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講談社
文庫



Kara no Kyoukai

Volume 01

The Garden of Sinners

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1/

Overlooking View

Thanatos



／ Overlooking View (Thanatos) -Fujou Kirie-

One day, I chose to take the main street home.

This was unusual for me, just a whim of the moment.

Walking along the building-lined street that I was tired of seeing day in and day out, someone came crashing down.

I hardly even had a chance to hear it. The muffled splattering sound.

But it was obvious: someone had fallen from one of the buildings above ... and was now dead.

A crimson color slowly seeped onto the concrete.

Only the long black hair still retained its former appearance. Thin, fragile, white-looking limbs. And a lifeless, smashed face.

The whole scene reminded me of a pressed flower, flattened between the old pages of a book.

Probably because the corpse, with only its neck bent like a fetus, looked like a folded lily to me.



On the night it turned August, Mikiya suddenly dropped in out of the blue.

"Evening. You're looking as fatigued as always, Shiki."

The sudden visitor stood by the entrance, smiling as he shot me this lame greeting.

"I passed an accident on my way here, actually. A girl committed suicide. Jumped off the building. I heard it's been happening a lot recently but I never thought I'd see one myself.... Oh yeah, put this in the freezer."

As he untied his shoes by the door, he tossed me a plastic bag from a convenience store. Inside were two cups of [Häagen-Dazs](#) strawberry ice cream. I guess I was supposed to keep them cool before they melt.

While I was slowly checking out the contents of the bag, Mikiya had finished taking off his shoes and was over the threshold.

I lived in a studio apartment. If you go from the entrance and past the hallway, which isn't even a meter long, you get to the room serving as both bedroom and living room.

Glaring at Mikiya's back as he strode hastily into the room, I followed suit.

"Shiki. You cut class today, right? I don't care much about your grades, but if you don't at least watch your attendance, you won't be able to go on to a decent school. You haven't forgotten, have you? We promised to go to college together."

"Yeah, like you have the right to lecture me about school." I replied. "And for starters, I don't remember making that promise. Oh, and didn't you already drop out?"

"... Well, I don't think rights exist for anything," said Mikiya, attempting to appear sophisticated, then sat down. He tends to let out his true feelings when he's on the defensive. It's something that came back to me recently.

Mikiya sat down in the middle of the room.

I lowered myself onto the bed behind him and lied sideways. He was just there, facing away from me.

I blankly gazed his back from behind, which was small compared to the average guy.

His full name was Kokuto Mikiya, and it had somehow happened that he'd been a friend of mine ever since high school.

In the midst of youngsters nowadays—the ones who show off all the latest fads that appear one after another, and ultimately burned themselves out—he was real rarity who boringly kept the image of a student.

He didn't dye or grow his hair. He wasn't tanned or wore accessories. He didn't carry a cell phone or flirt with women. His height was around 170cm or so. His kind-looking face was more on the cute side, and his black-rimmed glasses made that feature stand out even more.

Even when he had graduated from high school he dressed ordinarily. I sometimes thought about how he could even catch a few looks had he dressed up on the streets—

"Shiki, are you listening? I saw your mother too. Shouldn't you at least drop by your house? I heard that you haven't even contacted them since you got out of the hospital two months ago."

"Yeah, I've got no reason to, that's why."

"You don't need a reason for a happy family get-together, you know. They're your family after all. You haven't spoken with them for two years. So all you need to do is sit down and have a proper talk together."

I paused a bit before replying. "...Nah. I can't see it happening, so forget about it. If I saw them, it would just make us all feel even more distant from each other. I still feel weird talking to you, so how do you expect me to hold a conversation with those people?"

"Shiki, things aren't gonna fix by themselves, right?. It'll be like this your whole life if you don't make the first move and open up to them. It's not right for parents and children to live so close together and yet not even meet each other."

His judgmental words annoyed me.

Not right, he said. What exactly was "not right"? There wasn't any funny business between me and my parents. It's simple. Their daughter had been in a traffic accident and lost all of her memories. By law and blood we were still family, so I would assume there was nothing wrong with just leaving it at that.

But Mikiya always worried about people's emotional wellbeing. Even though stuff like that held zero interest for me.



Ryougi Shiki had been my friend since high school. Ours was a private school, famous for sending students on to good colleges.

You don't see a name like Ryougi Shiki every day, so it stuck in my mind when I went to see the application results. And we ended up in the same class. Since then, I became one of Shiki's very few friends.

As our school did not have uniforms, I think everyone expressed themselves by how they dressed. In that kind of crowd, Shiki stood out. The reason was because Shiki always wore a kimono. Always.

The modest, informal look complemented Shiki's sloping shoulders so much that it made the classroom feel like a samurai-style house just by her walking, and it wasn't just her looks, either.

She made no unnecessary movements. Only in class did she utter anything resembling words. I think that was the only thing that gave us any idea of what Shiki was like as a person.

As for her actual looks, well, they were too good to be true. Her hair was beautiful like black silk, cut in a half-hearted fashion, then left to its own devices. The result was a short cut just long enough to hide her ears. Strangely enough, it suited Shiki so well that many students mistook her for a boy.

Shiki was handsome in a way that she appeared female to men, and male to women. Rather than beautiful, her features were more awe-inspiring.

But if you asked me, I would say that she had something even more fascinating than these characteristics: her eyes. Those eyes had a sharp yet calm look, and her delicate eyebrows, too. She had a way of always seeming to be gazing upon something invisible to us. In my opinion, this summed up her entire personality.

Indeed.

Until she ended up the way she did.



"...jumping."

"Er— Sorry, I wasn't listening."

"Suicide by jumping off something. Would that be considered an accident, Mikiya?" I asked. My mumbled, bored-sounding words jolted Mikiya out of his silence and back to his senses. With that, he thought seriously about the question.

"Hm, I'd definitely say that's an accident, but... hm... I don't really know how to put it. If a person commits suicide, they're dead and gone, right? So long as it's the person's will to do so, the responsibility is only on that person. But if you jump from a high place, the responsibility doesn't completely belong to that person. Hard to distinguish it from falling. That's more like an accident."

"Then it's not a murder, nor is it an accidental death. The line seems pretty hazy, if you ask me. Maybe they should've picked a way that wouldn't trouble others if they were going to kill themselves."

"Shiki, it's not right to talk ill of the dead," said Mikiya. His tone didn't sound scolding, but blunt. His words were so utterly predictable that I could tell he was going to say it even before he opened his mouth.

"Quit the common sense talk, Kokuto." Naturally, my response got a bit harsh, but Mikiya did not seem upset by it.

"Aah. You haven't called me that in a while."

"Really?"

Mikiya nodded like a particularly well-mannered squirrel.

There were two ways I called him by: Mikiya and Kokuto. I didn't like the sound of Kokuto, although I never knew why. In the small silence that formed during my pondering, Mikiya clapped his hand, as if he'd remembered something.

"Oh, speaking of uncommon things, my sister Azaka saw it."

"Saw what?"

"*That* thing. The girl at the Fujou building, the one they say flying in the air. You said you saw it too, didn't you?"

Oh, I remembered now. The ghost story that started around three weeks ago. As the story had it, there was and high-class apartment complex in the business district called the Fujou building. At night, a human-like form could be seen floating above the building. So it wasn't just me that saw it, but Azaka did, too. The thing had to be real, it seemed.

After being in a coma for two years from a traffic accident, I was able to see things that "shouldn't be there". Well, as Touko would put it, I wasn't seeing but rather "perceiving" them. In other words, my brain and eyes had been raised to a new level, but it's not like I was interested in the explanations behind it.

"Not just once. I've caught sight of it at the Fujou building multiple times. Though I haven't walked that way in a while, so I don't know if I could still see it."

Mikiya responded, "I see. I go by there a lot, but I've never seen anything."

"It's 'cause you wear glasses."

"I don't think that has anything to do with glasses," Mikiya pouted. His reaction was so warm, and with no hint of maliciousness. That might've been why it was harder for him to see those kinds of things.

Even so, it just kept on happening: the mind-numbingly dull phenomenon of people jumping—or falling or whatever.

I didn't understand the meaning behind the thought, so I said the question out loud, "Mikiya, do you know why people would jump?"

Mikiya shrugged.

"Jumping or flying, I don't understand either." Mikiya said. "They're not something I've tried yet, are they?"

His answer was so matter-of-factly, and so coolly said.

2

On the night at the end of August, I decided to take a stroll.

The air was a bit cold for the end of a summer. It was long after the last train had departed, and the town fell silent.

Cold, quiet, desolate, it was like an unfamiliar ghost town. There was no one else to be found, nor there was any warmth to be felt, like the inside of a motionless photo. The view made me think of an incurable disease.

Disease. Illness. Sickening.

It felt like everything, from the dark-windowed houses to the brightly illuminated convenience stores, could crumble at the sound of a cough.

Amid it all, the verdant moonlight accentuated the night.

The moon was the only thing that looked alive in this totally anesthetized world. It made my eyes hurt horribly.

That was what I meant by sickening.

When I left my house, I put on a red leather jacket over my light blue kimono.

The kimono's sleeves were tucked up in the jacket, and I was sweating.

Even then I wasn't hot, or rather...

The weather had never felt cold to me to begin with.

Even being this late into the day, you could see people as you walked down the street.

A person hurrying down the street looking at the ground.

A person pondering in front of a vending machine.

A group of people congregating in the lights of a convenience store.

I cast around for a meaning to these actions, but, after all, I was an outsider looking in. There was no chance of my understanding.

For one thing, I myself had no reason to be walking out at night like this. I was simply repeating my old self's habits.

Two years ago.

I, Ryougi Shiki, was about to head up to my second year in high school when I got into an accident, and was hauled off to the hospital.

Rain was pouring that evening.

Apparently, I got hit by a car.

Fortunately, it was a nice, clean crash: no major injuries, bleeding, or broken bones. On the flip side, all the damage ended up unluckily concentrated in my head.

I was in a coma from that point on.

Maybe it was because my body was pretty much in perfect condition, but the hospital decided to keep me alive, and my body desperately carried on breathing as I lay there unconscious.

Then, two months ago, Ryougi Shiki came back to life.

The doctors were apparently as shocked as if Lazarus himself had woken up in their hospital, fust from that, I knew, after all, just how hopeless my condition must have been. I was in for something of a shock myself, though not as big as theirs.

I'd go so far as to say I didn't know who I was. My memories up until that point were strange, somehow.

To put it simply, I couldn't trust my own memory.

It's different from a simple memory defect that prevents you from recalling your past... the kind of defect that's called amnesia.

According to Touko, memory is composed of four processes operated by the brain: writing, saving, replaying, and recognizing.

Writing is writing the image you've seen onto the brain.

Saving is keeping that information stored.

Replaying is retrieving that stored information. In other words, recalling memories.

Recognizing is confirming whether the information recalled is the same as the event that actually occurred.

If one cannot physically perform any one of these processes, the result is a memory defect. Of course, depending on the system that is dysfunctional, you get a lot of totally different kinds of memory defects

But in my case, all these processes were working properly. I couldn't really feel my previous memories as my own, but my "recognizing" process was working properly, as my memories indeed matched what I had experienced before.

And yet, I could not be confident about my past self. I could not feel who I was now were who I had been.

Even if I did have memories of being Ryougi Shiki, I could only see that memory belonging to someone else. Even though there was no doubt that I was Ryougi Shiki.

Ryougi Shiki disappeared during that two-year blank.

Perhaps not as far as the rest of the world is concerned, but my contents were hollowed out all the same. My memories and the personality I used to have—those links had been hopelessly severed beyond repair.

With that being the case, my memory became nothing but a film reel.

But since I have access to that reel, I could still pretend to be my former self. I could pass myself off to friends and family alike as the Shiki Ryogi they knew.

As you'd expect, this wasn't especially nice for me, though. It tormented me with an unbearable suffocating feeling.

A total imitation of life.

It was like I wasn't living at all.

Just like a newborn baby, I didn't know anything and I hadn't acquired anything of my own. But the memory of the past seventeen years had proved that I was a fully grown human being.

Fundamentally, emotions that I should have felt from various experiences were there in the form of memories. But I didn't experience them. Try as I might to make them real to me, they were still things that I already knew. If they evoke no reaction, it doesn't feel like you're alive.... It's the same as when a magician's sleight-of-hand tricks fail to surprise you anymore.

And so I repeated the same routines my former self used to do, without the feeling of being alive.

The reason for it was simple.

Because if I did it, I might be able to return to my previous self.

Because if I kept at this, maybe these nighttime walks would start to mean something to me, too.

Ah, I see.

You could say that I was in love with my old self.



Feeling like I'd walked a fair distance, I looked up and found myself standing in the business district, the source of all those rumors.

Buildings of the same height neatly stood side-by-side along the road, their glassy surface now reflected only the moonlight. The group of buildings by the main street was like a world engulfed by the silhouettes of roaming humanoid oddities.

Among them, there was a shadow conspicuously taller than the rest. This twenty story-tall, ladderlike structure looked like a long, narrow tower and seemed so tall it almost touched the moon.

The name of the tower was Fujou.

It was an apartment building, but no light shone from it.

The residents must have been all asleep, probably because it was two in the morning.

At that instant, an uninteresting shadow came into my field of vision.

A silhouette of a girl was floating into my view. No, it wasn't a metaphor: the girl was, in a literal sense, floating.

There was no wind.

The night air was strangely chilly for summer. My neck shuddered from the cold.

Of course, that was just my imagination.

"Well, look at that. Here she is again," I said.

An unpleasant view, yet there was nothing to be done about it.

With that, the girl in question flew, as if leaning against the moon.

／Overlooking View／

The image was that of a dragonfly. Flying away, restless.

A butterfly came to follow, but the dragonfly didn't slow down. Then, the butterfly could not keep up and fell, powerlessly, as it was about to disappear from view.

It fell in an arc.

The falling motion was like that of a snake; a flattened lily.

That image was heartbreakingly sad.

Even if we could not travel together, I should have at least stayed by its side a bit longer.

But that was impossible.

Because my feet weren't on the ground, I did not even have the freedom to stand and stop.

Someone was talking, and I resigned myself to waking up.

My eyelids were heavy. Proof that I hadn't slept even two hours.

As I was thinking how petty I was for making an effort to wake up in that state, my will had won over my sleepiness. Frankly, I was troubled by my own simple-mindedness.

I remembered for sure that all last night, I'd stayed up to put the finishing touches on some plans, and gone to sleep in Touko-san's room.

I rose energetically from the sofa. Sure enough, the sight of the office met my eyes. Seemed like it wasn't even noon yet.

In the summer sunlight, Shiki and Touko-san were deep in conversation.

Shiki was leaning against a wall, standing, and Touko-san was sitting cross-legged on a chair.

As always, Shiki was wearing her neatly made kimono like it was the most natural thing in the world. As for Touko-san, she had a pair of plain, tight black pants, and what looked like a snazzy new white shirt. With her hair short and plunging neckline, Touko-san had the appearance of a secretary. Though, that said, her expression whenever she took off her glasses was so indescribably ghastly that she'd probably never get a job like that even if a disaster wiped out every other woman on earth.

"Morning, Kokuto."

The look on Touko-san's face, which was more like a glare, was nothing out of the ordinary. ... Seeing that she had her glasses off, I guess she and Shiki had been having one of *those* conversations.

"Sorry, I must have fallen asleep."

"Don't explain the obvious. I've got eyes, you know." She replied bluntly, took a cigarette to her mouth. "If you're awake, go make something to drink. It should make a good rehabilitation."

"....?"

Rehabilitation? What, like, back into society?

I didn't know why she felt I needed something like that, but since Touko-san was always like that, I decide not to question her.

"Do you want anything, Shiki?"

"I'm fine. I'm off to bed any minute now."

Saying so, Shiki did seem to be lacking sleep.

She had probably gone off for one of her nighttime walks after I dozed off last night.



Next to the room which served as Touko-san's private room and the office was a room that acted like a kitchen.

The sink had three faucets in a row—maybe it used to be a lab or something. Basically, it was more like a water fountain at a school than a kitchen. Two of those had metal wires wrapped around them and were not for use. The reason for that was unknown to me. Touko-san simply said it made things easier, but it struck me as pointless and just annoyed me.

I turned the coffee maker on. The first thing I did when getting to work was to make the coffee. I'd now progressed to the point where I could even do it in my sleep.

It had been half a year since I, Kokuto Mikiya, got employed here.

Well, "employed" isn't the right way to put it. This wasn't a company, in any case. To come here prepared even for that, it might have been due to my earnest adoration for Touko-san's work.

After Shiki had sealed herself away in a perpetual seventeen-year-old time bubble, I had graduated from school, clueless, and drifted into a college.

It was a promise made with Shiki to enter that college. Even if she had little hope of recovery, I still wanted to keep our promise.

But nothing was there for me besides the promise; after becoming a college student, I was just counting off days on the calendar.

While I was leading such an aimless life, a friend of mine invited me to an exhibition, and I ended up finding a doll.

The doll, as if testing to the limits of what was allowed for a human being, was an exquisite craft. It appeared to be a human made frozen in time, yet simultaneously felt like a mere fabrication of the human shape—something that would never move on its own.

A mannequin obvious to be inhuman, yet like a figure that couldn't seem to be anything *but* a human.

A human who would come back to life at any moment, but a doll which did not have any life to begin with. And yet I couldn't help but feel it was alive, but in a place where no humans could reach...

I became entranced with such ambivalence. It may have been because everything about its existence was exactly like Shiki back then.

It was unknown where the doll came from.

The pamphlet did not even mention its existence.

I frantically dug around for information, and it turned out to be an unofficial display, and the crafter was one surrounded by much rumour in the industry.

The crafter—whose name Aozaki Touko—was a hermit, to put it simply.

Although her expertise was doll-making, it seemed she also designed buildings; she would do anything that involved making something, but never accepted any commissions. She would always go to someone and show them what she would make, and began her work after receiving a payment upfront.

Either she was a bona fide libertine or else a real eccentric.

I was intrigued. Even though I shouldn't have, I looked up the address of this weirdo of a woman.

It was away from downtown, located in an ambiguous address, neither in the residential or industrial district. In fact, her house was hardly what you'd call a house at all.

Frankly, it was a ruin. And I don't mean it was just a little bit run-down either. Construction had started on it many years ago during the boom years, but the economy had gotten worse, and they'd given up on it partway through, leaving a genuine abandoned building, in every sense of the word. The exterior "building" shape was pretty much done, but the insides were a different story, with all the walls and floors totally bare, consisting of nothing but their raw materials.

It would have been six stories high upon completion, but there was nothing above the fourth floor. Nowadays, a more efficient construction method would be to start building from the top floor, but I guess the people then were doing it the old school way. Since the construction was stopped halfway, the half-done fifth floor became like a rooftop.

The building was surrounded by a tall concrete wall, but I doubt it would have kept anyone out. Hell, it was a miracle some kids hadn't made a secret base out of it. That alone should tell you how peculiar of a building it was.

Anyway, it seemed that Aozaki Touko had bought this abandoned building that nobody else wanted.

The kitchen-like room I was pouring coffee situated on the fourth floor. The second and the third floors were like Touko-san's workspace, so we usually communicated up here on the fourth floor.

...Anyway, back to the story.

Eventually, I got to know her and dropped out of college to come and work here. Amazingly enough, I was being paid wages and everything

As Touko-san put it, there were two types of people with one of the two attributes: those who create and those who explore; those who utilize and those who destroy.

She told me straight ahead that I had no hope as a maker, but still hired me. Instead, I had potentials in my ability to explore, according to Touko-san.

"What's taking you so long, Kokuto," I heard her complaint across the room.

When I turned to look, the coffee maker was brimming with some sort of black liquid.



"Seems that yesterday was the eighth one now," said Touko-san suddenly, stubbing out her spent cigarette. "It's about time the rest of the world started noticing the connection."

She probably meant the recent epidemic of female high school students jumping to their deaths. I doubted she was talking about the harsh water shortages we'd been having this summer. As topics of woe went, that wasn't one she'd normally go for.

"Eight... Weren't there only six?"

"There were more while you were spacing off. It started in June, and it's averaging about three per month. Maybe there'll be one more within the next three days." Touko-san said something sickening. I took a look at the calendar; August would come to an end in three days. Three more days...?

Something about that caught my attention, but it faded away quickly.

"But I heard they are all unrelated. The girls who committed suicide are all supposedly from different schools with no connection to each other. It might be that the police are hiding the facts, though."

"You're not trusting people? That's unlike you." The corners of her mouth raised as Touko-san teased me. The glasses-less person I was looking at now became the most malicious-looking individual imaginable.

"But they haven't released any suicide notes. Six, no, eight people—if there're that many, they could at least make an official announcement or something like that. But if the police have not said anything about it, you'd think they are hiding them."

"That's what I mean by connection." Touko-san replied. "Actually, common features would be a more accurate description."

"Out of the eight, more than half are seen jumping off by themselves, by several people, but no one can find anything wrong with their private lives. It's not like they were doing drugs or affiliated with a weird religion.

"There's no doubt that these were spontaneous suicides, inspired by individual anxiety. Therefore, they didn't want to leave any last words, and the police probably don't consider the factors they have in common to be important."

".. So, it's not that they aren't releasing the suicide notes. There never were any from the start?"

After I said so doubtfully, Touko-san nodded, indicating she couldn't be quite sure.

But could that be possible?

There's an inconsistency somewhere, I thought; I took the coffee mug and tasted the bitterness of the liquid inside.

Why weren't there any suicide notes? Why weren't there any suicide notes? A person doesn't kill herself without leaving a note.

Speaking from pure logic, a suicide note is a sign of lingering regret. When people who don't want to die but see no other choice decide to finish themselves off, they leave their reasons behind in the form of a note.

Suicide without a note.

Having no reason to leave a note. To no longer have any kind of view on the world and just bow out... vanish without protest. That's total suicide. Such a complete suicide would leave no suicide note from the start, and wouldn't, I felt, even draw attention to fact of the death itself.

Which meant that jumping to one's death wasn't actually total suicide.

Dying in front of onlookers like that felt in itself like a form of suicide note. Surely it was because they wanted to leave something for the world to remember them by... because they wanted to announce their deaths in some fashion? So it only made sense that they must have left suicide notes.

So what was going on? Had a third party taken the girls' last notes away, since none had been found? No, then we'd have been leaving the realm of suicide altogether. What, then? There was only one reason I could think of.

In short, that they had literally been accidents.

That the girls had never intended to die. In that case, there would've been no need to write any note. It would be like just heading out for some shopping and getting hit by a car through pure bad luck. Just like Shiki had gone out last night.

... But, still, I couldn't for the life of me think how someone could just go out shopping and end up falling off a building.

"Mikiya, it'll end at eight. There won't be any more for a while." Shiki's words cut off my runaway train of thought

"How you do know it's going to end?"

The question was out of my mouth before I knew it. Shiki nodded as she looked into the distance.

"I went and looked. There were eight flying about," her pretty lips let out those words, whispering.

"Aha! So there were that many at that building. You knew how many there'd be right from the start, Shiki?"

"Yeah," said Shiki. "I took care of her, but I think those girls will stay there for a while; makes my stomach sick. Hey, Touko. Do people end up that way when they can fly a bit like that?"

"I wonder. You can't say for sure since everyone's different, but historically speaking, though there have been a lot of experiments, no human being has ever managed to succeed in flying under their own power. The words flying and falling are closely interlinked. But the more you're obsessed with the sky, the more you forget about that fact. The result is that they end up aiming for the clouds after they die, too. Rather than falling to the ground, it's like falling up into the sky."

Shiki frowned, not happy with the answer.

She was angry... but at what?

"Sorry," I interjected, "I'm not following this at all."

"Hm? Oh, it's just the Fujou building ghost story. I was thinking that I'd have to see it for myself to see if there's any substance to it or if it's just a bunch of reflections. I was going to go take a look when I had the time, but if Shiki's already killed it, there's no way for me to check now."

... I see. So they were talking about one of *those* things.

When Touko-san took off her glasses and got together with Shiki, it was usually this kind of occult stuff they talked about.

"You heard the story where Shiki saw the girl floating at the Fujou building, right? There's more to the story. Apparently, there were human-looking shapes bustling and flying around the girl. Since they don't leave the building, we were talking about whether the place acts like a net, trapping them."

They'd lost me. My face clouded. What I was hearing was just too strange and difficult to understand.

Touko-san must have seen my expression because she summed up the whole thing for me. She said, "So, there was someone floating at the Fujou building, with the figures of all the suicide girls around her. And those girls looked like ghosts, right?. That's pretty much it."

I nodded in tentative agreement.

I could grasp the main point of the story, but I guess I was hearing it after it was all over. From what Shiki had said earlier, it looked like she had done away with the ghost or whatever it was herself.

It had been two months since I let these two meet. I was starting to become the one to hear about the epilogue when it comes to these kinds of tales.

I wasn't like these two women. Incredibly average old me didn't want to get mixed up in stuff like that. But I didn't like being completely out of the loop either, and so this state of affairs was pretty much just right for me. I guess this was what people call a blessing in disguise.



"The way you say it makes the whole deal sound like a cheap novel." Right, Touko-san said, agreeing.

Only Shiki didn't seem convinced. Her eyes filled more and more seethe, casting sidelong glances and glaring at me.

"...?"

Had I done something to make her mad?

"Huh? But Shiki saw the ghosts there at the beginning of July, right? So weren't there only four of them at the Fujou building back then?"

I said the obvious for the sake of clarification, but Shiki shook her head; her face grew even grumpier.

"Eight. There were eight from the beginning. I already told you there won't be more than eight jumpers. The order goes in reverse for them."

"What, so you could see eight ghosts from the start? Ha-ha! Since when did you become like that clairvoyant girl."

"As if. I'm normal. There's just something weird about the air there. Let's see, it's weird like fire and ice right next to each other, so..."

Touko-san wasted no time in picking up where Shiki's vague statements had left off and said, "So, time works strangely on the other side. Time doesn't pass in

one solitary way. The mileage things have before decaying away is uneven. So it's a fact that there's a time lag between the breakdown of the human body and the memories that fill that body.

"When someone dies, do their memories disappear? I don't think so. As long as there are observers, ones to remember, nothing disappears instantly, but gradually fades away.

"Memories of a person... no, a record, in fact. Say the observer isn't a person but the environment surrounding that record. In that case, it walks the streets as a unique, phantom vision after death, like those girls. This is one aspect of the whole ghost' phenomenon. The ones who end up seeing these visions are those who have something in common with them: friends or family of the deceased. Shiki's the exception.

"Of course, the passage of time does affect these records, but at the top of that building, it seems to occur at a much slower rate. The girls' memories from when they were alive have not caught up to their true state yet.

"As a result, their memories alone are still living. What we have is probably the extremely delayed-action reality of those girls, projecting itself onto that place as phantoms."

At that point, Touko-san lit the latest in who knows how many cigarettes.

In essence, she's saying that when something goes away, as long as someone remembers it, it isn't gone. Thus, the very act of remembering causes it to be alive. So if it's alive, you can see it. That was my best guess.

Which meant that they were illusions at the end of the day. No, actually, the way Touko-san herself labelled them "phantoms" meant they were definitely something more otherworldly and impossible than that.

"I don't care about all that explanation—there's no harm in that," said Shiki.

"The problem is *her*. I know I got that thing good, but if there's a main body somewhere else, we'll just end up repeating this over and over again. I'm tired of being Mikiya's bodyguard."

"I feel the same way. I'll take care of Fujou Kirie. You can just take Kokuto home; there's about five more hours until he's off work. If you're going to sleep, you can use the there."

ver

The bed Touko-san was pointing at hadn't been cleaned once in a whole half year and looked like the inside of an incinerator packed with wastepaper. Obviously, Shiki ignored her.

"So? What was *she*, then, anyway?" asked Shiki.

The mage with a cigarette in her mouth thought to herself, then walked silently over to the window.

She surveyed the outside world from there.

There were no lights in the room, which was illuminated solely by the daylight from outside, making it difficult to tell if was daytime or evening inside.

Beyond the window, by contrast, it was clearly day. Touko-san gazed at the summer streets for a while.

"She probably used to be one of the 'flying' types, too."

The cigarette smoke was absorbed into the white sunlight.

I was watching over her back as she looked down at the scenery outside the window... She was like a mirage amid a white, misty haze.

"Kokuto, when you look down at the ground from somewhere high up, what image does it make you think of?"

My absentminded senses snapped back into focus at this sudden question

I hadn't really been at a high place since I went to the Tokyo Tower as a child. I didn't really remember what I had thought about it then—I think I had tried so hard to spot my house, but ended up not being able to find it.

"Maybe, something small?"

"You're reading into it too much, Kokuto." She responded with a cold remark. I pulled myself together and tried to think of something else.

"Let's see. There isn't much that it reminds me of, but it is beautiful, isn't it? Scenery is incredible when you see it from high up."

I guess this seemed a more heartfelt answer than my last one, because Touko-san nodded slightly in approval.

Then, her eyes absolutely unmoving from the view outside, she began to speak, "The scenery you see from high above is magnificent—even an ordinarily boring landscape would look beautiful. But that's not the impulse you feel when you look down onto the world you live in. The only impulse you sense from that view from above is... " Touko-san paused slightly when she said the word impulse.

An impulse isn't based on reason or intelligence. I don't think an impulse is something that comes from inside you, like your thoughts do, but rather something that swoops down from outside. Something that sweeps over you. Like a violent mugging. No matter how much you try to resist. That's what we

call an impulse. But what kind of violence could there be in a view from above ... ?

"...distance," said Touko-san. "That panoramic view is far too spacious, too expansive. It creates a definite sense of estrangement from the world. And humans can only draw peace of mind from the things around them, even at the best of times. No matter what elaborate maps you may have, no matter the fact that you know you're in such and such a place, it's still nothing more than basic information. To us, the world is nothing more than what we can touch and feel. We cannot feel the connecting points in what our brains register as this planet, this country, or this city, and we ourselves cannot feel them unless we actually go to see those places ourselves. And in reality, there is nothing wrong with that way of recognition.

"But if you get a view that's too spacious, it throws a spanner in the works. You've got thirty feet that you can touch and feel around you, but you're looking down over thirty thousand feet. They're both the same, both the world that you live in, but the former seems much more real.

"See? There's already an inconsistency. It's proper and natural to recognize the vast scenery you're looking out over as being 'the world you live in'— more than the confined space you can actually feel with your body's senses. Yet you just cannot for the life of you feel that you are part of what you're looking down at.

"Why is that? This is just my hunch, but I think people always give priority to the information they get from their surroundings. So, at this point, 'sense,' or knowledge, and 'feelings,' or experiences, chafe against each other. Before long, there's friction, and your senses start acting erratically.

"...How small the city is from up here. I can't believe my house is down there. Did that park always look that way? I didn't even know it was there. It's like I've never been to this town before; it feels that I've ended up somewhere far, far away.'

"... A high perspective brings up these kinds of thoughts. Even though the person is still standing on a part of that city they're looking down on..."

A high place is indeed a place far away; that is true distance-wise. But what Touko-san was leading to was the psychological aspect of it.

"Mm... so what you're saying is we shouldn't look from a high place for a long period of time?"

"It's not good to take things to extremes. The sky has been thought of as a separate world since time immemorial—to fly meant that you were going to the

other world. If you don't arm yourself with civilized thinking, you will get influenced by deviant perceptions; just like it sounds, you go crazy.

"Protect your awareness, and, naturally, you avoid such bad influences. If you have a firm footing, there's no problem. Once you're back on the ground, everything's normal again."

... Now that she mentioned it, one time where I was looking down on the school ground from the rooftop, I suddenly wondered what would happen if I jumped down.

Of course, it was just a joke.

I never had the slightest intention of actually doing it, but why, I wonder, would such a clearly deadly thought jump into my head like that.

Touko-san said that everybody's different, but I don't think it's especially rare for anybody to picture climbing up somewhere high and jumping off.

"...Does that mean your mind goes crazy for just a second?"

Touko-san gave a dry laugh after I blurted out my question.

"Everyone dreams about the taboo, Kokuto. Humans gain pleasure from imagining things they cannot do.

"Though... I suppose that's pretty close. The important thing is that the temptation of the taboo only rears its head in the appropriate place and not elsewhere. That's just common sense. Your example just now... It's not that a person's senses go crazy; it's that their reason becomes paralyzed.

"This is dragging on now, Touko," said Shiki, clearly unable to put up with anymore. As I thought about it, the conversation had certainly moved far off the original mark

"It's not dragging. If we take it as the classic four-step narrative structure of introduction, development, twist, and conclusion, we're still only in phase two."

"I only want to hear the end. I'm not wasting my time joining you two and your inane banter."

"Shiki..."

Her response was harsh, but she had a point.

Shiki carried on despite my one-word interjection. E

"So, if there's a problem with looking at landscapes from high places," she said, "then how do you explain our everyday sight? When we're walking around normally, we're still higher than ground level, aren't we?"

Considering Shiki's attitude of trying to find holes in people's words, I found her argument to be surprisingly reasonable.

Indeed, a person's eyes are at a higher level than the ground, which makes it plausible to think our view to be overlooking the world.

Touko-san nodded at Shiki's words, acknowledging her argument.

"But the earth's surface, which you think of as ground level, is still an unreliable viewpoint to go on. And anyway, that aside, you still wouldn't exactly call our normal field of vision 'a view from on high,' would you?"

"A vision is not what your eyes see, but an image that your brain takes in. Our field of vision is protected by our common sense, so our standing viewpoint doesn't feel to us like we're high up. Even that's governed by common sense. There's no notion of height there.

"But on the other hand, all of us live with a view from above. Not physically speaking, but spiritually. There are a lot of individual differences at work. Those with the most expanded minds aim for great heights. But, even then, they don't leave the box they're in.

"Humans are made to live in a box, and can only live in the box—we're not meant to see from God's viewpoint.

"However, when one's mental vision surpasses a certain boundary, one becomes not so much a God as a monster. *Hypnos*, the personification of sleep, and his twin, *Thanatos*, the personification of death, switch places. No one knows one from the other, and in the end, it becomes impossible to distinguish between them."

As she said so, Touko-san herself was looking at the world from above. She was looking down at the earth with her feet set on the ground. It seemed significant, somehow.

And then, I recalled the dream I had.

The butterfly fell at the end.

Maybe she could have flown more gracefully had she not tried to follow me.

Yes, if she'd fluttered her wings and floated along, she should have been able to fly longer.

But since she'd realized what it meant to really fly, she couldn't bear just floating there, weightless.

That's why she flew. Instead of floating.

Thinking that much, I questioned myself if I was that poetic.

Touko-san, by the window, threw her cigarette away.

"The disturbances at the Fujou building might be the world she was seeing. I can presume that the difference in the air Shiki felt was the border between the outside world and the inside of the box. That is a discontinuity that only a human mind can perceive."

Finally, with Touko-san finishing her talk, Shiki's irritated look lifted. She looked away with a sigh.

"Discontinuity, huh? I wonder which side is the warm front and which is the cold one for her."

In contrast to the serious-sounding speech she just heard, Shiki's didn't sound like she was remotely interested.

"Of course, it'll be the opposite of whatever you might think," said Touko-san, adopting the same kind of nonchalant air.

3

My neck shivered.

Is the cold that's making me shiver coming from outside or inside my body?

Leaving the indistinguishable aside, Shiki kept on walking.

There was no sign of life at the Fujou building.

It was two in the morning. The apartments were lit only by white electric lights, their glow illuminated the cream-colored walls. *I could see them to the end of the passageway.* The synthetic light eradicating the darkness felt artificial—one could say that it was more ominous than the darkness that it was supposed to keep away.

Passing by the card checker at the entrance, Shiki entered the elevator. The. A mirror bolted to the rear panel of the elevator for the convenience of the passenger. Reflected in it was a languid-eyed figure in a black leather jacket over a light blue kimono. The eyes were laid-back, showing no interest in anything around. Facing her reflected self in the mirror, Shiki pressed the button for the rooftop. The world around her began to move upward, accompanied by a faint mechanical whir. The mechanical box was on its way up to the roof. A secret room for all of a few seconds. Right now, Shiki was cut off from anything that was happening outside these four walls and had no way of engaging with any of it. This feeling managed to slightly penetrate the void that was her heart. That feeling seeped into her supposedly empty mind.

This small box was the only world that felt real to me.

The door opened without a sound. Ahead was an utterly black space, completely at odds with what had come before.

Shiki emerged into a small room. There was only one door—the one to the roof—and the vacant elevator returned to the ground floor as she stepped out.

There were no lights, and the surroundings were chokingly dark.

Her footsteps echoed as she moved through the tiny room. Shiki then opened the door that led to the roof.

The deep black was replaced by a dim darkness. A panoramic outlook of the nighttime city leaped into view, filling her eyes in every direction. The roof of the Fujou Building had been built blank and featureless. The bare concrete floor stretched out, dead level, surrounded by a wire-mesh fence.

Apart from a water tank on top of the small room from which Shiki had just emerged, there was nothing else to draw the eye.

The place itself was a completely ordinary rooftop. Yet the landscape struck her. The roof was about ten floors higher than the surrounding buildings, and the view was more lonely than pretty. Climbing the thin ladder, Shiki found it to be like looking down over the world.

The city was like a dark, deep ocean where no light could penetrate, and it was certainly beautiful to behold. Burning lights here and there looked like the twinkling of deep-sea fish.

—If my field of vision is the whole world , then the world is sleeping right now.

Forever , for all I know. Though I bet it's only temporary. More's the pity.

This stillness grips my heart more than any cold does.

So much it hurts—



Rising there in the air was the pale figure of a girl.

White clothes, so florid and brilliant they could have been mistaken for a showy dress, and black hair down to her hips. Slender limbs protruded from her garments, making her look all the more graceful.

Her indifferent eyes and thin eyebrows would probably have secured her a place in the most prestigious of beauty pageants.

Shiki guessed her age to be in the early twenties. Of course, she doubted whether placing someone's age was applicable when it came to ghosts. But, in any case, she doubted that the translucent girl was a ghost.

She was definitely there. The girls twisting through the night sky around her... they would be the ghosts. The girls, drifting randomly through the air, felt more like they were swimming than flying. Their forms were vague, though, and faded into translucency occasionally.

A shining white woman with a mass of girls swimming around her in a seemingly protective formation, there above Shiki's head.

This series of images was not repellent.

Rather, it was ...

"Hmph ... This sure is magical," Shiki scoffed mockingly.

The woman's beauty was unearthly, inhuman. Her black hair was as magnificent as strands of silk thread, smoothed out one by one with a comb. Had it been stirred by a strong wind, her billowing hair would perhaps have been a vision of mystic beauty.

"In which case, I'd better kill you," said Shiki, and the woman must have heard this because she cast her eyes downward.

The rooftop of the Fujou Building was over three hundred feet above ground, the woman another ten feet above that. Their eyes met as Shiki looked up.

No words were exchanged. No mutually understood language even.

Shiki reached into her jacket. She pulled out a lethal weapon: a seven-inch blade—more a knife than a sword.

A murderous intent filled the eyes looking down from above. Instantly, the white garments flickered. The woman's hand swept smoothly down, her fingertips pointed at Shiki. What her frail, willowy limbs suggested, however, was not a living white color.

"Bones or lilies."

A voice echoed long into the windless night air. The outstretched fingers were full of the intent to kill.

Suddenly, the white fingers were pointing at Shiki's body.

Shiki's head swam with a pulsing clamor. She staggered, as though her slender frame were about to tumble down.

But only once.

The woman above faltered slightly at this.

Her subliminal suggestion, urging her victim to fly, wasn't working on this girl.

Her ability to force the image of flying into a person's very consciousness was beyond the realm of hinting and was more like full-fledged brainwashing. There was no resisting it. As a result of the inevitable suggestion, whether they believed it would actually happen or not, people simply ran over the edge of the roof, secure in the firm belief that they could fly.

Shiki had brushed this urge aside after only slight dizziness.

Maybe, the woman pondered, it had just been a glancing blow. She resolved to try once more.

It would be much stronger this time.

Not "You can fly" this time. A strong compulsion: "You will fly."

And yet...

Shiki looked up at her before she could do it. Two arms, two legs, one torso. One small spot slightly to the left of the center of the chest. Shiki could clearly see the cross section before her eyes: a blueprint for death.

The chest, above all, would be the best place to aim for. That would mean instant death. Illusion or no, Shiki was determined to prove she could be killed... even if this girl was a god.

She raised the knife in her right hand. Holding the hilt in a backhanded grip, Shiki narrowed her eyes at the opponent in the sky above.

As she did, an impulse welled up in her once again.

...Fly. You can fly. You've always liked the sky. You were flying only yesterday. Maybe you can fly even higher up today.

To freedom. To peace. To laughter. You have to go. Where to? To the sky? To freedom?

—It means...

... An escape from reality. A yearning for the heavens. Reversing gravity.

Your feet aren't on the ground. Flying unconsciously. Let's go, let's go, let's go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go... go, now!

"You must be joking" muttered Shiki, and raised her empty left hand.

The lure of the sky had no effect on her. She no longer even felt dizzy.

"I don't have yearnings like that. I don't feel alive, so I don't know what actual suffering is. That's right. To be honest, I've got no interest in the likes of you either."

Her words were melodic, dismissive.

Shiki didn't feel the bittersweet joys and sorrows or various binding restrictions associated with life. So she didn't feel any kind of fascination with the prospect of liberation from suffering.

"Still," she went on, "I can't have you taking a certain someone with you. If you want a reason, it's because I saw him first, so I'll be taking him back now."

Shiki's empty hand grasped the open air. The woman and accompanying girls were drawn toward her, just like that, while she pulled her hand back as though reeling in a line.

They were like fish being hauled up onto land in a net.

The woman's features changed, and she hit Shiki with redoubled force of will. If she could have vocalized her intention, it would probably have come out as a scream of "Fall!"

Disregarding the woman's rage entirely, Shiki gave an angry retort.

"You fall."

Her knife stabbed through the chest of the rapidly descending woman. It was as simple as stabbing fruit; the pierced woman was entranced by the sheer sharpness of the blade.

There was no blood.

Paralyzed by the shock of the knife, which had thrust all the way through her back, the woman twitched only once. Shiki merely tossed the dispatched body away. The woman's form sailed past the fence and plunged soundlessly.

Even on the verge of falling, her hair made no fluttering motion, and her clothes billowed in the wind as she melted into the darkness. She looked like a white flower sinking down into the ocean depths.

With that, Shiki left the rooftop.

Even now, the figures of the floating girls overhead.

4

I woke up after being stabbed through the chest.

It had been a huge shock. That girl must have been incredibly strong to just pierce someone's heart like that.

And yet, it hadn't been an angry, frenzied strength.

She had simply sliced through bone and muscle, calm and collected, as though it were nothing.

A terrible sense of unity.

The sense of death was sweeping my body. Again and again, the sound of my heart being run through. To me, that sensation hurt more than the pain.

Because it was both fear and indescribable pleasure. My body was shaking, a chill running down my spine to the point of insanity.

I felt anxiety and isolation of tear-inducing magnitude and a clinging attachment to life. Then, soundlessly, I started to weep.

Not from fear or pain.

It was because I, who would pray each night to see tomorrow morning, was experiencing firsthand something I had never felt—death. Most probably, this chill would be with me for eternity. I would never be able to escape it.

Or, on the other hand, I wouldn't escape as long as I myself was in love with this sensation.



The sound of a door opening.

It was afternoon. There was a trace of sunlight shining in through the closed windows.

Medical consulting hours were over, so this must be someone on a social call, I thought.

My room was a private one, and I shared it with nobody.

The only things here were the rays of sunlight that had just poured in, the static cream-colored curtains that had never known a breeze, and the bed I was in.

"Excuse me. You must be Fujou Kirie."

The visitor seemed to be a woman.

After speaking out in an incredibly husky voice, she came over to my bedside, not bothering to sit down. She must have been standing over me, looking down. Her gaze felt cold.

...This woman is terrifying. She'll destroy me for sure.

Even so, inside I was rejoicing. It had been so many years since someone had come to visit me. So what if it was death, come to finish me off? I couldn't send her away.

"You're an enemy, aren't you?"

The woman nodded in agreement.

I focused my senses and tried with all my might to make out the figure of this visitor.

It must have been the sun's fault, but all I could see was a vast silhouette.

She was minus a jacket, but her pristine, wrinkle-free clothes made her look like a teacher. I relaxed a little at this. Only, I had to take points off for the strong orange tie around her white shirt. It was too gaudy.

"Are you one of that girl's acquaintances?" I asked. "Or are you her?"

"No, I'm a friend of the one who attacked you and the one you attacked. Honestly, of all the weird people to get mixed up with. You've really... well, we've both got bad luck."

Having said this, the woman took something out of her breast pocket and immediately put it away again.

"No smoking in hospital rooms, huh?" she said regretfully. "It looks like your lungs are gone already. Smoking wouldn't do you much good."

It must have been a box of cigarettes then.

I had never touched cigarettes, but I wanted to see what this woman looked like smoking. Maybe... in fact, definitely, it would have suited her, like lizard pumps and a snakeskin bag on a shop mannequin.

"It's not just your lungs that are bad, though, is it? That's the cause, but I can see tumors all over your body. Extremities show sarcoma... and your insides are in especially bad shape. Your hair looks to be the only part that's unaffected. Even so, you've got remarkable physical strength.

"A normal person would have died long before the disease ate them away to this extent.... How many years has it been, Kirie Fujou?"

She was probably asking how long I'd lived hospitalized. But I didn't have an answer for her.

"I don't know. I stopped counting long ago."

There was no reason to, after all.

Because I could never leave here. Not until the day I died.

The woman gave a short sigh of resignation.

There was no sympathy there but no revulsion either. I hated it. The only thing anyone could give me was pity. This person wouldn't spare me even that.

"Are you okay where Shiki stabbed you? From what she said, it was from the left ventricle to the mid-aorta. You must have been sliced through the bicuspid valve."

Her voice was perfectly calm as she spoke these incredible words. I couldn't help but crack a smile at the strangeness of it.

"You're weird. We'd hardly be talking like this if I'd been stabbed through the heart."

"Perhaps," she replied. "We'll see soon enough."

Yes, that's right. I'd been wondering if this not quite Japanese, not quite Western-style woman would finish me off, and her words had just confirmed it.

"But you'll feel its influence. Shiki's got good eyes. If what she saw was a secondary entity, then its collapse will probably reach your real body. I have

two or three things I'd like to know before that happens. That's why I came out here."

A secondary entity. She must have been talking about the "other me."

"I haven't seen the flying you. Can you explain what you are?" asked the woman.

"I don't understand, myself," I replied. "All I can see is the scenery outside this window. But maybe I shouldn't have looked. I was always looking down at the outside from here. The trees showing the changing seasons, and people coming and going from the hospital... always changing. Even if I raise my voice, nobody hears, and I can't reach anything if I stretch out my hand. I've been gasping and wheezing for so long. Hating the scenery outside for so long. That's what a curse is, isn't it?"

".. Hmph. The Fujou blood, eh?" said the visitor. "You re from a pure bloodline going back into antiquity. They specialized in prayers, but it seems that curses were their real bread and butter. Its possible that your surname was originally Fujou, as in 'unclean,' but they changed the way it's written."

Lineage. My family. That ends with me, too.

When I had just been hospitalized, I lost my parents and brother in a car crash. Since then, my medical bills were being paid for by someone who used to be a friend of my father. This person had a complicated name that sounded like a priest or something, so I didn't remember what kind of person he was.

"But this isn't a subconscious curse you're not aware of," the woman pointed out. "What on earth did you pray for?"

... I didn't understand that, myself. I doubted even this woman could comprehend it.

"Have you ever stared out at the landscape for a long time? For year after year, kept on looking out until your consciousness stopped?... I hate the outside. I hated it, and it terrified me. I was always looking down from above, the whole time. And after that, one day my eyes went all strange. It was like I was in the sky over that courtyard over there, looking down at the ground below. It felt like my body and my mind were still here, and just my eyes were flying. But, because I couldn't move from here, all I ended up able to do was look down at this spot from above, though."

"...So, your brain took in the surrounding landscape. Which meant you could then see it from any angle at all, I imagine.

"Did you lose your eyesight around then?"

This was a shock. The woman had noticed that I could hardly see anymore.

I nodded.

"That's right. Everything got gradually whiter, until I couldn't see anything. At first, I thought everything would be pitch-black, but it wasn't. There's just nothing. That's what it's like to be blind.

"But I didn't have any problem with it. My eyes were up in the sky already. I could only see the area around this hospital, so I could never escape from here in the first place. Nothing changes. Nothing—"

At that point, I coughed violently. I hadn't talked this much in a long time. And my eyelids felt hot.

"I see. That's how your consciousness got up into the sky. But... then why are you alive? If that apparition over the Fujou Building was your consciousness, you should have been killed by Shiki."

Yes, I'd wondered the same thing.

That girl... Her name was Shiki, by the sound of it. How was she able to cut me?

In exchange for not feeling anything, that other me had never been injured. That girl, Shiki, had killed the other me easily, as though my other body were truly solid and tangible.

"Answer me. Was the you at the Fujou Building really Fujou Kirie?"

"The one at the Fujou Building isn't me. There's a me who is always looking out at the sky and a me who was up there in it. The other one gave up on me in favor of flying, in the end. Even my own self abandoned me."

The woman by my bed gasped. It was the first time she had displayed anything like emotion.

"Split personality ... No, it's not that. You were one originally but were then granted a second vessel.

"... One personality controlling two bodies. Certainly, I can't think of anything else to explain it."

Now that she said that, it sounded probable. I had abandoned the myself here in this room and gone looking out over the city. And yet neither of my two selves was affixed to the ground, and both were merely floating. I, who was so isolated from the world I saw outside the window, couldn't break through my sense of detachment, no matter how hard I wished for it.

Though we were split, in the end my two selves were connected.

"...It all makes sense. But why weren't you content with just projecting into the outside world? I don't think it was necessary to kill those girls."

Girls... Yes, those girls I envied so. They had done a terrible thing. But I was innocent. After all, they only jumped because they wanted to.

"The you at the Fujou Building is like a body of consciousness," the woman stated. "You used it, didn't you? Those girls could always fly, right from the start, couldn't they? Whether it was just in their dreams or they could actually fly for real.

"There are a great many people who don't sleepwalk but sleepfly. It isn't a problem, though. Why? Because they show those symptoms only when they are unconscious. Because they fly without any malicious intent while asleep, and the thought of flying never enters their minds when they're awake. Those girls were special, even in such a group. Though we aren't talking Peter Pan here, they were especially light during adolescence. One or two of them were probably flying for real, but most would only have been doing it in a dream sense. You made them conscious of this. You drew out that subconscious impression and made it real.

"The result was that they became aware of the fact that they could fly. And, yes, of course they could fly. But only unconsciously Unpowered flight is difficult. Even I can't fly

without a broom. The success rate for conscious flight is about 30 percent. Those girls just tried to fly as though it were as simple as anything and, naturally, plummeted."

That's right. Those girls were flying around me. I thought they could be my friends. But they weren't even aware of me and just floated there like mindless fish.

It wasn't long before I realized they weren't conscious. Even though I thought they'd notice me if I made them aware.

That's all I wanted. So why...

"Are you cold? You're shaking."

The woman's voice still felt like plastic. I hugged myself, unable to stop trembling.

"I'll ask one more thing. Why did you long for the sky even though you hate the outside world?"

The reason was probably because...

"Because the sky is endless. I thought that if I could keep going, fly far away, then I'd find a world I didn't hate."

Then came the question, asking if I had found it.

I couldn't stop trembling. It felt like someone was physically shaking me, and my eyelids were becoming hotter and hotter.

I nodded.

"Every night before I fell asleep, I feared that I wouldn't be able to wake the next morning. Wondering if I would be alive tomorrow terrified me. I knew that if I slept, I wouldn't have the strength to wake up.

"Every day was like walking a tightrope, and all I could do was dread death. But, on the other hand, that's what made me actually able to feel that I was alive. The smell of death was the only thing that filled my empty days. But I relied on that alone to live.... Because I'd shed my old self like a castoff skin. I can only feel alive by staring death in the face."

That's right. That's why I yearned for death more than life. To fly, as far as I could. To leave this place. That was why.

"Did you take the boy from my place to keep you company?"

"No. I didn't even notice at the time. I was clinging onto life, wanting to fly while I was still alive. I thought that I could manage that with him."

"...Shiki's just like you, then. In choosing Kokuto, there's still hope for her. Well, I guess there's nothing wrong with feeling alive through someone else."

Kokuto. Of course. That Shiki girl had come to take him back from me. His savior had been absolute death to me.

Still, I didn't regret it.

"That boy is a child. He's always looking into the sky. Always perfectly upright. That's why, if he felt like it, he could fly anywhere he wanted. Yes ... I wanted him to take me with him."

My eyelids were hot. I didn't really understand, but I must have been crying.

Not from sorrow or anything like that... If I really could have gone off somewhere with that boy, it would have made me so happy. Because it would never happen—because it was a dream that could never come true—it was all the more beautiful, and it filled my eyes with tears.

That was the sole dream I had had in all these years.

"But Kokuto's not interested in the sky or anything like that," the woman said. "... Hmm. Someone who yearns for the sky, yet can't approach it. Ironic, isn't it?"

"It is. I've heard that human beings hold on to lots of things that they don't need. I just floated. I can't fly.... All I can manage to do is float there."

The burning vanished from my eyes. It would probably never happen again.

Because the only thing that governed me now was the shivering coursing down my back.

"Sorry to have disturbed you. This really is the final question: what are you going to do now? I don't mind treating the wound that Shiki gave you."

I didn't answer. I merely shook my head.

The woman, I think, frowned slightly.

"...I see. There are two kinds of escape: fleeing aimlessly and fleeing with a goal in sight. As a rule, I'd call the former floating and the latter flying.

"Only you can decide which one of the two your view from above is. But if, by some chance, you choose based on feelings of guilt and self-reproach, then that's a mistake. We don't choose our path because of our sins; we carry our sins down the path we choose."

And then the woman left.

She hadn't told me her name the whole time she had been here, but I understood why. There would have been no point.

...That woman had doubtlessly known how I would end things. Because I could never fly. I could only float.

Because I was weak, I couldn't have done as she suggested.

That's why I couldn't beat this temptation.

Back then... the flash I felt in the instant my heart was pierced.

The overwhelming torrential pounding of death and the throbbing of life. I hadn't thought anything of it, but I still had that simple, important thing left to me.

What I had was death.

This fear gripping my spine. I had to crash into death headlong and, in doing so, feel the joy of being alive. All for the sake of every ounce of life I had—the life I'd shown nothing but disdain for up until now. Yet it would probably be impossible for me to go out to meet that nightlike death. Most probably, that

intense, vivid last moment was beyond my reach. That death which went through like a needle, like a sword, like thunder.

And so, I tried to get as close to it as I could. No plans came to mind, but I still had a few days left to think, so it would be okay. Besides, I had already decided on the method.

I hardly feel it necessary to say, but for my final moment... naturally, jumping to my death with a view from above would be wonderful.

／Overlooking View／

After the sun set, I left Touko-san run-down building. Shiki's apartment was nearby, but my place was about twenty minutes away by train.

Perhaps because of her lack of sleep, Shiki plodded along with a wobbly gait, nestled up close to me.

"Is suicide ever okay, Mikiya?"

The question came out of the blue.

".. Hmm. I'm not sure," I replied. "If I'd been infected with a retrovirus that meant that just by my living, everyone in Tokyo would die, then I think I might kill myself to save everyone."

"What's that about? That's way too far-fetched to use as an example," Shiki said.

"No, it'll do," I insisted. "But I'd do it because I'm weak, though, I think. I wouldn't have the guts to survive and have everyone in Tokyo out for my blood, so that's why I'd kill myself. That way would be easier. It's the difference between a second's worth of bravery, and courage you have to keep up forever. Anyone can see which one's harder. It's a bit extreme, but death is easy, I reckon. It's just a matter of why you do it. But there will be times when the person in question feels a terrible urge to run away. I can't deny that or object to it. Because I'm a weak person, too."

...Yet, still, self-sacrifice of the sort I had just mentioned is justified and would probably be seen as heroic, even.

But no. It doesn't matter how just or how noble it is; choosing death is foolish. Maybe we have to live on, no matter how ugly or how wrong we are, to correct our mistakes. Live on and accept the consequences of our actions.

That's what takes real courage. I didn't think I could do that, so I shut my mouth and stopped talking so brashly.

"... Er, anyway," I said, finishing up, "everyone's different in the end, aren't they?"

It was pretty half-hearted, as conclusions go. Shiki glanced at me doubtfully.

"But you're different," she said, like she'd seen straight through to my real feelings. Even though it sounded cold, there was a sort of warmth in her words, too. I felt kind of awkward and walked on silently through the town for a while.

The sounds of the main street came closer. The bright lights, the hustle and bustle, the lights of the busy cars, and the sound of engines. A surging crowd of people, a babble of noises.

The station was straight ahead, past the main street's mass of department stores. Shiki stopped abruptly.

"Mikiya, stay over tonight."

"Huh? What's with this, all of a sudden?"

Shiki pulled me along by the hand as if to say "Just come on, dammit." ...It would be much less of a hassle, since Shiki's apartment was so nearby, but I felt morally awkward about spending the night at her place.

"No, really, I don't have to," I protested. "There's nothing in your room anyway. It'll just be boring. Besides, don't you have stuff to do?"

I knew full well that she didn't.

I knew what I was talking about, and Shiki wouldn't have a chance to counterattack ... or so I thought. But she looked at me sternly, like I was the bad guy, and voiced her objection.

"Strawberry."

"Huh?"

"Strawberry Haagen-Dazs. Two cartons. You brought them with you and just left them. Clean up your damn mess."

"...Yeah, now that you mention it..."

They were still there. The presents I'd brought because I was feeling a bit hot on the way to Shiki's place last time. Still, I wonder why I'd brought something like that in the first place. It was almost September, after all.

Well, that was beside the point now, though. It seemed I would have to resign myself to it and just go along with her. Still, I was a little irritated and decided to offer some counteroffensive, at least.

Even though being sniped at like that annoyed me, I had a weakness around Shiki that meant I would just shut up and take it. And even though this showed my real feelings—a cry from the real Mikiya Kokuto—Shiki still wouldn't acknowledge them.

"Oh, all right then. I'll stay the night. But still, Shiki..."

Shiki looked at me questioningly, and I turned to her, a serious look on my face.

"Don't say 'Clean up your damn mess.' You should clean up your talk. You're a girl, you know."

Shiki was reacting to the word girl

She turned her back on me angrily and muttered something like "I can talk however the hell I fucking want."

Overlooking View / Finish

Epilogue

One day, I chose to take the main street home.

This was unusual for me, just a whim of the moment.

Walking along the building-lined street that I was tired of seeing day in and day out, someone came crashing down.

I hardly even had a chance to hear it. The muffled splattering sound.

But it was obvious: someone had fallen from one of the buildings above ... and was now dead.

A crimson color slowly seeped onto the concrete.

Only the long black hair still retained its former appearance. Thin, fragile, white-looking limbs. And a lifeless, smashed face.

The whole scene reminded me of a pressed flower, flattened between the old pages of a book. I guess. Probably.

Only because the corpse, its neck twisted into a fetal position, looked to me like a folded lily.

I knew who the person was.

In the end, Hypnos, or sleep, had, after all, become Thanatos ... death.

Ignoring the gathering crowd of onlookers, I was walking away when I heard a pattering sound, and Azaka caught up with me.

"That was a jumping suicide, wasn't it, Touko-san?"

"Yeah, looks like it," I replied vaguely. To be honest, I didn't really have any interest.

Whatever the victim's decision had been, a suicide was only treated as a suicide in the end.

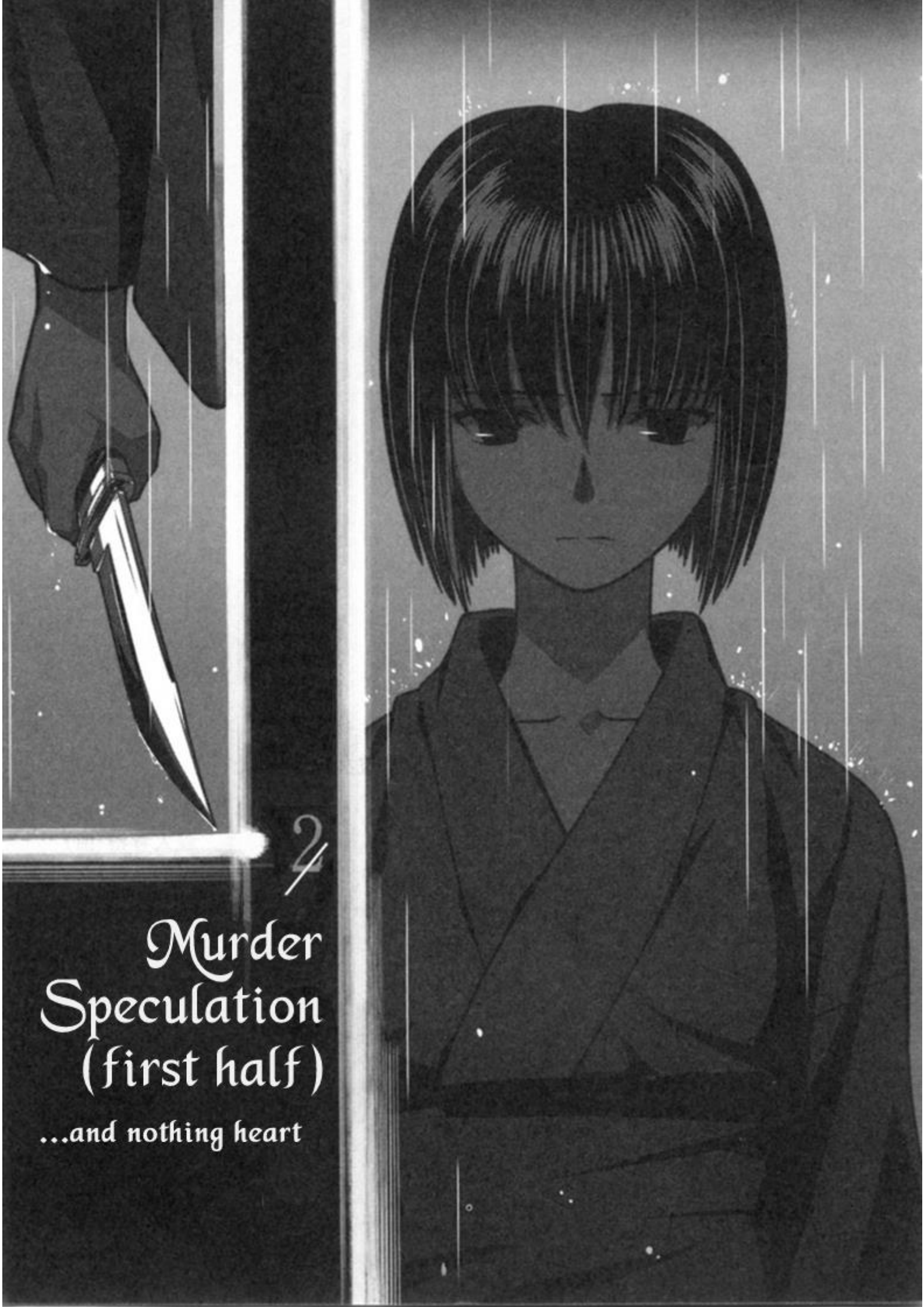
That girl's final act of will hadn't been summed up by the word fly, or even floaty but rather fall. The only thing in that act had been vain futility. There was no need for me to pay it any attention.

"I heard there were a lot last year," said Azaka. "Maybe suicide's coming back into fashion? But I don't understand people who kill themselves. Do you, Touko-san?"

I nodded another vague "yes."

I looked up at the sky and answered, as though gazing at an impossible vision.

"There's no meaning in suicide. She probably just couldn't fly today. That's all."



2

Murder
Speculation
(first half)

...and nothing heart

／ Murder Speculation (First half)

April, 1995.

It was then I met her.

／ 1

One day, I chose to take a late night stroll.

The weather was chilly for a late summer evening, maybe the frosty wind was bringing the taste of fall.

As I was putting on my shoes at the entrance, my caretaker Akitaka-san said, "Please return home early tonight, Master Shiki." I ignored his monotonous voice, and left to the entrance.

Trudging past the garden, I then passed by the gate. Once I exited the mansion, the street ahead of me was absent of streetlights, and darkness came to enwrap my surrounding. A black night ceased of humans and sounds, the moment of midnight where the date alternated from the end of August to the beginning of September.

The bamboo surrounding the mansion rustled in the light wind.

An unpleasant image welled up inside me.

A walk in such an uneasiness-induced tranquillity was the only pleasure of Shiki, the name which I bore.

As the night veil grew thicker, so did the darkness.

I believe the reason I enjoy taking these strolls on the empty streets is because I want to be alone.

Or maybe it's the opposite, that I want to think I am alone. Either way, it was a stupid question to ask. I could never be truly alone.

I walked away from the main street, and turned to a small alley.

I was to turn sixteen this year. In school terms, I would be a first year in an ordinary private high school. Regardless of where I were to end up, I would have to remain at the mansion in the future, thus there was no meaning in my education. I'd decided upon that school simply because it was nearby: a short commute was clearly the most efficient option.

Although, perhaps that turned out to be a mistake.

The alley was darker than the main street, there was only a streetlight flicker nervously.

Out of nowhere, a face popped into my mind. I clenched my teeth. In recent memories I'd been on the edge of my seats, even during one of these walks.

I couldn't help but think about him.

Even after I entered high school, my environment didn't change. Regardless of the grade they were in, no one ever approached me. I didn't understand why, but maybe it was because I tend to wear my heart on a sleeve.

I found people abhorrent. Since I was a child, I had not been able to like them. And unfortunately, because I am a human too, I even dislike myself. That's why I could not be nice to people when they talk to me... Even if I considered myself to hate humans, that doesn't mean I detested the people around me, although they seemed to come to take it that way. That characteristic of mine became known across the school quickly and within a month, nobody tried to talk to me. Thankfully, I preferred a quiet environment so I never went out of my ways to change the antagonism surrounding me, and ended up in an ideal situation.

But such heaven was not to last. There was one student in my class who treated me, Ryougi Shiki, as his friend. He had a last name like a certain French poet, and was a nuisance.

Oh, he was a real nuisance.

I saw a person under a streetlight far away.

Such was a blunder for me to think of his defenseless smile.

There was something suspicious about the person's behavior.

Thinking back on it later, why did I...

For some reason, I moved toward that human figure.

Why did I feel such a surge of violent excitement?



Deep in the back alley, it was another world.

The dead end served more as an enclosed room than a road. This narrow backstreet engulfed by the walls of buildings was devoid of sunlight even during the daytime. Normally, one would have expected evidences belonged a lone drifter in the small opening, which was considered to be the town's blind spot.

But today, there was no one.

Fresh paint coated the surrounding pale walls.

The alley, which was too narrow to be considered as a street, was lined with something wet.

An ever more overwhelming stench masked over the familiar rancid smell of rotten fruits.

What surrounded was a sea of blood.

The thing thought to be red paint was an unthinkable volume of blood—human blood spilling and flowing slowly through the alley. The smell thrusting through the nostrils belonged to that thick vermilion.

In the middle of it all was a human's corpse.

It was impossible to see its facial expression. Both of its arms were gone. Its legs seemed to have been cut off from the knee. That body was no longer human, and had morphed into a broken sprinkler that was only capable of spitting out blood.

This place had become another world.

The darkness of the night, too, bowed down to the redness of blood.

Amidst it all, she—Shiki—was smiling.

The bottom of her light blue kimono had then become crimson. In a gracefulness resembling that of a crane, Shiki caressed the blood flowing on the ground, and streaked it across her lips.

As the blood dripped down from her lips, her body was trembling in ecstasy.

It was the first lipstick she had ever worn.

2

Summer vacation had just ended and sparked the beginning of a new school term.

Nothing had really changed in my school life. If any, the only change was in the students' attire to suit the weather of fall. As for me, I'd never worn anything

other than a kimono since the moment I was born. Akitaka had prepared for me clothes that a sixteen-year-old girl might wear, but I never thought about actually wearing them.

Fortunately, this school doesn't have uniforms, so I was able to stay in my kimono. Truth to be told, I had wanted a formal-styled kimono, but with one of those it'd take an entire PE class just to change in and out of them. In the end, as a compromise, I favored a Yukata-like single-piece kimono. I was wondering about what to do about the cold during winter time, but I found a solution to that problem yesterday. It happened during a break.

As I was sitting in my usual seat, a voice bluntly asked me from behind, "Aren't you cold, Shiki?"

"I'm not cold right now, but I suppose things will become rough soon."

The person in front of me frowned; he must have figured out I was planning to be in my kimono during the winter too.

"You're gonna be wearing that even during winter?"

"Probably, but I'll be fine. I'm wearing a jacket over it," I said abruptly, trying to bring a halt to the conversation.

He walked away, seemingly surprised about the idea of wearing jackets over a kimono, and I too was caught rather off-guard by this solution.

Ultimately, I followed through and bought a coat. I decided upon a leather jacket as it seemed to be the warmest. I would wear it when wintertime came, but the jacket was staying in my closet until then.



I ended up eating lunch together with him, being invited and all. We were on the rooftop of the secondary school building, being surrounded by groups of students who were couples like the two of us. As I was observing them fixatedly, I could hear him speaking about something. I made efforts to ignore him, but there was quite an unsettling word that I could not help asking about.

"...what?"

"I said 'murder'. It happened on the last day of summer vacation, in the western part of the shopping district. It's not on the news yet though."

"Murder... that's harsh..."

"Yeah, and the method was a scene to behold. The killer cut off the victim's arms and legs and just abandoned the corpse there. I heard the whole place was such a sea of blood that the police had to board off the alley. They haven't got hold of the killer, though."

"Only the arms and legs? Can a human die from just that?"

"Of course, if people lose most of their blood, their organs cease to function from the oxygen loss. In this case, though, I would assume that death from shock occurred first." He said while eating. In contrast to his baby face, he often brought up this kind of topic. It seemed that one of his relatives was in the police force, although considering he was the type to leak confidential matters to his relative, I suppose he was not in that high of a rank.

"Oh, sorry Shiki. This has nothing to do with you."

"It's not that it has nothing to do with me, but Kokuto-kun..." I replied to this peer of mine, who seemed to be confused. "That's not something we should discuss during meals."

"You're right." Kokuto nodded.

Goodness gracious. That just made me lose the appetite for this tomato sandwich I'd bought earlier ago.



The first summer in my high school year ended on that strange rumor.

The season was making a gradual transition into fall.

For Ryougi Shiki, the life that seemed a bit different than what it'd been was about to head into the cold winter.



It'd been raining since this morning.

Accompanied by the sound of the falling rain, I was walking in the hallway.

There were not many students in the school building now that classes were over.

After the murder incident that Koku was talking about got announced publicly, the school had temporarily stopped all club activities. The murder spree resulted

in a fourth case this month. I knew for sure, as I'd heard from Akitaka in the car this morning. The authorities had not the idea of the killer's identity, nor had they figured out their motive. None of the victims were connected, except for the fact that the murders happened late at night.

It'd be easy to ignore something like this if the incident had happened somewhere far away, but it was a different story when these murders occurred in the very town you lived in. All the students went home before dark and everyone, even the boys, went home together in groups. Since the cops started patrolling at around nine, I hadn't been able to take any night walks to my satisfaction.

"Four victims..."

I murmured.

In all the four scenes, I had...

"Ryougi-san."

Suddenly, someone called out my name. Turning around, I saw a man who I'd never seen before. He was wearing blue jeans and a white shirt; plain clothing; his face appeared to be gentle. He must've been an upperclassman.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Aha, I wish you'd cut the scary glare. Are you looking for Kokuto-kun?"

He asked with an artificially amiable smile to pair up with his ridiculous statement.

"I'm about to go home. Kokuto-kun has nothing to do with this."

"Really? You're wrong. You don't understand, which is why you're irritated. You shouldn't take it out on others too much because of that. It's easy to blame things on someone... It grows to be a habit. Aha. And isn't four times a bit too much?"

"Huh—"

Unconsciously, I took a step back.

His mouth turned into an apparently... No, the smile was obviously fake.

A smile so satisfied. Just like my own.

"I just wanted to have my last talk with you. Now that I've done that, I need to go somewhere else. Farewell."

The man who I thought to be an upperclassman walked away, the tapping of his shoes vibrated from afar. I didn't even watch him leave, and headed to my shoe locker.

After I'd changed my shoes, I walked toward the entrance and was met with just the rain. Akitaka, who should've come to pick me up, wasn't here yet. He would drive me home on rainy days because my kimono would get wet, but it seemed that he was late today. It was a hassle to change my shoes again, so I decided to wait by the stairs near the entrance.

The rain acted like a pale veil and was enveloping the school grounds. My breath misted white in the December cold.

...I'd lost track of time. Before I could even notice, Kokuto stood beside me.

"I have an umbrella," he said, his words pronounced like of a Chinese man.

"I'm fine, I have a ride home. You should go home soon, Kokuto-kun."

"I'll get going in a bit. I want to stay here until then... Can I?"

I didn't answer. He nodded and leaned against the wall. At that time, I wasn't in the mood to go along with his talk and was determined to ignore anything he said—it would make no difference whether he was here or not.

In the rain, I was simply waiting. It was oddly quiet—I could only catch the sound of the raindrops.

Kokuto did not talk.

Leaning against the wall, he had his eyes closed with a satisfied expression. I looked at him in disbelief, wondering if he was sleep, but he was quietly singing. I supposed it must've been a popular song. Later, when I asked Akitaka, I found out it was a popular song called "Singing in the Rain". The song must've been all the rage.

Still, Kokuto wasn't talking. The distance between us was less than a meter. It was restless to be without a conversation despite being this close.

It was an awkward situation to be in. A quiet, but not a painful one.

How strange. Why did I find this silence to be so heartwarming?

However, I suddenly began to be fearful. My intuition was telling me that *he* would appear if this kept on going—

"Kokuto-kun!"

"Yes?!"

Surprised by my unconscious yell, he jolted up from the wall.

"What's the matter? Is there something wrong?"

I saw myself in his eyes that were looking back at me. It might have been at this moment that I truly looked at this boy before me, Kokuto Mikiya, for the first time, and not as a passing observation.

He had soft facial features, which made him appear a few years younger. His eyes were a gentle, stainless black. In a manner befitting his character, his hair retained its naturalness, neither dyed or gelled. He wore black glasses that even kids would not wear nowadays. His plain clothing was black from top to bottom—that kind of uniformity could be considered Kokuto Mikiya's only curious sense of fashion.

A thought just came to my mind.

Why would a good kid like him care for someone like me?

"Where have you been..."

Looking down, I tried not to meet his eyes.

"...all this time?"

"I was in the student council room before I got here. An upperclassman I know is about to drop out, so we had a sort of farewell party. His name is Shirazumi Lio. It sure took me by surprise, you know; like, he was a quiet person. I didn't think he would have done something like signing a school withdrawal form; he said he had figured out what he wanted to do and all that."

Shirazumi Lio. A name I'd never heard before.

But I knew the extent of his network that would get him into parties like this. Although his classmates only saw Kokuto as a friend, he had a modest popularity among the older girls at our school.

"I invited you too. I told you yesterday when we parted, but you never showed up at the student council room. I even went to the classroom to check, but you weren't there."

Certainly, he told me something along those lines yesterday. However, I would've only spoiled the party had I gone, and I thought he was just being polite when he asked.

"...I'm surprised. I didn't think you seriously meant it."

"Of course I was. What were you thinking, Shiki?"

Kokuto grew mad at me, but not because I had ignored his words or action. I believe it was because of my trivial speculations about him—I could only sense a distaste toward such treatment. After all, they were a Pandora box that I couldn't have experienced, until now.

I grew quiet from that moment on. Never in my life had I wanted Akitaka-san to show up this much.

A moment later, the chaperone drove through the school gate. Thus, I left Kokuto.



The day turned evening and the rain finally stopped. Shiki put on her leather jacket dyed in red, and went outside.

The sky was covered in speckles. There were occasional glimpses of moonlight peeking through the openings between the clouds. On the streets were bands of policemen in their civilian clothes patrolling hastily. She thought it would have been troublesome to run into them, and decided to walk to the riverside.

The wet ground from the rain's aftermath reflected the streetlight, glowing like a slug's trails.

She heard the train from a distance away. The rumbling sound of the running train made it known that a viaduct was nearby—that bridge crossing over the river was not built for pedestrians, but to let trains run on.

There, she spotted the silhouette of a person.

Slowly and unsteadily, Shiki headed toward the viaduct.

A train passed by once again; it must have been the last one for today.

A roar, incomparable to the earlier sound, vibrated around her—the pressure of the sound was like cotton being stuffed into a small box. She covered her ears without realizing it.

As the train raced away, it grew quiet underneath the viaduct. The area beneath the viaduct was without streetlight, without a crook for moonlight to get in; it was pitch black, as if the area was a slice of darkness itself.

This must have been God's blessing.

Now, even the red liquid spilled around this riverside appeared black.

This was the fifth murder scene.

The corpse had been turned into a flower—part of the weeds that grew up in a disorderliness. With the dismembered face at the center, the arms and legs were splayed around it like petals. The limbs, which had been cut off like the neck, were bent at the joints, emphasizing their flower-like appearance.

Unfortunately, the article still appeared more like a swastika than a flower.

Within the grass, an artificial flower was cast away.

Due to the splattered blood, the flower was red in color.

I am getting used to doing this.

That was the feeling she carried within her.

When she took a gulp, she noticed a terrible dryness down her throat. Was it caused by nervousness, or excitement?

The thirst in her throat had then become boiling.

The only thing that was overflowing this place was death.

Shiki's lips curled into a smile without a sound. Barely suppressing her ecstasy, she continued to stare at the corpse.

Because only in this moment, she could feel in her bones that she was alive.

It is custom for the successor to the Ryougi family to have a serious match with their instructor at the beginning of the month. The head of the Ryougi household many generations ago grew tired of inviting many masters from other schools of swordsmanship, so he made a dojo in house and invented his own school. This tradition had been passed on to this day and unfortunately, even me, as someone who carried the body of a woman, was required to wield a sword.

After finishing the match against my father, who surpassed me in both skill and strength, I headed to my room. The distance between the dojo and the main house building was as far as, for example, a gym would be from a school building. I walked along the unattractive, but silent wooden floor. On the way, my caretaker Akitaka was waiting for me. He was at least ten years older. I reckon that he was waiting to help me change out of my sweaty clothes.

"Good work, Master Shiki. Did your father say a word?"

"Same as always. And get lost, Akitaka. I can change by myself. Look, you can't be with me forever. It would be more beneficial for you to follow my older brother. It's the man who will become the heir in the end."

Akitaka smiled at my harsh words.

"No. In the Ryougi family, there can be no other successor than you, Master. Your brother did not inherit that nature of yours."

"...What's so good about this thing anyway?"

I avoided Akitaka and headed back to the building. After locking myself up in my room, I took a breath and undressed my gi.

I stood there glancing at the mirror, reflecting the body of a woman.

If that reflection were to have thicker eyebrows and appear more aggressive, it might've looked more like a man. But there was nothing to be done about this body. The ever-growing female body seemed to be sending SHIKI, not Shiki, day by day into despair.

"Maybe I should have been born a guy."

I talked aloud to no one.

No, there was someone I could talk to—inside me, there was another personality called "SHIKI".

All children of the Ryougi family were prepared two different names with the same pronunciation: a male name for yang, and a female name for yin. Since I was born female, I was named Shiki, which means "formula" or "ceremony". If I would have been born male, I would have been named SHIKI, which means "to weave". As to why we have such a tradition, the reason was because the Ryougi family produces children with a high probability of having DID, or split personality.

In short, someone like me.

Father said the Ryougi family has the heredity of a transcendent race. He also mentioned that it is a curse.

And indeed, it was. To me, something like this was not transcendent, but simply abnormal. Fortunately, no other successor had been of this nature for several generations. The reason was simple: they all ended up in the mental hospital before maturity. The single act of having two personalities in one body is dangerous—the boundary between realities becomes vague, and there had been many cases of suicide.

But despite it all, I grew up without showing any sign of insanity. It was because me and SHIKI ignored each other.

The right to the ownership of the body was completely mine. SHIKI was no more than a substitute personality that I could switch to like in the match earlier, as his aggressive personality fit the situation more suitably.

Come to think of it, SHIKI and I practically existed at the same time. This was different from what's typically known as a "split personality". I'm Shiki, but at the same time, I'm also SHIKI. It was only that I had the ownership of the body.

Father was happy how he could produce the rightful successor of the Ryougi family in his generation. Henceforth, I was treated as the successor despite bearing a female body, disregarding my male brother.

I didn't find it to be troublesome—I take what's been given to me.

I must've thought I would lead this somewhat distorted but normal life forever. I knew I could only lead such a life...

...Indeed, even if SHIKI was a murderous monster, I could not make him disappear.

Just as I raise this being called "SHIKI" in me, I was also another SHIKI, just like him.

Murder Study (First half) /

Murder Study (First half) / 1 /

"Mikiya, are you seriously going out with Ryougi?" asked Gakuto. I almost spew out my coffee milk. I

As I was coughing, I began to look around. Thankfully, it was loud in the classroom during lunchtime—no one seemed to have heard Gakuto's nonsensical statement.

"What do you mean by that, Gakuto?" Gakuto looked rather amazed when I questioned him.

"The hell are you even asking? It's a well-known fact that Kokuto of class 1-C has a crush on Ryougi. The only ones who don't know are you two."

I must have frowned after hearing his outrageous words. It had been eight months since I first met Shiki. The current month was November, right about wintertime.

...Although I do think it's normal for anyone to start going out after that much time.

"Gakuto, that's a misunderstanding. Shiki and I are just friends. Our relationship doesn't go past that."

"You sure?"

The aspiring judo club member turned his brawny face into a teasing look. This guy, whose name was in contrast with his athletic body, had unfortunately been a close friend of mine since elementary school. Thanks to our tightknit bonds, he must have figured out that I wasn't lying.

"But you call her by her first name. In what world would *that* Ryougi allow a simple classmate to address her like that?"

"Hey now. Shiki doesn't like that. When I called her Ryougi-san before she gave me a glare. People say gazes can kill, but hers literally kill. Anyway, she hates being called by her family name. She even says that that it's okay for people to call her anything but her name. But obviously, I wouldn't want to do that, so I compromised with 'Shiki-san'. She didn't like that either, so it ended up being just 'Shiki'. Are you happy now? That's the boring truth."

As I was recalling the events in April and rambled about it to Gakuto, he agreed that it was a boring backstory.

"Huh, that sure is an unromantic story," Gakuto said disappointedly.

...What kind of an answer was he hoping for?

"So that thing from last week at the school entrance was nothing either? Damn, I seriously wasted my time coming here. I should've just eaten lunch in my classroom."

"...Hold on. How did you know about that?"

"I told you, you guys are famous. Everyone at the school already knows you and Ryougi were getting shelter from the rain together by the entrance last Saturday. I mean, it's Ryougi. Even small things like that catch everyone's attention."

I sighed, and looked up. All I could hope for now was that Shiki would never hear about this.

"This is a school to get you ready for college, right? I'm starting to wonder if everyone's really studying..."

"I heard from the seniors that employment rate is good for students who graduate from here."

...I have to question how this school is run.

"But man, why Ryougi? She doesn't seem like someone you'd be into."

I remembered being told something like that by senpai.

He told me a quiet and gentle girl would suit me. Gakuto was probably thinking along the same lines too.

Somehow, I became strangely offended.

"Shiki isn't such a scary girl," I said annoyedly, letting those words slip.

Gakuto then grinned, his broad smile as if to let know that I had shown my true color.

"Hm? I wonder who just said 'we're only friends'. Like for real man, she's a ^{frightening} tough nut to crack. If you can't even tell that then that's a telltale sign you're head-over-heels about her."

He might have meant to describe her a little stuck-up by calling her frightening. Part of me agreed with what he was trying to say, but I didn't want to give in.

I said, "I already know that."

"Then what's so good about her? Her looks?" Gakuto was not holding back.

Indeed, Shiki was beautiful, but that was not what attracted me to her; what did was her fragile look. In reality, she was tough enough to not get wounded or injured all the time, but she always, always had that fragility of her that made her seem to get hurt. That must have been why I couldn't ignore her. I didn't want to see her in pain.

"It's just something that you don't notice. Even Shiki has her cute points... Let's see, if I have to come up with an animal to describe her, she's cute enough to be a rabbit," I said, and regretted immediately.

"Don't be stupid. She's definitely in the cat family, and probably the wild ones too; or maybe a bird of prey. A rabbit is too far off, way too far—does she seem like the type to die out of loneliness to you?" Gakuto said and laughed his ass off.

I thought she was like a rabbit in the sense that she didn't become attached to people, or that she observed others from a distance. But well, if that was only an imagination of mine, then whatever shall it may be.

"All right. I won't talk to you about girls anymore."

When I attempted to end our conversation, Gakuto said, "My bad, my bad", and stopped laughing.

"You might be on to something. She could seem surprisingly rabbit-like."

"Gakuto, don't just be a yes-man like that. It's pretty rude."

"Nah, I do mean it. I suddenly remembered that even rabbits can turn dangerous. Lemme tell you, in this world we're livin' it, there are rabbits that can chop off your head on a bad day."

I felt something funny in my throat when he said with such a serious face.

"That's one, uh, a batshit rabbit there."

Gakuto nodded.

"Of course it's batshit, I'm talking about the world of video games here."

Murder Study (First half) / 2 /

On the day of our finals for the second quarter, I saw something unthinkable on my desk: it was a letter. No, that in itself wasn't too weird. The problem was the sender and its content.

To put it simply, it was from Shiki, asking me out on a date.

The content of the letter read like a threat as if saying, "Bring me somewhere tomorrow, or else."

I was bewildered, and headed home and waited apprehensively for the next day to come, feeling like a samurai who was ordered to seppuku.



"Yo, Kokuto."

Those were Shiki's first words the moment she arrived. Our meeting place was in front of the train station, which had a dog statue. She wore a red leather jacket over her reddish-brown kimono. But rather than her outfit, I was more confused by the way she spoke.

"Did I make you wait? Sorry about that, took me awhile to chase off Akitaka," Shiki said as if it was the most natural thing.

She sounded like a guy, not like the Shiki I knew. Unable to respond, I looked over her again; there was nothing different in the way she looked. She had a graceful, somewhat diminutive body, but her confident stance and composure lent her a certain measure of strength—an unbalance belongs to that of active life-like doll. A food for thought: life-like dolls are one of the two types of marionettes where only their external appearances are carefully polished.

"What? You angry just 'cause I'm an hour late? I never knew you were that petty, Kokuto."

Shiki took a glimpse at me with her dark eyes. Her short black hair, although roughly cut, was beautiful, and her small face and big eyes both had their elegant contours. Those black eyes, which were like a pool of sumi ink, reflected the outline of Kokuto Mikiya, and at the same time, was gazing upon something much further away.

Come to think of it, it was those eyes that I was attracted to when we first met on that snowy day.

"Um... You're Shiki, right?"

"Yeah," Shiki laughed. The corners of her mouth lifted, and formed into something that seemed like a prideful smile. "What else do I look like? We're wasting time like this. Come on, take me somewhere. I'll let you decide, Kokuto." Saying that, Shiki seized my arms forcefully and started walking.

...She'd said she would let me decide, but in my confusion, I didn't even notice that she was leading the way.

We walked a lot.

Shiki didn't do much shopping, but she would go into various boutiques to look around, and head into another whenever she got bored. I had suggested to take a rest at the café or a movie theatre, but she rejected my ideas. The more that I thought about it, it would have been boring to go to such places with the way Shiki was acting at the moment.

She was very talkative.

If I wasn't mistaken, she seemed to be pretty excited. You could even say that she was *pumped up*.

Most of the stores she went to were fashion-oriented, though I must say I was relieved that they were all for women's clothing. Eventually, Shiki must have become tired from looking through four department stores in four hours, as she told me that she wanted to go get something to eat.

We wandered around and ended up in a fast food joint. She sat down at a table, and took off her jacket. Her out-of-place kimono drew glances from all around, but this fact did not seem to faze her.

After steeling my nerves, I asked her about what I had been wondering all this time, "Shiki, is this how you normally talk?"

"Well, yeah. That's how *I* speak. But there's no meaning in how someone talks. Even you can change your speech patterns, Kokuto."

Shiki sat there, eating her hamburger disinterestedly.

"But you know, this kind of thing never happened before. Today's the first day that I came outside. I didn't say anything until now 'cause I had the same opinion as Shiki."

...I did not get it at all.

"Let's just say, it's like a split personality, to put it simply." Shiki went on.

"I'm SHIKI, and the one who's normally out is Shiki. The character for SHIKI comes from the word, 'woven cloth.' But Shiki and I are not different people. The only difference between us is our priorities of things—the hierarchy of our interests is different."

Saying that, she wrote on her napkin with her wet hands. Her white finger traced the two characters "Shiki" and "SHIKI" that bear the same reading.

"I've been wanting to talk with you, Kokuto, that's all. Since it's not something Shiki prioritizes, I'm doing it in her place. Got it?"

"Well... kind of," I answered uneasily. Actually, I had felt what she was talking about. I think I had some memories of encountering something like multiple personalities in person.

Before I entered high school, I had met Shiki, but she said she didn't remember it. At that time, I thought she'd said that because she hated me, but after hearing this, it all made much more sense.

Or maybe the reality was even more different. After spending all day with her I could tell she was the same Shiki. As Shiki, or rather, SHIKI said, the only difference was her speech. Her actions belonged to that very same Shiki; even the uneasiness I had felt earlier diluted.

"But why are you telling me all of this?"

"I thought I wouldn't be able to hide it from you much longer," Shiki said with an unconcerned look, and drank her juice.

She put the straw to her mouth briefly, and quickly let go. She seemed to have a distaste for cold drinks.

"To tell you the truth, I'm like Shiki's destructive impulse, it's something that she really wanted to do, but up to now, there was no one she wanted to do it with, because Ryougi Shiki was uninterested in everyone," SHIKI said flatly. I could not move, being entranced by those deep black eyes.

"But rest assured, I'm still Shiki. I'm just saying what Shiki thinks. Like I told you earlier, we just talk differently; I won't go nuts out of nowhereAlthough, the two of us are divided on this regard, so take it with a grain of salt."

"Divided...? You mean, you and Shiki get into fights?"

"I mean, how can you get in a fight with yourself?" SHIKI replied. "No matter what I do, it has to be something we both want, so we both have no complaints. And no matter how much I try to oppose her, Shiki has control over this body. I'm seeing you like this because Shiki thought it was all right too, though maybe after I said this, she might regret it later. It's not like her to be wishing to see you, right?"

I nodded right away.

Then, SHIKI oddly laughed.

"See, I like that part about you, while Shiki doesn't. That's what I mean by being divided."

I wonder what she had meant then. Did Shiki not like the fact that I did not think too much? Or did Shiki not like the fact that she liked that part of me? I had no basis, but I thought it had to be the latter.

"Well, that's enough explanation for today."

Standing up suddenly, SHIKI put on the leather jacket.

"I've taken an interest in you, we'll meet again soon. Catch you later."

After grabbing out the money for the hamburger out of her pocket, Shiki's body, who was at the time SHIKI, took a stride to the automatic door.



When I was on my way home, the sun was already setting. Because of the recent murder incidents not many people were out on the streets even when it was noon.

I entered inside my house and saw my cousin there. His name was Daisuke.

I feel exhausted from all that talk with SHIKI, so I went to the kotatsu, put my legs in it, and lied the floor. Daisuke nii-san also had his legs in there so we ended up fighting silently for the small space inside. In the end, I couldn't lay down on the side, and got up.

"Daisuke-san, don't you have work to do?"

I asked him while removing the mandarin oranges off the table. He said, "Yeah. We've got five people in three months, of course we're busy. I can't even go home to sleep, so I'll be chilling at the big man's place. I'll fuck off in an hour, all right."

Daisuke nii-san worked as an investigation officer in the first division of the city police department. For someone who publicly announces their own laziness, I never understood why he decided on such an unfitting job.

"How's the investigation going?"

"It's all right. There weren't any clues until now but the killer finally left us something. Well, it does seem intentional though." Saying that, Daisuke nii-san lifted up his head, his grave look facing me.

"What I'm telling you is confidential. I'm going to tell you because you're not an outsider, and this will be important for you. Didn't I tell you about the first victim?"

Daisuke nii-san began to describe the second and the third murder scene. I listened closely while hoping not all policemen in this country had this much of a loose tongue.

The second victim had their body bisected vertically. From their head down to their groin. The weapon used was unknown. One of the cut halves was stuck to the wall.

The third victim had their arms and legs amputated, with the severed arms sewn onto the legs.

The fourth victim had their body cut into pieces and had some word-like symbol stamped on it.

The fifth victim was made to resemble a swastika using its arms and legs.

"What an obvious psycho." I said, trying to hold back the nausea. Daisuke nii-san agreed.

"The killer's probably acting like that on purpose. Mikiya, what do you think?"

"...Let's see. I don't think it matters that all of the victims have been cut apart, that's all I could say. Although, there's just one thing..."

"What?"

"The killer is getting used to this. The next one might not be outside," I said.

You're right, Daisuke nii-san said and covered his face.

"There's no motive or pattern. It's only happening outside right now, but this is the type of psycho who would break into someone's house, and there's even more incentive to do so if there's no more prey to be found at night. I just hope your bosses would take that into consideration and be prepared for it."

"About that," Daisuke nii-san changed the subject, "We found this by the fifth victim."

He placed our school badge on the table. We are required to wear this somewhere on our person when going to school, though it wasn't necessarily enforced as we didn't have a proper dress code.

"I don't know if the killer didn't notice this because of the grass at the murder scene, or if they left it on purpose, but either way, there has to be a meaning behind this. I might go over to your place sometime soon."

With the look of a proper police, my brother left such ominous statement.

The winter vacation ended in a flash.

The only thing that happened was that I went to the shrine on new year with SHIKI. Besides that, I would say I had been leading a normal and peaceful life.

When the third term started, Shiki isolated herself even more. Even I could tell the aura of rejection she was radiating.

After making sure everyone had left the school, I entered the classroom, and as usual, SHIKI was there. She was standing near the window, looking outside absentmindedly.

It wasn't that she had invited or call me to come here, my guts told me to not leave this fragile-looking girl alone, so I had decided to keep her company without an actual reason.

The sun set early in the wintertime and the classroom was tinted red. In this red and black gradation, SHIKI was leaning against the window.

"Did I tell you that I hate people?" said SHIKI. That day, she spoke like her spirit was somewhere else.

"I never knew. Is that so?"

"Yeah, Shiki hates people. She's been like that since she was little.

"...You see, when you're a child, you don't know anything. You think the world and everyone you meet loves you unconditionally. It's normal to think that if you like others, it's only natural for them to like you."

"Right, that makes sense. You never doubt anything when you're little. You unconditionally love people and think it's only natural for them to love you back. The only things I was afraid of were ghosts. Yet, it's humans who I'm afraid of now."

SHIKI nodded tiredly in agreement.

"But that's a very important thing." SHIKI continued. "You need to be ignorant, Kokuto. Since you only worry about yourself when you're small, you won't notice any malice from others. Even if the love you feel is just a misunderstanding, that makes the whole difference, a difference that allows you to be kind to others—people can only express the emotions they're familiar with."

The sunset casted a red hue across her face. At that moment, I couldn't tell whether she was SHIKI or Shiki, but it didn't make a difference either way, as this was Ryougi Shiki's monologue.

"But I'm different. I have known someone else since I was born.

"Since Shiki has SHIKI inside of her, she knew of others. She found out that there exist other people who think differently and that they do not love you unconditionally, so she could not love them, for she had found out as a child how ugly humans are. In time, she grew to pay them no attention. The only emotion Shiki knows is rejection."

That is why she had grown to bear hatred toward humans, SHIKI said so with her eyes.

"But weren't you lonely like that?"

"Why? Shiki has me. It's certainly lonely by yourself, but Shiki isn't alone. She was isolated, but she wasn't alone."

SHIKI said so with a resolute face, there was no deceit in her expression. She really was satisfied with just that.

But, was she really?

Yet, was she really—

"Yet, I've been acting weird recently. Shiki has an abnormality in her, which is me, but she's been wanting to deny me. Denial is my domain. The only thing Shiki could possibly do is affirmation."

I wonder why, SHIKI smiled.

It was a deadly—even murderous—smile.

"Kokuto, have you ever wanted to kill someone?"

At that instant, the sun painted her face in vermilion. It made my heart skip a beat.

"...Not so far. The most I've ever wanted was to punch someone."

"I see. But that's the only feeling I ever have."

Her voice echoed through the classroom.

"...Huh?"

"I've told you. Humans can only show the emotions they have experienced."

"I take on the forbidden taboos inside Shiki. What's low on Shiki's priorities is high on mine. I am content with that. I am aware this is why I exist. I am the personality that takes on Shiki's suppressed tendencies. That's why *I* have always killed my will. *I* have been killing this dark side called SHIKI. *I* have killed myself over and over. ...See? The only thing I've experienced is murder."

Then, she walked away from the window, and was silently approaching me
Why did I suddenly become afraid of her?

"Let me tell you something, Kokuto. Shiki's definition of murder is...." A voice murmuring by my ear. "...to kill the consciousness that is Shiki. It is to kill anyone who dares to drag out that part of her. You see, in self-defense, Shiki has a desire to eliminate anyone who tries to open her up."

SHIKI giggled, and left the classroom.

It was an innocent smile that one would give after playing a trick on you.



On the next day when I asked Shiki if she wanted to have lunch with me, she looked really surprised. It was my first time seeing that side of her.

"...Unbelievable."

Even after saying that, Shiki accepted my request. She asked that we go to the rooftop.

She ended up following me quietly, her silent stare felt like a stab on the back. Maybe she was mad at me... no, she totally was. Even I knew what she meant by those words from yesterday; it was her last warning telling me to cut ties with her, and God knows what could happen if I didn't.

But she didn't understand that it was something she was already communicating unconsciously, and I had gotten used to her hostility. When we got to the rooftop, no one was there. With the month being January, nobody else wanted to eat in this cold weather.

"It's cold, do you want to eat somewhere else?"

"No, I'd like to eat here. If you want to go somewhere else, please go ahead."

Her politeness caused me to shrug. We sat by the wall to avoid the wind. Shiki sat still without opening the food packaging, and by contrast, I had already finished my second sandwich.

"Why did you talk to me?" she murmured suddenly. I couldn't catch her words.

"Shiki, did you say something?"

"I'm asking how you could be so thoughtless, Kokuto-kun," said Shiki with knife eyes.

"That's harsh. People have called me excessively honest before, but I've never been told that I'm thoughtless."

"Maybe they were trying to be nice about it," Shiki said. I took in her words. Shiki then began to eat her egg sandwich, the stark crunch of the wrapper sounded appropriate for a frosty rooftop. Shiki remained quiet the entire time as she was nibbling her tomato sandwich with a familiar gesture. Our positions just switched. Now I was the person with nothing to do.

I can't just have a meal without a conversation, so I spoke to Shiki, "You seem to be a bit angry about something."

"...A bit?"

She glared at me. I scolded myself for not thinking before I opened my mouth.

Shiki said, "I don't understand, but I get irritated when you're around. I don't understand why you continue to speak to me, or why you still act the same way after SHIKI told you all that."

"I don't know the reason either. It's fun being with you, but if you asked me I couldn't tell you why. Considering what you told me yesterday I guess you could say I'm quite the optimist."

"Kokuto-kun, do you understand that I'm abnormal?" asked Shiki. I couldn't help but nod. Her split personality (or something resembling it) was the real deal, and surely it was nothing short of the ordinary.

"Yeah, you're pretty unusual."

"Right? So then you should understand that I'm not someone you could associate with normally."

"Why would I care about that when I get to date the person I like?"

Shiki froze, the time around her stopped so much so she had forgotten to breathe.

"But I cannot be like you," said Shiki, stroking her hair with slender fingers. The sleeve of her kimono swayed and revealed a bandage wrapping around the right elbow of her delicate arm. The fabric appeared to be fresh.

"Shiki, that wound..."

Before I got a chance to finish, Shiki interrupted me and stood up, "If what SHIKI said didn't make sense to you, I'll spell it out myself." She was gazing away into the distance. "If we keep this up, I'll definitely kill you."

...How could I have said anything back to those words.

After that, Shiki returned to the classroom, leaving her trash behind. On my own again, I began to pick up the litter.

"...Gakuto was right on the money, wasn't he."

I remembered the conversation I had with him. Just as he said, I might have been an idiot.

Even after she delivered the ultimate rejection, I couldn't make myself hate her. Rather, my mind became clear. There could only be a reason why I loved being with Shiki.

"I must've gone mad long ago."

Why didn't I notice this earlier?

I loved Shiki so much I could even laugh off her saying how much she wanted to kill me.

Murder Speculation (First half) / 4 /

On the first Sunday of February, the first thing I did after waking up was going to the dining room. There, I saw Daisuke nii-san as he was about to leave.

"Oh, you were here?"

"Yo. I just came to sleep 'cause I missed the last train, but I gotta go to work now. Must be nice being young, having your guaranteed days-off."

He appeared to be sleepless, probably because of the progress made on that serial killer.

"You were talking about coming to my school, what happened to that?"

"Actually, there was a sixth victim three days ago so we might have to go there again. We found evidence of skin in the victim's nails. She probably was

fighting for her lives. Women have long-as-hell nails so she must have scratched the killer's arm pretty badly. Maybe it was a desperate move. The scratches were deep, and she even clawed out three centimeters of skin."

The information Daisuke nii-san just shared had not been on TV or newspapers yet, but I was shocked for a different reason... probably because Shiki had been talking about something as ominous as killing in these past few days.

Why else would I imagine for an instant that Shiki would be this killer?

"A scratch... you mean on the killer?"

"Duh, do you think the victim would scratch her own arm? We've already learned that the skin is from around the elbow area, and the blood's been analysed. The killer is done for." Daisuke nii-san said and left.

My legs became weak, I crumbled onto the chair. Three days ago, I had that conversation with SHIKI in the setting sun. And when I saw her the next day, the bandage was around her elbow...

Right around mid-day I realized I had to do something besides sitting here and thinking. I was better off asking Shiki herself about the murder. If she told me her wound had nothing to do with it, this uneasiness would surely go away.

I searched for Shiki's house in the school's directory and went to visit her.

Her house was on the outskirts of town. By the time I'd found it the sun was already setting.

The mansion surrounded by bamboo groves was that of a classical samurai house. It had high fencing that make it impossible to tell the size of the place in its entirety by just walking. Unless I got in a plane to get an overhead view, I wouldn't be able to grasp its vastness.

As I was walking through the bamboo woods along a path I arrived at a tall gate and was relieved to see an intercom in this building that seemed to be stuck in the Edo period.

I pressed the intercom and declared my intentions. A man in a black suit appeared. The man, who was in his early thirties and had the gloominess that rivalled a ghost, was Shiki's servant; his name was Akitaka. He spoke courteously and politely, even to a student such as myself.

Unfortunately, Shiki wasn't home. Akitaka-san offered me to wait inside, but I refused. To be honest, I didn't have the guts to enter this place by myself.

The sun began to set so I decided to go home.

After walking for about an hour, I arrived at the train station and happened to run into senpai.

At his invitation, we ate at a nearby restaurant and ended up talking until ten.

Unlike senpai, I was still a student. I had to leave.

I said goodbye and bought a train ticket at the station.

The clock was about to turn eleven.

While standing before the ticket gate I thought for a second if Shiki had arrived home already.

"...What am I even doing?" I wondered as I walked through the town's neighborhood late at night. The neighborhood was devoid of any sign of life.

I couldn't understand why I was walking in this unfamiliar area, or heading toward Shiki's house. Of course, there was no way to see her now, but I wanted to know if she was home and had her lights on, and so I went in the opposite direction.

Trudging through the chilly winter air I exited the neighborhood and found myself facing a jungle of trees. I walked on the carefully paved road that appeared right in the middle of them.

There was no wind, the bamboos did not make a sound.

There were no streetlights, the moonlight became my only guide.

I half-jokingly thought what would happen if someone were to attack me here, and the thought began to eat at me.

The image grew stronger in my head even as my consciousness struggled to discard the thought.

When I was a kid, I was scared of ghosts. The shadows in between the bamboo looked like ghosts and I would be frightened.

But now, I was scared of people. I was scared of the fact that someone might be hiding in the bamboo grove.

Since when did the unknown ghosts turn into other human beings?

This dreadful feeling kept clinging onto me.

I think Shiki had said something like this before.

Yeah... didn't she say like—

As I fumbled through my memories, I saw something ahead of me.

"....."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

But it wasn't of my own volition.

At that instant, Kokuto Mikiya's mind was in a blank state.

A white figure stood a few meters ahead. The bright white kimono was covered in red stains.

The stains on her kimono began to spread. It must've come from the thing in front of her that was spurting red liquid everywhere. But the thing standing next to Shiki wasn't a fountain: it was a corpse.

"....."

I turned speechless.

I always had this image somewhere in my mind, the image of Shiki standing in front of a dead body.

That's why I wasn't surprised.

That's why I didn't even panic.

My mind just went to a complete blank.

She must've just cut the body while the arteries were still flowing, otherwise the blood wouldn't gush out like that.

On the torso was a diagonal cut, on the neck the decisive blow. A clean slash from the right shoulder to the left hip, thematically fitting the entrance to the samurai house.

Shiki was staring at the dead body, silently.

The color of blood alone was enough to make one faint, on top of that the corpse's organs spilled and bulged grotesquely out from the wound, transforming the corpse into something inhuman. It appeared like something slimy trying to assume a human form, the resemblance itself was so inhumane that it was difficult to look at; a mentally sound human being wouldn't be able to stand such sight.

But Shiki stood still and watched over the dead body as blood kept splattering her ghostly-white kimono.

The blood speckles looked like red butterflies.

The butterflies were flying toward Shiki's face.

The corners of her bloody mouth crooked.

Was it because of fear, or pleasure?

Was she Shiki, or SHIKI?

"....."

I tried to say something, but ended up collapsing onto the ground.

I vomited. I vomited out everything in my stomach and my stomach acid, as if to rid myself of this memory, vomiting to the point of tears.

But it did nothing. I didn't even feel better after that. There was so much blood, the overwhelming scent of it all seeped into my brain.

Eventually, Shiki noticed me.

Her head turned to look at me.

A smile was born from that expressionless visage—a smile so pure and calming like that of a loving mother, and so unfitting to this whole scene...

That I, then shivered.

My consciousness began to fade as she drew closer.

I believe these were the words she left me with.

Be careful, Kokuto-kun. A bad premonition tends to attract a bad reality.

Maybe, I was truly thoughtless.

After all, I had been trying to avoid this sinister reality until I saw it with my own eyes.

Murder Speculation (First half) / 5 /

I ended up missing school the following day.

A policeman found me standing blankly at the crime scene and took me in for questioning.

Later on, I was told of what happened during the question: I didn't say anything for a few hours, it took me about four hours before my mind returned back to normal. My brain didn't seem to have that good of a recovery system.

Anyway, by the time the questioning was over it was too late to go to school.

Judging from the corpse the killer must've had blood on their clothes, and fortunately, there was not a drop of blood on my shirt. With the benefit of being a relative of Daisuke nii-san my questioning went rather smoothly. The police didn't even interrogate me much.

After that, Daisuke nii-san offered me a ride home, which I accepted.

"You didn't see anyone, Mikiya?" he asked.

"I already told you I didn't see anyone."

Slouching on the passenger seat, I threw a glare at Daisuke nii-san.

"I see. Damn! It would have helped if you'd seen the killer... but I guess he wouldn't have let you go alive if you saw him, and I would be one hell of a shitty brother if you really died, so maybe it's a good thing that you didn't see anyone."

"That's not a police-like thing to say."

I spoke to Daisuke nii-san like nothing had happened, and that greatly annoyed me.

My conscience scornfully branded me a liar.

How could I lie with such a straight face, especially considering these are police matters we're talking about here? If I didn't tell the truth, things could only get worse.

And yet, I did not utter a word about Shiki being at the crime scene.

"Well, I'm glad you're not hurt. So, what's your impression of your first dead body?"

...That was a mean question to ask.

"Terrible. I don't want to see a corpse ever again in my life," I said. Daisuke nii-san agreed and laughed light-heartedly.

"Don't worry, dead bodies don't normally look this insane."

...Good grief. Did he think I would calm down from him saying that?

"And what a small world we live in! I didn't know you knew the Ryougi girl," said Daisuke nii-san. The fact that he was excited by this made it even worse.

The police treated the murder in front of the Ryougi's house as part of the ongoing series of murders. But the investigation stopped there. Once they finished inspecting the crime scene, the police were forced to leave the Ryougi house, and from what I'd heard from Daisuke nii-san, it was the family themselves that drove the police away.

The police report wrote that the murder happened between eleven and twelve at night on Saturday, February 3 with the only witness being Kokuto Mikiya. It also mentioned that I was there only after the crime had occurred and that the patrolling police took me in while I was in a state of shock.

Neither the Ryougi family or I had said anything about Shiki.

"But didn't you investigate anyone in the Ryougi family?" I said, trying to pry him out. Daisuke nii-san shook his head and said, "Their daughter goes to your high school so I wanted to ask them about it, but they refused. They said they didn't care about what happened outside their house. The way I see it, they are innocent. They have nothing to do with this crime."

I blurted, "Huh?"

I trusted Daisuke nii-san even if it seems like I don't. His colleagues understood the competence that allowed him to hold onto this job; that's why I thought he might have suspected Shiki.

"Why can you be so sure?"

"Hmm, well... do you think such a beautiful girl would kill someone? You don't, right? I don't think so too. That's what my manly instinct's telling me."

...I sighed at the length of his thoughtlessness. Why did he ever decide to become a policeman?

"I see. You're destined to be single for the rest of your life." I said.

"Hey now, missing your cell already?"

...I was about to be released soon due to the lack of evidence.

But still, I agreed with his opinion.

Even if I didn't have his intuition, it was Kokuto Mikiya's opinion that Shiki was not the killer.

And even when she admitted it herself, I shall believe otherwise.

Thus, there was only one thing that I had to do.

The story was about to close its curtains.

From then on, until that day three years later, the sight of the killer would disappear from the public view.

For me at that time, that incident seemed like it did not concern me.

However, this was the first and last event between me and Shiki.

Murder Speculation (First half) • Finish



A murder occurred in front of my house.

I couldn't remember well the events following my late walk.

But if you connect the parts that I remembered, then it was obvious what I had done.

Like SHIKI I could not stand the smell of blood. Just looking at it makes my mind go blank.

The bloodshed was particularly beautiful.

On the stone-paved path that led to my mansion, the space between each and every stone formed a maze, and through that maze there were several red lines running over it, creating a beauty like never before.

But that caused a disaster.

When I regained my senses, there was someone throwing up behind me.

It was Kokuto Mikiya.

I didn't understand why he was there. At the time I didn't even wonder why he was there.

But, I thought.

I went back to the mansion. Apparently, the crime was found out much later. There was no mentioning of my name.

So was it all just a dream? How could that honest-to-god boy would defend a serial killer?

And why did it have to be in front of my house?

"SHIKI, is it you?" I asked. There was no answer.

SHIKI and I were out of sync. That feeling grew stronger every day. Even if I let SHIKI use my body, the one who decides is me, so why did my memories become hazy?

...Perhaps.

Without realizing it, I might have gone insane like everyone else in the Ryougi bloodline. SHIKI would say, "If you think you're abnormal, then you're not." To an abnormal person, everyone else seems abnormal, so they would not question themselves.

At least that's how I was. This just means I finally became aware the difference between me and the rest of the world.

But who caused that?

"Please excuse me, Ojou-sama," said Akitaka after knocking on the door.

"What is it?" I said as an innuendo calling him to enter. He followed.

It was almost bedtime, and so he left the door open without entering.

"It appears that there is someone checking out the mansion."

"I heard from father that he got all the policemen out."

Akitaka then nodded, "All the police have been off the property since last night. I believe it is someone else."

"That's none of my business. Do as you wish."

"It seems the one outside is your schoolmate," said Akitaka.

After hearing that, I immediately got up from my bed. I went to the window facing the mansion's gate, and looked outside.

Between the bamboo woods surrounding the gate was a person's figure whom I wish would at least try to hide himself better. It was irritating to watch.

"....."

Then, I was seething.

Akitaka said, "I can get him to go home if you wish."

"I don't care. You can let it be."

I quickly made my way to bed and lay down. After wishing me goodnight, Akitaka left and closed the door

I couldn't sleep even with the lights off and my eyes shut.

There was nothing to do, so I checked outside the window again.

While adjusting the hood of his brown winter coat, Mikiya was shivering in the cold. He appeared to be looking at the gate, exhaling puffs of breathe. He put the thermos bottle and coffee cup by his feet. What a gentleman.

I now couldn't brush it off as a dream. Mikiya really was there, otherwise he wouldn't be checking on me like this.

I did not know what his motives were, but I think he was out to check the identity of the killer.

Anyway.

To my surprise, I was unconsciously biting my nail in anger.



Despite that incident, Mikiya was acting like normal.

"Shiki, wanna eat lunch together?" Mikiya asked. We went to the rooftop.

It felt like he was trying to groom me with food, probably because I'd accepted his offer to eat so many times.

I would have decided to ignore him, but I was curious about what he thought of that night.

I followed him up to the rooftop thinking he would question me about it, but Mikiya was the same as always.

"Isn't your house stupidly huge? I can brag about being greeted by a servant just by going to see you," said Mikiya. He had no right to call Akitaka a *servant*.

"Akitaka is my father's secretary. And we call them caretakers, not servants, Kokuto-kun."

"Huh, so you do have people like that at your place."

That was the only time my house was brought up.

With his personality, I don't think he realized that we saw him checking out the mansion; but still, it didn't make sense the way he was acting.

He must have seen me covered in blood that night. Why could he still laugh like it never happened?

And so I brought the topic up myself.

"Kokuto-kun, on the night of February 3—"

"It's okay."

He avoided my question just like that.

"Seriously, Kokuto? How can you just brush it off like that?"

Unbelievable. I started speaking like SHIKI without thinking. Mikiya was startled by the way I called him.

I said, "Tell me, why didn't you tell the police about me?"

"—I didn't see anything, that's why."

That's a lie. How could it be? At that time, SHIKI saw that he was vomiting and went toward him—

"You just happened to be there, right? At least that's what I saw, so I decided to trust you."

That's a lie. Otherwise, why would you be checking on the mansion.

...*SHIKI went toward him and—*

"Well, I'll be honest with you, it's a bit difficult for me to think about it right now. When I have confidence in myself, I should be able to hear you out; so let's not talk about it for now." He said. His sulking expression made me want to run to somewhere far away.

...and undoubtedly considered killing Kokuto Mikiya.

I never wished for such a thing.

Mikiya said he would believe in me.

If I could also believe in myself to not have such desires, then perhaps I would have never experienced this unknown pain.



From that day on, I ignored Mikiya completely.

About two days into it, he stopped talking to me, but he didn't stop coming to check on me late at night.

Under the cold winter sky, he would sit among the bamboo woods until about three in the morning, and gratefully, I could no longer take my nightly walks. This had been going on for two weeks.

I took a glance outside the window, wondering if he really wanted to figure out the identity of the killer that badly.

...He was stupidly patient.

It was almost three in the morning, but he kept staring at the gate.

There was no sign of desperation in his expression—in fact, he seemed to be smiling as he was about to leave.

"....."

I bit my lip in irritation.

I finally understood.

He wasn't here to look for the killer.

For him, it was only natural to trust me.

That's why he did not suspect me, he sat there knowing from the beginning that I would not go out during the night—he was only there to prove my innocence.

That's why he smiled happily when the night ended without anything happening, believing that the true killer was truly innocent.

"—What a happy guy."

I murmured, and thought,

Being with Mikiya somehow made me calm.

Being with Mikiya gave me the idea that I was like him.

Being with Mikiya gave me the fantasy that it was possible for me to go to the other side.

And yet, however, there was something certain.

That bright side of the world is a world I should never be in.

A world I cannot exist in, a world without a place for me.

And the foolish man that was Mikiya pulled me in with his smile, like it was the most obvious thing.

Because of that, I became irritated at myself for believing, and at Mikiya for having me believe in such things.

Inside me rested a serial killer named SHIKI, and that boy happened to bring it to the surface.

"I am fine by myself. Yet you're getting in my way, aren't you, Kokuto."

Shiki/I did not want to go insane.

SHIKI/I did not want to break apart.

Everything would have been fine had I not dreamt of a normal life.



March came and the cold started to ebb away.

After not doing so for several weeks, I finally looked outside from my classroom.

The view from here made a person like me feel safe—a view that I cannot reach precludes me from having any semblance of hope.

Mikiya entered the classroom as usual. The sunset dyed the classroom in red.

SHIKI always enjoyed having a conversation together in the classroom like this.

I, too, did not dislike it either.

"I never thought you'd be the one to invite me out. Are you going to stop ignoring me?" said Mikiya.

"It's impossible for us to keep this up." I said. "We need to talk."

Mikiya frowned. It felt as if SHIKI's personality was being ever more strongly intermixed with my own. I continued, "You said that I'm not the killer." The sunset was so red and vivid that I could not see his face. "Sorry to disappoint, but I am a murderer. Why did you let me go even after seeing that scene?"

Mikiya looked dumbstruck, "There's nothing to let go, you never did such a thing."

"Even if I admit it myself?"

Mikiya nodded.

"You're the one who told me to take your words with a grain of salt. And you're definitely incapable of doing such a thing. I'm sure of it."

How could he say that so confidently and be so ignorant?

"How could you be so sure? What about me can you understand? What about me can you trust?" I said, venting my anger at him. Mikiya appeared troubled, his face grew into a lonely smile, and said, "I have no basis for it, but I think I'll continue to trust you. How could I not? I'm in love you, Shiki."

That was the finishing blow.

Carrying such simplicity, those words, innocent as they were, were rather stripped of the veil of pretense.

These unassuming words to him was for me, Shiki, a little happiness and simultaneously an unstoppable destruction.

Indeed, they created a destruction inside of me. I was shown an impossible fragment of time where I was able live in by this happy person.

A world in which you can live with someone else must be a happy world.

However, I do not know such a world.

Surely, I do not know of such a world.

If I get to know someone, SHIKI will kill that person, because SHIKI's reason for existence is to deny.

And since my reason is to affirm, I cannot exist without denial.

Since I have never been attracted to anything, I was able to distance myself from this contradiction.

Now that I knew of such contradiction, the more I wish for it the more I understand the hopelessness coming from that wish.

It felt so painful, and so detestable.

For the first time, I detested this man from the bottom of my heart.

Mikiya was smiling as if it were nothing.

Even when I was not supposed to be in that world.

I could not stand his existence.

I knew for sure now.

Mikiya was to bring forth my destruction—

"You're a fool." I said what I meant from the bottom of my heart.

"Yeah, I get that a lot," said Mikiya.

The sunset blazed red behind me.

As I left the classroom, I asked Mikiya without facing him, "Are you going to come again tonight?"

"Huh...?"

He sounded surprised. He must have not known that I had noticed his "stake-outs".

Mikiya tried to shrug it off, but I prevented him from doing so.

"Answer me."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I'll go if I feel like it." He said. I acknowledged his statement and left the classroom.

Gray clouds loomed across in the red sky.

Judging from the sudden change in the weather, I believe it would rain tonight.

∠5

That evening.

The dark clouds began to shower rain upon the earth.

The countless droplets pattering against the ground sent a clamor against the timid night.

Considering the heaviness it would be an overstatement to call it a downpour, but it was not so light to be considered a drizzle.

The rain was atypical for early March, being frosty as it was.

Among the wet bamboo leaves, Kokuto Mikiya was gazing at the Ryougi mansion.

The hand holding his umbrella grew red and sore. He heaved a great sigh.

Even for someone like Mikiya, he did not plan on continuing this voyeuristic charade for much longer. In the best case scenario the killer was to be caught in the time that he was doing this, but Mikiya had decided to quit if nothing happened for another week.

Like one would expect it was tiring to stay in the rain.

Mikiya was building endurance against the bombarding of the droplets and coldness, but even then it was still harsh.

He sighed, not because of the rain, but rather as a result of Shiki's actions today.

What could Mikiya get across to her when she thinks he doesn't trust her?

At that time, Shiki appeared really fragile, so much so that Mikiya thought she was crying.

The rain did not stop.

The sparkling puddles on the stone path tirelessly went on and created tiny, little ripples.

The sound of the rain was calming, yet restless.

He stood listening to it in a trance, and was interrupted by a loud sound.

Echoed the sound of a tremendous splash.

Mikiya turned in the direction of the sound, a red figure was standing there. It was a girl dressed in red kimono. She was soaked from the rain.

Without an umbrella in her hand, the girl was exposed to the pouring rain and looked like she had just come out of the ocean.

Her short black hair clung onto her forehead, hiding her empty eyes.

"...Shiki!"

Mikiya quickly ran to her.

How long has this girl been out in the rain?

The red kimono was sticking to her now ice-cold body.

Mikiya handed her the umbrella and took out a towel from his bag.

"Here, wipe yourself. What are you doing at a place like this? Your house is right there." Mikiya said as if to scold. He reached out his hand.

She quietly ridiculed his defenselessness.

There occurred the sound of a blade slicing through the air.

"...Huh?"

It happened in a flash.

Mikiya recoiled from the burning feeling in the arm that was reaching out to her.

A warm sensation trickled down his arm.

Was it my arm?

That got cut?

Why?

It couldn't move?

The acute pain was so sharp he could not register it like the kind of ordinary pain.

His senses began to go numb from the intensity of it.

There was no time for Mikiya to think.

The girl in red whom he thought to be Shiki moved.

His mind had not panicked just yet, probably because it was not his first time witnessing calamity in this very place.

Jumping back calmly, Mikiya then ran off.

...No, there wasn't a way he could escape.

The moment Mikiya fled, she started dashing toward him.

Her speed was beyond for a human and more similar to a beast.

Mikiya heard a slicing sound from around his feet.

The rain became mixed with a red liquid.

Noticing that it was indeed his own blood, Mikiya fell to the stone path face-up, being unable to stand up.

"Argh..."

He groaned as his back slammed into the stony ground.

The girl in red leaned on top of Mikiya's body, her eyes absent of hesitation.

She placed her knife at Mikiya's throat.

Mikiya looked up at the events unfolding in front of him.

There was only darkness—and her.

Those black eyes carried no emotions.

She was firm, resolute.

The tip of the knife touched Mikiya's throat. The rain dripping on her face made it seem that she was crying.

But there was no expression.

That blank, crying mask of a face was frightening, and at the same time, pitiful.

"Please say something, Kokuto," said Shiki. She promised to listen to his last words.

In spite of his trembling body, Mikiya looked straight into Shiki's eyes.

"I... don't want... to die..." he said. One would wonder whether it was Shiki that they were meant for; whether those words were not directed at Shiki, but rather at the rapidly impending death itself.

Shiki gave a smile.

"But, I want to kill you."

It was a warm one.

Kara no Kyoukai / Prelude

July, 1998.

I finished my first job without trouble ever since Touko-san hired me.

In reality though, it was more of a secretary's job. All I had done was get a lawyer to approve a stack of contracts for me.

I didn't like how she treated me like a kid, but I know it's all I really deserve for the dropout that I was.

"Mikiya-kun, aren't you supposed to go to the hospital today?"

"Yes, I'll go after work."

"You can take your leave early, there's nothing to do anyway."

It was one of those lucky days. Whenever she had her glasses on Touko-san always treated me so kindly. She herself was also done with her work and was about to polish the steering wheels of her loving car.

"I'll head off then. I should be back in about two hours."

"Bring back something nice!" Touko-san said. I waved at her and left the office.

Every Saturday afternoon I would go visit her—Ryougi Shiki.

Since that night, she had been in a state where she couldn't even talk.

I didn't know what kind of trouble she was going through, or what she tried to do.

And I still didn't understand why she had tried to kill me.

But her smile at the very last moment was enough for me.

As Gakuto said, I had been madly in love with Shiki from long ago; a single close call with death wasn't going to change that.

Sleeping in the hospital room, she had remained unchanged since that night.

I remembered that day when Shiki and I were talking in the classroom as the sun set.

In the searing dusk, she asked me what part of her I could believe in.

I would repeat my answer from back then.

... I have no basis for it, but I think I'll continue to trust you. How could I not? I'm in love you, Shiki.

What an immature answer.

I had said I had no basis, but of course I did.

I can say with confidence that she would never kill anyone, because Shiki herself understood the pain of murder.

She was the victim and the assailant.

She understood more than anyone how grievous murder is.

That's why I believe in her.

In Shiki, who cannot be harmed; and SHIKI, who only knows harm.

And in you, who always looked so fragile, who could not let out your true feelings even once...

The three pieces were in place.

A human with two bodies that floats with reliance on death.

An incompatible human who takes pleasure from being in contact with death.

A human who has awoken their origin and discovered the self by escaping death.

They all intertwined with one another and waited at the spiral of conflict.



3

Remaining Sense of Pain

ever cry, never life.

／ Remaining Sense of Pain -Asagami Fujino-

When I was little, I once cut my hand while playing house.
Among those borrowed things, imitated things, fabricated things...
A real one was mixed in with all those cooking utensils.
While I was playing with this well-crafted knife,
I at some point made a deep cut between the fingers.
When I returned to my mother with my hand red and painful,
I remember her scolding me, then crying, and then kindly embracing me.
It must have hurt a lot, she said.
I was happy, not because of those words that I did not understand,
But because I was happier about the fact that mother embraced me, so I started
crying with her.
Fujino, the pain will go away once the cut heals...
Mother said so as she covered the wound with bandages.
I did not know what those words meant...
Because not even once did I feel any pain.

/0

"You brought an unusual letter of introduction," said the professor. He then shook my hand with a smile reminiscing of reptiles.

I was inside a university laboratory. The professor whom I just shook hands with was a lab coat-wearing old man. I thought it suited him.

"Supernatural powers... how curious. So you're interested in such things?"

"No, I just want to know what they are."

"Isn't that what they call interest? Whatever. To use her card as a letter... that's just like her. She was an outstanding student of mine, you see. I sometimes wonder what she's been up to these days. This place is getting fewer competent people, so we don't have enough human resources. You can never get enough of those."

"Um, about the supernatural powers..."

"Oh yes, the supernatural powers... But you see, there are many different kinds of powers. We don't have an actual way of determining those here so I don't know if I can help you. It's an ominous subject in my occupation; you can even

count on your hand the number of laboratories researching it in Japan. It's like a black box, you know, so the actual details don't get to me. Yes... I've heard there's been progress made in terms of the practicality of it, but I have to wonder. That 'thing' is, you know, something you have to be born with..."

"I really don't care about the classification. Either way, I think of them as psionic powers. What I want to know is how people end up with these powers."

"They're like channels. You watch TV?"

"Well, yeah... but what about it?"

"TVs. Think in terms of TVs. You can compare the human brain to channels. Which channel do you usually watch?"

"Let's see... I guess it's channel 8."

"That's it. That should be the channel with the highest viewership, right? Let's say there are 12 channels in the human brain. The brains of you and me are always on channel 8, the channel with the highest viewership. There are other channels but we can't turn to them. The channel that everyone watches—should I say 'common sense'? Channel 8 is the channel we have to be on in order to live within that common sense. Do you understand?"

"...Um, so you're saying we're made to watch the safest programs?"

"No no. It's for the best. The common sense of the 20th century, the channel with the highest rating is channel 8. Don't you think it's the most peaceful channel because we've been able to tune into it? While living in that common sense it also acts as an absolute law that governs us, which is how we're able to communicate with each other."

"You're saying other channels are not peaceful?"

"I would question that."

"Let's say the people who watch channel 3 can interpret the language exchanged between plants rather than people."

"And let's say the people who watch channel 4 are then capable of using brain waves that normally move your body parts to move other physical objects."

"It's terrific to have access to these channels, don't you think? However, there, the common sense airing on channel 8 doesn't exist since those channels have their own laws."

"So you see that in order for someone to live in this day and age they have to be watching the same channel, which is channel 8. Since those other channels don't air that sort of common sense that's in channel 8, someone who watches, let's say channel 4, wouldn't be able to integrate into this society."

"So you're saying if someone doesn't have channel 8 they're considered to be abnormal?"

"Yes. Say there's someone who only watches channel 3. That person can talk to plants, but in turn, cannot talk to people. As a result, society treats that person as mentally disabled and locks them up in a sanatorium.

"That's what it means for a person to have supernatural powers—someone who is born with different channels compared to everyone else.

"But, most people with supernatural powers have such channels as 4 and 8 at the same time and can switch between them. Like television channels, you can switch whenever you want, right? When you watch channel 4, you can't watch channel 8, and vice versa.

"Those who are able to switch between channels in this way can blend into modern society, so it's near impossible for us to spot them."

"I see. So that's why common sense is useless for the person who only has channel 4... because it wouldn't exist to begin with."

"That's right. Society calls these people maniacs or serial killers, but we have a different name for them—*incompatible existence*.

"There are many people who are incompatible for society, but for these people their existence alone is incompatible; they are people who shouldn't exist... no, they *cannot* exist.

"This is a 'what-if' story, okay? If someone were to have both channel 4 and 8, and something happened to them that destroyed their body, causing that person to be permanently on channel 4—then their life would be doomed. Even when they'd had all the common sense; if that person had no way of being on our channel, then it becomes impossible for them to communicate with us. After all, they would be operating through a different set of signals."

"Is there a way to make them compatible with modern society?"

"Hm, you can just end their life.

To put it more precisely, you have to destroy the abnormal channel. But to do so means to destroy their brain, so it comes down to killing them. There's no such thing as killing the channel without killing the body. If there is, that's what you would really call a supernatural power. That's around channel 12, I think? That channel can pretty much do anything," the professor said and laughed like he had just said something comedic.

"Thank you. I've learned something today. Oh, I have something else to ask you, Doctor. Would you say that spoon bending is most popular psionic power?"

"What? Spoons can bend?"

"I don't know about spoons. How about human arms, then?"

"You mean the arms of an adult? That sounds pretty amazing. *Distortion* depends on the object's size rather than its hardness. I would think it should take about seven days to bend something like the human arm. So, which way does it bend? Right? Left?"

"...Does it matter?"

"Of course. It has something to do with the fulcrum. Even Earth has a direction of rotation, right? What, it's not constant? Hmm... does such a power actually exist? Then you shouldn't go anywhere near this incompatible existence, they have more than two channels. I wager they can rotate in both directions at the same time. See, I have never heard of a case of someone having two channels and able to use them both at once; if Cyborg 001 and 002 from the manga 'Cyborg 009' were to fuse together, even 009 would bow to that."

"...In the interest of time I'd better get going. I have to go all the way to Nagano after this. Yes, thank you for your help today."

"Oh, it's really nothing. Not at all. It's her who introduced you to me, so come whenever you'd like.

"By the way... is Aozaki-kun doing well?"

1

Asagami Fujino got up in an absent state of mind.

She was inside a room. No one else was there besides her.

The lights were off, or rather, there was no such thing to begin with, nothing but an enveloping deep darkness.

"Phew..." She let out a nervous breathe. Fujino felt her long, black hair. The hair that was drooping down to the left side of her chest was gone, probably cut by the man who sat on top of her a second ago.

Once she recalled that, Fujino finally gave her surrounding a look.

She was inside an underground bar.

It was abandoned half a year ago due to bankruptcy and became a hangout spot for delinquents.

...There were folding chairs crammed into the corner of the room; in the middle a pool table; traces of store-bought foods scattered across the room, their containers piling up. Such sloven aftermath seemed to be creating this repulsive gunk.

Fujino felt uncomfortable by the overwhelming stench in the room.

The place was a ruin, others might consider it to be some back-alley slum in a faraway country. It was hard to imagine that a normal city existed on the other side of the stairway.

The only normal thing here was the smell of the alcohol lamp they had brought in.

"Erm...." Fujino looked around with manners that were no less dignified.

Her mind had not calmed down, nor had it even registered what just happened.

She picked a human wrist by her feet. There was a watch on the severed wrist; its digital screen displayed the date "July 20, 1998".

It was 8PM at the time. Not even an hour had passed by after that incident.

"Guh...!"

Fujino groaned. A pain around the stomach area came along that sudden agony.

She was writhing, unable to withstand the pain that felt as if her interiors were being twisted.

Her hands touched the floor and made a splashing sound. She came to realize that it was flooding in this abandoned building.

"...Come to think of it, it's supposed to rain today." Fujino mumbled to herself and stood up.

She took a glance at her stomach. There was a trace of flood on it.

It was the spot where those men laying on the floor had stabbed her.



The man who stabbed Fujino was an infamous name in his town. Being a rather conspicuous figure among his fellow high school dropouts, he had the reputation of being a leader-like character to the misfits in the area.

He looked for people who were similar to him, and the gang did whatever their hearts desired. As part of their pleasure they raped Fujino. There was not much reasoning behind it. They simply found her hot, and that she went to an all-girls school.

The man—being fairly violent, ignorantly selfish, and partly dumb as he was—along with his likeminded goons, were not content with abusing her just once.

At first, they were hesitant. To one's surprise, even brats like them understood they could get jailed any time, but things changed when they knew Fujino had been suffering silently—they realized they were in the driver's seat, and thus began dragging her to this dump countless of times.

Tonight was another one of those times. The group had nothing to worry about, but they also got tired of the banal act. Their leader wanted to bring some excitement into this habitual repetition, which must have been the reason why he had brought a knife with him.

Fujino went on with her lives without a concern despite having been raped. This had destroyed his pride; the man craved for a definite proof marking his possession over her. As a result, he prepared a knife in anticipation for an even more violent act.

But the girl's face was even more expressionless—when he stabbed her, her expression did not waver, so the man rose up, pushed her down, and then...



"I can't go outside like this." Fujino looked down as she felt her blood-soaked body. She didn't lose too much blood herself, with the only wound being the stab on her stomach. However, the problem was the stains of their blood, sticking on the top of her hair to the bottom of her shoes.

"How stupid of me... getting this dirty."

Am I more annoyed from having their blood on my body than being raped by them all the time?

She kicked at one of the youth's limbs that were scattered around the floor. Surprised by her unusual violent acts, Fujino then began to think.

It is raining outside. There should be less people walking around in about an hour. With it being summertime the rain shouldn't be too cold. I'll soak myself in the rain and then wash off the blood at the park...

When she came up with such solution, Fujino calmed down.

She walked away from the pool of blood, hopped on the pool table, and at last, counted the number of corpses lying around.

One, two, three, four. Four, four... Four? Why are there only four?!

She suddenly turned appalled.

There was missing one person.

"...so one managed to get away." she murmured quietly.

Which means I will be caught by the police. If he's able to get to them, I will be arrested.

But if you think about it, will he actually go to the police?

How will he be able to explain the situation?

Will he start by telling them that his gang kidnapped a girl named Asagami Fujino, then raped, and threatened her not to tell anyone?

As if, that's not something he can simply confess to, and none of these brats should not have the brains to fake a convincing story anyway.

Fujino relaxed a bit and lit the lamp that was on the pool table.

The light from the lamp brightened up the whole room, making the severed limbs— sixteen in total—clearly visible. If Fujino looked harder she should also be able to find four bodies and heads.

The orange light shone the room and painted it anew with a frenzy red paint, spelling an end to all things inside in every sense of the word.

Fujino did not care much about the disastrous scene before her.

One person got away, she thought. Her revenge had not ended.

Fortunately, it had not yet ended.

"Would I have to take revenge...?"

Fujino feared the idea of having to kill another person. Her body trembled at such thought, but she herself would be in danger if she let him live—she would be in danger if she did not seal his mouth tight.

But Fujino did not want to commit any more crimes, she did not want to kill any more people...

That was what she truly believed.

The pool of blood reflecting her face showed her forming a slight smile.

Remaining Sense of Pain / 1

As July was coming to an end, I was met with all sorts of surprising events: a friend of mine who had been in a coma for two years just came back to life; my sister whom I hadn't met in five years came for a visit; and I had recently finished another big job at my workplace ever since I became a college dropout. Basically, there was no breathing room at all, and thus began the nineteenth summer of me, Kokuto Mikiya.

Today was one of my rare days off. However, I accompanied my friend from high school to a drinking party and before I noticed it, I had missed the last train.

The folks took cabs home, but because payday was tomorrow, I didn't have the money at the time.

And so I decided to walk home. Thankfully, my house was only two stations away from here.

The date, which had been July 20 earlier, just changed to the next day, July 21.

Being past midnight, I walked through the night town alone. Since tomorrow was a weekday, the shopping district became fast asleep.

It rained hard tonight. The rain had stopped before midnight, but the asphalt still showed signs of rain as the wet ground made splashing sounds.

The time was the middle of summer and it was thirty degrees outside. While annoyed by the hot night air and humidity left by the rain, I noticed a girl by the sidewalk. She was crouching.

The girl, in a black school uniform, was holding her stomach in pain as she crouched at the end of the road.

...I recognized the nun-like uniform she was wearing—that plain but party dress-like fancy design belonged to Reien Girls Academy. According to Gakuto, the uniform was well-known among a certain kind of audience. To

them it was like an outfit worn inside a maid café. Well, it wasn't that I was one of those people. I only knew because my younger sister went there.

"I heard the students there lived in dorms..."

So why would a girl like her be at such a place and time? Was she in some kind of trouble? Or was she just a non-rule-abiding delinquent?

With my sister going to the same school and all, I decided to call to her. When I did just that she slowly turned to me, the clumps of her long, black hair swayed.

"....."

The girl appeared to be catching short, but quiet breaths.

She had long hair, her calm eyes made her seem quite relaxed. Her pretty face was small, and albeit cute it had a thin and well-defined outline—such delicate balance was similar to the beauty of the Japanese doll.

Her long hair was cast straight behind her, a small section of it was separated around both of her ears draping down to her chest, creating a symmetry. But despite its symmetry the left side of her hair was missing, like it was snipped away by a pair of scissors. Her evenly cut fringe formed the impression of a young lady coming from a respected family.

The girl said, "Yes? What is it?", her face was pale and her lips were purple. They were clear signs of cyanosis. She put her hand over her stomach, her face writhing in pain.

"Does your stomach hurt?" I asked.

"No, um... I, um..."

She tried to act calm, yet her words spoke otherwise. The girl had a rather fragile look that gave the impression that she could break down any second, just like Shiki when I first met her.

"You're from Reien Academy, right? Did you miss your train? That place is far from here. Do you want me to go get a taxi for you?"

"No, it's all right. I don't have any money."

"Yeah, I don't have any either."

The girl looked at me in surprise.

...I never knew I had that instinct in me to blurt out such a stupid reply.

"I see. Then your house must be near here. I heard it was a boarding school, so maybe they had something like a formal notice whenever you need to leave?"

"No, my house is a long way away."

I began to scratch my head, confused.

"So you're basically running away?"

"Yes, I think that is what I have to resort to."

...I wasn't sure of what to do.

Looking at her, the girl was all soaked up and had water dripping from her body. It was probably because she didn't find cover in that rain earlier.

Since then I had come to dislike the sight of girls getting soaked up in the rain, which must've been why these words came out of my mouth.

I asked, "You want to come to my place just for tonight?"

"Can I...?"

Still sitting down, she looked at me with desperate eyes. I nodded.

"There won't be a problem since I live alone, but I won't make any guarantees. I don't have any bad intentions, but if anything weird happens, I might get 'in the mood' for it. I'm a healthy man so take that into consideration too. If you're still okay with that, then come along. Unfortunately, it's before my payday so I can't give you much, but I should at least have some painkillers."

The girl was delighted. Seeing her defenseless and pure smile made me at ease. When I reached my hand to her, she gracefully got up.

For a moment, I thought I had seen red stains between the asphalts she was sitting.

I started walking through the night town with this girl whom I'd just met.

"It's going to be quite a distance so please let me know if it hurts a ton. I should be able to carry at least a girl on my back."

"Yes, but my wound is healed so it doesn't hurt," she said as to reassure me, yet her hand was still on her stomach. It's obvious that she was in some kind of pain.

Without a reason for it, I repeated my question from earlier.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

The girl denied and grew quiet again.

We walked a bit more.

After a small silence, the girl nodded and said, "...yes. It really, really hurts. It hurts so much that I want to cry... is it okay if I cry?"

I nodded. The girl closed her eyes, looking satisfied. She had a dreamy look on her face.



The girl did not tell me her name, so I decided not to tell her mine either. I believe it's more romantic that way.

Once we got to the apartment, the girl asked to borrow the shower. She also said she wanted to dry her clothes. I left the room to give her some private space.

I came up with an offhand excuse and told her that I was going out to buy some smokes, and I didn't even smoke. But now isn't the time to stroke my own ego thinking how much of a nice guy I am.

After spending about an hour outside and coming back, I found her asleep on the sofa. I set my alarm clock to seven thirty and lied on my bed.

As I fell asleep, I began to have countless thoughts about the cut near the stomach on her uniform



When I woke up the next morning, I saw the girl sitting upright in the living room. It seemed like she had nothing else to do. She then noticed that I was awake and gave a bow.

"Thank you for last night. I cannot do anything in return, but I am really thankful for your help." The girl said. She got up and was on her way to the door. I felt a bit guilty about making her sit like that and wait just to say that to me.

"Wait, at least stay and get some breakfast." The girl obediently followed what I said.

I only had pasta and olive oil, so the breakfast naturally was going to be spaghetti. I quickly made enough portions for the two of us and brought it to the table to eat. Since it got so quiet, I turned on the TV only to see some terrible news.

"Sheesh, another one of those that's right up her alley..." I murmured, thinking about Touko-san. Heck, if she were here Touko-san would've definitely thrown slippers or something into my face because of what I just said, but that's just how bizarre the news was.

The reporter at the crime scene began to drone on about the current state of things.

"Last night, four dead bodies were found inside an underground bar; the bar itself had been abandoned for half a year. Apparently, all four victims had their limbs torn off. There was a sea of blood flooding the crime scene."

The place was pretty close to here, maybe around four stations away from where we drank last night.

The way the reporter described how the limbs got severed was unusual: they weren't cut, but *torn off*. The news did not elaborate much on it, and went onto talking about the profiles of the victims.

The four victims, all high school boys, were apparently delinquents who had been hanging around the town near the crime scene. And apparently, they did drugs too. The reporter was then interviewing a person related to the victims about their personal lives.

"I'm not surprised those kids got themselves killed really. They got what they deserved," the person said in a tone different from the reporter. I got annoyed by them speaking ill of the dead, so I turned off the television.

I looked to the girl. She was covering her stomach in great pain. I noticed that she hadn't taken a bite of food. Maybe her stomach really hurt a lot. I couldn't make out her expression as she had her face down.

"...no one ever deserves to die."—she said while struggling to breathe—"The wound should have healed already, so why...?!"

The girl got up from the chair and ran to the door. I quickly followed her, but she raised her hand signalling me to stay where I was, her eyes still on the floor.

"Stay here. I think you should calm down first."

"It's all right. I... I can't go back after all."

Her face was distorted. It was the face of someone who was bearing terrible pain.

That face was awfully similar to Shiki's.

The girl calmed down and bowed at me before opening the door.

"Farewell. I hope we never meet again."

The girl left just like that. Her face was still like that of a Japanese doll, with the exception of her eyes.

Those eyes looked like they were about to burst in tears.

Remaining Sense of Pain / 2

After the incident with that stranger of a girl, I headed to my workplace.

The company itself didn't have any official titles. Its specialty was in doll-making, but most of the jobs we get were construction-related.

The president, Aozaki Touko, was a woman in her late twenties. She was also a weirdo who would buy an abandoned building to make her office. In short, you could say that this wasn't a company, but rather an extension of her hobby.

There were many reasons why I decided to work here, but this was my daily life now.

I had a few gripes here and there, but really I couldn't complain much, and hell I would even outright say that I was lucky. Of course, there were still some problems, but they were things I could afford to bear.

As I had such thoughts I found myself arriving at my workplace.

The building was 4 stories high and the office was on the fourth floor.

Situated between the industrial and residential area this building felt somewhat like a zen temple connecting to the other world, and despite not being tall, it gave an aura of intimidation to those who looked up.

There were no elevators so I took the stairs.

When I entered the office, I spotted an unfitting figure among the usual cluttered trash.

There stood a girl wearing a blackish blue kimono with a fish pattern on it. She turned toward me, her eyes looked like they were about to collapse.

"Huh, Shiki? Why are you here at a place like this?" I said.

"Well sorry that it's a place-like-this. Regardless of what you think of it this is still your workplace, Kokuto." Sitting behind Shiki, Touko-san glared at me with a cigarette on her mouth.

She was dressed as plainly as always, wearing tight black pants with a white shirt. Honestly, she could show up at a funeral right now with those clothes and it wouldn't be the strangest thing. By the way, she also had a pair of earrings, orange-colored of course. I don't know why, but she seemed to have this habit of always wearing something orange.

"But you sure are here early today, didn't I tell you to come around noon? We won't be getting any commissions for a while," said Touko-san.

"No, that's not happening." I said.

That's right. My wallet was not going to let that happen. It's rather uneasy when the only things in my wallet were my train pass and a telephone card.

"Anyway, so why is Shiki here?"

"I called her in for a job."

Shiki did not say anything and rubbed her eyes sleepily. Was she walking around at night again?

It had only been about a month since she recovered from her coma. For some reasons, we were finding it rather uncomfortable to talk to each other.

Shiki didn't seem like she wanted to talk, so I sat down at my own desk.

...Though there wasn't any work for me to do, so the mood in the air felt awkward. In times like these I couldn't help but start a conversation, and there was a convenient topic at hand.

"Touko-san, did you see the news this morning?" I asked her.

"The Broad Bridge? Japan isn't that sort of a country, why would it need that big of a bridge anyway."

I recoiled at her comment.

What Touko-san just talked of was about a big bridge, roughly ten meters long, that was to be finished next year. The town we lived in was close to the port; if you drove for about twenty minutes, you would arrive at that ruggedly made of a port. However, there was a problem with its shape.

To put it simply, there was another side to it. From a map the entire port was shaped like a crescent moon, and to go from one tip to the other you were forced to take a pretty long way around, curving along the crescent-like contours. Concerned about this, the city's development department teamed up with a big construction company and put into action what they said was the solution to the public complaints.

Their plan was to build a straight route across the tips of the crescent shape in the form of a bridge. Of course, most of the money to build this was coming from our taxes. I think this was a typical case of the government saying they are solving public complaints which did not exist from the start, only resulting in more public complaints.

The bridge was also to have art museums, aquariums, one large parking lot that could hold hundreds of cars, and such; at that point you can't really tell whether it's a bridge or an amusement park. It was called Baybridge until recently, but according to what Touko-san was saying, I guess its name had officially been announced to be Broad Bridge.

Incidentally, both Touko-san and I did not have positive feelings about this project.

"I thought you hated the idea, Touko-san. Why do you already have a space in there for your gallery?"

"It's not like I did it out of my will. A person I know gave me that space as a payment. I could sell it off, but since I have some relations with the Asagami construction company I can't just do anything shady behind their backs. Good grief, a check that won't make me money is worth less than a paper straw."

From the way she was talking, Touko-san seemed to be having trouble with money.

...I have a bad feeling about this.

"Um, I don't want to say this considering where we're at, but can I have my pay?"

"About that, Kokuto, I'm sorry to say this but I don't have any money. You're going to have to wait till next month," said Touko-san nonchalantly. To top it all the way she said it sounded so resolute, as if I was the bad guy here.

"Hold on a second. You're telling me you had 1.12 million yen in your bank account yesterday, and now it's all gone?!" I said.

"Yeah. I used it all," replied Touko-san while rocking on her chair.

Shiki was then looking at her with jealousy. ...Indeed, Touko-san seemed to be enjoying herself.

No, that's not something I should care about.

"What did you use the money on, Touko-san?"

"Oh, what I bought was this boring thing: it's a Ouija board from the Victorian age. I can't expect much out of its effect, but it's not totally worthless since it's over a hundred years old. No matter how useless it is, some mana and a large amount of time will give it additional value.

"But I guess that doesn't change the fact that it's useless now. If I have to give a reason for buying it, you could say it's part of my hobby," and so she said.

...I just don't understand this person.

Of course, Aozaki Touko was still a magus. I always thought how much better it would have been if she just did magic tricks or something, but being the way that it is there wasn't anything I could do.

"It suddenly appeared on sale, so I bought it on impulse," said the magus as she went on with her excuse. "Don't get so angry. I'm out of money too."

...Don't be *angry*? That's asking a bit too much.

Considering the fact that I had witnessed plenty of miracles from her, I often found her inability to live in the modern world to be quite charming, but I couldn't afford to tolerate her anymore.

"So is that it? I'm not getting paid this month?"

"Yeah. You go find money from somewhere else." Touko-san said.

"I see." I got up from my seat. "Then I'm going to go find some money to live off of this month. Is it fine that I'm leaving early?"

"Sure. By the way, Kokuto, I need to ask you a favor." Her tone changed saying this.

I wonder if it had to do something with the fact that Shiki was here. I bottled up my anger and stopped.

"What is it, Touko-san?"

"Can you lend me some money? As you can see, I'm quite broke."

"...I refuse with all my might."

I slammed the door and left the office.



After watching the conversation between Mikiya and Touko for a while, Shiki finally spoke up.

"Touko, continue."

"Sigh, I don't really like to accept this kind of a job but I won't be able to live without money.Geez, I'm going mad over gold when I'm not even an alchemist. This is all because Kokuto won't lend me any money."

Touko stuck her cigarette into the ashtray annoyedly. Mikiya is probably more annoyed than her right now, Shiki thought.

"Alright, so about the incident last night—" said Touko.

"I've heard enough. Got most of it sorted out."

"I see... I only explained to you the scene of the crime, and you already figured it all out? How sharp." Touko threw a glance at Shiki as if to say something.

She had only explained the results of the murder that occurred between 7PM and 8PM last night and Shiki understood the guts of it—a definite proof that Ryougi Shiki belonged to the same world as Touko.

"Our client has some idea of the killer. Your job is to take her under your care if possible, but if she shows any retaliation, kill her."

Shiki nodded.

Her job was simple: to find the killer, and kill her.

"And then?" said Shiki.

"If you happen to kill her, they will clean it up and treat it as an accident. The client already considers her to be socially dead—it's not against the law to kill a dead person. What do you think? I think this job rather suits you."

"No need for you to ask."

Saying that, Shiki began to leave the office.

"Such a hurry. Are you that thirsty, Shiki?" asked Touko.

Shiki did not answer.

"Here's her picture and profile. What were you going to do without knowing what she looks like?" Touko threw at her an envelope. It dropped to the floor, spilling the papers inside. Shiki turned to face her. Touko took that glance for an answer.

"I don't need it." Shiki said. "That killer is definitely of my kind. We'd try to kill each other the moment we met."

Shiki departed from the office, leaving only the rustling sound of her kimono and a cold glare.



After I made my grand exit from the office, I had no choice but to borrow some money from a friend of mine.

We chose to meet at the dining hall of the college I quit in June. A bit after noon, Gakuto rushed in. He had grown much bigger since high school, and even back then he was quite buffed already.

When I told him what I came for, he unexpectedly frowned.

"I'm surprised. Calling for someone just to borrow money? Are you really Kokuto Mikiya?"

"C'mon now, even I have to resort to doing this with my current circumstances."

"And so that's your opening line? 'Lend me cash'? That's not like you at all. Besides, you should know I'm broke all year around, and you're smart enough to consider asking money from your parents."

"Hey, I haven't seen my parents ever since that fight I got into with them when I dropped out of college. How do you expect me to go back and ask them that?"

"Haha, you're weirdly stubborn sometimes. You got into a big fight with your old geezer or something?"

"That has nothing to do with you. So, are you going to let me borrow your money or not?"

"Huh, you're in a pretty bad mood today."

I glared at him and thought, "Mind your own business," but Gakuto happily followed through. "If I put your name out, I bet I could fundraise fifty or sixty thousand yen quite quickly, and if you still need more, I could lend you some of my money. But with an eye for an eye." It sounds like he also had a favor to ask of me.

Gakuto looked around, making sure no one was listening.

"Well, to put it simply, I want you to look for someone. He's one of our underclassmen. Hasn't returned home yet apparently, heard he got himself into some twisted crime."

Gakuto's story was unsettling.

The name of the missing underclassman was Minato Keita. He had been missing since last night, and according to Gakuto, he was part of the group that was killed yesterday. Last night Minato Keita contacted one of his friends. They said he was acting strange and went to Gakuto—who was their senpai—for help.

"Keita said he was about to get killed or something. He never made any other call. And he doesn't even answer his cell phone now. Based on what I've heard from him his mind's gotten trippy."

Trippy—so probably drugs.

Beginner drugs—the type that doesn't give you any after-effects—were cheap and relatively easy to get nowadays. Even a high schooler could get their hands on L if they tried, but they shouldn't be trying in the first place...

"...C'mon now. Do I look like the type of person who'd get into this shady business?" I said.

"What are you even on? Isn't this sort of people searching your specialty?" said Gakuto. I grew quiet.

"Does this kid Keita normally do drugs?"

"No, the ones who did get killed. Don't you remember Keita? He's one of the kids that liked you."

"Ah, I remember him now."

During high school I had good reputation among the underclassmen for some reason, maybe because I was a friend of Gakuto that they all treated me differently.

"It would make things easier if he were just tripping on a new drug. What kind of drugs do they use? Uppers or downers?"

There were two types of drugs: uppers, which make you mentally high and feel good; and downers, which make you depressed. The one Gakuto named was an upper.

"Sounds like he's coping with his fears through drugs," I said. "This is bad. The killer really might be after this kid. All right, I'll look into this. Tell me about his friends."

Gakuto handed me an address book as if he was ready for me to say so.

One characteristic of the group was that their members had a lot of friends. The address book contained plenty of names with their respective phone numbers along with the hangout spots of each group.

"I'll contact you once I find him. I might have to take him into custody, are you okay with that?"

By "custody" I meant handing him over to Daisuke nii-san, a cop. Gakuto nodded to show his consent.

We had reached an agreement. To start off my search I borrowed about twenty thousand yen from him.

After saying goodbye to Gakuto, I decided to head to the murder scene. My intuition was telling that that I would have to put in serious efforts in order to find him.

Of course, I didn't take this job lightly.

I knew I shouldn't concern myself with these matters, but I couldn't say no. You couldn't just abandon a kid like him after hearing something of that degree.

/2

The phone began to ring.

After five rings it stopped and switched to the answering machine. It made a beep. A male voice came out of the machine. It sounded familiar.

"Good morning, Shiki. Could you do me a quick favor? I'm supposed to meet Azaka at a cafe called 'Ahnenerbe' near the station at noon but I don't think I can make it. You have nothing to do, right? Can you go there and tell her I can't come?" The caller said and hung up.

I woke my sluggish body and looked at the clock by the bed. It read, "July 22, 7:23AM". It had only been four hours since I came home.

I pulled my sheets over, my body was still craving for sleep, probably because ever since I took on Touko's job I had been walking around the town until three in the morning.

The summer heat did not affect me. From a young age Ryougi Shiki had always been capable of tolerating hot and cold weather rather well, and even now I still carried that disposition.

As I lied there for a while the phone rang again. It switched to the answering machine and this time, the voice coming out of the machine belonged to a particular person whom I didn't want to hear from.

"It's me. Have you seen the news? You haven't, right? That's okay, I haven't seen it either."

...I'd had this nagging this feeling for a while, but this confirmed it: the way this woman operates is far removed from mine; one should not grasp the true meaning behind Touko's words.

"Three people just died last night. One jumped off the building and two 'crimes of passion'. None of these are in the news so I'm guessing they were all treated as accidents. Though there's one strange case. If you want to know more, come to my place. Actually, you don't have to. Come to think of it, this will do.

"Listen up. I'll put it simply so even that sleepy head of yours can understand. There was another victim just now." The caller hung up. That almost made me snap out of my mind. Why do I care if more people die? None of this has anything to do with me. If I don't feel connected to the reality in front of me, then these distant events feel even more meaningless. The death of someone I did not know the name of makes less impression on me than the sunlight striking my body.

I finally got up when the weariness in me dispersed.

I made breakfast, ate it, and got ready to go outside—in the same way the previous Shiki had done throughout the sixteen years of her life.

I put on a light orange tsumugi kimono today. Since I were to be walking outside this morning, a tsumugi kimono would be my most preferable; even my choice of clothing was only a habit from the past. I bit my tongue, annoyed. It felt like I was watching over the life of someone else from a distance.

Two years ago when Ryougi Shiki was still seventeen, I was not like this. It was not that the two years of coma changed me; those empty two years brought me something else.

Apart from all that, it was like I wasn't acting of my own volition.

I always had this illusion—the strings that encompassed the sixteen years Ryougi Shiki had lived were controlling me like a puppet. But of course, it was none more than an illusion.

No matter how much I cursed myself for being empty and fictitious, in the end, I was moving of my own will. It is impossible for anything else to interfere with that.

When I finished changing, the time was almost eleven.

I rewound the first message on the answering machine, repeating the voice that I had heard many times in the past. Despite being once lost in the air, this was how it still retained its form, like an audio recording.

...Kokuto Mikiya—the last person I saw two years ago—the classmate whom I first opened my heart to two years ago.

I certainly had memories of him, but within my memory was missing the snapshot of our last moment together.

Not only that, throughout the memory of the year I got to know him there were full of holes, and it lacked the important details.

Such as why Shiki got in that accident.

Or why Mikiya was there at that moment.

How handy would it have been had my forgotten memories been recorded. Those missing details made it difficult for me to talk to Kokuto Mikiya normally.

The rewind came to a stop.

Whenever I heard his voice my worries went away a bit, it made me feel like I had a support holding me steady; it was quite fascinating. But when you think about it, how could a voice act as a form of support?

That, too, must have been an illusion.

No, most definitely, it was an illusion.

The only reality there was for me was the burning excitement inside of me when I committed murder.



Ahnenerbe turned out to be an antique coffee shop. I went inside after making sure the German-written store sign matched up.

There were surprisingly few customers for an afternoon. I didn't know the full design of it, but the store's interior was dim. The only bright area was where the front tables sat, while the back of the store with the counters was dark—the store's single light source came through the four square windows on the walls. As the light shed on the tables by the windows, they looked like they were rectangles cut from a sheet of black paper. Maybe it was because of the strong sunlight, but the contrast felt rather majestic.

Kokuto Azaka was sitting at the table in the very back. There were two girls in western-style uniform waiting for Mikiya. They sat side by side.

"Two...?"

That's not what I heard. Mikiya never mentioned another girl. There should just be Azaka.

I had my eyes on them as I approached their table.

The two girls both had long straight black hair. Being similar in their features, they had a certain calming demeanor and intellectual beauty that were fitting for someone from a Girls Academy. However, they gave off the exact opposite image.

Azaya's eyes reflected a tenacity which her ladylike front could not hide—a strength that could face against any challenges. If Mikiya was adored for his virtues, you could say that Azaka possessed an admirable toughness.

On the other hand, the girl sitting next to her seemed rather frail. In spite of her posture which was with dignity and grace, she gave off a weakness akin to a twig that was about to break.

I approached to their table and called, "Hey, Azaka."

Azaka looked at me in the eyes and frowned.

"Ryougi... Shiki," Azaka whispered my name with a faint hostility. Her perfect ladylike exterior ended up being a façade. "I am waiting for nii-san. You have no reason to be here," said Azaka while maintaining her coolness. Her words had a sting to them.

"I have a message from that nii-san of yours, says he can't make it. Looks like he ditched you."

Azaka gasped. I wonder if she was shocked because Mikiya broke their promise, or me being the one to come tell her that.

"It must be your doing, Shiki...!" Azaka's fist trembled. I guess it was the latter.

"Don't be stupid. I'm a victim, too. He just pushed it on me to tell you that he can't make it."

Azaka looked at me with fiery eyes. The other girl tried to calm her as though she might start throwing things.

"Um, Kokuto-san, everyone's surprised," she said. Her voice sounded soft.

I took a step back.

"...right, didn't you say you had something to discuss with me? Sorry Fujino, it was unreasonable for me to get angry." Azaka apologized to the timid-looking girl whose name was Fujino. I then looked at her.

She was looking back at me.

"Does it... not hurt?" I said unconsciously.

The girl did not answer and kept staring—with a lack of interest as if watching a scenery—a lifelessness resembling insects.

I had come up with two convictions: a gut feeling telling me she was an enemy, and the actual feeling that says otherwise.

"...No, it can't be you."

In the end, I trusted my feeling.

This girl would never find pleasure in murder. There was no reason for her to.

And besides, it would be impossible for her delicate arms to tear off human limbs, although it would be a different story if she had abnormal eyes like me.

I lost interest in her and spoke to Azaka, "That's all. Anything you want me to tell him?"

"Yes. Tell him, 'Nii-san, please quickly break ties with this woman.'" Azaka said seriously so.



"Nii-san, please quickly break your ties with this woman," said Azaka with a straight face to the kimono-wearing girl—Shiki.

Although just exchanging gazes, there was an indescribable tension between them that made me feel uneasy. It was like they were holding knives at each other's throats and prepared to strike the instant they saw an opening.

I became timid under that suffocating air. The best I could do was praying that nothing would happen.

Fortunately, the conversation stopped then. The girl in her beautiful orange tsumugi kimono left with such a swooning grace. I was looking at her back as she faded into the distance.

Shiki spoke with a very masculine tone. I couldn't tell her age because of that, but if I had to guess she was probably around my age.

Ryougi... would it be *that* Ryougi family? If so, that would explain her expensive-looking tsumugi. Traditionally, tsumugi kimono are a casual outfit, but the fine crease on her kimono appeared to be more modernized. If she was a Ryougi it would be no surprise that she had her own kimono maker.

"...how pretty." I murmured. I guess so, said Azaka. I thought she was amazing to be able to give her honest impression of someone she hated.

"But she is just as scary. I don't like that person." I said.

Azaka looked surprised. Her reaction was completely natural; even I was surprised. After all, it was probably the first time I felt repulsion toward someone.

"I couldn't have imagined you hating somebody," said Azaka. "I guess I'm still naïve."

"Hate...?"

I wouldn't say my dislike is on the same veins as hatred. I just felt I couldn't get along with her.

I began to close my eyes.

Ryougi, Shiki.

I could see her ominous black hair, ominous white skin, and those ominous, bottomless, empty eyes.

She was looking at me.

So I looked back at her.

Thus, we saw what was hiding behind us.

She only knew blood. She killed of her own will. She hurt others of her volition. That woman was a murderer.

But I'm different. Well, I believe have a reason for it—I had never wanted to do something like that myself.

I'm different, I'm different, I repeated to myself in the dizzying darkness behind my closed eyes. We had not talked even once, but her figure was engraved into my mind.

"I'm sorry, Fujino. I ruined your day off, didn't I." I opened my eyes to Azaka's words. I made my practiced smile.

"It's all right. I wasn't in the mood for it anyway." I said.

"You do look quite pale. It's hard to tell because you're pretty white to begin with."

I nodded, although that wasn't what bothered me. I knew my body wasn't well from its dull reaction, but I didn't think it was bad enough to show on my face.

"Well, don't you worry." Azaka said. "I'll ask Mikiya myself. Do you want to go home for today?"

Azaka was worried about my health. I thanked her.

"Is it okay to leave such a message to your brother?" I asked.

"It'll be fine. I don't even know how many times I told him that anyway. He should be used to it.

"Honestly, it's kinda like a curse. When you repeat things over and over again reality can twist in a way so that what you say actually becomes true. Childish, isn't it? It's all so silly, or maybe even a bit pitiful."

I wasn't sure if she really meant it, but that's what she explained to me in all seriousness. As I had gotten used to her unpredictability, I quietly let Azaka speak to me in her clear and beautiful voice.

Having scored top ten in the nationwide mocking exam, Kokuto Azaka was the number one student at our school, Reien Academy. She was also kind of weird and had this gentlemanly side of her.

Azaka was my only friend at Reien. Both of us got admitted to the Academy while we were in high school. Because Reien followed an escalating model where its students began attendance after elementary school, there were few other students like us who transferred from a high school, so this was how we met. We sometimes hung out together on holidays.

I was supposed have her brother look for someone today.

In my freshman year at a local middle school, I met a senpai from another school who approached me.

I had been depressed about what happened recently, but whenever I started thinking about him I felt hopeful.

After I opened up to Azaka and told her about this senpai, she said, Let's go find him! Her brother happened to go to this middle school as well, and knew a lot of people in the area. She said he was really good at looking for people at our age.

I wasn't too keen on seeing this senpai, but I couldn't say no to Azaka's pressure so we decided to find him. Which is why we'd been waiting here to see her brother, but sadly, he couldn't come.

Honestly, I was kind of relieved.

The reason why I wasn't in the mood to see senpai was because I already ran into him two days ago. Then, I was able to tell him what I couldn't three years ago.

There was no point in finding him anymore. I had already done what I wanted to do. Maybe Azaka's brother couldn't come because God knew I no longer needed to see him.

"Let's get going. It's weird to stay this long when all we bought was tea." Azaka got up. It was admirable how she could act with such grace even when her brother broke their promise.

I found her to be manly at times, it may be due to her terse speech. Whenever she dropped her formal tone like this Azaka could be as charismatic as a man. I'm not saying that she was acting innocent on the surface; that's just the way she is.

I thought dearly of this friend of mine.

So this shall be our last time seeing each other.

"Azaka, could you go back to dorms? I will be staying at my parents' house tonight again."

"Are you sure? I'm personally fine with that, but Sister will start giving you the looks if you stay out too much. You should restrain yourself." Waving her hands, Azaka left the coffee shop. I was by myself.

Then, I took a glance at the store sign. It wrote, "Ahnenerbe". The word meant "ancestral inheritance" in German.



After we'd parted, I began to wander aimlessly.

I wasn't going to go back to my parents' house. That was a lie.

There was no place for me to go back to now. I had not been going to school since that night from two days ago. They had probably contacted Father about my unexcused absences.

If they saw me my parents would've probably asked what I had been doing these past few days. I'm not good at telling lies so I might slip everything out, and if that happened... Father would disdain me.

I am my mother's child from her former marriage. Father only needed mother's house and land so I was just something on the side. That's why I worked hard in order to not stir any hatred in him.

To become a faithful woman like my mother, a student my father can take pride in, and a normal girl who would raise no suspicion—I—I always wanted things remain that way. But I wasn't doing all of this for anyone's sake. No, this was

the ideal world that I'd come up for myself. I yearn for such reality, and it had been protecting me.

But that world had come to an end. That sort of magic was nowhere to be found.

I continue walking, the sun was starting to set.

Among my leisure path was a sea of traversing people who I couldn't care less of, and the many insensibly blinking stoplights.

People older than me, people younger than me—they all looked so happy.

My heart contracted in pain.

I thought to pinch my cheek.

...I did not feel anything.

I pinched harder.

...Nothing.

I let go of my hands and noticed my fingertips were red. I guess I'd pinched hard enough that my nails dug into my skin.

Yet, I still felt nothing. I did not feel that I was alive.

"Hehe..." I laughed, thinking it was funny.

Why does my heart feel pain when I myself do not feel any pain?

First of all, what is the heart? Is it my heart that hurts, or my brain?

When the brain receives offensive speech directed at Asagami Fujino personally, it aches as a safeguard, letting her know that those words are supposed to hurt. Like a remedy to soothe the pain, the brain may come up with rebuttals, advocacies, and verbal abuse.

That's why even though I cannot feel pain, I still understand pain with my heart.

But that's probably just an illusion.

It definitely is an illusion. Real pain cannot be cured with just words.

One quickly forgets a pain in their heart because it is something so trivial; but a wound on your body gives you pain as long as the wound is there—it is a definite proof of life.

If my heart is my brain, then my brain should hurt.

And thus I should be able to feel pain, like my days up to now.

If only the memories of the days I was violated by those young, juvenile boys became a wound—

Those unpleasant memories came back at me.

The memories of their laughter, their scary looks.

The memories of the times where they abused, berated, and raped me.

When the man with a knife on him jumped on me, the stomach area of my clothes got ripped off; my stomach began to feel like it was burning; it started to bleed. At the time, I thought I was about to get stabbed, and reacted violently.

After I'd finished them off, I realized the burning in my stomach was a pain.

My heart shrunk once more.

I won't forgive them, those words repeated in my head over and over.

"Guh..."

My knee wobbled.

Here it comes—the burning in my stomach.

It felt like there was an invisible hand clutching at my insides.

I felt like vomiting—I wouldn't normally feel this way.

I felt dizzy—I would normally faint.

My arm felt numb—I would normally confirm it with my eyes.

It hurt a lot.

Ah, is this what it feels like to be alive?

The place I got stabbed was starting to hurt. The pain of a wound that should have healed suddenly returned.

A long time ago mother said that healed wounds don't hurt. But that is a lie. The wound made by that knife was still hurting me even after it had healed.

And yet, mother, I'm in love this pain. For me who has never once felt alive, there is nothing else that makes me feel more alive than this sensation. This remaining sense of pain was not an illusion.

"I have to look for him quickly." I murmured, my breathing was rough.

I had to get my revenge. I had to end his life—the one who got away.

I didn't want to kill him, but if I didn't people would find out that I was a murderer. After all my efforts of obtaining this sense of pain I couldn't let that happen. I didn't want to stop feeling this pleasure of being alive.

I dragged this body that hurts every time I move it toward their hangout place.

I cried at the remaining sense of pain in my stomach.

But even now, that discomfort is lovely.

/3

After we'd parted, I returned to my place. As night approached I would go out on the town.

There had been five people killed so far, four of them were in that basement bar two days ago, another was at a construction site last night according to Touko. Aside from the four killed two days ago, the last murder doesn't seem to share any common link.

But you can't just assume that none of them had anything to do with each other. Mikiya once said those that hang around at night know other guys that are like them, so maybe there's a chance those four and the one killed last night know each other.

"That girl..."

I suddenly recalled the girl who was with Azaka. That aura of death creeping out of her like capillaries.

As I had not been used to my eyes yet, I saw *those* unprepared. That *thing* was abnormal, probably even more abnormal than I am.

But the girl herself was normal.

She smelled of blood, and she had eyes like mine that made her seem unaware of the boundary she was standing on.

She must surely be my prey, but I still cannot be confident in myself.

The girl had no motive. She had no reason to kill for pleasure like I do, not possessing a dark side that takes pleasure in murder.

To take pleasure in murder... What would Kokuto Mikiya think if he were to hear that?

Would he scold me, saying that murder is bad?

"Fool." I got fed up, but at who? At myself? Or at Mikiya?

He told me I was the same as before, so apparently I was no different from before the coma. If that was the case, had I always taken these night walks? Had I always been this psycho who actively looked out for someone to fight till death?

"....."

No, that wasn't it.

Shiki didn't have such preference. Okay, to be more precise, she did, but it wasn't something on the top of her priority list.

Which means this is SHIKI's sensibility, who was that of the man, Ryougi SHIKI - the yang; inside the woman, Ryougi Shiki - the yin.

I dwelled on my conclusion.

I used to have him inside of me, but he was not there anymore. He was *dead*, meaning this desire to kill could only belong to me.

As Touko said, this job is just for me. Look at how happy I am, so eager that I was allowed to freely kill someone.

The time was near midnight.

I took the train and arrived at a station I rarely visited.

From this sleepless, noisy town,

I could see a large port in the distance.



After we'd parted, I changed my destination.

I don't know where the last one would run to, but I think there is a way to look for him.

The only ones directly involved with me were the four that I killed, and him. However, they had brought me to places in the past. If I went to those places and asked about him, I should be able to find out where he escaped to. They couldn't rely on the police or the school, so the only ones they could depend on were their kind.

I held my burning stomach as I walked through the unfamiliar night town.

I hesitated to enter such a sketchy red-light district at first, but such hesitations were now trivial to me as the pain and my memories of being violated tormented me.

At the third shop, I met a man who claimed to be an acquaintance of Minato Keita. He agreed to talk with me for a while. He had an unpleasant smile.

The big building where he worked at got converted into a karaoke club. He snuck out of his workplace and told me of a spot we could go to for a chat.

From my experience I could tell that he was about to take me to his buddies' hangout place. These types of people could sniff out the weak. With his artificially friendly front, this man must have seen me as an easy target.

He probably knew that the people in Minato Keita's group had taken pleasure in me. That's why he was able to take me out without a look of concern.

Even with knowledge of that I did not refuse to follow him.

This man, who was a few years older than me, was then heading to a quieter area.

I held my stomach as it started to hurt even more, and braced myself.

The time was near midnight.

Cursing those days of violations, I followed this man.

From this sleepless, noisy town,

I could see a large port in the distance.



He could feel his good fortune.

The man heard from Keita himself—he was boasting that his group was playing around with some girl from an all-girls school. It was Keita's routine to brag about all the things he did to that girl to satisfy his sexual desire.

But previously, the man himself had nothing to do with it.

He did not have any strong connections with Keita's group as they were from different areas. That's why he always listened to Keita's story with a kind of disinterest.

But for that same girl to actually come to him!

A man's gotta take what's been granted to him—he decided to abandon his shift and took Fujino somewhere.

It wasn't that he was hungry for sex. To rape a single girl with three or four other guys was an ordinary occurrence for someone like him.

There was another reason to his joy, a reason as to why he didn't call his buddies: Fujino was the daughter of the president of Asagami Construction. If he raped, her he could use that to blackmail and extorted a fortune from the company. Keita and his buddies were rather stupid when it comes to such matters. Maybe it was because their leader was stupid himself. Or was it the opposite—they didn't need the money precisely because they were smart.

Whatever. Who cares about that.

He was enthralled right now.

I better reap all of this myself, he thought, and did not contact his friends.

Asagami Fujino—the girl who came to ask about Minato Keita—was following him silently.

It would be bad to take her to the usual hangout place. The man headed to the port's warehouse area.

The darkened town was to approach midnight.

The area surrounding the warehouse was without a figure.

There were few streetlights. No one would notice them if he were to go in between the warehouses, although there were some things that would get on his

nerve, such as the sound of waves, and the lights from Broad Bridge currently under construction on the other side of the water.

Bringing Fujino into this darkness, the man finally spoke to her, "We should be good here. So, what do you want to know?"

The man figured that he should answer her question first. It was his philosophy to avoid attacking from the start.

"Yes, would you happen to know where Keita-san is?" asked Fujino, looking down and holding her stomach. Her cleanly-cut bangs drooped down in front of her covering up her face.

"I haven't seen him lately. He doesn't even have his own place so he's been going around people's places. You won't be able to contact him either 'cause he doesn't have a cell phone."

"No—I can contact him."

"Huh?"

He was baffled by her words. She can contact him but doesn't know where he is? Has this girl gone crazy from being raped so much? Well, if that's the case, it should make things easier for him. But it was also true that he got disappointed, as he had expected more from her story.

The man calmed down and said, "Well, if you can contact him, then just ask where he is."

"That's—Keita-san does not want to tell me where he is hiding. That is why I am going around asking his friends. Please answer me... I do not care if you know or do not know."

"Whoa, wait a sec. What do you mean he's hiding? Did he get into some deep shit?"

The man got irritated by the girl's strange choices of words.

He's hiding... does that mean that the cops know about them raping Fujino? No, if that was the case, she wouldn't come here by herself.

The man was thinking hard, but could not come up with an answer. After all, he had not seen the news.

"Well, whatever. But what do you mean you don't care if I know or not? Was that your intention to begin with? Using Keita as an excuse to find your new man or something?!"

The man laughed from his heart this time.

I'm a real lucky some of a bitch. Probably could get the money without even threaten her. And besides, in normal circumstances he would not be able to obtain a beautiful girl like Asagami Fujino. A prize of money and beauty—what else can you call this but luck?

"My bad. I should have taken you to my place from the start. Or do you prefer this sort of place better, m'lady?"

The girl in the black uniform nodded and said, "But before that, please tell me if you know where Keita-san is."

"Hey, dumbass, you can quit your excuse for coming here. I wouldn't even know where that punk ran off to anyway."

The girl looked up with a satisfied expression. She was looking at the man with abnormal eyes.

There was no emotion in those amber eyes that glowed in spirals.

Something was unusual—about her.

".....?"

The man, oblivious to the madness before him, encountered something strange.

His arm was moving on its own!

His joint bent. His elbow stretched to about 90 degrees, and it kept bending and bending. And finally, it broke.

"W-What...?!" He let out an idiotic scream.

The fate of the man ended here.

Certainly, he did have luck. And indeed, bad luck was a kind of luck.

In a dark alley where even moonlight could not shine upon, a tragedy began to raise its curtains.



".....!!"

The scream sounded like a beast-like groan.

The man's arms were no longer recognizable as arms. A puzzle ring... or a rubber band twisted around to make a model airplane fly. Either way, they had ceased to function as human arms.

"H-h-help...!"

The man was running away from the girl, who was standing right in front of him.

In that instant, his body was lifted off the ground and his right leg was torn away at the knee, blood splashed as if someone had emptied a bucket full of such liquid. The blood splattered on the wall created something resembling an artistic craft.

Asagami Fujino kept watching over that thing with her glowing eyes.

"I-i-it's twi... twist-t-t-t-ed...!!! Haha... it's like a screw! My leg's turning into a screw, hehe—ahahaha...!!"

What is he saying? I don't really know, he must be stupid. Fujino decided to ignore those words.

"...bend," she murmured the same word she had been repeating all this time.

Her friend had told her that when you repeat a word it becomes a curse.

The man was on the ground, dragging his body with only his neck. Both his hands twisted, his right leg gone. The blood from his leg was wetting the ground.

Fujino stepped into it. It's like a red carpet, her shoes sank into the red liquid.

The summer night was hot and the humid air grabbed hold of her skin and it felt irritating. The blood in the air had a similar feeling.

"...hah." Fujino sighed as she looked down at the man who was squirming like a green caterpillar.

She hated herself for doing such a thing; but she also thought this is what she intended to do from the start. She knew from the way he acted that this man did

not know what happened in that basement bar. But he would find out in time. Then, he would grow suspicious of Fujino for searching Keita.

But that's okay. He planned on doing *that* to me anyway. Although indirect, this was part of Asagami Fujino's revenge. A revenge to those who violated her, and nothing more. However, her ability to violate far surpassed theirs.

"I am sorry.... but I have to do this."

The man's remaining left leg was ripped away, causing the last of the life remaining in him to be cut off as well.

The remaining piece of flesh was twitching. Fujino looked down on it.

Right now, she understood what he was feeling.

Until now, she had never known. She could not have understood people's reaction to pain. But now that she knew pain, she could strongly sympathize with this man.

That made her happy. To be alive means to feel pain.

"At last... I can be normal."

My pain, others' pain.

I am the one who made him this way.

I am the one that gave him those wounds.

The proof that Asagami Fujino is superior.

This is what it means to be alive.

That is...

To be this terrible being who has to inflict pain on others in order to feel the pleasure of living.

"Mother. Am I so ugly that I have to go this far?"

The irritation dwelled in her stomach became unbearable.

Her heart started to beat rapidly.

As if there was a centipede running over her spine—

"I—I never wanted to kill anyone..."

"You're wrong," said someone suddenly. Fujino turned around.

At the entrance of the alley between the warehouses stood a girl in a kimono.

With the port reflecting the dim moonlight behind her, Ryougi Shiki was there.

"Shiki... san?"

"*Asagami* Fujino... I see, you must have a connection with the *Asagami* God."

With light footsteps, Shiki took a step forward. The overwhelming smell of blood caused her to narrow her eyes.

"Since when..." said Fujino without finishing her sentence. She had already known the answer.

"This entire time, when you dragged that sack of meat out here," said Shiki coldly. Fujino felt a chill.

Shiki had seen it all. She saw it, but she still showed herself to Fujino. She saw it, but did not stop her. She knew this was going to happen, but simply observed...

This person is abnormal.

"Please don't call him 'a sack of meat'. He is a human. And this is a human corpse." Fujino argued so in spite of what she was thinking inside. She felt Shiki had gone too far as to call that man a sack of meat, like she was degrading him to something lesser than human.

"Yeah, a human is still a human even when it's dead," said Shiki. "It doesn't become a sack of meat when it dies. But that's not a human death, is it? Humans don't die that way." She took another step forward. "Those who didn't die like a human can't be considered human. Even if the people you've killed are left with their head intact or their body unwounded, you can't consider them to have died a humane death—those removed from the boundary are deprived of all their meaning, so that thing is just a bag of flesh."

Suddenly, Fujino felt repulsion toward this person.

Shiki was essentially stating that she and the corpse that resulted from her doing was abnormal—just like Ryougi Shiki, who was witnessing this tragedy with a straight face.

"No. I am sane. I am not like you!" Fujino screamed without a reason or basis. Shiki laughed, like it was truly funny.

"We are alike, Asagami," said Shiki.

Fujino said, "Don't be ridiculous."

Fujino stared at Shiki. The vision in her gleaming eyes began to distort. The "power" she had as a child was coming into effect.

But the power suddenly faded away.

"...?!"

Not just Fujino, Shiki was also surprised by what happened.

Asagami Fujino was surprised at her disappearing power.

Ryougi Shiki was surprised at the suddenly-changed Asagami Fujino.

"Again...? What the hell is up with you?" she said angrily. Shiki scratched her head as if everything had gone to waste.

"I would have killed you if you stayed that way, you were like that too at the coffee shop. Whatever. I'm bored. I don't care about you now." Shiki walked away. The sound of her footsteps grew quieter into the distance.

"Go home. If you do so, we won't have to see each other again." She said, and disappeared. Fujino stood still in the pool of blood.

I'm back to my previous self. I feel nothing again.

Fujino looked down at the man once more. There was no remnant of the feeling that was in her before besides a sense of guilt numbing her brain.

What remained were the words Shiki left. Those accusative words saying that they were alike, that they were murderers.

"No. I am not like you," Fujino murmured like she was about to cry.

Truthfully, Fujino hated murder.

She was trembling at the thought that she would have to continue such an act in order to find Minato Keita.

You can't forgive someone who has killed another person.

That was what she truly believed.

The pool of blood reflecting her face showed her forming a slight smile.

Sense of Pain / Remaining 3

In the early morning of July 23, I finally found Minato Keita.

Based on the information I'd gathered from his friends and his range of action and thought process, I was able to narrow down his hiding spot after a whole day.

As of now Minato Keita was illegally residing at the sixth floor of an apartment located in a neighborhood far away from downtown.

I went to ring the doorbell and said, trying not to be loud, "Minato Keita, your senpai asked me to look for you. I'm about to get in. Don't mind if I do." The door was not locked.

I went quietly inside. The room had no lights so it was pretty dim, despite being early in the day.

I walked through the wooden hallway and reached the living room, which was empty, probably because there was no one living here. The only thing existing

in this room was the bright summer light; from there you could see the bedroom and kitchen.

I said, "You're in the back, right? I'm coming in."

There was another room beside the bedroom. I turned its knob and found that the inside was pitch black. Kid must have closed the shutters. The sunlight entered through the now open door. As if reacted to it, a small shriek came from the dark corners.

As I'd thought there was nothing inside—a room without furniture is just a box; a room absents of life. And in that room was a boy who looked to be about sixteen, food litters, and a cell phone.

"You are Minato Keita-kun, right? It's unhealthy to hole up in a place like this. And it's wrong to use this room even though nobody is using it. This could be treated as burglary, you know?" When I entered the room, Keita scrambled to the corner. His face was terribly worn-out. It had only been three days since that incident but his cheeks were hollow, his eyes red.

Clearly, he had not been sleeping. I heard he'd been on drugs, but that didn't seem to be the case—he was losing his mind even without them, like he had just seen an unbelievably tragic scene.

He was barely maintaining his sanity by staying in this dark room he'd created for himself—a last resort, but that might hold up for a few days at least.

"...who are you?" he whispered. There was still a bit of sensibility left in his voice.

I stopped in my tracks. His mind must've been utterly detached distraught after facing such a grotesque incident. He might be scared of the killer, so who knows what he would do if I were to get closer. Doubt could make him mistake me for his killer.

But it would be a different story if we could still communicate. He might regain his senses when we began talking. Instead of trying to calm him down from close by, I decided it was best to stay where I was and talked to him from a distance.

"Who are you?" he repeated. I raised both hands.

"I'm Gakuto's friend, and a senpai of yours. My name is Kokuto Mikiya. Do you remember me?"

"Kokuto—senpai?"

He must've not expected me to show up. He stood dumbfounded for a second, and then began crying

"Senpai... Why would you come for me?"

"On behalf of Gakuto's request I'm here to take you under my custody." I said.

"We're worried that you might've gotten yourself into some kind of trouble.

Would it be alright if I come a little bit closer?"

Keita shook his head and said, "I'm not leaving. I'll be killed if I do."

"You'll be killed if you stay in here too." I said.

Keita's eyes widened. He glared at me with his bloodshot eyes; they were fuelled of antagonism. I took out a cigarette and lit it. Although not a smoker myself, it's a handy gesture to make you seem composed, and help calm others.

"I've heard about the incident. Keita, you know the killer, right?" I asked, exhaling the smoke. He remained quiet. "That's okay. I'll just talk to myself for a while.

"On the night of the 20th, you guys were at your hangout place—the Shinkirou Bar. It was raining that night. I also happened to be out drinking that night, but that's besides the point.

"I've heard a lot of stories since Gakuto asked me to look for you. I think I know what you guys were up to on the night of the incident. I don't think the cops know about it yet. Your buddies wouldn't want to ask help from those kinds of people. A mess you've got here." I shrugged. Keita was then showing a different kind of fear. It wasn't a fear of what was going to happen, but fear of his doings being found out.

"On the night of the incident, there was one other person beside you guys—the high school girl whom you guys had been violating. I don't know her name, but someone saw her going down to the bar. That girl hasn't shown up at the police station, or anywhere for that matter since that incident. But it's not like her corpse was found like the other four of you. Do you know what happened to her?"

"Dunno. I—I don't know that chick."

"Then that would make you the killer. I'll go call the police."

"No, wait.... it wasn't me! Please! That... all of that... how could I have done any of that?"

"Yeah, I feel the same way. So the girl was really there?"

After a brief silence, Keita nodded.

"But that brings another question. That's not something a girl can accomplish by herself. Were you guys drugged?" I asked.

The boy shook his head, not to the question that the girl was the killer, but to the question of whether they were insane or not.

"It's impossible for five guys to be taken out by just one girl." I said.

"But it's true! I already knew she was weird from the start, but that girl really was insane! Monster... she was a monster!" He began to tremble and covered his face with his hands. He must've been recalling the series of events that happened then. "She was just standing there and everyone got their shit twisted. I heard their bones breaking and I didn't know what the hell was going on. After she killed two of us, that's when it finally hit me. I knew Fujino wasn't normal; I knew that I'd be killed if I had stayed there!"

There was definitely something odd about Keita's story—the person who tore off their limbs was a girl named Fujino, and she could do that by just staring at them.

Why would he come down to such conclusion? Maybe as someone who was actually there he could feel it in his bones. That is, the difference between the killer and the killed.

However, there was something that bothered me. She could bend things by just looking them?

It can't be like one of those spoon-bending tricks, I thought, but that might as well be the case; who am I to say after knowing someone like Shiki, who carries a special pair of eyes, and Touko-san, who's a magus.

Okay. Let's take him in for now. But first, there was something else I needed to ask.

"All right. I'll believe that this Fujino girl did it."

"..huh?"

Keita raised his head in surprise.

"But senpai, that was a lie! No one would believe such a story, right?! Please tell me you're joking..."

"Then let's just assume it's a trick, or should I say, 'hypnosis'? Either way, don't think too hard about it. Don't try to accept what you don't understand. Anyway, what do you mean she was weird from the start?" I asked. He looked surprised by my illogical reasoning, but that seemed to have calmed him down.

Keita said, "Um... she's just like, weird, you know? It seems like she's acting out everything, like her reactions are really slow. She didn't bat an eye even when our leader threatened her—or when she got drugged—that bitch didn't even look like she was in pain when we punched her."

"...I see."

I knew they were violating Fujino, but for him to come out and admit it himself made me speechless.

That girl—Fujino—was violated by those boys for half a year. She then killed them as revenge. Is there justice in that? Or has justice always been in conflict with the law?

That was something I didn't want to think about right now.

"Yeah she was hot and all, but it wasn't fun doing her," said Keita. "It felt like doing a doll. Oh. I just remembered something. There was a time where she acted differently. It just happened recently, but there was this messed up guy in our group. He found it entertaining how he could punch as much as he wanted and she wouldn't act up at all. So then he brought out a bat and smacked her across her back. He was like 'WHACK!', and smacked away. She did make a painful face. I was like, Thank God even someone like her can feel pain. I remember it 'cause she acted like a human being that night."

"Keep quiet, you."

Keita shut his mouth. I don't think I can keep my composure if I hear any more of this.

"I get the situation. I know someone in the police. We can go there. That's about the second safest place I know."

I approached him to make him stand up, but Keita jumped back and yelled, "No! I won't go to the cops. Besides... I'll be killed if I go out. I'd rather stay here if I'm going to be torn to pieces!"

"Killed if you go out...?" There was a subtle distinction in the way he'd phrased it. There was still one big misunderstanding between us.

I can understand him saying that he'll be found if he goes out. But for him to straight up saying he was about to get killed? That sounds like he's being... watched.

It was then I finally realized the meaning behind the cell phone by his feet.

"Asagami Fujino's been calling you," I said. Keita started to tremble once again. "Has she figured out this place yet?"

"I don't know," he said. "I had our leader's cell phone when I ran away. She called me after she'd done killing everyone. Says she's gonna look for me, says she'll definitely find me out! That's I gotta hide away from her!"

"Why do you still have that cell phone?" I asked despite knowing the answer.

"Because she says she's going to kill me if I get rid of it! And that I should hang on to it if I don't wanna die! She says that she's gonna spare me if I keep it!"

How callous. How deep-seated was her grudge.

Keita said, "But she still calls me every night... That bitch isn't right in the head. She saw Shono two days ago, Kouhei yesterday... She said she killed them because they didn't know where I was. I'm glad. She said it so fucking kindly! She told me I better come see her if I don't want my friends killed. Like hell I can do that!"

How could one imagine the magnitude of his fear? —the phone calls he received every night which belonged to the person trying to kill him.

I wasn't able to find you today.

One of your friends died in your place.

Come see me if you don't want them killed.

You don't have to come, but these murders will continue...

...and eventually, I will find you.

"What should I do? I don't wanna die. I don't want to die like that! They were crying in pain! They were coughing up blood and their necks—their necks twisted like rags!"

"Let's get rid of that phone. If you don't there will be more victims."

"Don't you get it?! I'm telling you I'll be killed if I do that!"

Two innocent people were killed because of that.

Asagami Fujino had to commit two meaningless murders because of that.

"You'll be killed anyway if you stay like this."

I buried the cigarette underneath my foot and moved toward him. I forcefully pulled on his arm. Keita said, "Please don't do this, senpai. There's no hope for me. Just leave me alone... wait, please don't. I'm scared. I'm actually scared. I don't wanna be by myself anymore. Please help me!"

I nodded.

"I'll help you. I won't go to the cops. I'll take you to the safest place I know."

The only place that I could take him in was Touko-san's place. Believing that to be the best option, we left the apartment.

Sense of Pain / Stay Behind 4

After I had told Touko-san about the situation, she agreed to take Keita in.

She left him to sleep on the sofa; Keita hadn't had a second of sleep since the night of the incident; and she returned to the office. Shiki and I were waiting there.

Touko-san sat at her table. Shiki was standing against the wall.

They said in unison, "You goody two-shoes." This was after I'd made sure Keita was asleep.

"That's about what I expected," I said.

"If you actually used your brain you wouldn't have involved yourself in this mess," said Touko-san. "You're easily taken advantage of by those kinds of guys, Kokuto."

"What else could I do? The situation called for it," I said. Touko-san began to ponder. Her criticism was harsh, but she did agree to take care of Keita nonetheless.

Shiki, however, was against it. From the way she was staring at me in silence, she was probably seething in anger.

"'The situation called for it?' Fine. I get it. This whole situation is unusual. But tell me, what are you planning to do next? Go find her? And convince her to stop somehow?"

"Well, we can't have him here forever, and Asagami Fujino might kill more people. I think our only way out is to talk through it with her."

"And that's why you're such a goddamn goody two-shoes, you fool," Shiki said, going all out. Of course, this was nothing new, but she was being more aggressive than usual. I guess she really was mad.

"You won't be able to talk to her, it's too late," said Shiki. "She won't stop until she accomplishes her goal. No, I don't even know if she'll stop then—at this point, murder *is* her goal."

"Shiki, you sound like you know her." I said.

"I know her, and I've met her too. She was there with Azaka yesterday."

"Eh?" I blurted. Why would Azaka be with Asagami Fujino? They shouldn't... not have any connections. I only heard the girl they were abusing was in high school, but it would be a different story if that high school was Reien Girls Academy.

"You're oddly slow today, Kokuto," said Touko-san. "You haven't investigated Asagami Fujino yet?"

"Hey now, I only heard her name for the first time two hours ago. My only purpose here was to take in Minato Keita, and I didn't have the time to."

Regardless, I was having a bad feeling about this.

I wasn't worried about Azaka being killed or anything. The feeling I had was more like the nervousness you have when you are forced to think about something you've been avoiding.

"...has Asagami Fujino been going to school, still?" I asked.

"No, she hasn't been home or back at dorms since the night of the incident. She's been skipping school too. Basically, she completely disappeared. Azaka said she hasn't seen her since yesterday."

I said, "Touko-san, when did you begin looking into her?"

"Just a while ago. I received a search request from her parents. I heard from Shiki yesterday that Azaka was with Asagami Fujino, but it seems Azaka haven't noticed anything wrong with her friend."

What irony. If my promise with Azaka was a day later, or if I had found Keita quicker, no one would've been killed yesterday.

"Which means there is a reason to why we're taking in Minato Keita. If we cannot find her, we can use him as bait. It'll get rough from there. You and Keita should remain in this building," said Touko-san monotonously. With that, I finally understood why Shiki was standing here this whole time.

"...what do you mean by 'rough'? What are you going to do with Asagami Fujino?"

"Depending on the circumstances, we'll probably have to resort to combat. The client wishes it anyway. He doesn't want his daughter being framed as a murderer. He told us to get rid of her before it all goes public."

"That's going too far! It's not like she's committing meaningless murder. I think we can still talk things out."

"That's impossible. You haven't heard the whole truth. You don't know the final blow she took when she killed them. I made Keita confess when I put him to sleep. He said his leader attacked Fujino on the last night with a knife; she probably got stabbed. And that kickstarted her revenge."

A knife... so she was threatened with a knife even after being violated? But that doesn't explain why she was beyond help.

Touko-san continued, "The problem is right there. She was stabbed in her stomach on the night of the 20th. Shiki saw her two days later. At that time, she had no wound; it had completely healed."

"Stabbed in the stomach..."

Stop. You're only hurting yourself by thinking about it. My mind tried to stop me but failed.

On the night of the 20th... student of the Reien Academy... stabbed in the stomach...

"Keita also mentioned that he heard her on the phone saying she cannot forget about what happened because the wound keeps on hurting—the wound that should have healed hurts.

"My guess is that whenever she has a flashback of the times when she was violated, the stabbing pain resurfaces—the horrible memory brings back the horrible pain. Personally, I think it's an illusion, but that pain must feel real for her. It's like a seizure. Every time Asagami Fujino has a flashback of a pain that doesn't exist, she kills someone. Who can be sure that won't happen while you're talking with her?"

On the contrary, that also means we can communicate with her if she doesn't feel the pain. But before I could say it, Shiki spoke up, "That's wrong, Touko. She really feels pain. It's still in her body."

"That can't be. Are you saying that you were wrong about her wound having healed, Shiki?"

"Her wound's healed. Not even a scrap of metal is inside her. What actually happens is that her pain comes and goes. Yes, there's nothing we can do about her when she's in pain, but when Asagami Fujino is in her usual state she's too boring. I told you I came back 'cause she wasn't even worth killing, yeah?"

"Well, she would already be dead if a fragment of metal were stuck in her body... but a wound that still hurts after it's healed, huh?" Touko-san took out a pack of cigarettes as if to contemplate on such fact. I, too, could only wonder at Shiki's words.

It's normal to be in pain until the wound heals, but why would the pain of a wound that's already healed come back from time to time? That's like having only the sense of pain remaining in your body.

"...Oh."

And it hit me.

I wouldn't say I'd come up with a solution to her unknown symptoms, but by thinking about the idea of a "symptom" I was able understand why Keita had called her "weird".

"Kokuto, is that some new way of staying healthy by saying vowels out loud?"

...I don't think anyone would do such a thing, even if it existed.

"No, it's something else." I said. "I think I have a clue about what's unusual about Asagami Fujino."

Touko-san raised an eyebrow. That reminds me, I'd only told her the summary of the incident, so I guess I hadn't told her about this yet.

"It was something he'd told me in our conversation: Asagami Fujino was unaffected by anything they did too her, or so it seems. At first I thought she was just tough-skinned, but that girl is nothing of that sort."

"...you sound like you know her, Mikiya." Shiki glared at me. My instincts were telling me to ignore her, otherwise I might be digging myself a hole.

"It's possible. I don't know that much about it, but I think she might have something like pain insensitivity."

Pain insensitivity is just as it sounds, a disorder where one cannot feel any pain—a very rare condition; you'd never encounter it in the wild, but that could explain her mysterious symptoms.

"I see. That would explain some things, but there should be a cause to it. Even if she did get stabbed, there wouldn't be any pain to start out with provided she was pain insensitive. To determine if she really has that condition we'd have to look if she was born with it, or whether her nerves are dissociated. Well, assuming she is truly pain insensitive, is there anything that might cause this insensitivity to malfunction, like someone hitting her back hard or taking lots of steroids?"

Hitting her back hard... that's it.

"I... don't know how hard, but I heard they hit her in the back with a bat," I said, holding back as much emotions as I could.

Touko-san then laughed and said, "Haha. If we're talking about those kids I bet they did a full swing on her back. And even after her backbone broke she still got raped by them, not knowing what that feeling is. Good grief, so that's the first pain she feels? She must not have understood what her irritation was about. And seriously Kokuto, I'm surprised you still took in Minato Keita after hearing all that." Touko-san said as the corners of her mouth raised.

She had this bad habit of cornering someone with her words whenever she's in the mood for it. I guess she enjoyed mentally abusing someone, and that someone is usually me.

In any other times I would've fought back, but I couldn't say anything in return right now. I didn't have the confidence to. All I could do was look down and refute her answers.

"...so Touko-san, are backbones and pain insensitivity related somehow?"

"Yeah, your spine controls your nerves, right? When you have a problem with your sense of pain, you usually have something wrong in your spine. Have you heard of Syringomyelia before?"

...I wouldn't know of such a technical medical term. Touko-san lowered her shoulders in disappointment when I shook my head.

"Syringomyelia is the most common case of pain insensitivity. Listen, Kokuto, there are two types of sense: Superficial sensation that lets you feel such things as pain, temperature and touch, and deep sensation that tells you of your body movements and general area. Normally, sensation numbness affects both of these aspects.

"What does it mean to not have any sense at all, do you think?"

"Well, it's just as you said. You don't feel anything that you touch, and you don't taste anything that you eat, right?"

Yup yup, Touko-san nodded enthusiastically.

"That's a natural response from a person with senses. You think that besides having lost their senses, they still have a body, so there should be no difference in the way they operate. But that's wrong. To have no sense means that you cannot obtain anything, Kokuto," said Touko-san.

To not obtain anything?

How could that be?

They should still be able to hold things, or talk to others. Being pain insensitive just means they cannot feel what they're touching, so why would that be the same as not being able to obtain things? It's not like they've lost their physical body. And frankly, they're probably in a better position compared to someone who's missing parts of their body.

Then I realized.

"...oh."

To not have a body—you can't feel what you touch; the only way you know you've touched something is to observe from the side. It would be like reading a book—how is that any different from having a pipe dream, or reading a fictional story?

Even when you walk you're only aware that your body is moving, unable to sense the firmness of the ground. No, you can barely feel that awareness with your eyes.

To have no sense is to have no body. That would make them no difference from a ghost.

For them, all reality is what they see through their eyes. That's just the same as not being able to touch anything even if they really can touch...!

"...so that's what it means to be pain insensitive."

"That's right. Let's assume Asagami Fujino's pain insensitivity temporarily went away from being hit in her back. That would mean she knows what pain feels

like. To be able to feel what was impossible to her must have given her the urges for murder."

Would that girl—who found out what pain feels like—hate such a sensation?

No. Why would she. For someone who's been living her life like a ghost, I can only imagine how happy she must have been when she felt pain for the first time. Though she probably hadn't known the feeling of happiness, either.

"...maybe her pain insensitivity went away temporarily, and her experiencing pain might have led her to feel what hatred is like," I said. "The sense of pain she finally obtained became the trigger for her revenge."

How ironic.

"But here's the thing. Fujino herself would say that she's taking revenge because her wound is hurting, but that makes me wonder about something," said Touko-san. "To be precise, her pain makes her remember about all the times she got raped, which makes her want to take revenge. I do believe this to be her motive, but part of it doesn't sit right. First of all, according to Shiki, she's back to being pain insensitive, right? Then that would take away her reason for revenge. Her wound should not hurt since it's healed."

I said, "That's wrong, Touko-san. If she couldn't feel anything, she shouldn't have been able to experience sexual stimulation either; so even when they raped her, she could not feel anything, including pain. To her, it only means that her body was raped. However, or rather, precisely because of that, instead of her body hurting, her heart was taking the pain. I think her wounds are not on her body but rather in her soul. That's why the pain comes back with the memory, because her heart is in pain."

Touko-san did not answer. As if in her place, Shiki began to laugh, "Ridiculous. There's no such thing as a soul. How can something that's not there hurt?"

...I couldn't think of anything to say back.

Indeed, something as poetic and sentimental as a soul is not something you can prove to exist.

As I stood in silence, Touko-san, to my surprise, said so quietly, "Not quite. The human mind is easily broken. I don't think you can conclude that just because something without a form it's free from damage. In reality, people can die from being mentally ill. Whether it's all in their head or not, as long as the person

themselves perceive it to be true, such abstract phenomenon can be considered to be pain."

A rather ambiguous answer for her, but at least now I had someone on my side.

Shiki became annoyed. She crossed her arms and said, "Seriously, Touko? Are you siding with Asagami Fujino, too? She's not as pitiful as you'd think."

"Yeah, I feel the same way with respect to that. I don't think Asagami Fujino would be that corny. She takes revenge because her soul was damaged? As if. Listen to me, Kokuto. For someone who's pain insensitive, even their heart doesn't feel pain."

My newly acquired ally instantly became my final boss.

"Look, personality is medically defined as 'a phenomenon by which a person reacts to outside force'," said Touko-san. "Within the human mind, such things as 'kindness' and 'hatred' cannot come from within. They would not function unless something from outside stimulates them. That's where the idea of pain comes into play. To not have pain means to be emotionally numb. People who are born with pain insensitivity lack that personality. They do not carry thoughts or desires like you or me, nor they understand common sense. Asagami Fujino is exactly that. It's meaningless to talk sense to her."

Touko-san brought back my suggestion of talking to Asagami Fujino to the conversation and brushed it off so casually. Her matter-of-fact attitude seemed rather like a last warning. It put me on the edge.

"...please don't say that when you haven't even met her." I stood up from the sofa, unable to withstand any longer. "This is all under the assumption that Asagami Fujino has been pain insensitive since she was born. We don't know if that's true."

"And yet you're the one proposing that she might've had pain insensitivity to begin with," said Touko-san coldly.

She really did not care about others. How can she be so cold to Asagami Fujino when she's a woman? Or is it that she can be this cold because she is a woman?

"Well, I do have things I'm concerned about too. Asagami Fujino might be just a victim. The question is which was first."

'Which was first?'

Touko-san began to ponder and did not elaborate further.

"What do you think, Shiki?" I asked while facing in the other direction. Shiki answered exactly as I expected, "Same as Touko, but I can't allow Asagami Fujino to continue regardless. I feel sick just from thinking that she might kill another person."

Touko-san followed up, "Hating your own kind, eh? I guess you bunch really do act independent."

I finally understood why Shiki had answered that way.

And I wonder the time when she herself realizes that she herself never wishes to kill anyone.

Asagami Fujino and Ryougi Shiki.

I believe that the two were alike, and because they were alike, they could not ignore the clear difference between them. If the two did end up fighting each other, would Shiki realize her true feelings?

No, I couldn't let them fight in the first place.

"...I understand. I'll look into her past history myself. Also, could I have any information about her, if you happen to have any?" I asked. Touko-san simply handed those documents to me.

Shiki looked away telling me to do as I please.

While looking through the documents, I noticed that Asagami Fujino had lived in Nagano until elementary school. At the time the last kanji in her surname was different. Her current father was not her blood-related, meaning she was taken in by her mother when she got remarried. I guess this would be the place to start my investigation.

"I have to travel quite a long way and may not come back today or tomorrow. By the way, is there really any such thing as supernatural power, Touko-san?"

"You don't believe what Minato Keita said? Asagami Fujino surely has some sort of power to that effect. See, the term *supernatural power* is pretty broad, so it's not accurate to call hers that. If you want to know about it, I can introduce you to a specialist." Saying that, Touko-san wrote the address of this supernatural power specialist on the back of her business card.

"Wait, you don't know much about it?" I said.

"Of course not. Magic is a field of study. How can we associate ourselves with something so inherently foul and has no history or logic behind it? You see, Kokuto, those kinds of powers that are only given to the chosen ones are what I hate the most." Touko-san really must've hated it, as she spoke like she had her glasses on. I took her business card, and spoke to Shiki who remained dubious this whole time, "Shiki, I'm going. Make sure you don't push yourself."

"You're the one pushing yourself. I guess you really can't treat stupidity," said Shiki spitefully.

Even so, she said in a tiny voice, "I'll try my best".

/4

July 24th.

It had been a day since Kokuto Mikiya went to investigate Asagami Fujino, not much had happened during this time. The only events worth bringing up were the upcoming big hurricane overnight, and a car crash off the road made by a 17-year old illegal driver.

At least, that was all that happened publicly.

From the dim-lit office inside Aozaki Touko's building Ryougi Shiki was staring outside absentmindedly. The summer sky was so vast one would get tired from looking, and within the cloudless sky shone the bright, dazzling sun. It all seemed like one bad dream when you think about how this vast blue canvas was about to get consumed by the storm clouds later tonight.

There was an ironworks next to the office. Clang, clang, rang the tinnitus-like metallic sound. As Shiki stood beside the window, the noise incessantly assaulted her ears.

Shiki took a glance to Touko.

Touko was in a phone call. She had her glasses on.

"Yes, it is that incident—I see, so he was indeed dead before the crash. Is his cause of death strangulation? No? But wouldn't it be in the same vein? His neck was practically twisted, so it is the same as strangulation, regardless of how much force was put into it.

"And how have you people treated this? A car crash accident? I see... That would seem right. Only the victim was inside the car; it is impossible even for the greatest detective to solve the mystery of a moving locked-room. No, that is all I need to hear. Thank you very much. I will be sure to repay you this favor, officer Akimi." Touko spoke politely and kindly as if there was no woman in this world kinder than her. It sounded so far off that anyone who had known her long enough would shiver.

After hanging up the phone, Touko adjusted her glasses slightly to reflect those emotionless eyes.

"Shiki, we've got seven now—more than the murder spree from two years ago."

Shiki walked away from the window, reluctantly. She had wished to see the sky as it would be taken over by the stormy clouds.

"See? It gotta be meaningless murder this time," said Shiki.

"And so it seems. Minato Keita had no relation with Takagi Shoichi. This murder has nothing to do with her revenge."

In a white kimono, Shiki was gritting her teeth in anger. She put on a red leather jacket in an exaggerated manner.

"Okay. Then I can't wait any longer. Touko, do you know where she is?"

"Nope. I can come up with a few places where she might be hiding. If you're going to look for her, you'll just have to go look at all those places."

Touko took out a few cards from her desk and threw them at Shiki. She quickly grabbed them.

"What are these? 'Asagami Business Group's personal identification cards'... Who is this Araya Souren guy?" asked Shiki.

They were all entrance cards to the construction areas in charge by the Asagami Business Group. Each of the card had a magnetic stripe on it, so one could assume that the type of lock was magnetic.

"That alias is the name of one of my acquaintances," explained Touko. "Our client asked me for a name to use for these ID cards and I couldn't think of a random one. Well, that doesn't matter. Asagami Fujino should be hiding in one of those places. Things will get messy. Finish this off before Kokuto comes back."

Shiki glared at Touko. Her usually hollow eyes became sharpened like a knife.

She directed a wordless annoyance at Touko but turned around without saying anything.

Ultimately, they had the same opinion.

Shiki did not walk to the door any more differently than her usual graceful strides. Now that she was alone, Touko looked outside the window.

"Looks like Kokuto didn't make it, may the storm arrive or occur. Shiki by herself might not make it out alive, Ryougi," murmured the magus to no one.



The weather gradually changed right around noon.

The sky—once so blue—was now covered with clouds as gray as lead, the wind was becoming stronger. The storm is coming, clamoured the people walking about.

"Guh..."

I kept walking, enduring the burning inside my stomach. The pain had reached to a point of no return.

I didn't know there was supposed to be a storm today, but maybe it was because I was so caught up in trying to find him.

Despite all the traffic there were fewer and fewer people out on the streets. It looks like I wouldn't be able to do what I'd planned for tonight.

Just for tonight, why don't we call it a day, I thought.

After hours of walking, I had finally reached the port.

The sky was already dark. Despite the fact that it was only seven in the summer, the appearance of a storm could even disturb one's sense of time.

I moved my body forward—its reactions were lagging more as time went on—and arrived at the entrance to the bridge.

This bridge was the fruit of my father's heart and soul. It was a giant bridge connecting two ports: the one where I'm standing at, and the one on the other side. The bridge was a four-laned road, and beneath it built a pathway that resembled the sight of a remora tailing a whale.

Part of the bridge's underground area was like a shopping mall. Although the area itself was floating above the ocean, it was still under the bridge. There's no other way to describe it but "underground".

I couldn't enter through the upper part of the bridge as there were guards, but there was no one at the entrance of the underground mall so anyone could enter

if you had the access card to it. I pulled out one of the cards I found at home and unlocked the entrance.

...It was dark inside. Even though most of the interior design work was finished, there wasn't any electricity running yet. The empty mall looked like a train station that was about to close up for the day. Many different stores straddled the sides of the corridors which gave the impression that they were to stretch on forever.

I walked for about 500 meters and ended up in a parking lot. The mall suddenly transformed into a forest with steel construction bars as its trees. The parking lot was still under construction so the surrounding was pretty messy. The walls were unfinished, and the tarps covering them were flapping under the wind.

It was about to turn eight.

The wind was strong. The sounds of the ferocious wind and sea were grating to my ear; hearing the intense rain outside that was striking the walls, I thought it was even fiercer than the machine guns I see in movies.

"Rain..."

It was raining on that day too. I remember washing the blood stains off in the warm rain after I had killed a person for the first time.

After that, I was able to meet him, who I met only once in middle school and who I only talked for the briefest of moments.

I still have memories about it, the sun was setting at that time. Towards the end of an event at my school I was left sitting on the schoolyard by myself. Then, a senpai from a different school spoke to me.

I was unable to walk around because of my sprained ankle. But because I was pain insensitive I could actually move around, and even if I moved my body when I wasn't supposed to, it had no effect on me mentally. However, my swollen ankle was warning that it would get worse if I started moving.

All I could do was watch the sunset, while feeling nothing.

At that time, I did not call for help.

I did not want to call for help.

If I did, everyone would tell me things like, "You're so tough for handling that pain," or, "Does it hurt?" or, "Doesn't it hurt?" or, "Don't you think it's painful?"

I was sick of it all. That's why I had decided to act like everything was normal and just sat there. I was hellbent on not letting anyone know about my wounds.

My mother, father, teacher, friends—I had to keep it away from them. I had to let everyone think that Fujino was normal, otherwise I would probably fall apart.

Somebody tapped me on my shoulder.

Although I didn't feel anything, I could hear the sound of it by my ear.

When I turned around, he was standing there.

The look on his eyes carried an ignorant kindness. If I have to guess, I had probably thought that he was aggravating the first time I saw him.

"Does it hurt?" he asked. I could not believe what I just heard. How did he know? I was trying so hard to hide my wound away.

I shook my head. I was being stubborn not to admit it.

He looked at the name tag on my gym uniform and said my name.

He then felt my sore ankle and made a sour face.

I knew he was going to say something I would not like, so I closed my eyes. I didn't want to hear another person asking me if it hurt—those insensitive words coming from someone with normal senses.

However, he said something completely different, "Aren't you a dummy. Listen to me, okay? Pain is not something you should bear, but something you have to speak out, Fujino-chan."

These were the words senpai had told me when I was in middle school.

He then carried me to the nurse's office and that was that.

It was like a hazy dream.

Come to think of it, Asagami Fujino might have fallen in love with him at that time.

She might have fallen in love with that smile—the smile that cared to notice someone's suffering in silent.

"...ack."

My stomach ached, rousing me from my dream.

There was no way someone like me could be dreaming when I was covered in human blood.

But perhaps the rain could wash away my impurity.

I suddenly felt the urge to go up onto the bridge.

The storm was already here. It would be like having a tropical storm, out there on a bridge.

Somehow, I became excited.

I dragged my heavy body and went up to the slope in the parking lot. The pain was here to stay.

Asagami Fujino was going to go up onto the bridge.

In order to be soaked in the familiar summer rain.



The big bridge had just transformed into a shallow lake. The four lanes of asphalt were flooded with rainwater, so much so the water level would reach one's ankles. The shattering rain poured down at an angle, the wind was raging as if to knock the street lamps down like they were the trunks of a willow tree.

The sky was dark.

What was here had long become one with the ocean.

As one would try to look into the city lights from the port, it would be like watching the moon from the ground beneath, so distant, and far, far away.

Asagami Fujino was then approaching into the middle of the storm. Her black, crow-like uniform blended into the night. She walked soaked in rain, breathing out from her now purple lips.

It was when she had walked to a street lamp that she encountered the shinigami.

"I finally found you, Asagami." In the sea of storm, Ryougi Shiki stood dressed in a white kimono. The red leather jacket flapped in the wind, repelling the incoming raindrops.

She, too, was soaked wet; and appeared ghastly.

Shiki and Fujino both stood under the street lamp. Indeed, there were about ten meters of ground between them. It was bewildering that they could see each other and hear each other through the driving rain and the raging wind.

"Ryougi... Shiki," said Fujino.

"You should have just gone back home like I told you." Shiki said. "You're a beast that've known the taste of blood. You enjoy murder."

"...that is you. I do not enjoy murder."

Fujino, still breathing hard, stared at Shiki with a hostility—a desire to kill.

Fujino quietly covered her face with her left hand. Her eyes peeked from between her fingers, and flared.

Reactively, Shiki held up a knife with her right hand.

This was their third encounter.

I guess this is what they call "third time's the charm", Shiki thought and laughed lamely.

With her current state, Asagami Fujino was more than enough to be her prey. She said, "...I get it now. We really are alike. Yes—I can kill you as you are now!"

With those words, the two became completely unchained.

5

Shiki began to sprint.

Amid the pooling water and whirling torrent, the speed at which she ran was enough to put one in awe. The distance between them was ten meters apart. It would not take even three seconds to close that distance—enough time to bring Fujino's frail body to the ground and stab her in her heart.

But even such breathtaking speed could not match the speed of sight.

Shiki had to close in on her target for her knife.

In contrast, Fujino only had to look at her target; those three seconds would be too late for her.

"....."

Fujino's eyes were glimmering.

A twist to the left with her left eye, a twist to the right with her right—using Shiki's head and left leg as the center points, Fujino twisted them at once.

Shiki immediately sensed the abnormal changes in her body. The moment she felt that invisible force upon her, she leaped to the side. But the effects of it did not weaken.

Fujino's ability did not act like a projectile weapon. Even if one were to step further away, it would be impossible to escape from her powers whilst being in her sight.

Damn it!

It was then Shiki realized Fujino's ability was stronger than she had expected.

She proceeded to run faster. As if to escape from her vision, Shiki ran in a circle around Fujino.

"Do you think you can get away—" Fujino murmured, but then was astonished.

Shiki did get away!

Astonishingly, Shiki had jumped off the bridge down to the ocean. Fujino could hear the shattering sound of the windows.

Such athletic ability. Shiki went off the bridge and dove into the parking lot right underneath it.

"What an outrageous woman," said Fujino to herself, and laughed. Indeed, Shiki did get away, but Fujino was watching Shiki's left arm this whole time. She witnessed the sleeve of Shiki's leather jacket twisted.

Fujino had just wrecked Shiki's left arm.

She then understood it was her who had the upper hand.

The pain in her stomach became worse by the second.

Withstanding the pain, Fujino walked on the path leading to the underground.

She had to settle her match with Ryougi Shiki now, or else.

Darkness engulfed the parking lot. It became a lot harder to walk in the dark. In a way the parking lot was like a miniature town, thought Fujino amusedly; the metal poles and the stacks of materials were arranged like buildings.

A few minutes after following Shiki down here, Fujino regretted making this place their battlefield.

Her ability required her to see her target in order to pinpoint the fulcrum for her rotation. Even if Fujino knew Shiki was hiding behind a metal pole, only the pole would be bent if she could not spot her. When they were fighting on the bridge, in that slight instant Shiki was able to grasp Fujino's power. That was why she fled here, the one place where she had a chance of winning.

Fujino had realized how inferior she was when it comes to actual combat.

But despite it all.

But even then, I am still stronger.

If she could not spot Shiki, the only thing she had to do was destroying everything blocking her view.

Fujino spontaneously bent and knocked down every metallic pole that might get in her way. As she twisted each one and another, the pain in her stomach worsened and the parking lot began to shake more and more.

"You're one damned son-of-a-bitch, aren't you...!"

Shiki's voice echoed through the darkness.

Fujino turned in the direction of the sound.

The stack of materials Shiki was hiding behind were smashed into pieces. At that instant, a white figure dashed forward.

"...there!" Fujino's eyes got a hold on Shiki. The girl in the white kimono and red leather jacket ran toward Fujino with her bloody left arm sticking out.

".....!!!"

Fujino hesitated for a moment, and bent.

The sound of her bones cracking was audible—Shiki's left arm broke apart.

Her neck is next, but when Fujino tried to look in that direction, Shiki was already within range.

The small glint from her knife could only be described as a flash of light. It was a shining swoop that left behind a lingering trace in the darkness.

Shiki swung the knife at Fujino without hesitation.

However, the knife did not land on her target.

Fujino ducked, and avoided the knife that was aiming for the veins running within her neck, or did she? No, Fujino was just so happen to look away in that moment because she was afraid of Shiki; she became frightened by the cheerful look on Shiki's face as she was running at her with her broken arm.

"Tsk." Shiki repositioned her right arm after whiffing. Fujino frantically stared at Shiki's body

"...begone!"

Shiki's movement was faster than Fujino's scream. She decisively ran into the darkness. One should be surprised not at her athletic ability, but at her quick thinking in choosing to escape.

"...what a..." — Fujino murmured—"...person." She was having trouble breathing, but it did not stem from the pain in her stomach.

Fujino nervously checked the darkness around her—Shiki could jump from out of nowhere anytime.

Fujino rested her hand on her neck. There was a slight scratch from Shiki's attack: a wound of about 4mm. The wound was not bleeding, yet it was difficult for her to breathe.

"I already broke one of her arms, so then why..."

...is she still going? Fujino whispered, unable to contain the fear surrounding her question.

She would never forget that moment—the looks on Shiki's eyes as she dashed at her despite of her broken arm.

Shiki was enjoying herself.

She is enjoying this situation where even I, the one with the advantage, am about to break apart under this stress.

Perhaps, it was not a thing of pain for Ryougi Shiki to have her arm broken, but of happiness.

Fujino had not enjoyed murder so far.

She did not want to kill anyone.

But that girl was different.

She found joy in being in a deathmatch—the more extreme the situation is, the happier she becomes.

Fujino thought, if Ryougi Shiki was similar to herself, being someone who did not feel like they were alive, what would she do to make up for that?

For Fujino, it was murder. When she sees other humans die, she gets this indescribable irritation.

But since Fujino found out what pain feels like, she is able to sympathize the feeling of pain with others by inflicting pain upon them; having control over

others makes her feel alive. In short, Fujino compensated her lacking with ruthless murder. Although she was not aware of it, it would be the same as taking pleasure in murder.

So then, what would Ryougi Shiki do to make up for her lacking?



"That was bad." Hiding behind a stack of debris, Shiki murmured to herself. Her left arm had lost its grip when it was twisted on the bridge and rendered useless. She had decided to use it as a shield and placed her bets on one decisive strike.

But her plan failed. Fujino was more cowardly than she had imagined.

Shiki took off her jacket and cut away the sleeve. She smartly wrapped the garment around her left upper arm to staunch the bleeding, quite the crude treatment.

She could not feel anything from her twisted left arm. It would probably never function properly again. Shiki felt a chill at such a reality.

"This is great, Asagami. You're the best...!"

She could sense the hasty loss of her blood—the fading of her consciousness.

That doesn't matter, I'm hot-blooded anyway. If I lose some, it will just make me think more clearly.

Shiki began to concentrate.

Asagami Fujino might have been the strongest foe she would ever encounter—a single mistake could cost her life.

And that is delightful to her. It makes Shiki feel that she is alive.

For her, normally bound by her past, only this moment felt real; this sensation that she could only feel when putting her life in danger; this small life of hers that she could declare as her own.

To kill or be killed.

For someone like her who felt unreal while living a normal, Shiki could only feel alive by such primal methods.

If Asagami Fujino seeks pleasure in murder, then Ryougi Shiki seeks the sensation of life through her desire for murder.

The difference between the two became definite now.

Fujino's breathing vibrated in the air.

Roughly, strongly, painfully, as if in fear...

Like Shiki she was breathing hard, despite being uninjured.

In the dark, their breathing came in unison.

Within the storm, the swinging bridge felt like a crib.

Shiki—for the first time—felt an affection toward Fujino, so much so that she felt that it was her duty to end Fujino's life with her own hands.

"Yeah yeah, I know this is pointless to do."

She knew from the time she saw her at the café, that the inside of Asagami Fujino was on the verge of breaking down. It was meaningless to take such risks trying to finish off Fujino right now.

But that's life.

Shiki believed some things would eventually come out of meaningless actions.

She remembered Touko saying that humans are creatures exist do meaningless things. Shiki felt the same way now, just like this bridge.

People decry one uselessness as stupidity while praising another uselessness as art. Where does the boundary lie?

Such boundaries are uncertain. Although it is one who establishes that boundary, it remains that external influences are always the one determining it. Therefore, there is no such thing as a boundary to begin with. The world is bounded by boundaries of emptiness. That is why there are no walls in society to separate the abnormal from the normal.

Ultimately, the ones to make the wall are us.

Like how I want to disintegrate from the world.

Like how Mikiya thinks I'm not abnormal.

And finally, like how Asagami Fujino is fervently approaching death.

In that sense, Shiki and Fujino were alike. They were similar. And in this small space, there should only exist one of their kind.

"Time to head out. I can see the trick to your magic show now." Shiki shook her head which had become clear from the blood loss, and got up.

She gripped the knife in her right hand firmly.

If Fujino did not lay her own boundary, then she would just have to eliminate her.

Shiki slowly appeared in front of her.

Fujino could not believe her eyes. Shiki was now facing right in front of her, and stood so far away, too. Fujino herself had not realized it yet, but her fever had surpassed thirty nine degrees. And she would never have learned that the pain in her stomach was a symptom of a "certain illness."

"Just as I thought. Something's truly wrong with your head," said Fujino. That was all she could have been lead to believe.

She stared into Shiki, and bent her.

Her vision distorted. The fulcrum created on Shiki's head and leg each rotated in opposite directions and twisted Shiki's body like a piece of carpet.

...Which was what was supposed to happen.

Shiki, whose left arm was bleeding, nullified Fujino's distortion just by swinging the knife in her right hand.

Or rather, she *killed* it.

"Tough to identify something invisible, but I can finally see it now," said Shiki. "Thanks for using your powers over and over again. Your power is a spiral of red and green, and honestly, it's—terribly beautiful."

Fujino did not understand the meaning behind her words.

The only thing she understood was that Shiki was surely about to kill her now.

She repeatedly prayed.

Bend, bend, bend, bend!

As Fujino continued to glare at her, Shiki swung her knife and eliminated Fujino's curses.

The pain in Fujino's stomach was about to reach a critical point.

"Who, are you?" asked Fujino fearfully. With her depthless eyes, Shiki answered, "Everything has cracks—the atmosphere, time, a human's will, and, without saying, humans themselves. It is natural for there to be an ending if it has a beginning. You see, my eyes can see the death of things. They're special, just like those of yours."

Shiki looked into Fujino with her black eyes. At some point Fujino had felt the omniety radiating from them.

"That's why... as long as it's alive, even if it were God, I'll kill it." Shiki ran, as gracefully as if she were walking. She approached Fujino, pushed her down to the ground, and got on top of her. Fujino's throat trembled at facing Death so close to her.

"Are you... going to kill me?"

Shiki did not answer.

"Why? I only killed because my wound was hurting."

Shiki laughed, "Then why are you smiling? That time before, and even now; why do you seem so happy?"

Fujino hesitated. She quietly placed her hand over her mouth.

Without a doubt, it was distorted.

I had never been able to tell because I couldn't feel things.

But indeed was I smiling.

On my first murder—how did my face look in the pool of blood?

On my second murder—how did my face look in the pool of blood?

I do not know why, but I was always irritated by something.

I was always irritated when I killed a person.

Was that emotion... happiness?

Because I could not feel anything even when I was raped, I went on to take pleasure in the murder of another human...?

"In the end, you were enjoying it. You like hurting others. That's why that pain would never go away."

If the pain were to go away, Fujino would have no reason to kill. The wound will continue hurting, for the sake of no one else but Fujino herself.

"Is that, the answer?" murmured Fujino.

I don't want to accept something like that.

I don't want to think about something like that

I'm, different from you, so then—

"I told you, we are alike."

Shiki's knife moved.

Fujino screamed at the top of her lungs. For everything to bend.

The parking lot shook like a great earthquake. The ocean in the middle of the storm appeared inside of Fujino's mind. Withstanding the burning in her brain, Fujino picked either side of the bridge as her fulcrum.

And bent.



Bam.

A tumultuous roar could be heard, like the crash of lightning. The metal bars creaked; yelled. The ground tilted and the ceiling began to collapse. Fujino blankly stared at the building that was about to give way. The girl who was on top of her fell away as the world suddenly tilted. There was a storm outside, with the ocean below. If she fell without being able to grab onto something, she would surely die. Fujino took command of that body of hers that was even having trouble breathing. She told it that this place was going to collapse, so she had to get away from here.

Dragging her nearly burned-out body, Fujino left the parking lot. The shopping mall was relatively free of damage, the square corridor now appeared like a rhombus. Fujino walked... or at least that's what she thought, and then fell.

She could not breathe.

Her legs would not move.

Her mind went blank and she could not see.

The only thing that was there was intense pain inside of her. For the first time, Fujino thought that she was going to die. Why wouldn't she? The pain just hurt so much. It was unbearable.

She'd rather die than live on with this pain.

"...cough."

Lying face down, Fujino coughed out blood. She turned her body to the side, her mind fell into a daze. In her whitewashed vision, she can only make out her blood.

The red blood—red vision.

The setting sun seemed like it was burning... it always seemed like it was burning...

"No... I do not, want to die."

Fujino reached out her arms. If her legs did not move, she would have to use her arms. Dragging her body, she inched forward. She had to move, otherwise the shinigami would come for her.

Fujino kept moving with every fibre of her body. The only thing she could sense was the pain.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, those were the only words she could think about. After all this time she was able to obtain pain, yet it seemed ever so disgusting.

But it's just like they say. It hurts. It hurts so much that I wish to be alive.

I can't die like this. I have to live on, and do something with my life.

After all, I've not done a single thing. I've not left a single thing behind.

And that's just too depressing.

And too empty.

And too... sad.

But it hurts. It hurts so much that my will to live turns numb, and disappears.

It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts, it hurts... but even then...

While coughing up blood, Fujino kept on moving her arms.

She was repeating the same words.

For the first time in her life, Fujino wished ever so strongly.

It hurts—I want to live longer.

It hurts—I want to talk longer.

It hurts—I want to love longer.

It hurts—I want to stay here longer...

But nothing moved now. There was only the pain that kept aching.

Truly, this was the true colors of her own pleasure. The reality of it hurt more than anything for Asagami Fujino.

At last she had come to understand the sins she had committed, the meaning of the blood she had spilled. And such meaning was too heavy for a person to repent. All she could think of was that kind smile.

If senpai was here, would he still carry me like he did?

Her body began shaking. The blood rolling up her throat announced the final pain that was about to come, and the shock from that erased the sight from her vision.

She could only see what was left in her.

No, even the vision of it was starting to fade.

Unable to bear the loneliness that came along with death, Fujino spoke. She spoke of her feelings that she had been hiding so stubbornly, spoke of a miniscule wish she had dreamed of since she was young.

"It hurts," said Fujino. "It hurts, senpai. It really hurts... it hurts so much... I, I might cry... Mother, is it okay if Fujino cry?"

Such was what Asagami Fujino had been yearning to say to someone.

If only I was able to say my true feelings on that day three years ago...

Tears fell from her eyes. It hurt so much; she felt so sad, so lonely, she could not help but cry.

Yet, a simple act such as crying helped ease the pain.

He had taught her that pain was not something to hold to oneself, but something to convey to the person whom loved them.

I am thankful to have met him.

I am thankful to be able to see him one last time.

"Are you in pain?"

On the brink of death, Shiki stood beside her. Her hand was holding a knife.

Fujino turned over to face Shiki.

"Should've said so, if it hurt," said Shiki in her last moment—those same words residing inside Fujino's memories.

Maybe I should, she thought.

Even if I could say something like that from now on, I might not have come down this path.

She began to have racing thoughts of an inconvenient, but normal life—alas, it was too late.

She had committed too many sins—she had killed the lives of too many people.

For the sake of her happiness she had then killed many people.

Asagami Fujino slowly stopped her own breathing.

Her sense of pain quickly disappeared.

So much so, that she did not feel the stabbing pain on her chest.

Remaining Sense of Pain / 5

As the storm was wreaking havoc on downtown, I returned to the office soaked in rain.

The first thing I saw entering the room was Touko-san dropping her cigarette. She said, "You're fast. It's only been a day."

"I heard a storm was coming and thought I better go back before the traffic halted."

I see, Touko-san nodded with a frown look. I wonder if I showed up at the wrong time. Regardless, there was something more important that I needed to discuss.

"Touko-san, about Asagami Fujino. She was not born with her pain insensitivity. She was normal until she was six years old."

"What? That can't be true. Look, even though she has pain insensitivity, it's not affecting her physical activities. If you say the pain insensitivity came after she was born, a hollow spine would be the cause, but that causes problems with physical activities. While she only lacks the sense of pain, so a rare case like hers could only mean that she was born that way."

"Yes, that's what her personal doctor said, too."

I wanted to tell her what happened in Nagano from the beginning, but there was no time for that. Instead, I gave her a quick rundown on the Asagami family, or rather, the other *Asagami* family

"The *Asagami* was a respected family in Nagano, but they went bankrupt when Fujino was around twelve years old. Her mother took Fujino to what is now the Asagami family, which is apparently a branch from the main family. That branch took care of the debt they had out of greed for the land belonged to the main family. Fujino had her sense of pain when she was little, but with it, she also had a strange power. They say she could bend things without touching them."

"...go on."

"Back home she got treated as the child of the devil, and was detested by her family. She suffered terrible treatments from them, too. But when Fujino turned six, the power had disappeared along with her sense of pain."

"...."

Touko-san's expression changed. Her crooked mouth that was forming an ironic smile was all I needed to sense her excitement.

"After that she got a personal doctor, but there is no record of that at the *Asagami* house. That place is empty now."

"The hell? You can't just stop there. I thought we're about to get to the meat of it!"

"Of course not, I went to look for the personal doctor and talked to him."

"...you sure got the wits, Kokuto."

"Yes, I followed the tracks left in the records and went all the way to Akita; the personal doctor is an unlicensed underground doctor, so it took me a whole day to get the story out of him."

"...I'm amazed. If you get fired from here you should become a detective. I'd even hire you as my personal detective."

I replied, saying I'll think about it, and continued on with my story.

"From what I can tell he only provided medicine. The doctor said he doesn't know why Fujino became pain insensitive and that it was her father's doing alone."

"Her father did it himself? Do you mean curing her, or giving her the medicine?"

I noted the subtle difference between the two, nodded, and said, "Giving her the medicine, of course. According to the doctor, Fujino's father had no intention of curing Fujino's pain insensitivity. Most of the medicine that the doctor provided was aspirin and indomethacin, so basically steroids. Based on his diagnosis he told me that Fujino probably had neuromyelitis optica."

"Neuromyelitis optica—Devic's disease, huh?"

Devic's disease—a type of myelitis that paralyzes your sense. Common symptoms include numbness in the lower legs, sensory paralysis, and deteriorating eyesight, which could also lead to loss of vision. This disease requires the patient to take steroids in their earlier stages, and those are what Touko-san mentioned before—adrenocorticosteroid.

"And so they used indomethacin to reduce the pain." Touko-san laughed. "I see. That would indeed make her like that. She's not inherent or posteriori—Asagami Fujino lost her senses artificially, the polar opposite of Shiki!" Touko-san said, and burst into an even more hysterical laugh. I startled a bit. She reminded me of the professor I met yesterday.

"Touko-san, what is this 'indomethacin'?"

"It's a painkiller. Peripheral or not, pain occurs when the body detects life-threatening externalities. Then, the body generates algescic substance which stimulates the axon terminal to send signals to the brain, telling the body to do something or it'll die.

"You know what algescic substances are, right? Kinin and amin are examples of them, as well as arachidonic acid metabolites which strengthen the two. Drugs like aspirin and indomethacin suppress the prostaglandin, which is present in arachidonic acid. The pain caused by kinin or amin isn't much, so taking in a lot

of indomethacin would soothe away most the pain." Touko sounded rather excited saying this. To be honest, these "Arachidon" and "Kinindon" things just sound like kaiju names out of a movie to me.

"So basically it's a medicine to erase pain?"

"Well, not directly. If that's all you want to do then opioid would do much better. You probably have heard of endorphin, right? Dubbed as the brain drug, that's what the brain secretes to ease the pain. And similarly, opioid dulls the pain in the central nervous system. ...I guess none of this has anything to do with the subject.

"I see where this is going. Asagami Fujino's father decided to seal her power by sealing her senses; the Asagami is totally opposite of the Ryougi who tries so hard to produce an übermensch. And the sad thing is, that just made her power stronger—magi from in and around Egypt stitched their eyes shut to keep their mana within them, how is that any different from Asagami Fujino?"

I'd known what to expect from her, but I was still shocked by her words.

I knew already that the Asagami family had children with special powers like Asagami Fujino—ones born with different channels. They detested those offsprings and tried to seal their powers by any means possible.

The result of that—is pain insensitivity.

In order to turn off that supernatural channel they would also have to seal away one's senses, which is why Asagami Fujino exhibited her power when she'd regained her sense of pain—along with her once lost senses.

"That's just horrible... The only way for her to stay normal is to be abnormal."

Indeed. Asagami Fujino had to bear the abnormality that is pain insensitivity in order to exist in our world.

But if she can't feel anything, she can't gain anything. She could only exist in this world as a ghost.

"Had she not felt any pain she wouldn't have to kill anyone..."

"Hey now, don't treat pain like it's a bad thing. Pain is good. It's the wound that's bad, don't get the two mixed up.

"We as humans need pain, no matter how much it hurts. People can recognize danger because they feel pain. Do we move away from fire simply because it

would burn off our hands? No. We can feel that it hurts, and then notice our burning hands. If that wasn't the case, we wouldn't know the danger of fire until our hands burn off.

"It's right for pain to be painful, Kokuto. Those who don't perceive that cannot understand the pain of others. Asagami Fujino was hit in the back, which got her sense of pain back temporarily and in turns, she defended herself for the first time—thanks to pain she was able to understand that those youths were a threat to her. ...Still, it was overkill of her to, well, kill them."

... But Fujino did not feel pain. Those people died because of her defending herself, but it was also on them because they attacked her. You can't just make her bear all the responsibility.

"Touko-san, can she be cured?"

"There is no wound that cannot be cured—a cureless wound is simply death." In a roundabout way, Touko-san declared that Asagami Fujino's wound was no longer a wound, but something spelling her death. The cause of these past murders is the stab wound on her stomach, so if that pain came back, if we could figure out the cause of it, then...

"Kokuto, her wound cannot be cured." Touko-san said. "It will only continue to hurt."

"What?"

"She had no wound to begin with," said Touko-san something surprising.

"Um... what do you mean by that?"

"Think about it. If you got stabbed in the stomach, could the wound heal by itself in a day or two?"

She—does have a point, but then...

I didn't understand where Touko-san was getting at. The statement she just made contradicted everything we had been discussing so far.

"Like you investigating Asagami Fujino's past, I also investigated Asagami Fujino's present. She hasn't gone to any hospitals since the 20th. She didn't even go to the personal doctor that she sees secretly."

"Personal... what?!"

Touko-san frowned in amazement.

"...You know, you're good at searching for things but lack in insight. Look, the scariest thing for a pain insensitive person is something wrong with their body. Since they don't feel pain, they cannot know of any sicknesses they might have. As a result, they have a doctor look at them from time to time."

Indeed, she was completely right. So then, did Asagami Fujino's current parents not know of her pain insensitivity?

"The trigger was a trivial misunderstanding, Kokuto. Fujino was taken down by a guy with a knife and thought she was going to get stabbed. No, she probably was a millimeter away from getting stabbed; by then her powers already came back, so she was able to use them.

"To twist or to be stabbed—the former was what happened first. As a result, the guy's neck got twisted off and his blood spilled onto Fujino's body. She must've thought that she had been stabbed in the stomach."

The scene Touko-san described vividly appeared in my mind. I shook my head as if to brush it away.

"But there's still something strange about it. If her sense of pain is back, she wouldn't make that kind of a mistake. She shouldn't feel any pain if she didn't get stabbed."

"The thing is, she had been in pain since the beginning."

....what now?

"Fujino's doctor showed me her medical record. She had chronic typhlitis, commonly known as appendicitis. I guess that is why she went to the doctor. The pain in the stomach is not caused by the knife, but rather an internal pain. Her pain ached from time to time. If her sense of pain returned right before being stabbed, she would surely think that she was stabbed. If you are raised not knowing pain, you wouldn't even make sure if the wound is there or not. Fujino would look at her stabbed stomach, and even if it didn't have a wound, she would think that the wound must've healed."

"So then, it's a misunderstanding all along?" I said weakly.

"The wound itself is. But the truth doesn't change. She was at a dead end. It doesn't matter if the knife was there or not. Her only way out was to kill them. If she did not kill, she would have been killed, not her body but her mind. But

unfortunately for her, Minato Keita got away. I don't think it would have turned out this bad if her revenge ended there. Like Shiki said it's too late."

Come to think of it, Shiki did keep on saying that. Why would it be too late? Is it because Fujino has committed murder? If so everything would've been already over for her at that moment. That's the one thing I couldn't understand.

"Why is it too late?"

"Shiki must have meant by her mental side. To her, the murder of those five boys would still be considered murder, but any more than that it becomes a massacre. There is no justification behind it. That is what Shiki was angry about.

"...Although Shiki has an aptitude for murder, that girl still understands unconsciously the importance of death. That is why she does not kill indiscriminately like Asagami Fujino—she cannot forgive Fujino for just doing as she wishes," said Touko-san.

Is Asagami Fujino really doing as she wishes? To me, it seems like she is running away desperately.

Touko-san continued, "But what I was referring to is her physical side. Typhlitis causes perforation in the bowel when left untreated and becomes peritonitis, bringing a level of pain incomparable to appendicitis. You could say it matches the pain of being stabbed with a knife. Then, one would start getting fevers and cyanosis, or may even receive shocks from lowered blood pressure. If it reaches the duodenum, you could die in half a day. It's been five days since the 20th, so it should already have perforated. I'm sorry to say this, but she's beyond help."

How could anyone say this with such an unfazed look?

"It's not over yet. We have to find her quickly...!"

"Kokuto, our client for this is Asagami Fujino's father," said Touko-san. "He must have known about Fujino's power. That is why he heard about the incident and thought it must be Fujino's doing. He requested that we kill that *monster*—the one person who can protect her wishes for her death. Listen to me, Kokuto. She has no salvation in any sense.

"And besides, Shiki already left."

"...you idiot!" I let out a scream to no one in particular.

Remaining Sense of Pain / 6

As if a giant's hand had grabbed hold of it, the Broad Bridge was wrecked into pieces.

When we arrived at the scene on Touko-san's buggy, a guard stopped us and we argued for a while until I saw Shiki coming from underneath the bridge; one of her arms was soaked with blood. The guard ran up to her, but she did a judo move that knocked him unconscious.

"Yo. I figured you'd be here, somehow," said Shiki sleepily. Her face was pale.

I had countless things I wanted to tell her, but seeing how vulnerable and weak she looked I couldn't make myself to.

I ran to help her. Shiki seemed to be really upset by that. She didn't even let me prop her up.

"I see that you made it out alive with just an arm," Touko-san said in surprise. Shiki glared at her, annoyed.

"She apparently gained clairvoyance at the last minute, Touko. If you let her be she'll seriously turn into some crazy strong psychic."

"Clairvoyance, huh? Certainly, if she adds such power to her arsenal, she'll be invincible—she'd be able to make a fulcrum even if you are hiding... Huh? If you leave her be...?"

"She went back to being pain insensitivity at the very end. How is that even fair? I couldn't kill her like that, so I just killed the disease in her stomach. She might make it if you hurry."

Shiki did not kill Asagami Fujino.

The moment I registered that fact I immediately called the hospital. Whether they were coming or not was one thing, but if they won't, I'd just take her there myself.

Fortunately, it didn't take long for her family doctor to say yes; I could hear him cry over the phone. Apparently, he became concerned about Fujino when she disappeared. I was glad to know there were still people on her side, even if it was a selective few. Behind me the two of them were having quite the nerve-wrecking conversation.

"Did you stop the bleeding on that arm? It doesn't seem to be, at least."

"Yeah, I killed it 'cause it was useless. Surely you can make an arm, right, Ms. self-proclaimed puppet master?"

"Very well. That will be your pay for this job. I always thought that your body was too normal in contrast to your eyes. Your new left arm should be able to grab hold of spirits and such."

...I was hoping you two wouldn't delve into those sorts of talk here.

"The ambulance is going to get here." I said. "Should we leave? I think we'll get into some trouble otherwise."

Fair point, Touko-san nodded. Shiki, however, kept silent. ...I guess she wanted to make sure that Asagami Fujino got sent to the hospital properly.

"I'm staying since I was the one who called them. Later I'll talk you the details, so you can leave now, Touko-san."

"In this intense rain? You sure are strange. All right, let's go back, Shiki."

Shiki refused Touko-san's offer. Touko-san smirked and went in her off-road buggy, which seemed totally illegal.

"Shiki, don't make Kokuto your new prey just because you couldn't kill Asagami Fujino." Touko-san said with a serious tone, laughed it away, and drove off.

In the summer rain, Shiki and I ended up seeking shelter in the nearby warehouse.



The ambulance arrived in no time and carried Fujino off. In this storm it was hard to make out her face, so I couldn't tell if she really was the same girl I'd met that night. But I think that's for the best.

Shiki blankly stared into the night. She looked like she could catch a cold from being soaked by all that rain.

Her eyes were glaring at Fujino until the very end. I decided to ask for her thoughts.

"Shiki, you still can't forgive her?" I said, my voice washed away by the sound of rain.

"...I don't care. I've already killed her once," replied Shiki firmly. There was no hatred, or anything behind that answer—Fujino must've already been a stranger to her. I thought it was sad considering everything that happened, but that may be the best for these two.

Shiki casted a glance at me and asked, "You think murder is wrong no matter what, so what do you say?"

It sounded like she was asking herself. I said, "...I do think murder is wrong, but I sympathize with her regardless. To be honest, I couldn't care less that the guys who raped her got killed."

"Huh. I was dead sure you were gonna say something super cliché."

...Do you want me to judge you, Shiki? But why would I? You didn't kill anyone.

"Really? This is just my opinion, but even though she lost sight of herself, Asagami Fujino is still a normal girl, Shiki. She couldn't simply lie to herself and run away from the reality of what she's done. Even if she does give herself up to the police, no one can prove what she's done and she won't be publicly and socially responsible for her sins. That's what makes it more difficult."

"Why?"

"...I believe that punishments are things people willingly burden themselves with—when one commits a sin, one casts a burden on themselves based on their sense of morals. That is what a punishment is.

"The more compassion you have, the heavier a burden your punishment becomes. The more common sense you have, the heavier a burden your punishment becomes. Asagami Fujino's sins become heavier and more painful the more she tries to live a happy life."

Softie, said Shiki.

"So then, are you saying that anyone who lacks compassion isn't aware of their sins?"

"Mm, I wouldn't say they're completely oblivious. It just means that to them those sins are lighter to bear, but they're sins nonetheless—a small sin within their small scope of compassion. For us it might seem trivial, like tripping on a road; but for that them it becomes a burden. Even the small pain for us can become unpleasant for those with a faint compassion. No matter the weight, a sin is still a sin."

On the brink of insanity Minato Keita had been living in fear upon the realization of his sins being the only one survivor. He could not atone for his regret, his guilt, his fear, or distress; all he can do is try to atone for them.

"Certainly, one might be at ease if one's sins are not deemed by anyone else. But if no one punishes you for your sins, you have to carry them yourself. A guilty conscience is not something that goes away, right? The memories of it are always there, lingering. Since no one ever forgave you for it, you cannot forgive yourself. The wound in your heart never heals and will only keep aching—like her sense of pain remaining, the wound would never heal. As you say, a soul does not have a physical form. If it ever carries a wound, then that wound could never be treated."

Shiki listened to me silently. I was being unusually poetic here, it must've been because I looked up Fujino's past.

Shiki suddenly left the cover of the warehouse and went out into the rain.

"Basically, what you're saying this: the more common sense you have, the more you're aware of your sins—therefore, no one is truly evil. But I don't have anything noble like that, so could you allow someone like me to roam around freely?"

Now that she said it, Shiki did bring up a good point. Before you can judge her to be good or evil, you have to consider the fact that she has a hazier concept of common sense than the average person.

"Hm, I suppose so. If that's the case I'll just have to bear all your sins, then," I said my honest thoughts. That seemed to have caught Shiki off guard, as she kept standing there dumbfounded. After standing underneath the rain for a while, Shiki then looked down. Her face was disturbed.

She said, "...I remember now. You used to say those kinds of jokes with a straight face. Honestly, it was hard for Shiki to deal with that sort of stuff."

"...Sigh, I see. I do think I can at least carry one girl on me, you know," I refuted timidly. Shiki laughed, seemingly enjoying herself, and said, "I'll confess one more thing. I think I've carried a sin this time, but in return, I've discovered my desires, my way of living. It's something unclear, and incredibly fragile, but either way I'll have to cling onto it for now—and that something turns out to be not as ugly as I thought it'd be—and that makes me a bit happy. It's a small, small murderous impulse for you—"

...I could only frown at the last thing she said, but I thought Shiki looked beautiful as she smiled against the rain. The storm should go away by morning.

I stood gazing at her, who was surrounded by the summer rain. Come to think of it, this was the first true smile she'd shown me ever since that coma.

Remaining Sense of Pain Fin

／ Commentary (by Ayatsuji Yukito)

The first time I had heard of the name "Nasu Kinoko" was three and a half years ago in the spring of 2004. In Kodansha's May publication of *Mephisto*, "Overlooking View" was printed as the introductory chapter of the novel and dubbed, "a stunning preview". That's when I became aware of the author.

My first unfiltered impression was, "Nasu? Kinoko? Hm, what a strange penname." And I wasn't sure how to read one of the characters in the book's title, 空の境界. I thought, "Is this supposed to read 'Sora no Kyoukai'? Or is it 'Kuu no'?" I then read the furigana and finally learned that you were supposed to read it as "Kara no". Basically, I remember being somewhat taken aback by the penname and title.

At the time I knew close to nothing about Mr. Nasu Kinoko or his work, "Kara no Kyoukai". It wasn't until I had received a letter titled "The force connecting the 80s and 90s denki genre" from Mr. Kasai Kiyoshi that I learned that Mr. Nasu was behind the PC sound novel "Tsukihime" (denki describes stories that are mostly set in our reality, but carry some supernatural elements). I had vaguely heard about the title before, but sound novels were a category I had

almost no knowledge of. Of course, this also means I was not aware that Nasu Kinoko was the writer for the game at all.

And thus...

I decided to give that "stunning preview" a read with a casual curiosity.

My honest thoughts, then, were as follow:

"You know, this is kind of badass."

A badass heroine, badass quotes, badass setting, description, general idea—the author wrote in such a badass and as true to his spirit as he possibly could without acting humble or putting on some weird front—and he was darn good at it, too. It was honestly a pleasant read.

You might think that I take the work lightly by using words such as "badass", but indeed, I do not intend to imply such meanings when I say this. To be able to write badass text in such a badass way can be, or rather, it is certainly a difficult feat.

After finishing just "Overlooking View"—which is better described as "the first episode of a lengthy saga woven in the form of a series of medium-length stories"—I was still unable to grasp the story's whole look, or its general setting (As I will state later, the story is intentionally written in this way). The writing style had a unique quirk to it, and if I had to describe it it would be more on the less approachable side. You could say that the genre falls into denki, but what would the work be like in its final form? What are the intents of its author? However, such was the extent of my interest at the time.

And not for long, "Kara no Kyoukai" was published under Kodansha under a gaudy blurb, "A masterpiece among masterpieces! The work that defines the rise of a new denki movement!". In its beginning the novel was posted on a blog in the previous century, later became self-funded into a physical work sold at Comic Market events and began to gain traction. The novel entered the commercial market with its content almost unchanged and right away Mr. Nasu made a big name for himself as more and more copies got printed. Though, I did not think about reading the book just yet.

As a reader I was an avid fan of denki science fiction, denki action and such—works written by writers from the likes of Hirai Kazumasa and Hanmura Ryou to Yumemakura Baku and Kikuchi Hideyuki. But, even when I heard about the "new denki movement" it was not something close to my own self interests. So naturally, I was not particularly motivated to pick up the book from the shelves.

However, one day came a request from a Kodansha editor asking if I could do a talk with Mr. Nasu from the "Mephisto" magazine. Around that time, I had just published "The Dark Mansion Murders" from the same Kodansha department.

For what? I thought quizzically and asked. Apparently, Mr. Nasu was a fan of the so-called "new-gen serious mystery novels", and listed Kikuchi Hideyuki, Kasai Kiyoshi, and me, Ayatsuji Yukito as his big three influences. As the publication of "The Dark Mansion" went smoothly, I thought it wouldn't be a bad opportunity to meet up with him.

I thought, Oh huh, isn't he like... and was reminded about the fact that in that preview of the book Mr. Kasai wrote something along the lines of "carrying the influences of the new-gen serious mystery genre" (in the fall of last year published the first entry of Faust, which featured a three-man talk by Kasai Kiyoshi, Nasu Kinoko, and Takeuchi Takashi. Unfortunately, I had not read it at this time). In the end, the talk went on to actually happen.

And then.

I decided to read "Kara no Kyoukai", all of it. This time I didn't approach it with the casualness as I did in the past, but with a slightly more intention about going about it.

I started reading it, finished it, and found that as I was at a loss for words, I became very much impressed.

Just as I thought, this is kinda badass.

And to think that every single little detail crafting this lengthy novel was meticulously thought out!

The various widgets that formed the "meat" of the story and the worldview at its core, the level of the setting created within the story, such and such... were indeed, as you may call it, "denki".

The main heroine Ryougi Shiki originally carries a male serial killer split personality named with the same reading but different character, which is given birth upon the superhuman gene that runs in the Ryougi bloodline. Towards the end of her first year in high school she then encounters a traffic accident and enters into a coma. After waking from her two-year long coma she realizes that her other personality SHIKI has disappeared, and in return she gains "the Mystic Eye of Death Perception"—an ability that allows her to see the death of

all things. In this world exists magic, spells, and the people who practice them. Plenty of bizarre incidents occur that involve the paranormality of the laws and physics of the world; and the epic battle between a formidable magus who lives for more than two hundred years and Shiki and others form the weaving threads of the story.

Yeah. If you were to define its genre, the first thing that comes to mind is definitely denki. However, while that may be the case at the same time the work can definitely be thought to carry influences from attributes of a new-gen novel.

As a result, you get something whose fundamental trait seems to stray from the many denki novels that have been written before it, forming a hybrid-type work which carries its own unique charm. If so, does that mean the "new" from "new denki" come from "new-gen"? or so I thought jokingly. It kind of made me grin a bit.

As we get back from the previous point, my talk with Mr. Nasu happened in late October of this year (it is published on Mephisto's serialization in January, 2005). Although slightly long, I shall quote Mr. Nasu's comment as below:

"During my middle and high school year, I was reading denki novels such as those represented by Kikuchi Hideyuki-san. I wasn't just being an observer of novels, but also had attempted to write myself. However, the more I wrote I began to notice the limitations of action scenes in the written form. I also read manga so this was something I would often compare with—no matter how much I tried my best to express the type of denki action with just words, I always had to aim for more in order to compete with the visual arts of manga... (omitted)... I was working my shift at a convenience store during midnight when this happened. I happened to see a shelved paperback volume of "The Decagon Mansion Murders"... (omitted)... Until then I'd never read a mystery novel and was fascinated by the opening part... (omitted)... I went home to read it more thoroughly and found myself completely stunned. I never knew that novels had their own ways to portray fight scenes in a way separated from manga—not as a competitor, but as its own style. Since then I got sucked into the genre of mystery novels."

As the comment originated from our personal conversation I had to omit some parts. However, the reality was still that Mr. Nasu had been emotionally impacted by the work "The Decagon Mansion". What he felt to be "the one thing only made possible through novels" at the time of reading it must have referred to the main trick used in "The Decagon Mansion". Readers of the book

must have understood what I am talking about here, but for those who aren't aware, it is referred to the "description trick" (aka "plot trick"), so to speak; and that is something we have to pay attention to.

As I am not writing this to discuss description tricks in details, we shall define them as such: a trap laid by the author through the mean of descriptions, targeted at the reader. Because this is something you can only do with paragraphs, if one were to replicate such tricks through the form of visual arts then one would often find that they immediately cease to be tricks. To put it differently, they are tricks which utilize the fact that print media inherently conveys less amount of information.

The trick laid in "The Decagon Mansion" may be considered to be terribly obvious, but with just that it must have left a strong impact on the young Nasu who had never read a mystery novel before. By the way, it is to be said that since then, the sea of books that Mr. Nasu had thrown himself into were the main genre of books published by Kodansha Novels, most of which were also written with the intention to employ such trick.

In any case, upon knowing the type of straightforward writing that is *only possible through novels* and its potency, Mr. Nasu had reflected to incorporate such technique into his denki works—his creation in which he had once felt the limitations of. And such was the birth of his first published work—"Kara no Kyoukai".

The description (or plot) trick employed in mystery novels can be explained using the following metaphor.

Imagine that all of the information and plot points that make up some story as a deck of one hundred cards. In the beginning phase, place all of those cards face down. As the story progresses, flip up these cards one by one.

In the case of a linear-fashioned story, it must be that the cards have to also be flipped in a linear way. The information will be presented in a chronological fashion, starting with the most fundamental plot points in the story. The reader will use that as a baseline to follow along the story.

Because mystery as a genre stems from the fact that its authors tinker around this "card-revealing order" in a particular scheme (in short, applying tricks), and if we have such mystery novel employing the description tricks, then this scheme is something that is especially flexible. For instance, in the opening phase there are cards that are supposed to be revealed, but one shall

intentionally keep them face down such that the reader is unable to tell if the cards are supposed to stay face down, and right at the very end one shall maintain that "mistaken painting", and such.

There is no doubt that "Kara no Kyoukai" was written with the intention to apply such scheme. As one can deduce that,

Each story utilizes elements commonly seen in denki novels -> Introduce a unexpected resolution—a schema/technique similar to those in mystery novel, experimenting with the card-revealing order on the plot level in an even more flexible way (dizzy alternating perspectives, jumbled timeline, the structure of the background and/or world of a character who rarely makes an appearance, etc.). I have mentioned earlier about being unable to grasp the whole picture after reading just the first story, and think this is the reason as to why that is the case. As the final result, while being armed with that technique in mind, "Kara no Kyoukai" had succeeded at differentiating itself from other works of the same genre.

...I also want to bring up another point.

Frankly, the plot of "Kara no Kyoukai" is filled with intricacies and meticulousness. And to employ the trick that I have mentioned into that plot, on top of writing a story interesting enough to pull the reader's attention until the very end, is not the work of a half-hearted talent.

During the aforementioned talk, Mr. Nasu expressed his opinion of conquering the "Mansion" after finishing the sub-series of books "XX Mansion Murders" from Ayatsuji's "Mansion" series. I suppose a similar statement could be made in the case of "Kara no Kyoukai".

"Kara no Kyoukai"—being a hybrid of the denki and "new-gen" genres, while also a challenge to be *conquered* by the reader (who can be thought of as an active "player")—is a non-straightforward novel. This means that as one reads the following second and third volumes that are to be published in the upcoming months, one will probably become delighted, for the feeling of finishing all the volumes must surely resonate with that of reading a type of mystery novel, being a new-gen denki novel and all. For one, I can assert that this is certainly the one distinctive charm of Nasu Kinoko.

When we met three years ago, Mr. Nasu confidently told me that being a game writer was his occupation. It was a time where he had not yet founded an

official company with his buddies, and thus he might have felt a strong need to hold onto that identity. However, he also added firmly, "I'll also do my best writing novels, too." Just as he said, in 2007 Kodansha BOX published his latest novel "DDD" and it appears that the work had also grabbed hold of a large group of audiences.

I just gave it a read the other day—the two volumes that have been published so far. Yeah. It's also kinda, you know, badass. The prose read completely professional-like. He probably has already developed his own "Nasu Kinoko prose".

Currently, the movie production for "Kara no Kyoukai" is in-progress. The studio has planned to adapt all seven stories as each of their own movie, and the first movie is expected to arrive this winter. Coupled with the reprints of the novels, I could see the growth in readership. The work without a doubt carries at least such power—or dare I add, "mystical". Indeed, I am looking forward to the future works created from the mystical talent of Nasu Kinoko.

And lastly.

I would like to read a serious mystery novel written by Mr. Nasu, something that would make you say, "This is seriously Nasu-esque!" I have directly casted this curse on him and included his response at the end. I shall end on that note.

"Yes. I think the best way for me to pay my debt to all the mystery novels that have influenced me is to write a serious novel."

"If you start writing one of those, I doubt you'll be able to write anything else, to be honest."

October, 2007

／Translation Notes

／Overlooking View

Kokuto – Japanese's pronunciation of the French poet, Jean Cocteau.

Fujou –

／Murder Speculation (First half)

Shiki/SHIKI – As mentioned in the text, the two names are read the same in Japanese, yet written differently: 式 being Shiki, 織 being SHIKI.

Gi – Also known as dougi, Gi is a traditional uniform worn for training in Japanese martial arts.

Gakuto's name – Originally written as 学人 in Japanese. The name is read the same as 学徒, which means "student".

Call by her first name – Originally means "to refer to someone without honorifics", it is considered informal to refer to someone's name without honorifics such as -san.

Anything but her name – Original means "calling her omae"—in Japanese, it is usually considered informal to refer to someone by pronouns (which are rare in Japanese literature in the first place until the 20th century), especially when the person's name is known. Omae is normally used among groups of close friends, typically boys; and in this case, it could be considered as rude for Mikiya to call another girl "omae".

Woven cloth – Originally "orimono".

Slash from the right shoulder to the left hip –

But I want to kill you – instead of using the common kanji for "to kill" (殺す), Nasu used 犯す, which can also mean "to violate".

／Remaining Sense of Pain

Zen temple – formally known as "shichidou garan".

Tsumugi – a type of silk used to make clothing, typically kimono. The color of tsumugi kimono is dictated by the color of the silk itself rather than being dyed over. Tsumugi kimono can be worn casually on the streets.

Different kanji in her surname – same reading but different characters; Fujino's current surname is 浅上, while her old one is 浅神. 上 means "above", while 神 means "god".

Sounds of wind and sea – although coincidental, the sentence reminisces of Debussy's "La mer" (it's fun how the piece is based on the waves of Kanagawa).