

雪女
Снежная королева
Yuki-Onna

Preface: The Hikikomori

引き籠もり (hikikomori—literally, “shut-in”) might be described as “acute social withdrawal syndrome” in English. It is a growing sociological problem in Japan that Japanese psychiatrists have come to consider a psychiatric disease. In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare defined a sufferer of the disease as someone who isolates themselves from society in their homes for at least six months (Itou). For the most part, hikikomori seems to be a young persons' phenomenon: initial studies showed that about 40% of people classified as hikikomori were between 16 and 25 years old—high school is not mandatory in Japan, and dropout rates have become a serious issue—and another 21% were between 25 and 30 years old (Watts). Studies estimate is that $2.35 \pm 1.50\%$ of Japanese families have histories of hikikomori, though experts say this number may be far too small (Teo). The popular opinion is that a hikikomori withdraws due to the pressures of a very intense school system that emphasizes memorization and a strict social system that emphasizes conformity (Watts). There is also speculation that the wealth of a typical modern Japanese family makes it less of a burden on the parents to support a hikikomori, making such situations more financially feasible; this may contribute to the rising numbers of hikikomori observed in the last ten years (Watts).

Chapter 1: 引籠り —одиночка— Shut-In

“черт побери!”¹ Yuki jumped as her father slammed something, probably a wall, and his curse rang out through the house. *God dammit!* Another student must have quietly withdrawn from the dojo, taking his money with him. An empty dojo wouldn't hurt them financially, of course; Papa was just proud. For a while after, it was quiet, and Yuki could get back to her reading. Another Boss/Sorrow fic², this one better written than the last. Papa's Russian even came at an emotional moment in the story, so she could pretend that The Sorrow had said it. It couldn't last, though.

Eventually, the sun began to set, signaling that any of Papa's students who had remained would be going home, and Papa was free to vent. As the sound of his tortured practice in the dojo—the mangling of a good punching bag—below her tiny room filled her ears, Yuki gave up on reading and opened a new tab, this one for ニコニコ動画³. After she'd typed the URL in—<http://www.nicovideo.jp>—she paused, her mouse on the search bar. What to watch? Anything to drown out the noise. Her mind was still on The Boss and The Sorrow, so she typed the first thing that came to mind:

“メタルギアソリッド.” *Metal Gear Solid*.

The screen flashed white as the search loaded and, without thinking, she clicked on the first link. A moment later, bouncy Swedish techno filled her ears, and a (rather unskillful) fanart of an aged, stealthily crouching Solid Snake appeared on her screen.

*Do, do doo...
Yeah-eah-eah, yeah
Vi undrar är ni redo att vara med
Armarna upp, nu ska ni få se
Kom igen
Vem som helst kan vara med*

1. Pronounced “chort poberi.” Literally, “devil damn you”—the closest Russian equivalent to “God dammit.”

2. A derivative work made by fans of a work series for personal enjoyment rather than for profit. The words “fic” and “fanfic” are both short for “fanfiction.”

3. Pronounced “Niko Niko Douga.” A popular Japanese website similar to Youtube.

Crude renditions of the characters danced on her screen. They appeared in twos and threes, stayed for a while, their hips wagging and their hands flapping to the beat on top of their heads in the meme's characteristic dance, and disappeared, replaced by a new pair or a new trio. Yuki leaned back in her swivel chair, smiling. This song, Caramelldansen in Swedish and English, ウツウツウマウマ in Japanese, always lifted her spirits. She liked to think that, as the translated lyrics said, it lifted the spirits of everyone around the world.

Ooh-ooh-oowa-oowa
Ooh-ooh-oowa-oowa-a~a...

Ooh-ooh-oowa-oowa
Ooh-ooh-oowa-oowa-a~a...

She listened to the song twice more, losing herself in the stories that the characters on the screen had unveiled to her over countless hours of gaming—the secret tragedy of the Snake Eater mission, the heroic defense of Costa Rica by the man who would declare war on the world, the cloned super soldier caught in the middle of a titanic conspiracy, the friendships and devotions that lasted more than half a century of conflict, the convoluted schemes of Revolver-now-Liquid Ocelot, the underground global war of loyalty-to-the-end—in the whole, fantastic tapestry of it all, fronted by inappropriately cheerful music. She felt better after that.

“ゆきちゃん,” Her reverie was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was お母さん. *Mom*.

“Yuki-chan?” her mother said, using the childish and affectionate 'chan'⁴ modifier. “Dinner is ready.”

“Leave it by the door, please.”

There was silence for a long, painful moment before, finally, Yuki heard a choked affirmative:

“All right, dear. Feel better.”

Yuki turned back to her computer and considered turning on Caramelldansen again, but decided

4. An honorific suffix used to address to someone with whom one is affectionate or close. Example: ゆきちゃん = Yuki-chan. (Similar in connotation to the Russian suffix “-kcha”—see below.)

against it. Instead, she pressed the “play” button on her multimedia keyboard, and the English lyrics of “Heavens Divide” filled her ears.

*Petals of white
Cover fields flowing in grieving tears
And all the hearts once new, old and shattered now
Love can kill, love will die
Give me wings to fly
Fleeing this world so cold
I just wonder why*

When Mom knocked again to signify that a tray of food awaited outside her door, Yuki paused the music. She thought about opening the door, saying at least something to お母さん, maybe even changing her mind and coming to dinner. But the thought made her feel tired. *Maybe tomorrow*. Yuki listened carefully, waiting for the sound of her mother's footsteps on the hardwood floor to recede. Then she carefully tiptoed out, retrieved the tray, and returned to reading her fanfic, her food illuminated by the glow of her computer screen.

Chapter 2: ハフ—половина—Half

She was on the train, the Yamanote Line, that carried her to school. Her uniform felt strange on her skin, alien. She could feel the stares of the others on the train, tickling her back, marking her, too, as alien. It was surprising how easily how the old habits came back to her. She stared straight ahead, pretended the others weren't there, or that she was just like them. After a while, all but the oldest hags and the youngest children would cease to stare, and go back to what they were doing. The salaryman⁵ would go back to his H-magazine⁶, with its wide-eyed nubile on the cover. The other students would go back to their manga⁷, their video games, and their phones. She was almost comfortable this way, could almost believe she was normal. Almost.

The train pulled to a stop with a lurch; “青山 – AOYAMA – 青山 – AOYAMA” scrolled across the screen, first in Japanese, then in English, and a computerized female voice repeated the name as the crowd flowed out of the train, dragging Yuki with it. “青山です。青山です。 This is Aoyama.” She let herself go with the current, the inevitable deluge of people swarming through the station, towards the street above. It was easier this way, to be one of them. When people move, when they concentrate on navigating the maze of modern infrastructure, when they work to be on time, they ignore the odd and the inhomogeneous. They sweep up the alien, and carry her safely along, past the rapids of 本音⁸, the true self, and towards the safe harbor of 建前⁹, the facade. Yuki let this current carry her all the way to school.

Once the flow stopped, however, once Yuki had passed through the gates of Aoyama High

5. Company worker. The standard career choice for men in Japan.

6. Pornographic cartoons. The descriptor “hentai” (which literally means “perverted” or “aberrant”) is often shortened to “H”; in this example, a hentai magazine is referred to as an H-magazine. It is socially acceptable to read hentai materials in public.

7. A Japanese graphic novel style that features complicated stories and that is very visual so as to be read quickly. It is acceptable for anyone of any age to read manga.

8. Pronounced “honno.” One's true feelings or desires. Part of a dichotomy with *tatema* (see below).

9. Pronounced “tatema.” Literally “the facade,” one's social face and obligations. Part of a dichotomy with *honno*.

School, her protection vanished and she was once again a spectacle. Students, teachers, groundskeepers—they all stared at her as she walked slowly to home-room, Class 302, her pale complexion (お母さん told her it was pretty, like snow or porcelain), her green eyes, and her dirty blond hair: they all screamed 外人, foreigner.

A short, wiry man walked in front of the class, his glasses a little fogged. He wrote his name on the board, 今田川朱雀—Sujaku Imadagawa. They were to call him 今田川先生—Imadagawa-sensei¹⁰—Mr. Imagawa, though it was all right if they just called him “teacher.” Yuki realized with gut-wrenching horror that this was the first day of class. Each student stood as Mr. Imadagawa called her name, introduced herself, gave her hometown, named one or two things she liked, then bowed and sat down. There was Akiko Hiramatsu, from Narita; she loved to sing. There was Azuma Kiyohiko, from Takasago; he liked to draw. Finally, there was Yukino Radzihovsky. Of course, Mr. Imagawa couldn't pronounce that. “Rah-doh-jee-hoe-boo-sue-kee,” he sounded out, a worried look on his face. The other students looked around, searching for someone who could have such a strange name. Their eyes, naturally, fell on her. Yuki stood.

“Hello,” she said, blushing furiously, “my name is ラトシホフスキ雪埜¹¹”—accepting the butchering of her name was painful, but it was better than correcting them—“and my hometown is Yamanote. I like writing and video games, especially Metal Gear Solid. Nice to meet you.” She bowed and sat, hoping the teacher would nod and move on to the next student.

“Rah-doh-jee-hoe-boo-skee,” he said slowly. “That's a strange name. Are you 交換学生?” *Are you an exchange student, a foreigner?*

Yuki's head pounded as she stated her denial, owning the word she hated so much. “ハノです。”

10. Pronounced “-sensei.” An honorific title signifying “teacher” or “learned one,” used to signify teachers, doctors, and professors. Can be attached to a name as a suffix or used on its own as a pronoun.

11. Yukino Radzihovsky: 雪 means “snow,” and 埜 means “field,” so Yuki's first name literally means “Snow Field.” The best that most native Japanese speakers can do with her last name is “Radojihobuski.”

I'm a hafu, half-Japanese.

Mr. Imadagawa nodded sagely, as if that explained everything. “All right, Rah-doh-jee-hoe-boo-sue-kee, I won't expect too much of you.” He paused, looking down his list for the next student, before adding a final comment. “By the way, you're naked.”

Yuki woke up in a cold sweat.

Chapter 3: 来光と雷に生れ っ て の 化 け 物—существо рожденное из молнии и грома

—The Beast Born of Thunder and Lightning

Her phone told her that it was 3:15 in the morning. Snow gently fell outside her window, the flakes shining like diamonds in the streetlights' beams. After getting a drink of water, she stared at her bed and, upon a moment's reflection, decided against sleep. She didn't bother turning on her light. The glow of her monitor would be enough. As her computer booted, she shuddered. She hated that dream.

When her computer finally chirped to her that it was awake, she opened a blank Word document and stared. By 3:30 AM, she had a title. She wrote it at the top of her page in Russian:

существо рожденное из молнии и грома

Though Metal Gear Solid Rising—the game that would follow the backstory of Raiden (whose name in Japanese meant *thunder and lightning*), the cyborg hero from Metal Gear Solid 2—had only been announced recently, Yuki decided to write about him anyways. She'd explore his adventures in Eastern Europe. To her, that meant St. Petersburg.

For hours, Yuki poured out her soul in her Papa's colloquial Russian, filling the unavoidable gaps in vocabulary with Japanese. She wrote of a young Japanese man, newly empowered with a cyborg body, on a heroic mission to Russia. His hardship, Yuki decided, would be terrible. While he faced armies of spies and special agents, biological weapons, malevolent artificial intelligences, and robotic soldiers, he was friendless in a land that desperately needed him. Because he was a foreigner. Worse, he was a conglomerate, composite creature, an abomination, a beast: молнии¹². Of course, in the end, he'd prevail, and win the acclaim of the St. Petersburg natives who mattered. Yuki's stories always had happy endings. There was enough tragedy in the world already.

12. Literally “monster,” but the connotations are much more primal. A better translation would be closer to “beast” or “creature”—it implies something less than human.

Though she could still feel the sweat of her nightmare on her skin, Yuki already felt a little better. She was sure that お母さん brought her food—there were empty plates by her computer and she never felt hungry—but she barely noticed. By the time the sun had reached its zenith, she had finished; the story had flowed through her heart, pushing her despair aside, and out through her fingers. She felt drained, elated, and strangely restless. As she re-read her work, her Russian seemed clumsy now, amateur. Yuki slowly began to expand the islands of Japanese she had used to fill in for her inadequate Russian. She translated, fussed over word choice, elaborated upon or deleted clauses that suddenly grated at her, carving her story into something that she could be proud of. At some point, the dirty dishes by her computer were removed and replaced. Eventually she had eighteen pages of what she dared consider eloquent Japanese. As she sat back, a feeling of satisfaction rising within her, she spared a look at the clock—it was just after 10:00 PM. She was about to turn off the computer when she noticed an oversight. Beneath the Cyrillic letters of her title, Yuki wrote a translation in English and Japanese:

来光と雷に生れっての化け物
The Beast Born of Thunder and Lightning

With that, she saved her file and shut down her computer. It was time for bed.

That night, Yuki slept a clear, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 4: トルストイ—Толстой—Tolstoy

Yuki woke to a dull gray light of a mid-day snowstorm. It had been ceaseless, her on-line weather feed told her—she'd written through the beginning of one of Tokyo's biggest snowstorms in years, and it was forecasted to last the rest of the week. She could dimly hear the *HI-A! HI-A!* of Papa's students below as they went through their forms; he'd never been able to convince them to practice in stoic silence. She emerged from her bedroom, hair disheveled, stomach rumbling, to find お母さん at the table. Neat piles of stock portfolios circled the narrow beach of worn, yellow wood around her open laptop. Yuki watched her for a while, unwilling to break her mother's reverie. The periodic tapping of her fingers on the keyboard and the scratch of her pen on her spreadsheets was the only sound in the kitchen.

Finally, her mother paused to tap her pen against her lips, and Yuki interjected. Her voice was an alien sound in the comfortable mid-day silence: “доброе утро.” *Good morning.*

お母さん turned, a surprised smile on her face. “こにちわ¹³,” her mother replied. “It's not morning, dear. Can I get you something to eat?”

Yuki nodded, expecting a scolding, or at least an interrogation. But お母さん did nothing of the sort. She moved silently to the counter and pulled over a tray that had obviously been sitting out since morning. “When you didn't respond, I decided to let you sleep, so I still have your breakfast here.”

“I see.”

お母さん watched her as she hungrily mixed her nattou¹⁴ and sipped her miso soup. “I admit,” お母さん said, “I was a bit worried about you when you didn't say anything at all this morning—but I know you were busy with something last night. So I'm glad that's all it was: You were tired.”

13 Pronounced “konichiwa.” Means “good day.”

14. Fermented soybeans. A very bitter-tasting food often mixed with rice. It is one of the few things permitted to be put on top of rice.

“I was writing.”

お母さん raised her eyebrow at this, but said nothing. She sat and let Yuki eat, watching her, a subdued sort of smile on her face. Though お母さん's eyes fell on her, Yuki didn't mind; they weren't like the eyes from her dreams, or from the outside world. お母さん's eyes were soft, kind. For a while after Yuki had eaten her fill, they sat in silence together, each enjoying the other's company in her quiet way.

Finally, お母さん spoke. “Can I see your writing, Yuki-chan?”

Yuki jumped. Her writing? It was trivial 同人誌¹⁵—fan work, silly, childish, based on a video game. She had never intended to show it to anyone. “何故か?” *Why?*

“I want to see what you worked so hard on.” Her mother paused, forehead creased. Then, suddenly, her tongue was slipping over disused Russian consonants: “баловать меня¹⁶.” *Indulge me.*

Yuki indulged her.

お母さん's eyes shone as she looked over the printout, reading and rereading the eighteen pages. “Yuki-chan,” she said, “this is fantastic. Wait until I show this to your Papa.”

Yuki blushed and looked at the floor. “すきじゃない。” *He won't like it.*

お母さん's hand gently brushed her hair. “Of course he will. It's yours.”

Yuki tried not to flinch from the contact. “Papa doesn't like to read. And it has bad Russians in it. Besides...it's not that good, anyways.”

Silence. Yuki looked up at her mother. お母さん's eyes were clouded, very different from the soft, kind eyes from before. “Your Papa knows that there are bad Russians,” she finally said, “and if

15. Pronounced “Doujinshi.” Fan work, an artistic or creative piece derivative of another piece made by a fan of the original work or series. An English synonym might be fanfiction (see above).

16. Literally, “pamper me.” Has a similar meaning to “indulge me.”

you're the author, I'm sure he'd love to read anything.”

Yuki didn't know what to say to that, so she didn't say anything at all.

Her mother pressed on. “Yuki-chan, have you written anything else?”

“Some other stories. I dunno. I write whenever I can't sleep.”

“Can I see them?”

Yuki showed her お母さん everything else she'd written. There were twenty-six stories in all.

“Yuki wrote all this? ой черт¹⁷, how did we not notice?”

The sound of her name spoken in Papa's gruff, gentle Russian caught Yuki's attention. She paused her game and crept to the door to listen.

“How much do we really notice about her now?” That was her お母さん's voice, speaking soft, regretful Japanese. “引き篭もりですから.” *Now that she's shut herself away.*

Papa's response was slow and halting, almost a sob. “да, ты права.” *Yes, you're right.* There was a pause. “We never should have stayed in Japan. You told me raising a mixed family would be hard, but...” Yuki heard the sound of a fist hitting a wall. “Но я не послушался!” *But I didn't listen!*

“Миша¹⁸.” お母さん's voice was soft, an island of tranquility around which Papa's chaotic Russian swam. “We talked about that. We couldn't go to the USSR. Not after—well, and neither of us speak English well enough to go anywhere else.”

“智子¹⁹... あなた²⁰. The USSR is gone.” As Papa switched from Russian to Japanese, his voice went dead, even as it lingered on his wife's name.

17. Shit.

18. Pronounced “Misha.” A common man's name in Russia, which literally means “Bear.”

19. Pronounced “Tomoko.” Literally means “wise child.”

20. Pronounced “Anata.” A pet name. Literally means “you.” However, calling someone “you” in Japanese rather than by a last name and an honorific implies a high level of intimacy.

“When we had the choice, it was not gone,” お母さん said, so quietly that Yuki could barely hear her. “Besides, would you rather raise your ハフ²¹ child there? Or here?”

“Until eighteen months ago, I thought I knew the answer to that question.”

There was quiet after that. Yuki thought she heard crying, but that was impossible. お母さん never cried. She was about to return to her game when the soft sobs transformed into Papa's voice.

“She's so brilliant!” The words hit Yuki like the strokes of a hammer. “She could grow into the next Толстой²²!”

After that, there was only silence. Yuki returned to her video game.

21. Pronounced “hafu.” Means half-Japanese.

22. Tolstoy

Chapter 5: 東京に雪が降る—идет снег в Токио—Snow Falls on Tokyo

Yuki came to breakfast the next morning. No one said very much, but Papa smiled and insisted on hugging her. It wasn't until after they had all eaten, and Papa went downstairs to the dojo to prepare for his students (the youngest wouldn't be coming until noon or later, but Papa was proud) that it happened. As Yuki rose to return to her room, お母さん spoke. “Wait a minute, Yuki.”

Yuki turned to see お母さん holding up a thick sheaf of papers. Print-outs of her stories. “Do you mind if keep these for a while?” お母さん smiled. “I want them for bedtime reading.”

“That's fine.”

Yuki took a step towards her room before お母さん spoke again. “You should share these, Yuki-chan.”

Yuki froze, like a 狸²³ caught glassy-eyed before an oncoming car. How could お母さん even ask her that? The stories were bad! Besides—“怖い.” *Scary*.

Yuki's confession was quiet, almost a whisper, and it didn't seem like her mother heard her. “You could start a blog,” お母さん continued, “to share what you've written. I'm sure other fans would be interested.”

“No one will notice. My stories aren't very good.”

お母さん thought this over as Yuki stood rooted to her spot. Finally, just as Yuki thought she might be able to move again, お母さん spoke. “Both your Papa and I think you're brilliant,” she said—and then those harsh, disused consonants again. “баловать меня.” *Indulge me*.

With that, お母さん's eyes released her. Yuki scurried to her room.

23. Pronounced “Tanuki.” A Japanese raccoon dog. In Japanese folklore, tanuki are legendary shapeshifters, renowned for their intelligence. They're more than a little absent-minded, however. Many Shinto priests were supposedly 狸 in disguise.

“Continue? 3 left.” Yuki grunted and pressed “enter.” Marisa and Miyako reappeared on the screen and, after Yuki skipped through the dialogue, the bullets began to fly. It was an interesting fight; the boss was a newcomer to the to the 東方 series who could eat items to heal herself, making the fight extremely difficult to win within the time limit. The screen flashed. “Continue? 2 left.” Yuki tried again. “Continue? 1 left.” Halfway through her last fight before having to start over entirely, Yuki's frustration got to her, and she hit “escape” on her keyboard. From behind the see-through pause menu, Marisa looked at her accusingly, stuck in the strange limbo of a paused game. Yuki minimized the window and opened her web browser.

Unthinking and guided by her frustration, Yuki began a web search for blogs and blogging sites. She found cooking blogs, fan blogs devoted to anime, news blogs, 東方 blogs and more. Yuki found it was easy to read the blogs, to imagine commenting. Every blogger and every commenter was an Internet personality, hidden behind the veil of a user name and an avatar. She read of people abandoning blogs, or getting banned from forums, only to sign up again through a proxy server and start over with a new user name. One could begin anew at will. Everyone was, in a way, safe.

According to a thread on ふたば。ちゃんねる, www.2chan.net, the best blog hosting site was blog.fc2.com. Yuki listlessly typed in the URL and watched the website load. Why was she doing this? To satisfy お母さん? Did she actually want to know what people thought of her writing? Did she expect them to be anything but hostile? Did she dare hope for the same response お母さん had given her? That Papa had given her—Толстой? The website finished loading and Yuki gave it her email address. It couldn't hurt, right? If she made the blog, and never posted, who would know?

After she clicked the confirmation link in her email address, she found herself facing the blog registration page. She needed a blog name, and a user name. For the user name, to play on her own name, 雪[❄]—*Snow Field*, she chose the mythical Yuki-onna: the snow woman of faerie tales who used

her terrible powers to freeze mortals solid. But what to name her blog? Feeling empty and afraid, she looked around her room for inspiration. How could she be tripped up by such a trivial thing? A glitter caught her eye. It was the snow that still gently drifted down from the heavens, blanketing the earth beneath a white field. Yuki smiled. It seemed appropriate. She turned and typed out:

Snow Falls on Tokyo

Chapter 6: ブログ—блог—Blog

It was several days before Yuki looked at her blog again. Before she could change her mind, she'd managed to upload the story that her お母さん had liked so much—*The Beast Born of Thunder and Lightning*—and quickly retreated to the safety of struggling to beat the new 東方 game, which had waited patiently for her to return to it. When Yuki un-paused the game, the now-freed Marisa greeted her with the familiar sound of bullets firing. Together they worked out Yuki's frustrations and fears.

When she finally did check her blog—only after registering with some surprise that she had bookmarked <http://snowfallsontokyo.blog.fc2.com>—she found it to be utterly sparse. There was no banner, no customized color scheme, not even a statement of purpose. There was just her single post, containing the link to her story and her terse summary:

メタルギアソリッドの雷電ファン。フィクション・コメントお願いします！

—*Metal Gear Solid's Raiden fanfiction. Comments please!*

There were comments. A smattering of them, all encouraging:

コメント—Comments

すごい！—*Amazing!*

すごいだよ！雷電の気持ちをよく伝えたな！—*Amazing! You portrayed Raiden's emotions really well!*

～雷電の一番のファン～*Raiden's #1 fan*

いいけど。。。—*Good, but...*

いいストーリーだ！でもダイアログはちょっと固いね。。。あ！いいキャラ！—*Great story! Your dialogue is a bit stilted, though... Oh! But your characters are great!*

～たまはメタルギアを好きです～*Tama likes Metal Gear*

もと！—*More!*

もと叙事文そしてもとはなしがほしい — *I want more descriptions! Also more stories!*

～だじゃれしたw～*lol, I made a pun.*

Yuki could only stare. The comments glowed like bright stars on her blog—bright stars in a very empty sky, she suddenly noticed. She clicked on Edit Profile and started tinkering with the settings: darkening the background, creating a banner, organizing the layout. Over the next few hours, her blank and vaguely corporate blog became almost homey; her empty sky filled with color. But when she looked through her folder of stories, searching for the next one to post, they all looked lackluster and juvenile—like *The Beast Born of Thunder and Lightning* had felt to her.

When Yuki emerged from her room, she found お母さん much like last time, her computer chirping periodically with new emails. Yuki's stories sat neatly piled next to her, her constant companion as she watched the rise and fall of companies, the dance of numbers. This time, お母さん noticed her instantly, and beckoned her over, patting the chair beside her. Once Yuki taken her seat, お母さん returned to her stock portfolios and graphs, her hand resting gently on Yuki's to tell her that she could interrupt any time. Yuki sat quietly, letting the minutes demurely drag onward, watching her mother, enjoying her touch. Not for an instant did お母さん's gentle grip cease: she typed her emails one handed, poking the keyboard with a single finger like a child, and dropped her pencil when she wanted to scratch her nose.

Eventually, Yuki spoke. "I need some help."

The one-handed typing stopped and お母さん turned to face her, pie charts reflecting off her eyes. "With what?"

Yuki pointed with her free hand to the stack of stories. "Can you pick some favorites from those for me? If you've read them."

Carefully, お母さん reached for the stack and, in a motion Yuki thought impossible, pulled twenty neatly-stapled sheets between her thumb and forefinger out from stack without causing so much

as a wobble. She gently opened Yuki's palm and handed her the document. "Of course I read them. They're all favorites."

"Then why this one?"

"Why not?" お母さん stroked Yuki's hair and, for the first time in a long while, Yuki didn't feel the need to flinch. "What do you need favorites for?"

"I...started a blog," Yuki muttered, abashed, "like you suggested."

お母さん hugged her.

Chapter 7: お願いごと—запрос—Request

No. It's out of character. Yuki deleted the paragraph, her clumsy Cyrillic disappearing in the blink of an eye. She had to get this story just right. It was a request, after all. Her first request. A fellow blogger—one of the first to “friend” her—wanted a story like the one about Raiden, only exploring the origins of Psycho Mantis, a villain from the first game. She hoped she could pull it off. Since that first story, Yuki had written three more, each one an extended endeavor after a dream. The dreams had been less frequent lately, however, and thus so had her writing. She didn't mind, though. If she could only write when she was miserable, she'd rather not write.

That was why the request was so important. It was not just that she'd made a friend, a friend who specifically asked her to write something. It was the first time that she had tried to write without the impetus of nightmare, though she still followed the old patterns: Cyrillic, then Japanese. She didn't want writing to be an exorcism anymore. So far, so good.

The feeling was different this time. There was the elation, as before, but there was no drain, no restlessness. She felt joy pour out of her with her words, with none of the pain and none of the loss. Yuki wondered if her stories would be the same now, if they were not born from pain. Would they be better or worse? Her Russian seemed inadequate from the start; again and again, she stumbled over yawning chasms in her vocabulary, and the complex sentences she wanted would suddenly fall apart in her hands. And this time, it bothered her even before she began translating to Japanese. Did Papa feel the same way about his Japanese as she did about her Russian? She doubted it. Papa's books were all in Russian, and she'd never seen him write for pleasure in any language, but she was sure he was brilliant.

The responses to Yuki's newest story, *Preying*, were wonderful— ギアヘッド, who had requested it, was thrilled. The best response, however, was from Papa. When she emerged from her

room, story translated, elation undiminished, it was late afternoon. お母さん sat at the table in her usual spot. As was her habit now, Yuki presented her newest draft to お母さん, hoping that she could help her edit. As usual, her mother welcomed her, shutting her laptop and her stock portfolios and repurposing her pen to the task of editing. For the rest of the afternoon, the two of them sat together, Yuki's story between them, reading, then talking, then reading some more. お母さん kept Yuki honest and her stories self-contained. It was too easy to get lazy, to write for an audience that knew every character intimately. お母さん just knew Yuki.

They were on the second to last page when the sun set and Papa came up from the dojo. With a glance at the table, he moved past Yuki and her mother to turn on the rice cooker. As Papa busied himself noisily in the kitchen, お母さん put down her pen and rose to supplant him. Yuki began to make her way back to her room—she'd wait for dinner there—but お母さん caught her arm with a tender grip. “Why don't you go show your father?”

“It's not done...”

お母さん laughed. “It's almost done, dear. Besides, I'm sure he'd like to see it.”

Yuki hesitated a moment more, and then nodded. “All right.”

The two of them headed for the kitchen. As お母さん began pulling ingredients out of the refrigerator, Yuki approached her Papa. “Я написала еще одну историю.” *I wrote another story.*

Papa got the hint instantly and handed the bag of rice he'd been holding to お母さん before responding in his burred Japanese: “May I read it?”

Yuki nodded and handed it to him, and he took お母さん's spot at the table. Yuki followed him anxiously. Papa rarely read her stories. Since he was always working during the day, he was rarely around when she emerged from her room with a stack of pages in her hands. Papa didn't edit. There was no scratching of pen on paper or muttering aloud to see if a sentence was right. There was only

rustle of turning pages and the sizzle of yakisoba in the pan. He lingered for a long time on the last page, struggling with something. Yuki wondered if he'd found mistakes that she and お母さん hadn't fixed yet. But his lips were turned in up a profound smile and his eyes were wet with tears. “йу-кичка,” he said, dropping his Japanese for the affectionate “kcha²⁴” ending of his mother tongue, “Yuki-kcha, this is...you are...” Papa stopped, trying to regain his composure. “Ой,” he suddenly exclaimed, “хотелось бы чтоб я мог писать как ты, йу-кичка!” *Oh, Yuki-chka, I wish I could write like you!*

Yuki kissed him on the cheek and he sighed happily as they rose to help お母さん. “You could be famous someday, Yuki-chka. I hope you will.”

24. The “-kcha” suffix specifies great affection by the speaker for the subject of the sentence.

Chapter 8: 清遊—поездка—Excursion

Finally! The good ending! It had taken her hours of extreme concentration, but she'd done it. She'd gotten Marisa's good ending in 東方, which she hadn't really returned to since she'd started her blog all those months ago. Writing and Metal Gear Solid had taken up all of her time. Yuki looked at her clock to find with surprise that it was almost three in the morning. Her stomach rumbled.

Yuki tiptoed to the kitchen, careful not to break the silence that stuffed the air like cotton. The click of the light switch in the kitchen felt like a scream, momentarily drowning out the gentle hum of the refrigerator. The refrigerator itself was sadly empty, containing only raw ingredients. The cabinets, too, were destitute. She briefly considered cooking something, but decided against it. She didn't want to wake her parents.

She found her shoes just where she'd left them. The gentle padding sound they made was muffled by the carpet as she slipped down the stairs and into the midsummer's night. It was cool outside, tempered by a warm ocean breeze that tickled the skin under her T-shirt and brought shivers to her wrists and ankles, exposed alternately to the heat and the cold. The street was empty and vast, the streetlights oases of illumination in the Tokyo twilight. It was as she passed beneath one of these islands that the sheer openness of it all hit her. How long had it been? Since she'd been able to see further than thirty feet? Was it two years? What had been keeping her cooped up for so long? She couldn't remember.

It had happened so simply, so effortlessly. She'd had the flu. While she lay in bed, the days of fever had sped by around her, distracted as she was by books and video games. When they had ended, and she was once again able to tromp about the house, to go to school, she'd found she didn't want to. Each morning the thought was the same. *My stomach still feels a little funny. Better take it easy. I'll go tomorrow.* The days turned into weeks and the weeks into months. お母さん stopped asking her about

her stomach, and even the pretense of going to school melted away.

The glass panes of the door parted for her with a “swish.” She wandered the convenience store, her gaze slipping past the hot dogs and the electronics magazines, lingering on the comic books. It was strange to be confined again, in this world of aisles and neatly stacked goods. The rice balls were in the back, cooled with the bento boxes and the sports drinks. She chose some with ginger filling and a Pokari Sweat to drink. Her conversation with the cashier was concise.

“いくらですか,” she asked.

“一千五百円ください,” he told her.

She handed over the money and thanked him. “はい. ありがとう.”

He bowed as she left the store, her supplies under her arm. The temperature had risen while she was in the store, and the wind had died. She thought she heard the “whoosh” of a train in the distance. Yuki returned to her ruminations. Her parents had been worried, of course. お母さん had called her teacher and the school counselor for help. She now suspected that Mr. Imagawa had finished sealing her in. After he had tried to help rescue her from her room, she'd wondered why she should leave the safety and comfort of her room just to put up with that man. After her parents had brought him, she barely spoke a word to them for more than a week.

It had been so easy, then, to ignore their concerns, any fear for her own future, and stay curled up at home, devouring fanfiction and Metal Gear Solid. Yuki had fallen into her self-imposed exile as easily as she had slipped out of it. An absent thought, a hated teacher, a midnight snack: these were all it took to cage oneself in at home, shielded from the outside world, and these were all it took to break those bars. Or had they been broken long ago? Since her first story, *The Beast Born of Thunder and Lightning*? Since the snow storm? The blog? Since she'd heard her father cry outside her door? As she

approached her house, she looked up at the sign advertising her father's dojo in three languages, painstakingly painted in his own hand.

СИСТЕМА
システム
The System

Yuki smiled. It had been so long since those first early practice sessions of her youth, when Papa had hoped that she could help him teach someday. At the time, she'd been thrilled to spend the extra time with him, but substantially less thrilled at having to practice kicks and punches all day. Now he hoped she'd be a famous writer. She thought she could handle that.

Yuki stood for a while longer, listening to the low buzz of the streetlights, then climbed the stairs to the living area and went home.

Related Terms of Interest

Terms listed loosely in order of appearance

雪女: “Snow Woman.” The Yuki-Onna is a demon from Japanese folklore, a creature which malevolently kills travelers with cold. The most famous story of Yuki-Onna can be found on Wikipedia, here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuki-onna>.

Снежная королева: Snow Queen. The main villain from a story of the same name by Hans Christian Anderson. A Russian animation of the story was produced in 1957. The Wikipedia entry on it can be found here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Snow_Queen_\(1957_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Snow_Queen_(1957_film)). The original story can be found here: http://www.online-literature.com/hans_christian_andersen/972/.

メタルギアソリッド: “Metal Gear Solid.” A video game series produced by Hideo Kojima. The gameplay focuses on stealth and espionage, while the story is a convoluted (and often ridiculous) character-driven war epic that takes place in an alternate version of Earth where bipedal nuclear-weapon-carrying giant robots are an important part of politics. (The series also contains a great deal of homoerotic subtext; for instance, two of the recurring male main characters live together and eventually raise an adopted little girl.)

気合: Pronounced “kiai.” A yell of fighting spirit. Thought to be an integral part of martial arts in Japan. It sounds like “Hyaa!” and has been corrupted to “Hiyah!” in English.

外人: Pronounced “gaijin.” Literally “barbarian,” used to refer to foreigners.

ふたば。ちゃんねる: Futaba Channel, “Futaba-chan” or “Futaba” for short. A Japanese image and message board where all posters are anonymous. Has tremendous influence in the Japanese underground and counterculture. America's 4chan was inspired by ふたば。ちゃんねる. Unlike 4chan, Futaba Channel is not associated with the international “Anonymous” group and its activities are substantially less illegal.

弹幕: Pronounced “danmaku.” Literally “barrage.” A genre of video game referred to as “bullet hell” in the Western world—a scrolling shooter where damaging bullets or projectiles move slowly in patterns across the screen, often leaving almost no space for the player to maneuver.

東方: Pronounced “touhou,” short for Touhou Project, or Eastern Project. The Touhou series is a series of danmaku (see above) games produced entirely by a single man. Touhou is extremely popular and has spawned a number of fan works, including entire novels, spin-off games, and movies. The stories focus on the character interactions between a large number of girls with magical powers. Surprisingly, very little of the fan-made material is pornographic in nature (compared to other fan materials in Japan).

システム: “система” in Russian. Pronounced “systema,” meaning simply “The System.” The martial art of the Russian Special Forces.

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