

Tomo and the Soul Catchers

By

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Supernatural

Thriller

with Sci-fi and Darks

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Chapter One: The New Boss

There was no reason to be anxious: the department was flourishing, and all its members worked perfectly together. However, no amount of logic and justification could calm his fiery nerves. *Today everything could change.*

They were welcoming a new boss, and it didn't matter how good, efficient, or cooperative a team was; if the leader was too severe or too lenient, too uptight or too lax—basically, anything short of perfect—everything else would fall apart.

Tomo couldn't help but think back to when he was a 5-year old boy and his father, a brilliant robotic engineer, had been laid off by his new boss. He remembered the dark, heavy atmosphere that descended upon the entire household. Even his relatives—cousins, aunties, uncles, and grandparents—took part in the mourning.

He remembered going to the bathroom that night. As he clambered through the pitch-black corridor, he found the deep, dull, orange outline of his parents' bedroom door glowing softly. Behind it, a hushed conversation was taking place.

His mom was sobbing and his father was speaking in his deep voice—solemn, but solid.

“I never did anything wrong,” his father said. “He’s just a jealous bastard. He probably thought I would be taking his job soon—and he was right.”

“What are we going to do?” his mother said hopelessly, not seeming to hear his dad’s angry words. “We won’t be able to make the house payments soon. Then what will the rest of family and neighbors think? It’s so shameful.”

As her sobs became more intense, Tomo felt frozen. He had spent his entire childhood in this house and couldn’t imagine life without it.

“Please don’t cry.” His dad consoled her in his most reassuring voice. “I’ll get another job, an even better one, and all this will pass. I believe in karma. Somehow, someday, he will get what’s coming to him for what he did to us.”

After several long, painful months of living lean and having close calls with the bank, Tomo's dad found a new workplace.

He was one of the first employees at a young company trying to break into the robotics business, and he remained there for years.

Sinking back to the present, Tomo couldn't help but smile at the perseverance and dedication his dad had demonstrated during those tumultuous times. He whispered silently to lady luck:

"You didn't abandon my dad, please don't abandon me."



Everything is going to be just fine, Tomo repeated to himself for the hundredth time as he walked through the underground garage of Nakia, which was filled with cars, and stepped into the elevator. He selected his floor from the display panel and the doors slid shut with a soft whirring sound. He felt a sensation in his stomach as it was pushed down by the G-forces, signaling that he had begun the long ascent to his office's level.

He was always the last person to get to work, but he made to arrive at the last possible minute to avoid getting into any trouble. So he was surprised when, after just a couple of seconds, the elevator slowed to a halt on the ground floor and its doors slid open.

White sunlight flooded the elevator, temporarily blinding Tomo. His eyes adjusted immediately, and he got a good look at the man on the other side of the door.

He was far past his prime years, with a large frame and an even larger beer belly. He wore big, round-edged antique spectacles that Tomo had seen only in classic movies.

He grinned at Tomo as he sauntered through the doorway and Tomo smirked back, masking his irritation.

"Phew!" the stranger said, turning around to face the door, which was closing a second time. As he bent to lay down his briefcase, Tomo noticed the bald patches on the back of his head.

"If I missed this lift, I'd have been late for my meeting," he said to Tomo, still maintaining his big smile. Tomo, looking out from the corners of his eyes, noticed that he had slightly yellowed teeth.

Tomo gave back a forced smile; he was not in the mood to talk.

"One hundred twenty-three for me, please," the man said to Tomo.

Before Tomo's hand could reach for the panel, the number 123 flashed on the antique LED display above the door.

"Cool!" Tomo said, his voice filled with awe. "Voice command. I've never used it before."

"Me neither," said the stranger. "I was actually talking to you, but *it* was listening." He said "it" as he pointed with his index finger at the ceiling, moving in a circular, tornado-like motion.

"Yeah, you have to be careful with these things nowadays; they might catch not only your words, but also your *thoughts*," Tomo said, squinting his eyes in suspicion to emphasize the last word.

"Really?" the stranger exclaimed with a shocked look on his face.

Tomo laughed. "No, no. Not really, not yet at least."

The man chuckled, then gestured around the elevator and breathed in deeply. "So where is everyone?"

"At their workstations," Tomo replied.

"And what about you?" the stranger asked.

"Well, I just like arriving at the last minute," Tomo replied in a matter-of-fact manner, maintaining his composure, though he was sure he was talking to somebody important.

"Isn't that risky?" the stranger asked. "This is a Japanese company, after all, and I know how their culture is very serious about discipline, especially punctuality."

“Well, of course one will get into trouble if one is late, but I’m not *late*. I just *choose* to come at the last possible second, you know.”

“I see, but there is always something unpredictable that could happen to disrupt your impeccable timing. Then what would you do?” the man asked.

“Unpredictability stems from a lack of organizational skills,” Tomo answered as he looked into the man’s eyes and saw only his reflection staring back at him.

A pleasant woman’s voice interrupted their conversation. “We have reached floor 123. Have a nice day.”

The doors opened with a light whirring sound.

“You first, Boss.” Tomo gestured towards the doors and smirked as he looked straight into the man’s eyes.

“H-how did you know?” the man asked with wide eyes and a confused smile crossing his face.

“Oh, calculated guess,” Tomo said smugly, feeling very clever. “Who else would be climbing to my floor at the last minute and not know who I am?”



Roger stood in front of the team and introduced himself to his new subordinates, speaking with clarity and confidence that showed years of experience.

“Good morning, gentlemen. It’s great to meet you all. I’m Roger Williams, but you can call me Rog for short. I’ve worked in sales and marketing at Flying Vehicles Incorporated my entire life. I was actually one of the first employees there, having joined when they were still a department of Mercedes.”

One of Tomo’s colleagues, Steve, who had always been fond of vintage cars, immediately raised a hand and spoke in an uncharacteristically formal tone. Though they may have had some shared interests, he wasn’t friends with Roger yet.

“Excuse me, Roger. I never knew FV used to be part of Mercedes. When did they split and become an independent enterprise?”

Roger was delighted at the man’s interest. “For ages,” he replied. “Around twenty years ago. I’m not really sure on the exact date, but I doubt there’s any human who knows more about FV than I do.”

“Oh really?” Steve asked, struggling to maintain his composure while feeling giddy, like a teen girl who had just been given backstage access to her favorite rock star.

“Well,” Roger replied, raising his eyebrows and smiling broadly, “I’m an old man, and with my own two eyes I’ve watched the world change to become what you all know. And I

was at the forefront of new technology before any of you could even say ‘mama.’”

The whole group burst out into laughter, and everyone seemed to be relieved. From the way his colleagues seemed to loosen and open up their body language, Tomo realized he hadn’t been the only one anxious about the turn of events. But it looked like the new boss was an easygoing guy with a good sense of humor. Though he hadn’t proven himself, at least he had a good personality.

They carried on chatting about Flying Vehicles for a while, but Tomo was keen to find out more about the personal motivations the new boss had for jumping ship. He seized the first opportunity to change the topic of conversation.

“Why did you leave FV? You seem really passionate about it.”

Roger looked straight at Tomo. Tomo noticed now that the boss’s demeanor had changed since he left the elevator. Though Roger had a sense of humor, he seemed more authoritative.

Roger’s voice pulled Tomo out of his thoughts before he could make any more observations about him.

“Upper management was pushing for more sales,” said Roger, slowly walking in front of the team in one direction and

then another, “but pretty much everyone who wanted, needed, or could afford a flying car in the city already had one. So, where were we supposed to get new customers?”

Rodger paused for effect, then continued.

“The only untapped market was in rural areas, but they lacked the infrastructure. All they would need, though, was a few well-maintained, cleared patches of land, which was no problem, them being farmers and all. However, again, most of the farmers are strict traditionalists and prefer the rugged ground vehicles to the high-tech, high-speed, high-flying FVs. Make sense?”

“Makes sense,” Tomo agreed, nodding his head slightly. “Ground vehicles are less expensive as well.”

Koji pushed up his sleek, thin-framed glasses and asked, “But is the market in the cities so full? I am sure there’s potential somewhere—if not among individual consumers, then among corporations.”

“They wouldn’t buy either. Trust me, we tried,” Roger replied.

“Why not?” Koji asked.

“Well, there were ... incidents, to put it lightly. The landing guidance system was buggy and drivers often missed the landing pad completely, crashing into skyscrapers and

penthouses. And the media, of course, blew every incident way out of proportion. It got so bad that even existing customers were selling their cars at steep losses just to get rid of them.”

“FV should have put an effort into improving the solution itself. Why didn’t they improve the safety features, add some sensors, or better yet, an autopilot system?” Tomo asked, feeling himself get angry that such a large corporation wouldn’t think of putting such simple measures in place.

“Definitely. I said it a thousand times during meetings. I wasn’t the only one who pointed it out. Many of us were unhappy, but...” Roger lowered his voice. “There were obviously political games going on in the upper levels of management. Probably someone interested in selling FV out and purposely being a saboteur to make sure the acquisition cost as little as possible. It was too risky for me to stay there longer, so I quit and left them to deal with their own issues.”

Roger finished his explanation; then the room settled into silence. But Tomo still wanted to dig deeper.

“Why would anyone want to sell out the company?” he asked.

Steve shook his head and said, “Politics! Politics is a weird and dangerous game.”

Roger pointed his finger at Steve and waved in agreement. “Exactly. It’s best for everyone’s sake to keep their hands out of the dirty laundry.”

Tomo nodded.

“So now that you’re here, Rog, I’m sure you’re not earning anything near what you were making at FV,” Steve said, though it was more of a question than a statement.

“Well, of course not. But I’m glad to have a change of scenery after all those years, and that counts more than money,” Roger replied.

He took a sip of his coffee, which by now was lukewarm, and glanced at his wristwatch.

“Ok, folks, time’s flying. Now that you know more than enough about me, it’s your turn to introduce yourselves. He laid his cup of cold coffee on the table and rubbed the palms of his hands against each other.

He gestured towards Tomo.

“Let’s start with you.”

Tomo nodded and with a voice slightly louder than it had been before, said, “Well, I’m Tomo Kaneda, born and raised in Japan, but moved to America. I’ve been working for Nakia for three years now.”

“Why did you leave Japan?” Roger asked.

Tomo sighed. “I didn’t like it there. It was too restrictive.”

“It’s true,” said Koji, who had been silent until now. “You’re supposed to be integrated into your company’s business day and night, 24/7. Only then would the company accept you, and you would have to work in that specific company for the rest of your life.”

Roger frowned and nodded. “So what do you do here?”

Steve jumped in before Tomo had the chance to reply. “He’s our computer genius.”

“Yes, your name did sound familiar. Aren’t you the one responsible for the three-dimensional navigation system?” Roger asked.

“Yeah, it was just a side project which Nakia took up and integrated into the main system. I didn’t know if it actually made it into mainstream usage, though,” Tomo said, feeling a little embarrassed but happy that his hard work was appreciated.

“The terrain mapping and elevation data was spot on; it was so precise that it actually had potholes in the road!” Roger said with a big smile.

Tomo was impressed that the boss had noticed such a tiny detail, which had taken a lot of effort to implement.

Roger continued his praise. “And the language recognition in the navigation was extremely impressive. Even though I spoke to it in English, which is not my first language, and was suffering a bad cold, it had no problem recognizing my commands. I never needed to repeat myself. It’s a brilliant piece of engineering, and you are truly one talented man.”

Tomo, who was trying to keep himself from blushing after all the high words directed his way, said, “I didn’t do it alone. The whole team worked really hard to make it perform well.”

“Yeah, well, he did do most of the coding himself, so he deserves most of the praise,” Steve added and punched Tomo’s shoulder playfully. “Stop being so modest.”

“I see. And how much time did you dedicate to that project?” Roger asked.

“All by myself? About fifty to sixty percent, hard to say,” Tomo replied.

“And what did you do with the rest of your time?” Roger asked.

Tomo shifted his weight onto the other foot and said, “E-A.”

Roger was unrelenting in his questioning. “EA?” he asked.

“E-Assistant, Artificial Intelligence Pal. We call it E-A for the sake of simplicity,” Tomo explained without raising his eyes.

“Do you mean the virtual head?” Roger asked.

Steve inserted himself into the dialogue again. He glowed with excitement as he said, “It may look like just a head, but don’t get it twisted; it has more mental processing power than an army of quantum scientists.”

Tomo nodded his head in agreement. “Yeah, you can call it anything you’d like, but it has some serious processing power.”

Roger was amused by Tomo’s spontaneous burst of enthusiasm. “It seems you’re really into this project,” he said.

“Yeah, you could say Artificial Intelligence is my one true passion,” Tomo replied.

“What exactly you are doing in that project?”

“Apart from designing the three-dimensional models, I’ve been concentrating on improving its analytical capabilities, problem solving and user behavioral learning, stuff like that. That navigation system you were talking about is a sort of test bed for the user recognition and assistance features,” Tomo explained.

“Fascinating!” Roger said. “And if I remember correctly, you have been outsourced for the E-A project by Artificial Intelligence International?”

“That’s right.”

“I’d like to talk with you about this project later on.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” Tomo replied.

Roger turned to the second employee. “Your turn, Steve,” he said.

“What about me?”

“Well, what’s your story? What are you doing here?”

“Well, I’m a fifth-generation American, but not purely American; according to our family tree, one of my grand-grandmothers had German blood.”

Tomo’s mind drifted away as Steve recounted his background. Tomo had to admit he hadn’t been entirely truthful when Roger asked him why he moved to States; it wasn’t only because of the rigidity of the people and the intensity of the work culture. The real reason was that he had developed a passion for American women.

Tomo’s thoughts moved to his early teenage years, back to when he first noticed American movies. The extroverted, self-confident, assertive American women were at first surprising and even intimidating to young Tomo, but over time they started to delight him. They were such a stark contrast from the quiet and shy Japanese girls he knew, and whom he found rather boring.

He began immersing himself into the culture. He carefully studied the American female characters’ facial expressions,

gestures, and even the subtlest of mannerisms. At one point, Tomo was considering becoming a tour guide for all the Americans, but the call of computer science was too strong.

After working in his father's company for several years, Tomo became a true guru in computer programming. Driven to work on his own idea, he joined Nakia, a small enterprise focusing on cutting-edge technologies.

That's when he'd seen *her*.

She was standing with her back to him and he stared at her slim figure in a perfectly tailored suit, her beautiful long brown hair and black high heels. Something stirred in his chest. When she turned her face to him, Tomo's heart spoke to him, saying:

“She's the one.”

Her name was Ann. She was the head of sales and marketing at A.I.I., Artificial Intelligence International, an American corporation. They were in urgent need of a skillful 3D modeler to rework the user interface of one of their flagship products. Coming to negotiate a partnership between A.I.I. and Nakia, she wound up finding Tomo, who was the perfect candidate for the job.

Isn't life amazing? Tomo thought. *My dream girl came to me and brought my dream job along with her.*

Steve had apparently finished telling his life story, and Roger made a gesture towards Koji, signaling it was now his turn.

“Well, I’m Koji Necho and my homeland is Japan,” he said with his characteristic lisp.

Tomo knew all this already, and his thoughts flowed back to Ann. He smiled as he remembered the day he was scheduled to have lunch with her, an executive of one of the largest, most successful companies in the world.

Chapter Two: Ann

Tomo entered the tiny, soundproof communication room of Nakia. He had always loved it, but had never figured out exactly why. It definitely had something to do with the ActiveWalls, which had screens covering every surface of the premises. In a perfect montage, they immersed the occupants in various exotic locations. Right now, he was in the middle of the Amazon rainforest.

He stood in front of the personnel directory monitor and, after scanning it for a moment, tapped Ann's tiny image on the holographic screen. While listening to the dialing sound, he felt a light shiver of excitement going down his spine.

Even after almost two and half years of knowing her, I still get excited every time I speak to her! Tomo thought. *That's how much this woman matters to me!*

Ann's face appeared on the screen, interrupting his train of thought.

"Hello, gorgeous!" he said with enthusiasm. His Japanese accent flared up and he accidentally said "herro" instead.

Ann did not return his greeting; instead she remained stoic and silent.

In spite of the cold reception, he continued. "Don't forget our special romantic lunch! We will treasure the memory of the pleasure..."

He saw her face change to plain irritation and caught a brief glimpse of her eyes rolling for an instant before the screen flashed black. She had hung up on him.

Ooh. She hadn't seemed too happy about that.



"I'm not complaining, Tomo, but there's a time and a place for everything."

They met in the A.I.I. canteen. It was called the canteen, but this was more of a pet name than an accurate one. It was, in reality, a gigantic hall with just a few decorations and minimal colors. Massive, transparent walls surrounded it on three sides, spanning from the ground to the ceiling some seventy

feet high, filling it with pure white sunlight. This gave the entire interior a cool glow and had a calming effect on the occupants, who felt like they were walking on a cloud.

But Tomo was not concentrating on the atmosphere or the impressive technology; all his thoughts were focused on Ann.

“You dropped in right when I was addressing my team!” Ann retorted.

“That’s hardly my fault.” Tomo shrugged, smiling broadly as he leaned back in his chair. “Your meeting was obviously in need of one more participant.”

Ann sighed. “All men are children, but you, Tomo? Infinitely more so.”

“So true,” Tomo said as he raised his hands in mock-surrender. For an instant his eyes flicked down to Ann’s ample cleavage. God, she was blessed in that department! He couldn’t very well stare openly, but he’d love nothing more than to get to know her body more intimately...

“And since I’m a child, I need a pretty nanny,” he flirted.

“A hungry nanny isn’t good for any child,” Ann teased him back. “Let’s get some food on the way.”

They each selected their meals on the ActiveMenu, which then sent their orders to the restaurant’s master computer.

“You look great today, by the way,” she said as he turned back to face her.

Pleased by the compliment, he ran a hand through his hair. “Thanks. I thought I’d make an effort for you, my sweet.”

“Huh. Are you sure I’m *your* sweet?” she replied.

Tomo stumbled as he tried to give a witty answer. “Well, it’s not against the law to dream, is it? Not yet anyway. Don’t you have dreams?”

He saw her losing herself in her thoughts, but then she was back with him in an instant.

“Well, not that sort of dream,” she said. “But you’re alright or else we wouldn’t be such good friends.”

“We could be so much more, Ann!” Tomo said, leaning forward and placing his elbows on the table. He quickly sat up when he realized the robot waitress was standing right next to him.

“Wow!” he exclaimed as the waitress—Alice-4, according to the tag on her apron—slid their plates on the table and flashed a broad, gracious smile. “Amazingly quiet,” he observed, tilting his head towards the robot.

“Bon appétit,” Alice-4 chirped in her slightly computerized voice, continuing to beam her welcoming smile at them both.

Ann nodded. “Thank you, Alice.”