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# When the Clock Strikes Z

2



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## Prologue: New BeginningZ

There I was, in a dimly lit room, plunging into the final preparations. It wasn't anything too exciting—just me going over a checklist. High-level scientific concepts were well above my pay grade. I just did as I was told.

"Everything's in order."

*"Good work,"* replied the AI on the other side of the screen.

Raven was a character once tasked with assisting *Field Battle's* many players. Back then, Raven hadn't been anywhere near advanced enough to qualify as a true AI. She'd been nothing more than a kids' plaything who could, at best, pick out a contextually appropriate, automated response. The Raven in the miniature display, however, was smart enough to respond to my muttering with kind words.

*As expected of an AI made by the one and only Shiiko Katsura.*

Granted, Shiiko'd had a preexisting sample to go off of, but to create something this impressive with limited time and resources was a monumental feat made possible only by her exceptional talent.

Also, there was a good reason for why this AI had the original Raven's voice and appearance—apparently, having a prebuilt receptacle at the send-off point would boost our chances of success and use up less data, or something along those lines.

"Off you go now," I said, rolling my aching shoulders. "You've got a big job ahead of you. Make it count."

Raven nodded. *"I will."*

"And the password?"

*"Survive, and humanity may flourish once again."*

"Perfect." Smiling, I hit the return key.

Raven froze, and a progress window that read "Transferring data..." popped

up on the OLED display.

That was all there was to it. No drama, no excitement, nothing.

The progress bar slowly filled up. I idly watched it fill all the way... or at least, that had been the plan.

From outside of the abandoned building I was holed up in, I could hear some sort of rubble come crashing down. Thanks to my extraordinary instincts, honed through countless experiences, I already knew...

It was *them*.

“Give me a break...”

*I just finished the job of a lifetime. Lemme savor the moment a little bit, will ya?*

I grabbed the Barrett M82A1 resting against the wall. It had originally been intended to be a bolt-action sniper rifle, and it showed. The gun had a long barrel, small magazine size, and an unwieldy frame, making it unfit for CQB and generally just annoying to use. I'd have thrown it away if it weren't for the fact that it was the only gun I had on hand that could take those bastards down in one shot with its .50 BMG cartridges.

“Well then.”

*There's a lot I still don't fully understand, but right now, all I have to do is wait for some results. It's a real gamble, but it's a gamble worth taking.*

I sighed, slinging my backpack full of homemade Molotovs over my shoulders.

Humanlike figures passed through the shimmering veil of heat, the midsummer sun shining down on them. I couldn't quite make them out because of the glare, but I knew they were anything but human.

“The happiest of happy endings is in reach. No backing out now,” I muttered, pulling on the Barrett's reload handle.

# Chapter 1: High HopeZ

The sea was calm and the sun was mild as our inflatable boat glided swiftly across the water, its engine humming quietly in the rear.

*Almost warm enough to swim in.*

I pulled my hand out of the water and took a deep breath of the salty sea air. Unlike the polluted, garbage-ridden water around the harbor, the seawater here smelled crisp and clean. It was also crystal clear, judging from the handful I had scooped up.

Nothing but peace and quiet. The sea was the same as always.

Sure, there might be occasional storms at sea, or the water up north might freeze here and there, but that was just the natural order of things. Fundamentally speaking, nothing out here had changed. Unlike on the mainland, there wasn't much to lose.

"I feel safer out here than I did back there. Fancy that," I muttered with a half smile.

No mutilated corpses to sully the eyes. No dreary groaning to defile the ears.

Most postapocalyptic settings in movies, anime, novels, manga, games, and virtually any other medium tended to depict a doomsday scenario where all the seas had dried up.

*Good thing that isn't happening anytime soon.*

We were well past the point of environmental destruction, let alone nuclear war.

*Peace at last... but is it meaningful if there's no one around to enjoy it? Who knows.*

*Hiroaki Dewa here. Seventeen, high school dropout, former recluse and hardcore VRFPS gamer currently serving as a guerilla soldier... or something like that. Actually, what's the point of introductions now that there's no one to*

*introduce myself to? What with the collapse of human civilization and all.*

“Yo, Otoha.” I turned to face my fellow passenger, who was sitting next to the engine. “Can zombies swim?”

“It depends,” she replied flatly.

Otoha had black, shoulder-length hair cut in a... what’s that again? A bob? Sure, that must’ve been it. Her big, round eyes were offset by a set of red-framed glasses.

She was quite pretty, but it was hard to savor this particular quality with her aloof manner, nonexistent makeup, and deadpan expression always getting in the way. Unfortunately, she cared little about how she looked to other people.

*Otoha Judou, also seventeen. She’s my partner, my lifesaver, and an expert in all aspects of lumbering corpses—a.k.a. zombies. In short, she’s a weirdo.*

*In her younger years, she developed a worryingly fervent fondness for zombies, which inspired her to amass a treasure trove of zombie-related knowledge. The other day, I was like, “How many zombie movies have you seen?” Didn’t mean anything by it. Had no idea she was going to list over a hundred in chronological order, from the first feature-length zombie film *White Zombie* and cult classics such as *Night of the Living Dead* all the way up to modern stuff like *Kabaneri of the Iron Fortress*.*

*I shouldn’t rag on her too hard, though; she saved my life, after all. The fact that I’m still alive and kicking in this zombie-infested world of ours is all thanks to Otoha. I don’t really show it, since that’d probably make it weird, but I have a lot of respect for her and I’m deeply grateful for all that she’s done for me.*

“The ones in the *House of the Dead* can.” Otoha tilted her head ever so slightly, as though perusing through the filing cabinets of zombie data inside her mind. “*Swiss Army Man* had zombies that could traverse water as fast as a jet ski.”

“How the hell did that work?”

*Honestly, if I saw a zombie rushing toward me that fast in the water, I’d definitely make a liquid contribution of my own.*

*“Zombie Lake had undead Nazis rising from their watery graves.”* Zombies couldn’t drown, so the ones that got swept away by the waves usually washed up on remote islands. *“Then there’s Rise of the Zombies...”*

*With that face, you look kind of like a zombie yourself sometimes.*

*“They’re dead, meaning they can’t drown. Gotcha.”*

There was no one around apart from us—no ships in the distance, no swimmers, and no floaters for that matter. Keeping clear of floating bodies was generally a smart move because you never knew when one might spring back to life. Assuming that a corpse was going to stay dead was an easy way to get killed.

*“If the infection is indeed viral, it’s possible there might be zombie birds or zombie fish.”*

*“Sounds great,”* I said sarcastically. A shiver ran down my spine as I imagined a bloated, swollen corpse at sea being picked apart by birds. I had seen my fair share of decaying corpses over the past month or so, but there was something about a bloated corpse in particular that just rubbed me the wrong way.

*Isn’t it gas buildup in the intestines that causes stomach bloat?*

*“Zombies come in all shapes and sizes. You just need to know where to look.”*

*What I really need to know is whether or not they exist in reality.*

If the zombies Otoha had just listed really did exist, we’d be in quite the pickle. There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, just water as far as the eye could see.

*We could try outswimming them, though it’s unlikely we’d succeed. Regular zombies would be easy to breeze past, but those zooming zombies at jet-ski speeds? Fat chance.*

At that moment, a buoy, rocking along to the gentle waves, came into view. This was the sole reason we’d spent all that time procuring a boat.

*“Kill the engine.”*

Otoha nodded and hit the switch. A few seconds later, the boat lost all its kinetic energy and began to drift. I pulled out the oars we’d stashed away and

slowly rowed the boat toward the buoy.

A light buoy, as the name would suggest, was used for demarcation at night. Its LED lights were powered by a combination of mini solar batteries and rechargeable, electric batteries. Light buoys could be used to guide ships and mark positions, coral reefs, and much more. Once placed, they served their purpose well.

There was no real reason anyone would want to go out of their way to touch one, occasional maintenance worker aside. I mean, nobody went around touching street signs. At least, that was my thought process until now.

“Let’s see here... Aha!” I leaned over the boat and grasped a nylon cord so thin I’d have missed it if I hadn’t known it was there. To make things even more complicated, the cord and the buoy had matching colors. “Nice and easy.” I slapped on a pair of gardening gloves and began reeling in the cord—or rather, the item it was attached to.

Twenty meters of cord later, a blackish container emerged from the thick veil of darkness down below. The container was shoddily made and a bit bent out of shape from the water pressure. It hadn’t really been waterproofed, but it was at least wrapped in multiple layers of transparent plastic bags.

“Need a hand?” Noticing that I was at the end of my rope, Otoha came shuffling over on her knees to help.

We hauled the container, which was about a meter long on all sides, onto the boat. “There we... go?!” Yep, we’d gotten an added bonus. The head popped up first, then the arms, torso, and legs. Between the pruned skin and horrible swelling, I could barely look at the hideously deformed corpse without retching.

*It’s no ordinary corpse, is it?*

It latched on to the side of the boat, clumsily trying to haul itself up. Water spurted out of its swollen lips.

“Why you little...!” I couldn’t kick the damn thing off because the container was restricting my movement. And to top it all off, it was tangled up in the same cord as the container, so waiting for it to fall back into the water was not an option.

The zombie leaned into me, foaming at the mouth. All its teeth were missing, but I knew it could easily tear flesh and shatter bone with nothing but the strength of its jaws.

I instinctively reached for my SAKURA. Snub-nosed revolvers weren't known for their accuracy, but that mattered little at point-blank range.

Suddenly, a blade whistled through the air, and Otoha's shovel sliced through the zombie's neck with the ease and precision of a well-tempered sword.

The head rolled down its back, falling into the water with a plop. Its whole body, especially the arms and legs, convulsed uncontrollably for a few seconds. After that, everything went silent.

"Man, I owe ya one, Oto—OOF!"

Otoha had fallen right on top of me. Although she'd managed to get in a beautiful swing, she had lost her footing immediately after. She wasn't used to fighting aboard an inflatable boat.

*So soft... Wait, no, now's not the time!*

Her breasts, soft and elastic unlike those of a corpse, pressed against my cheek.

I knew they were bigger than they looked, but with them right in front of my face, I really appreciated—

*Dude. Not! The! Time!*



“Hiroaki, I...”

“Easy now.” I embraced Otoha in order to stop her from flailing about with the shovel in her hand. She got the message and simmered down. “You’ll fall if you try standing up. Roll over, like so.”

Once Otoha got off of me, I got up myself. Thankfully, we were careful enough not to send the container flying.

Otoha leaned over the edge of the boat and looked away, as though avoiding eye contact.

*That must’ve been embarrassing, even for her.*

She looked devastated, as though she had been violated a few moments ago. I felt a sharp pang of guilt even though I knew I technically hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Sorry ’bout that,” I said, scratching my cheek.

She didn’t reply.

Considering that she’d gotten half-naked in front of me before without batting an eyelid, I didn’t expect her to take it so hard.

*Guess there’s something uniquely hurtful about getting your breasts touched.*

As I said earlier, Otoha was my partner and lifesaver. I couldn’t stand seeing her like this, so I panicked and rattled off whatever nonsense came to mind in order to make her feel better.

“It wasn’t that bad, was it? Well, I’d ask that if I happened to be an asshole. Erm, how do I put this? It was quite the treat! They, uh, they’re a lot bigger than they look! Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that. What I meant to say was—err, Otoha, are you even listening?”

Otoha said nothing.

I crawled over to her. “Hey, you okay?”

“I didn’t get to examine it,” Otoha lamented, staring longingly at the decapitated head as it sank deeper and deeper below.

“My condolences.” I sighed and took out my knife, turning my attention to

the container. I cut my way through the deceptively thick plastic bags and opened up the cube-shaped container. “Cha-ching!” The container was brimming with weapons and ammo—specifically, a few revolvers and semi-automatic pistols alongside a boatload of their respective ammo boxes. “Wolf and Blazer... Better than nothing, I guess.”

Both were ammunition manufacturers of less-than-stellar quality.

Wolf was a Russian manufacturer, if memory served. There were over ten ammo boxes, none of which were Winchester or other similarly esteemed brands. In any case, my top priority was finding ammo we could use for the guns we had on hand.

Managed to score three .38 boxes, fifty rounds each.

*My SAKURA's gonna freak out when she sees this.*

As far as revolvers went, the ones inside were similar in make to the SAKURA, the Chief's Special, the Detective Special, and comparable mainstays. That was where the similarities ended, though; they lacked serial numbers, and their makes and models didn't ring any bells. Nothing but Saturday night specials, or “junk guns” for short.

The semi-automatic pistols, on the other hand, were all Russian Makarovs.

“That reminds me, didn't a bunch of these come from the Russian mafia when Russia adopted a different standard sidearm?”

The Russian military had officially adopted the MP-443 Grach as their standard-issue sidearm a good while back. The Makarov's legacy hadn't ended, however. It was still very much alive and well all over the world, including Japan. This was because of Makarovs that were stolen from military warehouses and sold on the black market as well as the fact that it'd been mass-produced ever since the Soviet days.

A few years ago, the Makarov had taken the title of the most confiscated illegal firearm, edging out the TT-33, and it'd been going strong ever since.

“Even the yakuza's arsenal isn't free from global trends,” I said with a wry smile.

You guessed it: this container had been smuggled in by the yakuza.

This was how the yakuza smuggled their guns, according to a gun shop employee I'd known back in the day and a VRFPS buddy who'd claimed to be affiliated with the Japan Coast Guard.

Another person I'd gotten cozy with just recently had confirmed that the local yakuza had used this particular buoy to smuggle in weapons. After I'd heard that, I just had to check.

As for how they'd managed it, well, there wasn't much to it, actually. A foreign ship on its way to the harbor would stop just before entering, someone on board would "accidentally" drop a container into the water, and then they'd hook up a cord to the buoy. The yakuza members who were supposed to have retrieved the package had likely turned zombie by now, meaning it was ours for the taking.

*Actually, come to think of it, the tangled-up corpse from earlier might've been its "rightful" owner.*

"Are those grenades?!" Five round objects rested at the very bottom of the container. They closely resembled Russian RGD-5s but were likely replicas, judging from the complete lack of markings.

The idea of holding onto replica grenades was admittedly a little scary, but on the other hand, they packed enough of a punch to single-handedly turn a losing battle in our favor.

I decided to humbly take them as well.

*Testing one out would probably be a good idea, just to see if they're safe.*

"We're heading back," I told Otoha, who was still mourning her loss. I then fired up the engine and got ready to go.



Walkers, the living dead, the risen, zees, zombies... reanimated human cadavers had many names.

According to our self-proclaimed zombie expert, Otoha Judou, their creation was associated with Haitian folklore and specifically attributed to people called

bokors. Bokors would revive corpses using necromancy and use them as personal slaves on their farms and the like.

Naturally, this was all superstition. None of it was real.

A corpse couldn't move even if it wanted to. The very notion of a multicellular organism as advanced as a human moving—let alone walking on two feet—while deceased was utterly absurd.

Bipedal movement was an incredibly intricate process that necessitated a functioning balance system regulated by the inner ear. For the inner ear to do anything, a working brain had to process the signals. In addition, there was simply no way an organism without a functioning circulatory system could be in control of its nervous system.

A monster created for one of those “transported to another world” novels? Sure. A real-life human being that had been studied as thoroughly as possible? Not so much.

The virus or parasite theory was also moot. Even something as basic as voluntary muscle movement required a functioning circulatory system. Applying an electric current to a dissected frog would make its tiny legs twitch for a little while, but eventually its cells would run out of nutrients and stop.

None of it made a lick of sense, and most people had rightfully treated zombies as a myth, a fantasy.

With time, zombies had become known as *the* go-to monster for low-budget horror movies and were loved by many. Just a dash of makeup and you were good to go. When George A. Romero's timeless masterpiece—according to Otoha—*Night of the Living Dead* came out, it ushered in a new age of vampire-esque zombies. In other words, it popularized the idea that if you were bitten by a zombie, you'd turn into a zombie.

*Night of the Living Dead* had been recognized as artful enough to be placed in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art. It was also selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Film Registry.

Toward the end of the 20th century came *Resident Evil*, *28 Days Later*, and

*World War Z*, which had all attempted to imbue the zombie genre with a heaping dose of science.

Scientific terms like “virus” and “radiation” were used to explain the walking, flesh-eating corpse phenomenon.

*To me, it just sounds like they gave the occult a fresh coat of paint. I mean, really, is there a meaningful difference between evil spirits and a virus, or demons and a parasite? In my opinion, they’re all equally insufficient when it comes to actually explaining the whole damn thing.*

Regardless of how zombies had come to be, our *real* world had fallen apart, and now these creatures roamed the crumbled ruins. Whether or not it made sense, they were a genuine threat. Unless you really, really wanted to join their ranks for some reason, you had to fight back, and for that you needed a plan.

In other words, finding out what made them tick—if such a concept even applied—was essential to our survival.

A good starting point was asking questions. Were they nocturnal or diurnal? What did they use to navigate their environment? Their ears, their eyes, maybe something else entirely? How could they tell a corpse and a living being apart? That kind of stuff.

This was precisely why we made sure to examine their behaviors whenever possible. Although they had individual differences, establishing a pattern of behavior would make dealing with them a heck of a lot easier.



After driving for about half a day, we stopped by a local shopping mall. The sun was just peeking over the horizon.

I hesitantly slipped out of the car.

For a civilian vehicle, the G-Class Benz was a true fortress on wheels. As long as you were inside, you were pretty much safe. If you got out of it, though, not so much; zombies could be lurking around any corner, after all.

“Hmm...” Squinting, I scanned the area.

Just your average, run-of-the-mill suburban shopping mall and its excessively

spacious parking lot peppered with cars. Not a single living—or undead—thing in sight. Emphasis on “in sight,” though.

After a period of prolonged activity, zombies would enter a dormant state, whether to unwind or delay the decay. At least, that’d been my experience. There could be one anywhere, lying in wait for unsuspecting victims like a ticking time bomb ready to go off.

“Let’s see here.” I inspected the area again, this time using the Lightweight Stalker. Slowly, thoroughly.

I couldn’t possibly inspect every nook and cranny, but I didn’t need to. Searching for telltale signs, like limbs sticking out or pools of pus on the ground, would suffice.

“Find anything?” Otoha asked me.

“Nope.”

“Bummer.”

“Can you not?” I was tired of beating the dead horse of our usual banter. As Otoha hopped out of the car, I took a few steps forward and surveyed our surroundings a third time.

The busted entrance and windows were scorched in places. The fire must’ve taken place during the initial stages of the apocalypse, back when the sprinkler systems had still been fully functional. It looked like they’d kicked in and prevented the fire from spreading.

“Would you like me to go check?” piped up the maid sitting in the driver’s seat.

Yep, you heard me: the maid, stereotypical uniform and all. The fingerless, faux leather gloves she was wearing—presumably for driving—kind of clashed with the aesthetic, though.

Tetsuko Uemura was an invaluable asset to the team. We had picked her up the other day along with some additional goodies, like the G-Class Benz and the Lightweight Stalker.

She was no ordinary maid, oh no. Tetsuko had undergone specialized military

training conducted by a foreign officer in order to adequately protect her charge. The VIP in question was none other than the Kosahana family's only daughter. Needless to say, the girl couldn't have been in more capable hands.

Remember the "person I'd gotten cozy with" I mentioned earlier? Yup, that person was Tetsuko.

Out of curiosity, I had once tried squeezing an age out of her. She had *politely* declined to answer, shooting daggers straight through me with her glare.

"No need. I'll handle it. Keep the engine running in case things go south." I lowered the rifle and looked around one last time. The scope's powerful zoom was great for sniping, but it also gave the user tunnel vision.

*Seems clear enough to me.*

"Showtime." Leaning forward, I made a break for the front entrance. Then, I rested my back against a partly charred yet perfectly stable pillar by the entrance and breathed a sigh of relief. There were no zombies in sight. "Looks clear," I said, looking around the mall, gun pointed forward.

Although there was light flooding in from the outside, the interior was mostly dark.

I grabbed the flashlight Tetsuko had given me with my left hand in an icepick grip and placed the tip of the Lightweight Stalker over it. This was a classic technique used by the police. The army just used night-vision goggles, but unfortunately for me, I didn't have a pair conveniently lying around.

It was quiet. So quiet, in fact, that if you listened very carefully, you could only hear—

"Yoo-hoo."

"Wagh?!" I snapped my head back to see Otoha, clutching her trusty shovel, and a brunette beauty standing right beside her. They had almost scared the bejesus out of me just now.

The girl at Otoha's side had refined facial features, equally elegant mannerisms, and a fine head of chestnut-brown hair. The color was consistent and looked perfectly natural.

Her mere presence gave the room an air of class that was hampered only by the less-than-ladylike Remington 700 in her hands. She was none other than Shino Kosahana in the flesh.

This classy lady had been born to loving parents: an Italian mother and a Japanese business-mogul father. She was also the sniper who had taken *Field Battle* by storm.

“Thought you were gonna sit this one out?”

“I had an unexpected change of heart, p-partner,” Shino said with a sheepish smile.

*Even if she didn't lift a finger, she'd be intoxicatingly attractive, but those added little quirks and gestures put her into her own category. I mean, she can't even say "partner" without getting all shy since she's thinking of the other meaning of the word. There's no topping that.*

“I'm his partner,” Otoha growled, tapping her shoulder with the shovel grip. “Me.”

*Is it just me or is she giving me a death stare? Must be my imagination, uh-huh.*

“He's lost without me,” she added.

“Sure am,” I said with a wry smile.

*Here I thought all that time I spent under Otoha's wing helped bolster her image of me, but apparently not. It is what it is, I guess.*

In the end, we decided to explore together. Having not one but two partners by my side felt reassuring... and a little pathetic at the same time, seeing as I was supposed to be the man of the group.

*Not that I'm complaining. Those two can handle themselves in a fight.*

“Awfully quiet, isn't it?” Shino murmured.

Otoha and I had scavenged derelict stores like there was no tomorrow, but this was all clearly new to Shino. Of course she'd find it a tad off-putting that a place normally brimming with life had none left.

Stopping, Otoha pointed at the floor. “Those were not made by zombies.”

Fresh bike tracks.

*Biker zombies? Yeah, right. If only.*

“Then who, pray tell?”

“Looters, the desperate kind. It’s a staple,” Otoha answered matter-of-factly.

Shino winced ever so slightly.

She, just like yours truly, hadn’t experienced human nature at its absolute worst during the initial stages of the zombie apocalypse. Both of us were shut-ins, after all. If anything, Shino had gotten to experience the exact opposite: human nature at its finest. Self-sacrifice, unconditional fatherly love, and all that jazz.

Otoha, on the other hand, hadn’t been nearly as fortunate.

She had known what to expect going into it, but even so, witnessing the lowest of the low firsthand must’ve been a nightmare. No girl in her late teens should’ve had to see adults killing and maiming one another over the tiniest crumbs of bread.

“Otoha, I...”

“Hmm?” There wasn’t a dent in her deadpan expression.

“Forget it. So, what happens to the ones who don’t come out on top?”

“They turn zombie. Everyone does.”

“Ain’t that a kick in the head,” I said sarcastically.

“If so, wouldn’t they have come out by now?” Shino pointed out.

We had been wandering the premises for some time, yet we hadn’t had a single encounter thus far. Even the aforementioned dormant zombies should’ve been roused by our scents or our chitchat by now.

“Zombies tend to mimic past behavioral patterns, right, Hiroaki?” Otoha said as though she’d just remembered.

“Right.”

Be it my parents, store employees, or what have you, the overwhelming majority of zombies we'd stumbled across on our journeys had tried going through the same old motions of their pasts.

*There's a hypothesis called body memory, which suggests that memory can be stored in the body as well as the brain. For example, there are records of organ recipients exhibiting intense cravings for the donors' preferred foods. The brain is a bundle of neurons, but neurons aren't exclusive to the brain; therefore, there's a slight possibility that the body itself is capable of storing memories. It's kind of like muscle memory, which is learning through doing. Repeat an action enough times and the body'll remember, even if the brain has ceased functioning.*

"Who do you associate with shopping malls?" Otoha lifted a finger. "That's right—customers and employees. And what time is it? Well before opening hours. Case closed."

"Uh, sure."

*Okay, it's seven in the morning and the stores aren't open, but how is that sufficient evidence?!*

"It all adds up now." Shino nodded in agreement.

*Not you, too...*

"No, it doesn't! And you, Otoha, wipe that smug grin off your face right this instant!" Otoha was rocking her usual expression, but now that I'd known her for over a month I could tell she was feeling proud of herself. The slightly elevated corners of her lips, the subtle narrowing of her eyes... that kinda stuff.

"Posit the superior theory, then, Dr. Hiroaki."

"First of all, it's just Hiroaki. Secondly, I, erm..."

*I don't have one, but I can't back out now!* I racked my brains for the perfect retort.

At that moment, a groan came from down the hall.

"Check and mate," I declared.

"Unpaid overtime from beyond the grave. Didn't see that one coming."

“Even the dead cannot help but bend a knee to the cosmic horrors of unpaid overtime.”

“Sure enough.”

I nodded in Shino’s direction, gave her the signal, and got into formation.

Leading the charge was our shovel-wielding, front-line general, a.k.a. Otoha. I was about ten steps behind her, and bringing up the rear was Shino.

“Judging from the sound, there’s just one.” Crouching low to the ground, Otoha crept forward.

I knew better than anyone that Otoha was more than capable of handling herself in a fight, but even so my hands were clammy with sweat.

I swallowed hard, then warned, “Don’t get too cocky. It might be a trap.”

Zombies setting traps? Unlikely. Other living, breathing human beings who had once tried holing up in here? Very possible.

Otoha waved us over upon reaching the end of the hall. “Come.” She was standing tall with her shovel lowered, completely at ease.

“Odd...” Shino and I exchanged glances and walked over to her.

“What’s going on h—oh.”

“Eek!”

“Eek indeed.”

We’d turned the corner only to find a legless female zombie lying on the floor. A fledgling, from the looks of it. It had clean skin and wore a crooked pair of silver-rimmed glasses.

*Must’ve been one hell of an accident.*

Aside from the pool of blood and protruding intestines, the zombie could’ve easily passed for a human being.

“Hmm?” Something was off about this one. It was clutching numerous bags of sweets, some of which had spilled onto the ground.

As if that wasn’t enough, its jacket pockets were also stuffed full of sugary

treats, looking like they were about to burst at any given second.

*Did she plan on eating all these? No, that'd be insane.*

"I-It's moving," Shino muttered, voice quaking with fear.

"If it's got a head, it moves," Otoha replied, poking the corpse with her shovel. "Simple as that."

The fact that it lacked legs meant it wouldn't get up and move around, and the arms were... preoccupied, so to speak. In terms of threat level it was close to, if not entirely, harmless.

"It really likes its sweets, doesn't it?" Shino mused. "Imported sweets, that is."

*Now that you mention it, all the packaging is in English. Lots of chocolate stuff here, too.*

She looked over at me. "Think she might've been that one girl who gave every guy some generic, store-bought chocolate on Valentine's Day?"

"Of course... not!"

Shino was the closest thing to a "perfect" lady, inside and out, I knew, but even she had her moments of weirdness.

*Still, even those moments are cute in their own way.*

She tilted her head, then bent down to pick up a fallen bag of sweets. "What else would she do with all thi—"

"GraAargh!"

"Eek?!"

Teeth bared, the zombie cried out in rage.

Not expecting it to get this angry—yes, *angry*—we failed to react in time. Admittedly, this had been partially caused by our own hubris.

The zombie sprang up in the air, swiping out to grab Shino's ankle as it fell back down.

"Lady Shino!"

A shrill voice rang in our ears, followed by a thundering shotgun blast. The zombie's head flew right off, bursting into a million pieces like a ruptured water balloon. Blood, gray matter, and loose chunks of cranium scattered all over the floor.

Now missing everything above its bottom lip, the zombie collapsed.

After that, the remains of the silver-rimmed glasses fell to the ground with a *clink*.

"Are you okay?!" Clutching the Mossberg 500, Tetsuko ran over to her mistress' side.

*Are those... two shotgun shells between her fingers?! Combat load hype!*

Combat loading was a highly specialized technique performed primarily by trained soldiers on military shotguns. It involved loading a shell directly into the chamber, firing, and reloading again in quick succession, completely doing away with the need for a magazine. Shotgun ammo came in all shapes and sizes, but with combat loading, you'd get to freely switch between whichever one was needed.

Tetsuko had opted for either a slug or sabot round—single projectile rounds designed for hunting large game—instead of standard buckshot. Considering the zombie had been directly behind Shino, buckshot had been out of the question, as it would've hit her as well.

Otoha looked at the maid. "Uemura, why—"

"You were taking a little too long for comfort, so I came out to check on you. My sincerest apologies." Sensing that the danger had passed, Tetsuko lowered the shotgun.

I glanced over at the unmoving, effectively headless corpse.

In terms of caliber, shotguns were king, easily beating out the competition. While their effective range was rather small, their stopping power was off the charts.

After all, Tetsuko's blast had torn the zombie's head clean off, sparing Shino's clothes from the subsequent spray of blood and gray matter.

“Checkup time.” Otoha crouched down and reached for Shino’s clothes.

“Erm, Otoha, what are you doing?”

“Off. Now,” Otoha ordered, looking Shino in the eye. “If there’s a scratch or a bite mark, you could turn zombie.”

“Otoha, relax!”

“We’ve got to act fast. I’ll start by cutting off your limbs. That should do the trick.” Otoha raised her shovel overhead. “Quickly, before the virus spreads. *World War Z* style.”



“Nooo!”

Hearing Tetsuko ready her shotgun behind me, I quickly shouted, “She’s clean! Clean as a whistle! Not a hair on her head was sullied, I promise you!”

“Is that so?” Otoha tilted her head sideways, lowering the shovel.

“Yes. A-At least, I think so,” Shino said.

“Okay. Cool.”

“Really? That’s all?” I heaved a huge sigh.

Otoha’s unparalleled, quick decision-making skills were reassuring and sometimes utterly terrifying. Her calls tended to be right on the money—when it came to zombie-related matters, anyway—but everyone else wasn’t always on board. Especially not in the heat of the moment.

Had Otoha actually gone through and chopped off one of Shino’s limbs, she would’ve had a head full of lead not a second later, whether she’d been right or not.

*My blood pressure’s through the roof right now.*

I turned to the maid. “Uemura, I’m so, so sorry for what just happened. Take Kosahana back to the car. We’ll catch up.”

“If you insist.” Tetsuko nodded and went back down the hall with Shino.

“Listen,” I said to Otoha. “Would it hurt for you to, I dunno, think before you act?”

“Immediate threats call for immediate action.”

“I get that, I do, but you *did* just try ripping an innocent girl’s clothes off right in front of me.”

She gave me a look. “And...?”

*I can almost see the question marks flying out of her head.*

“It’s, you know, it’s embarrassing. For both parties.”

If Otoha had bothered to explain her reasoning beforehand and gotten Shino’s consent, things would’ve gone down much differently. Otoha’s actions

made sense; assuming Shino had, in fact, been scratched, immediate action would've been very much necessary. Ripping off her clothes without her explicit consent, though, had been a step too far.

"We've done it countless times. Was it embarrassing for you?"

"Umm, yeah. Very, I might add."

We checked each other's bodies every single day without fail, but we did it my way. Having learned from my mistakes, I always made sure to get inspected first. That way, my little Johnny wouldn't get riled up, and even if it did, I'd already have my pants back on by then.

Otoha never seemed to mind being seen half naked one bit, but she *did* find my little man a tad too intimidating, so the arrangement benefited both of us.

"You always look fine to me."

"*Look, Otoha, look.* I'm a teenager surging with hormones, for crying out loud."

"But—"

"Still, I push through. I'll never have a repeat of that dreaded incident on day one. Never again, you hear?"

Otoha blinked once, twice, then said, "That's nice."

"What is?"

"Well, you know..." She struggled to give me a straight answer.

*Her cheeks are turning a little pink, aren't they? Could she be thinking about the day one incident? Anything but that, please. Just put me out of my misery.*

"So, uh, zombies tend to mimic their old behavioral patterns, right?"

"Tend to. Exceptions exist."

The overwhelming majority of zombies fell into this category. According to Otoha, that was the case in many zombie movies, too.

"Then tell me." I crouched beside the corpse and picked up a bag. "What was it planning to do with all this sugar?"



The shopping mall trip turned out to be a bust. There was nothing of value left.

Food? Well, let's just say that even the vending machines had been stripped clean. The chocolate had nice packaging and all, but the mere possibility of it crawling with germs was enough to kill our appetites, so we left it all behind.

Our spoils consisted of a few articles of clothing—mostly underwear—some shoes we came upon in the backyard, and an assortment of cheap variety-store goodies.

We put them in the car and went back on the road, heading for the suburbs. The city was far too dangerous, in more ways than one.

“There we... go.”

I was disassembling one of the guns from the container we'd pulled up yesterday. Revolvers were famous for pretty much never jamming, so I didn't even bother to check those, but pistols were a whole other story.

I laid the Makarov's parts out on a plastic tray I'd gotten from the variety store earlier.

“Looks okay to me, though I'll have to give it a test run later. Just in case.”

“Good idea,” said Tetsuko, currently manning the wheel.

“Then again, it's the Makarov, so you should be fine.”

“Amen.”

Incidentally, Otoha and Shino were in the back seat.

Otoha just sat there, expressionless as ever. Shino, on the other hand, was nestled up against Otoha's shoulder, dozing off.

*You'd think she'd be a little more cautious around Otoha after what happened, but after we gave her Otoha's side of the story, Shino let her off the hook right away. She's a good kid through and through.*

Otoha was quite a softy herself. Whenever Shino's head was about to slip off, she'd carefully nudge it back, as she was doing right now.

“What?” Otoha blurted, noticing my eyes on her in the rearview mirror.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s early, but Kosahana’s asleep, so what say we find a nice place and take a little breather?”

Tetsuko nodded in agreement. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“Uemura needs rest, too; she’s been at the wheel since the morning hours. Where to, Otoha?”

“Sec.” Otoha rummaged through the backpack she had placed over her knees before pulling out a road map. “Found it. A little to the west and—oh, there it is.”

At that moment, a decently large river came into view.

*That’s what she was looking for...?*

“What are gonna do with a river?”

“Not there, *there*.” Otoha pointed at a small landmass in the middle of the river.

“You mean the sandbank?”

“Yup. The view’s great, plus the current and the sediment would make crossing the river immensely difficult for zombies. And they’d be easy to spot.”

“Makes sense.”

*I’d imagine the river sounds and the freshwater smell would have the added benefit of masking our presence.*

“Think we can get there, Uemura?”

“Easily,” Tetsuko said, heading down the riverbank.

The car rocked from side to side as it made its way over the riverbank’s diverse array of rocks, tearing Shino from her restful slumber.

“Apologies, Lady Shino.”

“I was out, wasn’t I?” Shino said, a hint of embarrassment in her voice.

“The wheels might get stuck in the mud, so I’ll be shifting into high gear. Hold on tight.” The G-Wagen crashed into the river, its bulky tires spraying water everywhere.

We reached the sandbank in seconds, then Tetsuko killed the engine.

“The soreness will never not be unpleasant.” I got out of the car, followed by Tetsuko, Otoha, and last but not least, Shino.

The sandbank was much larger than it had initially seemed, about a hundred meters wide in all directions. Tufts of grass dappling the surface swayed gently in the wind.

*You could fit a modest house here.*

I circled the perimeter just in case there were any zombies hiding in the water, but thankfully, I came up dry. The likelihood of a zombie successfully crossing the river was rather slim, just like Otoha had said, but one could’ve still feasibly washed ashore. Still, it turned out to be a needless worry.

*The sandbank is zombie-free.*

I breathed a sigh of relief and prepared to sit down.

“Hiroaki,” Otoha called out to me, “Uemura said she’d teach us martial arts.”

“What?”

*A little abrupt, no? Also, did Tetsuko actually volunteer to do this?*

“I asked her nicely,” Otoha added, as if she’d read my thoughts.

“Care to join us?” Tetsuko asked, popping out from behind her.

“You should really get some rest, Uemura.” Seriously, she’d done all of the driving thus far. “And you, Otoha, be a little more understanding, puh-lease.”

“I appreciate the concern, but I’m more than happy to oblige. We need to think long term, after all.” Tetsuko didn’t look the least bit bothered. In fact, she even kept up a cordial smile.

*How is she not feeling even a little bit tired? She looks like your average young woman, yet she’s got more stamina than the only guy in the group.*

“Quote. ‘Without the gun, I’m easy pickings.’ End quote,” Otoha said as she

drew closer.

“Well, yes, but—”

“It’s a valuable opportunity.”

“Not sure if a single session’ll do much, but you know what? Fine. I’ll give it a shot.”

Otoha was right. This was a valuable opportunity.

Needless to say, VRFPS games had done little to improve my martial arts prowess. I had good reflexes and a decent build, but that alone could only take me so far.

“Again, sorry for disrupting you, Uemura.”

“Please, it’s fine,” she said amicably. “We’ll focus on self-defense techniques, no fitness training. Hiroaki, would you be so kind as to walk over to me?”

At her request, I casually walked toward Tetsuko. “Sure, then wha—”

The moment I got within arm’s reach of her, she snatched me by my collar and threw me to the ground. Thankfully, the soft grass cushioned my fall. She had also pulled back at the very last second.

“Thoughts?”

“Never knew I could fly.”

“Judo and aikido are all about redirecting the opponent’s momentum. There’s more to it than sheer strength. Also, striking arts like karate and boxing aren’t very effective against walkers, so we can cross those off the list.” Her explanation was as eloquent as ever.

Strikes and blows wouldn’t do much good against an adversary that could shrug off broken bones and torn limbs like it was nothing.

Throwing techniques by themselves would have a hard time incapacitating a zombie, but they could set you up for a number of effective responses—stomping its face in, destroying its spinal cord, or even giving yourself enough time to escape.

“Your thoughts, Otoha?” Tetsuko asked, turning to face her.

“I like your movements,” said definite martial arts expert, Otoha Judou. “But we’ll need something more against zombies.”

“Such as...?”

“Allow me to demonstrate.” Otoha turned and started coming right at me.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this...”

“A zombie’s deadliest weapon is its teeth.” Without warning, Otoha shoved her fist into my mouth. “Or rather, its jaw. Scratches are deadly in their own right, but nothing a thick set of clothes can’t handle. The jaw, not so much, so we put it out of commission.”

“Hrmngh! Mmfff!”

Tetsuko watched attentively, then replied, “That sounds like an excellent idea, but what about the risk factor associated with sticking your hand inside a zombie’s mouth?”

“Ideally, you’d want to use an object—preferably a rolled-up magazine, but anything’ll do—while wearing appropriately thick gloves to mitigate the risk. If executed correctly, the zombie’s teeth go bye-bye.”

“Mrngh... Nmff!”

“A rolled-up magazine, that’s genius! Easy to find and easy to dispose of.”

“Disposing of the tool lessens the risk of infection, too.”

I finally reached up and pulled her hand out of my mouth. “When will you learn that your actions have consequences?!”



We’d had a little bit of a rocky start, but it was smooth sailing from there on out. With Tetsuko as the instructor and Otoha as a “supervisor,” we did a little zombie self-defense training. After that, we transitioned into learning various ways to use ropes for our survival. Soon enough, two hours had passed.

Also, we now had a rope stretching from across the river. Each end was tied to a crowbar buried deep in the ground. I’d fallen over many times trying to get the crowbars planted on each side of the water. The rope would make it easier

and faster to get from one riverbank to the other, so long as you held on to it.

This whole process had been the workout of a lifetime, despite Tetsuko's promise of no fitness training.

"I'm beat... No fitness training, my ass!"

"That should about do it for today. Fine work, Hiroaki." Tetsuko had helped with the process, yet not a single bead of sweat graced her brow.

*How is a mere gamer supposed to compete with this?*

"You've got potential. I'm sure you'll surpass me in no time."

"Um, thanks." It felt good hearing that, even if she didn't really mean it.

"We'll explore the area," declared Otoha, holding on to the rope. She pointed at me. "You make lunch."

"Can a man not get some rest around here?!"

*Then again, I haven't had a bite to eat since this morning, and that little workout certainly didn't help.*

"Okay, you know what? Fine. Safe travels." Otoha nodded and began making her way to the other side of the river, with Tetsuko following closely behind.

Once they had just about finished crossing, I sighed and headed to the trunk of the car. Why? To procure the ingredients and the cookware, of course. At least, that was my plan.

"Hello, Hiroaki."

"Oh, hi, Kosahana."

I looked down and saw Shino tending to a pot on the portable gas stove.

"So, erm, Otoha asked me to make lunch, but I guess that's taken care of."

"You bet," Shino said with a smile. "The rice is almost done."

"How thoughtful of you."

"We're partners, remember? Partners help each other out. Besides, you must be tired. Please, rest."

*She's too pure for this world. We're not worthy.*

“You know, Otoha’s pretty damn bossy.”

“Perhaps.” She flashed me a playful grin.

Each and every one of her smiles was memorable, especially considering Otoha was lacking in that department.

“I’m the supervisor,’ she says, and then all she does is complain. Like, she could be doing something useful in the meantime, you know? Ever since I’ve known her, she’s had this weird tendency to treat others as pack mules.”

“You sound close,” Shino commented out of the blue.

“Do we?”

*True, it’s not like we’re at each other’s throats all the time. We have a mutual respect thing going on. But would I call us close? Eh, I guess it depends on what you mean by close. It’s not really something I can answer on the spot; I’d be skipping over all the nuances. Personally, I’m inclined to say I’m her lackey more than anything else.*

“Have you known each other for long?”

“What? No, of course not!” I frantically shook my head, for whatever reason. “I’ve known you for way longer.”

“That’s odd. You seem to get along awfully well despite that.”

“Well...” Technically, even though we had only gotten to know each other fairly recently, I had spent a lot more time in Otoha’s company than I had in Shino’s.

Actually, Otoha was the first girl I had ever spent any considerable amount of time with, as much as it pained me to say.

“She’s... different. I don’t feel awkward around her.”

It had been smooth sailing ever since the awkward day one incident. All Otoha cared about was zombies. She was completely indifferent to everything else, which made it easy for me.

“Do you get nervous around girls?” Shino asked, tilting her head to one side.

“You know how it is with us, err, indoorsy types,” I replied, choosing my

words carefully. Wouldn't want to insult her.

"Do you get nervous around me, too?" Shino brought herself closer to me.

"I, erm..."

*A little too close for comfort there, Shino.*

"What's so special about her?"

"Well, Kosahana, you know... It's like... uh..." I couldn't give a straight answer to save my life.

*What do I do?*

"Hiroaki, listen to me," she said, staring into my eyes.

"Um, yes?"

"It's *Shino*. S-h-i-n-o. We've talked about this."

It was so abrupt that I had trouble processing it at first, but then it all came together.

*Oh, that's what she's so hung up on. I never really thought about it before. Otoha and I just kind of started out on a first-name basis, and it stuck. To everyone else, our relationship might seem more intimate because of that.*

"Let's hear it."

"B-But—"

"We've known each other for so long now."

"Yeah, but, like..."

*I'm a nobody, and you're the modern-day equivalent of a princess! It's hard!*

"Double standards," she huffed. "I'm calling it."

I groaned. "Come on."

"Need a reminder? How about our *Field Battle* days?"

"Yeah, but, like, I owe you my life and stuff. It's a respect thing."

"Don't you owe *Otoha* your life, too?"

"That I do, yes."

“See what I mean?”

*Okay, yeah, I get it.*

“Say it. Or else.” She brought herself even closer.

*Oh no, her fragrant aroma is assaulting my nostrils!*

“Okay, okay. Have it your way... Shino.”

“What was that?”

“Um, Shiii...”

“No!”

“Shino! Shino!”

*Why did you say it twice, dude? Oh, whatever. I’ll swallow my pride if this will make her happy. I’m sure I’ll get used to it eventually, but I’m more afraid of how Tetsuko will react.*

“Good. Keep up the good work, Hiroaki,” Shino said, her smile radiant as always.

“Will do, Kosa—”

“Hmm?”

“Shino, I meant Shino.”

“Good.” Shino nodded curtly.

Shortly after the rice finished cooking, we got to work making our unique spin on pot-au-feu with leftover ingredients from Shino’s place. We threw in some carrots, potatoes, and bacon. We then sprinkled in some seasoning and let it simmer. The smell was fantastic.

“This reminds me of all the times I went camping with Dad and Tetsuko.” Her tone was nostalgic, her eyes warm.

“I see.”

*Is she still in mourning?*

“It’s okay, I’m over it now. Thanks to you, Hiroaki,” Shino added quickly, reading me like a book. “A little pushy, I’ll admit, but it did the trick. You have

my eternal gratitude.”

“Um, yeah. No prob.”

*Thinking back on it, there might’ve been a better way, but all’s well that ends well, as they say.*

After that, we just watched the pot cook in silence for a little while.

“Now for the garnishes.” Suddenly, she froze. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah, I heard it too.”

We exchanged glances and tried making out the sound. It was something metallic rolling across the ground in the distance. It drew closer and closer and then... *splash!*

*Is something trying to cross the river?*

“Let’s go,” I whispered.

“Okay.”

The tall clumps of grass made it impossible to identify the source of the sound from our seated positions. We got on our knees, picked our guns off the ground, and waited.

The metallic sound came back, this time louder than before.

Shouldering the Lightweight Stalker, I placed my fingers over the bolt. I glanced over to my side and saw that Shino had done the same.

Fearing an accidental discharge, neither of us had loaded a round into the chamber. Not that it was necessary; we could load in quite literally an instant.

We waited until the very last second, just to make sure the zombie wouldn’t know we were there until it was too late.

Just then, the grass in front of us parted, revealing... a barrel.

“What the...?”

“Huh?”

“Is that a barrel?” I asked.

As if that wasn’t strange enough, Otoha’s head popped out from one end of

it.

“Hey there. Miss me?”

“What is *this*?”

“It’s a barrel.”

“No kidding.” Before I could ask “why,” Otoha crawled out from it and stood up. “What happened? You’re soaking wet!”

Naturally, crossing a river would get you wet. But Otoha wasn’t just a little wet; she was soaked from head to toe. Her virtually transparent clothes stuck snugly to her skin, leaving little to the imagination.

“I fell in,” she said matter-of-factly.

“And the barrel?”

“I found it.”

“It won’t even fit in the car. It’s too big. What do you plan on using it for?!”

“I won’t be taking it anywhere. It’s single-use.” Otoha stood it upright, then said, “Yo, Shino.”

“Yes?”

Otoha walked over to Shino, water audibly sloshing around in her shoes, and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Take off your clothes.”

“What?!”



“What did I do to deserve this?” I muttered, throwing handfuls of grass onto the fire.

The grass from the sandbank was full of moisture, so burning it produced a ton of thick smoke and made my eyes water.

*Whatever you do, don’t look up,* I reminded myself.

I had no choice in the matter. Otoha and Shino were bathing in their makeshift barrel tub, which was mounted over a U-shaped concrete gutter—another one of Otoha’s strange finds. Both of them were stark naked.

Shino awkwardly cleared her throat. “Hey, um, Otoha...”

“Yeah?”

“Th-The water’s just delightful, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. Hear that, firekeeper?”

“Uh, yep! Don’t mention it!” I shouted a little too loudly.

*Never thought I’d help someone set up a barrel tub, but there’s a first time for everything, I guess. To be fair, the water here’s clean and plentiful, so might as well put it to good use. Hygiene aside, regular bathing also helps mask our scents.*

“You could’ve gone in by yourself, you know? Why drag me into this?”

“I’m doing you a favor, Miss ‘Nooo, I can’t go in alone! That’d be the end of me!’”

“I-In my defense, Hiroaki is a... a...” Shino’s stammering easily reached my ears despite the thick veil of smoke between us.

By the way, I had been *politely advised* to look away as they were undressing.

“A perv? What else is new?”

“I’m still here, you know!”

“Do you deny screaming ‘Feast your eyes on this!’ at the top of your lungs as you unveiled your monstrous bulge with an equally monstrous grin on your face?”

“You had me backed into a corner, and it was a one-off thing!” My eyes came dangerously close to flickering upward, but I quickly covered them, safely avoiding a catastrophe.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

*Why you gotta do me like this, Shino?*

“Exactly what you think it means. We’ve explored each other’s naked bodies many times over, leaving no speck of skin unturned.”

“Again with this crap?!”

“I didn’t know what I was getting myself into. Hiroaki, he... he... I’m sorry,” Otoha said, her voice quivering as though she was about to burst into tears.

“There, there. You’re safe now. Now tell me, what did he—”

“I literally just checked her for bite marks! I’m innocent!” I yelled before Otoha could besmirch my good name any further. “You’re the one who brought it up in the first place! I didn’t do anything weird, I promise!”

“Weird? What d’you mean?”

*You’re purposefully trying to get under my skin, aren’t you, Otoha?*

“Hiroaki’s pervy proclivities aside, you did the right thing, Shino. You get to wash off the zombie gunk and your scent at the same time.”

“Erm, yay me?”

“Oh, and one other thing.” Otoha’s tone became just a shade more sinister, though it was so subtle even I could scarcely tell the difference. “Your boobs look heavy. Let me give you a hand.”

“Huh?! What are you—aah!”

“What’s going on up there?!”

*Let me in on the fun too! Wait, no, that’s not what I mean!*

“Two can play at that game!” It sounded like Shino was going on the offensive. “Take this, and that!”

“Shino, did you just...?”

“I-I didn’t mean to!”

*Didn’t mean to what? Inquiring minds want to know!*

A strong desire to sneak a quick peek welled up inside me, but in light of the shovel resting against the barrel, I immediately quashed it.

*What could they be doing in there?*

My imagination was running wild.

*I can feel a nosebleed coming on, and the smoke’s making my head spin. It’d be a shame if I were to pass out. A shame, indeed. I need to reign in my*

*imagination. Now, how can I do that? I take a quick peek, of course. Sounds like a plan, and a brilliant one at that!*

Conveniently, I had my trusty pocket mirror stashed away, the one I used for zombie-spotting.

*Just one little glance, I promise. Please forgive me.* Apologizing to no one in particular, I reached for the pocket mirror, only to have it caught midair.

“Where did you—?!”

It was none other than Tetsuko, who slowly shook her head without saying a word, as though admonishing a child.

*I get it, I get it! Please just let go. It hurts! Like, a lot! What’s up with that grip?!*

“Hiroaki...” I instinctively looked up and saw Shino and Otoha looking at me with scorn, their heads poking out from the side of the barrel.



“Perv.”

“Shame on you.”

“I-I can explain!”

In what could only be described as an act of karmic irony, the pocket mirror slipped out of my hand, landing to the ground with a loud thud.

*Begging it is.*

“Have mercy!”

“All I have for you is death.”

Otoha grabbed her shovel and began relentlessly dumping scoops of hot water on me.

“Hot, hot, hoooooot!”



Our bodies clean and our stomachs full, we spread out a map over the hood of the car and began mulling over our next destination.

I found this puzzling, seeing as our current location seemed to be just what we were looking for: a peaceful, suburban area. There were ranch-style homes and the occasional warehouse or facility, but that was about it.

We hadn’t seen many zombies around here either, though we couldn’t let our guard down in case those houses still had owners trudging around. You never knew when a dormant zombie might come out to play.

“Can’t we just, you know, stay here?” I asked Otoha, looking over the sandbank.

I had a hard time imagining a place more ideal than this. An endless water supply, a road close by, enough fish to last us a lifetime... What more could you want?

“No.”

“Why? Give me one good reason.”

Otoha pointed to a large facility at the lower reaches of the river. “There.

Happy?”

“The nuclear power plant...”

“Ah, a meltdown is what you’re worried about. I see.” Tetsuko nodded approvingly. “They *were* restarting some of the reactors recently. I’m not sure if this one in particular was restarted, though.”

Most of Japan’s nuclear power plants had been closed for the last twenty years or so. To fill in the gap in her energy-consumption needs, Japan had turned to newly developed solar tech and the smart grid network, along with some old-fashioned thermal power plants.

Eventually, Japan had finally clawed her way out of an economic recession, but things hadn’t stopped there. In hopes of ushering in a new golden age, Japan had then turned her attention to the electronics industry, supporting its growth through national policy four or five years ago. According to all known estimates, Japan’s energy-consumption needs would only increase with time.

As a result, Japan had begun looking into ways she could get her nuclear plants up and running again a little while before any of us had been born. As one might expect, anti-nuclear sentiments had arisen and promptly died out before they could ever really go mainstream. Japan had had an economic recession to confront, after all.

“The workers have likely turned zombie by now.”

The parts of a nuclear plant that weren’t automated would usually be operated by workers, who had almost certainly been infected. Zombies had a tendency to mimic their old behaviors, meaning the plants were relatively harmless for the time being. That said, they were a disaster just waiting to happen if nothing was done about them.

“Everywhere within an eighty-kilometer radius of a power plant is a potential danger zone.” Otoha ran her finger across the map, drawing a nice, round circle. “As you can see, we can’t stick around for long.”

Needless to say, our current location was within said eighty-kilometer radius.

“Doesn’t appear as though we have a great deal of options, eh?” Tetsuko said, crossing her arms.

“A deserted island could work,” Shino piped up.

Based on our experiences with the sandbank, a deserted island did sound rather enticing. However, it had one fatal flaw: accessibility. Something as simple as casually strolling over to the nearest shopping mall or hardware store for supplies would instead be a monumental undertaking.

I sighed. “We’ll need a real boat, I’m guessing? Don’t imagine our inflatable buddy or a shoddy raft will do the trick.”

*It’d be nice if there were a fully functional boat conveniently waiting for us somewhere, but that’s probably not gonna happen.*

We had once searched a harbor from end to end, and all of the vessels had either been too big for us to handle or in shambles, or both.

“Aren’t swimmers going to be a threat?”

*Not like we’ve ever encountered one before, but doesn’t mean we won’t.*

“That they will, if they *do* exist.”

Unlike fictional zombies, whose attributes adapted to a screenwriter’s every whim, our zombies should’ve been fairly consistent. In theory, anyway. If there was a way for us to verify that they were, in fact, incapable of swimming, a deserted island would likely shoot up to the very top of our priority list.

“Hold up. If zombies can’t swim, doesn’t that mean there’s a good chance that remote islands and the like weren’t hit?”

“Now that you mention it...” Tetsuko nodded thoughtfully.

“The outbreak occurred at roughly the same time all around the globe,” Otoha said. “America, Africa, China, Europe, Australia... Everyone, including our humble island nation of Japan, got hit. From multiple spots, too. Why? That I don’t know, but what I do know is that any remote islands were likely impacted as well.”

We all exchanged glances.

*Actually, yeah. Otherwise, the fact that the whole world was overrun in a matter of days wouldn’t make sense. But that leaves us with another question.*

“If the zombie outbreak was, in fact, caused by bacteria or a virus or whatever, it couldn’t possibly have sprung up everywhere in the exact same timeframe, right?”

*That’s not how infectious diseases work; they don’t just crop up out of nowhere. Maybe it had a carrier capable of worldwide travel? But then again, man-made or not, am I seriously supposed to believe that there’s this scary new disease that’s so infectious it just so happens to have brought humanity to its knees? Wouldn’t we have already caught it by now if that were the case? Not that I’ve really given it much thought.*

*What if it’s not a disease? What if it’s a bioweapon that got loose? Or maybe someone let it out?*

Silence settled over the group for a little while.

“In any case, I’ll take the deserted island idea into consideration,” Otoha concluded, folding her arms over her chest.



By sundown, we had decided on staying the night here.

Tetsuko and Shino rested in the car while Otoha and I stood guard. The plan was to switch shifts in six hours, wait out the night, and get back on the road come sunrise.

“Not seeing much,” I said, looking through the binoculars Tetsuko had given me.

Whenever I *did* come upon something suspicious, I’d immediately switch to the rifle, only to find out that I was either seeing things or that the zombie was very far away.

“Shame.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Don’t let your guard down.”

“I won’t.” As obsessive as she was, Otoha was pretty much the sole reason we had even made it this far. Her advice was to be taken seriously.

“So...” I said, looking through the binoculars once more.

“So?”

“I never really got around to saying it, but...”

“Uh-huh?”

“Well, it’s not like I didn’t want to, I just never got the chance.”

“Never got the chance to say what?” Otoha was starting to get a little confused.

“To, umm, to say thank you.”

“Huh?”

I couldn’t say for sure, but I had a feeling that I’d put a tiny dent in her deadpan expression.

I, of course, had my back turned to her. Otherwise, I would’ve died of embarrassment the moment those words left my lips.

“If it wasn’t for you, I never would’ve made it this far.”

Yes, she had almost sent my head flying back in the police station. Yes, she had pulled the shovel on me multiple times during our checkups, but she had also saved my life again and again.

If she hadn’t come to my rescue back when I was wrestling with zombie Shouji, I would’ve been toast, even if Shino *had* landed her shot on time. Imagine if Shino had put down her dad and then put me down, too... Actually, don’t.

“You’ve got the smarts, you’ve got the, umm, decisiveness... Both equally important, of course. Because of all this, uhh, well, not *just* because of this; I mean, there’s more to you than that, naturally. But, umm...”

*Just gotta find the right words... Oh, I know. Otoha, there’s probably been someone just as smart and just as decisive as you, but know this.*

“You’re perfect just the way you are,” I said.

“What?”

“I find your presence comforting.”

Even this late into the game, Otoha, being the zombie otaku that she was, still managed to enjoy herself.

She had gone toe-to-toe with countless zombies and endured one life-threatening encounter after another, and she had never once shown any sign of weakness.

On the contrary, Otoha always reveled in it. It was as though her whole life had been building up to this very moment.

There was something about her enthusiasm that I—and Tetsuko and Shino, I imagined—found oddly comforting. The end was nowhere in sight, our future was uncertain, and yet here we were on a fun little camping trip. No existential dread, no sorrow, nothing.

And it was all thanks to Otoha.

“Thanks for that and everything else.”

“Don’t mention it.”

*That’s not very generous of you. I’m on the brink of dying from embarrassment over here, and all I get in return is a brisk “Don’t mention it”? Guess that’s Otoha for ya.*

“You know,” Otoha said after a few moments, “I’ve always felt like I don’t belong.”

“Don’t belong where?”

“In this world. I know I’m weird; I’ve been told as much by my family, my classmates, everybody. Again and again and again. You’re pretty messed up even for a horror junkie, they said.”

“I know what you mean.”

I myself had been called all sorts of names by people who had only seen the world in black and white, thinking they were doing God’s work by informing me of my flaws or something.

“Seeing the world brought to its knees, seeing zombies roam the streets... It

made me feel warm inside. Finally, my time has come, I thought. Finally, I get to apply my knowledge to the real world. At the same time, it felt like they were right about me all along.”

“I feel ya.”

Our tormentors were gone, but their hurtful words had never left our minds. There they festered, inducing feelings of guilt and worthlessness, reminding us of our *weirdness*.

It took a toll, and a heavy one at that.

“So, umm, yeah.” Otoha grew quiet, and for a few moments, we listened to the river babbling in the background. “Thanks.”

“Come again?”

“Thanks... for the thanks.”

*I think I understand.*

“And another thanks for having my back.”

“As a wise woman once said, ‘Don’t mention it.’”

“No, really, I mean it. Without your gun expertise, your marksmanship, your military knowledge, and your quick wit, I wouldn’t have made it this far either.”

“Huh.” The first three made sense, but that last one caught me by surprise.

*I suppose being put through countless life-or-death situations in a VRFPS environment does wonders for one’s quick-thinking skills.*

“Only you could’ve convinced Shino what needed to be done. That’s something to be proud of. Although you can be rather brash, forceful, and even pervy at times.”

“You just had to include that last bit, didn’t you?”

*Could’ve ended on a high note, but no.*

“You did try to spy on us earlier.”

“Yeah, but...”

*You have no idea what it’s like being perpetually horny! Saying that would*

*cement my reputation as a creep, though, so I'll just keep it to myself.*

"I appreciate you for who you are, warts and all. I'm glad we met."

*So... it's okay if I'm perpetually horny?*

"I-I'm glad we met, too."

*Good thing I have an excuse not to look her in the face. Thanks, binocu...lars?*

"What is it?" Otoha asked, sensing a disturbance in the force.

"I think something just moved on the top of that building over there." I put away the binoculars and switched to the rifle.

It was one of few buildings over by the river, a big one made entirely of concrete. Judging from the shortage of windows, it was likely a factory or a research facility of some kind.

"Is it a zombie?" Otoha inquired gleefully.

*I know you're into zombies and all, but please don't just blindly charge in, okay?*

"I think so. Actually, wait." I couldn't tell what, but there was something *off* about its movements, so I adjusted the lens.

"What's the verdict?"

"It's... a human."

On top of the roof, there was a lone girl sitting in a wheelchair.



Shiiko Katsura was faced with her greatest obstacle yet: the chain-link fence.

It was rather short for a fence and purposefully so. It had been put up as a fall-prevention measure for maintenance workers who would have periodically checked up on the solar panels.

Your average healthy adult could climb over without so much as breaking a sweat, but to Shiiko, this would be a Herculean task.

Wheelchair-bound since early childhood, she couldn't stand on her own two feet without falling over, let alone walk. The one-meter-tall fence towered over

her.

“Who needs legs when you’ve got arms? I sure don’t.” Shiiko gave herself a little pep talk, wheeled herself up to the fence, then grabbed onto it with her right hand, lifting herself up. Her left hand joined shortly after.








































































































































































































































The harsh  
sound of  
clashing  
metal  
echoed  
across  
the room.

Like a well-trained  
knight locked in  
a glorious battle,  
the zombie had  
thrown up its steel  
pipe to block  
Otoha's attack.  
What followed was  
unlike anything  
we had seen before.









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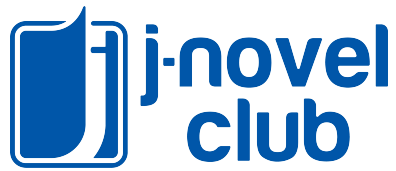
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When the Clock Strikes Z: Volume 2

by Ichirou Sakaki

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