umehito smiled back. "It's my job as The Black Magic Club president and my job as a friend to check up on you."

...

"The good psychic would pick up the phone before it rang. Of course it is possible there was no one on the other line. Once she said, 'God Bless you.' I said, 'I didn't sneeze.' She looked deep into my eyes and said, 'You will eventually.' And damn it if she wasn't right. Two days later I sneezed." - Ellen DeGeneres

Chapter 6

"I'm not honest, but you're interesting." - Daniel Tosh

...

"Sensei, do I have to use the molds? Can I mold them by hand?" liyo asked her Home Economics teacher. She didn't want to use the cutesy molds for her pancakes. Ever since joining the Black Magic Club, liyo had wanted to incorporate it into everything, and that definitely didn't stop her in her cooking class.

"No, these molds are all we have, and frankly, doing the shapes by hand seems too difficult."

For this class, liyo added on within her thoughts.

Besides her 'partner' the other classmates seem to be having trouble of their own. There were already two small fires, pungent smells of burnt remains nearly every day, a kid almost puking because something was undercooked, and another student slipped and nearly cracked his head open like an egg last week. Not to mention that someone had just found out he was highly allergic to peanuts on the day they were making peanut-brittle. That all happened within the first two months, and liyo doubted that things would get any better by the end of the school year.

I should have asked to be in the sewing class, liyo remarked in her head, as she settled for the sakura flower shaped silicone molds.

The arrangement was going well between liyo and her partner, even though their teamwork participation grade was halved. During the month, they didn't collide once, and because they worked on opposite sides of the oven (wide ovens with wide stoves at that), there weren't any touching. Her partner was sore from her teamwork percentage was halved, but she eventually got over it. What they

were both eager about more than each other were the quarterly exams.

liyo was doing fine in all of her classes, especially her writing class, but she wasn't so sure about geometry-her worst subject. In addition, according to Umehito, she had to maintain at least a 65 to be able to remain in the club. liyo was barely managing a 53. She had been toying around with an idea for some time, but she was nervous about bringing it up.

By the time liyo was done making six small blueberry pancakes, one of which was only slightly burned as a test, and cleaning up her area, the bell rang and liyo knew she had to do it. Her access to the Black Magic Club room depended on her doing it.

As expected Umehito came by liyo's class just as she got out, and he had a wide smile on his face that liyo was slightly cautious about. "I know we don't have a club meeting today-"

"-But we still go everyday anyway," liyo interrupted playfully. She had gotten used to Umehito, especially when Umehito had finally had the no touching rule ingrained.

"Right, but I have a special surprise for you."

"What's the surprise?" liyo asked with greater caution. She hated surprises.

"It won't be a surprise if I tell you, it's in the club room, and I finished it last night. Think of it as an official welcome into the club."

"Joy," liyo muttered to herself. Please don't let it have anything to do with him performing a ritual over me.

When they arrived at the club room, Umehito started to ramble. "I wasn't sure if it would be OK to give this to you yet since you only seem to be interested in the books, so it would be practically useless, but I decided that I should give it to you anyway because

you're a member whether you fully participate or not, and you might be interested later." He handed liyo a soft folded material, which was hard to identify exactly what it was in the dark. "It's a robe for when we perform rituals and cast spells, but you can wear it to just signify that you are part of the club."

liyo had a stubborn lump of awkwardness stuck in her throat. "Thanks Nekozaawa-san."

"Because you're quite short I had to hem it, but it wasn't a problem. "

Was he hinting that he wanted her to wear it like he wore his robe every day? "Wait, you hemmed it? Don't you have someone else who usually does that kind of thing?" liyo asked. After a while, she had noticed two more oddballs that seemed to follow Umehito around, but at a distance. They looked like a maid and a butler-and creepy ones at that, but she decided that maybe it was best to not know. Ignorance is bliss after all.

"Yes, but I wanted to do it myself as President of the Black Magic Club."

He took his job of presidency way too seriously.

"By the way, what is that?" Umehito asked pointing to the paper bag that liyo had placed on the table.

"Oh, they're pancakes I made in class. You can have it if you want, I already had a few."

Umehito's smile widened, sending chills down liyo's back. "Yes, thank you. Now I have an offering to the cat deities tonight."

liyo didn't even bother asking what he was talking about, and went ahead to the library to try and forget what he said about using her sakura shaped pancakes as offerings. After she was sure Umehito was done with whatever spell he was casting, about an hour later,

liyo finally gathered enough nerve to ask what she had been meaning to ask before the surprise. "Nekozawa-san, are you done?"

"Yes, is there something you need Fukuda-san?"

liyo's scalp tingled, and her spine seemed to vibrate. "I was wondering if you could help me study for our math exam that's coming up. I don't feel ready for it at all, and studying at school doesn't seem to help with my concentration."

"Oh, if that's all you wanted, you could have asked me any time. I'll get started on it right away."

liyo held on to the edge of his sleeve to get his attention back. "What do you mean? What will you get started on?"

"Making charms of course. I was going to make you intelligence and a luck charm for the exams." Umehito took note of liyo's crestfallen face. "Was that not what you meant?"

"No, it wasn't. As much as charms seem like a hopeful idea, what I need help is studying. I get too nervous asking teachers for help, and to be honest, you're my only friend that I trust." Even if he was a completely insane oddball.

"I see now. I apologize for the misunderstanding. How about we study later on Saturdays after club hours are over, and a few hours every Sunday at my home?"

liyo felt buzzing in her gut at the thought of going to his house. "Saturdays and Sundays are fine, but could we study at my house?"

...

Oh gee, how will the studying go I wonder? Does anyone out there listen to Emilie Autumn by the way? Her songs (two in particular) seem to help me concentrate on typing this story. If you've never heard of you, I don't blame you, but "Miss Lucy Had Some Leeches"

and "Gentlemen Aren't Nice" are pretty cool in my opinion. You can ignore this if you want.

"Why is it that our memory is good enough to retain the least triviality that happens to us, and yet not good enough to recollect how often we have told it to the same person?" - Francois de La Rochefoucauld

Chapter 7

"That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way." - Doris Lessing

...

What was I thinking? Iiyo and her family lived in an apartment. Moreover, she didn't even know what Umehito liked as a snack or if the tea she had would be good enough. Would juice be better? Maybe ice water would be best; would tap be OK though? Would Umehito even be able to find the apartment? Would he even know what an apartment was? Should she wait outside for him or would that be considered rude?

Questions continued to zip through Iiyo's head as she frantically cleaned her room, stuffing scattered story vignettes, random illustrations and research material in random drawers, folding and putting away her futon, and did other chores. By the time she was done, it looked like an OCD germophobe inhabited the room. Iiyo started a mental panic frenzy when she heard someone knocking on the door and thought about not having any more time to prepare anything more. She hurried to the door and took a few deep breaths before finally opening it.

It was indeed Umehito, except he wasn't wearing his cloak, which was a good thing if her parents came home early. Instead, he wore a loose black sweatshirt with the hood off, straight legged dark wash jeans-which Iiyo liked, but would never admit to wanting them because she was afraid of the price-and dark running shoes. The new outfit was surprising, but Iiyo felt immensely better seeing him in casual clothes. If it weren't for the fact of personally knowing that he was rich, he would have seemed normal.

"Hello Fukuda-san. So this is your dwelling," he approved with his usual grin and a bright blue eye peeking through his black hair.

That is, he would have seemed normal until he started talking. His extremely polite and creepy wordage habit was extremely apparent.

"Come on in," liyo said, ushering him by holding onto his sweatshirt sleeve and dragging him into the apartment directly to her room before he had a chance to notice the tacky figurines that her mother collected. Why did it have to be unicorns and faeries? liyo thought, as she opened her bedroom door. "This is my room, so please make yourself comfortable, and if you're hungry or thirsty just let me know and I'll whip something up." Oh my gosh, can I get any lamer?

"No thank you. Now, what exactly did you not understand in math?"

liyo was thankful that they went straight to studying, and was almost amazed that he didn't bring up his club. Umehito occasionally asked about the apartment, and what her parents did (cosmetology and news casting) while she was working on some example problems. Other than that, the atmosphere was normal; as if they were in the club room, except it was easier to see her paper and she didn't have to worry about what kind of curse he was casting in the corner.

"Is it too bright in here Nekozaawa-san?" liyo asked, only just remembering after a couple hours. He hadn't been smiling for a while, and it was actually starting to worry her.

"Hmm, yes, it is bright, but as long as I have black clothes and my wig to repel it, I'm fine."

liyo's eyes widened in surprise. "You've been wearing a wig this entire time?" Only having glimpsed his entire face a few times out of the months they've been together, and by chance, she was slightly disappointed that it wasn't his real visage.

"Yes. I'm very vulnerable to light, that even if a single strand of hair is touched by the sun's rays, I'd faint."

"Ah," liyo said, pretending to understand, and then getting back to working on math problems. If the teacher had explained it the way

Umehito had, then she would have understood it right off the bat. Although, she didn't think every teacher would actually sit down and make up stories to go with the math problems (that would definitely not be in the job description).

After a few more problems and questions relating to school, Umehito inquired, "B or AB, Fukuda-san?"

"What? My blood-type?" Iiyo was getting a funny feeling, the same feeling she gets when she thinks that Umehito might go on another one of his occult glee-sprees.

"Yes. For the past few days I've been trying to guess as to which blood type you are and I've narrowed it down to two. B because you seem to want to learn as much as you can despite you being focused on your research and writing, and AB because you're very strict with people. Actually, especially with other people."

"So blood types are supposed to tell a person's personality?"

"It's a common divinatory practice, you've never heard of it?" It was true that it was a common thing in Japan, and very popular with the girls, but he just wanted to get to know her. He had noticed that Iiyo was very secretive about her life before she moved to the new district, so he thought that maybe if he knew her blood type he would get closer to finding a key as to why touching hurts her. It wasn't as if he wanted her to get over it, he just wanted to know why. He had given her answers why he is weakened in bright lights, and he didn't see a reason how it was so different, even though he knew that Iiyo still didn't quite understand his condition.

"Before I met you, I haven't heard of ninety percent of what I've read. So, no, I haven't." Umehito's seriousness was worrying Iiyo to the point where she almost wanted to ask what was wrong.

"I'm just curious as to what your blood type is." Umehito smiled, trying to show he didn't mean any harm, but Iiyo only showed

extreme skepticism. "I'm A, which isn't all that surprising considering that it's the most common blood type in Japan."

After some consideration, she didn't see any harm in him knowing her type. It wasn't as if he asked if he could have a drop or two of her blood. "AB."

He pulled out a book from his sweatshirt and began reading a passage from a bookmarked page.

" People with Type AB Blood are said to have a delicate sensitivity. They are considerate of other people's feelings and deal with them with care and caution. On the other hand, though, they are strict with themselves and those close to them. They, therefore, seem to have two personalities: one for those "outside," and another for people on the "inside." They often become sentimental, and they tend to think too deeply about things. AB Types have a lot of friends, but they need time to be alone and think things through, as well."

Umehito looked up to see liyo's reaction.

She only replied with, "That doesn't really sound like me." After that, they dropped the subject and went back to studying. The truth was, before her stalker got heavily involved in her life, and before she lost her friends, that passage would have been her to a T, but not anymore.

...

The passage is from a site called Funatikel. They actually list various forms of horoscopes and zodiacs, but since blood types was invented in Japan, I figured this would be more appropriate. My blood type is actually pretty accurate, but I favor the celtic tree and animal signs (now that was scary accurate). I know it's been a while, but I hope you enjoyed this chapter; Umehito is showing concern (aww).

"Have you ever noticed that there are people who do things which are most indelicate, and yet at the same time-beautiful?" - E. M. Forster

Chapter 8

Hi, I've made a change in the first chapter, but you really don't need to reread it. Just know that Iiyo didn't have a stalker cheating ex-boyfriend.

In addition, just to get this out of the way, I had been rereading the manga version, and decided that Nekozaawa is in the same year as Mori and Hani. I've seen so many people say he's a second year, but the author didn't really disclose too many details about him (sadly). My own proof that he's a third year: throughout the entire manga, Tamaki and Kyouya specifically call him with the 'senpai' suffix, meaning he's an upperclassman; in one of the chapter covers after Mori and Hani graduated, he was depicted on what I'm assuming to be the college campus with a sweatshirt instead of his normal cloak, along with Mori and Hani in the more casual attire, and finally, in chapter 71, when Mori and Hani graduated, he said something to Tamaki-something along the lines of remembering him... or something. If he did show up back at the high school after graduation, like Mori and Hani, he could have simply been visiting, helping his club members.

"And God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light, but the Electricity Board said He would have to wait until Thursday to be connected." - Spike Milligan

...

The full two months of studying paid off... barely. Iiyo passed the class with a score of 89 on the mid-terms, making her class grade an average of 65.2. After giving Umehito her sugar cookies from the cooking class as a reward for helping, Iiyo thanked him a thousand times over.

"It's no problem, Fukuda-san." He gingerly took the bag of cookies. "How did your parents take it?"

On the last study session before the big tests, liyo's parents came home early from work and caught Umehito leaning over her text book trying to explain a problem, but it looked to them like he was about to cop a kiss. When liyo told them he was just a classmate who was helping her study, her mother spied a book that she had forgotten to cover with paper and exploded with anger. Even though it wasn't directed at him, it was enough to make Umehito freeze. liyo didn't have an excuse for it, so told the truth: she was in the Black Magic Club and had been studying the occult since the first day of the school year.

Upon hearing the secret she had been keeping, liyo's father glared at Umehito and told him to go home. Umehito hesitated in gathering his school supplies, along with another divination book he had pulled out earlier, and stepped out. He wanted to say, "See you at school," but considering how tense the air suddenly became, he decided that staying silent was best. After the door clicked closed, both pairs of eyes were on liyo.

"Why are you studying all of this weird stuff again?" Her mother asked. "You were studying odd subjects before, but," she picked up the book *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* by Montague Summers, "witchcraft? Demonology? Black Magic Club?"

"It's not that bad-."

"Honey," her dad started, "we just want you safe."

"It is safe-."

"You were studying odd stuff before and you ended up-." Her dad continued to try to reason with her.

"This isn't the same. All of the books I've borrowed are from school clubroom, so it won't be tracked by any computer. I haven't used the internet at all. And all of this occult stuff is purely for research-I'm not practicing anything."

Her parents looked at each other, acknowledging that she had been careful, but still wasn't sure on the subject matter.

"The Black Magic Club isn't bad, and all of this research isn't as bad as it sounds-at least all of the neo-pagan stuff isn't as bad. The ancient ways were something different, but that's beside the point. Can you at least read one of the books before you ground me, or forbid me from studying it here?"

"Let your mother and I talk about it first," her father, the more let loose but reasonable one said. Her mother gave him a wide-eyed look, already deciding to forbid her daughter from the Black Magic Club. They went to the living room to talk about it, leaving liyo in her room. They had taken the book with them, but Umehito had let her borrow a couple more at a time, when the research had strings to multiple books involved. She didn't go back to studying her math because she felt comfortable enough that she would pass.

An hour later her parents came in just as liyo had hid the book under the low table. Her mother had a serious look on her face, and her arms were crossed. It meant that she lost, but was still opposed to it. It also meant that her father was the one going to talk. "While I'm still not quite OK with what you're studying, I understand your need for the research, especially if it involves one of your stories. I don't know much about the occult, but I do remember a few things on the 'Satanic Panic' back in America, and while there wasn't a way to prove that that had happened, it's still deterring whether or not we want you to continue studying 'black magic'. We don't want what happened at your last school to happen at Ouran-."

"-It won't. Nekozawa-san is also in the Black Magic Club, and practically my only friend. So there really isn't anything for me to lose when it comes to my social life."

"OK," he raised his hands up. "But still, I would feel better if I knew what you are studying before you continue."

"So, what, you want a book, a summary...?"

"Bring me a book that summarizes what these cults are, and what black magic is. I'll read it, and if it really isn't as bad as you say it is, then neither of us," he raised his voice an octave for liyo's mother, "will restrain on what you research."

"And if you somehow find it worse?"

"If I do deem it as bad as what I'm thinking it is, then you have to ask us permission for each book you're borrowing."

liyo was visibly confused.

"Because your only friend is also in the Black Magic Club, and you two obviously haven't been doing anything morally wrong here, I don't feel it would be right for you to stop socializing with him or stop going to your club cold turkey."

Oh, thank gosh! liyo thought with a huge sigh of relief.

Her father's stomach growled loudly. "We'll talk more about this tomorrow. Let's eat."

She and her mom cooked dinner in relative silence. This was going to be tricky.

When Umehito and liyo entered the clubroom, she only told him of the deal, and nothing of what had happened before she moved.

"Well, that's good, isn't it? Occults and magic is generally perceptive depending on who's reading, and if your father was already skeptical of the 'Satanic Panic' that's generally a good sign."

"What is the 'Satanic Panic' anyway?"

"Basically, in America, witnesses widespread of the country said they had been kidnapped and brutally tortured for ritualistic purposes, seeing all of the typical rumor-spread imaginary nonsense about satanistic stuff like sacrificing animals or babies. Because the witnesses were from all over instead of a select few areas, it seemed

to have credibility; however, besides the witnesses, there weren't any proof of it happening at all."

"So should I read up on that, or because of the lack of physical proof should I ignore that."

"That all depends on you. A number of people still believed it happened, some think only a few people who were brutally tortured, and some others think it didn't happen at all. There's no proof that can prove or disprove that anything happened."

liyo hummed. "I think I'll save it for some other time. Can you explain more about making sigils? To be specific, I don't understand the numerology and the magic square aspect. How do you reduce the numerical value in the letters?"

"Of course. Are you planning on making sigils?"

"No, it's just for research."

Umehito wasn't disappointed anymore. He figured out that she would rather observe and read everything thoroughly before actually get involved in anything. It was the same with their PE class. If they were doing something new, she would stand back and observe how the game worked before really getting in the middle if the game was a no-contact sport (if it was she would stay at the edge). Umehito had a medical excuse so didn't have to take part in the class, but still logged in hours of exercise each week at the inside gym. From the gym, he could see liyo out in the field.

liyo just wanted to be thorough with anything.

Umehito took out a star-shaped sugar cookie and took a bite. "These are good. Thank you."

"I'm glad you like them."

...

" And since you know you cannot see yourself,
so well as by reflection, I, your glass,
will modestly discover to yourself,
that of yourself which you yet know not of." - William Shakespeare

Chapter 9

It's been forever, I'm sorry. This chapter explains her parents a bit further because I thought it was important, and there are a few time skips because I want this story to span all three years into high school... at least that's the plan. It's funny, I started this story at the same time as *Sequestered Mind*, but I have twice as many chapters for that story. The reason I think it's funny is that I practically have this story planned out to the end, and I only have planned the other story to a point which I haven't reached yet. It's probably because I decided that the chapter word limit for that story is only 1000 words. By the way... where did all of you come from! I was surprised to see thirty favorites and forty alerts. That gives me a totally awesome feeling, and I hope I keep your appreciation until the end of this story. Anyway, to the quote, then the story.

"So what's the speed of dark anyway?" - Jade Pudget (AFI guitarist)

...

After a few days, mostly trying to stall the inevitable, liyo finally chose the book for her father to read: *The History of the Occult*, the first book she ever read from the Black Magic Club. Fittingly ironic. She wasn't too worried about the deal going south-he was a newscaster, so his job was to find out the truth and stay neutral about it. At most, she figured that the worst that would happen would be that he would forbid her from actually participating in rituals, or making charms, or casting spells, which was completely fine with her. However, she still had her mother to worry about. She never approved of liyo's research, mostly because of what she was researching-physical illnesses, mental disorders, human parasites, ancient medical treatments, home-made bombs, at one point even modes of ancient and modern torture, but her mother never found out about that. It was also her research that had kept her mother away from her stories. She wanted no part of it, thinking that there may have been a chance that her one and only child, a daughter,

would be a normal girl interested in normal things, like gardening, or crocheting. Alas, she didn't get what she wanted. liyo, more than anything, wanted her mom to see her as her, and not as something she wished she was. For a while, she even pretended to be a good daughter, but it was too much of a hassle, and it just made her feel depressed. The day she fully stopped pretending, and showed her mother what she really liked, was the day that their close relationship seemed to crumble. It wasn't completely destroyed, but liyo wasn't sure if it could be repaired.

It was strange. Normally, there would be horror stories between the step-parent and the child, but she had no problems with him. They were close enough where she didn't mind calling him 'Dad.' He never minded the subject matter when she wanted to share an interesting fact with him, and she often asked him questions, or asked him to help her research something because she didn't know where to start. He probably thought she was weird, but still encouraged her on. Now it was weird that the first opposition she received from him was about the occult, and it seemed pretty harmless to her-just don't piss someone off who knows black magic.

After a couple more weeks, her dad finished the book, and deemed it OK to carry on as she was, but he had been trying to get her mom to understand. She wouldn't have any of it and stopped talking to her completely, but she still argued with him. That was over a month ago, and she still hadn't uttered a word to her, even when liyo tried explaining it all, but when she did, her mom just left the room.

liyo felt bad-horrible-but she didn't want to stop just because her mom disagreed with it-she didn't even know what *it* really was. All the sacrificial blood offering in a golden goblet shtick liyo had originally assumed came from her mom. Overall, it just dampened her usual spirits.

"You're not feeling well," Umehito stated. "Is it because of your parents?" They were in homeroom, and because it was nearing Halloween, all the classes were voting to see what would be done to

celebrate. It seemed to be more like free-time because no one was paying much attention.

"Mom." Iiyo didn't want to explain the situation she was in at home, and Umehito caught the signal.

"Since Halloween will be on the weekend, what are you going to be doing?"

"Staying home most likely. Someone at the late night news casting quit just in time, so my dad got promoted that spot. Since he won't be home, I can't go anywhere, but it's fine. He and I have a bet going on counting down how many acts of vandalism, fires, and fights will be happening on the thirtieth and another bet for the thirty-first."

"Do you two have bets like that every year?"

"Yeah, but he usually wins on deducing precisely how many of each happen. I usually have better guesses on which of the places actually make the news. I'm assuming you've made special plans for Samhain. Thanking your deities for the harvest?"

"Precisely. It's too bad our club can't participate on its own for the school festivities."

"Why?" Iiyo had been wondering what the club would be doing, but for it to not participate at all seemed to be unfair.

"We just simply don't have enough members. It's disappointing, but it's fine as long as the club is continuing at all. I had some plans I had been wanting to do for the school festivals, but I guess we'll just have to wait until next year."

Iiyo could see the sadness beyond the tresses of the wig. "Maybe I can help, what kind of plans did you have in mind?"

He smiled, but before he could disclose his plans, the class president yelled, "Hey, you two in the back! Nekozaawa and," he took

a minute to look at the seating chart, "Fukuda." We looked up to see that the entire class was looking at us. "You two are the experts here. What are your ideas for this year's Halloween? We want to beat the upperclassmen."

That's when Iiyo had an idea. Maybe the club itself couldn't participate, but they could do something individually to promote their club, so when the next festivities rolled around, the club could celebrate on their own. "We could make and sell clay charms that represent Halloween. Or we could sell papier-mâché monster masks. Or treats like cookies...?" As she was spouting out ideas, the president didn't look at all thrilled to hear them.

"The clay charms would be fine, maybe, but a few classes are already selling masks and cookies. Try thinking of something more elaborate. Where you're from you probably can only afford to think small-scale."

Iiyo had a strong urge to throw her bag at his head, or run over there to kick him.

"Fortune telling," Umehito uttered, standing up. "Some of us can learn simpler methods of divination so we can sell those services, the rest can sell the charms. Fukuda-san and I can also make talismans for those who would prefer something more authentic, along with my wooden Beelzenef dolls. I can guarantee that no other class would know how to tell fortunes, or know about talismans, so how about it?"

The president sighed. "I guess it's good enough." He turned to the rest of the classroom population and asked, "Would anyone like to talk about this further? Does anyone at all think this is a horribly bad idea?"

There were murmurs, but no one outright said anything to argue with Umehito's idea.

"Alright then. Who would like to help out with the fortune telling side of business?"

No one but Umehito and Iiyo stood up. Iiyo wasn't very particularly excited about telling fortunes, but since she was the only other club member, thus the only other person who had a clue about divination, had to stand up. Annoyed by the lack of participation after they had been called upon, Iiyo asked in a slightly haughty manner, "Come on girls, I know you do fortune telling amongst yourselves anyway, so what's different now? You'll just learn other methods to show off to your friends. And guys, if you haven't figured it out already, girls like fortune telling. It'll definitely give you an interesting pick-up line. So what do you have to lose? We're not soul snatchers."

...

"Who are all you people, and what did you do with the empty space that's usually here to see us?" -Davey Havok (AFI lead singer), yes, I'm listening to them right now.

Chapter 10

I thought this would be only fifteen chapters, but it looks like I'll be wrong. It's looking more like around thirty, but that's OK. At least I have this story planned out (for the most part).

"The difficulties you meet will resolve themselves as you advance. Proceed, and light will dawn and shine with increasing clearness on your path." - D'Ambert

...

"I went too far with my recruiting methods, huh?" liyo asked Umehito while they spent their lunch making cell phone charms-she was making a pumpkin jack-o-lantern, and he was making a ghost. After she said 'We aren't soul snatchers,' she saw scared faces and knew her speech went south.

"Yes, but at least we still have a few people willing to learn divination." It was probably less than if she had just left the last sentence out, but it was better than no one volunteering.

True. Surprisingly, the first to stand up to volunteer was her cooking partner, and after that, a few more girls and one boy stood up. liyo definitely would thank her when they met up at home economics.

"And who knows, maybe a few more would volunteer after a few days." They were both praying for it so they would be too busy teaching than to make the cutesy charms. liyo had been looking forward making cat, dog, rabbit, bat, and crow skull charms, but the president deemed it too creepy. She couldn't even make turnip jack-o-lantern-what was originally used before pumpkins-because no one would understand and the fear that it wouldn't sell. liyo silently vowed to get more members just so she could prove him wrong one year. Since it was already apparent that not a lot of people would

want real talismans, Umehito and Iiyo agreed to start making them later.

By the time lunch ended, they had an array of pumpkin jack-o-lanterns, ghosts, cats which would be painted black when they dried, different kinds of candy, bats, little discs that were going to be red moons-the one thing the president allowed of her suggestions, with the silent insistence of Umehito by her side. Just thinking how their class president treated her ideas made her visibly annoyed.

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"Oh, I didn't do it for you," Tsukishima Sayoko, Iiyo's cooking partner, stated, responding to Iiyo's thanks. "The only reason I did it was so I wouldn't get my hands dirty with clay-look at yours, your fingers, they're stuck in your nail beds-and so I wouldn't have to bake."

"Well, thank you anyway." They were making grilled shrimp today, and Iiyo was taking the heads off, peeling off the outer shells along with the legs, and deveining the shrimp, while Sayoko was putting them on skewers and onto a plate, waiting to be cooked. After a few more shrimps, Iiyo asked, "Why are you in this class if you don't like cooking. You seem to be good at it well enough."

Without any hesitation, Sayoko answered in a droll, "Because my parents are chefs, and because they want me to be just like them, but, really, I want to be a beautician. I want to own my own salon, paint someone's nails, fix hair, airbrush on make-up, I just want to do my own stuff."

Iiyo could very much relate.

By the end of the class, which ended early because someone was allergic to shellfish and developed a serious case of hives, Iiyo and Sayoko didn't dislike each other as much. They weren't friends per se, but they could tolerate each other. "So are we going to this demon-worshipping club of yours now?"

"For one, we don't worship any demons, and two, not yet. I have to go back to my writing class first. You can come with me if you want. Nekoza-wa-san will be rounding up the other volunteers so we'll be going to the club room ourselves anyway."

Sayoko shrugged and went with liyo, feeling it was better than being alone with the freakish president. She'd rather have liyo teaching the divination. "So, basically it's cards right? Tarot?"

"Yeah, tarot is one method, but there's also different kinds of scrying, I-Ching, you can tell someone's fortune with dice, dominoes, mahjong tiles, normal playing cards, runes, oghams, geomantic figures, there are oracle books, palm reading, face reading, basically almost anything can be a divination tool. Even a certain place where you itch can be considered a divination method."

Sayoko's eyes widened in disgust. "Really?"

liyo's face winced, and nodded, understanding the semi-grossness in having an itch a method of divination. "Because we don't have much time, we'll probably be doing simple readings, like with dice, dominoes or mahjong tiles-Nekoza-wa-san will be doing the more intricate readings."

"Not you?"

"I've only been reading about them, not actually learning how to use divination techniques, so I'm in the same boat as you mostly." They arrived at the classroom, empty except for the teacher because this was his break period. liyo reached into her bag and got out her small red journal that she fills with story ideas. "Sensei, I have the story idea for the Halloween contest. I decided to go for the children's book category."

"And let me guess. It has something to do with demons, witches, or black magic." Her teacher looked at her with a bored expression.

"No. It's about two girls with two different Halloween traditions. One goes trick-or-treating, and the other creates an altar and casts a spell-."

"Hold on. You just told me your story wouldn't be about witches or black magic."

"It's not. The little girl is pagan, and the spell is to thank the gods for the harvest, which isn't black magic." liyo fibbed a little, since the title of black magic was a label from outsiders, so from an outsider's point of view, it was black magic. "The point of the story is that the girls become friends despite their differences of tradition."

The teacher sighed. "I'm glad that, for once, this isn't a horror story, and that for once, you want to try something different and are going for a children's book, but spells, pagan? They're what you've been writing about since the beginning of the school year."

"Well, it's been a new interest of mine since the beginning of the school year." liyo hadn't meant to sound offensive, especially to a teacher, but she wasn't getting the point. Every story that she had turned in had seemed different. She wrote about monsters from the original lore-vampires that weren't always drop-dead gorgeous-or stories from the demon's point of view that showed not anger or trickery, but sympathy, or high school teenagers who fall into witchcraft. They seemed very different to her.

"All I'm asking is that you spread your wings a little. Try and stay away from the black magic stuff." He wasn't trying to stop her from writing, but he could see that liyo was getting upset from her narrowed eyes and her crooked jaw.

"So I can't turn my story in at all?"

"No, go ahead and do that. You're a good writer-very talented-it just gets routine when I know that you're going to turn in something that deals in the same circle you've been writing in."

liyo put on a smile, but it wasn't because she was happy. "I can enter in more than one category, right?"

"Yes, you can, and because you've been doing a wonderful job keeping within the ratings system and the genre, you don't have to show me your idea to sign off on. Surprise me."

liyo nodded and walked out of the classroom. Sayoko could see liyo was in a bad mood when her smile twisted into a scowl, so didn't say anything as they headed to the Black Magic Club, still early. When they arrived, liyo unlocked the door with the key Umehito gave her because he knew he would be later than usual, lit the candelabra and went inside. Until the last bell of the school day rang, she was writing down her ideas for her new story that she was going to surprise her teacher with.

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"There was an odd fellow at Trinity

Who solved the square root of infinity.

But it gave him such fidgets

To count up the digits

That he dropped Math and took up Divinity."

Chapter 11

For the next few chapters or so, I'll be posting hilarious famous last words and funny epitaphs (gravestones). So if you don't quite understand how significant the sentences are, or what they mean... yeah. Also, my high school drama teacher said I have a "dark and quirky sense of humor", so if you don't think it's funny, it's probably not funny then. Some will be meaningful, but the others will be funny (or not).

"Death leaves a heartache no one can heal,

Love leaves a memory no one can steal." - Headstone in Ireland

...

As if Iiyo wasn't annoyed enough, the class president also came to the club room, but only to observe and to check on the clay charms, which was fine with her for the most part. He thanked them for volunteering their club room and their club time for the festival, but it didn't sound so enthusiastic. Both Umehito and Iiyo welcomed the gratitude anyway.

For the official first ten minutes, Iiyo was busy lighting candles, because there were complaints that it was too dark, and the Black Magic Club president refused to turn on the lights. She did this while listening to Umehito explain the different forms of divination. He said if they worked hard, they would be able to also use more complex divination in time for the festival, and then summarized how to read a person's fortune in the different methods. Iiyo could tell he was very excited at the possibility of having more members, and, surprisingly, he was refraining himself quite well. Maybe with this good behavior some people would actually stay, even if it was to only learn about fortune-telling. It was a start.

Umehito had been classmates with most of the volunteers since elementary school, so knew them well enough to suggest which form of divination would suit them best. Sayoko was chosen for palm reading, which made her very happy. Umehito assigned Narumi Sasa, a quiet girl with one of the top grades and was well-known for her chess-playing skills, with mahjong tiles. Soma Sakura was a very athletic girl, which surprised Iiyo that she would volunteer at all, so Umehito thought that her covering the dice and dominoes would suit her well. Joshuyo Wazuka was a very gossipy sort of girl who knew a little something about everybody, so tarot cards fit her perfectly. It turned out that she even had her own tarot deck at home that she preferred using, so it seemed that Umehito wouldn't need to instruct her as much since she already knew what she was doing. The last volunteer, and the only boy, was Minoshita Kageru. Unlike the others, he transferred into the school late, so Umehito didn't know much about him, so on a whim decided he should manage the oraculum divination-a book of questions, in which depending on the number of stars drawn, leads the questioner to the answer. It was basically a Napoleon's Book of Fate and Oraculum.

Umehito said he would be managing the scrying table, and told Iiyo that she would be managing the playing cards and the Lenormand table. She knew a little of playing cards, but hadn't heard of the Lenormand method, so immediately went to look for a book on such without much luck. At most, she could only find that Lenormand used the normal playing cards, but they had entirely different meanings from the playing card method. At a time like this, she wished she had a private computer, or a laptop. She looked back at Umehito to see that he was teaching Sasa and Sakura about their methods since dominoes and mahjong were very similar. Wazuka and Sayoko chatted mostly while Sayoko was practicing off of the other's hand, using a book Umehito recommended as reference.

Iiyo didn't know if she liked it-the club having more people in it. It was hard keeping track of where people were, and when she was trying to read, she could feel the buzzing presences moving about behind her. The chattering wasn't any problem, she hated complete silence

even more, but it made it all the more different. Overall, it was kind of lonely.

There was a sudden vibration to Iiyo's right, out of her eye line, which made her snap her body towards it. Kageru, the boy, was taking a seat right next to her with his book in hand. "Whoa, sorry. Didn't mean to scare you," he said in good humor, but Iiyo couldn't keep her analytical stare off of him. Even Umehito didn't sit directly beside her, so it was nerve-racking to her.

Even so, she tried to keep her composure. By default, she guessed she was the Vice President, though that wasn't confirmed, so should act like one. "No, no, not at all. You just surprised me. Did you need help with something?"

"Yeah. I kind of understand this, but I wanted to make sure."

To be honest, Iiyo didn't know how to use this book of fate either, but was willing to learn with him-that's what Vice Presidents were supposed to do, right? After she read the instructions a few times, and tested it out herself, she explained, "You have the person, or the querent, either ask a question, or have him or her choose a question from this list. Some questions won't be exact so choose whatever's closest, and then have the querent draw five rows of stars, telling them not to count. If the line of stars is even, put one star, if the line has an odd number of stars, place two stars-I don't think it's required to add up the digits of the number of stars on a line. Then, once you have your pattern of stars, find the question number on the graph, and line it up with the star pattern, and there's your answer. Do you think you understand?"

"Yup, thank you." After a few minutes, Kageru started smiling, as if he was holding in his laughter, and taking quick peaks at the corner of his eyes.

"What?" Iiyo asked.

When she was about to look where he was peaking, Kageru quickly whispered, "No, don't look! Just don't look." He took a few breaths to calm down. "I think the president likes you."

liyo made a confused face, looking at Umehito, and then looking back.

"Not the club president, the class president. He's been staring at you for quite a while."

"No way, you're lying." Even after saying that, liyo took out a compact mirror and placed it on the table. Once she got the angle right, she could see the class president working on clay charms, but after a while, he looked up to look at her for a few seconds before getting back to work. She snapped her mirror shut and looked at Kageru. "Thank you so much for creeping me out now." It didn't help that the candle light made the president look eerie.

Once Kageru started laughing, it was infectious, it made liyo start giggling.

Umehito looked at Sayoko and Wazuka, but it wasn't either of them giggling-not in the same way at least. He looked farther into the club room and saw that it was liyo chuckling, with Kageru sitting right next to her. He was startled that Kageru was so physically close to her, but when another round of liyo's quiet giggles started up, he thought she would be fine-if she thought he was too close she would have pushed him away. Still, he didn't like it. He didn't know why he didn't like what he was seeing, but he just knew the sinking feeling in his gut told him that he didn't like it.

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"What a pity Hell's gates are not kept by O'Flynn

The surely old dog would let nobody in." - Epigram on a stern Irish security guard

Chapter 12

"This is no time to make new enemies" - Voltaire; said this to a priest asking him to renounce Satan.

At first, Iiyō wasn't sure what to think about Kageru. Because he kept getting close, she was scared; she didn't want to shove him away, but it was uncomfortable in more than just physical ways. In the club room, the candles kept refracting against his aura, so it was hard to distinguish one color from the other, but when they first exited the club room, she could see a strong dark green-blue with a dirty red and white that looked like TV snow intermixing in patches along with a black spot focused over his chest. She knew that the green-blue was depression, and the bloody red color was anger; she knew because she and her mother were sharing those colors, but she wasn't sure about the snow and black colors. During the time she had suddenly developed this ability, she had never seen anyone with a heavy black spot in their aura. After a while, she had figured out that the black shroud over Umehito wasn't an aura. He had learned enough about black magic and had enough spiritual awareness that he had unconsciously pulled a veil over him. Kageru, however, didn't have a veil; his black spot was a part of his aura, and it honestly scared her that he had it.

Over the next week and a half, Umehito had been keeping a close eye on Kageru and Iiyō outside and inside the club room. Iiyō stayed by Umehito's side during school hours, and acted normally, but in the classes that they all had together, she kept looking over at Kageru. Sometimes, after looking at him, she would look down and start shaking, clenching and unclenching her hands. When they were in the club room, Umehito was always being asked of something, so was constantly distracted. They never had any time alone together, so they hardly talked anymore. More than anything he wanted to make sure that she was fine, but every time he asked if there was

something wrong, she always replied that there wasn't anything wrong, or that she was stressing over her family or school.

Meanwhile, during after school club hours, Iiyo and Kageru would chat, and Iiyo would practice with the playing cards. She finally figured out what the Lenormand card method was when she and Kageru went to the library to use the computer a few days before, and was currently drawing on one of the decks of playing cards to jog her memory of which card was which: a cross on the six of clubs, a book on the ten of diamonds, the symbol for Mars on the ace of hearts, and so on and so forth, from the sixth card to the ace in each suit. Iiyo was just happy that she didn't have to memorize two entire decks of fifty-two card meanings, and for the most part, it looked like she could use the card spreads interchangeably, so that was another good thing.

Over time, Kageru's aura shifted some. He was still predominantly dark green-blue, but the red became brighter and there were thin streams of turquoise. The white noise and the black spot didn't change. If anything, the white noise seemed to get thicker instead of looking watered down. It still held her concern.

"You seem to be in a better mood," Iiyo commented, drawing another symbol on a card.

"Yeah, I guess. Well, I'm having fun here," Kageru replied. "I can hardly wait for the festival." He smiled, but Iiyo only sensed it was half genuine.

Did he know?

"Hey, Fukuda-san, you OK?"

It was harder hiding her concern, both from him and Umehito, so she may as well at least ask him about it, since she didn't seem to have control of her facial muscles anymore.

Umehito had started testing the volunteers to see how far along they were. Sasa grasped the concept of the mahjong tiles quite well and even knew to have him grab another tile when the season and flower tiles came up. Sakura had the dice down, but needed to work with dominoes more. When he got to Wazuka and Sayoko's table they were a tad distracted. Wazuka had a grandmother who was a seer, so she had no problems with intermediate level tarot, and that was perfect for a high school festival. Sayoko was getting the hang of palm reading, but was complaining about the fainter lines being too hard to see or identify, but during the testing, Wazuka and Sayoko kept gossiping. Eventually, when a certain subject was brought up, he gave up trying to stay focused.

"It seems like Fukuda-chan is getting along with Minoshita-kun," Wazuka stated, much to the annoyance of Umehito.

"I noticed. I guess they would make a cute couple, but neither of them is really sociable, huh."

"Not really. Fukuda-chan is a little weird, but at least I expected that, but Minoshita-kun isn't really friendly. I heard he got kicked out of his last school for fighting some guy."

"Really?" Sayoko raised her voice in surprise. "Do you know why?"

"From what I heard, he was abusive to his girlfriend, so when she cheated on him with another guy, he flipped and fought the guy."

Sayoko's mouth fell open with her eyes wide. "Are you sure? Where did you hear this?"

Wazuka started waving her hand, putting emphasis to her story.

"Well, I was talking to one of my girl friends, and I mentioned Minoshita-kun, and she started flipping out, right? So then when I asked her what was wrong, she told me that her best friend's sister's neighbor's friend who went to Hagetaka High School told her what happened. She also said that his dad's the chief of police so got away with it due to "mishandled evidence", or something."

"Shouldn't we warn her?" Sayoko asked, looking over at the couple they were talking about. "What should we do?"

Umehito knew not to believe every rumor, after all, it was rumors that falsified black magic, but it was still enough to make him extremely worried. "We won't say anything to them."

Sayoko couldn't believe her ears. Before Kageru came into the picture, she could have sworn that Iiyo and Umehito were an item-aside from no handholding, hugging, or kissing, they looked like they were together-but when that was proven to be just close friendship behavior, she was slightly disappointed. Even so, together or not, friends wouldn't let each other get hurt, right?

"We'll keep this between us, and keep a close watch on her. If his abusive behavior stands true, there will be signs, so if and when one of us sees these signs, we'll intervene."

When Umehito came over to Iiyo's and Kageru's table to test them, Iiyo had a serious expression and she and he were discussing something in a low whisper. Umehito cleared his throat startling both of them.

"I would like to test what you've learned thus far for the Samhain festival, and give you any last-minute advice."

"Yeah, of course Nekozaawa-san," Iiyo ushered, nodding. She was hiding something.

"Hey, fellas! How about this for a headline for tomorrow's paper? 'French Fries!'" - James D. French; said this to a bunch of journalist to witness his execution via the electric chair. (I'll never look at french fries the same way again).

Chapter 13

"One last drink, please." - Jack Daniel; said just seconds before dying of blood infection from his broken toe when he kicked his safe in anger. (He could have used his name-brand whiskey to disinfect it).

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"Here you go, class president," Iiyo chirped. "It's a collection of the most Halloweenish music I could find." Tonight was the night of the festival, and she didn't want the class president's attitude to bring her good mood and excitement down.

The class president gave a sullen look and took the CD case to deliberately put it at the bottom of the pile, and then went to check on how the rest of the class was doing.

Iiyo's evil eye followed him until he was out of sight. "What a jerk!" She growled. Kageru had to be wrong; there was no way the president liked her.

"Is something the matter?" Umehito asked from directly behind, making Iiyo jump.

She glared at Nekozaawa, warning him again not to sneak up from behind, and then grunted. "The class president's being a total jerkwad again, that's all."

"Would you like to perform a small hex on him? You don't need the moonlight to perform hexes." Umehito's creepy smile appeared. She hadn't seen it in a while, probably because normal club activities had been on hold, but she replied the same as she always had.

"No. While as tempting as that sounds, let's just get through the night. I'll play my music at home. I don't need to perform a curse or a

hex or a jinx on someone like him. Besides, if I decide to hex him before the festival, it might affect tonight in a bad way."

"Very true. You never quite know how the curse would affect the surroundings. By the way, I wanted to give you something." He rummaged through his robes and pulled out a thin flip cell phone. "You mentioned that you weren't allowed to give away your number, and you weren't allowed to call anyone but your parents on your cell phone, and since tonight's a big night I thought it would come in handy. I am supposed to drive you home, after all." The conversation between Umehito and Iiyo's dad was a mysterious one. She was almost sure that her dad said something threatening because Umehito was being extra polite and tried his very best (without much success) to sound normal, refraining from occult terminologies, but they both swore that the conversation was on the pleasant side.

"Yeah, that's a good idea, thank you." Iiyo took a closer look at the charm hanging off of the cell phone and raised her eyebrows. "Is this a cat skull? Are you sure the class president didn't mind you wasting his clay?" She had a teasing smile planted on her face. The cat skull was open-mouthed with a clear red marble in it, making it look ghostly. It was better than the closed-mouth version she had imagined. It was even browned, instead of yellow or white, giving it an aged look.

"Whatever he doesn't know won't hurt him, so just make sure he doesn't see it. And this disc above the cat skull is a Solomon seal for protection from all earthly dangers." The disc was a circle within a circle with a cross within the smaller circle. At the top, there was an obtuse six-pointed star, and there were tiny Japanese kanji around the circle and on the arms of the cross. "On Halloween, I'm more afraid of people than spirits, otherwise I would have given you a seal of spiritual protection."

"That makes sense, especially from someone who watches the news every year." Iiyo checked her watch. "I have to go turn in my stories to my creative writing teacher, and then I have to go to Sayoko for a quick make-over, so I'll see you probably in a couple of hours before

it gets too dark." She looked down at the phone in her hands and looked up to him to thank him with a smile before stuffing it in her pocket, heading over to her class. The teacher said that he would be in his room later for any late submissions, and Iyo used every minute she had to get her stories typed up, illustrated for the children's book, edited, and printed out. He wasn't in his classroom, but she saw a stack of other student's stories as instructed, so she put hers on top. Before she left, she had a last minute idea. She took a sticky note, wrote "SURPRISE!" and stuck it to her horror-thriller story.

She skipped out of the classroom with a smug smile, unaware that someone had been waiting for her in the darkened adjacent hallway.

...

The night was going well so far. Even before the actual festival, a few of the talismans and cell phone charms were sold, and even a wooden beelzenef doll was bought. It was indeed going to be an exciting night. Not only was he looking forward to his own class's station, but when his and Iyo's shift ended, he was looking forward to exploring the other class' stations. While he was helping the male half of his class organize and add last-minute decorations and making sure that the stands were stable, Sayoko and Wazuka rushed up to him in a panic and started to babble over each other.

Umehito was visibly confused trying to decipher what the girls were trying to say, so Sayoko hushed Wazuka in order to speak. "Fukuda hadn't showed up for her make-over, so we left our post to look around, and when we were getting close to her writing class we heard her scream, but we couldn't find her."

Umehito's mind blanked, petrified upon hearing the news.

"And we came back here and noticed that Minoshita-kun wasn't around," Wazuka finished.

Umehito's mind raced with horrifying images, involving bruises and blood, but he couldn't show that he was panicking-not tonight. "You two keep looking, and tell the class president that Fukuda and Minoshita aren't around. Don't mention the scream or Minoshita's background yet until we're sure of the entire situation." He didn't want everyone else to panic either. "Ask around, but don't make it sound dire." Umehito didn't wait around for any affirmations and darted down the hallway towards liyo's creative writing class.

He found the teacher, but he said that he didn't see her, but she did leave her stories on his desk, chuckling at the sticky note she left. Umehito traced his steps toward the Black Magic Club room, where she would have had the dress-up but stopped at the nearest hallway. If Minoshita had been stalking her, he would have waited in this area. He hurried down the hall and called the cell phone he had given to liyo, faintly hearing the ring. He kept redialing after the third or fourth ring. Eventually, he heard the phone pick up. "Fukuda-san? Fukuda-san? Are you OK? Where are you?"

"Nekozawa-san." It wasn't liyo on the phone.

"Where is Fukuda-san, Minoshita?"

"She's... we're in the second science room." Kageru's voice shook. "I don't know what to do. She's shaking on the floor. I don't know what-."

"Just stay right there, and don't touch her," Umehito warned. Within a minute, he arrived at the second science room and slammed the door open to see liyo curled up on the floor and Kageru kneeling on the floor next to her. Kageru looked scared, but Umehito was more focused on liyo.

She was unconscious, shaking her head, her arm was rippling as if the limb was being electrocuting, and was groaning and sounded as if she was having trouble breathing.

"Go to the nurse's office and tell them that Fukuda-san is having a seizure." When Kageru didn't move, Umehito yelled, "Hurry up!" At that, Kageru bolted out of the classroom.

...

"They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance." - General John Sedgwick; if you can't predict what happened just after he said it, you're not a fan of ironic comedy. He was sniped by the enemy, trying to encourage his troops during the Civil War.

Chapter 14

Hilo. I hope everyone's winter holidays went well, along with New Years. I spent them at another person's home pet sitting a HUGE Golden Doodle. A very handsome dog, but even though poodles and golden retrievers are intelligent breeds, he wasn't too bright, but he's very loveable. I'll be looking forward to pet sitting him again soon. I had typed this chapter during the pet sitting, but I had forgotten my quotebook, and I just didn't want to publish this without them, their like my signature here on FFNet.

"Pardon me, sir. I did not do it on purpose." - Queen Marie Antoinette when she "accidentally" stepped on the foot of her executioner as she went to the guillotine.

...

liyo was currently resting on one of the beds, completely still except for the deep breathing. She wasn't shaking, and her arm wasn't rippling anymore. Umehito had Kageru go tell the class president of the situation, just so he could calm down from his worries and his anger alone. After the nurses told him that she would be fine, he felt better, but his hands wouldn't stop fidgeting, or squeezing the cell phone he had given her. As soon as the class president heard of the news, they rushed over to the infirmary where Umehito re-explain the situation to get the president to calm down, telling him that she needed to rest (assuming that it was a seizure). It was getting closer to their shift for the festival, so of course the class president would be panicking. Umehito had to assure him several times that he and Kageru would be at their tables by the time their shift started, before the class president finally left, leaving him and Kageru the only conscious ones in the room.

Umehito didn't pull off his hood or bother to look at him, away from liyo. "What happened? Tell me every detail." His seething tone

scared Kageru, who wasn't ignorant about Umehito's favorite hobbies.

"I needed to talk to her, and knew she would be coming from her writing class at some point, so I waited around. When I saw her, I grabbed her hand, trying to surprise her, it being Halloween and all." Umehito's suspicions were proven. "I had no idea she would scream that loud." Kageru's hand clenched. "She wandered down the hall, telling me to stay away, but she looked like she was in pain, and she was having trouble breathing. I tried to get her to walk in the direction of the infirmary, but she wouldn't have it, and then she collapsed in the science room and started shaking. I called her name, but she didn't respond. That's when you called."

The boy in black didn't say anything for a while, measuring Kageru's reliability. It was obvious that Kageru was oblivious of Iiyo's reluctance of physical contact, and knew nothing of how it caused physical pain. If he had been lying, he would have left the part out about him touching her, he knew, but he was still mad, mostly because Iiyo had been hurt.

Iiyo's closed eyes started darting around, and her brows furrowed together. Her hands grasped her blankets, and she started groaning, as if in pain.

Kageru was about to reach for her hand, but Umehito forced it away before any contact was made. "Don't touch her!" He made sure to stand between the bed and Kageru.

"What is wrong with you?" Kageru growled. "Aren't *friends* supposed to help each other? You're her *friend*, aren't you?"

"And friends don't hurt each other. If you touch her, you are hurting her," Umehito quipped. "Don't touch her."

"Why the hell not?"

"It's not my business to tell you. Just know that physical contact puts her under a grand amount of torture."

"What? 'Physical con-.'" That's when Kageru realized his mistake, his surprise overtaking his face. "When I grabbed her hand...?"

"Yes. That's what caused her attack." He sat back down in his stool when Kageru clearly got the message.

Kageru dragged a stool over to sit a few feet away from the other. "Why?"

"I don't know. It never seemed to hinder her, so I never felt the need to ask." Not immediately anyway. He had been trying to respect the boundaries Iiyo had given him, but the mystery had been gnawing at him. Out of the corner of his eye, in between the tresses of his wig, he saw Kageru pop a couple of pills, and take a swig from his water bottle. When Kageru looked back, catching Umehito, Umehito looked away.

"Fukuda-san knew. I'm not sure how she knew, but she knew. That was one of the things I wanted to talk to her about." Kageru cleared his throat, and casually told Umehito. It wasn't as if it was a big secret, it was just something he didn't particularly like making a conversation about. "Since I was little my chest would occasionally hurt, but since it would always go away, I didn't think anything of it. Then, last year, it started hurting especially bad, for longer periods of time. I finally told my parents, but all the doctors could say was that it was pretty bad. They said while I wouldn't need surgery immediately, that it's something I can live with, there are some things I won't be able to do because of it, and even if I'm careful, there is a possibility that I could die from it. What made it worse was that my girlfriend kept urging me to just go through with the surgery and get it over with, and when I wouldn't make up my mind fast enough, she dumped me for someone with a jockstrap for a brain."

"And you got in a fight with him?" Umehito slipped.

Kageru blinked. "Yeah, he kept mocking me for not being man enough. How did you know about that?"

"Er, so Fukuda-san knew you were sick?" Umehito tried his luck at changing the subject.

"Yeah. It was weird. She asked me about it when I felt like I was at one of my lowest points. We talked about it, and I finally decided to go through with the surgery. In fact, I'm getting my surgery tomorrow, so I wouldn't be able to stay at school in case I would end up needing multiple surgeries, which is why it was urgent that I talk to her tonight."

And thus, all of the puzzle pieces were in place. Kageru wasn't abusive; he wasn't manipulating her, and didn't mean to hurt her at all. Wazuka's story was wrong in the presumptuous way. "I apologize, Minoshita-san. I shall cancel out the curse I had placed upon you immediately."

Kageru became appalled. "What?"

"You should thank Fukuda-san when she wakes up. If it wasn't for her overwhelming desire for your safety, and for her to see that safety with her own eyes, you would have been forcibly removed from the school, and would have never be heard from again. It must have been her strong feelings that halted the curse."

Kageru thought best to not question what "forcibly removed" would have meant, and just counted himself lucky it didn't happen.

"Hmm, interesting," Umehito muttered to himself, curling a pale hand over his chin, smiling, and creeping Kageru out. Iiyo had never performed any sort of spell, so her feelings must have been especially strong to counter a curse from such an experienced practitioner. She definitely had promise.

As if the devil heard his thoughts, Iiyo sat up rubbing her eyes and her temple. "Whoa, that wasn't at all fun," she uttered. She had a

slight headache, but other than that, seemed reasonably OK.

"Fukuda-san, are you alright?" Kageru and Umehito had asked simultaneously, standing up.

liyo was surprised to see them both standing right next to the bed she was sitting on. "Uh, yeah, I'm OK. What's up with you two? You look really... tense."

Umehito smiled, knowing that liyo would be alright. "I'll go let the class president know that you're awake. Take your time; I won't expect for you to be at your table immediately, so it's perfectly fine if you're late." He handed liyo back the phone he lent her. "Text me when you're ready, and I'll come back to escort you. In the meantime, I think Minoshita-san had something to tell you?" Umehito stood up and nodded to Kageru before taking his leave. He had finally no need to be worried. For tonight, at least.

...

"I can't sleep." - said by J. M. Barrie, and if not being able to sleep before he died wasn't enough of a pun, he's also the author of *Peter Pan* .

Chapter 15

Hilo! This is going to be longer because I just couldn't fit something within a span of 1300 words, so yay for that. There's probably only going to be one more chapter of the festival, and then I can move on and continue the normal school year. Hope you enjoy!

"Dammit... . Don't you dare ask God to help me." - Joan Crawford to her housekeeper who began to pray aloud.

...

As promised, Nekozaawa came to escort Iiyo back to her station, which was conveniently right next to his. No one really wanted to try out his black scrying mirror, so he had plenty of time in between to go fetch her. He was pleasantly surprised to see that Iiyo was wearing the Black Magic Club robe for the first time, and had let her shoulder-length black hair out of her usual tail, with sections softly framing her face. To get into the spirit of Samhain, she also dusted some orange make-up on the apple of her cheeks, and put on black lipstick along with black eyeliner. It definitely brought a smile to his face seeing her. "Shall we?"

"Yes," Iiyo stated with a wide smile. She still had a slight headache, but it wasn't enough to hinder her concentration, or her good mood. It was an exciting night, but Iiyo was ultimately happy to hear that Kageru decided to go with the surgery and was hopeful that it would go well, but was also sad to think that he might not be around anymore, for the rest of the school year at least anyway. Iiyo was going to make the best of the festival night.

Their class's section was set up with each table lined up forming a half-circle. The people who volunteered to devote their time to divination would sit at one of the tables toward the center of the arc, and everyone else would sell the charms, Solomon Seals, and sigils at the two ends. Naturally, Nekozaawa's table was at the very center,

liyo was to his left with Kageru, and then Sasa, the girl with the mahjong tiles. To the right of Nekozaawa was Sayoko as a palm reader, Sakura with dominoes and dice, and then Wazuka with her tarot cards. Behind them all was a stereo to play the mood music, but so far, liyo wasn't impressed with it; it was playing creepy music with shrilling violins and the chimes of xylophones, sure, but it didn't have enough attitude or beat. Unfortunately, her disc was deliberately going to be played last.

Of course when she was about to sit down, twenty minutes late, the class president didn't like it and chewed her out. "We don't have time for your mistakes, so either be more careful or don't show up at all," he stated before huffing toward his station selling the clay charms. Even though she had expected it, casting a hex was sounding more and more pleasant by the second to liyo, but she couldn't, not on the festival night anyway. It was frustrating times like those that liyo wished that she could just have one thing her way.

Almost like magic, she recognized a song coming out of the stereo playing subtly behind all the diviners. liyo found it extremely hard to believe that anyone of her classmates, Nekozaawa included, would even know who was currently playing, let alone have it on a mix CD. Curiously, she looked behind her towards the stereo, to make sure it wasn't just her mind playing tricks, and it was indeed playing the song she was thinking of.

"This is your CD, right?" Kageru asked with a wide smirk.

liyo couldn't help but smirk back, also trying to hold back her guffaws so the class president wouldn't have suspected their trickery. She nodded out her thanks, slowly calming down before her first customer.

As she was reading her playing cards, she realized that she had slightly forgotten some of the card meanings, so she had to guess and cheat a little by reading the person's aura. Nekozaawa had advised that if they forgot a meaning, then subtly skip it, distract them, or make their best guess, so for the most part it was fine as

long as they weren't guaranteeing a set future or outright lying. In between customers, she reviewed her flashcards so she wouldn't have to guess or cheat as much.

Kageru's sect was as easy as breaking open a fortune cookie, but he made the most of it by explaining to the questioner the different meanings their answer could possibly have. His table wasn't as popular as tarot or palm reading, but lots of people wanted to try out this Book of Fate.

Nekozawa, on the other hand, was probably the least popular of the tables. He didn't particularly mind, but it was starting to feel similar to his failed recruiting methods. "Maybe you should have chosen a crystal ball instead of a mirror," Iiyo uttered, trying to lift his spirits a little.

"Maybe. I just wanted to try something different this year."

At that point, there was a rush of customers because the Ouran middle school ninth graders decided to drop by. One in particular stood out to Iiyo, and it wasn't just because he was blond, making him an obvious foreigner. Instinctively, Iiyo called to him, "Excuse me?" She waved her hand to get his attention. When he looked over, she smiled and waved him over.

He, along with another boy with dark hair and glasses, came over. "Hello, miss. You did call for me, right?" The foreigner had a smile, enjoying being called out to specifically.

Iiyo nodded with a wide toothy smile. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help but notice that you look a little detached, like you're missing something, or someone, badly."

His joyous expression faltered a bit, before quickly fixing it back in place. "Sure. I'm pretty new to Japan, so I miss home very much."

"Well, maybe I can help you find some answers, or some sort of solution to your problem."

"Solution? Didn't you just say I was just missing home?"

"But it's more than that, yes? You have enough money, so could go back if you wanted to, but for some reason, you can't, right?" liyo fixed him with an all-knowing gaze. She in fact couldn't tell much based on his aura alone, except that simply missing something and fearing something were two different color spectrums. "I won't guarantee that my cards will give you the positive answers, but maybe they'll shed a little light. So, how about it?"

"Tamaki, let's move on. This is obviously a scam," the boy with glasses stated with an annoyed sigh.

"I'm not trying to scam anybody. Why not try it for yourself, just for curiosity's sake. Maybe you'll finally gain a foothold out of the pit you're in." His aura, unlike the blond, had a somewhat murky appearance, in red, blue and green. Even though he had brighter color patches, he was still depressed and worried about some things. As to what it was precisely, she didn't have a clue, but the boy's eyes widened. She had touched a nerve.

The blonde's smile widened. "Alright, I'll try it out. Just for curiosity's sake. Kyouya, why don't you try after me?"

"No thank you," Kyouya said in a dignified manner.

liyo beamed back at him, holding out the box for payment, and replied, "Now, would you like the normal 53-playing card method, or the Lenormand method with only 36 of the playing cards?" On the box were the prices for either method.

He hummed for a second. "I'll go with the latter."

liyo nodded back, and stated her set of instructions. "Please shuffle the cards however you'd like, as many times as you like, and cut with your left hand."

Nekozawa stared in awe. She had instinctively knew what was bothering a mere stranger? Maybe the foreigner had missed home, but even he wouldn't have suspected that the blond was somehow being forced to stay. In fear that she was merely bluffing, he stayed quiet and discreetly observed. He thought back on his and Kageru's conversation; how she just knew that he wasn't well, and knew that it was specifically the chest area.

One by one, liyo flipped the cards in three rows with three cards per row for a nine card spread. liyo's eyebrows rose as she looked at the set-up. The exact placement of the cards were the ten of clubs (The Bear), the ten of hearts (The Dog), the Ace of clubs (The Ring), then the Jack of clubs (The Whip), the nine of clubs (The Fox), the Ace of hearts (The Man/Gentleman), and for the last row was the six of spades (The [High] Tower), seven of diamonds (The Bird[s]), and the Ace of spades (The Woman/Lady). The top three cards represented the past, the middle row, the present, and the bottom row, the future, but what intrigued her was that the last column was all Aces, and if she remembered correctly of what each card represented, it would definitely be something to be happy about.

"Well this has to be the most interesting spread I've gotten all night." Aside from the three Aces, the spread was complicated. "Starting from the top row, the past, starting with the tens, you've had to endure someone else's power, but because of it, you've made a very reliable and trustworthy friend. The ace of clubs represents a serious partnership, both as friends and probably will be business partners." liyo liked the expression she was seeing from Tamaki because it meant that so far, her reading was for the most part correct.

"Currently you're suffering from conflicts and arguments. Since the ten is over the Jack, I'm assuming whoever the ten is, is who you're having problems with." Tamaki nodded, so she continued. "Be careful. There's already some trickery going on, as pointed out by this nine of clubs, which is at the center of the strife you're experiencing, and probably has some connection with a man, which is all that the Ace of hearts represents."

"I'm not quite so sure about that part," Tamaki humorously countered. "I am arguing with my father a lot, but he's not the source of it, I'm sure."

liyo looked back down at the cards, and realized he was right. "This man, your father, while he is connected, you're right, he's not the source of your frustrations. If we look diagonally, the ten of clubs, the nine of clubs, and then the Ace of spades, it points out that the source is actually a woman, yes?"

Tamaki hesitated to speak, apparently a correct prediction, but Kyouya spoke for him, "You look like you just covered your mistake."

"I'm only human, I can make mistakes. It's still his choice whether to believe my reading or not. Continuing on, this last row represents what might come, in other words, the future. Since this six of spades is underneath the ten and Jack of clubs, there'll be some legal decisions made concerning you and this person that's been calling the shots, the woman. After the appropriate decisions have been made, then you can communicate more clearly what you want in life whether it's going back home, your business, or even showing your true feelings for a person, probably a woman, as pointed out again by the Ace of spades."

"So, my troubles will be resolved? I will see my mother soon?" Tamaki eagerly asked.

liyo hesitated, but was more confident in the societal laws than her card reading skills. Once he turns eighteen, he would be able to do whatever he wanted, right? "Most likely," liyo settled for a neutral answer. "There are two more things you should know. This good friend of yours, The Dog," liyo pointed to the ten of hearts, "will be your ultimate ally. He'll make a huge impact in detecting the treachery that is at the heart of this reading, probably using his excellent communicative skills with his many sources."

Tamaki laughed at Kyouya, mainly because of "The Dog" aspect, but had agreed that Kyouya definitely had many sources and

communicative skills.

"The last thing I would like to point out is this last column, which has intrigued me from the beginning of this reading."

"Yeah, they're all aces. What are the odds of that happening?"

"Probably very rare, but it looks like a clear reading. To reiterate, the Ace of clubs, The Ring, represents a union of all sorts, and the Ace of hearts and spades are The Man and The Lady. They're neutral cards and mean exactly how their names sound, a man and woman."

"Are you saying that he might actually find a woman that'll marry him?" Kyouya questioned incredulously.

liyo spat out a chuckle.

"Is that true?" Tamaki eagerly inquired.

"Either that, or you'll find a very close female business partner, or be reunited with your mother," liyo answered.

Tamaki immediately had stars in his eyes at the possibility of the future.

"If you want, you could try all of the other divination tables and see if you'll receive further clarity, or ideas on how to resolve your situation."

"Yes, I shall definitely do that!" Tamaki grabbed Kyouya's hand and dragged him to the table, intending to start from end to end.

Nekozawa scooted closer to liyo with a wide grin. "That was a very impressive read, Fukuda-san. You should record that."

"So you agree with my interpretation? I was kind of unsure about some things."

"Your reading bounced around, but you still got the message across to the querent, and that's all that really matters. Seriously, write it down and keep it."

liyo nodded and got out her journal to write the spread down before another customer arrived.

...

In case anyone's wondering, not that it especially matters, but I have a new favorite band I found and listening to it really helped with writing these Samhain festival chapters. Creature Feature. How fitting, right? So far "Buried Alive", "A Gorey Demise", and "Such Horrible Things" are my top three favorite songs, but they do have a few songs that are fitting for monster and Halloween themes like "Mommy's Little monsters" and "Aim for the Head."

"I am perplexed. Satan get out!" - Aleister Crowley, a famous occultist heavily involved in a form of Satanism.

Chapter 16

I'm just letting you know now that I'm going to be moving out of state soon (like in a month) so updates will be slow for probably twice that long. Be patient.

"It's stopped." - Joseph Henry Green, upon checking his own pulse.

...

After liyo's reading with the blond foreigner, just like he had said, Tamaki had gone to every table as liyo had hoped. Umehito finally received a querent who was actually excited about the reading, but it was probably because Tamaki hadn't heard of the rumors about Nekozawa Umehito yet. liyo wasn't about to ruin Umehito's enjoyment though. In addition, that was a surprise for liyo, Tamaki was quite popular, so it meant that their class' section got more business quite suddenly, so, unfortunately, she was so busy with her readings that she couldn't observe Umehito's readings with the blond, or with anyone else brave, or oblivious, enough to try it.

Just as the crowd was finally dying down, it was liyo's and Umehito's turn for a shift break to explore the other class' stations, and they were lucky because they got the last shift, so didn't have to worry about divination for the rest of the night, but they did have to come back to help clean up.

liyo stuck to Umehito's side because even though it was a festival, people seemed to be still quite aware of the occult president's presence, and gave him plenty of room. She loved the dainty domino masks and looking at the other shops, but didn't buy anything. Her dad had gotten a raise along with his promotion, but due to the moving, they were still low on money, otherwise she would have bought a white masque decorated with black floral lace, outlined with silver gems, and adorned with black feathers on the upper corners.

The only other station that was customer-involved besides their class was the haunted hallway, which had been narrowed with prop walls from the theater club, painted with a setting inspired by horror movies galore, complete with a fog machine and spooky sound effects. Unfortunately, the theater club didn't seem to like them. They didn't like liyo because every time they had a member try and scare the pair, she sensed their presence and merely looked at them, waved and said greeted them, or said, "I see you." The only time she got relatively nervous was when one of the members ignored her greeting and came too close for her liking. liyo didn't once get startled though like the theater club wanted. Umehito didn't get scared easily either, and was more interested in criticizing the lack of research on the symbols used to make the setting creepy. He even told one of the theater club members that came out to scare them to tell their president that if they want accurate occult facts that they could come to the Black Magic Club any time. After they exited the haunted hallway, they both noticed glares sent their way and decided to see how their class was doing since it was almost time to clean up anyway.

liyo got to say her good nights to Sayoko and Wazuka along with Kageru. She could see he was nervous about the surgery, but could tell that he wanted to, and was finally ready for it. Then it was time to call it a night as Umehito escorted liyo to his family's car where liyo silently recognized the bald butler as he opened the door for them. She smiled at the giant and got in the car, moving down a couple seats over to give Umehito room.

"Wow that was more fun than I had expected. We should definitely do fortune-telling next year! Hopefully, we'll have more members by then. By the way, thank you, again, for giving me a ride home," liyo said. Her smile didn't leave her face-if anything, it got wider as she relished the new memories. Despite the painful start, it was the most satisfying night she could remember having.

"You're most welcome, Fukuda-san. It was, very much indeed, an exciting night," Umehito replied with an equally wide grin. "Are you

sure you're well? You still look a little pale." Not that the make-up helped. If liyo wasn't pale, the orange dust and the black lips and eyeliner in comparison was certainly creating that illusion.

"For the umpteenth time, I'm fine. I had a little headache before, but it's gone now. The headache has been gone for hours now."

"I apologize." His smile shrunk, remembering. "When Minoshita picked up your phone, and seeing you unconscious on the floor... I got scared. I was frightened out of my wits, to be more precise."

liyo merely observed this new side of her friend. He had never showed so much upset before. Umehito had his body slightly turned away from her, with his face aiming downwards, making his hair hide his eyes. She could also see his puppet's hands rubbing the side of its head, as if in great despair, and, with his unoccupied hand, he clenched at his robe. liyo didn't quite know what to say. It wasn't as if she could have predicted Kageru would plan to surprise her and grab her hand. "I'm sorry," she stated. It was the only thing she could think of saying that was appropriate, even if she didn't have anything to apologize for. "If I could change it, I would have done so a long time ago."

Umehito turned back to her, his smile still there. "Not being able to touch, that must be very hard to live with. I believe you, but maybe there's still a chance that it could change."

liyo chuckled. "I hope so."

"If I didn't have to, I wouldn't ask this, but, since tonight happened, I feel like I have to in order to keep you... safe. You won't tell me if I don't ask, so forgive me if it's something you don't wish to talk about, or share with me, but, why is it exactly that touching hurts you?"

She groaned. It was definitely not something she wanted to talk about, especially since she couldn't see a way to "cure" her of whatever ailment she had, so talking about it would be pointless, but she had noticed that he hadn't asked although he really had wanted

to. All the divination books, concerned expressions, and the worry he had shown in the nurse's office was a dead giveaway. He did deserve some answers for the amount of patience he had given. Iiyo took a breath. "Have you heard of an NDE?"

He shook his head, no.

"It stands for 'Near Death Experience'. There was a fire less than a year before I moved here, and I was caught up in it. The firemen rescued me, but I had inhaled too much smoke. I wasn't breathing, and as far as they could tell, I didn't have a pulse either. I still wasn't... 'alive' by the time I reached the hospital, but one of the paramedics had urged to keep trying, so they did and eventually resuscitated me back to life. When I woke up, my mom and I tried to hug me, and..." A sudden sob interrupted Iiyo. Remembering that her body felt like it was on fire and her lungs were filling with smoke was horrible, but the hurt look on her mom's face practically killed her when she had to push her away. She thought her mother still hadn't recovered from that, even though that was over a year ago.

"That's when you found out that touching causes you pain?"

Iiyo nodded, wiping any tears from her eyes. "Along with that, I started being able to feel when people got close and started seeing colors."

"Colors'? Please, explain."

"I didn't know what they were at first; I just figured out that they changed when the person's mood changed."

Umehito's eyes widened as much as his grin did. "You mean you can see auras? Is that how you figured out Minoshita-san was sick, and that Tamaki fellow seemed to be forced to stay in Japan?"

Iiyo's cheeks darkened in a surprised blush. "Yeah, except yours. All I can see of your aura is this black mist, probably because of your

awareness of the supernatural, and somehow learned how to hide yourself from me. I can't feel your presence either."

"Really? Huh. I don't think I've been doing anything special; although I'm not exactly forthcoming with everything either. I'll have to think upon that a whi-."

Umehito stopped his sentenced and merely stared ahead of him. It started to scare liyo to the point where she wished she could read minds; however, knowing that her aura-seeing powers didn't work on him, mind-reading might not have worked either. "What is it?" She timidly asked, almost afraid of knowing what he was thinking.

"If I'm somehow negating your abilities-seeing auras and feeling physical presences-do you think I would be able to touch you?"

The notion both terrified and exhilarated liyo. If she could touch Umehito, then there really might have been a chance to change things, but if the pain continued, her heart would hurt just as much as the rest of her body. Was it worth taking the chance to try?

Umehito took out a hand, a sign of giving her the free will of choosing what to do.

Her hand shook as she hovered her hand over his, revealing her fear and uneasiness. When she finally found her resolution, she grazed her middle digit against his, only to be met with a huge spark of hot pain, forcing her to tuck her hand to her chest as she bent over her knees. liyo's yelp startled Umehito along with the driver.

"Master Umehito, should I pull over?"

"No, no," liyo grimaced, "I'm fine." Although it wasn't at all convincing, Umehito told his butler to keep driving.

"I'm sorry, Fukuda-san." Umehito really thought that he would be an exception, and was disappointed that he had hurt her instead. He wasn't even sure if he could place a hand on her back to comfort her.

...

"Tomorrow I shall no longer be here." - Nostradamus, and you know what? He was right!

Chapter 17

"Put out the bloody cigarette!" - Said by Saki to a fellow officer while in a trench during WWI, fearing that the smoke would give away their positions. He was shot by a German sniper who had heard the remark.

Once Iiyo and Umehito arrived back to school after All Hallows Eve, they went back to what they had. A mutual friendship with a mutual intellectual curiosity of the occult and other strange oddities. With no touching. Iiyo was still mildly disappointed about still not being able to touch even one person, even if that one person was the oddball, Umehito, but she had been used to it. She had over a year to get used to it. On the other hand, she still had her mother to deal with.

Meanwhile, Umehito had been doing a research project of his own: finding out how and why physical touch hurts Iiyo. He had looked up aftereffects of NDE and found stories of people who were able to see glimmers of auras and able to see spirits, but it all seemed like sugar-coated fairy tales. They didn't seem to have any bad side effects, and most of them have claimed them to be wonderful gifts to have and that they were doubly blessed. He knew he wouldn't find the answers he was looking for this way. Instead, he began thinking of how he's been hiding himself from her. She couldn't see his aura, nor feel his "presence" but she still hurt when they touched. What was he doing that most other people weren't doing? Unfortunately, that was one question with hundreds of answers.

Surprisingly, after Halloween, a few of the divination volunteers had signed up for the Black Magic Club, but only as ghost members until next year. So while Umehito was happy that he had temporary members, he was disappointed that he didn't gain permanent members. Iiyo was partly glad for the additional members, but equally glad for the lack of daily additional presences.

liyo should have been happy-ecstatic, even-to hear that her story won first place. No, not her story in the children's book category, which won a respectable third place, but the other one. The story she wrote only in order to piss off her teacher who had told her to lay off the occult and black magic.

It didn't make him angry that the story had started off with a psycho-killer murdering the protagonist's friends and family, and then turned into the protagonist being the psycho-killer who went off her medication after her memories of the torture and abuse that she had suffered through by her parents, but then through bad therapy turned it into an episode of the Satanic Panic, had resurfaced and made her snap. It heavily referred to what she had been studying: the occult, which her teacher had specifically said to stay away from. Instead of her teacher just putting his stamp on it and passing it on to the contest, like he had done with the rest of her stories she had written over the course of the school year, he had sent his letter of recommendation, something he did to only exceptional stories he had read, along with her story to the contest. A week after the Halloween weekend, he had announced the winners with a smile and a round of applause.

liyo could do nothing, but rest her head on her arm and silently sulk.

"liyo?" Umehito cautiously sat down next to her in class the next morning. She had been glaring ahead of her all throughout first period, and had been glaring into her books during club hours the day before. The poor student who sat in front of her was scared out of his wits. "Are you feeling well? I heard your story won. That's usually an exciting event."

liyo inhaled through her nose, and exhaled through the same way, but it didn't make her feel better. "That story was a joke, and I only wrote it to make the teacher mad." All year, she had consistently earned third or second place, which she was fine with for one real reason: the first place winners had their picture taken by reporters for the small article. Her name was risky enough, but a picture? Just the thought made her jumpy. If she declined her winning status in the

contest, her scholarship could be in jeopardy. Trying to piss off the teacher had drastically backfired.

Umehito didn't need to be able to see auras in order to tell that Iiyo was piqued, so he tried to change the subject. "You look nice today." He was being truthful. Instead of turtlenecks or her other black clothes with long sleeves, she wore a short sleeved yellow wrap with purple and blue floral designs, a long white skirt that brushed her ankles, and gold flats. The only thing she had to cover a part of her arms were her deep purple fingerless gloves that only reached the middle of her forearm. Her mother had insisted that she couldn't wear all black, and because Iiyo's wardrobe had drastically changed during the past couple of years, Iiyo had to borrow her mother's clothes. She didn't feel safe in these clothes which put her even more on edge than usual.

Her mother doting on her fashion trend for the single day was the first time that Iiyo's mother had began speaking to her again, and seemed genuinely excited that she had won despite the risk.

It seemed to mean that her mother had finally stopped her silent treatment, but they still had a hard time keeping eye contact. The occult was obviously still something that couldn't be talked about in the apartment, and Iiyo continued to wonder if she should keep bringing books home from the club. She wasn't worried about the possibility of her mother being a book-burner, but maybe if she didn't bring the books home, their relationship would start to heal more. It would mean hiding a part of herself again though, and that was the one thing she didn't want to do. "Thanks," Iiyo grumbled. "I mean it, thank you for the compliment for today. I know I'm in a sour mood."

"Do you not like having your picture taken? Is it because you believe that they suck out your soul?"

"No. And I definitely don't believe in that. I just don't want my picture in the article, that's all."

"Is it because you don't want that person to find you?"

Honestly, liyo had thought that Umehito had forgotten about that conversation, and not to mention that she had even forgotten she had told him that someone was probably looking for her. "Yeah. The point of us moving here was to move away from him and to move on, like nothing ever happened, but I still can't help but worry that it will happen all over again."

Umehito felt a familiar pang of not knowing how to comfort his friend. In the car, he didn't realize how much touching was a necessity of socializing and living with other people. What did it feel like to not be able to touch anyone for over a year? Before Umehito could say anything, the class president stood up to the classroom, "Everyone, I have an announcement about the Halloween festival. The tallies have been counted up."

liyo was thankful for a distraction, even if that meant focusing on a person she did not like. After the festival, he had, for the most part, completely ignored her, and she couldn't for the life of her figure it out. Even his aura didn't give her any hints.

"The honor for the Most Popular Class of the First Year Students goes to Class 1-B." The class erupts with cheers and talk. "The honor for the Most Popular Class of the School goes to 3-A for their Haunted Hallway." liyo and Umehito snicker in the back corner. "The honor for the Richest First Year Class goes to 1-B." The class cheers again, and even the class president expresses a cheeky grin. "The honor for the Richest Class in the School goes to... ," the president's face turns white, and liyo sees utter dread in his aura, "2-A for their Masque Shop." Not even the awing of the class could match the defeat and depression showing in the class president's aura, which is weird because no one should be feeling that much negativity from just a festival.

Later on, at lunch, liyo and Umehito walk towards the front of the school to meet up with the reporters, who are just school students from the Newspaper club, but their newspaper gets circulated to anyone who wishes to buy them. liyo was vehemently looking forward to pulling on her club's cloak just to finally be able to cover

herself up, but couldn't because if her mother saw one out of place wrinkle, she was afraid of getting a lecture about it later.

"Hey, wait! Hold on, Fukuda-san!"

Iiyo and Umehito looked behind them to see the class president jogging toward them.

When he caught up, he looked around to make sure that no one was in the area.

He looked between her and Umehito. "Could he have a minute?" he asked toward Umehito.

Iiyo shrugged her shoulders. "I'll be nearby," he said, pointedly not stating that he would be keeping Iiyo within his sight and that if the president had done anything to harm Iiyo, he would curse him into oblivion.

"What's up?" Iiyo asks with a raised brow. His aura showed intense irritation.

"Fukuda-san, please go on a date with me!"

"This side's done. Turn me over and have a bite." - Lawrence of Rome/Saint Lorenzo. His execution was a grill big enough for a human, so he was barbecued to death. His last words are both the first and most accurate instance that "Bite me" was used as a comeback.