



INTO PANDORA'S BOX

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"THINK OF IT AS A box, not a school," Liz said.

"Or a skull," I pointed out. "I'm scraping the brainpan—"

"How morbid." Liz's placid expression twisted into a scowl.

We stood outside the Kamata High School, a blocky stone structure fringed with artificial bamboo grass and spider lilies climbing like furtive little creatures along the walls. A pair of cherry blossom trees that didn't exist in the real world sprouted from the concrete near the entrance.

But everything behind us lay shrouded in darkness. Neither of us looked back, all our attention focused on the front door.

"I don't want to do this," I said. With Liz, I could be honest. I wasn't scared. I couldn't describe how I felt, standing with my fingers curled around the cold door handle. Going in was wrong. I knew that much. The mind within was weak, and it didn't want me here. It knew instinctively that a Pan's presence meant pain.

"Better to get it over with quickly," Liz said, adopting her teacher's tone. "If you have to enter someone's house and rifle through their most private possessions, get it done quickly and leave as few fingerprints as possible."

"You make us sound like thieves."

"We are," Liz said. "Mind thieves—but instead of dubs or yen, we search for brain activity. To analyze, to advise. Remember that." She squeezed my hand and disconnected her implant from mine. When she vanished, I opened the door and went inside.

I walked down a long hallway lined with brown lockers set into the walls. My fingertips brushed the metal doors as I walked, searching. Which one was hers?

A sudden wind blew dark hair away from my face, exposing the implant at my temple. The hallway filled with the sound of young voices. Students poured out of classrooms, the rush of their passing making me stop and hug myself protectively. Their ghostly shadows moved around me and through me. Logically, I knew they couldn't hurt me, but it was difficult not to shy away, not when I imagined their small hands pushing and shoving against me. They were trying to drive me away, to overwhelm me and sweep me back outside the box. I held on and kept walking toward the end of the hall.

Ahead of me stood a taller figure, a looming shadow almost concealed around the corner. Black spiky hair and a trail of cigarette smoke—that brief glimpse, and everything inside me went rigid. His name flashed through my mind—Natsu the Slicer—and in the next instant I was running, hurling myself across the space between us.

I skidded around the corner, but he'd vanished. A cloud of cigarette smoke

hung in the air, but nothing else remained of Natsu Nakishima. I should have known better. Natsu was the phantom. The child was the key.

When I turned back to the hallway, I was alone. The students had vanished as well, but all the locker doors stood open. Some of them hung by one hinge, and others had been torn off completely, as if a storm had gutted the building.

Fingerprints, I thought. I'm leaving too many traces.

I walked back along the hall more slowly this time. As I passed each locker, I peered into their empty, dark holes. Breezes wafted from some of the openings, daring me to reach inside and see what lay within, but I knew better than to fall into these traps. They were distractions, just like the students, to keep me away from where I needed to be.

The police had given me a few details about Yui Akiyama's life. I knew she attended Kamata, wore a green and navy school uniform like everyone else at this school, and played guitar. When Natsu the Slicer had attacked her, she'd been walking home from school. Vid reports claimed she'd used the instrument to fight him off, but I knew that was just a story. Her parents had shown me the guitar—it was pristine. They kept it in a corner of her hospital room.

A chill raised the hair on the back of my neck. I turned to face the nearest locker. The faded metal plaque above it said it was number twenty-four. Yui's locker. Her parents had told me that, too. They had been very thorough. Little details like a locker number, meaningless in the real world, could make all the difference to a Pan's work. I wondered if they'd dealt with one of us before. Likely not.

The impenetrable darkness inside the locker made me hesitate, but only for a second. I grabbed the sides, put my foot on the bottom, and hoisted myself up. My body wasn't going to fit, but Liz's words echoed in my head. This place was just a box, an imaginary shield constructed around a traumatized mind, and I had to punch holes in it until I found what I was looking for. I pulled myself through the small opening, a dark-haired Alice going into the rabbit hole, and let the darkness swallow me.



I emerged in the music room, a wide rectangular space with mirrors covering one wall from floor to ceiling. A grand piano, drums, and a cluster of music stands huddled in another corner. The mirrors gave the impression that I'd walked into the middle of a crowded orchestra rehearsal, but the musicians had all stepped out.

Turning, I glimpsed a familiar acoustic guitar—steel strings and reclaimed mahogany top, an instrument made for small hands—leaned up against a chair.

Yui. I ran across the room and seized the guitar by the neck. The instrument bumped against my leg, and I heard a soft whimper.

"Yui," I said, clutching the guitar to my chest. "Where are you?" I looked in the

mirror again and caught a flash of dark hair and feet running away. When I looked behind me, there was no one. I went to the mirror and touched the glass, trying to find a seam in the box—anywhere I could start a crack.

“That’s mine.”

A man’s voice! It jarred me so much I almost put my fist through the fragile glass. I spun and confronted the killer. Natsu the Slicer—a living legend and child’s nightmare—sat in a chair with his legs spread, hands on his knees. There was laughter in his dark eyes, and a damnable lack of tension in his lanky posture. He looked at the guitar I held and smiled as if at a fond memory.

“That’s my guitar,” he said.

“Like *hell* it is,” I snarled. Instead of advancing, I pivoted and slammed the guitar into the glass at the place where his smiling reflection was. The instrument shattered, and the sound of breaking glass and high-pitched moans filled my ears. A weight hit me from the side and knocked me off my feet. I fell into the pile of music stands, the sharp metal edges tearing into my clothes and skin.

The weight fell away, and I saw the ruined portion of the mirror where I’d hit it, and Natsu retreating, running across the room in pursuit of Yui. The little girl’s reflection was all I could see of her from the floor, the jagged images of many little girls running away from the killer. For a second, they all had different faces—Japanese faces and Thai faces, old and young—*no!* I pulled myself up and forced my gaze away from the mirror.

I looked around for the guitar, but it lay in splinters on the floor. I picked up one of the music stands instead, even though I knew this was the worst mistake I could make. Weapon, attack, pain—the more I gave into them, the more real they became.

A line of slick wetness ran down my forehead. I brushed it away and saw the red streaks on my hand. I tried to will the blood away, but the red stain remained, collected in dark lines under my fingernails.

I’m screwing everything up. This is just making it worse.

Across the room, cracks in the mirror spidered outward from where the guitar had made its mark.

“Yui, come out,” I pleaded. “He can’t hurt you anymore.” Hollow words, even to my ears. The blood on my face proved Natsu could still hurt.

A hand grabbed my ankle, and I screamed. Resisting the urge to strike out, I went down on one knee and looked under the piano. Yui looked back at me from beneath the bench, her eyes wide and glassy. I wanted to reach out to her, but I still had the blood on my hands. I didn’t want her to see it.

“It’s time for you to come out,” I said. I tried to make my voice gentle. Liz would laugh at me. She knew I wasn’t a gentle person. I wondered why she’d ever given me this assignment.

“I want my guitar,” the little girl said.

The triumph I'd begun to feel withered inside me. It had been right in front of me all along, the detail I'd needed, and I hadn't seen it. The monster had snared me in its trap, and I'd smashed the guitar.

"Can't you go without it?" I said, clinging to hope. But the girl shrank from me at the mere suggestion and seemed to grow smaller beneath the bench, pulling away into a corner of the box where I couldn't reach her, not without doing more damage.

"Go away," she said, "before he comes back."

"Please—"

"Go away!"

The force of it shattered the glass. Shards of it lodged in my skin, and I screamed again. I was still screaming when I came to with Liz's familiar hands on my shoulders. Their softness ran up and down my arms, soothing, caressing the nightmare away.

"Come out of it," Liz said. "Come on now. That's it."

A group of nurses crowded in the doorway, their bodies held back by the arms of the police officers guarding the door to the hospital room. Liz sat next to me in a metal chair, the two of us poised beside Yui's bed.

She'd been in here for a week now, unconscious, haunted by the memory of a monster she couldn't escape, even in dreams. How long had I been trying to reach her traumatized mind? How many times had I gone in? I was so disoriented I couldn't remember.

Liz took my hand. "Three times," she said, as if reading my thoughts. "This was the fourth. We can't risk many more tries at this, not without doing permanent damage to both of you."

"Then why don't you do it?" I said, my voice raw. Calmly, Liz held out a cup of water. I wanted to slap it out of her hand. "At this rate, she's going to be meat when I'm done with her."

"In many ways, she already is," Liz said. "The killer took care of that part. Our job is to salvage what's left. If we're lucky, with what we're learning about him, we'll make sure he can't do this to anyone else."

"But why—?" I unclenched my hands from the bed sheets and pushed away from the girl. "Just finish it, please."

"I can't," Liz said. She spoke in the teacher voice again, and for just a minute, I hated her. "Yui knows you now. If she sees someone else, she'll be even more frightened. Trust me on that. You're learning a little more each time. Next time you'll know what to do, won't you?"

I looked at the guitar propped against the wall, the pristine instrument that I had smashed to pieces only moments ago. "I want to kill him," I said. "Every time, I want to hurt him more."

"I know," Liz said. She stroked my hair, her fingers lingering at my neck. "But

that's not your job. Our job is to pick up the pieces, assess the damage, and get out." She leaned forward, forced me to look at her. "It's a box, love, not a school. Do you understand?"

She knew I understood. What she didn't know was whether I could accept it. That would determine everything, in the end—whether I could become a Pan, whether I could let Liz keep teaching me or if it would end us.

"It's a box," I said, trying to make myself sound certain. I sent a mental command to the chip linking me to the little girl's brain. "It's a box."



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