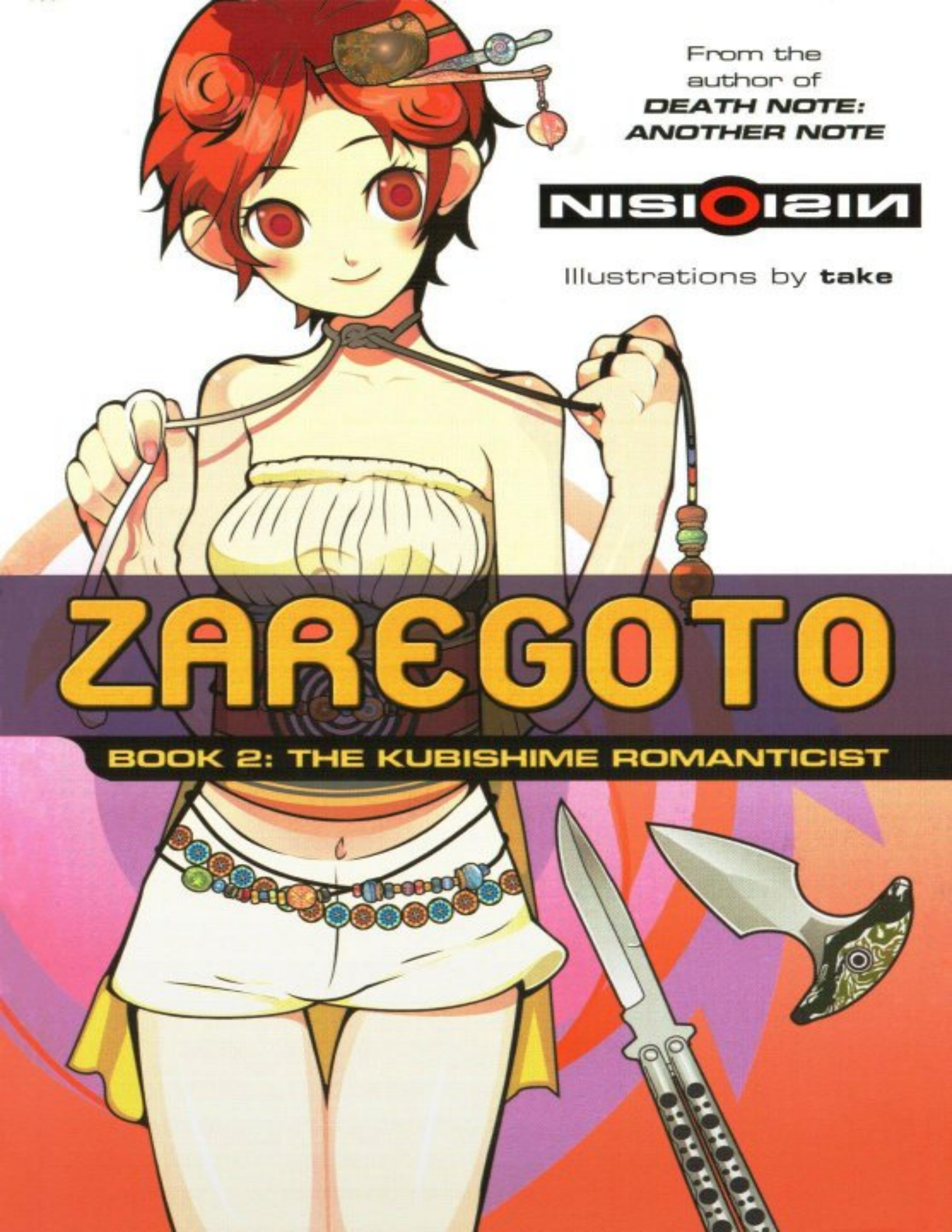
From the
author of
DEATH NOTE:
ANOTHER NOTE
NISIOISIN
Illustrations by take
ZAREGOTO
BOOK 2: THE KUBISHIME ROMANTICIST

Zaregoto

BOOK TWO:

The Kubishime Romanticist

NISIOISIN

Illustrations by take

Translated by Greg Moore

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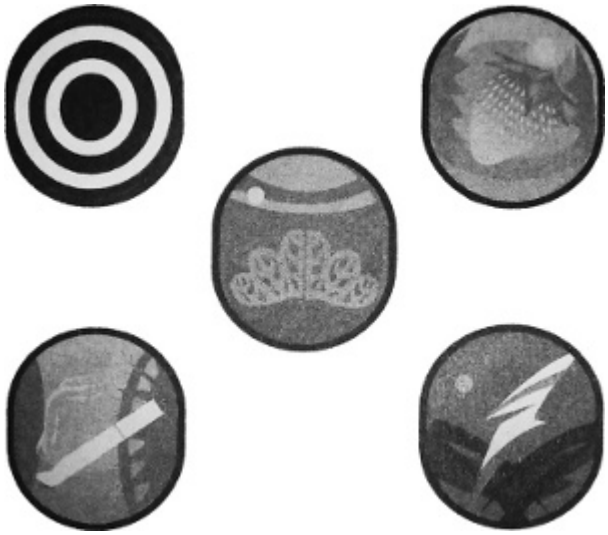

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FINAL CHAPTER:
A WORLD THAT CAN'T END

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Me (narrator): *The protagonist.*

Zerozaki Hitoshiki: *The murderer.*

Atemiya Muimi: *Classmate.*

Usami Akiharu: *Classmate.*

Emoto Tomoe: *Classmate.*

Aoii Mikoko: *Classmate.*

Asano Miiko: *Neighbor.*

Suzunashi Neon: *Asano Miiko's close friend.*

Sasa Sasaki: *Detective.*

Ikaruga Kazuhito: *Detective.*

Kunagisa Tomo: *????*

Aikawa Jun: *Most Powerful Entrepreneur in the World.*

Me (narrator)

The protagonist.

PROLOGUE

Dreams don't come true so easily.
Well, yeah. I mean, I can barely handle reality.
So, in other words, all wishes are nearly unattainable.
Well, yeah, but not all nearly unattainable things
are wishes.

That's a single fragment of Zerozaki and me. A small sample of our conversation.

Let's suppose that it hadn't been a nonsensical babbler like me who was there. Imagine, instead, it was someone who harbors at least a *soupçon* of doubt about the world—the person would *still* have had a more or less similar experience in conversation with Zerozaki.

When you were in conversation with him, the exchange wasn't influenced by cheaply supplied empathy, or a pathetic desire to conform. Nor was it ever a product of the miraculously common synchronicity you see everywhere. Instead, a conversation with Zerozaki was a meditative realm within a mirror, that preceded meaning and conceptualization; It simply said, "This is the way it is."

There was no speck of realism, or any fragment of necessity, or any segment of a theoretical formula, or clarification or clownification, not a single puff of congruence and no such word as *allusion*, no solution nor illusion, not a drop of cogency, not a streak of the world order, and above all else, there was no romance.

The true comedy of it, however, was that in spite of all the things conversation with him wasn't, there was still *something*. It was the kind of comedy that bred sorrow, demanded compassion, and that had an even poignant air.

I think he was an irregularity to begin with. An untouchable. When I think about Zerozaki as someone "on the other side of the water"—as the person I saw on the other side when I saw my reflection on the surface of the water—that's the only way I can think to make any sense of him. And without being able to make any sense of him, there's absolutely no point in trying to put his existence into words.

But then again, regardless of what he may have been, was there even any meaning to Zerozaki in the first place? If he was like me and possessed no meaning whatsoever, then to look at Zerozaki from the outside and expect to come up with any kind of judgment was a misguided train of thought from the very beginning. How could one go about describing this sensation? Explaining this miraculous, entirely too familiar tale?

Being with Zerozaki was like looking into my own face and talking to myself.

Yeah.

It was an impossible, chance meeting to begin with.

Maybe it had all begin long ago, with our very first experience.

The very first word we ever heard.

Our root memories.

A past both easy to recall and easy to metaphorically describe.

We were traveling in the same direction from the same point.

From before the beginning of days.

Like reflections in a mirror.

That is to say, I think we were similar.

We were like two congruent figures, so similar that there was no need for a geometric proof. And we were both in-credibly aware of this. From a subjective viewpoint, when we spoke to each other, I was, of course, myself; and Zerozaki, of course, Zerozaki.

Neither of us was anything more or less than just that, and we were well aware of this. And yet we identified with each other, were unified with each other. That was the paradox that we shared—a paradox that surpassed the limitations of language.

He was on the opposite side of the water's surface.

Now imagine an innocent young girl.

Imagine the first time she ever looked in the mirror. Surely, in her perfect innocence, she didn't know that the image before her was a mere reflection of the light. Instead, she *imagined*. She created something more: On the other side of the mirror, she saw an endless world, separated from her by a single pane. A perfect replica of her "here," yet existing in an infinitely distant place. An enormous paradox of a world—living inside of her imagination.

It wasn't ignorance that allowed such a paradox to exist. It mattered little which world was the true one and which was false. If one side was real, then the other was fake, but if reality was in fact fake, then both sides had equal value, and equally lacked value.

That's what I think.

So did Zerozaki.

In a sense, my relationship with Zerozaki was very much like that. We realized we were the same, but we also under-stood that, at the same time, we were completely different.

“I might have once become like you, so I feel a certain affinity.”

“I definitely could *not* have become like you. That’s what I like about ya.”

This was another fragment of us.

Truly nonsensical.

Ultimately.

I’m pretty sure we both despised ourselves. Likewise, we despised our own kind and scorned our own species. We both hated ourselves, resented ourselves, cursed ourselves so much that we were able to acknowledge each other with a bit of irony.

I think it was something special.

Wait, of course it was: I was the passive onlooker and he the homicidal monster. We existed at such extremes; it really did feel like there was a mirror between us.

But as soon as that dreamer of a girl reached out her graceful hand and placed a finger on that mirror, all she would feel was a void. Nothing but nothingness. The thing she had allowed to exist, someone else had not. Moreover, the thing she had allowed to exist didn’t mean anything to anyone else. And this she finally realized.

For that girl, in that moment, without any exaggeration, a world had been destroyed.

And so begins the story of the downfall of a single world. A world that fell apart not due to the interference of an azure-haired Savant or a crimson-haired Mankind’s Greatest, but simply because that’s the way it was. When a fallacy bearing a justifiable paradox descends

upon a human failure and me, a pile of damaged goods, everything goes back to zero.

So . . .

ZAREGOTO

BOOK TWO

Zerozaki Hitoshiki,

the murderer.

1

THE SPOTTY-CRACKED MIRROR

The Purple Mirror

My world is the coolest.

1

Rokumeikan Private University, located in Kinugasa, in Kita Ward of Kyoto, has a total of three dining halls. Of the three, the Zonshinkan Chika Dining Hall (lovingly abbreviated to "Zonchi") was thought to be the most lively. This was probably because it had an extensive menu, and it was right next door to the co-op bookstore.

That day, since I had no class during second period, I went straight to the Zonshinkan Chika after first period. I'd had no breakfast that morning—I'd accidentally overslept by a whole hour—so I thought I might grab an early lunch.

"Man, it's empty at this hour. Risky business," I mumbled to myself, doubting all the while that I was using the phrase "risky business" correctly. I picked up a tray.

Now, what to eat?

I'm no foodie, so usually I just eat whatever without much of a fuss. Be it spicy or sweet, I say bring it on. But lately things had been just a little different.

It was only a month ago that I'd spent a hell of a week in a place where I'd been served three gourmet meals a day.

Now, as an aftereffect, my tongue was still stuck in Snooty-ville. It had been a whole month since anything had made me say, "Wow, this is good." Every time I ate some-thing, it always felt like something was missing, like some key ingredient was lacking.

It wasn't enough of a problem to merit being *called* a problem, but I sure was sick of feeling that way. As far as solutions, I had already thought of two.

The first was fairly simple: Just eat tasty food.

"Can't hope for *that* to happen in a school dining hall."

But that first suggestion was impossible to follow. Not, any-way, without heading back to that strange, isolated little is-land. I won't say I was totally against the idea, but I certainly had my reservations.

"So *that's* no good."

Yes, I was talking to myself.

This left one other possible measure, and it was a strong-arm tactic. It was the "beat the child who doesn't listen" tactic. Most problems in the world are solved by either giving or taking.

I made my way to the *donburi* corner and placed an order.

"Excuse me. Large kimchee bowl, please. No rice."

The lunch lady gave me a quizzical expression and said, "That's just kimchee, son," but she dished it out all the same. As if it were nothing, she plopped it in front of me, displaying an admirable degree of professionalism.

A big, heaping, mountainous bowl of kimchee. I doubt there was a single tongue in this world tough enough to chow all that down and still preserve its sense of taste. I nodded with satisfaction, placed the bowl on my tray, and settled the bill.

The dining hall was so empty that I could hardly decide where to sit. In another hour, the place would be filled up with students who had cut out of second period early. I was never a fan of crowds, so I considered myself under a time limit. I took a seat in the corner.

"Down the hatch," I muttered, and took the first bite. . . .

This. Was. Awful.

I really had to eat a whole bowl of this stuff? Wasn't this what was commonly known as suicidal behavior? What cruel fate had brought me to this pass? What had I done?

"Is this divine retribution?"

I guess they also say *reap what you sow*.

From then on, I wielded my chopsticks in silence. If I kept on talking to myself, people would start thinking I was a weirdo. And besides, it's poor table manners to talk while you're eating.

And then, just as I hit my limit—my entire head had gone numb from the tip of the tongue up, I didn't know what the hell I was doing, or, for that matter, who I was, or what the word *who* meant, and even what the word *meant* meant . . .

"Yo."

She sat in the chair across from me.

"Pull that tray back a little, will you?" she said. Then she pushed my tray toward me and placed her own tray in the newly opened space. Her tray was laden with a plate of spaghetti carbonara, some tuna-and-kelp salad, and a bonus fruit dessert for a grand total of three courses.

Oh, how bourgeois.

I looked to my right, then to my left. The dining hall was empty as ever. You could practically call it deserted. So why had she decided to eat her spaghetti directly across from me? Probably some kind of dare.

"Oh my God, what is that?! It's all kimchee!" she ex-claimed at the shocking sight of my lunch. "Wow! You're eating a whole entire bowl of kimchee!"

...

She was wide-eyed, her hands up in the air like she was doing a banzai cheer. Maybe that *was* what she was doing, or maybe she was surrendering. There was also the possibility that she was just Muslim. Any of these was fine by me, but in reality, she was probably just surprised.

Her shoulder-length hair had a reddish tint and was done up in a sort of bob. Her clothes were nothing out of the ordinary. They were ultra-plain, following the style of so much of the Rokumeikan student body. All of a sudden, when she sat down, she seemed much shorter—but then I realized most of her height had come from her extra-tall London boots.

She had a young face, so I couldn't tell if she was my senior or a peer. Judging by her demeanor alone, it would have seemed plausible that she was my junior, except that being that I was a freshman, that was pretty much impossible.

“Hey. Y’know, if you don’t respond, I’ll get lonely and stuff.” She stared at me with puppy-dog eyes.

“Right,” I finally said. “*Who* are you?”

I was pretty sure this was our first encounter. But I’d learned one thing in the past month: This weird little pocket of space known as a “university” had an unusually large number of people who were friendly and genuine. These strange people would strike up conversations with you like you had been their close friend for the past ten years—even if you had never seen them before in your life. For a guy like me who’s bad at even *remembering* personal encounters, this made things difficult from time to time.

And surely this girl was another one of those types. Fearing the hassle of having to deal with a club invitation or, worse, some religious thing, I went ahead and posed the above question.

Doing so launched her into an over-the-top shocked pose. "Hwa?!" she said. “Oh my God! You mean you forgot? You’ve forgotten? You freaking forgot?! Ikkun, that’s so cold!”

Huh.

Judging from her reaction, it seemed this was *not* our first encounter.

“Ohhh. I am shocked. But what are you gonna do, right? Yeah, nothing, I guess. You’ve just got a bad memory after all, right? Well, might as well introduce myself again.” She flashed both hands at me and gave a full-faced grin. “I’m Aoii Mikoko!”

This might prove to be a painful encounter.

Whether it was our first encounter or not, this was, to be sure, my first impression of Aoii Mikoko.

2

Her story was simple. Mikoko-chan and I were classmates. Not only were we taking the same core subjects, but we were also in the same foreign-language class. We had met face-to-face a number of times, and were in the same group for the class training camp before Golden Week. We had even been paired up before in English class.

“Man . . . from this conversation alone, I must seem like a total nut for not remembering you.”

“I think you are a total nut!” She laughed lightheartedly. To be able to laugh so cheerfully after someone had entirely forgotten her existence took a special kind of vacuousness. I figured she was probably a pretty nice girl after all.

“Normally, I’d find it pretty disturbing that you forgot me like that. Or rather, I’d be pissed. But that’s just how you are, right? Like, you don’t forget the stuff that’s *really* important, but you forget normal stuff,” she said.

“Well, I can’t argue with that.”

She was exactly right. One time I had even forgotten if I was right- or left-handed, and found myself in quite a bind when I actually tried to sit down and have a meal. To top it all off, when all was said and done, I turned out to be ambidextrous.

"Okay, and what’s happening with you?” I asked. “Why aren’t you in class?”

“Class? Well, the thing about that is . . .”

For some reason she seemed abnormally happy. But I got the feeling that “abnormally happy” was her default setting. To be honest, even

though I'd seen her before, I still could not remember what she was like normally. But either way, it was hard to be put off by this smiley-faced girl.

"I'm playing hooky."

"Freshmen really ought to go to class," I said.

"Aw, come on, it's boring. Totally boring. What was it again? Oh, yeah, my economics class. It's just a nonstop stream of jargon. And it's like a math class. I'm a humanities person! And *you're* skipping class too!"

"I don't have a class right now."

"Really?"

"Yep. Fridays I only have a first period and a fifth period." She flung her hands wildly in the air again. "Doesn't that kind of suck? That's like six hours of boredom."

"Boredom isn't necessarily a bad thing."

"Hm, I thought boredom was practically the definition of 'a bad thing.' Different strokes, I guess." She began winding the spaghetti around her fork as she spoke. Unable to successfully get it all on the utensil, it soon became a matter of trial and error. I reckoned it would be awhile before the food actually reached her mouth. Before I knew it, she had put the fork down and switched to chopsticks. So much for stick-to-itiveness.

"Say . . ." I said.

"Hm? What-what?"

"There are tons of open seats."

“Yeah, for real. I think this place will fill up pretty soon, though,” she said.

“But it’s empty now, right?”

“You said it. Something wrong with that?"

“I wanna eat alone, so let’s move along now, honey,” I wanted to say. But then I saw her smile—a vulnerable smile that showed she couldn’t possibly have imagined she was about to be completely rejected—even I had to take pity.

“Nah . . . it’s nothing.”

“Hm? You’re a weird guy.” She gave me the pouty lips. “Ah, but I guess if you weren’t weird, you wouldn’t be you. Weirdness is like your identity, right?”

I couldn’t help but feel like I was being inadvertently insulted. But then again, it wasn’t as bad as completely forgetting someone you had been regularly interacting with for a whole month. So I swept the notion aside and switched my focus back to the kimchee.

“Ikkun, you’re a kimchee fan?”

“Nah, not particularly.”

“But that’s a *ton* of kimchee. Not even Koreans eat that much in one sitting.”

“Well, I have my reasons,” I said as I crammed some kimchee into my mouth. More than half of it still remained in my bowl. “Not very interesting ones, but still.”

“Reasons?”

“Try to figure it out yourself first.”

“Huh? Oh, right. . . okay.” Mikoko-chan crossed her arms and began to contemplate my rationale. Of course, figuring what circumstances could possibly require my eating an entire bowl of kimchee wasn’t exactly easy. After just a few moments of pondering, she let her arms drop back down apathetically. She really was quick to throw in the towel.

“Oh, yeah, by the way, I had a question for you. I thought this was a good opportunity to ask you. May I?”

“Uh, sure.”

Wasn’t the phrase “a good opportunity” usually used for something that came up by chance? As far as I knew, Mikoko-chan had come here and sat down in front of me of her own volition.

Or maybe that was beside the point.

She was wearing the same smile when she posed her question. “Ikkun, you know how you didn’t come to school for a while in the beginning of April? Why was that?”

“Uh . . .” My chopsticks stopped moving. The bits of kimchee they held plopped back into the bowl. “Uh, well . . .”

I must have had a troubled look on my face, because Mikoko-chan was quick to start waving her hands around frantically and say, “Oh, if it’s hard to talk about it, don’t worry. I was just wondering, that’s all. It’s like, *Unsolved Mysteries Featuring Mikoko-chan*.”

“No, it’s not hard to talk about. It’s a simple story, really. I was just on a vacation. For about a week.”

“Vacation?” She blinked at me like a little forest animal. Her expressions were also easy to read. It made it easy for me to talk to her—she was a great listener.

“Vacation? Where’d you go?" she asked again.

“Out to some deserted island in the Sea of Japan, kind of by accident.”

“By accident?”

“Yeah. A big accident. Anyway, that’s how I got myself into this kimchee-eating situation.”

She scratched her head, which was probably a natural response. But I am a fundamentally lazy person, so I couldn’t

be bothered to explain all the details. Or rather, just *how* the hell would I?

“Anyway, just a vacation. Nothing particularly deep.”

“Huh. You don’t say.”

“What did you think it was?”

“Oh, nothing . . .” She blushed a bit. “I just thought may-be, uh, like you hurt yourself somehow and had an extended stay at the hospital or something.”

How and why such an idea would occur to her was a mystery to me, but then again, for someone to suddenly take a week off just after entering a university, there weren’t really any other plausible explanations that came to mind. At the very least, it was a more likely explanation than “I was just on a vacation.”

“I see. Sort of like a delayed graduation trip.”

“Yeah, something like that. I couldn’t get a reservation, so it ended up eating into April,” I said with a shrug, but of course the real facts were totally different. The very idea that I had “graduated from school” was something I hadn’t experienced since elementary school. I’d certainly never been on a “graduation trip.” But all of the circumstances surrounding what had happened would have required a pointlessly long explanation, and it wasn’t exactly the kind of thing I wanted to talk about at length anyway, so I just went with her interpretation.

“Hmm . . .” She gave a sort of half-convinced expression. “So did you go alone?”

“Yeah.”

“Gotcha.” And then, just like that, the cheerful smile was back. It was as if all confusion had been cleared. It was like she really didn’t put on any façades. She was so straightforward with her emotions that I almost envied her.

Well . . .

Not really.

“So, Mikoko-chan . . . Why are you really here?”

“Huh?”

“You have something to say, I assume? I mean, considering you came and sat right here when there’s a whole roomful of empty chairs.”

“Huh.” She narrowed her eyes and lowered her gaze a bit, down to my chest. “So I can’t sit with you unless I’ve got something specific to say to you?”

“Huh?” This time it was my turn to scratch my head.

She continued talking in the meantime. "I mean . . . am I bothering you? I just saw you when I was walking by, so I thought maybe we could eat together."

“Ah, gotcha.”

So she’d just wanted someone to eat with. I was the type who preferred doing personal things, like eating, alone, but there were plenty of people who viewed mealtime and talk time as one and the same. Surely Mikoko-chan was one of them. But having unexpectedly decided to skip class, she couldn’t find a friend to eat with, so she went ahead and struck up a conversation with the first acquaintance she happened to see—me.

“Well, if that’s all it is, it’s fine by me,” I assured her.

“Thanks. That’s a relief. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you had said no.”

“You don’t?”

“Hm? Yeah. Maybe something like this,” she said, pretending to hold the edges of her tray in both hands. Then she twisted her wrists in a sudden cracking motion. “Like that.”

“I see . . .” Even if she was just joking, I was a little relieved I had refrained from saying no. I wouldn’t have put such a reaction past her, in reality. Someone who expressed happiness so freely might express anger just as freely.

“Well, I guess I’m free anyway. As long as you just want to talk,” I said.

"Thanks.”

“So what are we talking about?”

“Oh, umm . . .”

As I prompted her onward, she began anxiously scraping her chopsticks together. She was probably trying to think of a topic.

I may have forgotten who she was, but surely in the past month it seemed like she’d at least managed to grasp the surface of my personality. So just what kind of topic would she broach with me? Me, who was so ignorant, and so lacking in common sense, that I used to think soccer was baseball played with your feet? I was strangely interested to find out, as if I were watching it happen to someone else.

She clapped her hands as if she had suddenly thought of something. “Don’t you think the world’s gone crazy?” she said.

“Huh? In what way?”

“I mean . . . er, you know, the prowler. Even *you* must know about it.”

Even me.

Even *me*—the phrase was pretty enraging. Except that it happened that I had no idea who the hell “the prowler” was. “Don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot! Of *course* I know!” An angry outburst like that would have been fairly justified, but "Shut up! How the hell am I supposed to know what that is, stupid?!” just didn’t have the same ring of validity to it.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Ikkun?” she asked.

“Ah, nothing. What’s ‘the prowler’?”

Obviously I wasn’t looking for the dictionary definition, *one who prowls*. She gawked at me in amazement.

"You’re kidding, right? Is this a joke? Ikkun, it’s been all

over the news. There's no way you could have missed this if you live in Kyoto."

"There's no TV in my house, and I don't get the paper either."

"What about the Internet?"

"Oh, I don't have a computer. Don't really use the ones on campus much either."

"Oh my God, Ikkun is a caveman!" she said, sounding almost impressed in a way. "Is it some sort of ethical policy?"

"Maybe it is, in a sense. How do I put it . . . I don't like having possessions."

"Cooool! You're like an ancient philosopher! Wow!" She clapped her hands with joy. I seriously doubted I would have gotten the same reaction if she knew it was actually for a practical—and completely lame—reason: My room was just too small.

I mean, newspapers take up a lot of space.

"When you say 'if you live in Kyoto,' do you mean this 'prowler' thing is going on here?"

"Yeah, that's right. It's made a pretty big splash. 'Panic in the Old Capital!' Some places have even called off field trips."

"Wow . . . too bad for them."

"Six people have been murdered! And it's still going on right now! With no known suspects!" She had become all riled up, and there was a hint of excitement in her voice. "He stabs them with a knife and then flings their guts all around and stuff! Freaky, huh?"

"..."

Let's set aside the fact that we were in the middle of eating. After all, I was partly responsible for the fact that the conversation had veered in this direction. But what did it say of this girl that she was able to discuss the murder of others with such absolute glee?

It's scary how detached people can become.

"Six people, huh? Is that a lot?"

"*Yeah* it's a lot! It's a hell of a lot!" She almost sounded boastful in a way, as if she were the one doing the killing. "Maybe not overseas, but serial killings are rare in Japan! It's become quite a sensation, you know."

"Huh. So that's why there are patrol cars circling around all over the place."

"Yeah. There are people from the mobile police force in Shinkyôgoku. Makes me think of the Gion Festival." She chuckled to herself for some reason.

"Wow, go figure. I didn't know anything about this."

As I nodded along with her explanation, somehow I knew Kunagisa would definitely get a kick out of this. Kunagisa, for those new to my story, is the short version of Kunagisa Tomo, one of my few friends. That is to say, my only friend. Kunagisa Tomo was a nineteen-year-old electronic and mechanical engineering professional shut-in of the mysterious variety, with blue hair and a passionate interest in collecting information on just these types of incidents.

Unlike me, she wasn't constantly in the dark about what was going on in the world. In fact, she was essentially an information-collecting expert, and she was probably already well aware of this prowler case

without my having to say any-thing about it. In fact, she was probably already taking action.

“So when did it start?”

“Around the beginning of May, maybe? I think that’s right. Why?”

“Oh, I was just asking.”

I put the last piece of kimchee in my mouth. My tongue, or rather the entire inside of my mouth, was completely mangled. I would probably never take food for granted or say "this tastes bad” again. If you thought about it, the fact that a single bowl of kimchee could so easily destroy all my principles didn’t say much for my taste buds. Or maybe it was more of a stomach issue.

“Well, I’m done. See you again sometime.” I put down my chopsticks and began to get up from my seat.

"Ah! Hold on! Hold on, will you?! Where are you going?!” Mikoko scrambled to stop me. “Wait a minute, Ikkun!”

“What do you mean, Where am I going’? I’m finished eating so I figured maybe I’d drop by the bookstore.”

"I’m not done!” I took a look at her tray. Indeed, more than half of her food was left.

"But I am.”

"Don’t make me sad. Stay with me till I’m finished.”

“Why should I have to do a pointless thing like that?” . . . is exactly the kind of thing I’m not tough enough to say. I’m more of the go-with-the-flow type.

“Okay. I’m free now anyway.” I didn’t have anything urgent to do, and it wasn’t like I was full yet, either.

I figured I might as well eat some real food while I was there. “Wait a minute. I’m gonna go buy something.”

I approached the register from the opposite direction (which was against the rules) and took a look at the menu on the wall, pondering whether I should order the beef bowl. Geez, it was more expensive than Yoshinoya. Maybe some-thing else was the way to go.

“Kimchee again?” the lady at the counter interrupted lightheartedly as I was trying to decide.

“Yes.”

Oops.

I had up and said it.

“No use crying over spilt milk.” Or wait, was this more of a “hindsight-is-always-twenty-twenty situation”?

A few dozen seconds later, I received another heaping bowl of kimchee (this time the lunch lady gave me a little extra) and sat back down in front of Mikoko-chan.

"What the hell? Am I supposed to be following along with something here?” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. So what were we talking about?” “Hm? Uh, what was it? I forgot."

“Gotcha. Well, then you want to talk about class?”

She shook her head firmly.

"Why? There were some things I didn't really get in first period today, so I was thinking maybe we could go over it together. It's a required class for freshmen, so you must have gone, right? If you ask me, the professor's inability to explain things properly is to blame, but what do you think?"

"What do *I* think?' I think that there isn't a boy alive who brings up something like this to a girl when there isn't even a test coming up!"

I was only kidding, but she seemed seriously put off by it. "What's the matter? You don't like studying?"

"Nobody likes studying."

"That sounds debatable to me. But if you hate studying, why did you go to college?"

"Ah, that's a forbidden question. If you ask that, it's all over. I mean . . . everyone's like that, right?"

It seemed I had inadvertently touched a soft spot, and she suddenly seemed a bit melancholy. Come to think of it, it seemed to me that someone had once said Japanese universities weren't a place for people who wanted to study, and that college was just a time to prepare for entering society.

"Heh, that's one way to put it."

"Do you like studying?" she said.

I shrugged.

Of course not.

In fact, I hated it.

“But it’s not bad for killing time. Or as an escape from reality, rather.”

“Usually studying *is* the reality.” She gave a heavy sigh. Then, as if shifting her focus back to her meal, she picked at her salad for a while in silence.

Hmm. Was a plate of spaghetti, a large salad, and a dessert really a normal-size portion for a girl under the age of twenty? I didn’t know anybody fit to use as a standard for comparison—everyone I knew was either incredibly finicky, ridiculously gluttonous, or always fasting or something—so I had no standards for judgment. But seeing as Mikoko-chan was neither too slim nor the opposite, perhaps it was, at the very least, an appropriate portion for her.

“Umm, it’s hard to eat with you staring at me like that,” she said.

"Oh, sorry.”

"S’okay.”

She resumed eating. When she was nearly done, she began looking my way in a sort of probing fashion. Really, she had been peeping up at me every so often the whole time, but now she had suddenly become obvious about it, making eyes at me like there was something she wanted to tell me.

And indeed, that proved to be an accurate speculation.

As if she had at last made up her mind about something, she placed her chopsticks down without finishing her dessert. She gave a bit of a playful smile as she leaned her body forward, bringing her face close to mine.

"So, Ikkun,” she said.

“Yeah . . . ?"

“The truth is, I may or may not have a favor to ask you.”

"You don’t.”

“I do.” She leaned back again in her seat. “Are you the kind of guy who might be free tomorrow?”

“If you define *free* as not having any plans, then I sup-pose I’m more apt to say yes than no.”

“Yeah, *kind* of hard to follow you.”

“That’s just how I am,” I responded as I chewed my kimchee. “To put it more simply—I’m a free dude.”

“Really? You’re free? Oh, good!” She pressed her hands together in front of her chest with a look of true joy. To cause someone such teary-eyed happiness just by not having plans on a Saturday seemed a bit much.

More important, this didn’t look good. I had the distinct feeling I was about to get dragged into something.

“I see, I see, so if I’m free, something good happens to you, huh? One hand washes the other. It’s also kind of like the food chain. A magnificent circuit, if you will,” I said.

She wasn’t even listening. "Yeah. So anyway, if you’re free tomorrow, I was hoping we could get together!”

Her hands still pressed together, she tilted them to the side a bit as if to emphasize her request. It was such an earnest, imploring pose that it almost felt like foul play. There was scarcely a male life-form alive that wouldn’t have surrendered to it. They would *want* to surrender.

Nevertheless, I refused without mercy.

“No,” I said.

“Wha?! Why?!” she shrieked. “You’re free, right?”

“Well, yeah. But it’s like I said, I don’t dislike boredom. Sometimes people like to just spend the day doing nothing, right? Everyone feels like that sometimes. Everyone wants to escape the hustle and bustle of the world sometimes, to free themselves of the hassle of dealing with other people. Everybody has a right to time to contemplate their own lives. I just happen to have more.”

“But-but-but! How can you just refuse without even hearing me out?! That’s crazy! It’s like a bunch of eighth graders forming a band, but they all end up playing bass!”

It was a pretty great analogy.

On close inspection, it was apparent that she was about to cry. That is to say tears were already brimming in the corners of her eyes. This was not a desirable situation.

I looked around. It was about time for the dining hall to start filling up, and students began trickling in, their numbers gradually increasing. At this point, I wanted to avoid standing out (by, say, making a relatively hot girl cry) as much as possible. But come on, who cries just from one little rejection?

“Okay, okay, just calm down. I’ll hear you out. Come on, have some kimchee.”

“Okay,” she said, sniffling.

Doing as suggested, Mikoko-chan placed some kimchee in her mouth. “Uwa!” she peeped, and then the tears really started flowing. It seemed she wasn’t much for surprises (which I kind of knew).

“Ahh, hot . . .” she cried out.

“Well, it is kimchee. It wouldn’t be kimchee if it wasn’t spicy.”

They say there’s also sugar-preserved kimchee, but I always went with spicy, so I had never seen it. I wouldn’t mind if I never did, either.

“Ohh, you’re terrible. You’re so mean. . . . Now, what were we talking about?”

“That prowling killer?”

“No! We were talking about tomorrow!”

Bam! She slammed her hand on the table. It looked like she was seriously a little mad now. Maybe I had gone too far, I reflected.

“Umm, do you know Emoto-san?”

“Whether I know her or not, I don’t remember her.”

“She’s in our core subject classes. Her hair is like this.” She stuck her fists to the sides of her ears, but even with this striking pose, “Emoto-san” and her hairstyle remained firmly beyond the grasp of my imagination.

“She’s a pretty noticeable girl. She’s always wearing shiny things.”

“Huh. Well, I don’t really look at people much. What’s her full name?”

“Emoto Tomoe. That’s the *tomo* from *wisdom* and the *e* from *blessing*."

Interesting name. Sounded like it could do a headstand and start running around upside down. It felt like it rang a bell, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I didn’t want to just toss out some answer like,

“Oh yeah, yeah, I know that chick. She’s the one with the contact lenses, right?” There was always the chance that Mikoko-chan would throw it right back in my face, like, “I tricked you! There’s nobody like that in our class! Ahahaha, looks like the pants are on the other leg now! Nya-nya-nya!”

And then the egg would be on my face, my fraudulence exposed. Not that Mikoko-chan would do something like that.

“Her nickname is Tomo-chan.”

“That’s not gonna work for me.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“No reason. Just my own personal thing.” I shook my head. “Sorry. I don’t remember at all.”

“Figures,” she said, laughing. “But if you didn’t remember me, I guess it goes without saying that you wouldn’t remember her. If you did remember her, I’d be a little shocked.”

I didn’t quite follow her reasoning, but as long as my lack of memory made her avoid feeling terrible, I guessed it wasn’t totally worthless. Something definitely seemed off with the logic there, though.

“Well, okay. How about Atemiya-san? Atemiya Muimi-san? I call her Muimi-chan.”

“Another classmate?”

She nodded. "Then there’s Usami Akiharu-kun. Akiharu-kun is a guy, so you must remember him, right?”

“My memory functions in a gender-neutral environment.” “But you sure don’t seem like a feminist.”

She let out a big, unintentionally exaggerated sigh. It was like I had done something wrong. But it was my memory's fault, right?

"Anyway, so Tomo-chan, Muimi-chan, and Akiharu-kun. We're all going out tomorrow night for a little drinking." "Huh. What's the occasion?"

"It's Tomo-chan's birthday!" For some reason she seemed a tad boastful. It was hard to deny her adorableness as she sat there with her hands on her hips, chest stuck out. "May fourteenth! Happy twentieth!"

If this Tomo-chan was a classmate, that meant she was a freshman. Maybe she had entered college a year late. Or maybe she was a returnee like me. It didn't really matter.

"I'm only nineteen, by the way. My birthday's April twentieth."

"Huh," I said.

I didn't really care.

She continued. "Umm, so anyway, tomorrow's Tomo-chan's birthday, so we figured we'd throw a really light, casual kind of party."

"Huh. Seems like an awfully intimate group for a party."

"Yeah, well. We all like the rowdy atmosphere thing, but nobody wanted there to be a ton of people, so what are you gonna do?"

"Ah. Then four people is pretty appropriate, huh."

"Huh?" She looked surprised.

"A fifth person would throw off the balance."

"Huh? What?"

“Well, say hi to everyone for me. And happy birthday to you.”

“It’s not *my* birthday! Hey, wait, I mean don’t just get up and leave! You don’t know the other half of the story yet!”

“Well, they say knowing is only half the battle,” I said.

“That’s not what that means!”

She grabbed me by the sleeve as I started to leave and forced me to sit back down. But even if the conversation was only half-over, I could more or less tell what was coming next.

“Okay then. So now you’re going to tell me to partake in this drinking party . . . or birthday party, rather. Right?”

“Gah! Wow, that’s exactly right.” She flung up her hands in surprise, but this time it reeked of phoniness. Maybe it wasn’t that she didn’t put on any façades; she was just a lousy actress. “Amazing, it’s like you’ve got ESP or something, Ikkun.”

“Let’s not go there. Not a good subject.” I let out a light sigh. “How did all this come about? I don’t even know these people, right?”

“Yeah you do. They’re your classmates.”

Ah, right.

Maybe I had amnesia. I was never good at remembering people, but lately it had gotten particularly bad. These three classmates aside, there wasn’t a single person in all of Rokumeikan University whom I had a clear picture of.

But there was a more likely explanation: that it was simply the result of my apathy toward other human beings. It had nothing to do with

my mind's functionality. It wasn't a defect. It wasn't that some essential part was missing, either.

It was just that I was, from the very start, a broken thing.

"Could it be that I've just forgotten, and that I'm actually good friends with these three people? Even I wouldn't forget something like who my friends are, I think."

Mikoko-chan's expression grew a little sad. "I don't think that's the case," she said. "You probably haven't spoken much. I mean, you've always got this narrow-eyed scowl as if you're thinking really hard about something or filled with contempt. Even now. It makes you kind of hard to approach. It's like you've got a wall in front of you. Or your AT field is fully operational. And in spite of all that, you always sit directly in the middle of the classroom."

I wanted her to leave me the hell alone. I wanted to tell her not to bother talking to me if that was how she felt. But I didn't.

I finished my kimchee. As it turned out, two bowls ended up being pretty excessive, and I felt dreadful fullness in my stomach. I probably wouldn't be having kimchee again for a long time.

"But you and I are friends, right?" she asked.

"Are we?"

"Yes!" She slammed both hands on the table again. It seemed she had a habit of hitting nearby things when she got emotional. I'd have to remember to stay out of range of those slender arms if I was going to make fun of her. That is to say, I'd have to stay out of range when I made fun of her. Maybe it was better to pick on her over the phone.

Er, I mean, why was I planning ways to harass her?

“And, so, naturally, I tell my friends about you sometimes, right?”

“I guess.”

"And then my friends think, ‘Man, for a guy who’s always got such a crummy face, he seems kind of cool,’ right?”

“I guess it’s possible.”

“So it’s not so strange that they would want to try being friends with someone who seems kind of cool, even if he is a weirdo. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess we all have temptations.”

“So that’s what I’m saying,” she said.

“What is?”

“That.”

She peered up at me with eager, expectant eyes. I pretend-ed I was drinking tea in order to escape her gaze. But a single cup of tea sure wasn’t going to be enough to revive my paralyzed mouth.

"Huh. I understand,” I said.

“You do?”

“It’s a good opportunity and all, so I think I’ll go spend the night at my parents’ place tomorrow.”

“Don’t make plans’ You didn’t even go home during Golden Week!”

She slammed the table again. I was a little disturbed that she knew what I had been doing during Golden Week, but then again, maybe I had told her and forgotten.

“But you know . . . it’s almost Mother’s Day and stuff.”

“That was last week! And besides, you’re not the kind of guy who would go out of his way to show devotion to his parents!”

That was rather harsh. And even if she was right, did she believe that a seventeen-year-old guy who wouldn’t even go out of his way for his parents would be any nicer to someone who was just a classmate? Maybe she was so worked up she didn’t realize what she was saying anymore.

“Come on, I’m begging you. I already told them I’d bring you. I’ll lose face.”

“It seems like there’s a misunderstanding here, so let me clear things up—I’m not the kind of guy you can have fun talking to. They say I’ve got about as much pep as a storm cloud.”

“Wow, that’s as disappointing as hearing about two bud-ding young authors, only one’s poison ivy and the other got eaten by tent caterpillars." She looked a little somber as she chewed her lip. “Come on, Ikkun. Do it as a favor to me. I know it’s selfish of me, but hey, I’ll even pay for drinks.”

“Sorry, I’m not a drinker.”

This was true.

“Why not?”

“I once drank a whole bottle of vodka in one go.” I didn’t dare tell her how things ended up after that, but at any rate, ever since then I had sworn off alcohol. I may not be such a smart guy, but I’m not so dumb that I don’t learn from my experiences either.

“Wow, not even the Russians do that.” She was truly surprised. “I see. . . . So you can’t drink. Hm, now what?”

She immersed herself in thought once again. It seemed she had a firm understanding of what it was like for a non-drinker to show up at a drinking party. Perhaps she was a lightweight herself at least to some extent.

Nevertheless . . .

I wasn’t so cold-blooded that I felt nothing for this girl sit-ting before me, looking so deeply troubled.

Dammit . . . I get dragged into things so easily. Going along with something out of pity was one thing. But getting dragged in just because the situation presented itself was totally lame.

“Okay, okay. As long as you’re okay with me just sitting in the middle of the room scowling.”

“Hmm, I guess that would be an awful bother for you, but you know, I think . . . Wait, you mean you’ll go?” she said.

She shot her body forward. Maybe it’s a rude analogy, but she was like a dog who had just had food tossed in front of it. A cat would have approached it with some caution, suspecting the possibility of a trap, but Mikoko-chan was completely unguarded. She may have physically resembled a cat, but she was definitely more like a dog in personality.

“Is it really okay? Will you really come?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’m free anyway.”

Even I was a little appalled by my own bluntness and wondered if I couldn’t have put it a little more nicely. All the same, she shrieked with joy.

“Waaah! Thank you!” She smiled innocently.

I replied by downing the rest of my tea. At some point she had finished her dessert as well, so it was time I really should start to leave.

“Ah, wait a sec. Let me know your phone number. I’ll call you.”

“Hm? Ah . . .” I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket. “Okay, it’s . . . uh, I forgot.”

“Figures. Okay, then I’ll give you mine, so dial me.”

I entered her number as told and sent it. A ringtone emerged from her little bag. David Bowie. She had surprisingly great taste.

“Okay, got it. Hey, Ikkun, your phone doesn’t have a strap.”

“Ah, yeah. I don’t like that girly stuff.”

“Are straps girly?”

“Well, I’m no expert or anything, but they’re definitely not very manly.”

“Mmm, guess not,” she said with consternation.

“Well then,” I said, stepping away from my seat with my tray. “See you tomorrow, Mikoko-chan.”

“Yep! Don’t you forget about me again!”

She gave me a big wave, to which I responded with a small one as I made my way out of the dining hall. After returning my tray and silverware, I headed straight to the co-op book-store. Of course, being a university bookstore, its main selection consisted of academic texts, and its recreational reading selection was fairly limited. But on the

plus side there was a 10 percent discount on everything, and for some reason (I wonder why) this particular bookstore had an unusually large selection of magazines, so it got fairly crowded.

I made my way to the novels section and picked one out.

Wait. *Huh?* Something had occurred to me.

"Wait a minute. Did Mikoko-chan call me 'Ikkun'?"

Now that I looked back on our encounter, that nickname she used seemed to stand out. I hadn't even noticed when she'd used the nickname—but I didn't think anyone had ever addressed me with such an overly familiar nickname in the past. I thought about it for a moment, but I couldn't remember. I had no specific memory of her calling me that before, but then again, I didn't remember her *not* calling me that, either. After all, I hardly have any memory of Mikoko-chan herself, much less a trivial thing like what name she called me.

"Eh, whatever."

Either way was fine by me. Satisfied with that notion, I began reading the novel inside the store.

Yup.

No big deal.

Hardly a life or death situation.

All was well with the world.

Even if Heaven was empty.

What is a fatal wound?

Cutting off someone's head.

Yeah, obviously that's one.

Crushing someone's heart.

Again, obvious.

Destroying someone's brain.

Naturally.

Stopping their breathing.

That's another good method. Pretty final, too.

But when I say "fatal wound," I'm not referring to these trivial sorts of things.

I'm thinking of something else. A fatal wound is an impact so intense, so devastating, that you fall into a state where you're no longer a human—even though you are. You're no longer able to lead a life even though you're living. It means being ground to bits after falling victim to a relative paradox created by reason itself.

That is a fatal wound.

In other words, failure.

The key here is the fact that even after a profound failure, we go on.

The world is brutally tepid.

It's so kind that it's cruel. It's a devil's Heaven.

To put it plainly, you don't die by making a big mistake.

Or maybe I should say you *can't* die.

Yeah, you don't die.

You just suffer.

You simply suffer in agony.

And you go on. Forever, wherever.

Meaninglessly, you just go on.

Life isn't a video game, not because there's no reset but-ton, but because there's no Game Over. Even though it was "over" long ago, tomorrow shows up anyway. Even when night falls, morning comes again after it. When winter ends, spring rolls in. Life is wonderful.

It's an absolute paradox—even though you've taken a fatal blow, you can't die. It's like asking what a person sees when he looks backward while traveling faster than the speed of light. An unthinkable question.

Even though the potential to be you has long since been cut off, you go on. You do it all over, again and again. You redo your life again and again.

But it's like making a million crappy copies, and each time you make one, your "self" gets a little bit shoddier.

And eventually you get to thinking . . .

Am I really me, or . . .

. . . did I become something else

long ago?

Have I devolved?

Just as the central figure in an incident can't all of a sudden become just a disinterested bystander, you can't become your own spectator.

And *that*, my friends, is what's truly fatal.

"In other words, it's like mind over matter . . ." I muttered. As I pondered these fruitless ponderings, I was trying the new McDonald's burger. The five hundred twenty-five yen value combo.

The kimchee must have worked, because my sense of taste had returned to normal. A McDonald's hamburger tasted pretty luscious again. After all, as a Japanese person, there was no way I could have gone on with my life if unable to enjoy McDonald's.

The time was 7:30 in the evening.

The place: Shijôkawara-machi, Shinkyôgoku Street.

After fifth period had ended, I decided I wanted to see those mobile police Mikoko-chan was talking about for myself, and my feet had taken me this far in an effort to kill time.

Next to the tray with the hamburger on it was a single magazine. What they call a "weekly infozine." I had bought it at the co-op, and on the cover it said, "Feature Story: Jack the Ripper Resurrected in the Devil's City!"

"Pretty tasteless."

The ridiculously apocalyptic feel of the magazine was actually the second reason I had bought it. The first was that it featured a big story on the "prowler" incidents Mikoko-chan had been telling me about.

I shoved two fries in my mouth, added a straw as well, and sucked down some cola. I started flipping through the weekly. The first page was set with an all too vivid picture of a corpse as the background, and in big, Gothic letters, it read: "The Homicidal Monster Who Shook Kyoto!"

Ominous indeed.

"So they let you show photos like this . . ." I muttered as I flipped through the pages. I had already scanned through the details of the articles, so I at least knew something about the incidents now, if not everything.

The media had dubbed the crime spree the "Kyoto Prowler Serial Killings." Not the most imaginative name in the world, but then again, maybe a case like this didn't need one. Still, the word *prowler* hardly seemed to be an accurate description of the criminal. I always thought of as a prowler as a sort of stalker, someone who stalks people on the street and causes them harm. But in this case the culprit was luring the victims into desolate areas, killing them with a sharp blade, and finally dismembering the corpses. It seemed like maybe "serial killer" was a better description than prowler. And you could definitely make an analogy with the Jack the Ripper murders.

"Six people now, huh? Not bad," I muttered as I stuffed the magazine back into my bag.

Yeah, six people. Just as Mikoko-chan had said, six people in less than two weeks' time was quite a death toll. It was probably unprecedented. By the third murder, the police force had been dispatched all over the region for surveillance. Even the riot police had been dispatched, and yet the murders went on, as if the killer were laughing at them.

The victims had no apparent connections. They were young and old, male and female: The killer showed no mercy to anyone. The police (and everyone else, for that matter) had deemed these incidents merely a series of acts of random violence.

Therefore the sixth victim probably wouldn't be the last. The killings would go on. As long as this monster remained on the loose—or until he decided to stop of his own volition—there would be more murders. Perhaps even tonight. Perhaps even right now.

"It's all nonsense in the end, huh?" I stared out at Shinkyô-goku Street from the entrance of McDonald's.

It was the same scenery as always. Fewer tourists and students on field trips, but it was still pretty crowded—a lot of kids with dyed hair were milling around. I suppose you could say that this was when they came out to mark their territory.

Nobody, absolutely nobody walking along this street right now was seriously considering the notion that *they* could be the next victim.

Of course, everyone was still being a little cautious. Some were visibly unsettled by the mobile police units scattered here and there. "What a mess," they might think, but that about covers it. At most, they would go home a little earlier than usual.

But deep in their hearts, everyone believed they would be going home.

That's how it is with these things. There are very few people who can accept as a hard reality the possibility that they might be the next to die.

It was true that the probability of becoming the next victim was negligibly low: "Those victims must've had been really unlucky." A terrible thought, but what else could people think?

Anyway . . . perhaps I should go ahead and mingle in with this unguarded crowd? With that in mind, I got up from my seat only to feel my phone vibrating in my right pocket. I wasn't familiar with the number on the display. But I didn't want to just ignore it. I went ahead and pushed send.

"Ciao! Mikoko-chan here!"

Hyper from the get-go. It was easy to imagine her giving me the thumbs-up on the other end, even though I guess she probably wasn't *actually* doing that. But without even knowing who she was talking to, she was so bubbly and friendly. What would she have done if this was the wrong number? A small fire ignited in my inquiring mind.

"Eh? Hey, it's Mikoko-chan. What's wrong?"

I didn't reply.

"Uhh . . . This is Ikkun, right?"

Again, I was silent.

"Hellooo? This is Ikkun, right?"

I persisted in not replying.

"Did I mess up? Huh? I messed up!"

I kept up the silent treatment.

"Gahhh! It's like getting all prepped for the next radio calisthenics session—you know, that exercise show broadcast over the radio—only to have them go 'We're outta time, so just do the chicken dance'! I'm sorry, I dialed the wrong number!"

At that, I finally said something: "No, this is right. What's up?"

“Uwa!” she shrieked in surprise when I spoke. “Huh? Wha?” she sputtered, confused. Eventually, she let out a sigh, so I figured she had calmed down a bit. I also figured that it was only a matter of seconds before her relief turned to anger.

"For crying out loud! It’s the phone! You have to say *something*! I’ll freak out if you don’t! Ikkun, you jerk! You snake! You . . . you monster!”

I didn’t think I’d done anything *that* bad.

"Sorry, sorry, I was just kidding around.”

I hadn’t meant to stay quiet for so long, but I also had never expected she’d provide such a hilarious response either. Before I knew it, my timing had been thrown off.

“God . . . It’s fine, I guess. Since it’s you and all.”

She let out a moan. It was hard not to feel a little sorry for her. “Umm,” she started again, back to her normal self. “This is a business call! Regarding tomorrow’s business!”

“You know, you don’t have to yell. It’s quiet here.”

“Hm? Where are you now?" she asked.

“Ah, uh, I’m at home. At the boarding lodge.”

“Oh. I’m still at school. I had to talk to Inokawa-sensei about something, so I just got out of the research room. Isn’t that place incredible?! Books everywhere!”

Inokawa-sensei led the general-education class. A slightly eccentric assistant professor, he was popular enough with his students if you were willing to set aside the fact that he was way too strict about

punctuality. (If you weren't in your seat by the time the bell *started* ringing—even if you were in the classroom and were in the act of sitting down while it was ringing—he marked you absent).

"Umm, right, so about tomorrow. Will you be home to-morrow?"

"Yeah, that's right. Are we meeting somewhere?" I asked. "Uh-uh. If we set a meeting place, we might miss each other, right? That's no good, so I'll come meet you at your boarding lodge. I bought a scooter and I kinda wanna take it for a spin. So, let's say four o'clock. Can I go to your place at four?"

"Yeah, it's fine, but . . . you know where the boarding lodge is?"

"Huh? Oh, no problem there." She seemed flustered. "I mean, because we made that address list when classes first started, so I know it."

"Is just the address enough?"

"I know Kyoto well, so we're a-okay. You're at Senbon Nakadachiuri, right?"

"Huh?" I asked. There was something suspicious about the way she was acting, but if she said she knew it, I figured there was no problem.

"Fine by me," I replied.

"Okay. That settles that, then. Hmm, I'd like to talk more since I went to the trouble of calling, but I've got to go to driving school from here. I made an appointment, and if I don't go now I'll be late."

"Huh. You're going to driving school."

"Yep. How about you? Got a license?"

"I do. Just for automatic, though."

If it wasn't such a big hassle to get a license, I could actually drive *anything*, but that was a secret.

"I see," she said. "I'm going for a manual. I'm reaching that age where I want my own set of wheels, you know? My dad said he'll get me a car once I get my license. Yup. Anyway, see ya tomorrow. Bbbbyeee!"

She giggled and hung up. I stared at the phone for a while before putting it back in my pants pocket.

Right. We did have plans tomorrow, didn't we? It hadn't *completely* slipped my mind, but it was close enough. At this rate, I might forget again by tomorrow. Maybe it would have been best to write "Plans with Mikoko-chan tomorrow" on the palm of my hand, like an unusually dim-witted elementary school student.

Oh, but if she was coming to meet *me* at my house, it didn't really matter if I remembered or not, I thought. I was just going to be there all day anyway. I returned my pen case to my bag.

This time I really did actually walk out of the McDonald's. It was already almost eight o'clock, and the shops outside were preparing to close. Suddenly something occurred to me.

"Ah, that's right. It's a birthday thing."

In that case, I should probably take the opportunity to buy a present while I was out and about. It was only common sense—not that I ever thought of myself as someone with a lot of common sense.

Then again, I'd been sort of half-forced into going. Maybe I didn't have to go out of my way to be a good guy or anything. As I thought it over, I peeped into a nearby souvenir shop.

Emoto Tomoe. Now, what kind of a character was *she*? I didn't have a single memory of her. Once I actually saw her face, I might remember

her. But no matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't remember a single thing about her. Which meant she probably wasn't a particularly eccentric or remarkable person. Maybe she was a little more subdued than most. The kind of person who reads a book before the start of class instead of messing with her cell phone.

Wait . . . but hadn't Mikoko-chan said she was a striking girl who always wore shiny things? Huh. I had no idea after all. Not even a vague image.

Then there were those other two: Atemiya Muimi-chan and Usami Akiharu-kun, right? I tried to recall them as well, but with no success.

"Eh, I guess if they're Mikoko-chan's friends, they can't be all that weird."

"Tell me what company thou keepst, and I'll tell thee what thou art." Cervantes said it, but surely you could've switched it around and it would still make sense. Nothing to worry about too much.

As my mind wandered, I picked up a box of snacks from a display. They were *yatsuhashi* cinnamon cookies folded into triangles and stuffed with red bean paste. A wholly conventional Japanese snack. Thirty pieces, one thousand two hundred yen.

"Hm . . ."

Kyoto and *yatsuhashi*—a confection made from rice flour, cinnamon, and sugar—were synonymous with each other. If there were no *yatsuhashi*, it wasn't Kyoto, which meant that if there were *yatsuhashi*, it *was*. Compared to *yatsuhashi*, Kiyomizu Temple, the Daimonji Fire Festival, and the Big Three festivals didn't even matter. Shrines and Buddhist temples were irrelevant. If you didn't eat *yatsuhashi*, you didn't know 80% of Kyoto.

Okay, then, I thought.

And so it was settled that Tomo-chan would receive snack food for her birthday. I didn't want to burden her with something nondisposable, and I figured it would be the perfect thing to eat while drinking. Or wait, *did* sweet stuff go with alcohol? I didn't drink, so I didn't know. At any rate, it wasn't like they would be *inedible*.

And then my back shivered.

It felt as though liquid nitrogen had been poured into my spinal cord. As if my entire body had been frozen to absolute zero and the heat of the outside air was about to scorch me. Only a basic level of brain functionality remained. And then I felt an intense pressure crushing me. If I couldn't maintain my composure, surely I would be pulverized.

But I didn't look back. I just tried to collect myself as coolly as possible, and thrust the box of *yatsuhashi* at the store clerk. The clerk had a brown earring, a brown ponytail, and a smile that wasn't very professional.

"Welcome, now." The clerk wrapped up the treats for me, which I accepted as I fished for the exact change. "Please come again there, now," the clerk said cheerfully with a little head bob. Surely it was this kind of heartfelt service that captured the hearts of tourists, I thought, a little irrelevantly, as I left the store and began on my way to Shijô Street.

And then I felt it. A gaze so intense it couldn't be ignored once detected, a gaze so ferocious there was no way *not* to be aware of it. No, this was more than a gaze.

This was the intent to murder.

It was a 100 percent pure murderous desire. Nothing—not one of a million emotions; not animosity, aggression, or a sense of mischief—

diluted the purity of this desire. My entire body ached with a terrible feeling. This feeling was long past the point of unpleasant or unsettling.

I walked.

The feeling followed me.

I walked some more.

The feeling still followed.

"In other words, I'm being followed," I muttered to myself.

Since when? *From* where?

I had no idea.

It was so blatant that I didn't even need to look back.

It was so blatant that I didn't even need to sense it.

That meant that whoever it was had surely noticed that I had noticed. The fact that they continued to tail me anyway was the most blatant thing of all.

"This ain't good," I sighed as I weaved my way through the crowd. It was strange. I really thought I'd left all danger behind me . . . back on that island on the other side of the sea. Being tracked all the way to this country, to this city, no less, seemed unthinkable, much less being *killed*. I had already employed Kunagisa's skills to confirm that.

In which case . . .

This was a random act.

The first thing that came to mind was the feature story from the magazine in my bag.

The slasher.

"Aw, hell no," I said to myself. What cruel fate had brought me to *this* pass? If I were to put it like Mikoko-chan, I might have said something like, "It's like forming a second Onyanko Club, but everyone's a backup dancer." On second thought, I have no idea what that means. I guess you shouldn't try to be something you're not, I thought. Clearly I was panicking.

But even supposing the person one thousand feet behind me right now was the famous prowler, or even supposing it was just your run-of-the-mill psycho killer, or even supposing that it was someone with a grudge against me . . .

Something was off. This just didn't make sense. It was unfathomable and absurd.

What I felt was uneasiness. Yes, like the uneasiness you feel when you notice that reflection in the mirror is looking back at you, that kind of absolutely mistaken textbook explanation. I had now confirmed that that red line that's usually in front was, suddenly, behind.

"More nonsense?" Of course this was an illusion.

What mattered right now was that someone was following me. This much was certain. That and, sometime soon, I would be killed. This much was also certain. With these two essentially definite facts in mind right now, I had no leeway to be distracted by any other sensations. Ultimately, my options were limited.

Give, or take.

"Ahhh, this is becoming a freaking hassle," I muttered.

I made my way from Shinkyôgoku Street onto Shijô Street. On the other side of a cluster of cabs was a long line of cars. Shijô Street was extremely congested at this time of day, to the point that it was actually faster to walk than to drive. In a town like Kyoto, which had so many traffic lights it wasn't even funny, a bicycle was by far the number one most effective way to get around.

Number two, incidentally, was by foot. Maybe number three was a boogie board.

I had come to school by bus, so number two was my only option. I debated for only an instant about which way to go before heading east.

After a pause at a red light, I crossed Kawara-machi Street. If I kept straight on this road, it would take me to Yasaka Shrine. From there, if I broke south, I would reach Kiyomizu Temple. It was a textbook route for the Kyoto temple sight-seer. But I was no sightseer, and I had no intention of going as far as Yasaka Shrine.

I was on pins and needles. I felt that high-pressure gaze edging ever closer. And if it ever caught up to me, that pres-sure would erupt into plain, simple violence.

"Ah . . . this is gonna be close." May already and here I was in a cold sweat. Just how long had it been since I had been this nervous? Surely not since I'd left that odd little island. Yet at the same time, what I felt now was somehow distinctly different from what I had felt back then.

I am nervous, therefore I am at peace.

I became aware that, for me in this nervous state, failure was something wholly improbable.

"Phew . . ."

And so I arrived at Kamo River. Instead of crossing the big Shijô Bridge, I made my way down the staircase beside it and emerged on the riverbank. Whenever the sun came out, countless young couples would start crowding the riverbank. In my personal opinion, this riverbank, lined with perfectly spaced out boy-girl pairs, was one of the top three must-see attractions of Kyoto. When the moon was out, the riverbank offered itself as an after-bender hangout for drunks. After drinking the night away, they could come here to sleep it off. The drunks ranged from college students all the way up to salarymen.

The drunks and lovers had one thing in common: They were both complete nuisances who went around shoving their happiness in other people's faces. But there was no time to wax philosophical about. No matter what I thought about the drunks and young lovers, only one thing mattered right now. It happened to be that one brief moment of the day when the riverbank was empty. The lovers had already gone home, and the drunks were still getting drunk.

In other words, it was a perfect situation.

And being underneath a bridge made it even better, right?

I entered the shadow of the bridge as soon as I had descended to the riverbank. The sounds of passing cars rushed overhead. The chatter of people crossing the bridge. It was one hell of a ruckus. But it wasn't enough to cover this guy's footsteps.

Shuffle.

The sound of scraping grit.

I muttered something and turned around.

He made an incoherent noise as he faced me.

My feelings at that point were probably pure and simple confusion. Ordinary, everyday confusion and nothing more.

There was a mirror in front of me.

Or so I thought.

His height was a bit under five feet, and he was long-limbed and slender as a flower stem. He wore tiger-striped shorts; nonskid rustic boots; a red, long-sleeved, hooded parka; and a black tactical vest. Both hands were clad with gloves, but they obviously weren't for something as cowardly as covering his fingerprints, as they were fingerless gloves. It was my guess that they served a much more sinister purpose—to stop the knife from slipping on sweat.

His long hair was tied up in the back and buzzed on the sides as if he were a dancer. His right ear had a triple piercing, and two straps that looked like they belonged on a cell phone dangled from his left ear. His stylish sunglasses rendered his expression unreadable, but the sinister-looking, obviously real tattoo running down the right side of his face communicated this person's eccentricity loud and clear.

He was unlike me in almost every conceivable way. Our similarities ended with age and gender.

And yet I felt like I was looking into a mirror.

So naturally I was confused.

And my new friend appeared to be just as confused.

Still, he made the first move. He inserted his right hand into a pocket of the vest, and an instant later he was brandishing a small, five-centimeter-wide knife. He made not a single wasted motion. It was as if he had surpassed the limits of the merely human. Light and sound seemed distorted around him.

Even supposing I had been observing all this from the point of view of an uninvolved bystander, even knowing that this was a murderer, his technique was so perfect that I could've only described it as *artful*.

There was no escaping it. There was no accepting it.

But I managed to dodge the knife by pulling my upper body back. Of course, normally this would be impossible. I wouldn't say I'm any less athletic than average, but I'm certainly no Mary Lou Retton either. I had neither the quick eye nor agile body needed to elude a plausible contender for the title of the world's fastest knife fighter.

However, supposing a dump truck was coming straight at you at a hundred miles an hour, but you became aware of this when it was a few miles away, I think we can all agree that dodging it would be a simple task.

Likewise, I'd been anticipating my assailant's slash attack. It was so obvious that it was coming that it was if I had been expecting it for the past five years.

I groped wildly for my bag, then swung it around, hoping to smash him in the face. But with no more than a simple motion of the neck, he managed to dodge my attack as if he had been expecting it for *ten* years.

Because I had strained to dodge his attack, I tumbled backward. Of course, I didn't do anything as foolish as try to roll back to my feet. Even a single arm wasted on such a maneuver would surely have created a prime opportunity for the killer. Just as I feared, he wheeled back from his initial miss and came straight for my carotid artery. Not good. There was no way to dodge from this position. I guess I could have theoretically performed a stupid-looking roll and dodge this one attack. But the next moment, or the moment after that, regardless of how pathetically I scrambled around on the ground, he would plunge

that knife into my spine. I could imagine it so clearly that I felt like a certain clairvoyant I once knew.

In which case, dodging was beside the point. The key was simply *taking* it. I swung my right elbow up at the knife.

My opponent twisted his wrist, altering the direction of his swing. Consequently, the excess momentum from my elbow had me swinging at nothing. This left my entire front side, including all of my organs, not least notable of which were the heart and lungs, completely exposed to the enemy.

Behind the sunglasses, his eyes seemed to smile ever so faintly.

With another twist of the knife, he aimed it directly at my heart.

A moment's pause.

And then the tactical knife swung down at double speed. So strong was his will to destroy human life that it made his body move at speeds that couldn't be detected by the human eye.

He left me not even time enough to gasp. That's right: I didn't even have time to gasp.

But I had known this one had been coming before I'd even been born.

! !

The knife tore through a single layer of my clothing and stopped. My left index and middle fingers had stopped it—by pushing up my assailant's sunglasses.

A stalemate.

He had my heart and I had his eyes. If you put the two on a scale, their weights obviously differed, but this was no matter to be weighed on a scale. For my opponent, tearing through my flesh and bone to demolish my heart was simpler than taking candy from a baby. But it would leave just enough time for me to pulverize his eyeballs.

The opposite was also true.

I could sacrifice my own heart to destroy his eyeballs, and he could sacrifice his eyes to obliterate my heart. Hence, a stalemate.

We stayed that way for as long as five hours, or maybe it was five seconds, and then: "This is a masterpiece," he said, tossing his knife aside.

"It's nonsense is what it is." I retracted my fingers.

He backed away from me, and I rose to my feet slowly, shaking the grit off my clothes and slowly straightening out my posture.

Our fight had been a farce—but it had gone so harmoniously, it was as if it had all been predestined. I felt overcome by an incredible faintness.

"I'm Zerozaki," my opponent said as he straightened his crooked glasses. "Zerozaki Hitoshiki. So who the hell are you, Mr. Doppelgänger?"

The question left a sour taste in my mouth. It was like seeing myself asking someone else for my own name.

And that—*that* was the first encounter between the passive onlooker and the homicidal monster.

Strangely enough, it was Friday the thirteenth.

Asano Miiko,

neighbor.

2

YÛYA'S BANQUET

Yûya's Link

Misfortune and misery are underplayed.
Give me more despair. Give me more darkness.
Give me wholehearted depravity.

1

The thirteenth of any given month, by the way, is more likely to fall on a Friday than any other day. Friday the thirteenth occurs once a year at least, and three or four times a year on average. But for a guy like me who wasn't Christian—I don't even understand the difference between Catholic and Protestant—Friday the thirteenth meant little more than that the next day was Saturday the fourteenth.

Now, then. The next day was Saturday, May fourteenth. I awoke inside my one-room Senbon Nakadachiuri apartment. I looked at my clock to discover that it was about ten until four p.m.

"Seriously?"

I was a bit . . . that is, *fairly*—nay, *insanely*—surprised. This was a whole new oversleeping record for me. How many years had it been since the last time I slept until the afternoon? And it wasn't only the afternoon—the p.m. was a third over already. This would probably remain as a stain on my memory for the rest of eternity.

“But then again, I want to bed at nine in the morning, so it’s only natural.”

Finally shaking away the sleepiness, I returned to my sense and rose from my bed.

The room had four straw mats of floor space and a naked lightbulb. This little pocket of space was unbelievably classic, and so full of anachronisms that it made you wonder if it had been around since the olden days when Kyoto was still our capital. Naturally, the rent was deathly low. Deathly to the landlord, that is.

I folded up my futon and stuck it on the closet. There was no toilet or bath, but there was a washstand of sorts, so I used it to wash my face, then got dressed. My wardrobe wasn’t exactly jam-packed with options, so all of this took less than five minutes.

I opened the window and let in the outside air. Kyoto is an incredible place, in that once you’ve passed Golden Week, you’ve already entered summer. It’s as if life is still being run according to the old Chinese calendar—or as if fall and spring don’t even exist.

Then there came a knock at my door. This apartment wasn’t equipped with such modern amenities as telephone intercoms. It was exactly four o’clock. Mikoko-chan was certainly a punctual one. I was just a little bit dazzled by this. People who were as anal about time as Inokawa-sensei were just annoying, but I figured that if you really wanted to refer to yourself as a human being, you had to be at least as punctual as an analog clock. In that sense, Mikoko-chan passed as a human.

“Yo, I’m coming.”

I unbolted the lock (now *that’s* what I call radically retro) and opened the door. But to my surprise, it wasn’t Mikoko-chan.

“Sorry.”

It was Asano Miiko-san, my neighbor. She was twenty-two years old, making her my senior, and she was a seasonal worker. There was something strangely Japanesey about her style, and even right now she was dressed in classic Japanese summer casual wear. It was black cloth, with the word Carnage printed on the back of her top in white letters, and she had a distinctly samurai-esque ponytail. At first she seemed unapproachable, but after you talked to her for a bit, it quickly became clear that she was a pretty decent human being. Maybe a little on the mysterious side, but that just added to her charm.

“Miiko-san . . . right? Good morning.”

“Yeah. Were you sleeping?”

“Yeah, I actually overslept a bit, so . . .”

“If you slept this late, I don’t think it still qualifies as ‘a bit,’ ” she said drably. With her subdued demeanor, it was often hard to guess what she was thinking. It wasn’t that she was completely expressionless. Instead, her default expression was a glare, with changes so subtle that she might as well have been expressionless.

“Oh, please come in. As usual, there’s not much to see, though,” I said without a hint of false modesty. I stepped aside to make way, but she shook her head.

“Nah, I just came to give you this.” She passed me a flat box. It was wrapped in paper with the word *Snacks* written in big letters.

“. . . .”

“They’re *yatsuhashi*. They’re a Kyoto favorite.”

“I know them, but—“

“They’re yours. They’re good, you know. Well, see ya . . . I’ve got to get to work.”

She spun around, flashing the word *Carnage* at me. The fact that she had offered no explanation as to why she had just given me a box of *yatsuhashi* was hardly unexpected. She was a woman of few words, and when you thought about how much effort you would have to exert just to fish an answer out of her, it was easy to justify leaving things unexplained. And so I send her off with a simple “Thanks very much, I’ll definitely enjoy them,” and nothing more.

She stopped in her tracks.

“Sounded like you got back just this morning,” she said without turning around. “So, what’s the story?”

“. . .” Damn these thin-walled apartments. Actually I sup-pose they do have their perks.

“Oh, I was just hanging out with a friend all night. Nothing shady. Nothing exciting either.”

“A friend, huh? Wouldn’t happen to have been that colorful blue-haired girl who came by around February, would it?”

“Actually, Kunagisa’s an extreme shut-in. This was some-one else. A guy.”

She nodded with a look of complete and utter disinterest, but I wondered if she would’ve perked up a little if I had said “I was schmoozing with that killer everyone’s been talking about under the big Shijô Bridge.” Then again, Miiko-san being the way she was, it was entirely possible that she wouldn’t have given me more than a “huh,” even if she knew I wasn’t joking.

She nodded, seemingly satisfied, and proceeded on her way down the planked hallway. She was headed to her part-time job. When I first discovered those weren't just her indoor clothes, even I couldn't help but vocalize my surprise.

I shut the door and returned to the middle of the room.

But why did it have to be *yatsuhashi*? Come to think of it, these were the exact same *yatsuhashi* I had picked up the previous day for Tomo-chan's birthday. It was a terrifying co-incidence, but there it was.

"Well, whatever."

I stacked the two boxes and stuck them in the corner of the room.

Looking at the clock, I discovered is was several minutes past four.

Thirty minutes later, it was past 4:30.

"Well, duh," I said aloud and lay down on the floor.

Well now. Wasn't Mikoko-chan coming to pick me up at four? Of this I was certain. I may forget things, but I never misremember them. This meant Mikoko-chan had either gotten in an accident, gotten lost, or was just a sloppy person. But no matter which it was, there was nothing I could do right now.

"Time for some Eight Queens?"

Of course, there was nothing as extravagant as a chess-board in my room, so I'd just have to play it in my mind. The rules to Eight Queens were simple, and concise—just place eight queens on a chessboard so that none of them can capture any other. It's one of those "brain exercise" routines. I'd played the game quite a few times, so I basically knew the solution. But with my poor memory, I always forgot the exact arrangement, so I was able to enjoy the game every

single time I played it. Okay, not that it was really all that enjoyable. But it was a good way to kill some time.

I started strong, but the trouble set in around the fourth queen. The game was starting to lose its consistency. Queens just don't get along with other queens. There should never be more than one party in power. Moreover, if I allowed my thoughts to wander like this, I'd lose track of where I had put all the pieces up until now, and I'd have to start all over.

The thrill of sectioning off your mind like this was indescribable. You could say it was something like the feeling of walking on a balance beam, only the more pieces you placed down—that is, the closer you got to a final solution—the harder it became. In that sense, it was very much like a game, and great in that sense. In the case of failure, there was no one but yourself on whom to vent your anger, and herein lay the real thrill.

And just as I was trying to find the place for the seventh queen, there came a knock at my door and a cry of "Ikkun!"

The chessboard went flying. Queens everywhere.

For an instant, my heart, not to mention my thoughts, stopped.

I approached the door and swung it open. This time, it re-ally was Mikoko-chan. She wore a pink camisole with a red miniskirt, exposing a healthy and refreshing amount of skin.

"Morning!" she said with a wave. Then came the full-faced grin. "Ikkun, *guten morgen*!"

". . ."

". . ."

". . ."

"*Morgen* . . . *gen* . . . *gen* . . . It's like the Doppler effect or something." She was as spastic and smiley as I'd come to expect her to be. Her eyes drifted away from me off into space. "Umm, I was just wondering, and I know this isn't the kind of thing you would do, but . . . Are you mad or resentful or hate-filled or cursing my name or anything? Actually, cursing my name does seem kinda like something you'd do."

". . ."

"Come on, let's communicate! Hey! Don't be so quiet! When you get all quiet I feel like I'm about to have something terrible done to me!"

"Your palm," I said.

"Hm?"

"Hold the palm of your hand in front of your face like this."

"Okay . . ."

She did as told.

Smack! I smooshed her hand into her own face.

"Gwah!" she shrieked in unfeminine fashion. Satisfied for the time being, I went back inside to fetch my bag. Now where had I put those *yatsuhashi*?

"Uwa! You're terrible!" she said as she came into my room for some reason. "You're being violent with me just for being a *little bit* late? That's abuse, you know. It's like forming a jury-based judicial system, only all the jurors are O. J. Simpson!"

Apparently forty minutes late was only "a little bit late" in Mikoko-chan's mind. Without waiting for an invitation, she came into the middle of my room and took a seat on the floor. *Plop*. She scanned her surroundings with a look of true curiosity. "Oooooo," she sighed in awe. "Wow, there's nothing here. Amazing!"

"You know, that kind of compliment isn't particularly flattering."

"You really don't have a TV! You're like one of those struggling students from the good ol' days. I bet you study by the light of fireflies! Does anyone else live in this apartment?"

"Uh, well, there's one swordsman freeloader, one hermit, a fifteen-year-old and thirteen-year-old brother and sister currently running away from home, and then there's me, so that's four rooms and five people. Up until recently there was an aspiring singer here too, but she went to Tokyo to launch her major-label debut."

"Wow, so this place is kind of prosperous. Kind of a surprise. So I guess that means there's an open room here? Hmm. It does have a certain ambience, huh? Maybe I should move in!"

What could she have possibly seen in this apartment, in this room, that would've given her such an idea? "Better not," I said, giving her the appropriate advice. "Well, let's get going, huh?"

"Ah, not yet. It's still too early," she blurted out.

"But won't it be bad if we don't leave soon? We're already pushing forty minutes here."

"No, we just have to be there by six. Tomo-chan's apartment isn't far from here, so even if we leave at five thirty we'll have plenty of time to get there."

"Oh really?"

“Really,” she said with an index finger thrust skyward. It was hard to deny the adorableness of her grandiose gesticulations, but it didn’t seem like the thing I needed to go out of my way to mention, so I didn’t. I didn’t want to get her all excited.

“Then why did you say four o’clock?”

“Huh? Oh, that. Well, you know. Ehh, I’m not so great with time. It was just in case, just in case.”

“You mean there was a chance you might have been an hour and a half late?”

Just thinking about it made me feel like blood might shoot out of my ears.

“Huh?” she said, peeping at my face to catch my expression. “What’s the matter?” she asked cheerfully.

“Nothing. I’m not thinking about anything. I’m definitely not thinking about how you should maybe consider the feelings of the person waiting for you to arrive. Or how you should stick to the time that *you* designated. Or how you should at least call if you’re going to be late. Or how you should take better care of chessboards.”

“Chessboards?” She scratched her head.

Naturally she wasn’t supposed to understand that.

I found the *yatsuhashi* lying in the corner of the room and cut the seal on one of the boxes. I placed it in front of her.

“Can I eat ’em?”

“Sure.”

I stood up and made my way over to the sink. I thought to boil some water for team, but I didn't have a kettle. I thought of using a hot pot, but I had no burner in any case. So I just poured her a cup of tap water and placed it in front of her.

Looking thoroughly baffled, she glanced at the liquid thrust before her, but then pretended not to see it and didn't bother touching it.

She chowed down enthusiastically on the *yatsuhashi*. "Asking this might be one of those things and all, but are you poor, by any chance?"

"No, I'm not particularly strapped for funds."

Living in an apartment like this, I had no evidence to sup-port this statement, but it was the truth. At the very least, I had enough money saved up to pay for your years of college without lifting a single finger. Technically it wasn't money I had earned personally, but it was in my possession.

"I guess you're sort of an economist then, huh? Or is it a philosopher?"

"I'm just bad at spending money. Sort of the opposite of a shopaholic."

I helped myself to some *yatsuhashi* as I spoke. She gave me a halfhearted nod of comprehension.

As she knelt on the straw-matted floor of my room, I stared at her from top to bottom. Huh. Not that I was thinking anything in particular, but there was something very awkward about having her sitting here in the middle of my room. I don't know if you would call it unnatural or risqué, but something about it felt incredibly iffy.

I stood up.

“Huh? Where ya going? We’ve still got an extra forty minutes.”

“Forty minutes is just a ‘little bit,’ right?”

“Ahh! Ikkun, that’s the kind of thing a big jerko would say!” she said, recoiling overzealously. “You don’t have to hold it against me forever!”

“I’m just joking. Let’s go get a light lunch somewhere. It’s no fun just picking at each other in this empty room.”

I hoisted my bag over my shoulder and headed toward the door.

“Aww, that’s not true,” she mumbled as she followed me.

2

Tomo-chan resided in a students-only apartment complex near Nishiôji Maruta-machi. Just looking at that steel-reinforced, concrete exterior, I could imagine the difference in rent from my own place. Five times as much, or even ten if you got swindled.

Mikoko-chan must have been there before, because she entered the main lobby with an air of confidence. She pushed the room number on the intercom and pressed the call button.

“Yellooo! It’s Mikoko-cakes.”

“Yo-yo. C’mon up.”

As the somewhat drowsy voice emerged from the inter-com, the firmly locked glass door slid open. An autolock security system. Actually, maybe that’s too extravagant a term. Whether that lock was there or not made little difference to anyone trying to break in.

“Come on, hurry. Hurry hurry hurry hurry.” Mikoko-chan passed through the door and beckoned for me to hurry along. “Sixth floor,

sixth floor! We gotta hurry!"

"It's not like the sixth floor is going to get away."

"Yeah, but it won't come down to greet us either."

"That's true . . ."

I followed along as told.

"The sixth floor is the very top one. Tomo-chan lives in the corner apartment, and there's a pretty nice view, as views go."

"Mm, nice view, eh?"

That was one thing I never hoped to see where I was living. If you opened the window in my place, you got trees.

We called down the elevator and got in.

"I wonder if Akiharu-kun's here yet. Muimi-chan is pretty much a given, but . . ."

Mikoko-chan was incredibly excited. Seeing her carefree expression, even I couldn't help but think about how nice it must be to have friends. Whether or not it worked for me, it must've been very nice for her.

We got off at the sixth floor. Mikoko-chan raced down the hallway and stopped in front of the very last door. "Over here, over here!" she shouted and beckoned. It made me want to ask if she was just completely oblivious to the looks people gave her.

She pushed in the doorbell. *Ding-dong*. The door opened, and a girl revealed herself.

“Welcome,” the girl—most likely Tomo-chan—said drowsily, a cigarette hanging from her lips. She was entirely different than I had expected.

“So, Mikoko. On time for a change, eh?” She wore her long brown hair in a *sauvage*—with her hangs long and the rest cut at wildly varying lengths—and her fashion sense was impeccable: Her light jacket and jeans combo was very stylish. She was probably a little taller than me, and was so sickly thin that if she said she had only one day to live, I probably would have believed her. It was the perfect match for her slightly crooked smile.

“Howdy, Muimi-chan!” Mikoko-chan greeted. “Haro haro!”

It seemed this wasn’t Tomo-chan after all, but Muimi-chan. “Oops,” she said, finally noticing my presence. Without a hint of shyness, she gave me a hard study from top to bot-tom. “Maybe this is our first time talking, ‘Ikkun,’ “ she said with a smirk.

“Yeah,” I said apathetically. “Hey.”

It seemed my apathy had struck a chord with her. She let out an exaggerated laugh. It was boisterous, and not very feminine.

“Well how ‘bout that. You *are* an interesting guy. I think we’ll get along.”

“Really.” It was more of a sigh than a response. Not the kind of thing that warranted such judgment. It was just about as enthusiastic as my greeting had been. “I don’t think so.”

“Heh, well, we don’t have to get into all that. Just come in. Stupid Akiharu isn’t here yet. We just called and he was still at home.”

“Oh my God, he’ll never change. Last time he claimed he got confused by the time zone difference. That lousy tardy-man.”

Mikoko sure was throwing stones at the proverbial glass house. It was almost impressive. But I wasn't in the mood to start teasing her about it, so I stayed silent as I removed my shoes.

At the end of the short hallway between the kitchen and bathroom was a single door. It seemed this was one of those sectioned-off one-rooms. Muimi-chan went ahead of us and opened the door. The room inside was about eight or nine mats in size, but the floors were hardwood. By the window was a bed, and in the middle of the room, a mini-table covered with cake, snacks, and a row of empty glasses. So this was more of a drinks thing than a dinner-thing affair after all.

A girl was sitting daintily beside the table. This time it had to be Tomo-chan. She was even more petite then Mikoko-chan, and dressed in a strawberry-patterned one-piece. Her hair was in pigtails. She gave me a little wave.

She was just as shy as I'd imagined. And yet something about her made me think she probably had a bad habit or two. It was like there was more than meets the eye—as if her simplistic form prevented you from being able to see through her. Thinking about it made me feel as though someone had asked me for the sum of all integers.

"No, wait."

That's all nonsense. Everyone feels that way when they meet someone for the first time. It wasn't technically my first meeting with Tomo-chan, but I didn't really know her, so it was only natural that I had this impression.

Hmm. Come to think of it, it did seem as though we had crossed paths a few times in our general education seminar. I joined her at the table so that I was facing her, and tossed out a simple greeting. "Yo." She looked at me a little crookedly, then gave me a politely deep bow.

“Thanks for going to all this trouble. Sorry to ask such a big favor.” Her voice was pretty and calm, with a watery quality. “I’ve always wanted to have a chat with you, so I hope you have a good time today.”

I was a little moved by her good manners. It was some-thing I hadn’t seen much lately (especially in the last day or two).

“Ahahaha, quick to break the ice, eh?” Mikoko-chan said as she sat down next to me on her knees. Muimi-chan, in turn, sat down next to her. This allowed enough room for Akiharu-kun to eventually come sit between me and Tomo-chan.

“Ahhh.” Muimi-chan put out her cigarette with her own finger, then deposited it in an ashtray. “So what are we doing? We’ve got a brand-new guest here. Should we go ahead and start? It seems stupid to sit around wasting time just because of that asshead.”

“Hey, we can’t do that,” Mikoko-chan interjected. “For something like this we have to all be together! Right, Tomo-chan?”

“Yup, Mikoko’s right.” Tomo-chan nodded. “You know he’ll be here soon, so don’t be so impatient. Right?”

“I don’t really care, but…” Muimi-chan gestured towards me. “What about Ikkun here?”

“I don’t mind. I’m used to waiting.” To be sure, that didn’t mean I was used to people *making* me wait. But it would have been too much of a hassle to start an argument about it, so I just fed her an easy line.

Muimi shot me an inquisitive look, but “Well, whatever then,” was all she said. She pulled out a fresh cigarette, then shot me another look. “Are you an antitobacco kind of guy?” she asked.

“I don’t smoke myself, but you can smoke all you like.”

“Ah. No, I’m good.” She broke in half the cigarette she hadn’t even lit yet and deposited it in the ashtray. “I make it a point not to smoke around nonsmokers.”

“Huh.”

Did that mean Mikoko-chan and Tomo-chan were both smokers? The fact that she had asked only me seemed to indicate such. Huh. I was a little surprised.

“Hey! Muimi-chan, you’ll make me sound like a smoker if you put it like that!” Mikoko-chan objected once again. She was giving us the puppy-dog eyes. For some reason she seemed vehemently opposed to me finding out she was a smoker.

“But you do smoke.”

“No I don’t! I was just going with the flow that one time!”

“Ah, right. Gotcha. My fault, my fault.” Muimi-chan gave her a friendly pat as she threw her little tantrum. Meanwhile, Tomo-chan watched on in delight.

Huh. It didn’t take long to notice the dynamic here. It was the good girl, the bad girl, and the regular girl. This made me Wonder what Akiharu’s role was. He finally showed up at 6:30, half an hour late.

“Sorry, sorry. I thought I’d be here on time, but the train was crowded and stuff,” he said with good humor.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Tomo-chan said as she greeted him with a smile. The good girl.

“The train doesn’t arrive any later just because it’s crowd-ed! And you live in a boarding house, so you don’t even take the train anyway!”

Mikoko-chan, the regular girl. She had the nerve to question his lame excuses.

"You think you can get off with a simple apology? You gotta chug three beers," Muimi-chan said, passing a beer bottle over to him. The bad girl.

"Okay, okay. Don't rush me so much, Atemiya. This is a birthday, a *birthday*. Not a mayday. Goddamn I'm a clever bastard. What the . . . ?" It seemed he had noticed my presence. He gave a problem-child sneer. "Heh heh, so you really brought him, Aoii," he said.

He sat down next to me and said, "Well, good to meet you," with a slight bow.

I did likewise.

He had an easy-breezy air about him, with light brown hair and a taste for street fashion. Maybe it wasn't uncommon for a university student to dress like that, but at Rokumeikan in particular, it was kind of unusual. Judging from his build, it looked like he was involved in some kind of sport, but I couldn't tell which one.

"Umm, what do I . . . wha? Are we all supposed to just call you Ikkun then?"

"I don't mind."

"Really, really? Gotcha. You're a good guy. Don't you think so, Aoii?"

He shot Mikoko-chan a meaningful look. She shot back a flustered one. "Oh, uh, yeah." Judging from her response, it didn't seem like she thought I was a very good guy at all. Of course, considering how much I made fun of her, that was probably only natural.

“Well, shall we start?” Muimi-chan said. She seemed to be the leader of the four. She pointed at me. “Umm, you don’t drink, right?” she said.

I nodded.

“Oh? What’s this now, Ikkun? You can’t go around being finicky all the time, you know. Alcohol is a vital component in man-to-man interactions after all, right? I mean, am I right or am I right?”

“Akiharu! What did I tell you about pushing your bullshit opinions on others?! I’ll fucking kill you!” Muimi-chan gave him the look of death. Her cool, almost dazed demeanor from a moment ago had sharpened into a knife of fury. “Did you already forget what I told you last time? Huh?”

Akiharu quivered and tensed with fear. “Uh . . .”

“I’m not lookin’ for an ’uhhh.’ ”

“Sorry.”

“Not lookin’ for a ‘sorry’ either. Why the hell are you apologizing to *me*? Huh?”

Akiharu-kun’s mouth opened and closed like he was a suffocating fish. Then he looked over at me. “Please forgive me,” he apologized.

“Okay, then,” Muimi-chan said with a look of satisfaction. “Sorry there, Ikkun. He didn’t mean anything by it. Forgive the guy, will ya?” She had completely returned to her original self and smiled back at me. “Did he piss you off?”

“Uh, I don’t really care.”

Atemiya Muimi. She was definitely an ex-delinquent. No, not *even* an "ex." I *thought* that brown *sauvage* seemed a little out of date.

Maybe I should call her Boss.

Meanwhile, Mikoko-chan poured some low-malt beer into each glass and lined them up in front of everyone. She also placed a single glass of oolong tea in front of me.

"So who's going to lead the proceedings? Shall it be Tomo-chan, our queen for a day?"

"Yeah, I believe it shall," Muimi-chan said. "Tomo, let's have it."

Tomo-chan raised her glass a bit reluctantly. "Okay then. To my twentieth birthday and our new friend."

Cheers.

I lightly tipped my glass.

3

"So the thing about friends is that they're like, eh, you know, like . . . y'know," Zerozaki said with a cynical smile. The tattoo scrawled across the right side of his face wrinkled unpleasantly.

"What do you think?"

"You're actually asking me? I thought this was going to be some kind of spiel."

"Hah, don't expect me to do everything. They say if you want to figure out your own opinion, you gotta ask others theirs, right? So let's hear it. What do you think? What is a friend?"

“It’s not such a hard question. It's just someone you hang out with, have meals with, joke around about stupid things with. Someone who brings you peace. That kind of thing, right?” he said.

“You got it. Exactamundo. If you look at it that way, friends are such a simple thing, man, like pie. You hang out, you eat together, act stupid and feel peaceful together, and that makes you friends. If you come to each other’s rescue, you’re *close* friends. If you smooch each other sometimes, you're lovers. Oh, what a treasure of life friendship is!” he said with a sneer.

“So the question here is, how long do these friendships last? A year? Five years? Ten years? Forever? Until tomorrow?”

“Is your point that even friendships come to an end?”

“My point is that *all* things come to an end.”

“Well, sure. But without endings, there could be no beginnings. That’s the vital subtext. If you’re looking to gain some-thing, you’ve got to be prepared to sacrifice one-third of it. If you want a payoff, you've got to take a risk. If you can’t do that, you’re better off just living with what you’ve got.” “Gahaha. I guess you must be that type.”

I had no need for things I would just lose in time. If it was just going to end anyway, it didn’t have to begin. I had no need for pleasure if it came accompanied by pain.

“Why? Are you any different?” I said.

If it meant never being sad, I didn’t have to be happy.

If it meant never fading, I didn’t have to succeed.

Evolution loaded with risk was a waste of time.

“Eh, but in reality, that's all true whether you’re after something or not,” I said.

“No doubt.”

Zerozaki laughed. I didn’t.

Be that as it may.

Three hours had passed since the party began. I won’t get into what happened during those three hours. Nobody particularly wants others to see what they’re like when they’re drunk, and they certainly don’t want to have the details relayed from person to person.

No matter how people feel while they’re drinking, it’s inevitable afterward that good old shame comes to pay them a visit. It's difficult to determine which is real: the person you are under the influence of alcohol, or the person you are when you’re sober. But one thing's for sure: A wild night spent in good fun isn’t something you want to try to recount later on. It’s one of those “unpaintable scenes” like Urashima Tarô talked about.

Still, if I were to dare to share a little vignette of the evening’s festivities just for kicks, it would go something like this:

“So whaddaya call a rock made of oxygen and nitrogen?”

“Quartz! Gaaahahahaha!”

“That’s like a two-hundred shot barrage from a water-cooled heavy machine gun, only it’s an assassin squad!”

“Shit, that aside, it’s *hot* today. Why is it so hot in the middle of May? Is it global warming? Is it the greenhouse effect?”

“What?! Listen here, chump, if you want to complain about the summer heat, you answer to *me*! Bring it!”

“Are you the one they caught in *Catcher in the Rye*?!”

“It's a tropical night, that's what it is.”

“Then I guess that makes me a tropical fish!”

And so three hours passed.

At present, Mikoko-chan, Akiharu-kun, and Tomo-chan were playing PS2. It looked like a racing game. Realistically depicted four-wheeled machines sped around the narrow on-screen circuit.

Huh. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it tantalizing, but there was something rather pleasant about watching them all so fully immersed in their fun. It looked like they were willing to share some of that happiness with me, and somehow that made me surprisingly lonely.

“Well, I guess even this is—”

Someone slapped me on the shoulder. It was Muimi-chan. Apparently a heavy drinker, she didn’t seem any different from when she was sober, even from a bystander’s point of view.

She didn’t call herself Boss for nothing. Not that she called herself Boss at all.

“Wanna go outside for a bit?” she said, pointing toward the entrance. “Let’s go to the convenience store.”

“What about Mikoko-chan and the others?”

“We can just let ’em be. They don’t know what’s going on right now anyway.”

She was right about that. I nodded and left the room with her. We got back into the elevator, traveled down to the first floor, and exited the building.

“Is the convenience store close by?”

“Eh, it’s a bit of a walk. But c’mon, let's walk a little bit. It’ll help me sober up.”

“You don’t really seem drunk though.”

“Maybe not on the surface, but I’m pretty far gone. It feels like my brain’s flipped upside down so my cerebrum and cerebellum are switched. Right now I wanna kick the crap outta that sign.”

“Just don’t kick the crap out of me.”

“I’ll try,” she said with a little laugh. She shook her head and looked up toward the sky.

“Doesn’t really feel like a birthday party,” I said. “I wonder if this is really enough to make Tomo-chan happy. She’s still drunk now, but I wonder if she’ll get depressed about it later.”

“Yeah, I wonder . . . But it’s still better than being depresssed from the very beginning. Yeah. It’s all good. You don’t need a good reason to get wild. Ahh . . . I’m groggy.”

“You look pretty exhausted, Muimi-chan.”

“Well, that’s what I get for hanging out with those guys.”

My sentiments exactly. Mikoko-chan was spunky enough to begin with, but when she was inebriated she was four times as bad. Then there was Akiharu-kun, and even Tomo-chan was getting pretty rowdy.

“Man, if you think about it, I guess being able to hold your liquor so well puts you at kind of a disadvantage. It must be hard to follow along with the mood.”

“Exactly. I mean, it’s still fun, so it’s no big deal.”

“You think it’s okay to leave those three drunks in a room unattended?”

“They’re not kids. They’ll be fine. Actually, it's probably more dangerous to be walking around outside in the middle of the night,” she said.

A good point. We were in the midst of the Kyoto Slasher serial murders. So that was why she bothered taking me along with her. I may look scrawny and unreliable, but I’m still a guy, in a manner of speaking.

“What a messed-up world, huh? What could be enjoyable about chopping up a human being?”

“Well, different strokes, I guess.” I tried to brush off the topic. If I was thrust into a conversation about it, there was a chance I would let my tongue slip. It wasn’t that Zerozaki had told me to keep my mouth shut, but it sure wasn’t the kind of thing I wanted everyone and their mother to know about.

“I can’t understand it at all,” she said. “I mean, I’ve been around for twenty years now. Even I’ve thought to myself before, ‘I oughta kill that bastard.’ Actually, it happens a lot. Even nowadays. Like, ‘this person would be better off dead. Killing him would serve the greater good.’ ”

“. . . .”

“But what's up with these *random* killings? I can’t under-stand the idea of finding pleasure in the act of killing itself.”

“In general, they say serial killers who choose their targets at random are fueled by resentment. So it’s just like when you say to yourself, ‘I oughta kill that bastard,’ ” I said.

“Really? But then the killings aren’t random.”

“It’s a little different, though. In this killer’s case, he resents the victims simply because they happened to walk by. He resents the world as a whole. He hates the world that surrounds him, a world that, for him, is as vague and nebulous as the air. And so his killings *appear* to be random.”

“Hmm . . .” She nodded, but to be honest, I was only speculating. I had no idea why he was committing acts of murder. We had only talked about stupid, irrelevant things the previous night, and never touched upon the topic of his motives.

We were probably saving the best for last, childish as that may sound.

“It’s just nonsense, though,” I said.

Muimi-chan scratched her head at me.

While we were talking, we eventually reached the convenience store. She entered ahead of me and quickly made her way to the liquor section.

“You're buying more alcohol?”

“Nah, there’s already plenty of that. Let’s get some Pocari. Gotta sober those guys up or they won’t be able to get home.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

We put three two-liter bottles of Pocari sports drinks in a basket, picked out two or three types of snacks, and proceeded to settle up at the register. Maybe I should've expected this, but I ended up carrying everything.

As we left the store, Muimi-chan pulled a cigarette from her pocket, stuck it in her mouth, and lit it with a cool-looking Zippo, all in one fluid motion.

"Ah!" she said and immediately went to extinguish it with her finger.

"I don't care if you smoke one. We're outside, anyway."

"Really?"

"Well, I guess it's rude to smoke and walk at the same time, but since it's night and nobody's around, it's probably fine as long as you don't litter ashes everywhere." And, indeed, there was no one around who'd object to her blowing smoke everywhere as she walked.

"Well . . . nah, it's okay. I'll stick to my decision." She went ahead and snuffed it with her finger. Then she curled up the cigarette butt and put it in her pocket. It seemed she wasn't the littering type. I was a little impressed: For a college student, she had above-average morals.

"If you don't mind my asking, isn't that hot?" I said.

"Not really. I'm used to it," she said with a slightly bashful smile. "There was this Mafia boss bad guy in a movie I used to like, and he did the same thing with cigars. With the palm of his hand, like this. It was cool, so I started imitating it."

"Huh."

"Looking back, I just thought the actor was hot, but it's a habit now. Anyway, that aside . . . Ikkun, let's talk seriously for a minute." Her

expression immediately grew serious, changing as abruptly as a circuit switch. I couldn't help but be a little surprised. "It's pretty tough keeping up with Mikoko's hyperness, huh?"

"Not particularly."

"Huh," she said. Her expression grew all the more serious. She hesitated for a moment. "What do you think of her?" she asked me.

"What do I think?"

Judging from her expression, she wasn't looking for some halfhearted bullshit answer.

But I couldn't figure out what that question was supposed to mean. I didn't really think much of *anything* about her.

"Well, I think she's got a little bit of red in her hair. She's around five feet tall, and may or may not weigh as much as one hundred ten. From the way she acts, I'd guess she's a type B, and her astrological sign is probably one of the beasts. She's got a kind of koalaish feel in general."

"Did you really think I was looking for a half-assed answer like that?" she asked.

Whoops. Delinquent mode. Why oh why do I so love step-ping on land mines, I wondered. I broke eye contact with her.

"I dunno. I mean, she's a nice girl, I guess. Sure she's a little overly hyper, which can be exhausting, but I know a girl who's even worse than her, so it doesn't particularly bother me."

"Huh. How neutral of you."

"Well, I don't like making waves."

“Is that a fact?”

She paused for a moment, then gave me a sort of sidelong glance.

“You’re kind of a slimeball, aren’t you, Ikkun?” she said.

“I’m self-aware.”

“Self-aware, huh? I wonder. I wouldn’t know. Anyway, let me give you a word of advice.” She took a step ahead and turned to face me directly. I had no choice but to stop. The apartment building was still about a hundred feet away. Surely the others were still inside racing. Muimi-chan ran her fingers through her *sauvage* hair and shot me a direct glare.

“Mikoko and I have been friends since we were just little brats.”

“Huh.”

“If you hurt her, I’ll never forgive you.”

I scratched my head a bit. Why was she telling me this? Could it be that she was mad because of all the times I had teased Mikoko-chan up to now? It didn’t seem like the kind of thing to take so seriously, but Muimi-chan sure didn’t seem to be joking, so I answered with a shrug.

“It’s okay. Despite how it seems, I’m actually nice to my friends.”

She blinked her narrowed eyes at me. “Hahahahaha!” she laughed. A moment later, she spun back around. “I stand corrected.” She recommenced walking. “You're just clueless.”

It felt like a terrible insult, but at the same time, it was probably the most accurate description anyone had ever applied to me in all my nineteen years, so it was hard to get mad.

We returned to the room to find that the others were in-deed still racing. Surprisingly, Tomo-chan was apparently the most skilled. Mikoko-chan was a lap behind.

“Yo! Guzzle down this Pocari, you goons! You drunken bitches!”

For some reason Muimi-chan had suddenly gone berserk, smacking the “drunken bitches” in the heads with Pocari. Being hit in the head with a full plastic bottle should have been fairly painful, but they were so thoroughly numb with drink they didn’t even seem to mind.

I don’t like noisiness. I hate boisterousness. Loud situations irritate me.

But on occasion, like maybe once a year, maybe these things are kind of nice. Or so I thought.

I was wrong.

4

It was past eleven p.m.

“Well, thanks for tonight,” Muimi-chan said as she rose to her feet. “Akiharu, take me home.”

“Aw, why?” Akiharu whined. He shot her an aggravated look; he was sprawled out in the comer of the room. “Just go yourself. I’m gonna rest a little before I go. Your place is far. My place is in the opposite direction.”

“Are you a man? Don’t tell me you’re not even worth a ride home.”

“Tch . . . fine.”

He stood up, still looking aggrieved, as if he knew there was no point in objecting. His eyes shifted over to Tomo-chan. “Well, here's your birthday present,” he said, pulling a package out of his bag.

“Ah . . . Muimi-chan said. “That’s right, you give *presents* on birthdays . . .”

“Hm? What’s that you say? What? Come again, Atemiya-san?” Akiharu-kun said with the glee of someone who had just defeated an ogre. “Don’t tell me that you forgot to get your dear friend a birthday present! Oh my goodness, I cannot believe it! Is this a joke?! Ohh, what to do, what to do?! For the love of God, tell me, what to do?! Huh? Huh?”

“Cram it, oaf. Isn’t my smile enough?” Muimi-chan said sulkily and headed toward the entrance.

“Hey, wait up! Don’t get mad so easily! What are you, a kid?! Ahh, here we go. See ya at school, Emoto! Adieu! Let’s hang out again soon, Ikkun!” Akiharu-kun gave a light wave and chased after Muimi-chan.

“Bye-bye. See ya again,” Tomo-chan said as she waved sluggishly back. As soon as the two had left, her hands went for the present. She undid the ribbon and neatly opened the wrapping paper.

“I wonder what it is. Ikkun, what do you think it is?” It seemed the alcohol was mostly out of her system. Her cheeks still had a bit of red in them and her voice was a little shrill, but her personality seemed to have returned to its default setting. “I’m a little excited. This kind of thing always makes me giddy.”

“Well, it’s probably not *yatsuhashi*, at any rate,” I said. Incidentally, the *yatsuhashi* I had brought had already been evenly divided among the

stomachs of all five party members. “Judging from the size, it's probably an accessory or some-thing.”

“Yeah, maybe. Oh, it’s a neckstrap. Pretty cool, huh?”

It was a capsule-style neckstrap with a liquid center. It didn’t really look like a girly item, but as Tomo-chan had said, it was pretty cool.

“Heheheh, it’s just what I was hoping for,” she said glee-fully as she immediately tried it on. “How does it look, Ikkun?”

“It’s a good match,” I said, but I didn’t really know.

My eyes made their way from the gushing Tomo-chan over to Mikoko-chan, who was snoozing in the comer. She looked so peaceful that I couldn’t bear to wake her. Perhaps she was planning to just spend the night at Tomo-chan's place.

“Hey, Ikkun,” Tomo-chan said, suddenly straightening her-self out. “I want to say thanks again for coming all the way out here today.”

“I don’t think it’s the kind of thing you have to thank me for.”

“But you don’t like doing this kind of thing, right?”

Her question was a little awkward, but it also came out as if it was something totally normal to her. She delicately raised her face to view my expression.

It was like . . .

She was looking *through* me.

Like she was looking at my brain from the inside.

“Uh, no, I . . .”

“You don’t like opening up to other people, right?”

“It's all right. I don’t hate it. I actually kind of like goofing around with everyone like chums.”

“That’s a lie.”

“It’s the truth.”

“It’s a lie.”

“Yes, it is.”

She snickered at me. But her eyes weren’t smiling. They actually looked rather sad and lonely. The strange combination of expressions had me puzzled.

What was wrong? What reason could she have for looking so sad when she had spent her birthday surrounded by friends?

There shouldn’t have been anything wrong.

Supposing there was . . .

“Mikoko-chan . . .” she said, casting a glance over at the slumbering Mikoko-chan. “She’s really a great girl.”

“Yeah,” I responded. I was being unusually direct—by my standards, anyway. “I bet she is.”

“I wanted to be like her.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But I couldn’t.”

“Uh-huh.”

She cast her eyes downward.

“And now here I am, twenty years old, still unable to be like her. I’m sure it’ll go on like that. No matter how many years pass, no matter how many decades. I’ll never be like her, until the day I die.”

“What’s wrong with that? Everyone’s different.”

“Say, Ikkun,” she said, looking up again. “Have you ever felt like, as a human, you’re damaged goods?”

I had no idea how to respond.

“I have.” She was smiling. It was the saddest smile I had ever seen.

“Everybody does . . .” The words just came out. Whether they were really from the heart, I didn’t know. They were just words of comfort. I was probably just saying words I didn’t really mean so as to not have to see Tomo-chan look so sad.

What a slimeball.

How comical.

How terribly unseemly.

“Everyone feels like that sometimes, I suppose. Nobody’s perfect, after all. We’ve all got our strong points and our weak points. That’s what makes us human.”

“Yeah, I know. Even I know that, but you probably under-stand that that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about something more finite, I guess, or more lethal, like a fatal wound, I guess.”

Boom.

The words shook me.

“It’s kind of like that.”

“. . . .” So this was the real reason I couldn’t read Emoto Tomoe very well. *Perhaps this was really it.*

In other words, a long time ago . . .

“There’s another me right here,” she said, pointing over her own right shoulder. “When I get all rowdy and have fun with Muimi-chan and Akiharu-kun and Mikoko-chan and you like this, that part of me is just watching on, sighing. It’s looking down on me with cold disdain as I have my fun, saying ‘What you’re doing won’t amount to anything.’ ”

“Sighing,” she said. “I know I’ll probably never be like Mikoko-chan until the day I die, but maybe I’ll be able to once I really do die. If I’m reincarnated, I want to come back as Mikoko-chan. I want to be able to laugh with complete innocence like her, to get mad when I want to be mad, to cry like crazy when I’m sad. That’s what makes a great life.”

“I . . .” This time I was speaking from the heart. “I don’t want to be reincarnated. I want to just hurry up and die.”

“I’ll bet,” she said with a gentle smile.

…

Mikoko-chan woke up around one hour later.

“Uhhh.” She shook the sleep out of her head. She still looked pretty tired.

“So what’re you going to do?” I said. “I’m going home. Are you going to stay the night?”

“No, I’ll go . . .” She rose to her feet in a daze. “It's okay, I've sobered up. Give me ten more seconds.”

“Sure. I’ll take you home, then.” I was at least worth a ride home, I wanted to emphasize, but she didn’t seem to get it. She had been deeply immersed in sleep when Muimi-chan left, so that made sense.

“Well, bye-bye, Tomo-chan.”

“Yep. See ya later.” She gave a little wave.

I took my bag and headed toward the entrance. I sat down in the doorway and put on my shoes. They had messy laces, so putting them on was always much more of a hassle than re-moving them. Situations like these were an irritating waste of time. Meanwhile, Mikoko-chan seemed to be having problems with her own footwork, and a clumsy clopping noise could be heard through the door separating us.

It probably wasn’t something to worry about. She appeared in the hallway outside the entrance shortly after me.

“Ohh,” she moaned, rubbing her head. “My head hurts . . . It’s spinning. It's like a murder at a convenience store, only the murderer is wearing Rollerblades.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying. Are you sure you don’t want to stay here for the night? There’s no need to overexert yourself.”

“It’s okay, I can go.”

She hobbled down the hall on unsteady feet. I gave a shrug and followed after her.

“So did you have fun?” she said once we were out of the building.

“Eh, I guess. But I think I'll pass next time.”

“Don’t say that. Let’s do it again! With everyone! When’s your birthday?”

“March.”

She looked defeated. “Mine’s in April. Ohh, I guess I should’ve invited you sooner.”

“So where’s your place? I’ll take you back.”

“Near Horikawa. Horikawa Oike. But we’ve got to go to your place first.”

“Why?”

“My scoot . . .”

Come to think of it, she had come as far as my place on her bike.

“Can you drive?”

“Sure . . .”

‘Okay then.” Obviously she was in no condition to drive, but if she said she could drive, who was I to stop her? When the time came, she could just call a taxi if she had to.

We took Nishiôji Street up to Nakadachiuri and broke east, when for some reason, David Bowie music started playing from somewhere. Thinking it was a nearby guerrilla concert, I was a bit taken aback, but it turned out to be Mikoko-chan's ringtone.

“Hm?” She pulled her phone out of her purse. “Hello? This is Mikoko-chan, the spunky and energetic girl of Lake Ashi! Hm? What? Tomo-chan?” It seemed it was a call from Tomo-chan. “Yeah. Yeah . . . Yeah,

he's here with me right now. He's walking right in front of me. Sure, I guess. Okay, I'll pass it over."

She passed me the phone. "It's Tomo-chan. She wanted me to give you the phone."

"Me? Why?"

". . . . ?"

I must have forgotten something at her place. I scratched my head as I took the phone. It was more than a little smaller than my own phone, so it felt kind of awkward.

"Hello?"

". . . ."

"Hello?"

"Ikkun."

A voice.

It was quivering, like she was afraid of something. It could've been partially the phone's fault, but something in her voice was obviously different from when we had spoken moments earlier at her place.

"Tomo-chan?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong? Did I forget something? I've got my bag here."

"No, it's not that. Um . . . I forgot to tell you something earlier."

Forget to tell me something?

“Yeah, what?”

“Never mind. See you.”

Click.

Suddenly the call was cut off. *Beeeep*. *Beeeep*. *Beeeep*. *Beeeep*. After four rings, I took the phone away from my ear. I scratched my head, stared at it for another three seconds, then handed it back to Mikoko-chan. “Thanks.”

“Sure,” she said, taking it. “So what’d she say?”

“Nothing. I don’t know what that was about.”

“Huh?”

She gave me a confused expression, but I was the one who was confused. Tomo-chan wanted to tell me something? Why would she start and then stop like that?

“What? I wonder what it was. Maybe it was a secret or something. Did you guys have some kind of secret talk?”

“No, nothing like that, but . . . oh yeah, Mikoko-chan.” I switched trains of thought. “Is there somebody right here?” I said, drawing a circle with my finger over her right shoulder.

“Huh?”

She raised a dubious eyebrow at me. Naturally.

“I mean, do you get the feeling someone is right there, looking down on you?” I asked.

“I don’t think so, but . . . why?”

“Eh, if you don’t feel it then don’t worry about it.”

“If somebody was there, it'd be pretty scary,” she said as she imagined it. “But as for in here,” she said, pointing to her own heart, “there is somebody.”

Huh. I nodded. Judging from her bashful smirk, she must have been talking about her boyfriend.

In about ten more minutes, we had arrived at my apartment. In the apartment parking lot, there was only a single bike, so it must have been hers.

“Whoa, it’s a Vespa.” And a white vintage model, no less.

This girl called her Vespa a “scooter”? A Vespa is a Vespa, and only a Vespa. Calling it a scooter was, to me, an insult. And not just your everyday insult—it was the *ultimate* insult, which threatened to shake my very existence. Everyone has one thing that they’d sacrifice their own life for, that they'd trade the world for, and to me, this was that thing. I wanted to shout at Mikoko-chan. I angrily turned to face her.

“. . . .”

She was sleeping.

“I’m speechless.”

She was sleeping standing up. She had been awfully quiet for a while. Was it possible that she had been sleepwalking? She probably had been. This was the power of the human race pushed to its absolute limit. I gave her a few taps on the cheek, but she refused to wake up. I had the urge to start stretching her face, but it seemed that there would be no way to explain my way out of it if somebody happened to see us, so I restrained myself.

“I wonder if I could just leave her here . . .”

If not, there were only two options.

“Hup,” I groaned as I lifted her onto my back. She stirred a little bit on the way, but didn’t wake up. Likely because she was so short, she was actually quite light. Or maybe all girls were like this.

With her still on my back, I entered the apartment, then made my way up the stairs to the second floor. I clomped my way down the boarded hallway to the room next to my own.

I knocked lightly.

“Yeah, wait one moment,” an answer came from inside. Miiko-san soon appeared before us. She was dressed in yet a different set of Japanese summer casual wear, which was red this time. I was pretty sure this was the outfit with the word *Treachery* printed on the back.

“Yes?” she said, eyeing the girl on my back suspiciously. “You’re still under legal age, right?” she said after a moment's thought. “Well, of course I'll let you hide out here, but speaking purely out of kindness, I suggest you just turn yourself in. Japan has a pretty capable police force. Not likely that you’ll be able to escape.”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that this time. Er, this girl’s a class-mate. Looks like she drank too much and passed out. Would you be willing to let her spend the night?”

“Huh?” She put her hand to her chin and thought for a moment. “Why don’t you just put her up yourself?”

“Eh, but I mean, as you can see, she's a girl. And it sounds like she’s got a boyfriend, so I can’t just have her sleeping over in my place, right?”

“Huh. Well, if that’s how it is, I guess I don’t mind. But what is given today I will one day receive. To ignore thanks where they’re due is a dastardly deed.”

“I gotcha. Want to go antiquing again?”

“Yes. Okay then. So what’s this girl’s name?”

“Mikoko-chan. Er, last name is Aoi, I think.”

“Aoi Mikoko? Heh, strange name,” Miiko-san said, taking Mikoko-chan from me. Everyone should have a neighbor as dependable as her.

“Well, I’ll be on my way then.”

“Mm. Get some sleep. You’d best not make yourself out to be some afternoon-sleeping lollygagger.”

“Huh? I never sleep in the afternoon.”

“Is that so? Well, just forget that then. Good night.”

“Good night.”

I bowed and returned to my room, where I laid down my futon and curled up on it.

“Time to sleep.”

And so the day ended. Saturday, May fourteenth. No, it had already passed zero o'clock, so it was Sunday the fifteenth. So at zero o'clock twenty-four hours later, it would be the sixteenth. The next zero o’clock would be the seventeenth.

Zero o’clock.

Zerozaki.

Wondering if that human failure was currently killing his seventh person or had perhaps already dismembered his eighth, the damaged goods gradually fell into a slumber.

Emoto Tomoe,

classmate.

3

THE AGE OF THE CLAIRVOYANT MAN

The Murderer

No more.
I don't want to think anymore.

1

When I awoke to a knocking at the door, it was already past eight o'clock.

I brushed the hair out of my face with both hands and rose to my feet.

"Uhhh."

I opened the door to find Mikoko-chan. Her usual hyper greeting had been replaced with a shy look of apologetic embarrassment.

"Did I wake you?" she said meekly.

"Eh. It was time to wake up anyway," I answered as I stretched out. "Morning, Mikoko-chan."

"Good morning, Ikkun. Um . . . I'm sorry about yesterday. I sort of, er . . . it looks like I fell asleep."

"Eh, forget about it. Just be sure to thank Miiko-san."

“Ah, right.” She nodded after a moment of ambiguous hesitation.

“Isn’t she a good person?”

“Well, yeah, she is, huh? Kind of cool, I guess you could say. So is she the ‘swordswoman freeloader’ you were talking about?”

“Does she look like a thirteen-year-old little sister?”

“No, I guess not.” She awkwardly broke eye contact with me and gave a brief pause. “I don’t know if it’s because she practices sword fighting, but her clothes were kind of weird. Sort of Japanesey, but like the kind of thing you’d wear to a festival.”

“You mean her *jinbei*?”

“A djembe? What’s that?” Evidently Mikoko-chan had never heard of it. “Oh, you mean like a *jinbei* shark?”

“Uhh, well, yeah. Have you ever seen the pattern on the back of a *jinbei* shark? It’s just like they’re wearing that same type of clothing. So we ended up naming that kind of Japanese clothing *jinbei*, after the shark.”

“Ahh. You sure know a lot, Ikkun,” she said. “I’ll have to teach that to Tomo-chan and the others.”

Yep. And if Tomo-chan and the others weren’t as cruel as me, they would probably teach her the truth. Why did I tell such meaningless lies? Perhaps it was time I gave that some serious thought.

“So anyway,” Mikoko-chan said, changing the subject. “Are you and that girl—Asano-san—are you two close?”

“She’s saved me from starvation a few times. But then I saved her from being crushed under a pile of antiques, so we’re even Steven.

Those *yatsuhashi* you had yesterday were from her too."

"Huh," she said with a complicated expression. "You know, I don't really like *yatsuhashi*."

"Huh? Oh, you don't say."

"Too sweet."

"Huh. Miiko-san likes sweet stuff."

"Well, I don't."

For some reason she was getting a little serious. I scratched my head at her, not sure where she was going with this.

"Well, that's fine. So what are you going to do now?" I said.

"Oh, er, I've got this," she said, pulling a pink, wrapped present from her purse. "It's Tomo-chan's birthday present. Forgot to give it to her. Big mistake, huh? I should've given it to her before we all got drunk. I got carried away trying to get things going."

"Hm. Well, why not go give it to her now? She should be home."

"Yup, that's the plan." At last, she showed her trademark smile. "Well, thank you. Let's get together again."

"We'll see."

"Why do you say stuff like that?! Let's do something!"

"Just kidding. Fine by me. If I've got time, I'll spend as much of it with you as you want, so please invite me again," I said.

I only said it to be polite, but seeing Mikoko-chan's face light up, the guilt kicked in. Thinking she'd probably burst into tears or rage if I

said “just kidding” again, I just said, “See you next time,” instead.

She gave a big, energetic nod and spun on her heels.

Something came to mind. “Hey, Mikoko-chan. Let me just say one more thing.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Call a Vespa a Vespa. Calling it a *scoot* is just offensive, so knock it off.”

“Wow, Ikkun giving an order?! It’s like a first-rate school where you can wear your own clothes, but all the students show up in uniforms anyway!”

“You got it or not?”

“Wow, you’re as scary as Muimi-chan . . .”

She seemed to seriously be a little scared. But I had to say it firmly or she wouldn’t get it.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll be careful from now on.” She made her way down the hall. When she reached the comer, she turned back around. “Hey! I’ve got something I want to say to you too!”

“Huh? What?”

She took a big breath. “My last name is Aoii! Not Aoi! I told you not to forget!”

I wanted to tell her I knew that, but then I realized that I had introduced her to Miiko-san as “Aoi Mikoko.” Miiko-san was the kind of person who was hard to correct once certain information had entered her brain (thanks to me, she still believed Shakespeare was a

flavor of a McDonald's McShake), so she had probably spent the morning calling her "Aoi" over and over. Well, maybe not that many times.

To me it didn't seem like the difference between Aoi and Aoii was such a big deal, but I decided that was probably fairly rude. Japanese are as proud of their last names as Italians.

"Okay. I won't forget again. I promise."

"Okay then. Also . . ." She turned halfway back around. "I don't have a boyfriend," she said softly, then quickly made her way down the stairs as if trying to escape.

"Huh?" I probably looked more than a little confused.

Er . . .

What was that about?

She had probably heard that from Miiko-san as well. I did seem to remember having that kind of conversation with her. Something about Mikoko-chan not being able to stay in my room because she had a boyfriend. But Miiko-san, she . . .

"I don't go around regurgitating every little detail like that."

Whoa. At some point she had appeared in front of me.

"Looks like we've got a couple people yelling in this dilapidated apartment. Never mind that everyone can hear you from their rooms; if you shout like that, the whole building's gonna come down."

"Heh . . ."

“Now then, I have to go to work. Let’s hope that classmate of yours learns to mind her p’s and q’s,” she said, and shuffled her way down the hall. There was something frightening about the fact that *Rage* was written on the back of her blue *jinbei*. Maybe she and Mikoko-chan hadn’t gotten along so well. Their names were sort of similar and all.

But in that case, the name thing seemed kind of dubious.

“Maybe she was actually awake last night . . .”

Sleeping while standing up is one thing, but walking around while asleep isn’t all that easy. The power of the human race pushed to its absolute limit isn’t something you see every day. Maybe Mikoko-chan had actually been awake, how lucid she may or may not have been at the time notwithstanding. Maybe that was why she knew I had mistaken her name and said she had a boyfriend.

She probably just didn’t want to bother with making the trip home. But then she could’ve just said so without pretending she was asleep. Some people sure do strange things, I thought as I went back inside.

2

Now then.

It was precisely that evening when the story started getting altogether tiresome.

As I was alone in my room reading a fat book I had checked out from the school library, a wild knocking came at my door. Now, it’s only natural to be irritated when someone interrupts your valued quiet time like this, but having become rather accustomed to this kind of thing by now, I wasn’t particularly angry. Wondering if it was that

damned fifteen-year-old brother coming to ask for money again, I opened the door.

“Oh.”

It was an older guy and a girl I had never seen before.

There was something particularly peculiar about the guy. He was probably in his mid-to-late thirties, and not so much tall as long-legged. Moreover, he had his hair slicked back. Stranger still, even in this heat he was dressed in a black suit and tie. It was a disturbingly bizarre way to be dressed. He even had sunglasses on. If he had been a foreigner, I would’ve been afraid it was the MIB here to erase my memory.

The woman, on the other hand, was dressed in a slightly more normal suit and tight skirt. She had straight, black hair, and was relatively pretty. But the look in her eyes was not ordinary. Without a hint of the reservation normally expected when meeting someone for the first time, her eyes met mine with a penetrating, *gouging* gaze.

She took a step forward. “Have a look,” she said, flashing me a police badge. “I’m Sasa Sasaki of the Kyoto Police First Investigative Division.” It was the kind of name that threatened to make you bite your own tongue. Her parents must have been awfully whimsical.

“Oh. Hey.”

I gave a little head bob for the time being. The woman— Sasaki-san— seemed a bit surprised by my reaction. Maybe I should’ve shown more surprise myself, but it didn’t take more than a glance to tell that these two were obviously police officers. The thought of these two stone-faced individuals being anything other than police officers was, to me, unimaginable.

The male officer chuckled to himself a bit and showed his own badge, "Ikaruga Kazuhito from the same division. Mind if we come inside for a bit?" It was essentially coercion in the form of a question. As a kid, I naturally felt the urge to defy this coercion, but it didn't look like this Kazuhito-san would let it fly.

"Oh, uh, well, sure. It's small, though."

I invited them into the room. They seemed surprised to find that the inside of the room was just as small as I'd said, but they passed it off with an impressive coolness. If I was their boss, I would've given them a raise. Of course, not being their boss, I didn't give them squat.

"Please have a seat over there," I said. I poured water into two cups and placed them in front of the pair. Just as Mikoko-chan had the day before, they ignored this completely.

"Allow me to be frank," Sasaki-san said, eyeing me firmly. "Emoto Tomo-san is dead."

"Oh." I prepared myself a glass of water and sat down across from them. "Is that right?"

" 'Is that right?' Is that all you have to say?" Sasaki broke her poker face for the first time.

"Oh, well, I'm not much for expressing emotion. I'm to-tally shocked on the inside, so don't pay it any mind."

That and, by this point, I was becoming kind of used to this sort of thing.

But I really was shocked. This was half because Tomoe-chan had been killed, and half because the instant I had seen these two outside my door, I had guessed they were here to talk about Zerozaki.

I was half-relieved, half-stupefied. It was like a contradicttion of emotions swirling around in my gut.

“Umm, is it safe to assume that since there are detectives oil the case, she didn’t die under ordinary circumstances? Not to mention that you’re from the First Investigative Division.”

Considering the kinds of cases First Investigative Divisions usually handle.

“That’s correct.” Sasaki-san nodded. The seriousness of her expression was pure and undiluted.

“So was it, by any chance, the ‘prowler’?”

She shook her head at my inquiry. “No.”

“Oh, really.”

It was like something had deflated. Part of me was relieved. I couldn’t help but wonder why, but I quickly switched trains of thought.

“What happened, then?”

“Her body was found this morning. She had been strangled to death.”

“Strangled?”

Strangulation.

Emoto Tomoe.

Murdered . . . ?

I felt my heart going cold.

Just how many people had I seen die? How long had it been since I stopped counting dead friends? My first encounter with death was before I could even remember.

“It’s been about a month since the last one, huh? That’s got to be a new record.”

Sasaki-san gave me a sideways look. It was entirely different from the kind of sideways looks Mikoko-chan gave me, a purely intellectual pose completely devoid of any adorable charm. Then again, in my whole life, I had never seen a pose that was both intellectual *and* adorably charming, whether it be from a male or a female.

“Did you say something?”

“No, just talking to myself. I do that a lot. They say I’m just a nineteen-year-old soliloquy that can dress itself and walk around.”

Although Sasaki-san looked satisfied with this answer, she didn’t crack so much as a smirk.

Suddenly I noticed that Kazuhito-san had been closely monitoring my expression. I kept quiet.

Interesting.

That explained the need for sunglasses. Sasaki-san was in charge of doing the talking. Kazuhito-san was the observer. It was marvelous nonsense. A true masterpiece.

It seemed I was a prime suspect.

“I guess that makes sense. I was with her all night.”

“Did you say something?”

“No, just your plain old, everyday nonsense.” I sat myself up straight. Not that I was nervous, but maybe it was time to start getting a little more serious. “So if she was killed, who killed her?” I asked.

“That’s currently under investigation. To tell you the truth, that’s the reason we’ve come here today,” Sasaki-san said.

“Then tell me,” I wanted to say, but I refrained from provoking her.

“You were in Emoto-san’s apartment from about six in the evening to midnight. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Just to check, would you tell us the names of the other people present during that period of time?”

“Umm.” Good luck, memory. “Emoto Tomoe-san, Atemiya Muimi-san, Aoi . . . no, Aoii Mikoko-san, and Usami Akiharu-kun. And then me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“You arrived with Aoii-san. Is that correct?”

“Yes. Aoii-san first came to my place—here, I mean—then we went to Emoto-san’s place together. It was around six p.m.”

“More specifically? Was it before six or after?”

“Before.”

She was barraging me with questions. The limitations of my mind’s processing speed had been surpassed long ago, and my head was spinning.

“So all of the guests were there at that time . . ."

“Please wait a minute,” I interrupted. “I can’t settle down and focus if you keep throwing out questions one after an-other like that. I think I mentioned that, but this all has me a little mixed up.”

“Oh, sorry about that,” Sasaki-san said. It was the most unapologetic apology of all time.

I spent the next hour responding to her assault of questions, divulging every last detail of the previous night’s events. The things we talked about during the party. The atmosphere of the party. My going to the convenience store with Muimi-chan. Returning. Akiharu-kun and Muimi-chan leaving at around eleven o’clock. Akiharu-kun giving Tomo-chan a present just before that. The neckstrap. My talk with Tomo-chan after that. Leaving the apartment with Mikoko-chan in tow. The phone call from Tomo-chan around the time we reached Nishiôji Nakadachiuri. Leaving Mikoko-chan with Miiko-san because she appeared to be sleeping (whether it was the truth or not, I didn’t know). And then, sleeping. Mikoko-chan’s short visit in the morning. The rest of the day, which I spent reading.

I didn’t bother mentioning the intense pressure of having Kazuhito-san peering over Sasaki-san’s shoulder the whole time when she was already plenty scary on her own. We were just sitting and talking, but I felt like I had wasted a great deal of energy. And then there was Sasaki-san’s brilliant last line.

“Okay, so far this pretty much matches what we’ve already heard.”

Boy, she was super.

The string of questions seemed to have come to an end for the time being. “Hmm,” Sasaki-san said with a perplexed look. But something about it seemed like an act. If Mikoko-chan could be called a person

of no façades, this woman, on the other hand, was a person of nothing but façades, to the point that they appeared to be her true personality. She certainly wouldn't be the easiest person in the world to deal with.

"So how about that phone call?" she said with a finger to her temple. "She really didn't say anything? According to Aoii-san, Emoto-san specifically asked her to pass you the phone, from which one could deduce that she had something to say to you."

"She began to say something, but she didn't. She just said 'never mind,' and hung up."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"And it was definitely Emoto-san on the phone?"

"Yes. I never mistake voices of people I know."

She exchanged glances with Kazuhito-san behind her. It looked like they were done questioning and about to be on their way, but I couldn't just sit idly by in silence.

"Umm, Sasaki-san, may I ask a question?"

"Huh?"

Her poker face broke down once again, naturally. Having had a younger boy suddenly address her by her first name, it would've been stranger if she *hadn't* been surprised.

"Something's been bothering me."

"Uh-huh . . ." She exchanged another glance with Kazuhito-san. He responded with nothing more than the slight drop of his jaw.

Apparently a sign of consent; Sasaki-san turned back toward me. "Okay."

This consent was most likely not spurred by sympathy for a boy whose classmate had just been murdered, but by the mean-spirited notion that they could use my question to see into me. Not that I cared.

"Um . . . by any chance, was Aoii-san the one who discovered the body?"

"That's correct," she answered coolly, providing no further explanation. It seemed they had no intention of telling me anything more than necessary to answer my questions. Of course, they probably wouldn't answer all of my questions either.

So I was right, after all. She had gone to drop off Tomo-chan's birthday present, but there had been no answer. She tried calling, but nobody picked up. The door to the building had an autolock, but surely that was easy enough to get around. All she had to do was follow one of the residents inside. In that sense, it hardly even passed as a lock.

Hmm . . .

Mikoko-chan.

How must she have felt at that time? She was always so full of emotion. What could she have possibly felt at a time like that?

"Maybe I should've gone with her. . . ."

But then again, how could I have known? Besides, I wasn't sure I would've been much help even if I had gone along. I wasn't worth that much. I might have ended up just making her angry.

“Is that your only question?”

“No, I’ve got a few more. What was the time of death?”

“We’ve determined that it was sometime between eleven p.m. on the fourteenth and three a.m. on the fifteenth.”

“In that case . . .” Mikoko-chan and I had left her apartment at midnight, which meant that the crime must have occurred between midnight and three a.m. “Er, and you say she was strangled, correct? There wasn’t a knife involved or anything?”

“That’s what I said.” She narrowed her eyes at my mentioning of the word *knife*. Of course I didn’t tell her, not even with my eyes, that I knew a certain knife-wielding killer.

“Was it a rope?”

“It was a thin piece of cloth. She most likely died instantly from vascular compression. I doubt she suffered much.”

This was most human thing Sasaki-san had said so far. But to me, whether Tomo-chan suffered or not was relatively trivial. Either way, she was dead.

I knew what it was to die. It isn’t death that people fear: It’s nothingness. Pain is nothing more than a peripheral add-on, despair nothing more than decoration.

“Um, have you already gone to see everyone else?”

“Everyone eke?” Sasaki-san replied, even though she knew damn well what I meant.

“Everyone who was gathered at Emoto-san’s place last night. Usami-kun, Atemiya-san, and Aoii-san.”

I asked this without any particular expectation. I figured she probably wouldn't even answer. But to my surprise, she answered immediately.

"Yes, we have," she said. "We've finished questioning all of them. Your address was a little hard to find, so we ended up coming here last."

"What was everyone doing during that window of time when Emoto-san was killed?"

One more step. I cautiously took another step forward.

Sasaki-san's lips curled up into a vague smirk. "Usami-san and Atemiya-san say they spent the night singing karaoke in Shijôkawara-machi. As for Aoii-san, well, it probably goes without saying."

It did. Mikoko-chan was staying with Miiko-san in the room next door. I felt a little relieved. If you could believe Sasaki-san's claim, that meant that the top three suspects all had alibis. Akiharu-kun and Muimi-chan could only account for each other, so their alibi wasn't exactly watertight, but it was enough to loosen any suspicions toward them.

I felt the pressure of Kazuhito-san's gaze grow even stronger.

"Tch . . ."

How unseemly.

Much too late, I broke eye contact with the two of them.

Dammit. They had set me up to feel at ease. They had caused me to let my guard down. I had been careless. These two detectives aside, you were never supposed to let your guard down around a police officer.

Shit . . . what had they seen?

“Is that all, then?” Sasaki-san asked without a hint of change in her tone.

“Oh, no. One more.”

If I had ever known failure, surely this was that time. Kazuhito-san’s penetrating gaze was minute subtlety com-pared to what I was about to face.

But it was a subtlety that had flustered me enough to ask a question I didn’t even have to ask, a question that I *shouldn’t* have asked.

“Who do you suppose did it?”

It was a question that had already been answered. And I had gone and repeated it.

“That’s currently under investigation,” Sasaki-san answered with a meaningful gaze—and the smile of a predator who had just bagged its prey. She rose to her feet. “Pardon us for intruding for so long. I think we’ll be back again later to talk more,” she said, placing her calling card on the floor. “If you remember anything else, please give us a call.”

I took the card in my hand. It gave a number for the prefectural police as well as her own cell phone number.

“Well, take care, Mr. Student,” Kazuhito-san said with a smirk, and began to make his way out of my room.

Interesting . . . so *he* was the real faker. I had committed such a fatal misstep that I didn’t even deserve to call myself a passive bystander anymore. I had completely mixed up the roles of the two detectives.

In other words, it was Kazuhito-san who was rushing me along while Sasaki-san had been absorbing everything I said.

And what's more, Sasaki-san had purposely let down her guard and invited me to attack.

The gall. The utter audacity.

"Oh, by the way," Sasaki-san said as if just remembering something. "About your alibi. For the time being, it's been confirmed by your neighbor, Asano-san. She said you can hear people walking down the hallway from inside the rooms."

She flashed me a refined smile. This was essentially a checkmate. No, this didn't even make for a match.

She even had the nerve to throw in this little scrap of compassion at the end there.

Well, son of a bitch.

I don't know if it was because I hadn't dealt with them for a long time, but I had completely underestimated the Japanese police. Did my arrogance know no bounds? Who the hell did I think I was?

It was the first time I had felt such defeat since my run-in with that redheaded private contractor.

I chewed my lower lip. "Kazuhito-san," I said to him as he was leaving.

"Hm?" He looked back.

"If you were better-looking, you'd be a dead ringer for Matsuda Yûsaku."

"Guess that means I'm *not* a dead ringer for Matsuda Yûsaku."

It was a bull's-eye answer. My last hopeless jab at him had been a big whiff, and with that, the two detectives were on their way. I cleared

away the cups and plopped myself onto the floor.

It had been a decisive defeat. I hadn't felt this sensation in a month, and I hadn't felt it this strongly in a whole year. But in this case I could just abandon the emotion. When you thought about the fact that someone had just died, it was all too trivial.

"Tomo-chan . . ."

I tried whispering the name aloud. The first thing to come to mind was our conversation from the previous night.

"Have you ever felt like, as a human, you're damaged goods?"

Now, now, Tomo-chan, that's not the sort of thing one admits out loud, isn't it?

It's better to not know things; it helps us go on living. As long as we're not too aware of ourselves, we can live in happiness. You might compare us to an airplane that's lost its engine and wings. We're nothing but insignificant nobodies who can only soar like crows who can't call out. Once you start questioning things, it's all over.

It's not about denial. It's about ignorance.

"You can get killed asking questions like that." As someone with experience, it wasn't my job to just dish out empty words of condolence. "If you put your mind to it, it's only natural . . . whether you're a person like us or not . . . Or rather, if you don't put your mind to anything, that is."

Having realized these things myself long ago, I was now a person living without purpose, just as Tomo-chan had been living a life without meaning.

I closed my eyes.

And I opened them.

“Well, so much for mind over matter.”

I swiftly rose to my feet.

Now then.

What to do now? There was nothing I was supposed to do, but plenty of things I wanted to. For me, this was a fairly rare condition.

First, I took out my cell phone. I checked the call history, then began to dial Mikoko-chan’s number. But halfway through, I stopped myself.

“Seriously, who the hell do I think I am?”

This was utter and complete nonsense. If I did call Mikoko-chan, what did I possibly have to say to her?

So I put off calling her. At that moment, I just didn’t have the right words to say to her.

“In that case . . .”

First things first. I cleared my phone and began reentering a phone number. It was the one and only phone number I knew by heart. With the phone at my ear, I tried to remember how long it had been since we’d talked.

She picked up immediately.

“Ohhh! Ii-chan! A long time indeed, old friend! Do you still love me?”

Her hyperness dwarfed Mikoko-chan’s by a factor of about twelve; unlike Mikoko-chan, once you removed her stopper, the gushing would never end. If you let her alone, she would shoot all the way up to Heaven like the Tower of Babel.

“What oh what oh what oh what is wrong? You *never* call me! This moment is monumental! It’s the Himeji Castle! It must be a diversionary tactic! Hyaooo! I wanna take a photo-graph to record it, but a photograph can’t capture sound so there’d be no point! Therefore, commence audio recording!”

“You don’t have to bother with the audio recording.”

I made an effort to keep my cool.

Muimi-chan had asked me if it was tough keeping up with Mikoko-chan’s hyperness, but as I had told her, compared with Kunagisa, Mikoko-chan was pretty much a piece of cake.

If Mikoko-chan was happy-go-lucky, then Kunagisa Tomo was happy-go-crazy.

“Tomo, are you free much these days?”

“Nope! More on the busy side. Extremely occupado. My processing power is facing an imminent meltdown! Emergency memory expansion! Defrag imperative! I’m going to freeze! Oh my God, it’s happening! It’s happening! Present progressive form! Please reboot!”

“Is it this Kyoto prowling serial killer case?”

“Bingo! Wowww! You’re like Maki-chan! Or the red con-tractor! Kyahahahahaha! Return of the ESP! And forever! Mankind’s strongest! This is the end!”

“Sorry, Tomo, could you dial it down a notch?”

“Huh? What’s wrong? Well, whatever. Yep, it’s the Kyoto prowling serial killer case! But you know what? It’s not going the way I expected! This darn case! Hurdles! Serious hurdles! Surely the killer is the reincarnation of Dread Jones! Wahaha!”

“Let’s make a deal, Kunagisa Tomo,” I said. “I’ll give you some information on this Kyoto prowler case. You’ll give me information on a certain murder that’s come up.”

“Huh?”

She thought for a moment. I knew she wouldn’t ask me why I had information on the prowler case or why there was a murder case I was interested in. I believed in her, and she trusted me.

Unnecessary explanations.

Excess clarifications.

Wasted words.

Inane questions.

Distracting chatter.

The very best thing about Kunagisa was that she had no use for any of these things.

“Ehh, I don’t like this word *deal*, Ii-chan.”

“How’s *bargain*?”

“Awful.”

“*Pact*?”

“Almost there.”

“*Conspiracy*?”

“Not technically wrong, but something’s off.”

"Well, then what about a *mutual complementing of each other's attributes*?"

"Yeah, that'll do," she said happily.

Give or take.

At this point, I still hadn't decided which.

3

After finishing my call with Kunagisa, I went to visit Miiko-san next door. I knocked on her door.

"Yo," came her response. Several seconds later, the door opened. As usual, she was dressed in a *jinbei*. It seemed to me that if she was going to take such an avid interest in Japanese clothing, she ought to get herself a nice, pretty kimono. It definitely would've looked good on her.

"Can I help you?"

"Oh, I just wanted to thank you. They said you vouched for my alibi."

"I didn't do anything remarkable. I just told the truth."

"Yeah, but I created an unnecessary burden for you."

"I don't care. Happens all the time . . . but you've certainly dealt with your own fair share of nuisances, haven't you?" She sounded more amazed than concerned. "You're like the man of a thousand disasters. So what about that girl? Based on what the authorities were saying, it sounds like she was involved as well."

"Well, in a manner of speaking . . ."

“Gotcha,” she nodded. “Well, then, how do you intend on thanking me?”

“I’ll treat you to tea.”

This was literally an invitation to go have real tea at a tea-house, not just a regular coffee shop. It was sort of a Kyoto thing, or maybe just a Miiko-san thing.

“Does that come with *dango*?” *Dango*—those tasty rice flour dumplings—went really well with green tea.

“It even comes with *hiyashi shiruko*.” Yes, and sweet red bean soup, too!

“Where at?”

“The Oharame-ya in Gion.”

Miiko-san’s eyes immediately lit up. “Hold on, I’ll get ready.”

She shut the door. For what it was worth, she was considerate enough to change into normal clothes if she was going out with somebody else. That level of thoughtfulness made her a pretty rare specimen in my circle of acquaintances.

“And I’m back.” A minute later she was ready to leave. She handed me a car key. I flipped it over once in the palm of my hand before clutching it tight.

4

And so eight o’clock in the evening rolled around. Tea with Miiko-san had ended and I found myself walking between Shijô and Oike on Kawara-machi Street. Miiko-san had already driven her Fiat back to her apartment.

“Don’t use me just to kill time and save on shoe leather.” Those were the words she had left me with.

She could see right through me, all right. Miiko-san was sharp, all right. But you had to hand it to her for accepting my invitation anyway. She was a nice girl. Or maybe she just had a sweet tooth.

I came to a stop and entered a nearby karaoke spot.

“Welcome,” the guy behind the counter said. “Party of one?”

“Umm, I have a friend who should already be here.”

“May I have your friend’s name, please?”

“Zerozaki Hitoshiki.”

“Ah, Zerozaki-sama?”

He briefly entered something into his computer. “Okay, that would be room twenty-four,” he said, flashing me a customer-servicey smile. I said my thanks and made my way to the elevator. Room twenty-four was on the second floor. I got off there and walked down the hall, checking the number of each room.

“*Dadadadadada dadadadadadadada! Dadadada! Dadadadadadadadadadadadadadadada! Ah! Aaaahhhh!*”

Just as I was wondering who was the bozo with the rusty pipes, I realized it was coming from room twenty-four. I gave a little shrug and opened the door without even knocking.

“Wha?”

Zerozaki stopped his belting once he noticed me.

“Yo, Damaged Goods,” he said, waving a finger at me. I entered the room without reacting and took a seat on the sofa.

“Hey, Human Failure,” I said.

He placed down the microphone and used the remote control to end the song.

“You can keep singing if you want. You’re paying for this, right?”

“Nah, it’s okay. I’m not really all that into singing, to be honest. And I sure as hell don’t like imitating other singers. I just do it to kill time.”

He sat down so that he was facing me and sighed deeply.

“Haven’t seen ya for a day. But, like, it don’t really feel that way.”

“Eh, I guess not.” I nodded.

To be honest, I was surprised. Until a moment ago, I didn’t even think Zerozaki would be here. Sure, after our conversation the day before yesterday—I mean, yesterday morning—we’d arranged to meet again. “I’ll be at the karaoke joint, so let’s meet up there,” he had said. But I didn’t think he would actually show up. I guess he probably thought the same thing. And that was no doubt the reason that I *had* come and the reason he *was* here waiting.

The meaning of the phrase *used to waiting*: Here too lay a justified contradiction.

From there, we began talking about a variety of things, none of which mattered in the least. It was just like the night we had first crossed paths. Ridiculous philosophy, boring facts of enlightenment, irrelevant views on life. At times we veered off-track a bit and got into discussions on music (“Guess the one-hit wonder”) or literature

("What's the trick to truly moving your reader?"). None of it had any real point. It was as if we were both just trying to check something.

"Say, Zerozaki," I said somewhere around the four-hour mark. "What's it feel like to kill someone?"

"Huh?" he said, tilting his head at me. His face looked blank, as if he hadn't been thinking of anything in particular. "It's not really the kind of thing that makes you feel this way or that. I don't really feel much of anything."

"You don't? It doesn't feel good or refreshing or anything like that?"

"Listen, dumbass, what do you think I am, some kind of sicko?" he said with a heaping helping of condescension. Committing grisly murders sure seemed like a funny way of *not* being a sicko, but I decided to hear him out.

" 'Cuz, you see, it's like this. I mean, I *am* a murderer. But I'm not what you would call a 'lust murderer.' That's a tricky distinction to make. I guess it doesn't do any good for me to make that kind of claim myself anyway. In the end, it's the people around you who decide who you are. All I can do is go along with it. I'm not really one for deep thoughts, you know."

"Huh . . . yeah, I guess not. Okay, then how about I change my question—what is murder to you?"

"Nothin'."

I could find two meanings buried in that word.

It was worth nothing.

And therefore, it cost nothing.

“Now here’s a question for *you*, D.G. What is death to you?”

“When you flat-out ask me like that, I’m at a loss. If I had to answer, I guess I’d say it’s kind of like a battery running out of juice.”

“A battery? You mean like with the AA and stuff?”

“Yeah. Well, something like that. I guess you could say battery power is like a life force or something. Which I guess would make you and your body the insulator.”

“I’ve been called worse,” he said with a little laugh. He seemed to be truly enjoying himself. I wondered if I sounded like him when I laughed.

“I guess my question was ambiguous,” I said. “How about this, then? Do you understand why other people commit murder?”

“Huh? That’s a bizarre one. But very *you* somehow. Let’s see . . . nope.”

“You don’t?” I asked.

“Well, first of all, I don’t understand other people, period. Whether or not they’re killers, and regardless of how evil they may or may not be. Second of all, I don’t even understand myself. I have no freaking idea what causes all that chaos and confusion swirling around in my guts. So all I can say is no, I don’t understand people who kill others.”

“I see your logic there.”

“I might add that murder was never particularly what I was going for,” he said as if it really was just an afterthought.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, this is going to get awfully conceptual, but in other words . . . well, here’s an example.” He picked up the receiver for the room phone. “Excuse me, could we get two ramens please?”

Not much later, a staff member came in carrying ramen.

“Eat up. I’m payin’,” he said, and took some noodles with his chopsticks. “Now *this* is a meal.”

“Yup. You didn’t even have to tell me.”

“They say food, sleep, and sex are the three basic desires of mankind. But why are we eating this meal right now?”

“To ingest vitamins.”

“Yes. Without vitamins, people die. And thus eating food brings pleasure. Sleeping feels good, too, and sex, well, that’s obvious. Anything that you have to do to stay alive always comes with pleasure.”

“Sure. That’s easy enough to understand. So?”

“Don’t rush me. 'So? So? So?’ You sound like Akutagawa Ryu-freaking-nosuke.”

“Huh? Wasn’t that Dazai’s thing?”

“It was Akutagawa, dammit. Dazai wrote about it in an anecdote on Akutagawa.”

Whichever literary figure it was, I decided to once again do as told and hear him out. He paused for a moment before speaking, as if to build up the suspense.

“Now let’s imagine someone who’s obsessed with eating. In other words, someone who eats not simply to take in vitamins, but because he’s mad for the sensation of eating itself; for the beauty in the very act. The stimulation of his taste buds. The pleasure of feeling the food pass through his mouth. The joy of mastication. The ecstasy of feeling that mushed-up gook flowing down his throat. The feeling of fullness nearly destroying his satiety center altogether. The euphoria taking over his brain. In other words, I’m talking about a fat guy,” he said, laughing. ‘To a guy like that, vitamins or lack thereof are to-tally irrelevant. The means and the end have switched places for him, so that his main goal is something subsidiary. Now there’s your problem. Can you still say this guy is eating? No, don’t answer. You and I both know the only possible answer is no. What this guy is doing isn’t eating. He’s just eating the *concept* of eating.”

“And you’re just killing the concept of killing? That’s a bit of a stretch,” I said with a shrug. “It’s pretty perverse to try to equate a natural appetite for food with the urge to kill. Are you sure you don’t just have your priorities mixed up? Maybe you’re mistaking killing for something else.”

“Ehh, that’s a tough one. It’s hard to say. I’ll say it again, man—the act of killing itself was never my intention, nor was the stuff that comes afterward. Y’know, the dismemberment.”

Then what the hell is your intention? Man, you’re a tough guy to understand.”

“Not as much as you. I mean, I know that I’m hard to understand. I just said that. Anyway, in the beginning, I thought I was in it for the thrill.”

“The thrill,” I said.

"Yeah. You've heard of 'high risk, high return' before, right? In Japanese, I think we say, 'If you don't go into the tiger's den, you don't get no cub.' With murder, the risk is high, but the return is low, right? It hardly seems worth it. It's stupid. That's why most murders are almost always cases of people 'going too far' or 'using too much force.' They're not *trying* to kill the person, but before they know it, they've gone and done it. However . . ."

He pulled a rather dangerous-looking blade from his vest pocket. "This here is what they call a dagger. You grip it in your fist like this. So the first person I killed, I stuck this thing in his carotid artery and just tugged it to the side. This was an inexplicable act of murder. I had no particular intention of causing the person suffering or pain. In fact, it was a rather pleasant way to die, if you ask me. Now let me just say right now that by no means was this a boastful act. I'm sure you know this, but acts spurred by one's pride are the most pathetic actions a person can take. People who take pride in causing harm are the lowest of the low. I'm just boasting about my faults here. Seriously, all joking aside, that's the only kind of murder I can perform. Even when I went after you, on the other side of the mirror."

"Huh. You don't say."

"I do say. Like, let's imagine that you and I ended up fighting to the death again. Of course, logically speaking, it's entirely possible that you would kill me. But in the one time that you could kill me, I could kill you nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine times. Well, in reality you and I each only have one life, but this is a metaphor. At any rate, I can only kill for the sake of killing. In other words, I can affirm that the eight people I've killed up until now were not victims of me 'going too far.' "

Eight people. In two days, the body count had risen by two. Well, I guess you could say that Zerozaki had gone about living his life while I had been living mine.

“So am I an idiot? Maybe. After all, it’s not like I’m getting anything out of killing these people. Well no, I guess I am getting *something*. Whatever’s in their wallets,” he said.

One of the alarming details of the prowler case had been that the victims’ money and valuables had been stolen. This was a rare thing in cases like this, in which the murders seemed to have been committed for the thrill of it, but the reason was simply that Zerozaki needed the money to support his homeless lifestyle.

Even his karaoke money was probably coming out of one of those victims’ wallets. If you looked at it that way, even this ramen was tainted with sin, I thought as I slurped my noodles.

“But you could get that stuff just by working a normal job, so it’s no reason to commit murder. If you think about the effort that goes into killing one person, it makes a lot more sense to just spend the day working somewhere instead. And yet I choose murder. And therein lies my whole theory.”

“Ah, I get it. In other words, to Zerozaki Hitoshiki, the risk *is* the return.”

“Yup. The means and the end aren’t just swapped, but unified. The act itself is the purpose. The purpose is the act. The act is complete when you’ve carried out that purpose. This is actually not a bad theory at all.”

“But how is that any different from just losing sight of your purpose? It’s like having a guy who loves to read, so he fills his room with books until it’s completely buried in them. But he still keeps buying new ones. Whether he buys books or not is up to him, but he’s got so many books in his room now that even if he spent his whole life reading them, he’d never get through them all. But he just keeps on buying and buying.”

"Hmm. Ahhh, ah-ah-ah, I get it I get it. You're talking about processing capacity. Once you've surpassed your processing capacity, means and end become one and the same. It's like Ishikawa Goemon said: 'A splendid view, a splendid view, even a thousand pieces of gold is too little to pay for the beautiful sights of spring. I, Goemon, am worth ten thousand ryô.' Hmm. Yeah, maybe so," he said with an impressed sigh as he reclined into the sofa. "But you know, my man, even if that is the case, it doesn't have much to do with me. You know why? Because that theory I've been talking about is so totally wrong to begin with. Risk equals return? Now there's a bullshit equation if I've ever heard one. I'm just having fun with logic here."

"Huh. So what are you getting at?"

"Well, this story is a little generic," he said, leaning for-ward. "But let's go back to when I was just a little brat. You were a little brat once too, huh? Well so was I. What kind of brat was I? Well, I wasn't particularly weird or anything. I even believed in God. If I got smacked, it hurt. If I saw some-one else get smacked, it hurt. I had all your average sensibilities. I wanted to bring happiness to the people near me. I knew gratitude. I knew unconditional affection for another human being. That's the kind of little brat I was. . . . But sometimes, I would just sit. Not to read a book or watch TV or something. I would just sit. I'd be there resting my chin in my hands, my mind up in la-la land, just sitting there. Sooner or later I realized that during these times, I would always naturally start pondering how one kills a human being. The first time I realized what I was doing, I was seriously freaked out. I mean, I was pondering, *examining* how you kill a person as if it was the most normal thing in the world. The idea that this was really *me* was the scariest thing," he said.

"So it was something you discovered in yourself. But what part of this story is supposed to be generic? It seems pretty out there to me. You're saying that from birth, you've had an innate proclivity to murder?"

“I said don’t rush me. I thought that once myself, but that’s not the case at all. I thought I was born with a murderous mindset, with the urge to kill. But that’s not it. It’s that—and this is where it gets generic—I’m attached to a rail.”

“A rail? What are you talking about?”

“It’s a metaphor. You hear it a lot. People talk about *life on a track*, right? You go through middle school, you go through high school, you go through college, you enter society, you support yourself with a salary so that you can bag a lover, and then you depart from the world. That’s the track of life. Well, similarly to that, I’m on the murderer’s track.”

“Sounds more like you’re *off* the track to me.”

“Like you’re one to talk. Anyway, that’s not important. The kind of track I’m talking about here isn’t necessarily the one set up by society. It might be a track you’ve set for your-self. Like, imagine there’s a kid who becomes obsessed with Ichiro in elementary school and decides he wants to be a base-ball player. In that moment, he *makes* a track for himself.”

“I see. So that means we’re all on a track . . . except for people who ‘drop out,’ I suppose.”

Except for people who have suffered a fatal blow.

Except for people who go off the rails.

“Yup. I don’t know who laid down this track for me. I might have done it myself. Someone else might have. But one thing I know for sure is that I’ve taken the track too far. I’ve made it too far down without suffering that fatal blow, and now there’s no stopping me. I can’t even entertain the idea of putting on the brakes.”

“Aha. So it just keeps going on and on.”

In other words, right now, he was in motion. And the him in midmotion was entirely different from the him who had first started running along this track.

“Yup. It’s like a curse from the past. And in my case, it’s slowly killing me. It may sound boring living life on a track someone else has laid out, but you know, it doesn’t make any difference *who* laid it out if it if you get sick of it midway through. Not that I could just quit at this point. Too many strings attached now.”

“Must be even tougher not having anyone to blame.”

“That’s right. Especially for an outcast like me.”

“Might as well give it up. You may not break away from the track, but you sure do break away from the rules.”

“Oh? Well you’re no Mother Teresa yourself, you know.”

“But I *am* a serious student at a university. I’m not like you.”

“Doesn’t saying that depress you? It’s like looking into the mirror and saying, ‘Who the hell are you?’ ”

“Exactly,” I said nodding.

“Anyway, it’s for that reason that I don’t view myself as a murderer. Because killing isn’t my goal. You’ve heard of people who ‘kill like it’s as simple as breathing,’ right? Well, for me, if I don’t kill, it becomes hard to breathe. I’m just paying the train fare for this track I got on long ago. Or it’s like I’m perpetually repaying a loan. You could say I’m killing the act of killing.”

“This is all becoming a little too idealistic and abstract for me. Can’t you put it more realistically?”

“Not really. I mean, we’re talking about a vague concept here. If you put it in realistic terms, the conversation would be over with ‘I killed and dismembered someone times eight.’ ”

“That’s true . . .” I sighed and looked up at the ceiling. Talking with Zerozaki was interesting enough, and I had even learned a thing or two, I suppose, but it wasn’t exactly useful information. “Hmm. And here I thought a killer like you would be the one most capable of *understanding* the heart of a killer.”

Maybe I’d been wrong to assume that. After all, Zero-zaki’s MO and Tomo-chan’s cause of death were completely different. I didn’t believe for a second that Sasaki-san had given me the whole scoop, but she had at least told me that Tomo-chan had been strangled with a thin piece of cloth. Meanwhile, Zerozaki was cutting people up with a knife. The similarities began and ended with the fact that both killers had brought death to their victims.

Zerozaki killed people at random.

Tomo-chan’s killer had sought her out. It was most likely the result of a grudge. Something spurred by a sticky, slimy, disgusting personal relationship that had eroded away.

“Hah? Why do you say that?” he said.

“Well, it’s just that a classmate from my university was murdered recently.”

“Murdered? Your classmate?”

“That’s what I said. Yeah, at first, I wondered if you had done it, but it doesn’t match your style at all. They strangled her with a piece of

cloth."

"Ah, yeah, that's not my thing," he said, waving his hands with a grimace.

"So I thought. But I just figured one monster would understand another."

"You're mistaken. And it's such a *you* mistake. Monsters don't kill people; people do. And just as people don't under-stand monsters' feelings, monsters don't understand people's. It's like comparing a platypus to the archaeopteryx."

I didn't know who was supposed to be the platypus and who the archaeopteryx, but he was probably right. Guys like Zerozaki were peculiar and dysfunctional, and that was why they were so rare.

"So, what happened, then?" he said, sounding not particularly interested. Figuring there was no need to keep it a secret, I proceeded to tell him everything I had heard from Sasaki-san. I told him about Mikoko-chan, Tomo-chan, Muimi-chan, and Akiharu-kun and about the birthday party. He occasion-ally dropped in a brief remark or shook his head as he tried to follow along with the story's twists and turns, and just once, he even flashed a look of concern.

"Hmm," he said when I was finished. "I see. I see I see I see. So that's how it went down. So?"

"What do you mean *so*?"

"*So* means *so*." He stared me directly in the eye. I didn't answer him. This silence continued for a whole hour.

"Okay, I got it," he eventually said, standing to his feet. "Let's go."

"Huh? Where?"

“To Emoto’s place,” he said like with all the casualness of a good friend inviting someone over to hang out. With that, he made his exit. This was all going just as I had expected, I thought. I rose from the sofa and followed him out, leaving our half-eaten ramen behind.

5

“But about that Aoii chick,” Zerozaki said apathetically as we walked westward down Shijô Street. “Seems pretty obvious that she’s got the hots for you.”

“What?” I couldn’t help but be surprised by this sudden leap in our discussion.

It was already past midnight, meaning it was now Monday, the sixteenth. Even on Shijô Street, which was a major east-west road, traffic had grown sparse. Occasionally we passed a group of college students probably coming home after a night of drinking, but the sidewalks were otherwise mostly empty.

I realized that the next day I had to go to school. And from first period, no less. What’s more, it was my foreign language class, where they always took attendance. And it looked to me like this was going to be another allnighter.

“Eh, what were we talking about again?”

“That Aoii chick,” he said irritably, knitting his brow at me. “Hearing what you have to say about her, she’s got to have a thing for you.”

“No way. What could’ve possibly given you a dumb idea like that? That doesn’t even sound like something you would say. I mean, she’s already got a boyfriend anyway.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

"Oh wait, that's right." Come to think of it, she may or may not have told me that. "But still. I don't think that's the case. I mean she does seem to be fond of me, but it's like how people are fond of animals. And even then, she probably sees me as an iguana or something in the reptile family. You know, like 'Aw, that's . . . *kind of* cute.' "

"An iguana? If you're an iguana, then that makes me a chameleon," he said, and proceeded to laugh. "For example," he then said, immediately switching back to his serious tone. "She knew your address, right? That's extremely suspicious right there. Who bothers looking up the address of someone they don't even have a crush on?"

"She didn't even have to. It was in the address log from class."

"Aha. You said it yourself, man. You were on vacation when class started and you missed the first week of your . . . general education, was it? Whatever that class was. Hence, there was no way your address could've been recorded in that log."

"Oh."

Now there was an oversight. I certainly didn't remember telling my address to anyone else, and that meant there was no way the address of my ancient ruin of an apartment building could've been on the sheet. There wasn't a single person at Rokumeikan who should've known where I lived.

"But Mikoko-chan claimed she got it off the address list. Was it just a misunderstanding? But misunderstandings like that don't happen, do they? So maybe she lied to me."

"Eh, not so much a lie as an excuse. She probably followed you home one day."

"If she'd been following me, I would've noticed."

“Maybe. At any rate, she probably learned your address through fairly illegitimate means. She couldn’t tell you the truth, so she just blurted out that thing about the address log.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So let’s think about this. Have you ever met a girl who would go that far just to learn the address of some random guy? You might not put it past a guy, but we’re talking about a girl here.” He flashed an unsavory smile.

I let out a sigh of a laugh. “Don’t act like you know what’s going on.”

“What can I say, it’s who I am.”

“But I really think you’re wrong about this. I can say that for certain.”

“Well, I’ll be damned. And what are you basing this certainty on?”

“Well, she acts like she hates me.”

“*Huh*?” Zerozaki’s facial expression alone was enough to make it clear that he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Come on now, at least remember the stuff you said *yourself*. You just said Aoii was fond of you, didn’t you? So what the hell are you squawking about now?”

“Hang on, this isn’t a contradiction. I have sort of a dualistic or Boolean view of the world. Shall I explain? In other words . . . like, take the cars on this road. Let’s say there’s a car going twenty-five miles per hour.”

“Yeah. You want me to tell you if that’s fast or slow?”

“Yeah. Which do you think?”

“It’s slow, isn’t it? At this time of night they could go faster than that.”

“Okay, then let’s imagine the same car going at full speed. I don’t know much about the limitations of automobiles, but let’s just say it’s going one hundred miles per hour at full throttle. Is that fast?”

“Fast works for me.”

“Finally, let’s imagine the car when it’s at rest. How about this time?”

He gave a restless shrug. “It’s at rest. What the hell do *you* think?”

“Just humor me.”

“Well, slow, I guess. You sure can’t call something that’s not moving fast.”

“That’s right. Now let’s go back to the initial question—is twenty-five miles per hour slow or fast? I would express it like this: ‘It’s twenty-five fast and seventy-five slow.’ ”

“Ahh.” He gave a convinced nod. The cheek on the tattooed side of his face curled up into a slight smirk. “So the way you see it, what does Aoii think of you?”

“Well, to give an approximation, she likes me seventy and hates me fifty. Approximately.”

“I guess that doesn’t add up to her liking you twenty.”

Indeed. The logic of arithmetical operations didn’t apply when it came to human emotions. Besides, these numbers were highly prone to fluctuate, making such calculations troublesome. They could only be expressed as averaged values.

“Okay, so what about you, now?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“You. How much do you like and hate Aoii?”

“I like her zero and hate her zero.”

“Whoa . . .” He pulled back a bit in surprise. “My God, man . . . you’re brutal.”

“You should talk.”

“Cram it, Captain Passive.”

I liked her zero and hated her zero. You might call it apathy.

Sure, my words might have been a little exaggerated and laced with apathy, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t telling the truth.

Because after all, I’m such a cold, dried-out person that I can kill a person just by living. Indeed, I was as brutal as Zero-zaki made me out to be. I simply couldn’t take any type of assertive action for the sake of a stranger.

“This is totally . . .”

“Totally.”

“A masterpiece,” Zerozaki said, laughing.

“Nonsense.” I didn’t laugh.

“Well, putting all that textbook mumbo-jumbo aside, don’t you have the hots for anyone?”

“Huh. I don’t really know.”

“Even though they’re your emotions?”

“*Because* they’re my emotions.”

“Ah, I get it. Because you’re the passive spectator. You understand other people better than you understand yourself. I guess they say you can’t be your own observer. It’s like that thing . . . what was it again? The uncertainty principle? Quantum mechanics? Doppelgänger’s cat?”

“ ‘Doppelgänger’ can’t be right.”

“Ahh, who was it? It’s math, so it’s gotta be a German guy, but . . .”

After that mildly racist remark, he sat and thought to him-self for a minute. But ultimately, he couldn’t seem to recall whose cat it was. “Goddammit,” he said, slapping himself in the left cheek. This seemed to relieve him.

“Well then,” he said. “Here’s my conclusion: You’ve got a fucking terrible attitude.”

“That’s probably correct. But. . .”

But.

What could I possibly have intended to follow that up with? Might I have been considering saying somebody’s name? Of course I was. But whose name that could’ve been, I don’t know.

“It’s all just nonsense in the end.”

“Um, is that supposed to be, like, your escape line?” He slumped his entire upper body dramatically as if my incredibly delayed response had completely knocked the wind out of him. Though not to the same extent as Mikoko-chan, it seemed Zerozaki was also one for big reactions.

“Eh, then again, I guess I’m kind of like that too. Or rather, I *am* like that,” he said.

We arrived at the Nishiôji-Shijô intersection. The Hankyû Saiin Station was visible to the south. Of course, the final train had long since made its stops, and the area surrounding the station was desolate. We turned north. If we continued up as far as Maruta-machi, we'd arrive at Tomo-chan's apartment.

"Maybe we should've hailed a cab after all. We're still only halfway there."

"It's a waste of money. That is to say, I don't *have* any money. Or were you going to pay?"

"Nope. There isn't a single student in Kyoto who rides in cabs."

"Huh. I'm not a student, so I wouldn't know."

Suddenly a doubt rose in my mind. I thought of Sasaki-san's stern gaze for some reason as I asked Zerozaki my question.

"Are you on a most-wanted list or anything?"

"I don't think so. Nobody's ever tried to talk to me, and nobody's ever followed me. I've done my share of following other people, though," he boasted. It amazed me that some-one who stood out this much—I mean, he had a tattoo running down half his face; maybe that kind of thing was normal in Tokyo, but he was probably the only one of his kind in all of Kyoto—hadn't been arrested yet. But then again, if you thought about it, whether he stood out or not probably didn't make much of a difference in a case like this.

"So we're going to Emoto's place from here, right? But . . ."

"What?"

"In reality, you can already pretty much deduce what happened, right? I mean, who the killer is and stuff."

“Deduce?” I parroted his word back at him. Could I really figure out the answer based only what I knew at this point?

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I mean it when I say I don’t really know what happened. I’m not some mystery novel or movie . . .”

Detective.

The redheaded private contractor.

“Detective.”

“Well, of course not,” he said with surprising plainness. “But I guess I also mean it when I say that I don’t think it’s beyond figuring out. She was strangled to death. Inside a room. The estimated time of death leaves a fairly narrow window. The suspects all have alibis. We just need a few more clues.”

And it just so happened that I currently had Kunagisa collecting that very thing. And I myself was on my way to do the same.

“Is it possible that it was just a random robbery?”

“Well, technically it’s possible, but the cops don’t seem to think that’s the case.”

There was something very unordinary about both Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san. It was hard to believe they were the kind of people who would be sent out just to handle a simple burglary-homicide case. Of course, that was just my hunch.

“Mmm.” Zerozaki's eyes drooped lazily. “But I don’t think you really have to go out of your way to investigate things. Is there some logical reason for doing this?”

“Not especially. Listen, nobody's making you come along. Why don’t you go cut up some more people?”

“Nah, that’s okay. I’m not in the mood for that tonight.” He took my suggestion more seriously than I had intended. “Besides, I was the one who suggested we go in the first place.”

Meanwhile, we’d arrived at Tomo-chan's apartment building. Apparently the police had already checked out, leaving the area as desolate as the train station. We made our way through the automatic door and into the main lobby.

Now then.

“Ah, right. You need an autolock card key to get in.”

“What now?”

“Here’s what we do.” I walked a step ahead of Zerozaki and entered a random room number into the intercom.

“Hello?”

“Um, this is the person from room three oh two. I’m so sorry to bother you, but I went and locked my own card in the room. Would you mind opening the door for me?”

“Oh, certainly.”

K-chunk, the glass door said as it opened up.

“Thank you,” I said to the complete stranger, and Zerozaki and I quickly made our way into the building.

“You don’t mind lying just like that, huh?” he said.

“What can I say, it’s who I am.”

We got into the elevator and went up to the sixth floor. As we walked down the sixth floor hall, I produced some thin white gloves from my pocket and slid them onto my hands.

"Not to make this awkward, but . . . were you prepared with those gloves this whole time?"

"Yup. I planned this whole thing."

"Wow," he said as he pulled his own pair of gloves out of his vest pocket and switched them with the fingerless ones he was currently wearing. Of course, a guy like him probably just carried gloves around with him every day.

We arrived in front of Tomo-chan's room. When I tried the knob, the door turned out to be locked, as expected.

"So how do you propose we clear this one?"

"Actually, I hadn't thought about it. Any ideas?"

"I gotcha," he grumbled, pulling a thin knife from his vest pocket. Or perhaps *drill* was a more accurate word for it. He jammed it into the keyhole. He rattled it left and right until we heard the click of something settling into place. Then he pulled the knife back out, spun it around once in his hand, and closed it back up in his vest.

He turned the knob. "It's open."

"This can't be safe, can it?"

"Not even a little bit. The killer could be anywhere."

We shrugged and went in anyway.

We walked down the hall between the kitchen and bath-room, and passed through the door at the end. The room hadn't changed much from my Saturday visit. It looked like some things had been slightly moved around, but that was probably owed to the crime-scene investigation.

And then there was the center of the room. White strips of tape formed the shape of a person.

"Wow," Zerozaki said with awe. "So they really do that. It's like something out of a TV show or a manga. Hey, that Emoto girl had about the same build as me."

"Looks like it."

Tomo-chan was pretty small, even for a girl, but for a guy, Zerozaki was ridiculously petite. They weren't *exactly* the same size, but they could've easily fit each other's clothing.

"Incidentally, I prefer tall girls," he said.

"Really?"

"Yup. But tall girls don't like short guys, do they?"

"But none of your six victims were tall girls."

"Who goes around killing the girls he's into, idiot?" he said angrily. It looked like I had touched on a difficult subject.

Nevertheless.

My gaze fell back on the tape on the floor. Tomo-chan must have been strangled and then collapsed on the floor here in this position, asphyxiated. But this tape hardly captured the reality of it.

I looked back over at Zerozaki to find him immersed in silent prayer. His eyes were closed, with his hands pressed together in front of his chest.

I deliberated for a moment before deciding to do likewise.

Afterward, I once again began inspecting the area around the tape.

“Hm.”

There was something on the right hand of the human shape. It was dark, so I couldn’t see it very well, but we couldn’t just go turning on the light, either. I managed to make out a small ring made out of black tape.

It seemed this was some sort of mark they had made during the investigation.

“What’s this? Maybe something was on the floor here?”

“No, look closer,” Zerozaki said, crouching down next to me. “Something’s written here.”

“Dammit, I wish we had a little more light.”

“Just wait a little longer. Your eyes’ll adjust soon enough.”

It assumed that we were working at our leisure here, but right now that was our only option.

In time, my eyes did begin to adjust.

Thin carpet. On its surface there were red letters.

“*x* over *y*?” we both said.

The letter *x* was written in cursive handwriting. Then a diagonal line below it. Then the letter *y* in the same cursive handwriting. It was messy writing, so you had to struggle to make it out. But it didn't seem like it could've said anything else.

"What's *x* over *y*?"

"Beats me."

"Is it red because it's written in blood?"

"Nah, seems to be some kind of oil-based ink."

Strange writing next to the body's right hand. Could this have been her dying message?

"But hey, we don't actually know that this is the right hand. We can't tell if the body was faceup or facedown just by looking at this tape."

"Ah, right. But, Zerozaki, I don't think she could've writ-ten this if she was facedown. Not that *she* was necessarily the one who wrote it."

"Yeah, that's right. There's still the possibility that the killer wrote it. So what's this *x* over *y* bullshit all about? Math? But this isn't an equation. You can't take it any further than this."

"Maybe whoever wrote it didn't finish."

"If that's the case, we're pretty much at a dead end. I can't even imagine what they were getting at with this," he said as he walked over to a comer of the room and slid down against the wall. "I'm sleepy," he said with a big yawn. "Figure any-thing out?"

"Just the fact that this may or may not have been her dying message is a pretty good haul. Now, then . . ."

I scanned my eyes around the room. There were no signs of a struggle. As far as I could see, nothing was broken or missing.

“Yeah, I don’t think this was just a burglary,” I said. Was it all because of a grudge after all? But what could a girl who had just turned twenty years old two days ago have done to have inspired such hatred?

I continued examining the room as I pondered. Of course, the police had probably already done this with complete thoroughness, but right now it was necessary to see the crime scene with my own eyes, in order to fill in the gaps in my imagination. For later on.

“What now?” Zerozaki said as he watched me moving around. Judging from his current state, it didn’t look like he intended to help me any further. Not that I was expecting him to do anything. I’m not such an idealist that I would expect anything from a mere water reflection.

“You seem strangely comfortable doing all this,” he said.

“Well, I've got experience.”

“What could a *twenty-year-old* have possibly experienced in his life to have broken him so badly as a human being? I can’t even imagine,” he said.

“You should talk. But I guess I’ll humor you anyway. I guess you could say I haven’t lived a very respectable life. Or no, my life has been plenty respectable, but I haven’t been.”

“Hmm. You know, I don’t like myself very much,” he said plainly to my back. “But seeing you, I realize I’m not so bad.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. I may be a screwup, but I’m not as bad as you. When I look at it that way, it’s kind of a relief.”

“I wonder.”

“*I* wonder.”

“Say . . . why do people die anyway?” he asked.

“Because you kill them.”

“Well, yeah, but I mean aside from that. Umm, what is it again? Apoptosis? Darwinism? Genes? Cancer cells? Cell suicide? All that good stuff. It’s like the termination point of our functionality.”

“Come to think of it, I heard once that the longest a human can live is somewhere around one hundred ten years, regardless of the era or region.”

“Huh.”

“I mean, the bottom line is that living creatures have a lot of diversity. But you know, whether you live a long time or not doesn’t really make a difference. I don’t really think there’s even much point in living two hundred or three hundred years. I’ve lived for nineteen years and two months up until now, but quite frankly. I’ve had enough.”

“You’re tired of it?” he asked.

“Well, it’s more like I just can’t endure it anymore. I’m still okay for now, I guess, but if things go on like this . . . yeah, in another two or three years, my ability to process reality will have reached its limit.”

“But isn’t that just one of those things? Like, I’ll bet you thought the same thing when you were fourteen, right? Like, ‘in another few years I’ll probably have committed suicide.’ ”

“Yeah, I did think that. But I didn’t have the balls to go through with it.”

“Chicken.”

“Yeah, well. I always wanted to be a bird.”

“Not a chicken, I bet. They can’t even fly.”

“I’m joking. But I do think this: There isn’t a person on this earth who’s lived for ten or twenty years without pondering God and death, unless he’s just some slaphappy nut.”

“God and death, huh?”

“Yeah. But before he can contemplate those things, he has to have learned about life. Some knowledge of life is necessary in order to contemplate death, so you have to study life before you can even begin to think about the fact that it will one day end. It’s like that saying: ‘If you want to kill someone, your victim had to have been alive to start with.’ No matter how much effort I might exert, I can’t kill John Lennon.”

Nor could I kill Emoto Tomoe.

“Now tell me, Zerozaki. What does it mean to be alive?”

“That your heart’s still beating?” he said off the top of his head.

“Wrong,” I answered. “Showing signs of life and being alive are not the same thing. But that aside, what if there existed a person who had experienced death *before* life? What kind of human being would he turn out to be? Could we even call him a human being? A living creature who could reminisce about his own passing, who had mourned his own death be-fore life even began. What would we label such an existence?”

"I guess that would be Death himself. It would have to be, or else . . ." His eyes seemed to be searching for the right words. He pointed a finger at me with an awkward look on his face. No words came out. To be sure, they probably didn't need to.

"Eh, it's just another mind-over-matter thing," I surmised.

An escape line.

"Say, man. I know I already asked, but *is* there some reason you've gone to all this trouble—I mean, illegally entering her apartment, not to mention the fact that you're supposed to be the passive observer type—just to gather information about the murder?"

"Yeah, there is," I answered. I meant to say *no*, but for some reason a confirmation leapt out of my mouth. I wasn't sure which one I really meant.

"Huh . . . you said yourself that you don't like or dislike Aoii, right? Then why should you do anything for her? And it seems to me that you only met those other three through her, like little add-ons."

He slapped his hands together as if he had just thought of something. "Is it for Emoto Tomoe?"

Tomo-chan.

A tragic figure, brutally murdered just after celebrating her own birthday.

That alone wouldn't have moved me, normally. If starving children on the other side of the world were being shot to death, I wouldn't have thought anything of it. If some giant earthquake in some faraway country killed tens of thousands of people, I wouldn't feel a thing. Whether or not a string of murders occurred in the town where I lived, it was no matter to me. I just didn't have that kind of spirit; it

wasn't much more to imagine that I wouldn't feel much sadness or despair over the passing of even a nearby acquaintance.

However, there were always exceptions.

"I was hoping I'd get to talk to Emoto Tomoe just a little more."

Zerozaki said nothing to this.

"That's all, though, really."

"I see," he nodded. "Well, whatever the case, what we have here is a masterpiece for sure."

Indeed, he was right that there seemed to be no compelling reason for me to go to all this trouble. It wasn't like I was being somebody else, but it certainly wasn't my usual style.

I realized I was being stupid. I just didn't think I was wrong.

"Ahh," Zerozaki yawned again.

"If you're bored, you can go." That is to say, *get lost*.

But he shook his head. "It's okay. Besides, how are you planning to lock up without me?"

"Actually, I've got one of those things that allows you to lock the door without the key."

"That's a pretty useless device."

Of course, I was joking.

Zerozaki soon closed his eyes and began to doze off. It was like watching my own sleeping face, which was a bizarre, alien sensation, to say the least. I continued examining Tomo-chan's room until four

in the morning, but didn't come up with anything that seemed like a decent lead.

"But . . ."

Maybe it didn't matter anyway. In fact, halfway through, I had entirely lost my will to search for clues and spent the rest of the time staring down at the tape human.

And I reminisced. About the time I had spent here on Saturday night. That wild, ridiculous night during which we'd all left reason and rational thought behind.

If I could be allowed to say something a bit romantic, perhaps this was my memorial to Tomo-chan. Now *that* wasn't my style, to be sure, but it seemed like a good enough reason all the same.

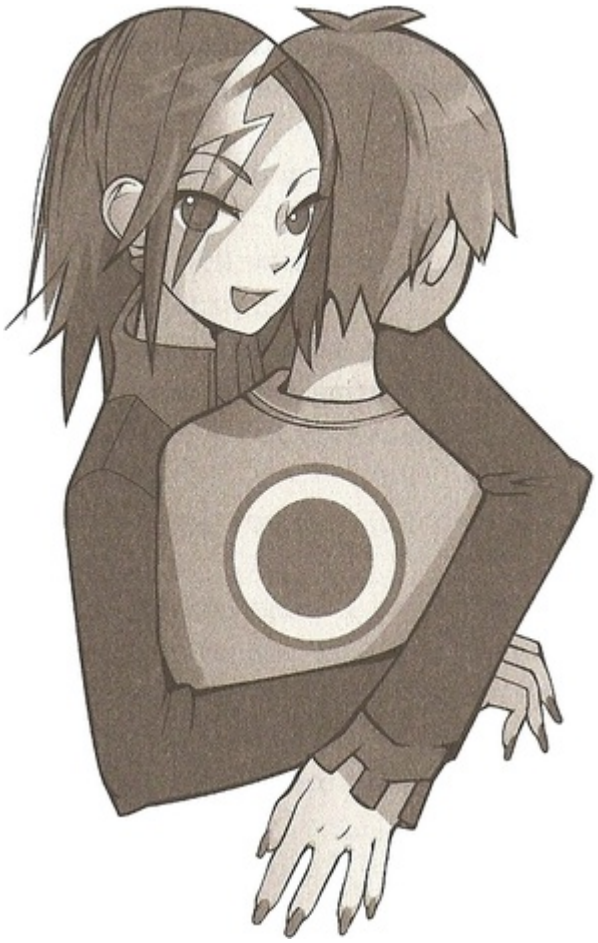
"Okay, let's go."

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay."

We left the building, and Zerozaki and I parted ways there. We spoke no parting words, and made no plans to meet again.



Aikawa Jun,

the most powerful

entrepreneur in the world.

4

RED VIOLENCE

Stress Through Transgressions

There ain't no meaning.
Got it.
Got it.
Got it.
Got it?

1

Wednesday, May eighteenth.

With second period over, the afternoon break had begun. Since the dining room got crowded at that time, I always skipped lunch on days when I had a second-period class. So I instead made my way directly to my general-education class.

General education.

Classmates.

Aoii Mikoko, Atemiya Muimi, Usami Akiharu, and Emoto Tomoe . . .

I hadn't seen a single one of these four people since the week began. This was no coincidence; most likely, not a single one of them had come to school. Being dead, Tomo-chan had her reasons, but the other three had neither died nor been murdered. Perhaps Tomo-

chan's death was to blame for them not showing up, or perhaps this was just how college students behaved after Golden Week.

Things hadn't progressed any further. The pair of detectives—Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san—hadn't returned to visit my apartment again, I hadn't had any contact with my three classmates, and I was still waiting for news from Kunagisa. Naturally, I hadn't met with Zerozaki again either.

As someone who doesn't read the news or watch TV, I of course had no idea what kind of press (or lack thereof) Tomo-chan's death had attracted. Nor did I know if the prowler had struck again in the past three days.

It was something I had no desire to know.

Right now, I was only waiting. After all, that was one thing I was used to.

"Man, it's hot. . . . I wonder if I'm a slug," I muttered as I made my way across campus, from Meigaku Hall to Yôyô Hall. It was less than three hundred feet away, but it was a tough walk anyway. I had heard of boiling-hot climates before, but I didn't think they really existed. Neither Kobe nor Houston had been this bad. This was the kind of heat and body-soaking humidity unique to basin towns. I struggled to endure it as my legs carried me along. I climbed a staircase, which brought me directly to the second floor of Yôyô Hall. I went inside and at last took a moment to catch my breath.

Just then, I spotted somebody familiar. But it wasn't because she was familiar that I noticed her. Rather, it was that my eyes had been attracted to her against their better judgment by her flamboyantly hot-pink jersey. It didn't exactly blend into the surroundings.

That brown *sauvage*. If only she was crouching on the ground in front of a convenience store, the image would have been complete.

It was Atemiya Muimi-chan.

She was currently talking to some guy, probably a class-mate. Thinking it would be a little obnoxious if I were to butt in and start up a conversation, I tried to slip by her unnoticed when she called out to me.

"Whoa, it's Ikkun," she said.

"Yo," her male associate greeted me informally. He had light brown hair and an easy-breezy kind of smile. Wait, who was this again? I didn't know anyone with this sort of easy-go-lucky surfer quality, did I? Was he from our general-education class?

"Long time no see, huh?" Muimi-chan said with a weak smile. "Umm . . . Geez, this is kind of awkward, huh? How have you been since it happened?"

"I've been coming to school as usual."

"Oh . . . heh, well, I guess *you* would." She smiled, but it seemed slightly forced. She appeared worn out, which prob-ably wasn't forced.

"How about you?" I asked. "What've you been doing? I haven't seen you at school."

"Oh, well, how do you put it . . ." She couldn't seem to find the words. She probably didn't like the idea of exposing her weakness to others. I'm not that type of person myself, but her feelings weren't beyond my comprehension.

“Well, I’ve got to prepare for a presentation. Time to get outta here. See ya later,” the guy said to us, and rushed off in the direction of the staircase.

“He’s sure an energetic son of a bitch, huh?” Muimi-chan said we watched him take off. “He’s totally lazy until an opportunity to be the center of attention comes along. Gen. Ed. ought to be a good show today. I’ll be watching that bastard from the front row.”

“Huh. So that guy is a classmate, then.”

Muimi-chan stood frozen for a few seconds before slowly and stiffly turning her head toward me like her neck needed an oil change. I almost expected to hear it creaking.

“Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“Hm? Oh, I guess Mikoko-chan didn’t tell you then, huh? I’ve got a pretty bad memory, so I don’t really know who’s in our class. I might remember him if I heard his name, though.”

But she wouldn’t tell me the guy’s name. She was staring at me in shock for some reason.

At last, she opened her mouth. “Usami Akiharu.”

“Oh.”

There you had it.

This *was* shocking.

“Does he leave that little of an impression?” she said.

“Well, less than you, anyway. It’s not like he goes around wearing hot pink jerseys.”

That was what I wanted to say, but I stopped myself. Muimi-chan was the type of person who would probably really start hitting you once you made her mad. And I probably wouldn't get off with just a jab or two. If I teased her the way I teased Mikoko-chan, I'd be dead meat.

"It's my memory that's at fault here, that's all."

"If that's the case, then do something about it."

"Well, the weak impression thing may be an issue too. He's not as crazy as Mikoko-chan. I know a lot of eccentric people. Actually, that makes it sound like I know a lot of people. Correction: The only acquaintances I have are eccentric people, so normal people just slip right out of my mind."

"Normal people, huh?" She gave a wicked little laugh.

"What? Did I say something funny?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, I was just thinking, you're a surprisingly poor judge of character."

"Huh?"

"Akiharu's got a meaner personality than you think," she said in a way that seemed strangely meaningful as she stared off in the direction he had gone moments ago. "Well, you'll figure that out eventually . . . eventually." Something in her soft tone seemed to suggest her words had a deeper meaning, but a moment later her facial expression switched like some-one had pressed a button on a remote. She turned my way again.

"This is perfect," she said. "I wanted to have a chat with you. Let's go talk in the lounge."

She began walking without waiting for my reply. After a short walk, we broke to the right, where we came upon the student lounge. I wondered if it would be crowded since it was the middle of the afternoon, but looking through the window glass I could see that, for some reason, fewer seats were occupied than empty. There was a plate hanging off the lounge door with *No Standing* written on it in red, Gothic letters. It was a prank a student had carried out several years back, and at this point nobody even bothered questioning it anymore. As a result, nobody bothered getting rid of it, either.

We entered the lounge, and Muimi-chan took a seat. The place was filled with cigarette smoke. Muimi-chan took one whiff and immediately reached into her pocket for something, but then stopped herself as if she had recalled her "policy" just in time. It was nice of her to stick to it so fastidiously, but in a place already this filled with smoke, it didn't really make much difference to me whether she smoked or not. But I knew that even if I told her she could, she would just say something like, "No, it's my decision," so I took my seat without saying anything.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"Don't play dumb. What's the one thing you and I would have to discuss?" she asked.

"Tomo-chan?"

"Mikoko."

She leaned forward with her arms on the table and glared up at me. But I wasn't so clueless that I wasn't prepared to meet her gaze.

"Have you seen Mikoko since then?"

"Since when?" I asked innocently.

“I told you not to play dumb. The police must have paid you a visit, too.”

“Well, yeah . . .” I recalled my meeting with Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san, but to be honest, they weren’t really a pair I wanted to think about too much. “So they visited you too?”

“Yeah. Kind of an unpleasant pair, weren’t they?”

“A man and a woman?”

“Yeah. The guy looked like he belonged on *The X-Files*, and the lady looked like she paid regular visits to underground cells. Regular cops piss me off enough already, much less these two . . . uh, but that’s another story,” she said, righting her posture. “Yesterday was Tomoe’s funeral.” She looked at me in an accusatory fashion. “You didn’t come.”

“Well, nobody told me about it.”

“Mikoko didn’t come either. Akiharu and I went, though.”

“Well, what can you do, right? Her death must’ve been a big shock to all of you,” I said.

“Yeah, must’ve been. You make it sound like this doesn’t have anything to do with you,” she replied.

“It doesn’t,” I stopped myself from saying. Ah, the art of tact.

“You’re not at all shocked by the fact that Tomoe was murdered?”

“Well, I was surprised enough when I first heard the news, but after three days, well, what do they call it? Cleaning out your heart’s drawers? I mean, the past is just memories.”

“As Tomoe’s friend, I want to be pissed at you for saying that, but you’re pretty much right, huh?” she said, a bit defeated. “I guess the human heart is conveniently constructed. Especially for someone who’s thick-skinned like me. It’s only been three days and I’m already back at the point where I can go to school again. But it really was devastating at first. I mean, I had just seen her, and then . . .” She snapped her fingers.

And then, silence. I wouldn’t have called it awkward, but it was a little unbearable. There was definitely a painful aura flowing between us.

“It looks like Akiharu-kun’s recovered to some degree, based on how he was acting just now.”

“Is that how he looked?” she asked.

“I thought so.”

“Well, maybe, if you say so.”

Again, she seemed to be getting at something, just like when she had said, “Akiharu’s got a stronger personality than you think.”

So what was she saying? She changed the subject before I could figure it out.

“So apparently you were the last one to hear Tomoe’s voice.”

“Yeah. Although it was over the phone. Did you hear that from Mikoko-chan? Or from the detectives?”

“Mikoko,” she said, nodding. “I went to her place yesterday after the funeral ended, but . . . I think she needs more time to recover.”

“Ah.”

“And that doesn’t bother you at all?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean you just heard that Mikoko is feeling down, and I’m asking if that bothers you.”

“Everybody sure is hung up on that,” I said. Muimi-chan looked a bit puzzled, possibly because of the word *everybody*.

She let out a big sigh and stretched. “Fucking clueless . . .”

“What’s that? I couldn’t quite make that out.”

“Ah, nothing. Listen, you might not want to hear this, and frankly I’m the last person who should be telling you. I was the one who was opposed to it in the first place. . . .”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Okay, let me ask you a favor, then. It’s a simple favor and there’s no catch. Just go visit Mikoko’s place, will ya?”

She pulled a piece of paper out of her jersey pocket and handed it to me. “Aoii Mikoko” was written on it in hiragana, and below that were her address and phone number.

“Man, these are some round letters. Who wrote this?”

“Me.”

“Ah . . .”

“What’s that supposed to mean? What up with that expression, like you saw that answer coming or something?”

“Uh, nothing. That’s not what I was going to say.” I looked down at the memo in an effort to escape her deadly gaze, and confirmed Mikoko-chan’s address. Horikawa Oike. Come to think of it, had I heard that before? It felt like I had, but it also felt like I was learning her address for the first time. I couldn’t remember.

“It’s pretty far from school. I guess that means she com-mutes here on her Vespa.”

“Nope, bus. This school doesn’t allow bikes.”

“It doesn’t?”

Incidentally, I commuted on foot. I had a bike, but I didn’t use it much, as a general rule. It wasn’t that I particularly liked walking, but somehow it works for me anyway.

“Okay, so I go to Mikoko-chan’s place, and then what?”

“She’s down, so cheer her up. Just say stuff like ‘it won’t do any good to just sit around feeling blue’ and ‘keep your chin up.’ I’m sure that’ll do.”

“Oh, just the usual crap, huh? But wouldn’t that kind of thing be better coming out of you? Oh, but I guess you already told her yesterday. But if her good friend couldn’t even cheer her up, I’m a lost cause.”

“It’s not that hard. Just go there and that’ll be enough. Seriously, that’s all. Go see her, say a word or two of encouragement, and then just play it by ear.”

Whatever that meant.

But then again, I didn’t really have any reason to refuse, and it was a relatively convenient proposal, so I went ahead and accepted. “Okay.”

“Try stopping by today after school.”

Just then, the bell indicating the start of third period rang. “Oh, crap,” said the look on Muimi-chan’s face. My face prob-ably didn’t show it, but I pretty much felt the same way.

Inokawa-sensei, the Cerberus of time.

“Ah, crap, that was the bell.”

“Even if we go now, we’ll be marked as absent. Or rather, he won’t even let us into the classroom,” I said.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it now. Hate to miss out on Akiharu’s studly performance, but let’s cut class.”

She was quick to make a decision. I hesitated to make a decision for just a moment longer. But no amount of mental effort would turn back the hands of the clock, so I just gave up. “Fine.”

“So, what now? Wanna go eat?”

“The dining hall’s probably still crowded at this time, right?

“Oh, right. Well, wanna stay here and chat a little more?”

“Well, then can I ask you something?” I said, thinking this would make a good opportunity. “Was there anyone who might’ve had something against Tomo-chan?”

Muimi-chan’s face immediately grew serious. It was like she was deliberating over something. Or, more likely, she was just mentally confirming something she’d already thought of.

“Nope, no one,” she said decisively, after a long pause and a perplexed expression. “Logically speaking, nobody *could* have had something

against her."

" 'Nobody could have had something against her' . . . heh, kind of a weird phrase. Sounds like a crappy translation or something."

"But I think it's an accurate one. I mean, I think. I've known her only since high school, though."

"Speaking of which, how do you all know each other, any-way? You said you've been friends with Mikoko-chan since you were little kids, right?"

"Mikoko and I were childhood friends, and then I met Akiharu and Tomoe in high school."

"Hey, wait. Isn't that a little strange?"

"What?"

"Mikoko-chan is nineteen, and her birthday is in April. Tomo-chan just turned twenty. . . ."

"Oh, no. Tomoe repeated a grade in junior high."

"Ah." So she hadn't entered college late or returned from abroad after all. She had just been held back a year. I hadn't even considered that option.

"The thing is, she was in the hospital for a long time. She had to take about half a year off, and even after that she tended to be absent a lot. She just didn't have the attendance record in order to pass. Apparently she was pretty sick. They said she was near death."

Near death.

Death.

Awareness of death.

"Hahhh . . ." I tried my best to be coolheaded about it, but I wasn't sure how well I managed to pull it off. "I see, so that's what it was."

So that was Emoto Tomoe's story. I nodded a few times so that Muimi-chan wouldn't notice my surprise.

"So anyway, it's been the four of us ever since high school. Apparently that was when Akiharu and Tomoe first met too."

"I see. Go on."

"Oh, right. So in other words, Tomoe was really good at adapting. Or wait . . . maybe that's not it. Maybe she was a little bit like you, if you don't mind my saying," she said, pointing at me twice. "You've heard of the 'personal space bubble,' right? Well, she was extremely good at defining them. She could get close to people as far as a certain point, but she would never step over that line. She would never come into intimate contact with anybody, and on top of that she never let anybody come into intimate contact with her. She always stayed at a cautious distance, never too near or too far. Kind of like a master sword fighter."

". . ."

The term *sword fighter* made Miiko-san spring to mind for a second.

"Tomoe was my friend, but . . . I don't think she ever opened up to me. I also don't think I was ever any help to her."

"I doubt that," I said, but my words probably didn't mean anything to her. They didn't mean much to me either. Whether her hunch about Tomo-chan was right or not, it probably wasn't very far from the truth.

But Muimi-chan, you mustn't mix things up. It's incredibly rude to Tomo-chan. If you're really her friend, you shouldn't be saying such things.

Tomo-chan and I weren't alike. We were simply on similar tracks. In essence, however, we were different.

The only ones who are really similar to me are the murderers, Muimi-chan.

"Anyway, she was that kind of chick so by nature she couldn't have done anything to incite a grudge. I think you can say that for certain."

"Then who the hell killed her?"

"Like I know. Probably that serial killer."

"The serial killer uses knives, I think."

"Well, whatever. Somebody killed her. Those cops looked pretty sharp, so I'm sure they'll find who did it if we just let it be. There's nothing we can do right now anyway."

She wore a stern face that didn't match her passive comment. Surely she was speaking these words against her own will. Her beloved friend had been murdered, and there was nothing she could do. She must have felt helpless.

But it really was beyond her control. It was probably true that she had no idea who the killer could have been. She had nobody at whom to direct her anger.

Hmm.

"What the hell is everyone doing?" she said, looking at all the students walking by outside the lounge. "Seriously, what the hell are they

doing?"

"Everyone?"

"Everyone. Everyone here. It's so stupid. They're just living. They're just not dead, that's all. They're just fucking living."

They're just fucking living.

She repeated the phrase one more time. "Ah, I'm groggy," she said, straightening up again. "I wonder if any of these people really have a purpose. A purpose for living, or a future goal or something. I wonder if they actually have those things."

"They must. I mean, I'm sure it varies from person to per-son. But it doesn't really matter either way."

"That's not really what I'm trying to say. I don't know. It's not that complicated. Like, take those chicks over there," she said, pointing to a group of girls on the opposite side of the lounge. They had a sophisticated air about them, suggesting they were probably sophomores or juniors. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but even if I could hear them, they were most likely chattering about something I wouldn't have understood anyway. They were laughing and slapping one another on the back with giddy enjoyment.

"Now let's say I had an assault carbine in my hands. An M4A1. Then I aim at them, and . . . ratatatatata! What would happen?"

I looked over at them once again. Their laughter was just as giddy as before, but in my head, I saw them drenched in blood, their bodies torn apart, pieces blown all the way out the window.

"Well, I suppose they'd probably die."

“Yeah, they’d probably die. But in that moment, what would they be thinking? Would they have regrets? . . . I don’t think they would.”

She glared at them with contempt, but none of them noticed. They were fully absorbed in their own chatter, so much that they didn’t even glance in our direction.

“They probably wouldn’t have a shred of remorse. Nothing left undone. After all, they’re just living their lives without any goals or aspirations. What could they possibly leave behind?”

“. . . .”

“Of course, I’m not saying life is dull. It’s got its moments. But all these people are desperate. They’re all desperately looking for a way to kill tomorrow’s time. Suddenly they’re all just thinking about ways to kill time. ‘How will I spend to-morrow? And the next day? How can I kill twenty-four hours?’ Like idiots, they desperately scramble for ways to fill their schedules. But what *is* that? What’s the point in that? Tomorrow might as well not come at all, if they’re just living to kill time. If you’re *just* living, you might as well die. . . . That’s what I think, anyway. . . . Ah, sorry, I guess that was all kind of weird.”

“No, it was really interesting.”

And I really meant it.

Muimi-chan was probably thinking this, as well: In the end, what about Tomo-chan? What was she thinking in that moment when she was killed? For Muimi-chan, who had never been able to step over that line into Tomo-chan’s heart, this would remain an eternal mystery. But if I were simply to speculate, if I were to speak from what I had seen as a passive observer, I would bet that she was no different from the giddy girls we were observing: Tomo-chan died with no regrets.

“The dining hall’s probably cleared out a bit by now.” Muimi-chan checked the time on her watch and stood to her feet. “Let’s get some food. If we go to Ryôyû Hall we can probably get a seat.”

“Hey, I’m sorry, but would you mind just going alone? I’m not really hungry.”

“Oh,” she said, tilting her head at me a bit. She started to take off, but then came to a halt and looked back at me.

“By the way, how do you know Mikoko’s birthday is in April and that she’s nineteen?”

“I heard it from her.”

“Let me rephrase that: Why did you *remember* something like that? Your memory is totally crap. There’s no way you would remember details like that, normally.”

It was a rude question, but she was probably justified in doubting me, considering I had completely forgotten Akiharu-kun’s face.

“Eh, well, I have my reasons. I won’t get into it.”

“Hmm?” she said with a puzzled look, but didn’t pry any further.

“Let me ask one last question too,” I said. “Muimi-chan, do you know what *x* over *y* is?”

“Hm? Probably means *x* divided by *y*, right?”

“Yeah, right.”

“I don’t know of any other explanation.”

“Okay, don’t worry about it. Thanks.”

“What’s this about?”

“It was Tomo-chan’s dying message. I don’t know what it means.”

She looked a bit puzzled by the phrase *dying message*, but again, she didn’t pry.

“Mmm . . . Well, see ya later,” she said after a moment’s thought. “Don’t forget about Mikoko.” She waved a hand at me and left the lounge.

I waved good-bye to her. From there, I stayed in the lounge for a while, not thinking anything in particular, just sitting in a daze. Soon enough my throat started to hurt from all the cigarette smoke, so I made my way outside. I put my hand into my pocket, where it touched a piece of paper. I pulled it out to see that it was the memo Muimi-chan had just given me with Mikoko-chan’s address written down.

“Guess I don’t have a choice. . . .”

Maybe I should have viewed this as another good opportunity. Fortunately, the class after general education was a lecture in which the professor never took attendance. I considered my options for approximately three seconds before settling on a self-declared holiday.

At the same time, I thought about the fact that when I died, not only would I not have regrets—I would be relieved.

And, walking by all those people who were just living utterly without purpose, I left the lounge behind.

2

Mikoko-chan's apartment in Horikawa Oike was even more lavish and splendid than Tomo-chan's. It was far too ritzy for a mere college student; it had an almost sublime air about it.

"Now then . . ."

The bus deposited me in front of her apartment building at just around two o'clock. The time right now, however, was 3:30. So, looking at the facts objectively and rationally, this meant I'd spent an awkward hour and half just standing at the building's entrance.

"What was he doing all that time? Why, he was shaking in his boots at the very idea of visiting a girl of his age in her apartment where she lived alone." I said aloud.

I tried to reaffirm the current state of affairs and apply a personal interpretation, but there was hardly a point. It made me feel kind of stupid. But if I thought about it, this was possibly the first time I had ever made a decision to take an action, and then still hesitated to the point that I wasn't moving at all. If it had been a close friend, I wouldn't have gone to such lengths to consider each and every little possibility and detail, but I had only known Mikoko-chan for a few days (or actually since last month). That didn't bother me, personally, but I didn't want to accidentally put Mikoko-chan in a bad mood.

That is to say, as an innately passive human being, I suck at taking the initiative.

"Man, this is so lame. . . ."

Still, an hour and a half was a bit much, even for me. The longer I stood there, the stupider I felt, but I at last made up my mind and stepped inside the building.

Unlike Tomo-chan's building, there was no autolock here and thus no need for a card key, but there was a security camera watching over the

lobby. Much more effective than an autolock, which is pretty easy to get past. Of course, the most effective method was what they had in Kunagisa's monster of an apartment: a real live security guard.

I looked at the memo I had received from Muimi-chan.

Fourth floor, room three.

I boarded the elevator and pressed four. I arrived at the fourth floor a moment later and began my way down the narrow hallway. Then I spotted surveillance cameras in front of the elevator and on both sides of the hallway. Wasn't security a bit too tight here? Even convenience stores didn't have this many cameras. Maybe a big celebrity was living here in secret. Even though it was Kyoto. Or wait, maybe it was *because* it was Kyoto.

My head full of these meaningless ponderings, I arrived at the door of room three. Deciding that since I'd made it this far, there was no point in hesitating anymore, I went ahead and pushed the button for the intercom.

Inside, I heard a relatively normal-sounding bell ring, and then the sound of someone moving around. Figuring that, as a girl, she would probably take some time getting ready before coming to the door, I prepared myself for the long haul and leaned up against the wall behind me.

"Okay, I'm opening up now!"

Wha?

Wow. That was freaking fast. I guess I should've been glad, but something about it gave me a bad feeling. And as a passive observer, my unpleasant premonitions boasted a 100 percent accuracy rate. Crap. Something big was coming.

“This is pretty late for you, Muimi-chan. . . . Did some-thing happen?”

K-chunk.

The lock slid open with a satisfying sound and the door opened.

I failed to respond, and Mikoko-chan *couldn’t* respond.

It was a dead freeze, and ctrl + alt + del wouldn’t fix it.

“Ah . . . ah . . . ah . . .” She turned bright red, then pale blue. Then back to bright red.

“Ciao,” I greeted, for lack of a better idea.

“*Eeeeeyaaaaahhhh!!!!*” She let out an ear-piercing scream as the door slammed shut with such an incredible noise and force that I thought the entire frame might break. The whole world distorted for a moment, and then came a silence, as if the whole thing had never happened.

Well, if worse came to worst, at least the security cameras could vouch for my innocence in regards to her scream.

“Well . . . then again . . .”

She was still wearing her morning face. Her hair was all messy, and her bunny-print pajamas were partially unbuttoned. So Mikoko-chan’s reaction to suddenly being con-fronted by a member of the opposite sex wasn’t all that weird after all.

“Why?!” came a voice from the other side of the door. She sounded like she was just barely holding back tears. Or maybe she wasn’t holding them back at all. “Why-why-why-why? What are you doing there? Wasn’t Muimi-chan supposed to be coming over? It’s like,

gumshoe Asagi Semimaru solves the case of the sealed room decapitation murders right away, but the culprit was caught red-handed! Oh, my head! I don't get this! Why?! Nowaynowaynoway! You're a ghost! This is a lie! A dream! A nightmare!"

Aw, crap, she was panicking.

I wasn't doing such a great job keeping my cool either, but with her getting this flustered, I might just be able to keep my wits about me. Interesting. So Muimi-chan was originally planning to come visit her. Then that lazy punk passed the role over to me, and she hadn't even told Mikoko-chan about it.

Okay, conditions confirmed. Proceed with maneuver authorization.

"This is creepy! You shouldn't even know where I live! You're an illusion! This is all some vicious prank!"

"Well, I'll explain everything later, so just let me in. No point in standing her talking like this."

"Go away! Hurry up and go! No wait, I'm sorry, don't go! I'll go clean up and get ready, so wait a minute! Please! And forget what you just saw!"

"I've already seen you once, so what's the big deal? Just let me in."

"*No!*"

With that final, sharp rejection, I heard her stomp back into the depths of her room. This was followed by what sounded like full-on battle. She was probably cleaning up. She really didn't have to go to the trouble, I thought as I leaned back against the wall again. I waited half an hour before she finally let me in. It was past four o'clock.

The structure of the apartment itself wasn't so different from Tomo-chan's, but there was a ridiculous amount of furniture and other furnishings. It seemed Mikoko-chan was a woman who liked her material possessions. It wasn't a messy place, but you couldn't deny there was a little clutter.

"Wait a sec, okay? I'll pour some tea."

She wore a pink camisole and shorts. The outfit exposed far more skin than her pajamas from before, but I wasn't about to say anything. Her hair was also very nicely styled. It was like she had become a completely different person.

She placed a cup on the low table. Of course it wasn't filled with tap water, but with delicious-looking barley tea. It had three ice cubes in it and looked nice and cold.

She plopped down across from me. "Um-um-um . . . So what's going on, Ikkun?"

Perhaps still shaken up, she was acting a bit strange. If she had been walking around Shinkyôgoku, the mobile police would have stopped her for sure.

"Um, so yeah, Muimi-chan should be here any minute! It's already past the time we were supposed to meet, oh my God, where *is* that silly girl?"

"Uh, I'm her substitute," I said, waving for her to calm down.

"Wha!" she cried in surprise, and then flashed an ambiguous smile that seemed to express anger, embarrassment, joy, and some other stuff I couldn't put my finger on all at the same time.

"Freaking Muimi-chan . . ."

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m not planning to be here long, so just relax. I heard you were feeling pretty lousy, but I’m glad to see you seem pretty alive.”

“Oh . . .”

“The word *lousy* seemed to spur a reaction out of her, and she hung her head down. Perhaps I hadn’t been careful enough with my wording, I thought, but that was the only way I knew how to phrase it.

Yes. Not only had Mikoko-chan’s friend been killed; Mikoko-chan was also the first one to see her friend’s corpse. She was the first person to have the image of that still, lifeless body burned onto her retinas. And that burned image prob-ably still remained, even now. It wasn’t something she could just bounce back from.

“So you came here because I haven’t been going to school and you were worried about me?”

“Yeah. Well, something like that.”

The reality of it was a little different, but I supposed the difference was negligible.

This time she flashed a straightforward, happy smile. “Thank you!” she spouted. “I’m so happy you came!”

“There’s nothing to thank me for. I didn’t even bring any-thing.”

I realized this as I said it. Showing up to another person’s house without bringing anything was probably pretty thought-less of me. Not to mention the fact that she wasn’t feeling well. But since I had come directly from school, I didn’t reckon there was anything I could’ve done.

“Oh, no problem,” Mikoko-chan said. “It’s not like I’m incapacitated or something. It’s just that . . . if I go to school, I know I’ll start thinking about Tomo-chan.”

“But it’s not like you don’t think about her when you stay home, right?”

“Well, that’s true, but . . .” She laughed weakly. “But seeing you has cheered me up. I’m okay. I’ll be going to school again starting tomorrow.”

“I don’t really think the school thing matters one way or the other. Have the police been visiting you?”

“Yeah, a few times. A big guy and kind of a scary lady. But I *was* the one who found her body, after all, and this *is* a murder case.”

“Who could’ve killed her?” I said, not so much asking as talking to myself, but still loud enough so that Mikoko-chan could hear.

“I don’t know.” Her weak response was no surprise. “Tomo-chan wasn’t the type of girl to make enemies. That’s for sure.”

“Yeah, that’s what Muimi-chan said, too. But I wonder . . . realistically speaking, is it actually possible to live without ever being resented or disliked by anybody? I have my doubts about that.”

“Huh?”

“I think it’s worth considering the possibility that you only feel that way about Tomo-chan because you two were such good friends, at that in reality, someone out there did resent her. Even if that resentment was unmerited.”

She grew unbearably silent. She wore such an expression of pain that I blurted out an apology. “Sorry.” She may have been acting strong,

but she was still in no state to be discussing things like this yet.

"I shouldn't have come here after all, huh?"

"Huh? Why?"

I really hadn't meant for her to hear me. But her face swung back up at me. She'd heard. "Ikkun, that isn't true. I'm glad you came."

"Come on . . . you're just trying to look cheerful because I'm here, right?"

A close friend, one who could speak frankly to her, like Muimi-chan, would have been much better in this situation.

"But that isn't true," she persisted. "Even if I am just acting, the more I do it, the truer it'll become, right? I'm fine. I'm really glad you came. Even if you were just doing what Muimi-chan said and you really hate being here."

"I don't hate being here. . . . If I hate something, I say so."

"Really?"

"Nah, I just thought I'd try saying it. I'm actually pretty easy to push around."

"I don't doubt that," she agreed.

I let out something like a sigh and stretched my arms. "All joking aside, how are you really feeling? Are you finally starting to get over the shock?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. It's just . . ." Her eyes shifted to my right. I followed her gaze to see that there were scattered piles of newspapers and

magazines lying around. “Umm, do you mind if I talk about when I was in elementary school and stuff?”

“Go for it. I’ll listen.”

“It was when I was in the third grade. The building my class was in was undergoing construction, so trucks and bulldozers were constantly coming and going. But then one day, there was sort of a near miss, and a truck carrying a big load of sand crashed into the first-grade building.”

“Gee, I wouldn’t call something that big a ‘near miss.’ ”

“Well, maybe not. The wall was smashed in, and sand spilled into the classroom, burying some of the first graders. It was a mess. But you know, we were still kids, so to us it was almost like a fun event. Muimi-chan was going wild, surfing on the sand mound and stuff.”

“Heh.” She really did seem like she would’ve been that kind of kid.

“So, then, the next day. I woke up early and went to read the newspaper. Anybody would be proud to have their school mentioned in the newspaper, right? I mean, it was just be-cause the accident had happened there, so it wasn’t really any-thing to be proud of, but just the idea that my school was ‘in the papers’ was enough to make me happy.”

“Well, you were just a kid.”

“But you know what? It wasn’t in the paper,” she said with an uncharacteristically glum sigh. “To me, it was such a big incident, but on a national level, it wasn’t a big deal at all. I don’t remember what the headline article was that day, but in that moment, it felt like someone was telling me, ‘Your existence isn’t worth squat.’ Something so amazing to me didn’t mean a damn thing to everyone else. It was the saddest feeling.”

“. . .”

“I feel kind of the same way now,” she said, pointing to the stacks of newspapers and magazines. I could see where she was coming from. Sensational murder stories like this Kyoto prowler were one thing, but the papers weren’t likely to dwell for very long on something as ordinary (sorry to say) as the murder of a single college student in her apartment. It would be in the news the next day, and then maybe the next at best. But even then, it would be a brief article that didn’t take up too many column inches.

I grew silent. Mikoko-chan did likewise. We remained in complete silence like this for a while, but she was the first one to break it, with a question that took things in a confusing new direction.

“Ikkun, have you gone antiquing or anything with Asano-san since the other day?”

“Huh?” I blinked at her. “What? What do you mean?”

“I . . . oh, I’m sorry! I don’t know where that came from! I didn’t mean to ask that!”

“It’s okay. . . .”

Now how did she know that I went antiquing with Miiko-san sometimes? There was no way Miiko-san would’ve told her something that personal. Come to think of it, I seemed to remember that I might have promised to go with her again . . . oh, yeah, that’s right. Was Mikoko-chan awake that time?

“Does it bother you, by any chance?” I asked.

“What what what? Does what bother me?”

I had asked because I thought she might be feeling bad that I had to promise to go antiquing with Miiko-san just to thank her for putting Mikoko-chan up for the night, but this nervous reaction was not what I was expecting. There was just no reading this girl.

"Anyway, don't let it bother you. We do that a lot."

"You do?"

"Yeah. She likes antiquing quite a bit. Did she show you inside her closet? As small as that room is, she won't stop buying antiques. I guess she sells them after she's enjoyed them for a while, though. She says art isn't something one person should monopolize." At the same time, however, she was no saint herself. "Basically I'm there to carry her stuff. Even a guy like me has *some* basic strength, and they say you should always lend what you have to others. I'm not particularly interested in antiques, but that doesn't mean I hate them or anything, so if she asks me, I go."

"Huh. I see. So you and Asano-san go out . . . a lot . . . and stuff." For some reason her voice was trailing off.

"Not a lot, really. But you see, she's been in Kyoto for a long time. She said she's been living here alone ever since she dropped out of high school. I got her to show me around to all the Buddhist temples and shrines once while we were antiquing, like Seimei Shrine and the Philosopher's Walk. Do you know 'em?"

"Yeah. Well, I know the names, anyway. I'm not really interested in that stuff."

"Huh? Didn't you say you knew Kyoto pretty well?"

How could she know Kyoto well if she wasn't even interested in the temples and shrines?

“Oh, uh, well, you know, yadda yadda yadda,” she said, blatantly dodging the question. “How come you only remember that kind of stuff? . . . Er, I mean, you and Asano-san must be pretty close then, huh?”

This conversation was starting to sound familiar. She was awfully hung up on the whole Miiko-san subject. Had some-thing happened between them? I couldn’t imagine what might have taken place in just a single night. Why was she trying so hard to bring me and Miiko-san together? It didn’t make much sense to me.

“Yeah, well, she’s a pretty interesting person and all,” I said. “But we’re not ‘close,’ per se; she kind of takes care of me. Like sometimes she lends me her car. It’s a Fiat 500. You know, *the* Fiat 500.”

“Huh . . . well, maybe it’s all okay then.”

Apparently having no interest in cars whatsoever (she drove a ‘scoot,’ after all), she let my words pass right through her and started babbling about something I didn’t understand.

“I wonder if she minds you coming to another girl’s house like this.”

“Huh? Oh. Uhh, are you telling me to leave?”

“No, that’s not what I mean! I mean, you go out with her and stuff, right? So, I mean . . . dammit, Ikkun, you pinhead!” she shrieked, slamming her hands on the table, her face bright red. Why she was getting so emotional over this, I had absolutely no idea. All I could do was be confused. It all seemed awfully unreasonable to me, but it was obvious that my presence was only making her angry.

“I don’t really get it, but I’m sorry,” I said.

“Ahhh,” she moaned. “Fine, let me put it another way. You and Asano-san go shopping and stuff together, right?”

“Well, yeah. Not to run the point into the ground or any-thing.”

“So would you go shopping and stuff with me too, then?”

Her logic here was beyond my comprehension, but her face was written with such a sincere look of what could only be described as “last-ditch desperation” that I just couldn’t bear to point that out.

“Yeah, I guess I would. No reason not to.”

“Really? For sure? You’re not just saying that because you’re on the spot?”

Her whole body leaned forward like her life depended on the answer to this question. She chewed on her lip. She looked for all the world like a little kid who was about to start bawling. Her emotions were exposed so plainly that there was no way you would guess she was a university student about to turn nineteen.

“You sure are hung up on this. Did something happen, by any chance?”

“Answer the question!”

“I mean . . . probably. I can promise, if you’d like.”

“Really? You really mean it?”

“I don’t lie. As a general rule.”

“You absolutely mean it?”

“If there’s something you want to buy, sure.”

“This is a promise! If you forget, I’ll be pissed!”

“Okay.”

Overwhelmed by Mikoko-chan, I had gone and let her pull a promise out of me. But it wasn't such a terrible thing, so I decided to let it slide. This, at last, seemed to calm her down, and she proceeded to drink down the tea in her cup in a single gulp.

"Ahh," she sighed. "I'm so sorry. Occasionally I get a little emotional and I don't even know what I'm saying."

"Occasionally? Did you just say occasionally?"

"Er, well, all the time," she nodded, sheepishly.

Huh.

The shock of Tomo-chan's death. Certainly Mikoko-chan wasn't completely over it, but at least she wasn't so down that she was thinking about following after her by committing suicide or anything. Somehow she was keeping herself together. Some of the stuff she was saying didn't make a lot of sense, but that was forgivable. It seemed she was okay for the time being. She would probably be mostly recovered by Saturday.

"Well, that's it for me today," I said, starting to get up. "I'm afraid I've got to go."

"What-what-what? You're going already? Oh, I'm sorry, I did put you in a bad mood, didn't I?"

"I said I didn't plan on staying long when I got here, right? Well, let's get together again soon."

"Ah, um!" she said, stopping me as I tried to leave. "Um . . . um, Ikkun."

"What?"

“Um . . .” She hesitated a bit, a *lot*, rather, and thought for a while before she spoke. “What do you think Tomo-chan wanted to say that last time you talked to her?” she said.

The final phone call.

Tomo-chan had tried to tell me something.

“I have no idea, really. That day was the first time I ever even talked to her, so how could I possibly know something like that? I don’t even know why she was talking to me. But, Mikoko-chan, you must have some idea, right?”

“I . . .” she dropped her head down. “I don’t know. I don’t even have a clue.”

“. . .”

“Because Tomo-chan never talked to anyone.”

She never talked.

She never opened up to anybody. She kept her cautious distance.

“It was like our friendship took place through an unbreakable sheet of glass. She never told me anything deep about herself, about what she felt in her heart.”

“. . .”

Then why had such a person made an attempt to talk to me?
“Nonsense,” I muttered aloud.

“Huh? What?”

“I doubt I’ll get much of an answer out of you with the current state you’re in, so I won’t ask a lot, but Mikoko-chan, will you answer just

this one question for me?"

"Wh . . ." She wore a puzzled expression. "What?"

"What do you think *x* over *y* means?"

She thought it over for a moment. "I don't know," she answered.

Oh, I see. How about that.

I nodded and said, "Well, see you at school. Sorry I bothered you." With that, I left her apartment. I proceeded out of the building and began contemplating what to do next.

Horikawa Oike.

There was quite a distance between here and my apartment, but even still, I could probably make it home in around thirty minutes on foot. It seemed like a waste of money to bother getting on a bus, so I decided to just walk.

It never crossed my mind that the world's greatest entrepreneur might be waiting in my room.

3

Near my apartment, by Senbon-demizu, I ran into Miiko-san, who was out for a stroll, aloof from the world. When she noticed me, she sped up to a pace unusually fast for her and came over to greet me.

"Yo."

"Hello. On your way to work?"

"Nope. Today I'm going to Mount Hiei."

“Ahh, with Suzunashi-san?”

She nodded. Suzunashi-san, full name Suzunashi Neon, was Miiko-san’s close friend. She worked part-time at Enryaku Temple on Mt. Hiei in Shiga Prefecture. Some called her “Violence Neon.” Others, “Blackout Suzunashi.” She was sort of a cool lady, but prone to flipping out randomly. I occasionally saw her myself, but she would lecture me about something every time. For someone so young, she was strangely fond of lecturing others. It was hardly her only major personality issue, but I liked her more or less as much as I liked Miiko-san.

“It sounds like she wants some advice on something, so I’m going out there. I’ll be back by tomorrow, so watch over things back here in the meantime. If someone comes to see me, just get their name and tell them whatever you want. If it’s someone freaky-looking, don’t worry about it.”

“Uhh, sure, no problem, I guess.”

“Also, you have a visitor.”

“A visitor? For me?”

“. . .”

“Yup,” she nodded.

“When I noticed her, she was breaking into your place. She had a little pizzazz about her. Or rather, a *ton* of pizzazz. I don’t know who it was, but her gender appeared to be female. She didn’t seem to be up to anything in particular, so I just let it be.”

A female? What woman was likely to come visit my place? I didn’t have many friends to begin with, so it seemed like I should’ve been

able to narrow it down pretty easily. But the way things had been going lately . . .

“Was she about this tall? If so, it was that detective.”

“No. That was no detective. Detectives don’t look like that,” she affirmed with confidence. “Besides, I’ve met that detective you’re talking about. I never forget a vibe I get from someone. Oh yeah, and there was a car parked by the apartment that looked like it was probably hers. Maybe it’ll give you a clue. Well, see ya,” she said, and made her way towards the parking lot. Today’s *jinbei* had the word *Tranquility* printed on the back. Yep, she was in a good mood today, possibly because she was going to see Suzunashi-san.

But what did Suzunashi-san want with her anyway? She was the type of person who rarely called on others, so I couldn’t get it out of my head. And just what kind of “advice” was she seeking? She may have liked sticking her nose in other people’s problems, but when it came to sharing her own problems with others, Suzunashi-san was wholly passive.

“Something’s odd here.”

But the more pressing issue for me right now was: Who was this “visitor” currently waiting inside my apartment? If it wasn’t Sasaki-san, who was it? There was always Muimi-chan and Mikoko-chan, but it was unlikely to be either of them. And Kunagisa was an all-out shut-in, so it was highly improbable that it could’ve been her.

I turned onto Nakadachiuri.

“Gah . . .”

Suddenly, everything was clear. Parked on the shoulder of the road, as if to say that it was above all traffic laws, was a spectacular bright red

Cobra. Completely out of place in a city like Kyoto, it was a monstrous, incredible specimen of machinery.

"Oh my God . . . I don't want to go home."

I seriously considered the idea of running straight to Kunagisa's place, but based on personal experience, I could imagine the cruel fate that would be in store for me if it were ever revealed that I'd attempted escape. Giving up, I went back to the apartment, dragging my feet all the way.

I climbed up the stairs and headed for my room. The fact that my locked door was no longer locked didn't surprise me. This was a woman who could mimic voices, pick locks, and read minds: The most difficult task was for her as easy as breathing. I opened the door to see the private contractor, adorned in a wine-red suit as dark as blood, sitting on the windowsill with legs crossed, as if her presence were the most natural thing in the world.

Uncompromising.

Aloof.

"Hey, Aikawa-san."

"Didn't I tell you not to call me by my last name?"

"Hey, Jun."

She gave me a slightly cynical grin.

Aikawa Jun.

Mankind's greatest private contractor. I had met her a month ago through the great fiasco that had occurred on that island. She left me that day with the cool line, "If our fates are linked, we shall meet

again," only to show up to hang out at my university the next day. She was kind of weird like that. And what's more, she spent the following week making me do her bidding, not even allowing time for sleep, until finally having to leave Kyoto for a job. Speaking from that experience, she was a woman with whom I didn't particularly want to get involved. She was perhaps the most unnerving person I had ever met.

Looking at her with all the objectivity I could summon, she was extremely wild—and she was a beauty of such wicked allure it was hard to resist her. She had any number of eccentric mannerisms. And she was completely unapproachable.

She looked at me, searching my expression. "You don't seem at all surprised to see me."

"Oh, no, I am. So you're back in Kyoto, huh?"

"Yeah, well, y'know, duty calls. We can talk about that later, though. . . . Ahh, I get it. You saw the flashing car out-side and it tipped you off, huh?"

"No, actually the girl next door told me."

"Aw, and I was being extra careful not to be noticed. That makes me extremely . . ." Aikawa-san's expression grew sharp as a knife for a moment, but it was *only* for a moment before she reverted back to her normal sardonic smirk. "Eh, what-ever," she said.

I removed my shoes and stepped into the room, then made my way straight to the sink. I poured a cup of tap water and served it to her. "Enjoy," I said.

"*Muchas gracias,*" she replied, and drank about half of it before placing it on the windowsill.

Geez, she took it as if there was nothing unusual about it. Just once I wanted to see Aikawa-san get surprised about something.

"So what's going on? Why are you back in Kyoto?"

"I said I'll tell you later. More important, allow me to apologize for the period of neglect. But hey, you've got a nice place here. It's the perfect environment."

"Exactly where do you see that?"

"That's not what I mean. Come on, you know what I mean, don't you? Well, whatever. So what've you been up to lately, anyway?"

"Nothing, really. I'm just your average university student. I'm not living some *yakuza* lifestyle like you."

"Just a regular old student, huh?" she said, chuckling.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Oh, except for the fact that you apparently define 'average' as someone who starts nosing around when one of his classmates is murdered, and maintains friendly relations with serial killers."

". . ."

"Ooh, *there's* that surprised look. You've made me happy."

She jumped down from the windowsill and plopped her-self down cross-legged on the tatami floor. Whether this was something she felt compelled to do because she was wearing such a short skirt, I wasn't sure, but either way, I kind of wished she hadn't.

"How do you know about that stuff?"

“How do you think I know?” She grinned with unbridled elation. But I had no idea what lurked behind this unbridled elation. I was expending copious amounts of energy just standing here talking to her like this. What’s more, she was a mind reader of the highest order, so my emotions were all leaking out of the pipes. It felt like we were playing poker, but with my hand faceup on the table. She sure didn’t make such things easy. She was like a piece of food that you couldn’t eat no matter how long you boiled and grilled it.

But as long as she didn’t want something out of you, she was a nice person, I guess. She was my type and all.

“I have no idea,” I said. “Not even a clue. It’s not like I can ever tell what you’re thinking.”

“Think. And then face it, man. I’m a lone wolf, but I’ve got a quite a number of friends, in Kyoto and out.”

“Hey, that’s really something. It’s great to have a lot of friends. Even I can acknowledge that. I’ll acknowledge it right now. So what friends would you be referring to in this case?”

“For example, Sasa Sasaki.”

“. . .”

“Ikaruga Kazuhito.”

“. . .”

“Kunagisa Tomo.”

She pulled a single envelope from her black bag.

“Here you go, it’s from your sweet, sweet Kunagisa.”

“For me?”

“Yep. She said it’s the ‘thingy’ she promised.”

I accepted the envelope. Well, how about that. She must have paid a visit to Shirosaki before coming to my apartment. While I was just your everyday, boringly average university student, Kunagisa Tomo was, with all her eccentricities, an expert computer specialist. She and Aikawa-san knew each other fairly well.

As ordered by Aikawa-san, I thought for a moment. It looked like she had come back to Kyoto for a job. Then she had gone to Kunagisa for help with said job, just as I had gone to her for help investigating Tomoe’s death. Then when Aikawa-san went to visit Kunagisa, Kunagisa had decided to use her as a messenger. Was that what happened? But . . . something was missing. There was no reason Kunagisa should have to ask Aikawa-san to do such a thing, and there was no reason Aikawa-san should agree to do it.

This brought a much uglier scenario to mind, and it wasn’t purely theoretical. To be more specific, Aikawa-san was . . .

“Well, now there’s just the simple matter of collecting your fee. Tell me what you know about your pal, the Kyoto prowler.”

Aikawa wasn’t a messenger—she was the collector.

“Jun-san, you mean you came to Kyoto . . .”

“Yup. To have a little chat about morals with that psychotic nutjob.”

Aikawa-san made her living as a “private contractor.” This involved anything and everything. Simply put, she was a jack-of-all-trades, a multitalented freelancer who didn’t limit her-self by specializing in any one particular field. Whether it was walking dogs, solving locked-room murder mysteries, or catching mass murderers who had already

cut up ten people into little pieces, as long as there was money involved, she would take it on. Granted, there probably weren't too many nuts out there offering a big stack of cash just or walking their dog. At any rate, she lived out each day "accomplishing the impossible"—never bothering to make the distinction between legal and illegal.

Be that as it may.

"The Kyoto slasher claimed a twelfth victim yesterday. Seeing as you lived in another country for so long, maybe you don't realize this, but that number is unprecedented in Japan. This kind of incident simply doesn't happen in Japan, much less in a provincial city. What's more, the identity of the killer is a complete mystery. At this point, it's going to require government intervention."

"And so you've been called upon?"

She nodded. "It sounds like there are other people atwork on the case as well—Public Welfare, Walker, Texas Ranger—frankly, I don't really know who. Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of horizontal ties. At any rate, my job right now is just to stop that maniac from claiming more victims."

"Did Sasaki-san hire you?"

"Can't tell you that. What do you call it again? The code of confidentiality? Business ethics? Trade secrets?" She gave a comical little shrug and laughed. "Anyway, it seems a lot more worthy of my time than that crazy fiasco on Wet Crow's Feather Island ever was. That's for sure."

Worthy of her time. That's all she had to say in regard to the grisly murderer who had already chopped up twelve people. The idea of taking on this anonymous monster didn't frighten her in the least. On

the contrary, she was so laid-back about the whole affair you'd think she was sashaying on her way to a picnic.

Suddenly, I realized all over again just how dangerous this crimson woman was.

And I also realized that I was currently face-to-face with said danger.

"Now then. I heard from Kunagisa-chan that you know a thing or two about all this. I don't suppose you'd mind filling in your favorite big sister—I am like a sister to you, aren'tI—on the details now, would you?" she said in a soft, coaxing voice, like one might use to address their pet cat, as her fingers crept up my face. It wasn't that I particularly minded that voice, but the speaker herself was either a tiger or a panther, and it was more than a mere tabby like me could resist.

Damn that Kunagisa. What ever happened to helping each other out? Without the slightest hesitation, she had sold me out.

"What's your problem? Why are you clamming up and looking away? You're being awfully uncooperative. Don't tell me you're not going to tell me. Are you breaking your contract? You promised this in exchange for what's in that envelope, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah, but I said I'd tell *Kunagisa*, not just anybody. If I went and told you, it would be . . . what's the word? A betrayal? Immoral? Divisive? Rebellious? Whatever. The bottom line is that it feels like backstabbing, and that's just not my thing."

"Ex*cuse* me?!" she said, her voice suddenly much more stern. If looks could kill, I would already be dead. Which sounded a lot better than what was really in store for me.

"Are you saying you can tell Kunagisa but you can't tell me? Well goddamn. I had no idea you were such a cold son of a bitch. I see, I

see. Gee, you make me sad. So you'll listen to Kunagisa, but you won't listen to me? I had no idea you were such a tough guy."

"It's not like that. It's just that with Kunagisa, no matter what you tell her, she's harmless. But you're planning on taking some kind of action, right? Getting myself directly involved with something like that, well . . . it's just not in my nature."

"Excuse me, did you just call me harmful?"

"Well . . . aren't you?"

As if she herself were aware of this, she refrained from objecting to my remark, instead murmuring to herself thought-fully. She was, to a certain degree, someone who might listen to reason. Once you had surpassed that degree, however, well, you can imagine what happened then—that is to say, it would backfire.

"Kunagisa will probably just tell me anyway. That girl has a big mouth. I figured I might as well just cut out the middle-man and come straight to the source."

"Er, yeah, I know, but . . . I just have my own reasons, or rather, uh . . ."

"Hm? Ahhh, ah-ah-ah, I get it! Well, why didn't you say so?!" she said with a wickedly and ghastly grin. She beckoned to me. Each stroke of her hand was so alluring, so graceful, that it was mesmerizing.

"Uhh, you get what, exactly?"

"Just come to me. I'll tease you to your heart's delight."

Seeing that I still wouldn't budge, Aikawa-san instead crawled over to me on all fours. She stared up at me with a challenging, provocative gaze. She nestled her body into mine and wrapped her arms around

my back, forcing all of her weight upon me. She applied some pressure, digging her nails into my back.

“Now. What were you saying?”

“Um, I’m terrified of you.”

“By the by, did you know that my index finger is perilously close to jabbing through your ribs into your liver?”

“. . .”

“Don’t tense up so much. It’s bad for you. It’ll make your flesh all stringy. So just out of curiosity, who do you think is scarier—me, or the serial killer?” As she said this, she ran her tongue down the carotid artery on the right side of my neck. The pleasure I felt from this delicate sensation, along with the more pressing sense of fear that she might actually take a gigantic bite out of my neck, bored their way into my brain.

Dammit.

Indeed, the serial killer did make for better company than this.

“Jun-san . . . I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to say no.”

“Oh, go right on ahead. But if you do that I won’t tease you like this anymore.”

“. . .”

“Either way is fine by me. It doesn’t change the fact that you’re going to talk. I’ve already decided that I’m going to have you tell me about this killer. That’s a fact. But since you’re a friend, I just thought I’d ask first. Now do you want me to be nice? Or do you want me to make this painful?”

“Uhh . . . what’s the difference?”

The fact that we were in this embracing position was my one saving grace; I didn’t have to see her face, and she couldn’t see mine. But even still, my cold sweat and pounding heart probably betrayed my terror.

“What do you think is the difference?”

Chomp. She bit down on my neck. She literally had my life in her clutches. Softly, teasingly, she dug her canines into my skin, but at the same time worked a healthy amount of saliva onto her tongue, licking my flesh between her lips, rubbing her body against mine, running her fingers down my back.

“Okay!” I said, using every ounce of strength to pull myself away from her. “I won’t disobey you anymore! Please forgive me!” Sitting a little apart from me, Aikawa-san responded with a sly yet somehow innocent smile.

“Don’t get so serious. It was just a little joke,” she said.

“Yeah, a *bad* joke. Bad for the heart, anyway . . .”

“Hahaha. Actually, I’m relieved. You’re a healthy young man after all.”

“Come on, give me a break.”

I had to calm down. So I chugged down a cup of water. It didn’t take long for my heartbeat to slow down, but the cold sweating was out of my control.

I am no good at dealing with this woman after all. I should have just run straight to Kunagisa’s place without worrying what might happen later.

“Really now, this *is* nonsense.”

After that, Aikawa-san managed to fish out of me every last detail about Zerozaki Hitoshiki, no stone left unturned. I tried my best to weasel out of revealing the key facts, but with her ability to read my mind, I wasn’t especially successful. Every time I tried to hide something, she would see right through me and threaten me, and then either through coercion or trickery would pry the answer out of me. It served to remind me that I was basically her prisoner.

The person known as Zerozaki. His appearance, build, and clothes at the time we met. The way he spoke. The circumstances surrounding our first meeting. What we talked about. Even the details of our secret infiltration of Tomo-chan’s apartment. Aikawa-san drew all of it out of me. At least, as much as I could remember.

It wasn’t like Zerozaki and I were friends. We were just of the same breed, and we were like mirror reflections of one another. We hadn’t exchanged any sort of promise, and he wasn’t preventing me from talking.

Nevertheless, I felt so spineless it was a wonder I didn’t collapse.

“Hmm . . .” After all that, Aikawa’s smile disappeared and her expression grew more serious. She thought to herself in silence for a few minutes. “So this guy . . . Zerozaki, was it? Like *zero* and *zaki* put together?”

“Yeah. At least, that’s what he calls himself.”

“Zerozaki Hitoshi . . . ahhh, that’s a nasty name.”

Aikawa-san looked truly irritated, like the whole thing was just a big hassle. It was the first time I had ever seen her wear such an expression. It was almost refreshing.

“What do you mean? What’s wrong with it?”

“No, no no no . . . On second thought, maybe a ‘nasty name’ isn’t the right expression. But ‘Zerozaki’? Sure is an *unusual* name.”

“Oh, but you know, it might not be his real name. That guy’s no fool. I doubt he would give someone his real name on a first encounter.”

“That’s beside the point. Even if it’s an alias, the fact that he would choose an alias like ‘Zerozaki’ is proof that he’s a nut. And if it is his real name, well . . .”

She began thinking in silence again. Once this lady started thinking about something, she sank into her own world, and if you were there beside her, it felt like you had become invisible. But then again, even an invisible man still exists. In this case it was more like you had become empty space.

“Even as a joke, there isn’t an idiot on this *earth* who would announce himself with a ‘killer’s name’ like that. ‘Zerozaki,’ huh? Damn, that’s right above ‘Susukino’ in rank, isn’t it? I guess it’s still better than ‘Niounomiya’ and ‘Yamiguchi,’ but you know, I actually hope it *is* just an alias. Or better yet, just a case of two people having the same last name by coincidence. But there’s no way that’s it. There’s no way something that convenient would ever happen to me. Wow . . . so even Kunagisa, even an ex-member of the ‘team’ was of no use.”

“Uh . . . is there something wrong with the name ‘Zerozaki’?”

“Yeah, there is. It’s about as terrible as names come. It’s so bad that to us, the worst possible insult you could call some-one was a ‘Zerozaki.’ That’s how bad it is. I don’t really want to bother explaining any deeper than that. To be perfectly honest, I don’t want to have the slightest thing to do with the ‘Zerozaki Ichizoku,’ and that includes giving explanations. Eh, but actually it’s the name itself that I don’t

like. In this case, the individual is essentially irrelevant. He's probably just some irregularity . . . probably. But is this guy really the Kyoto Prowler?"

"Yes, that's what he said."

"So you didn't actually witness him in the act? You're just taking his word for it?"

"Well, you could say that," I said, nodding.

"Hmm. So then there's a chance that he might be some delusional, lying bastard who's just saying this stuff."

"Yeah, there's definitely that chance. I mean, I didn't get that impression, though."

"Really? Come on, he's got a big tattoo on his face, right? And it covers the entire right side. Even in Chicago he'd be a freak. He's been standing out like that and he's still able to escape the cops without leaving a single clue behind?"

"Yeah, well . . ."

Naturally, I had considered this possibility myself as well. But having heard what he had to say, there was no basis on which to call him a fake, and frankly, I didn't care all that much to begin with.

Whether it was him or not, it didn't make much of a difference to me. Maybe he wasn't the prowler.

"That guy is a murderer without a doubt," I said to Aikawa-san. "Aikawa-san, you must know that I haven't lived the most decent life, right? In Kobe, Houston, even here. Hell, even on that island I was almost killed. I may still not hold a candle to you, but I've seen my fair share of Hell in my time."

And Heaven was still a long way from here.

“I never actually saw him kill somebody, but he did almost kill me. He was just using a plain old short knife, and yet the terror I felt was that of someone facing an opponent with a *naginata* . . . no, with a machine gun.”

“Hmm . . .” Apparently convinced, she nodded several times. “At any rate, I suppose the bottom line is that this ex-pert of dissection who calls himself the ‘prowler’ is some-where in Kyoto. Yeah. As long as I have that straight, that’s enough.”

“It is?”

“Sure it is. Combined with the other information I’ve gathered, it’ll give me a place to start. For now, anyway. I think for the time being it’ll be faster for me to proceed on my own two feet, if you know what I mean. If I don’t have a bit of a challenge, things get boring and I can’t function anymore. Know what I mean? Anyway, more importantly,” she said, bringing the conversation back to me, “putting my stuff aside, what’s going on with you? I heard from both Kunagisa and Sasaki that you’ve been sticking your nose in some boring, everyday kind of case.”

“I got caught up in it.”

“You got caught up and then you kept sticking your nose back in, didn’t you? I mean, sneaking into the victim’s apartment? Quit pretending you’re just some passive observer.”

Touché.

“Now what is it, exactly?” she pondered, looking at me with a touch of awe. “You’re a hard guy to understand, y’know? It’s like you have no conviction, or no style. What you say and what you do are completely different things.”

“It’s that clash that gives me my flavor.”

“*What* flavor? Can’t you view yourself objectively?”

“Sure I can . . .”

“You’re more like the comic relief than a passive observer. Eh, but whatever. Do whatever you like. It’s your life, I guess. Not my place to butt in. Not my problem.”

“You’re a cold woman.”

“Not really. Keep studying, young’un. You do your own dirty work. And if you set out to do something, do it to the end. I told you before, didn’t I? Quitting midway through is the worst thing a person can do. Oh yeah, and also,” she said as if she had just remembered, even though that obviously wasn’t the case, “a message from Kunagisa.” She pointed to the envelope under my arm.

“What is it?”

“Don’t go having an affair now, Ii-chan. I’ll forgive a smooch on the cheek and nothing above that. ‘I love youuu, kiss kiss,’ ” Aikawa-san said, mimicking Kunagisa’s voice and intonation and grinning. “She said.”

“Roger that,” I said, throwing my hands up.

4

It had gotten to the time where it was technically okay to be eating dinner, so I invited Aikawa-san to join me. But because she was eager to proceed with her pursuit of Zerozaki as quickly as possible, she refused and soon left.

In the very end, I asked her one final question. “What do you think *x* over *y* means?”

“Don’t look to others to confirm what you already know,” she said flatly. Touché, I thought.

I let out a sigh as I watched her disappear.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

Aikawa Jun.

She would probably find him in a matter of two days. I hadn’t exactly provided a cornucopia of information, but it was more than enough to serve Aikawa-san’s purpose. She was in a state of mind beyond my wildest imagination, and even that was something she was free to break away from whenever she desired. The superiority of Aikawa Jun’s cognitive faculties defied the imagination.

And the two would likely collide. Mankind’s Greatest and the Human Failure would meet head-on. And if it came to that, the outcome was obvious. If Zerozaki Hitoshiki was a homicidal monster, then Aikawa Jun was the ultimate monster hunter. Having a bit of a penchant for taking lives was great for drawing attention, but it wouldn’t be enough to stop her from sniffing him out. The nature of this scarlet woman was one so transcendental, so elevated, that if there was one thing you didn’t want to do, it was make an enemy of her. And making friends with her didn’t serve as a very good plan B. If there was any one saving grace, it was that she had a sense of the whimsical. But it was hardly something that could be exploited.

“I wonder if he’ll get away . . .”

I was just a little worried. Not to mention incredibly sympathetic.

But I didn’t give it too much thought.

I had little interest in something that was to take place a world away from here. Even if it was happening to my own mirror image.

Now was the time to think about my own world.

I took the envelope from Kunagisa in my hand.

Me, narrator,

and Aoii Mikoko,

classmate.

5

CALLOUS

Black and White

Ilikeyoulikeyouloveyoulots.

1

On Saturday, May twenty-first, I woke up early in the morning.

"Time to get up."

I had had some kind of nasty dream. It seemed like I was about to be killed, and like I was also trying to kill someone. My entire body was being controlled by the sheer will to commit harm, and at the same time, I was *being* harmed. I ran and I ran and I ran and I ran and I ran, but sooner or later the figure chasing after me turned out to be myself, and I was gripped with terror. Certain death was just behind me, and yet it was strangely exhilarating. It was that kind of awful dream.

The sheer fact that I couldn't remember it made it a night-mare, and the fact that it was a nightmare made this a rude awakening.

I rose up from my futon and checked the time. Five fifty in the morning. My plans with Mikoko-chan weren't until ten o'clock, so I still had roughly four hours to kill. With nothing in particular to do, I folded up my futon and pushed it into the closet.

I went outside, thinking it might be nice to go for a run for the first time in awhile. I locked up just to be safe, but with a lock of this quality, Aikawa-san wasn't the only one who could easily break in if so inclined. Not that there was any-thing in that place I'd mind having stolen.

I ran east down Imadegawa Street and turned back once Dôshisha University had come into view. I went directly back to my apartment and changed out of my sweaty clothes. Why, oh why had I thought it would be a good idea to run in this heat? I wondered with the usual remorse.

I picked up the book I had borrowed from the school library and reread the part I had previously stopped in the middle of. That alone ate through a good chunk of time, so from there I picked up the envelope from Kunagisa, the con-tents of which I had already glanced over a few times.

The envelope contained police documents. Through what means Kunagisa had obtained such a thing, I didn't know, but we had sort of a don't ask, don't tell policy. What I did know, however, was that Kunagisa could access pretty much any place with electricity running through it, and that within her circle of friends were criminals who knew just about every-thing in the entire Milky Way galaxy. Of course, normally I had little interest in criminal investigation. But these were documents on the murder of Emoto Tomoe.

"But come on . . ."

I flipped through the paper-clipped sheets of A4 paper.

There wasn't really any new information. The documents elaborated on some of the more minor details, but most of them seemed irrelevant, and it was all more or less what Sasaki-san had told me. I

was a little bit shattered to realize that this was what I had endured Aikawa-san's interrogation for.

Still, it wasn't a complete waste. There was some information I hadn't been aware of, and it was worth knowing.

"So here we have alibi relations."

As logic may have dictated, the four classmates who had been with Emoto Tomoe the night she died (us, that is) were the prime suspects. Nevertheless, all four of us had alibis, at least for the time being. Miiko-san next door had graciously vouched for Mikoko-chan and me, while Muimi-chan and Akiharu-kun were vouching for each other. The possibility that they had committed the crime in cahoots was present, but based on the police's observations, that didn't seem to be the case. Sasaki-san had made it sound like Muimi-chan and Akiharu-kun went to karaoke, just the two of them, but apparently other people from school had been present as well. In other words, Akiharu-kun and Muimi-chan had a sound alibi, just like Mikoko-chan and I. If anyone had a weak alibi, it was me. After all, Miiko-san could only vouch for what she heard (or didn't hear) through the apartment walls.

But of course, *I* knew I wasn't the killer.

"Okay then, that's all clear . . ."

Next was the list of items in the apartment. When I snuck in with Zerozaki, I didn't think anything was missing, but apparently I was wrong. The police documents gave a complete list of everything inside Tomo-chan's apartment, from the largest piece of furniture to the smallest accessory. It was like the concept of privacy no longer even existed, but at the same time, it gave you a good idea of who this Emoto Tomo character was.

It was just that on this list, one thing was missing—the liquid-filled capsule neckstrap Akiharu-kun had given Tomoe-chan as a birthday present.

I had seen him give it to her with my own eyes, so it was strange that it wasn't on the list. The most logical explanation to come to mind was that the killer had taken it, but that just raised the question of why the killer would want such a thing.

"It wasn't exactly worth a lot. . . ."

Meanwhile, the cell phone she had used to call me had apparently been found in her pocket. The documents included corroboration of the call based on the call history in her phone's memory.

No foreign objects had appeared in her apartment either. Evidently the killer had left with the think cloth allegedly used to strangle her.

"Cloth . . . cloth . . . cloth, eh?"

Next was a thoroughly documented account of Mikoko's discovery of the body, which was information I hadn't been able to draw out of her. She had visited Tomo-chan's apartment in the morning and called her room on the intercom. But there was no answer. She wouldn't pick up her phone either. Thinking this was strange, Mikoko made her way through the autolocked door as one of the other residents was leaving and headed to Tomo-chan's room. The door to the entrance wasn't locked. I had feared we might have another damned sealed room on our hands, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"And finally."

That *x* over *y* writing.

The police had deemed this the "work of the perpetrator," which made sense. Sasaki-san said herself that Emoto Tomoe had died

instantly, so it didn't make sense that she could've written a dying message. This was something I had realized in time as well. Once again, this raised the question of why the killer would do such a thing. Leaving a sign at the crime scene—this was no Jack the Ripper after all.

"And that's the end of that."

Those were the facts I had deemed useful. But overall, my ideas on the case remained largely unchanged.

And that was fine, I thought.

Based on this information, a number of minute possibilities had been crossed out. From here I would gradually narrow down the remaining possibilities. But for the time being, it was safe to say that a basic process of reasoning was starting to take form.

"But still . . ."

What the hell was I doing? Why did I have to do all this stuff?

Was it for Tomo-chan?

Or for Mikoko-chan?

Going as far as obtaining these documents, dedicating co-pious amounts of time—what the hell was I doing?

"I ought to talk to Sasaki-san again, huh . . ."

There were some things I wanted to ask. Some possibilities left to be narrowed down. I wouldn't use the word *solution* until I had something 100 percent watertight.

I slid the papers back into the envelope, tore the envelope to pieces, and threw it all into the garbage. In the unlikely event that somebody caught a look at these documents, there would be trouble. Besides, having perused them pretty thoroughly, most of the information had been committed to memory already.

Now then.

There was still a little over an hour until Mikoko-chan would be here. Two hours, if you factored in her lack of punctuality.

I lay down on the floor and thought a bit more.

About the murder?

No.

About my own ridiculousness.

Luckily, there was still plenty of time.

Life had only just begun.

2

Mikoko-chan showed up on time.

"I'm not late today!" she said, giving a gleeful German salute with both hands. Though it was probably a given at this point, she was so hyper that you might think she had blown a circuit. She was dressed in a tight tank top and large, loose overalls. She also had her head deeply inserted into a yellow hat that looked like it belonged on a kindergartener (not to be mean or anything). There was something adorable about her reddish hair peeking out from under the brim. The tank top was just a bit too small, making it look like she was wearing

overalls directly over nothing, which was, well, how do you say . . . actually, I guess I didn't mind.

"Well, shall we go?"

I started to leave, but she immediately stopped me. "Oh, wait-wait-wait," she said, pushing me back into the room and entering herself without being invited. She had done this last time too. Maybe invading houses was one of her hobbies. Not a very sociable one, if you asked me.

"I brought you a little something today. To say thanks for spending the day with me."

No sooner had she said it than she opened her bag—a Boston bag different from her usual purse—and pulled out a lunch-box-like item wrapped in a bandana. She unwrapped it to reveal that it was actually Tupperware.

"Wow, what is it?"

"Treats," she said boastfully, and opened it up. Inside were six pieces of sweet potato shaped like Mont Blanc. I could tell by the slight indents that these were handmade.

"Wow, so you do baking and stuff."

"Yup. But don't expect it to taste too good or anything."

"Can I eat 'em?"

"Of course. Oh, right." She pulled a thermos out of her bag, handed me a cup, and poured the contents of it. It was black tea, and Marco Polo, no less. So she had even come prepared to compensate for the fact that I didn't have anything besides water here. This girl didn't let anything get by her.

She prepared herself a cup of tea as well, and flashed a nice smile. "Well, cheers."

I clinked glasses with her and popped a piece of sweet potato. Unfathomable sweetness immediately spread through-out the inside of my mouth. Of course they weren't called *sweet* potatoes for nothing, but this didn't seem like an ordinary amount of sugar to me.

"Pretty sweet, huh?" I said, letting my true impressions show.

"Yep. I looove sweet stuff."

"You don't say." I nodded and popped the next one in my mouth. Yup. Sweet. Come to think of it, I hadn't had any breakfast that morning, so this was quite the convenient little surprise. But hey, hadn't Mikoko-chan said she didn't like sweet stuff before? It seemed to me like she may or may not have said that at one point. I couldn't seem to remember.

Well, whatever.

She was a girl, after all. You know how fickle they can be.

Within five minutes, the sweet potatoes had been completely consumed.

"Mikoko-chan, you're pretty good at cooking and stuff, huh?"

"Yep. It's because I was a latchkey kid."

"What's a . . . latchkey kid?"

"Uhh, it means a kid who's home alone a lot. Kids whose parents both work have to bring a house key with them to school, right?"

"Why?"

“Um, because if nobody’s home, the door is going to be locked, right?” she continued, looking rather perplexed. “So that’s why they call them latchkey kids.”

“Oh . . . I get it.”

I broke my eye contact with Mikoko-chan and stared up at the ceiling to hide my facial expression.

Well how about that, I thought. So households like that exist.

“Ikkun, did I say something wrong?”

“Huh? Why?”

“You’re making a really weird face right now.”

She didn’t sound so much worried as nervous, almost frightened, even. I shook my head and said, “No, it’s nothing.” Yup, nothing at all. Why should something like that bother me?

“So should we really go now? Where do you want to go?”

“Huh?”

“You wanted to go shopping, right? I think that’s what you said. Shinkyôgoku? Kyoto Station? Or do you want to go all the way to Osaka?”

“Oh. Umm. Umm.”

She started to get flustered, as if she hadn’t even thought about it. Her eyes darted around looking for something or someone to save her, but ultimately looked back at me and said, “Uh, a-anywhere is fine.”

What did *that* mean?

“You can’t mean that. You’re the one doing the shopping.”

“There isn’t any place in particular you want to go with me?”

“There isn’t really anything I need. Living in a room like this, I only have space to buy things you can throw out quick. It wouldn’t make any sense to go shopping. Not that I’m against nonsense. There just really isn’t anything I need to buy. What is it you wanted to buy?”

“Uh, well, you know, clothes and stuff.”

“Huh.”

“And I want to eat somewhere.”

“Well, then I guess Kawara-machi’s the way to go.”

“Okay,” she said.

I may not be the assertive type, but Mikoko-chan might have been even worse. Why did I have to decide where she would go shopping? Of course, such questions were pointless.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said, and we left the room together. We walked for a bit until arriving at the Senbon Nakadachiuri bus stop, where we stood and waited for the Shijôkawara-machi bus. Within five minutes, the 46 line bus had arrived. We got on and found a lucky pair of empty seats. We sat down with me on the inside and her beside me.

“By the way, you came on your Vespa, right?”

“Yeah, my Vespa. My Vespa,” she said, looking a bit nervous. It seemed my previous anger had left a strong impression on her. I wondered if I might have gone too far last time, but there are times when even I can’t hold back my emotions.

In fact, it happens a lot.

“So you’ll have to come back to get it . . .”

“It’s okay. As long as I take the bus, the price is the same! It’s a flat fare within city limits!”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

“So you’re not planning to buy a car or scooter or any-thing?”

“Nah. Things aren’t particularly inconvenient without one.”

“Hmm . . .” She nodded ambiguously. “Tomo-chan was the same way. She had a license, but she didn’t have any wheels. She said she just wanted to use it as a proof of identification.”

“Yeah, that’s basically what I’m doing.”

“I see. Maybe everyone’s like that. But I want to start driving once I get my license.”

Come to think of it, I did seem to remember her saying something about going to driving school and getting her dad to buy her a car once she had a license.

“I drive on occasion too,” I said. “Sometimes I borrow Miiko-san’s car.”

“Mm-hm.”

The instant I brought up Miiko-san, Mikoko-chan’s expression grew terribly bored. By this point, even I had come to learn that Mikoko-chan wasn’t someone with whom you could have a good conversation about Miiko-san.

“Wow, so Tomo-chan had a license too.”

“Yup. For what it’s worth.”

“I see. Hey, by the way, did you go to school yesterday and the day before?”

“Yup. Didn’t see you there, for some reason.”

That was because I *didn’t* go to school yesterday and the day before. With those documents from Kunagisa in hand, I had a lot of things to think about. It wasn’t that my role as a student was my lowest priority or anything, but it wasn’t my top one either.

“I met up with Akiharu-kun and Muimi-chan, though. I talked to them about the idea of having an event in Tomo-chan’s honor. You’ve got to come out when we do it.”

For a moment, for just a single instant, I hesitated. “Yeah, for sure. Be sure to invite me,” I replied. I couldn’t tell if I was genuinely agreeing, or if I was just saying that because I was on the spot. Knowing my personality, it was more likely the latter, but in this particular case, just maybe it was the former.

We arrived in Shijôkawara-machi and got off the bus.

“Ooookay! Today, we get crazy!” she declared, stretching out both her arms. And then she flashed me the most beautiful, awe-inspiring, liberated smile I had ever seen in my life.

“Say good-bye to the dark stuff. Today we’re having fun! Right, Ikkun?!”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Yeah! Mikoko-chan, full speed ahead!”

For the next six hours, Mikoko-chan did just as she'd declared, running around Shinkyôgoku from one end to the other, almost as if she really had forgotten about Tomo-chan.

Skipping and hopping around.

Frolicking about.

Vanquishing evil.

Going wild.

Joking around.

Almost crazily.

Almost like she was broken.

Almost like shad had somehow faded.

Like she had melted away.

Dancing madly.

Flying about.

Spiraling.

Like she was scrambling for something.

Like something was holding her back.

Like she was on a self-abusive binge, and yet still somehow mistakable for a pixie.

Like an innocent child, utterly free of sin.

A wholly pure existence.

Freely expressing her emotions—laughing, losing her temper, and at times even lamenting with watery eyes, only to return once again to that joyful smile.

Even I, even I, just some guy who happened to be there.

Me, Mr. Damaged Goods.

Or perhaps she had already made up her mind to confront her destiny. For me, the one who couldn't save her—no, who *didn't* save her—this was nothing more than an excuse, but I still couldn't help wondering.

Was she already aware of her fate?

"Wow, time just flies by, doesn't it? I can't believe it."

"Well, it's like Einstein said. There's a world of different between a minute spent with a pretty girl and a minute spent with your hand on a stove," I said, as if Einstein were an old friend of mine.

"Huh?!" Mikoko-chan said with a look of pure triumph. "Could it be? Are you saying you think that I'm pretty?"

"Well, I don't suppose I'd deny it," I said, simply for the sake of the conversation. If there was one thing today had taught me, it was that giving her too direct of a response would result in me getting dragged into something unnecessary.

I currently had three paper shopping bags in my right hand, two in my left, and two plastic bags on my back. They were mostly filled with clothes, so none of it was all that heavy, but it sure was a shock to see Mikoko-chan throw her ten-thousand-yen bills away one after another. Kunagisa was a big shopper too, but in her case it was all

online from home, so the reality of seeing someone splurging this heavily right before my eyes was a fairly fresh experience for me.

“Well, then . . . should we eat something and then go back?”

“Yeah, yeah! Wowww!”

“What?”

“I’m so happy you asked me!” she said with a big grin.

She was really hyper today. Why was she so damn happy?

From there, we went into a place in Kiya-machi that was sort of a cross between a Japanese-style pub and a coffee shop. The interior was decorated to look like a prison, with the staff dressed in prisoner or policewoman costumes, but despite the place’s peculiarities, the food and the prices were both decent. I had come here once before with Miiko-san once, during which we deemed it one of the top three restaurants in town, but that was probably the kind of thing I shouldn’t bother telling Mikoko-chan. Aikawa-san would only take me to Japanese bars that only served Japanese liquor, Kunagisa only ate junk food, and pretty much everyone else I knew was finicky. If I really thought about it, having someone I could go to places like this with was something to be cherished.

A (fake) policewoman showed us to our cell, where we sat down.

“Would you care for something to drink?” she said. Mikoko-chan ordered a cocktail, and I a glass of oolong tea.

“You really don’t drink, huh?”

“It’s kind of a policy. Like how Muimi-chan doesn’t smoke in front of nonsmokers.”

“Haha, that’s right! You know, it was actually Tomo-chan who asked her to stop. Tomo-chan rarely demanded anything from her friends, so even Muimi-chan listened to her just like that.”

“Come to think of it, she doesn’t seem the type to care much about whether or not she’s disturbing others, normally.”

“Yeah, but you know, she said she’s quitting.”

“Huh.”

“It’ll be good for her health!” she said, sweeping away the darkness about to form. At the same time, the drinks finally arrived. The waitress placed the cocktail in front of me and the oolong tea in front of Mikoko-chan. We ignored this for the time being and placed our order.

“So you’ve been friends with Muimi-chan since elementary school, huh?” I said.

“Yup. And even then she was a smoker.”

“And yet she’s pretty tall.”

“Yup. But I’ll bet she would’ve been even taller if she hadn’t smoked.” Such a thing was virtually unimaginable. “You know, she used to be a bully. She reformed some time during high school.”

“That’s pretty late.”

“She met Tomo-chan, and, well, some things happened. You know, yadda yadda yadda.”

Some things.

Yeah, I'll bet some things happened. They had certainly spent enough time together.

"What about you?" I said.

"Hm?"

"You make it sound like Tomo-chan really had a big influence on Muimi-chan, but what about you? And Akiharu-kun?"

She fell silent for a moment, then let out a deep sigh. "You know, I always thought human relationships were all about the long term," she said. "You spend a long time getting to know a person, and then one day you start to click. That's what I thought. But I was wrong. I was wrong, Ikkun. You don't need to know somebody for a long time or to 'click' in order to be drawn to a person."

"Why do you think Tomo-chan was killed?"

"H . . . how would I know something like that?" She hung her head down. "There was no reason Tomo-chan had to die. There wasn't a single possible reason for killing her."

"I think the reason people kill one another is actually quite simple," I said, ignoring her. "Interference. If some factor is interfering with your life, the logical next step is to try and weed it out. It's just like kicking stones off a railway track."

"But Tomo-chan—"

"Yup, Tomo-chan made it a point never to overstep people's boundaries or be invasive. In other words, there was no reason for her to have been considered an interference to any-body. She was too far out of range to begin with."

"Uh-huh."

"To put it another way, she wasn't even in a position to become the object of somebody's ill will or enmity or malice. Thus, there was no reason for somebody to kill her. She wasn't disturbing anybody."

You're only living,

and that's causing

disturbance to others.

"But it's not that simple. I mean, Tomo-chan wasn't some hermit living in the forests of Mount Fuji. She was a normal university student, living a normal university student's life. As such, she had to form personal relationships, whether she liked it or not. Now let me pose you a question, Mikoko-chan, and please answer with your own opinion. What does it mean to form a personal relationship?"

"Umm . . ." she said, seeming a bit perplexed. "Well, I can't say for sure, but it's like getting close to somebody, I think."

"Yes, that's right. That's absolutely right, Mikoko-chan. Now if you were to go and rephrase that, it essentially means 'choosing somebody.' But let's think about that for a minute. To choose someone means to *not* choose somebody else. The act of 'choosing' and the act of 'not choosing' are just opposite sides of the same coin. I'm not talking about things like how you can only have one best friend or one lover. Such dilemmas are irrelevant here. What I'm talking about is that it's logically impossible for a human being to be liked by everyone, to be able to get close to anybody he or she hasn't chosen."

"Hmm . . . It may be hard—to be liked by everyone, I mean—but I don't think it's impossible. Maybe not everyone in the *world,* but I think it's at least possible with the people directly surrounding you."

"I don't think it is. That's what I believe. People aren't all as kind as you think. There are monsters out there who only view other people as subjects to be dissected. There are blue things that can only process the world in terms of zeros and ones. There are Mankind's Greatest ladies who are cynical about everything in the whole world, not to *mention* other people. There are fortune-tellers who have seen all hope and all despair in the entire world and still go on sneering away. Artists who view their very existence—not to mention the existence of others—as nothing more than elements in her style. There are even people who can only accept human beings as either good or evil."

". . ."

"Now don't you think Tomo-chan's awareness of this was the reason she chose to avoid forming deep relationships with people? She was trying to make as few enemies as possible."

"Tomo-chan wasn't . . . that kind of girl," Mikoko-chan said, fading in and out, but I mostly didn't hear her. It seemed she knew herself that such a claim had no basis. "But even if that was true, the fact remains that she was killed."

"You're right. Tomo-chan made sure never to fall in too deep with anybody, and yet at the same time, she showed superb skill in not letting it show."

It was the very thing I was incapable of.

No matter how hard I tried.

"But despite all that, she was murdered anyway. Tomo-chan was murdered. Now at this point, Mikoko-chan, let's take a look at this serial killer who's become such a sensation as of late. This guy is an *indiscriminate* murderer. Just falling into his field of vision or, conversely, *not* falling into his field of vision, just happening to bump

him on the shoulder, or even *not* bumping him on the shoulder is enough of a reason for him to kill you. He kills mechanically. Automatically. For a killer like that, even Tomo-chan is a possible target. Even I am."

"So then Tomo-chan was killed by the slasher?"

"Apparently not. According to Sasaki-san—that detective, I mean. Apparently, that's the one thing that they know for sure. Now then, if I might change the subject a little bit, let me ask you this: Haven't you ever thought there were just too many people in the world?"

Taken aback by the suddenness of my question, she looked away. Nevertheless, I silently waited for her answer.

"But that doesn't mean you can just kill people," she said. "Ikkun, could you ever forgive someone for murder?"

"No," I answered without hesitation. "It's not a matter of forgiving or not forgiving. There's a far more fundamental issue. That is, the fact that murder is the absolute worst thing. That I can confirm. The desire to take a life is the most despicable human emotion. To hope and pray and wish for another person's death is a hopelessly evil act. It is a sin beyond redemption. It's an atrocity beyond apology, and I'll be damned if it has anything to do with forgiveness."

My voice was so rigid and merciless, I didn't even sound like me.

Complete nonsense.

Who was really the hopeless one here?

"Anybody who's taken a life belongs in Hell, without exception."

"B . . . but . . ." She gulped in terror at my bold declaration, but managed to muster up an objection nevertheless. "Like, what if the

person was in danger? Like what if you were walking around Kamogawa Park at night, and then this Kyoto prowler guy came at you with a knife? Would you just sit there and let him kill you?"

"No, I suppose I would resist."

"Right?"

"You're right. And I might even use too much force and accidentally kill him. The same thing goes for me as goes for everyone else. But I would also realize in that moment, when I'm taking somebody else's in order to preserve my own—I would realize my own sinfulness. I would acknowledge that I'm guilty of a sin so deep that it won't even be forgiven when I'm dead."

"But you were going to be killed! It's only natural to defend yourself in a situation like that, right?"

"If you start thinking like that, you've already committed the sin. Let's make one thing clear right now," I said sternly. "I am capable of murder."

". . ."

"Whether it be for my own sake or for someone else's, I could slaughter another human being. I could eradicate an-other life, whether it be a friend or a family member. Why do you think that is?"

"Why? I don't know," she said anxiously. "I don't think that's true. You're a kind guy. I don't think you could do those things."

"I can. Without a doubt. The reason is that I can't comprehend other people's pain."

". . ."

“For example, I have a certain female friend who lacks most of the basic human emotions. She’s always super-happy, having fun no matter what she’s doing, but that’s only because she doesn’t know any other emotion. As a result, she can barely comprehend when other people get sad or angry.”

It was the only way she could process the world. Never able to distinguish between paradise and paradise lost.

“I’m the same way. No, I’m much worse. I can’t under-stand the pain of others even a little bit. Why? Because I myself can’t properly interpret my own feelings of ‘pain’ or ‘suffering.’ The thought of dying doesn’t even bother me. It’s not that I *want* to die, but my will to resist it is abnormally low. And thus this leads to what I was saying.

“There are a variety of ‘stoppers’ that prevent people from killing one another. One of the most vital ones is having thoughts like, ‘Gee, this probably hurts,’ or ‘Man, I feel sorry for this guy.’ Isn’t that right? It is. For example, I’m sure you’ve gotten the urge to hurt somebody before, right? But you probably didn’t actually beat the crap out of them or anything, did you?”

“Mm. I’ve never hit someone before.”

“But I’ll bet you’ve *wanted* to before, right?”

She didn’t answer. This was the clearest confirmation she could’ve given. But this was no crime. Nobody can go through life without ever harboring ill will toward someone, even if you’re up in Heaven.

“I guess basically I’m talking about an ability to feel *empathy*. You understand the other person’s emotions, you feel mercy for them, and you conform to them. Of course, this isn’t always a good thing. Jealousy and envy both have empathy at their root. An understanding of another person’s emotions. It’s both a merit and a demerit.”

And if, like the woman on that island, you knew *everyone's* emotions, all you could do was break down.

"But let's not wax philosophical about loss and gain, here," I said. "The point here is that I don't have these 'stoppers.' I can't make head or tail of people's emotions. As a result, I have to suppress myself. Doing so proves to be incredibly agonizing. It's not even funny. But somehow I've managed to keep the demons down."

I had some nerve, living life while harboring such a monster within myself.

"Ikkun . . ."

"I could reach my limit any day now. And *that* is why I can't forgive a murderer. How could I? The very existence of a murderer is detestable. Deplorable. I hate all murderers from the bottom of my heart. I hate them heartily. I think I'd like to crush them all."

". . ."

"Just kidding, I don't think that at all," I said.

Our food arrived. Mikoko-chan ordered more alcohol, and I a glass of water. We sat for a while eating our food in silence.

"Say, Ikkun . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Why are you telling me all this stuff?" she said, suspiciously. It had been such a fun day.

Silently, I shook my head. It was no doubt a terribly cold gesture. "I just figured you might want to hear it. Was I wrong? No, right? And,

well, I wanted you to know the extent to which I was damaged goods."

"Damaged goods? How can you say such a terrible thing? And about yourself!"

"It's because it's about myself that I can say it. If I'm not damaged goods, then I'm at least a human failure. Don't you think? Actually, people tell me that a lot. Anyone who's grown even slightly close to me has said so. 'You're out of your mind,' they say. 'Abnormal.' 'A heretic.' 'Grotesque.' 'Shoddy.' And those are all correct."

"Ikkun . . ." Mikoko-chan said nervously. "You sound like you're headed for suicide."

"I won't commit suicide. I promised."

"You . . . promised?"

"Yeah. To the first person I killed."

A pause.

I popped a cube of steak in my mouth. "Just kidding," I said. "Un fortunately, my life isn't that exciting. And I'm not romantic enough to make such an incredible promise. I'm just an ordinary guy who's missing some vital component. The actual reason I won't commit suicide is that, well, it just looks bad. You know, like I'm running from my own flaws. Of course, I *am* running from my flaws, but I don't want to *look* like I am."

"Ikkun, I know you're not like other people, but . . . if you killed yourself, I would cry. I know I would. Forget about what you're missing. You're living a normal life, aren't you?"

"Broken things can be fixed. Things that are simply inadequate can't."

Mikoko-chan let out a deep sigh. “It’s like I’m talking to Tomo-chan.”

“Hmm? Did she talk about this kind of thing a lot?”

“Well, not really. I mean, she didn’t open up to people that much. But if we ever had a ‘real’ conversation, I’m sure it would’ve been something like this.”

“In that case . . .”

In that case, it was truly regrettable. I felt all the more like I should have had a serious talk with Emoto Tomoe.

If I had . . . if I had?

What if I had?

Who would have been saved? Did I actually think she might have been saved? As if.

Rather, wasn’t it *because* we had talked that she had . . .

“You know, about Tomo-chan,” I said without looking up at Mikoko-chan. “I don’t think she would resent the person who killed her. I’m sure she doesn’t, not even a little bit.”

“. . . Why do you think that?”

“Eh, just a hunch. No other reason. But that’s what I think. I’m sure she’s not the type to resent others.”

I even had the gall to use present tense instead of past.

Present tense.

“Of course, they say she was strangled from behind, so she probably didn’t even see the killer’s face. I don’t suppose she could have

resented the killer even if she wanted to, I said.

"The killer's . . . face . . ." Mikoko-chan repeated. "The per-son who killed her . . ."

"But Tomo-chan probably wouldn't have had any interest in something like that anyway. I mean, no matter who kills you, the outcome is the same. In the end, being killed is nothing more than just that. The fact that you die doesn't change, no matter whose fault it is. Plus, Tomo-chan was like me—she had little resistance to the idea of death in the first place. I can say this with a fair degree of certainty. She didn't seem to like herself very much. She told me so that day. She wants to be reborn as you."

Hearing that, Mikoko-chan looked like she was about to cry. She managed to hold back the tears, but she continued speaking Tomo-chan's name softly to herself for some time.

"Tomo-chan . . . Tomo-chan . . . Tomo-chan."

I watched this, unmoved. Honestly, truly, completely without emotion.

"Mikoko-chan, who do you think did it?"

"You know, you sure do seem hung up on that," she said with just a hint of suspicion. "Have you been investigating or something?"

"Yes," I answered honestly. "Well, not so much investigating as wanting to know. I want to meet whoever did it. I want to ask some questions. Or rather, I want to *interrogate* this person. You know, like, 'Can you justify your own existence?' "

"Ikkun," Mikoko-chan said, "You're really scary, aren't you?"

"Am I? I personally don't think so, but maybe I am."

“You apply your own rules to other people. I don’t know how to describe it. It’s like while you view yourself as one part of the world, you view *all* people as like . . . the world’s gears. No, not gears. If a gear goes missing, the whole machine breaks down, but you don’t care if a person or two disappears.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I really don’t think you’re the kind of person who could just kill someone, Ikkun. But I’ll bet you also don’t hesitate to tell someone to die.”

“. . .”

“Am I right? I mean, asking the person who killed Tomo-chan a question like that is the same as saying, ‘You don’t deserve to live.’ It’s cruel. It’s so cruel. Ikkun, do you realize that?”

“Yes,” I shot back. “I’m fully aware of that. I’m as aware of my own sins and of my own nonsense-sputtering nature as I am of the fact that *I’m* the one who belongs in the depths of Hell. Someone once told me that most murders are the result of a person ‘going too far’ or ‘using too much force,’ but in my case, I’m fully capable of fully premeditated murder. I’m one of the rare, deplorable breed of people who can take a life without any need for self-approval or self-deception or self-denial or self-satisfaction.”

“You sure are self-hating, though.”

“I’m a masochist,” I said casually. “And an extremely nasty one, at that. But that’s my way, my style, my assertion. And I have no intention of giving that up.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.”

She looked a bit sad.

It was as if she were looking at somebody in the distance.

Somebody who was already gone.

An ephemeral, painful gaze.

Her expression.

Her aura.

Surely it was because she never hid her emotions, nor even tried to do so.

I could understand.

I could comprehend.

It almost felt like I had gone and understood somebody's feelings.

"But that's . . ." she said.

This was, among other things:

A feeling of affection.

A lovely presence.

An utterance of sentiment.

A truly aloof air.

A truly casual aura.

A singular impossibility.

An inability to remain apathetic.

A dazzling nightmare.

A feeling like reality itself would distort and collapse.

I desired a partner. I faced my partner.

The pleasure of being beaten down.

The pleasure of being run through.

The ecstasy of being dismembered.

Cut into little bits and pieces.

A vital component-stealing,

Heart-clutching,

Mind-penetrating

Smile.

"That's the Ikkun I love," she said.

3

A single, thuggish-looking person was crouched down in front of my apartment. I approached closer, wondering who it could be, only to discover (as half-expected, I suppose) that it was Aikawa-san. Her hairstyle had changed a bit since Wednesday, suggesting she had gotten it cut. It was a slick style like the kind celebrities sometimes get, where the bangs in front form a perfectly straight line above the brow. With her already extraordinary proportions, the new hairstyle made her look even more like a model. If only she hadn't been squatting like some high school thug.

"Yo," she said upon noticing me. She stood up and came to greet me. She had a heartless, somehow catlike sneer on her face. "So how was

your date?"

"You were watching us?"

"I just spotted you in Shinkyôgoku. So I came here to make fun of you."

"I . . . see."

How much free time did this woman have? I was amazed. She was completely ungraspable. There was no way to guess what she might do next. A wily phantom of a woman.

"So you cut your hair, huh? Looking for a change of pace?"

"To be more accurate, I *got* it cut," she said as she tweaked her bangs.

"Well, yeah, I suppose."

"Yup. Like this"—*flick*—"with a survival knife. If I had dodged a second later, I wouldn't have my left eye anymore. I gotta admit, even I was scared."

She must have gone to the worst hairstylist ever.

"I figure I might keep it short for a while. What do you think? Does it work?"

"Aikawa-san, any hairstyle would look good on you. You're a beautiful woman."

"Aw, you're too sweet. But how many goddamn times do I have to tell you not to call me by my last name?"

She put me in a headlock and noogied my brains out before letting me go again. Then she flashed me that wicked smile.

You couldn't hold anything against this woman. If you did, you'd never get away with it.

"So? How was your date? What's going on with that younger girl? Hmm? Hmm? Come on, talk to me. If you've got a problem, I can give you advice."

"I think you've got it all wrong, er, Jun-san. She's just one of the people involved in this murder case."

"Hmm? Oh. Really. Then . . . by any chance was it Aoii Mikoko?" I nodded. Her face went blank. "Hmm," she said. "I see. Well, either way, I guess if you're already back at this hour, you don't have much of a chance."

Incidentally, it was eleven o'clock.

Mikoko-chan had imbibed a ridiculous amount of alcohol, with all the inevitable consequences. She passed out in the middle of the restaurant. I hoisted her onto my back and took her all the way back to Horikawa Oike, entered her apartment, put her to bed, locked up, and took the bus back home. This time she didn't look like she was fake-sleeping.

"Too bad, young'un. Want me to console you?" she teased with genuine amusement.

"I'm telling you, it's not like that . . . and more important"—I decided to change the subject before I had another annoyance to deal with —"so about this hairdresser who did your bangs—was it Zerozaki, by any chance?"

". . ."

Her facial expression distorted.

And became one of sheet delight.

“Yeah. Hell of a kid, lemme tell you. Still only a second-rate killer, but as a knife wielder, he’s as good as they come. He knows exactly how a human has to move which muscles for maximum speed. And take a look at this,” she said, rolling up her right sleeve. Her arm was wrapped in white bandages, stained with crimson blood from underneath. “And he walked away with hardly a scratch. Seriously, that’s one hell of a kid. I guess he’s living up to the ‘Zerozaki’ name.”

“. . . Is he even tougher than you?”

“It’s not a matter of tough or weak. In terms of sheet strength, I’m proud to say I’m several tiers above him. I’ll admit that he is frighteningly quick, but he’s still a hundred years too slow to deal with me.”

Aikawa-san, ever the narcissist. The possessor of unrivaled confidence.

“Still, when he’s dead set on escaping, he’s really some-thing. He was unexpectedly calm too. As a homicidal monster, I figured he’d be a little more hot-blooded. But he was just like you said.”

“How do you mean?”

“He’s *identical* to you. I can’t exactly put my finger on one specific similarity, but he’s just like you,” she said, her voice full of cynicism. “The sick masochistic freak and the sick sadistic freak. It’s a match made in freaking Heaven.”

“So in other words . . .” I said, choosing my words as care-fully as was humanly possible, “Er, in other words, you found Zerozaki and you let him get away?”

“Hmm?!” She grinned creepily and pinched both of my cheeks. “I’m sorry, did I just hear something come out of this mouth right here?

Huh? What was that? Aikawa Jun is just some girl who likes to go around bluffing about herself, you say?"

"No, I didn't mean that. First of all, there's no way you still pass for a 'girl' . . ."

Squeeze.

Huh. Who knew the elasticity of a human cheek was so high?

"Eh, I guess you're right," she said, suddenly releasing my face. She scratched the top of her head with a bored expression. "I guess I've still got some things to learn. Oh, I wonder if that tattoo face is still in Kyoto."

"If I were Zerozaki, I definitely would've fled to another prefecture."

"Yeah, I know," she said, slumping her shoulders. "Oh, what a hassle. Not that I had any intention of letting him get away."

Seeing the icy cold look in her eyes as she said this, I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for Zerozaki after all. Aikawa-san looked pretty damn persistent.

"Well, I'm done bothering ya," she said. She stretched out her back and began to leave. Evidently she had come on foot today instead of in the Cobra. "Or rather, I'm done trying and failing to bother you. Well, whichever. Good night. Let's both have sweet dreams."

"Jun-san. Can I ask you something?" I said to her back.

"What?"

"Could you forgive a murderer?"

"Huh? What kind of question is that? Is this some sort of metaphor?"

“Eh, well, to say it more directly . . . do you think it’s okay for one person to kill another?”

“Yup, I do.” She answered immediately and firmly. “People who are supposed to die should die. Heh heh,” she laughed cynically. “Like let’s say you kill me. Just relax, dammit. The world goes on,” she continued coolly, then waved a hand at me and disappeared from view.

Geez.

“. . .”

If only I could be so defiant. So filled to the brim with cynicism. How wonderful it would be.

“I really am half-baked.”

I was sick of myself.

Not just sick, disgusted.

“But either way, Aikawa-san, it’s all just nonsense.”

I went inside my apartment building and managed to make it to my door without running into anyone. I reached into my pocket to get my key when I felt a foreign object inside. I pulled it out and took a look.

It was Mikoko-chan’s apartment key.

“. . .”

In order to get her back inside, I had taken it out of her bag without asking her. I couldn’t just leave the door unlocked, so I had borrowed the key to lock up. At first I considered drop-ping the key through the mail slot, but it was attached to the same key ring as the Vespa key, so

I ended up bringing it home, deciding to just drop it off tomorrow along with the Vespa. It wasn't like I just wanted an excuse to try out the Vespa.

"Besides, the Vespa and the key aren't the only things I have to drop off."

I might have been antisocial, clueless, and kind of a big jerk, but spending that much time face-to-face with someone, you couldn't just ignore them.

Aoii Mikoko.

"I remember, Mikoko-chan."

I entered my room and lay down on the floor without even bothering to set out the futon.

It was my first day of college after coming back from that ridiculous island. I didn't know right from left in regards to the Japanese schooling system, and it was Mikoko-chan who was the first one to strike up a conversation with me.

"Nice to meet you! Is there anything you don't under-stand?" She was beaming with friendliness. This was the caring gesture of a girl looking out for a classmate who had gotten a late start.

I was horribly irritated. And just a little grateful. Because somewhere in that bright, innocent aura, echoed a slight re-semblance to that precious friend of mine.

This is a real masterpiece," I said like Zerozaki Hitoshiki, and closed my eyes.

No thinking about tomorrow.

No thinking about the case.

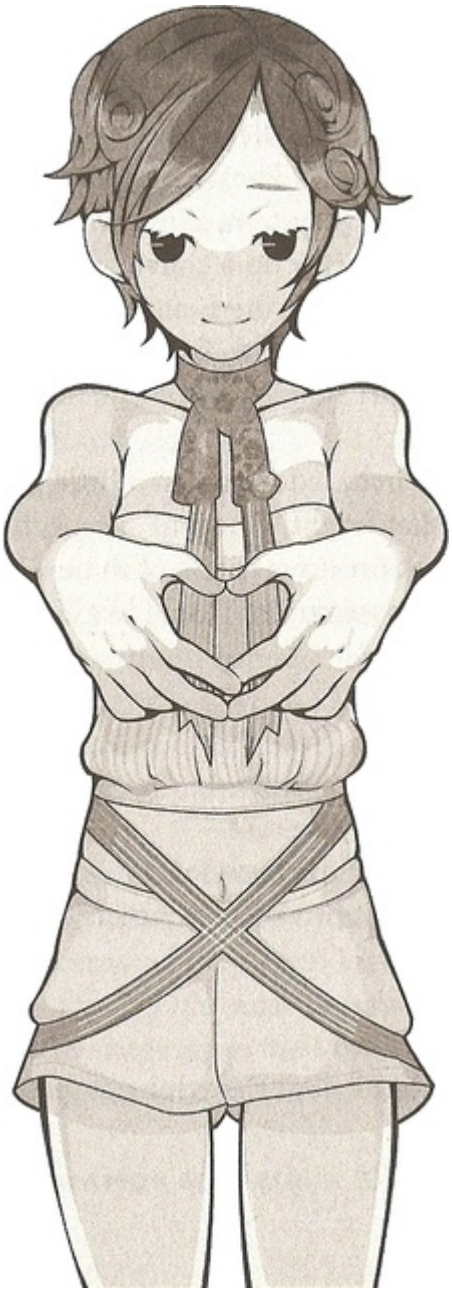
No thinking about the prowler.

No thinking about private contractors or my one and only friend.

I didn't want to think about anything anymore.

Aoii Mikoko,

classmate.



6

ABNORMAL ENDING

That Wraps It up

I'm begging you, please stop getting my hopes up.

1

"I'll be back tomorrow. Around twelve. You'll have your answer then."

That was the note I had left for Mikoko-chan on her tea table. Getting to Horikawa Oike took less than ten minutes by Vespa, so I still had an abundance of time.

I awoke at eight in the morning. I did a little jogging to kill some time, and after that I regretted it. Miiko-san invited me to breakfast, so I went to her place and was fed. It wasn't just Japanese-style food, but full-blown Buddhist vegetarian cuisine. As a result, the flavor left something to be desired, but there was certainly a lot of it, so it at least took the edge off my hunger.

"Well, I have to go to work," she said around ten o'clock, and left her apartment.

I returned to my own room to kill more time. I tried playing a game of Eight Queens, just as I had done earlier, but my brain didn't seem to be functioning properly, and I gave up by the fifth queen. I moved on to the Cannibals and Missionaries problem, but again I got sick of it midway through. If only I had owned a computer; I could have passed the time playing video games. Maybe it was time I went and got one

from Kunagisa. But then again, it didn't seem like a great idea to decrease the amount of space in my room just for the sake of having a way to kill time. Besides, time passes just the same, whether you kill it or not. And like I had said to Mikoko-chan, I didn't particularly dislike being bored, and I was plenty used to waiting.

. . .

As any child won over by shallow wit is oft to do, I read *The Little Prince* at a very young age. I didn't get it. The people around me at that time told me, "You'll get it when you're a grown-up." Recently I had recalled this and tried reading through it once again. I still didn't get it.

"Zerozaki's gone from Kyoto . . . there's no way to contact Aikawa-san . . . and Kunagisa's a shut-in."

I truly didn't have a single normal acquaintance. Of course, I never particularly wanted one. Still, sometimes it occurred to me. I was just a single, lonely guy trying to live, but rotting away in a cage instead.

"It's a hopeless situation."

In the end, there was no way for a guy like me, just a single character in this great big world, to view my situation with any kind of bird's-eye perspective. Especially when, as Aikawa-san had said, I wasn't the main character or even a supporting character, but merely the comic relief. I was just sitting off in some corner away from the world, clumsily babbling about the story.

And something this factual couldn't even be written off as self-deprecation.

"Well, I suppose I'll get going."

The time was currently eleven o'clock. It was still way early, but I doubted I could be faulted for showing up ahead of time. With that in mind, I left my apartment and made my way out to the parking lot. I started up the vintage Vespa's engine and put on the helmet. It was the stylish, half-size number Mikoko-chan had left in my room the previous day. There was nothing I could do to make it suit me, but the size was right, so it would at least uphold its role as a helmet, for what that was worth.

Blast off! I rode down Senbon Street and turned east on Maruta-machi Street. I broke east again onto Horikawa Street and rode the Vespa straight ahead from there.

The sweet sensation of slicing through the wind. I could almost forget about the fact that I was alive.

As expected, I reached Oike within ten minutes. I parked the Vespa in the apartment's underground parking lot and locked it up, exited the lot, and walked around to the front of the building.

"Did I really waste over an hour here last time?"

It was a pretty embarrassing memory. My brain had a knack for remembering only this kind of thing. I guess the best thing I could do was learn from these memories and not repeat the same mistakes.

This time I entered the building without stopping. I gave a quick greeting to the security camera and entered the elevator.

At this point.

At this point, I still hadn't thought of anything.

How to reply to her confession.

What words I could use to respond to her affection.

I hadn't thought of anything.

"Just kidding."

In reality I had made up my mind long ago. I only had one word to say to her. There was nothing to deliberate over. If you thought about the kind of person I was and the kind of person Mikoko-chan was and added them together, an answer would emerge naturally, just like a mathematic equation. Of course, reality never turns out like an equation. It's more like trying to figure out if the last digit in pi is odd or even. Mean-while, I was standing at the height of stupidity, off in outer space with my equations and formulae and calculations, trying to find the area of a triangle by multiplying the height and dividing by two.

I was the kind of person who changed his opinion in the end anyway, no matter what he had decided, so what I thought about now was essentially irrelevant.

I got off the elevator on the fourth floor and walked down the hall.

"Room three, was it?"

My memory was fuzzy, but that sounded right. I wondered if she was awake yet. She certainly didn't seem like she was the kind of person who had low blood pressure and would have trouble waking up, but considering how bad she was at keeping time, I doubted she was much of an early riser.

I pushed the button on her intercom.

No reply.

It wasn't simply that there was no reply through the inter-com; there was no *reaction* whatsoever. No noise coming from the inside. Nothing.

“How odd . . .”

I pushed the button once again.

No change.

I couldn’t sense anyone moving about inside.

Restless. Restless. Restless.

My heart throbbed.

My bodily functions grew abnormal.

I continued pushing the intercom button without speaking a word.

Once, twice, three times, four times.

I quit counting after the fifth time.

I could feel it.

Not suspicion, but a premonition.

But closer still to precognition.

“It was like watching a nonstop stream of movies where you already know the ending.”

Wasn’t that how that prophet had described it?

Like something you could never touch on the opposite side of the boob tube.

Suddenly I understood her feelings, and I’d never even wanted to.

Aoii Mikoko.

My classmate.

Always cheerful, sometimes sad.

The girl who said

She liked me.

Here now was an image.

A scene I had left behind somewhere.

A nostalgic view.

One that had been all too close to me for some time.

That I had forgotten somewhere along the way.

One that was unnecessary to recall.

A terrible,

Detestable

View.

Death.

Nothingness.

. . . .

I mumbled a curse and opened the door to Mikoko-chan's room.

Aoii Mikoko was dead.

2

A brutal sight. A devastating sight.

I stood frozen in the center of Mikoko-chan's room. It was all I could bear to do.

I feel sick. I feel sick. I feel sick.

I feel sick. I feel sick. I feel sick.

I feel sick. I feel sick. I feel sick.

Eiffelzick.

I clutched my chest.

I was nauseous.

It was like I had accidentally choked down some absolutely undigestible object. My eyes fell on the bed. Mikoko-chan was there, lying down.

Sleeping.

Could you call it sleeping?

Even supposing her body had ceased to function.

Supposing she had no pulse.

Supposing the hideous marks left by fabric remained etched into her neck.

Supposing her eyes were never to open again.

Even then, there was no other term I cared to use.

Thump. *Thump*. *Thump*. *Thump*. *Thump*. I feel sick. I'm dizzy. I'm dizzy. I'm dizzy. It's spinning. It's spinning. This is crazycrazycrazycrazy.

Or was it I who was crazy?

Right here, right now, I thought I might collapse.

My pulse was going wild.

It was hard to breathe.

It was hard to live.

I thought I might die.

The insides of my eyes were burning.

The inside of my heart was freezing.

I tried swallowing to calm myself, but to no avail. This was agony. Agony. Agony.

"Aoii Mikoko was . . ." I said, as if making the announcement to myself, "murdered."

Whump.

I really did collapse, right there where I stood, right on my rear end.

I was used to people dying.

I was even used to people close to me dying.

Death *was* something close to me.

And still, this was agonizing. It hurt. It hurt too much.

It was excruciating.

I would probably never be able to forget this. To forget Mikoko-chan's "death itself" burning into my retinas the instant I had entered the room. I would never forget her lifeless, mindless corpse.

Somehow I managed to maintain consciousness. I shifted my gaze back to Mikoko-chan's body once more. She lay faceup on the bed, her bloated, violet-hued face wrenched in agony. Having known what her smile was like made this all the more terrible.

She was no longer dressed in yesterday's overalls. Now she wore a snow-white bare shoulder top with a striking pants skirt of the same white, but with more of a milky quality. I stopped myself from thinking it looked like a burial outfit.

And then I remembered. This was one of the many outfits Mikoko-chan bought during yesterday's outing. It was the last one she bought. She had tried it on and said, "How do I look?"

Finally tired of giving made-up answers, I looked at her and said, "It's a good match."

It was *that* outfit.

When I had brought her home the previous night, naturally I hadn't made her change clothes. I just tossed her on the bed with what she was wearing. This must have meant that she had woken up later on and changed.

And then . . .

What had possessed her to put on this outfit? And who was she waiting for? The power of my imagination was already completely exhausted.

And then there were the red letters, right by her head.

x/*y*.

It was the exact same formula as the one we had found in Tomoe-chan's place.

"This has nonsense written all over it."

I pulled out my cellular phone. I entered a number from memory and sent it. She picked up on the first ring.

"Sasa here."

"Hello . . ."

"Oh, it's you," Sasaki-san said before I had a chance to announce my name. Apparently she could remember people just by their voices. And we had only spoken once. If circumstances hadn't been what they were, I would've been impressed.

"What's wrong? Did you remember something?"

She was cool and calm. This was somehow offensive. It was objectionable. Objectionable.

"Sasaki-san, um, right, well . . . Aoii-san . . ."

"What's that? I'm sorry, I can't hear you. Could you please speak up a bit? What's that about Aoii-san?"

"Well . . . she's been murdered."

Something changed on the other end of the receiver. "Where are you now?"

"In Aoii-san's apartment."

“We’ll be there soon.”

Click. The phone cut off as abruptly as a human life. I stood there with the phone held to my ear. Mikoko-chan remained there in front of me.

“Christ . . .” I said to her still body. It was a pointless act. It was pointless and despicable. “What was I really planning to tell you?”

Mikoko-chan.

There was no prospect of me getting rid of that nasty feeling in the pit of my stomach. Not a chance.

The police burst into the apartment in less than ten minutes.

“Are you okay?” Sasaki-san embraced me. I must have looked pretty damn miserable, because she seemed genuinely concerned for me “Are you okay?” she repeated. Unable to form a verbal answer, I simply raised an arm instead. She saw this and gave a firm nod.

“Let’s get you out of her for now. Come on, hurry.”

Leaning on Sasaki-san’s shoulder, I was taken out of the hallway. Police were filing in one after another from the elevator. Hey, now. No Kazuhito-san. Hadn’t he come? Maybe he was somewhere else, doing something else. Maybe, maybe not.

“Ughhh . . .” My chest hurts. My chest hurts. My chest hurts. “Ughhhh . . .”

I feel sick. I feel sick.

I really feel like I feel sick.

A discomfort, as if my chest were burning, like my insides were being demolished, like something was raging inside my guts, seeped into my blood and traveled throughout my whole body.

It burns it burns it burns it burns.

The anguish was maddening.

Sasaki-san took me out of the building and helped me into the rear seat of her Toyota Crown. She sat in the driver's seat.

"Have you settled down a bit?" she said, looking back at me.

I shook my head in silence.

"I see." She eyed me suspiciously. "I thought you were the kind of person who didn't mind seeing a dead body. Even if it belonged to a friend." She'd abandoned her courteous manner. "I guess you're more sensitive than I thought. You looked like you were dying back there."

"Yeah, thanks. I'll take that as a compli—"

Just as I was about to get the "ment" syllable out, I felt the urge to vomit. I clamped my hand over my mouth. There was no way I could just toss my cookies in Sasaki-san's car. Somehow I managed to keep control of my internal organs. Dammit. I couldn't even mouth off.

"Hmm." Sasaki-san nodded with a slight look of disappointment. "You're awfully spineless. I'm surprised Jun-san is so fond of you."

Ah, come to think of it, hadn't Aikawa-san said something about being old friends with Sasaki-san? Recalling this completely irrelevant detail helped distract me a bit. I sat up from my hunched position and rested my weight against the back of the seat. I breathed in deep.

“Yeah, I’m surprisingly fragile. Of course, I can’t tell if it’s brittleness, frailty, or if I’m just delicate . . .”

“What in the world are you talking about? You’re not making a lick of sense.”

“Well, please wait till next time. Next time, ‘kay? I’m in a very irregular state right now, so let’s wait till next time before you judge what kind of human being I am. I’m not doing so hot right now.”

“Guaahhh,” I groaned, and shut my eyes.

Sasaki-san was silent for a moment. “From here, we’re going to have to question you about the circumstances of this case. This means I’ve got to take you to the police station. Can you handle this?”

“As long as you drive carefully, I think I’ll be all right.”

“Okay. I’ll try not to make the ride too bumpy.”

She faced forward and began to drive. Mikoko-chan’s apartment disappeared from the window view in no time at all. I couldn’t make out the speedometer from where I was sit-ting, but judging by my body’s response to the car’s movement, there was no way Sasaki-san’s driving style could be defined as “careful.”

“Sasaki-san, is it okay for you to be away from the crime scene?”

“My job is more about intellectual labor than about that stuff.”

“That sounds like, well . . .” I wanted to say it sounded like we’d get along, but I stopped myself. No matter how you looked at it, there was no way we would get along. “Um, Sasaki-san?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“How do you know Aikawa-san?”

She was silent for a moment—though it was plenty easy to imagine the look on her face—and then said, “Sometimes I go to her for help with work. Yeah, that’s all. Do you ever watch detective TV shows and the like?”

“I know a thing or two about them.”

“Yes, well, you know how oftentimes the detective goes to an informant to gather information that isn’t quite legal? Well, it’s like that. We have a businesslike relationship.”

It was an awfully crude explanation. Or rather, she didn’t seem to want to explain it at all. Then again, Aikawa was a pretty inexplicable woman, so maybe there wasn’t much of a choice.

“No, I don’t mean something that specific,” I said. “Can you give me something more abstract? I mean, what kind of person is she to you?”

“Do we absolutely have to talk about this right now?”

“It might take my mind off things.” I really meant this. If I didn’t get something to distract me quick, my stomach was going to burst. “Please, I’m begging you. Just talk about some-thing.”

“You pose a difficult question, you know,” she said, after awhile. “For example, would you believe a story about a per-son who took a point-blank shot to the gut from a sawed-off shotgun and survived? How about the one about someone who can walk around in the midst of a storm of rifle fire with a normal, straight face? How about someone who leaped from the fortieth floor of a burning building a walked away without a scratch? You wouldn’t believe it, would you? Whenever I talk about Jun-san, people think I’m lying. So it’s a tough subject to discuss.”

"..."

I understood exactly how she felt, so I didn't dare press any further.

In another ten minutes, we had arrived at the police station. She took me inside the building.

"Looks like it's exactly twelve o'clock—lunchtime. Would you like something to eat?" she asked.

"Could we get *katsu-don* or something like that?"

"I don't see why not. They'll bill you for it later, though."

The government was anal.

"Eh, never mind," I said, shaking my head. If I tried to eat anything now, I would just throw it up anyway. That I could say with a fair degree of certainty.

"Hmm, well, then go on into that room and wait for me. I've just go to make a quick report. I'll be back in two minutes."

She led me into a small conference room and made her way back down the hall alone. Well, at least it wasn't an interrogation room, I thought as I sunk myself into a chair.

I want to smoke, I thought for an instant.

I had never smoked a cigarette in my life.

Was I bored?

Was I trying to escape reality?

Or was I just suicidal?

Any one of those was of equal worth, if you asked me.

These were pointless thoughts.

This was starting to get pretty bad.

One more push, and this existence known as "me," this state of being known as "myself," was going to be over.

"Sorry for the wait," Sasaki-san said upon returning. She was carrying some sort of item wrapped in pink. "Are you okay? You're looking worse and worse by the second. Even your hands are sweating."

"I'm sorry, could you show me where the bathroom is?"

"Down that hall, on the right. It's at the very end, so I don't think you'll miss it."

"Thanks," I said, and raced out of the room, clamping a hand back over my mouth. Suppressing the nausea.

I found the bathroom right where she had said it would be, entered one of the stalls, and vomited everything that had built up in my stomach.

"Gwaaahhh . . . glllaaahhh . . ." Unpleasant noises that sounded very unlike they were coming from myself spilled from the depths of my throat.

An acid taste remained in my mouth. I had vomited so profusely I thought my guts might have flipped upside down. Slowly, I drew in a deep breath and rose to my feet, wiping my mouth with a handkerchief.

I flushed the toilet.

Phew . . .

I made my way over to the sink and washed my face. I scooped some water into my hands and rinsed out my mouth as well. I looked into my own reflection in the mirror. Okay, so I did look like I was at death's door, but at least I was feeling decidedly better than I had even moments ago.

"Okay," I said.

Revitalized, I muttered as I left the bathroom behind. I made my way back to the room, where Sasaki-san was still waiting for me. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm okay. I puked, and now I feel a lot better."

"I see. Here," she said, placing the packaged item from be-fore in front of me. "It's my lunch. Want it?"

"Is it okay?"

"I won't bill you for it, don't worry." She chose a chair and sat down across from me. I graciously accepted her lunch. It was a fairly generic bento lunch, but my stomach was now empty. I scarfed it down pretty fast.

"Okay, then," she said once I was finished. "So what's going on here?"

"That's what I want to know."

". . ."

Seemingly a bit offended by my phrasing, she grew silent and gave me the death stare. I recoiled and diverted my gaze. "Well, then please give me the facts, in simple terms."

“Er, to do that, I’ll have to back up to last night, so it’ll be a little long.”

“Go right ahead. Until we solve this case, you and I will be spending a lot of time together.” She was smiling a little. Her eyes, however, weren’t smiling, which was frightening. I decided to quit with the mouthing off for a while and be straight with her.

“Yesterday, Aoii-san and I went out. We were in the Shinkyôgoku area. Then, well, she drank a little too much.”

“Oh, really? . . . And then?”

She sharpened her gaze on me as if she had been waiting for this opening. Surely she wasn’t going to get on my case about underage drinking. I realized I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Yeah, so then I took her back to her apartment. I went ahead and took the key out of her bag and put her to bed. Then I took the bus back to my place.” I went ahead and skipped the part about running into Aikawa-san, figuring it wasn’t necessary to recount. “After that, I just went to bed like I always do.”

“Did you lock up before you left?”

“I did. Her Vespa was still parked in my apartment parking lot, so I was planning to bring the key and Vespa back together tomo—today. So then today, I went to her place on the Vespa. When I opened the door and went inside, well, things were as you saw them.”

“Hmm . . . how about the door? Was it locked?”

“Huh?”

I looked up at her as if the question had taken me by surprise. I made an expression as though I were searching through my memory for as

long as five seconds.

“No, it wasn’t locked. I don’t have any recollection of using the key.”

“I see.” She wore a suspicious look on her face, but nodded along anyway.

“That place has a lot of surveillance cameras, right. I think they should be able to corroborate my story if you take a look at those tapes.”

“Most likely. We’ve already arranged with the management firm for a viewing,” she said coolly. “Now, this is just to make sure, but—you didn’t touch anything at the crime scene, did you?”

“No. As pathetic as it sounds, I was just too petrified. I couldn’t even run over to Aoii-san.”

“You took a very appropriate action,” she said. From there, she shut her eyes and thought to herself.

So “intellectual labor” was her major job responsibility. That was already more than clear enough from the time she had visited my apartment. That chess-game mindset of hers was unforgettable, even if you wanted to forget it.

“I didn’t even touch Aoii-san’s body, so I don’t know, but was she really dead?”

“Yes. That I can confirm. She had likely been dead for around two to three hours. We’ll have to wait for the autopsy results before we can confirm the specific details, but the incident is believed to have occurred between nine and ten a.m.”

“This may be useless to you, but . . .”

“Go right ahead. Nothing in this world is useless.”

That was a line I thought I might like to try saying once myself. But I doubted a guy like me would ever have the chance.

"When I put her to bed last night, Aoii-san was wearing overalls. But that wasn't what she had on today, was it? So I think that means she woke up at some point, either in the morning or the middle of the night. And I locked the door last night, so maybe Aoii-san let the killer in herself."

"I see . . ."

"Oh, and just for your information, that outfit she had on today was something she bought yesterday when we were out shopping."

"Really." Sasaki-san nodded. I noticed that she hadn't been taking any notes. Come to think of it, that was true during the time she visited my apartment as well. She was just listening to me talk without recording anything.

"You've got a pretty great memory, huh?"

"Sorry? Oh, well, it does the job," she replied as if it was nothing special. But to me it was an extremely enviable trait.

"Also, as it happens, I was eating breakfast at my next-door neighbor's place during that nine o'clock to ten o'clock time frame, so I think I have an alibi, for what it's worth."

"Ah, I see," she nodded with an apparent lack of interest. It was as if to say she had more important things to think about than my damn alibi.

"You know, when you first called, I thought you were probably the killer."

". . ."

This sudden declaration left me speechless. “You certainly are direct. Excuse me if I’m a little surprised.”

“Yes, well, you would be. But it’s true. The fact is that I did think that, and I’m certainly not trying to hide the facts. I thought you killed her and then tried to pretend you had dis-covered the body. But it seemed you were feeling genuinely ill, and time of death and such aside, there was no murder weapon at the scene of the crime. Which means it would have been physically impossible for you to have done it.”

“. . .”

“That is, of course, unless you’re hiding it somewhere in your clothes right now.”

“Care to check?”

“No, that’s fine,” she said, but by no means could this be considered negligence of duty. Sasaki-san had already finished checking me out back when she took me out of Mikoko-chan’s apartment. Unable to walk on my own, she had lent me a shoulder to lean on. It was kindness—injected with a touch of shrewdness.

I didn’t particularly have a problem with that.

“Gee, thanks,” I said.

“I’m sure your innocence will be proven beyond any doubt once an official time of death has been established and we take a look at those surveillance tapes. But only then.”

She looked me directly in the eye.

“Who do you suppose did it?” Sasaki-san asked. I’d already asked her the same question twice before on other occasions.

“Well . . . I don’t know.”

“Nobody comes to mind at all?”

“Nobody,” I answered promptly. “I mean, Aoii-san and I weren’t really all that close to begin with. It was only very recently that we had started hanging out together and going out to eat and stuff.”

“Allow me to be a bit direct,” she said. “Were you and Aoii-san romantically involved?”

“The answer to that is a no. A no and nothing more. Thinking about it now, I’m not even sure we were even friends.”

“Ahh, I see. Come to think of it, Jun-san did say you were ‘like that,’ didn’t she?” she muttered, seemingly satisfied with whatever explanation she had recalled.

“Aikawa-san? She said what about me?”

“Well, I can’t tell you that.” This tease of a statement was sure to bother me, but it occurred to me that this too could be part of Sasaki-san’s strategy, so I was careful not to press any further. It was easy enough to imagine the kind of judgment Aikawa-san had passed in regard to me anyway.

From there, Sasaki-san posed several more detailed questions and ended with a simple, “I see.”

“Now then, do you have any questions for me?” she added.

“No, nothing this time,” I said after a moment’s thought. “I’d rather just get home and rest as soon as possible.”

“I see. Well, that should be enough for today. Allow me to take you back.”

She stood up from her chair and exited the room. I fol-lowed close behind, and together we exited the building. After getting into her Crown, I sat in the same seat in the back. Sasaki started the car and accelerated even more aggressively than before.

“Nakadachiuri, was it? Off Senbon?”

“Yeah.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay. Throwing up was surprisingly refreshing.”

“You know,” she said while driving. Her voice was stripped of all emotion. “I can’t help but feel like you’re still hiding something.”

“Hiding? Me?”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, nothing in particular. As you can see, I’m just an hon-est, harmless, and well-behaved young man.”

“Wow, really?” she said in a rare display of sarcasm. “You sure don’t look that way to me, but I guess if you say so your-self, it must be true.”

“You sound like you mean something by that.”

“No, not especially. If it sounds that way to you, it’s prob-ably because you’ve got a guilty conscience. Although I do doubt that an honest, well-behaved young man would go around breaking into crime scenes illegally.”

“Oh.”

Open bag, withdraw cat.

Naturally, I'd been prepared for this risk from the very be-ginning, but Sasaki-san had certainly caught me off guard. There hadn't been a single word about this in those documents from Kunagisa, so it had never been clear if I had been found out or not.

She continued staring straight ahead at the road as she spoke. "At any rate, please just relax," she said as if she could see right through me. "That information hasn't gone beyond me yet."

"You?"

"That's what I said." Her voice lacked intonation. And yet there was a meanness to it. Yeah, somehow it was very reminiscent of mankind's greatest private contractor.

"I don't know what possessed you to break into Emoto-san's room, but I suggest you exercise a bit more discretion in your actions. Consider this a piece of advice."

"Not a warning?"

"No, no, just advice."

But there was something very offensive about her wording. Granted, my actions had been totally rash, and her attitude was entirely justified, but still.

"Sasaki-san, I'm just asking, but . . . why hasn't that information gone beyond you 'yet'?"

"Well, I have my ways. I won't go into detail, but I just want you to realize that I have that advantage over you. That's all. But please be sure not to forget it."

All I could do was sigh. My shoulders slumped and the energy drained out of my body. This damn pattern again? Why were these the only

kinds of people I ever met?

"Everybody I know is either extremely smart or has a terrible personality. They all had that same damn character. Just once I'd like to meet somebody who's nice. I don't even care if they're stupid."

"Well," Sasaki-san said without even cracking a smirk. "I'm sorry to hear that. But I have no intention of forfeiting my position."

And we arrived at the Senbon Nakadachiuri intersection.

"Would you like to come inside?" I asked.

"I'm working," she said. I didn't find this particularly unfortunate, nor did I think the opposite.

As a final thought, she opened her window. "What do you suppose *x* over *y* means?" she asked.

"Search me," I said after a moment's contemplation. I knew she'd never be satisfied with this answer. But she simply nodded, closed the window, and took off in her car once again.

I stood there awhile, unmoving, then felt the sheer pointlessness of my inaction. I returned to the building, walked down the second-floor hall, and entered my room.

This quiet space.

Not a single sound.

Not a single person.

A room Aoii Mikoko had twice visited.

Once I had set out *yatsuhashi*; once she had come with handmade sweet potatoes.

I wasn't much for sentimentality. I was no pessimist, either. Nor was I a romanticist. Rather, I was a misguided trivialist.

"I guess I can't say this was a complete surprise," I muttered. "I won't say that. No, no I won't."

I recalled my conversation with Mikoko-chan from the previous day. A conversation we would never have again.

"It was all nonsense, huh?"

Let us hypothesize as to Mikoko-chan's feelings towards her killer. She probably wasn't resentful. Accusing, maybe, but that's it. That was the kind of girl I took her for.

There must have been something.

Something I should have said to her.

What was I really supposed to say to her yesterday?

"This is like crying over spilt milk," I said to myself.

My terribly lukewarm soliloquy. I realized that this was probably the kind of situation that usually makes people cry. The person over my shoulder sure thought so.

Night fell.

Miiko-san visited my room looking concerned. "Eat this," she said, thrusting a bowl of rice porridge at me. She wore an innocent expression, but her eyes were serious. Knowing her gesture had come straight from the heart, I started to feel guilty.

Christ. Just how many people had I caused extra grief by now?

“Thanks a lot.” I scooped some up with the spoon Miiko-san had provided (there were only disposable chopsticks in my place), and helped myself to a mouthful. She wasn’t an especially good cook, but this porridge was pretty tasty.

“Did something happen?” Miiko-san *didn’t* ask. She never asked that type of question. She was just the neighbor who silently and protectively watched over me. A neighbor in the truest sense. This was probably something entirely different from true kindness, but she was a kind person all the same.

Come to think of it, hadn’t Mikoko-chan given me the same compliment? That I was kind?

“Mikoko-chan . . . she died,” I said without any introduction.

“I see,” Miiko-san nodded. She sounded like she didn’t particularly think much of it. “That night,” she said, “by which I mean the night when the young girl stayed in my room, she was strangely grouchy when she woke up the next morning. At first I thought it was probably due to a hangover, but that didn’t seem to be it.”

. . . .

“I asked her, ‘How do you feel?’ She answered, ‘this is the worst morning of my life.’ . . . That’s the whole story.”

“That’s plenty,” I said. “Thanks so much, Miiko-san.”

“You really do lead a difficult life, don’t you? The road you walk is not steep, but it is shaky and brittle. And yet you’re able to go on without slipping. You have my honest admiration.”

“I slipped and fell through the cracks long ago. But this path has a sort of strange gravitational pull, and I’m clinging to the bottom of it now.”

“Whatever the case may be, you’re entering a crucial phase now,” she said, her voice deepening a bit. It almost sounded like a threat. “If you lose your grip now, you’ll never make it. Everything you’ve endured and built up and worked for will spill right down the drain. You probably don’t care either way, but just remember that your life isn’t something you made all by yourself. Don’t forget that there are those you have saved just by being alive.”

“There are no such people.” Perhaps there was too much self-loathing in my statement. Possibly as a result, Miiko-san gave me a pitying glance.

“You carry too much of a burden,” she said. “Don’t think you can really affect people so much. Only the weak turn red when they cross paths with scarlet. As long as you can exercise their own judgment, you’re less easily influenced by others. Your existence isn’t such an annoyance to others.”

“Mmm, maybe not.”

It was just extreme self-consciousness in the end.

Whether I was alive or not made no difference.

Even if there were a murderer in my midst, the world would go on.

“Still, I’m sure there are those who love you. There are those who have unconditional affection for you, that much is certain. That’s part of the world’s cycle. You may not under-stand it now, but remember what I say. There will come a time when you understand. At least stay alive that long.”

Those with unconditional affection for me.

Today, one of them had died.

So then how many people were left?

“I won’t tell you to cheer up. That’s a problem for you to sort out on your own. Just know that that young girl’s death wasn’t your fault. I can guarantee you that. I don’t have any basis for my belief, but I feel sure of it all the same . . . Those who die just die.”

“But . . . it’s like I killed her,” I said.

“Did you?”

“Well, no, but if . . .”

If.

If I hadn’t left her alone in her apartment, if I hadn’t gone home, or if I had just brought her with me, things would have turned out differently.

“And I say you’re taking on too much of a burden. Do you realize the pointlessness of such thoughts?”

“Yes. But Miiko-san, I still had something left to tell her.”

That one last thing.

I hadn’t yet told her that one last thing.

“It’s useless to regret what’s done and gone. That’s all I can say.” Her gaze wandered just a bit. “Also, I forgot to tell you this morning. Suzunashi sends a message. She told me to make sure I told you.”

“It’s from Suzunashi-san?”

She nodded. I sat up straight. It wasn’t like Suzunashi-san was in the room or anything, so I knew there was no need to do so, but

something about that name just made me reflexively fix my posture. Something about that Suzunashi Neon character.

Miiko-san opened her mouth. "There are two types of people—those who are frightening because you don't know what they'll do, and those who are frightening because you *do* know what they'll do. But you're not very frightening at all, so you don't need to worry about such things."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Make sure you do. She said she'll come visit from Hiei next time, so let's all go out for lunch. I think she wants to give you a good lecture."

"Well, you had me up to the lecture. But I'm definitely okay with lunch. Just . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Oh, nothing. Thanks a lot for the food."

I returned the porridge bowl to her. She took it, said good night and left my room. The word *Impermanence* was written on the back of her *jinbei*. It was the second time I had seen this one.

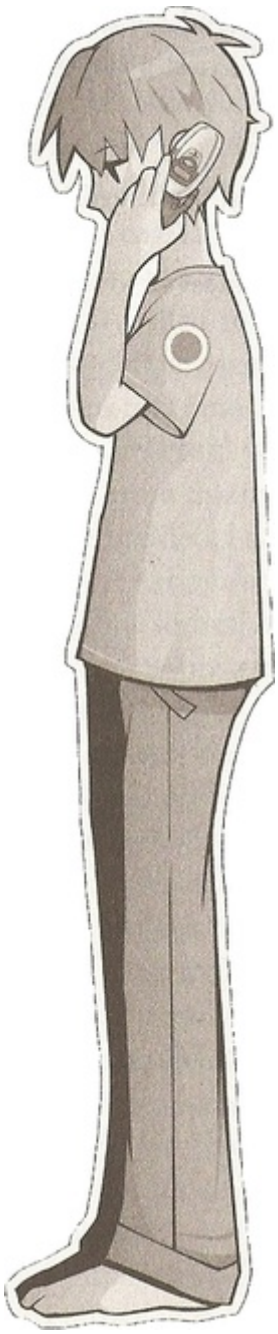
"Seriously . . ." I mumbled to myself. This was a trouble-some existence. Maybe it was about time I had a day-long lecture from Suzunashi-san.

But.

"But I really don't want to go to that restaurant again for a while . . ."

When would this mind-over-matter business be over?

I didn't know.



Me, narrator.

7

SINK AND DIE

Cynicism

Kill every suspect, starting at one end.
The one left standing is your culprit.

1

Three days later, it was Wednesday, May twenty-fifth. I awoke at eleven fifty in the morning.

"I guess it'd be cheating to say it's still morning, huh?"

I rose from bed feeling fairly awful. Lately it had been like this every day. I couldn't wake up at a normal time at all any-more. I guess you could say my body had been rejecting the idea. Naturally, once I had overslept, I couldn't get into the mood to attend classes, and if I wasn't in the mood to attend classes, there was no reason to.

And thus began my fifth straight day of skipping school since Thursday of last week. For a freshman to already be doing this in May, it wouldn't be strange if I ended up having to repeat my freshman year. I realized this, but I wasn't particularly opposed to the idea. There was no one to object—I was paying for my schooling with my own money, after all.

. . .

Since the recent incident, Sasaki-san had come to visit on both Monday and Tuesday with Kazuhito-san in tow. She made a number of detailed inquiries regarding Mikoko-chan's murder, and in exchange for my answers, provided several tidbits of seemingly vital information.

She informed me that Mikoko-chan's time of death had been narrowed down to between nine thirty and ten o'clock. They had also confirmed beyond a doubt that she had been killed by strangulation with a thin cloth, and that it was the same type of cloth that had been used in Tomo-chan's murder. From this the police had determined that the same killer was responsible for both murders.

"What's different from Emoto-san's case is that Aoii-san appears to have been strangled from the front."

"From the front?"

"Yes. Emoto-san was strangled from behind. You can tell by the shape of the marks."

"In other words, Mikoko-chan saw the killer?"

"It's possible," she said, without emotion. It probably didn't make any difference to her whether the deceased had seen the killer's face or not. It was certainly a rational view-point.

She also went over the alibis of the various involved par-ties. Muimi-chan was out sightseeing with her younger sister (named Muri-chan, as it were). Akiharu-kun didn't have an alibi. And of course, I was with Miiko-san. But all three of us had alibis when Tomo-chan was killed, so none of us were really prime suspects, so to speak.

"I personally don't agree, but it seems the big shots upstairs are considering the possibility that these were just robberies gone awry, or possibly some stalker who went too far."

“If either of those were the case, there wouldn’t have been multiple incidents. It’s too strange to be a coincidence, and besides, nothing was even stolen, right? There weren’t any signs of a struggle, either.”

“I know. It’s just that neither of them had the ‘enemies’ to account for it being a simple vendetta case. I guess it would be one thing if it was some ‘enemy of the world’ kind of thing—but then we’d have another indiscriminant killer like the prowler.”

Speaking of which, the slasher case had come to a stand-still. The number of victims had yet to exceed twelve. In other words, since encountering Aikawa-san, Zerozaki hadn’t had taken any fresh victims. He probably wasn’t in Kyoto anymore after all, just like Aikawa-san and I had talked about. I wasn’t even sure he was still in Japan. Then again, if I had made an enemy of Aikawa-san, I probably would’ve fled to the South Pole. Or outer space, even.

“Still, there’s something strange going on,” Sasaki-san said.

“Strange? What?”

“The surveillance camera. That apartment had surveillance cameras set up as a crime-preventing measure. You said so yourself last time.”

“Right.”

“But on the camera videos, there wasn’t a single person who seemed like a possible suspect.”

“What does that mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. We checked all the tapes from the time Aoii-san returned home—or rather, when you carried her home—at ten thirty, but the only people to appear were other residents of the building and you, from when you showed up the next afternoon.”

What did that mean? Was the entire apartment building, in essence, a locked room? What a joke. It was too unrealistic. But then again, if it *was* a fact, such criticism was meaningless.

"But the camera in the hallway must have a blind spot somewhere," I said.

"Yes. We tried it out. It is possible to reach Aoii-san's room without entering the camera's field of view. The stem of the camera kind of swivels like this, see. But it's nearly impossible without having practiced it beforehand quite a bit, and even then, your chances of success would be relatively low. Why would a person go to all the trouble?"

"Well, what if they didn't? What if they came in from the veranda or something?"

"Not possible. It's simply too high and too risky. At any rate . . ." She let out an exhausted sigh that didn't seem very characteristic of her. "I think this is going to turn into a war of attrition," she said.

She was probably already in the middle of one.

"A war of attrition . . ."

But no matter how much new information she was willing to divulge, I had already stopped thinking about this string of incidents. Of course I wasn't at such an elevated level of enlightenment that I didn't even have split-second thoughts about it anymore, but I had been at least half-successful in suppressing that part of me.

On the contrary.

On the contrary, I was hoping the truth behind the incidents would never come to light. I didn't want to have any-thing more to do with it, in any form whatsoever.

But that was impossible. Sasa Sasaki-san was a detective of immeasurable brilliance. This had become evident through my several conversations with her up to now. It was clear how she and Aikawa-san could be friends. It wouldn't be long before Aikawa-san uncovered the truth. Maybe she wouldn't figure out every little detail, but enough to form a consistent story.

And thus there was no need for me to do any more thinking. Or to put it more plainly, I could already see most of the facts. One more step and I would have the whole picture figured out, and that was one step I didn't want to take. Nor did I feel much like condemning criminals. I had gone as far as breaking into Tomo-chan's room and enlisting Kunagisa's help, and here I was ready to throw in the towel, to leave things as unfinished as a baboon without a butt.

But frankly, that's just who I am. Half-baked all the way. I've never put up a struggle. I've never shown any enthusiasm for anything.

"Okay . . ." I stretched out my torso, took a deep breath, and switched channels in my brain. "Maybe I ought to pay Tomo a visit for a change."

As a complete shut-in, it was essentially guaranteed that she would be home, so I knew it wouldn't be a waste of time to just head there now. She might have been asleep, seeing as it was the afternoon, but I didn't care. It would serve as a good chance to give her a stern talking-to for selling me out to Aikawa-san.

Besides, being with her was sure to cheer me up.

With that decision made, I changed clothes and stuck my cell phone into my pocket. I debated with myself for a while over whether I should borrow Miiko-san's Fiat, walk, or ride my bike, but ultimately I decided on walking. It just felt like a good day for walking. Of course,

that would take a good three hours, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

I left my room, locked up, and exited the building.

It was nice out. It had been muggy lately, but that day it was pleasantly dry and crisp. I thought about how nice it would be if the weather was always like this, but even I wasn't sure that I exactly meant "always."

"Huh?"

After walking for a bit, I spotted someone familiar. I couldn't remember who, but it was definitely someone familiar. Just who was it? It felt like we had met before, but . . .

He was a dressed in street fashion with light brown hair and the face of a playboy. He was toting an abnormally large bag that left a strong impression, but it was a poor match for his street fashion.

I've always wondered why street fashion looked so bad on Japanese people. It wasn't so much that it didn't suit them; it was just that it always made them look like they were posing. I suppose you could call it a national trait.

That aside, who in the world was this?

Upon noticing me, he ran over to me. "Yo!" he said casually.

"Hello," I replied, but of course I still couldn't remember him. I knew he was a Rokumeikan University student, but I didn't remember knowing anyone like this.

"How ya been? Maaan, I don't know this place too well. You know, the geography 'n shit. I'm totally lost."

“Ahhhh . . . yeah,” I improvised. “Yeah, those things sure happen.”

“Start coming to school again, man. I had to come all the way out here. I mean I know you’re shocked about the whole Aoii thing, but man, you’re gonna end up having to repeat a year. People will call you ‘Double Dragon’ ’n shit.”

Aoii? Did he just mention Aoii?

Oh, right. Got it.

“Akiharu-kun, right?”

“Whoa. What the hell, man? Don’t tell me you just figured that out.”

Akiharu-kun had a boisterous, lighthearted laugh. I felt as though he could see right through me and just the thought of it had me in a cold sweat.

“You mean you came to see me?”

“That’s what I mean. Just some minor business. Come on, follow me.”

He started walking. His explanation was not very convincing, but I went ahead and followed after him as told. There I was, just going along with the flow again.

“Where’re we going?”

“Kitanotenman Shrine. It’s parked there.”

“What’s parked there?”

“That’s the surprise,” he said with a smile that didn’t quite sit right with me. “Man, I knew you were a gloomy guy, but your face right now is like a full-fledged gloomathon.”

“You, on the other hand, seem cheerful.”

“Well, you know. It’s like, there was the Emoto thing, right? It’s like that toughened me up. Maybe I’m still not over the shock. Man, life sure likes to just peace out on ya, huh?”

It was an awfully casual way to put it, but I got the feeling he was trying to laugh something off. What was it? I pondered this for a moment, but came up empty-handed.

“Akiharu-kun, didn’t Gen. Ed. class just start? Should you really be here just messing around like this?”

“Ah, whatever. I don’t care about school anymore,” he laughed. “I just want to get this favor out of the way so I can relax again. Let the dead rest, y’know? Besides, I hate that Inosen guy, so I’m not really a big fan of Gen. Ed.”

That was short for Inokawa-sensei, by the way.

“Really? I think he’s a pretty good guy.”

“Well, I think there’s a difference between good and self-righteous. It’s not just the time thing, either. That guy’s always trying to force his beliefs on other people, am I right? It’s that kind of thing, man. I don’t like it. I mean I guess he’s not a hypocrite or anything, but . . . eh, something like that.”

“Huh.”

“Besides, I’m not gonna lose any credits just for skipping class a couple times. Our school is easy-peasy, man. They say it’s famous for letting you pass classes blindfolded. Number two in all of Kansai.”

Where the hell is number one? I started to ask, but I cut myself off. The less I knew about that, the better.

We arrived at Kitanotenman Shrine within five minutes. Despite its being a national treasure, something about its proximity to home made it a lot harder to appreciate, and this was actually the first time I had ever set foot on the premises.

"This way, this way," Akiharu-kun said, bringing me to the parking lot. "Here ya go, man."

He pointed proudly to a white Vespa. It was a vintage model. I took a glance at the plate and saw that this was, in fact, the very Vespa that had belonged to Mikoko-chan, that I had ridden to her house on that day.

. . . .

"Oh yeah, and this." He handed me the key as I stood there, flabbergasted. He pulled the helmet out of his bag and gave that to me as well. I had thought it was a suspiciously large bag, but who would've guessed there was a helmet in-side?

"Akiharu-kun, this . . ."

"What do you call it again? Distribution of possessions? That's all this is."

"You mean . . . I can keep this Vespa?"

"Yup. You like it, right?" he said casually. He sat down backward on the Vespa seat. He let out a boyish giggle. "Aoii was saying the Vespa was the only thing that tripped your alarm."

"Hey, that's not true . . . but is it really okay? I mean, these things are pretty valuable. Shouldn't we give it to her family or someone?"

"We got permission. Don't worry."

“But, I mean, it’s only me. We just met.”

“I’m tellin’ you, it’s fine. This was Aoii’s will. Her *actual* will, I mean. Funny how the two words sound the same,” he said contemplatively. “Anyway, that’s what it comes down to.”

“What do you mean, her ‘will’?”

“Oh, that’s to say, awhile back—last week, maybe—she said it. If something happened to her, if she was killed like Emoto, I should give her Vespa to Ikkun. She’s terrible, man. I wanted this thing too. I told her that, and you know what she said? ‘Hell no. Go die. Worse yet, go live.’ What the hell is that, man? We’d been friends since high school.”

“If something happened to her?” Something? If *what* happened to her? “What does that mean?”

“Well, I don’t know. Aoii was Aoii, man. She must’ve been thinking about stuff, what with Emoto getting killed and all. But I bet she didn’t really think she would be next, that’s for sure.”

No . . . you’re wrong.

It has a deeper meaning than that.

You really haven’t noticed?

“Anyway, just take it. Think of it as a present from her.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I played with the key in the palm of my hand, then stuffed it into my pocket.

“Get your own insurance. I don’t really know much about applying. Ahhhhh . . .” Still straddling the Vespa, he stretched his arms up

toward the sky. He gave himself a good stretch, then slouched weakly into the seat. “Things have gotten crazy.”

“Yeah.” I absolutely concurred. “How’s Muimi-chan doing?”

“Ohhh, her. She’s awful, man. This might be a bad way to put it, but . . . honestly, I couldn’t bear to see her,” he said, casting his glance away from me.

Perhaps he was thinking of Muimi-chan, perhaps not. Either way, these words had revealed that underneath his light-hearted, casual demeanor lay true compassion toward others.

Interesting; so he was that kind of guy. Such a decent human being that he couldn’t even acknowledge it himself. Believing he wasn’t anything special, he hid his true values under the façade of a bad boy. He was a sheep in wolf’s clothing.

The complete opposite of a wolf in sheep’s clothing—like me.

“After it happened—Aoii’s death, I mean—I went over there once. To Atemiya’s place. It’s in the middle of Senbontera-no-uchi. Anyway, she was even more depressed than Aoii was when Emoto died. Eh, but what can you expect? Those two were buds from way back in the day. I mean, they grew up together.”

“She was that bad?”

“Dude, you should’ve seen the way she looked at me. *Me*, man. I mean, come on. Where does she come off glaring at me like that? And she’s not eating. Probably not sleeping, either. If we just leave her be, I think she’ll die. I want to do some-thing for her, but . . . it’s like, what can a guy like me possibly say? I only knew Aoii since high school. We were never that deep.” Meanwhile, I had only known her for a short time in college. Even if that hadn’t been the case, I had no words for Muimi-chan. “She’s gonna end up massacring whoever did this.”

“Muimi-chan?”

“Yeah. I mean, I wouldn’t put it past her. That’s how friends are, right?”

“But she’d still be committing a crime, even if her victim was a murderer.”

“Well, sure. You’re right about that. But don’t these things happen? Like, aren’t there moments where you just toss all the laws of society and common sense to the wind?”

“Toss them . . .”

“Yeah. I mean they really are just moments, like a flash. Then you come back to your senses. But it’s never pretty. Hmm, but that kind of thing never happens to a guy like you, huh?” he said with a strange amount of confidence.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you already look like you throw everything to the wind all the time,” he chuckled, pointing a finger at me. “Heh, but I’m just stealing Aoii’s lines. Say, would it bother you if I talked about Aoii?”

“Not especially.”

“In that case, gather ’round, buddy. I feel like talking about her,” he said. “Apparently she was pretty sure from the first time she ever saw you. ‘I’ll probably fall for that guy,’ she said. . . . You already knew she had a thing for you, right?”

“You could say that.”

“To be honest, I didn’t really get it at the time. It’s weird saying this as a friend of hers, but she was a pretty desirable girl. I don’t just mean

she was hot. That has nothing to do with a girl being desirable. A pretty girl is just a pretty girl."

"Do you not like pretty girls?"

"I hate 'em. They always look like they're up to some-thing."

That didn't seem like it was the pretty girls' fault to me, but I didn't bother interrupting.

"But with her, well . . . even if she was up to something, she would always spill her guts about it. She let all of her emotions show. There was no front and back to her. She was more like double-sided tape."

I didn't really follow his analogy.

"I've never met anyone in my whole life who had their in-sides as exposed as much as she did, and that includes back in grade school. I thought she must be an idiot or something at first. Anybody would, seeing someone like that, right? You think, 'Aw, man, what's *wrong* with this chick?!' "

"I concur."

"Yeah, but she was no fool. She wasn't a ditz either. It wasn't even that she was emotionally immature or that she had a low IQ or anything like that. She was actually pretty sharp and clever, in her own way."

"I agree with that, too."

"As soon as I realized all this, I got jealous, to be honest. I mean, I can't do that. It sounds simple enough just to be able to cry when you want to cry, laugh when you want to laugh, but guys like us, we can't do it. We act tough or apply strange logic to everything. Basically we're all warped. That's why Aoii was so lucky; she could get pissed

off if something bad happened. She could enjoy herself to her heart's delight if something good happened. But I couldn't even acknowledge my own envy. It just turned into anger."

"Isn't there a class on that kind of thing?"

"Yeah. Educational something-or-other theory. I'm taking it too. What did they say again? Modem youth lacks a sufficient vocabulary? I think that's pretty true. We don't have enough words to express ourselves, so we don't even know what we're getting mad at. Even when we're really just sad, we say we're pissed off. But Aoii was different. She expressed exactly what she felt."

"You've sure got a lot of good things to say about her," I said as passively as possible. "Akiharu-kun, didn't you ever consider going out with her?"

He gave a bashful chuckle, but his expression was other-wise unreadable. "Well, I'm a guy, too, after all, so I won't say I never had feelings like that. Especially since I was still a virile high school student when we met. And I didn't believe in boy-girl friendships back then."

"Ah yeah, I've heard of guys like that."

But I also didn't really believe that same-gender friend-ships were possible either.

"But it wasn't really like that with her, actually. This goes for Atemiya and Emoto too, but it's like, you look at them and they're definitely easy on the eyes, but it's like . . . you just don't feel the fire, or like, you *wither*."

" 'Withering' is a good way to put it. I can't say I don't fol-low you on that."

“Right? So that’s how it was with her. Anyway, she was a nice girl. Emoto too, but she always had this sort of distance about her. Not that it was her fault, but still.”

“. . .”

“Well, anyway. I liked Aoii, romantic feelings aside. It wasn’t like I was going out of my way trying to make her happy, but I didn’t want to see her unhappy. I wouldn’t let it happen. So when she fell for someone, I had to help out, y’know?”

“Huh.”

“You’re that ‘someone,’ man.”

“Yeah, I know. She told me herself.”

“Oh,” he nodded. “Listen, I don’t know if I should be saying this . . .”

“You don’t have to say anything you don’t want.”

“No, I should. It’s just that at first, I was opposed to it. Not just me—Atemiya and Emoto, too. Especially Emoto. She was unusually upset about it, saying stuff like ‘anyone but him.’ She even threatened to cut off Mikoko-chan if she pursued you.”

“So you guys didn’t like me.”

“You're not surprised?”

“I’m used to not being liked. On the contrary, it’s being liked that’s weird for me.”

“Oh. But we didn’t actually dislike you. We had barely even talked to you. But the thing is—I still feel this way now, even knowing you’re a good guy, but thing is, there’s just something freaky about you.”

"..."

"Like you could easily kill a person."

"Hey now, let's not go nuts," I said.

"Don't get me wrong, man, I'm not saying you *did* kill someone, but it's like you *could* kill someone, and you're just suppressing it all the time with a completely straight face. What you've got built up in your belly would take ten regular people like me to choke down. It's like you're just pretending to be human."

"Geez."

I responded as coolly as possible, but on the inside I was whistling. If I had the coordination, I would've applauded and praised him as well. Being so thoroughly figured out in less than a month's time was an entirely fresh experience for me. It was no wonder he and Tomo-chan were friends.

"But Aoii was really stubborn about the whole thing. She had no intention of giving up on you, so we gave in. But we told her to let us make a test. You know, to see if this Ikkun character was really right for her."

"Is that what that birthday party was all about?"

"You guessed it. I mean it really was Emoto's birthday and all, but still." He let out an exaggerated groan and hunched forward. "But the story just cuts off when someone dies. That goes for Emoto and Aoii both."

"Akiharu-kun," I said, deliberately cutting the intonation out of my voice. "Who do you think killed Mikoko-chan?"

"Like I would know. I don't even *want* to know. If I find out, I'll end up hating, *despising* whoever it was. But I don't like hating people and holding grudges and stuff. It totally sucks, man, I mean, am I right?"

"Huh." I chewed on his words in my head for awhile and nodded slowly. "Yeah, you're right."

Interesting. So Akiharu-kun was living on his own terms. What about me? What terms should I have been applying to life?

I felt somebody's eyes on me and turned around. The only people there were tourists and a group of students on a field trip.

"Huh? What's wrong?" Akiharu-kun asked.

"Oh, nothing. It felt like someone was watching me."

"Hmm. Probably just your imagination."

"Yeah, maybe. But lately I've been getting that feeling once in awhile when I leave my apartment."

"Maybe it's Aoii's ghost or something."

"Yeah, could be. Yeah. Maybe."

He was probably only joking, but to me, there was truth to his words.

"Hup," he groaned as he jumped down off the Vespa. "Well, that's enough chitchat for today. Anyway, it's in your hands.'

"Yeah, I'll take care of it."

"Be sure you do. It's Aoii's memento."

"Yeah. I'll call it the Mikoko."

“Ahh,” Akiharu-kun groaned, “I think you’d better not,” he said. “You shouldn’t attach names to vehicles. It’s just needless sentimentality.”

“If it’s a memento, it’ll be sentimental either way.”

“Ah, gotcha.” He nodded. “But don’t call it the Mikoko.” He stretched out one more time. “Ahhh. Well, I’ve passed on the Vespa, I’ve said my piece about Aoii; I can die happy now.”

“Huh?” Something about his phrasing bothered me. A blurt of suspicion leapt from my tongue, but I posed my question anyhow. “What’s that supposed to mean? You make it sound like you’re on your way to the afterlife or something.”

“Hahaha. Nah, it’s just . . .” His mouth curled into a smile of defeat, or possibly resignation. “I just figure I’ll probably be the next one who gets killed.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It means just what it sounds like. Or maybe it doesn’t mean anything at all. Anyway, see ya later,” he said without giving me a straight answer. He waved a hand at me, turned his back on Kitanotenman Shrine, and started walking. I thought to stop him, but decided against it just before saying anything.

I sighed.

The bequeathed Vespa.

I wondered if it was really okay to use it, but somehow I knew that if I didn’t, nobody would. It certainly would make life more convenient. And I wouldn’t have to borrow Miiko-san’s Fiat as much. Maybe that was what Mikoko-chan had been hoping for all along.

There was something a little amusing about that idea. Just a little.

“Guess I’ll have to buy myself a parking space.”

I didn’t know how that was done. Deciding I’d have to ask Miiko-san about it, I returned home.

2

Whoa. Is that Mikoko-chan over there?

Yup, that’s right. Long time no see, Ikkun.

Uhhh, oh. I get it. This is a dream.

Ahaha. You catch on quick, Ikkun. I guess that’s about what you'd expect from such a realist. Or are you a romanticist? Or maybe you're a classicist. Half and half, maybe. And then you're one-third pessimist.

I’m not sure that adds up.

True.

Hey, you’re not really Mikoko-chan, are you?

Oops. You got me. Well, who do you think I am?

Beats me. Who?

You decide. It’s your dream, after all.

Okay, you’re Tomo-chan, then.

Why do you think that? You might be wrong. I could be Kunagisa-san or Aikawa-san or Muimi-chan or Akiharu-kun or Miiko-san or Suzunashi-san or anyone else.

I can talk to everyone else whenever I want. I can't talk to you. You're the only person I want to talk to that I can't.

Liar. You know there are others.

No, no, no. I don't want to talk to them anymore.

Okay, fine. If you say so. Well then, let's talk. Let's discuss all the things we didn't get to that day.

Really? Okay, sure. In that case, there's one question I've wanted to ask you.

What?

Do you hate the killer?

The one who killed me? The answer is just as you thought—not even a little bit. We talked about it on that day, didn't we? I said I want to be reborn. It was myself that I hated. I don't think of my death as unfortunate in the slightest.

Sounds like you're just saying that.

Well, sure. Anything you put into words sounds that way. Say, Ikkun, do you ever read mystery novels?

I don't read much in general. I used to, but now I just do it when I need to kill time. But I basically know what mystery novels are like.

I see. I'm a big fan. I'll read anything, but mysteries are my favorite. They're easy to understand. But one thing I don't like is how they always put so much emphasis on the criminal's motives. I mean, I know you must need a pretty good reason to do something like kill a person. After all, the risk is so high.

Yeah. A peer of mine said something like that once. The risk is high, but the return is low. Of course, that guy turned out to be a human failure who could only prove himself by killing others.

But, you know, a motive is nothing more than an excuse. It's just a plea to a person's sympathies. When you think about it, it all comes down to the morals of the individual. Do you know this saying? 'A gentleman kills not for himself, but for justice and for the sake of others.' But hang on a second there. What does that mean, 'for the sake of others'? What is 'justice'? I don't know the answer.

I don't know either. Sounds like it's just a means of self-justification. I don't know what your killer was thinking. Or maybe I just don't want to know.

Why not?

Because I can't sense any rhyme or reason to it. I mean, things obviously aren't that clear regarding Mikoko-chan's death either, but in your case it's like everything was totally uncalculated. Like your death was just improvised.

Yeah, maybe. But does it matter? I'm not angry about it, and I'm not sad that I'm dead, either. Really, it's no lie. I'm not the least bit resentful.

And so now you're going to be reborn as Mikoko-chan?

Yup.

But she's dead too.

She is, isn't she?

How do you feel about that? Your own death aside, how do you feel toward the person who sent Mikoko-chan to death? No resentment

there either?

I guess I don't really have an opinion.

Isn't that a little cold? You were friends, weren't you?

It's a little funny hearing that from you of all people.

I've got a friend myself.

Kunagisa-san? Or could it be Miiko-san? I know it's not Muimi-chan or Akiharu-kun, right? But I think you're like me, Ikkun—even if a friend dies, I don't feel sadness. I know how to be sad, but I just can't seem to set foot into that domain. I must have less emotion than the average person.

I can't say I don't understand.

Maybe it's a matter of distrust toward human beings? Like I've suffered some fatal wound that's destroyed my trust in others. A person once persecuted can never believe in another human being for the rest of their life.

I think you're going too far there.

You don't think that.

Yes, I do.

No, you don't.

No, I don't.

People who realize how much human beings love to discriminate can never trust anyone. Japanese people are particularly like that. Like, let's say someone's friend is being victimized by some group. It's one person versus many. Now obviously, the right thing to do is to stick up

for the friend. But the average person wouldn't do that. They would go with the group. Human beings crave to belong to a group. They don't even care who the group is. All that matters is that they have a group and that people are with them. What kind of group it is doesn't matter at all. It doesn't have any meaning or value. And once you realize this cruel fact, it's impossible to trust people. For example, do you have a family, Ikkun?

If I didn't, I wouldn't exist.

That's not what I mean.

Yeah, they're alive and well. I think they're somewhere around Kobe. We haven't seen each other in years, though. Now that you mention it, Mikoko-chan once told me that I didn't seem like the type to show any devotion to my parents. True enough. I haven't seen them since I was in junior high. You probably could call me a bad son.

Sounds like your household has some issues.

Nah, not really. Not at all. We didn't have any problems, actually. If I had been aware of any problems at all, I probably wouldn't have turned out like the person I am. What about you? Do you have a family?

Uh-uh. Not anybody that really feels like one. That's why I decided on a university so far from home. Mikoko-chan and the others apparently had similar situations.

You mean you all couldn't trust your own families?

Yeah, that's right. I can't even trust myself. I don't remember who it was who said "there's nothing sure in this world," but that's about what it feels like. It feels like the whole world is fragile and threatening to topple over and shatter to pieces at the slightest nudge. But in reality, that isn't the world, but myself.

Sounds like you're damaged goods.

You said it. I mean, think about it. Would you define a person who has never cried since the day she was born as well rounded? I can form a smile, but is that enough for you to be able to say I'm a decent human being?

I'm the same way. I used to try to write it off as individuality.

What about now?

Not now. Individuality can go eat some shit. Being different isn't necessarily good. Anyone who's ever thought about the effect being radically different would never preach such nonsense. People talk about "the chosen ones," gifted individuals who have left their mark on history. Most of those people were probably totally messed up. But they were just regular people, all the same. They weren't outcasts. They were just regular people, except that they were broken. But Tomo-chan. From what you're saying, it sounds like you don't trust Muimi-chan, Akiharu-kun, and Mikoko-chan, nor do you have any faith in them.

Yeah. I won't deny that. In fact, I'll confirm it. You know, I think you of all people must understand how inferior that makes me feel. You know what a nice girl Mikoko-chan is. Akiharu-kun's a good guy, too, and Muimi-chan is of a rare breed nowadays whose loyalty to friends runs all the way to the bone. The idea that I can't trust people like that, that no matter how hard I try, I can't truly think of them as friends, makes me feel like a filthy human being. They've shown me so much love, and I can't give anything back.

I know how you feel. It's a sense of guilt.

Yeah, that's it. So it's good that a flawed specimen like me passed on.

What about Mikoko-chan?

That's Mikoko-chan's problem. I'm already dead. There's nothing I can say. And, Ikkun, that's not really what you're here to ask, is it?

Well, I dunno. There were a ton of things I wanted to talk about. No, actually there were only a couple. By which I mean there was just one.

Go ahead.

Is it okay for me to be alive?

Ahhh, now that is a fine question.

As a member of this colony known as mankind who con-tributes nothing toward their collective gain, do I have a right to live?

I think I could have easily presented the same question myself. I mean, if I weren't already dead. Well . . . in regards to that question, I only have one word for you.

Huh? What is it?

It's —

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep

I awoke to an unpleasant electronic noise, groaned, and got up.

Not from my futon, but directly off the floor where I had apparently been sleeping. I had had an awful dream. It had progressed so arbitrarily and with such self-indulgence that it made me disgusted with myself. As if I had completely figured out Tomo-chan's inner psyche after less than an hour of talking to her.

And yet I couldn't shake the odd feeling that the dream had been real.

"But what the hell am I doing holding debates with dead people?"

Could it be that I was still feeling a bit regretful?

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep. In other words, even now—*beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep*—even now, I—*beepbeep-beepbeepbeepbeep*—

Nah, let's set that aside for now.

This wasn't my alarm clock. It was the ringtone from my cell phone. Despising musical ringtones, my phone was still set to its default ring, but even that wasn't very pleasant. I picked up the phone and pressed the send button.

"Yes, hello?"

". . . ."

Huh. No answer. But I could sense breathing on the other end. Maybe it was a weak signal.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

. . . . .

"Hello? Can you hear my voice? Not so much?"

Silence. It was strange. Maybe the phone itself was broken. I had recently thrown it into the laundry with my pants, after all. But modem electronics weren't so fragile. In which case, maybe it was a crank call.

"If you don't say anything, I'm gonna go ahead and hang up, okay? Is that okay?"

With inappropriate timing, my mind began to wander to the time Mikoko-chan had called and gotten all flustered thinking it was a

wrong number.

“Okay, I’m hanging up. Commencing countdown. Five, four, three, two—”

. . . .

Whoa. I’d heard something. But it was too soft to make out.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t catch that. Could you say it again, please?”

“Kamogawa Park.”

“I’m sorry? Kamogawa?”

“I’m waiting at Kamogawa Park. . . .”

The voice faded in and out, my eardrums just barely able to pick it up. I couldn’t tell if it was a male or female, adult or child. There was no discernible intonation, so I couldn’t even determine what emotions the caller was attempting to convey.

“I’m sorry? Please say that again. And who is this?”

“Mikoko.”

The voice said only that, and the call ended.

I tossed the phone on the floor, stood up, and stretched my hands up toward the ceiling. It was low enough that I could reached it if I exerted myself. Who lived above me again?

Oh, right, the fifteen-year-old brother and thirteen-year-old sister. Those two shared a closeness that made even me smile. Of course they were just barely surviving, so maybe that wasn’t an appropriate reaction.

The apartment building was three stories tall, with two rooms per floor, meaning there were a total of six rooms, two of which were currently vacant. The brother and sister up-stairs lived next to the old hermit. He was into Christianity, which meant he probably would've clashed quite a bit with Miiko-san's ultra-Japaneseness, but by no means were they enemies. Both rooms on the first floor were vacant, but the landlord said someone would be coming in next month. Even a place like this had a pretty impressive draw of tenants.

I plopped back down on the floor and picked up the abandoned phone. Checking the call history, I discovered that, sure enough, the call was from an unknown number.

Now let's think about this. "Kamogawa Park. That's definitely what they said."

So they were waiting there? Okay, fine. That was fine, for now. The problem was with what the caller said after that, when I asked for a name. How had they answered?

" 'Mikoko' . . . yeah, I definitely heard 'Mikoko.' "

There wasn't likely to be another person on earth with a bizarre name like that. But at the same time, it couldn't have been Mikoko. She was dead. If dead people could use telephones, the whole telephone infrastructure would've gone to hell in a handbasket long ago.

. . . .

With what little information I currently had, thinking would do no good at all. Something about that made me feel a little empty inside.

I deleted the call from the phone's history and checked the time on the LCD display.

Eleven thirty at night.

Wednesday, May twenty-fifth.

. . . .

Huh. How had I spent the day again?

I seemed to remember waking up at just around noon. Then I had gone out to visit Kunagisa, had run into Akiharu-kun along the way, inherited Mikoko-chan's Vespa, returned to my apartment to ask Miiko-san about the parking-space thing, gotten frustrated by the hassle of the parking-space thing, and gone to bed in a huff.

"In a huff? What's wrong with me?"

What was I, a little kid?

Anyway, that was around two in the afternoon. I had no recollection of what had occurred between then and now, meaning I had slept for nearly ten hours. That was enough to make even Sleeping Beauty gawk in disgust. I had been awake for less than three of the twenty-four hours in May twenty-fifth.

"I've been sleeping like mad lately. . . ."

Anyway, then had come the phone call. A bizarre, garbled phone call with no context, just words. I didn't know its meaning. Or rather, its meaning was the *only* thing I knew.

"Well, whatever."

I had two choices. One, I could obey the caller's request and head down to Kamogawa Park; or two, I could ignore it. Now, obviously, common sense would dictate that the latter was the correct choice. But I didn't know a thing about common sense. And besides, I couldn't just sit idly by when the caller was throwing a name like that around. It didn't take long for me to reach a decision.

I washed my face and changed clothes.

“This is the first real piece of nonsense I’ve encountered in awhile,” I said to myself.

I left a note behind and left the building. I mounted my Vespa, which was tentatively parked illegally in a nearby alley-way until I was able to secure a parking space. I could’ve just walked, but Kamogawa Park was a bit far. The caller hadn’t designated any specific meeting time, but I figured the sooner the better.

I turned east onto Imadegawa Street and drove straight ahead.

Still, I wondered, returning to my original train of thought, what was that dream all about?

I didn’t believe in ghosts or apparitions or the afterlife or that sort of thing, nor was I sure they didn’t exist. People do have unexplainable experiences, after all, and I wasn’t so hard-headed as to claim I didn’t believe in something about which I truly knew nothing. Having said that, this wasn’t some piece of classical literature, so it wasn’t like somebody else had entered my dream. It had been a product of my consciousness, and mine alone.

“Was it lingering attachment? Desire?”

Either way, it was only an illusion. Nothing to lose sleep over, so to speak. The important thing was that it was Tomo-chan who had appeared in my dream, not Mikoko-chan. Surely this was a crime.

“Face your crimes. That is your punishment.” So Suzunashi-san had told me one day in February. She was no psychic, but she could see through me. She was the kind of woman who commanded respect, yet never made you feel inferior. Perhaps that was a rare thing.

I passed Horikawa, Torimaru, and Kawara-machi Streets, eventually arriving in Kamogawa. Even if it was the middle of the night, I couldn't just ride a scooter through the park, so I parked it by a bridge and headed down to the riverbank, also known as Kamogawa Park.

"Ahh, so, now what?"

The name Kamogawa Park, in reality, represented a ridiculously enormous area of land. It wasn't spacious, exactly, just *long*. And the opposite side of the river was considered part of it. There wasn't an idiot in all of Kyoto who would arrange a meeting here without designating a specific street name.

"Well, whatever."

I probably didn't have to take a random phone call like that so seriously anyway. I began walking down the river in the direction of the current. Looking at my watch, I saw that it was already past midnight. It was Thursday, May twenty-sixth. It occurred to me that there wasn't much left to the month of May. Being here reminded me that it was along this very river that Zerozaki had nearly killed me, right under the big Shijô Bridge. At the time, neither Tomo-chan nor Mikoko-chan had died yet.

That felt like ages ago. And I didn't think it was just my imagination.

I looked back. It was hard to tell because it was so dark, but there didn't seem to be anyone else around. Even though I had felt something.

A gaze.

"Hmm . . ."

I had felt it this afternoon when I was with Akiharu-kun as well. He had suggested that it might have been Mikoko-chan's ghost, but what

was a more realistic possibility? The most likely explanation seemed to be that the police had sent some-one to tail me. After all, I was involved in the deaths of both Tomo-chan and Mikoko-chan.

“But come on, at this hour?”

Besides, there was no reason for them to have to sneak around. So on to the next possibility. A being of origins unknown had summoned me on the telephone, and when I arrived at the designated place, I felt somebody’s gaze. There was really only one possible explanation here.

. . . .

I boosted my alertness a tad and kept walking. The strange gaze seemed to vanish. It was around Maruta-machi Street that I began to feel like a doofus. What the hell was I doing here?

“I suppose I could just leave.”

I climbed back up the embankment onto the road. I crossed the bridge to the other side of the river and descended to the park below. I thought it would be a nice change of scenery if I switched sides for the walk back. Looking out at the river, I saw some ducks swimming around. Was that why it was called Kamogawa—or Duck River? It seemed peculiar that someone had actually named the river that for such a bland reason.

I thought about hurrying back home to get to bed, but then I realized I had just slept. Since I had come all the way out, it might not have been a bad idea to take the Vespa for a spin around Kyoto. If I kept parallel to the river, I could drive to Maizuru. It would be good for getting used to my newly acquired vehicle, not to mention for killing time.

Even as I pondered this, I continued walking straight ahead. When I was approaching Imadegawa Street, I spotted a shadowy figure

huddled on the ground in front of me. Next to it was a fallen bicycle. It was hard to make out because of the darkness, but it looked like the figure was actually a person who had collapsed. It lay motionless with its back to me. I wondered if it was a sleeping homeless person, but if that were the case there probably wouldn't have been a bike nearby. Perhaps someone had gone drinking out in Kiya-machi and fallen off their bike passing through the park. Though I had little sympathy, I couldn't just leave a person there like that. The figure's long, black hair led me to believe it was a woman.

"Are you all right?" I called out, but received no reply. It almost seemed like the person was dead. Frankly, it was a definite possibility. Just falling off a bike was enough to kill a person if they had a bad landing. All the more if the person was drunk. I considered the idea of just passing on by, but it just didn't seem right, so I ran over and tapped the figure on the shoulder.

"Are you all right?" I checked one more time. The figure didn't move an inch. "Are you all right?" I asked a third time, and decided I should at least turn the figure onto its back. The instant I gave the shoulders a tug, the figure, which had been completely still until now, flipped over with incredible nimbleness and sprayed some kind of mist in my face.

I tried to spring backward, but my timing was off. A dull pain ran through my left cheek. As I realized I had been struck, I slammed down into the riverbank onto my back without even managing to roll.

My attacker stood up.

Not good. Either because I had been struck or because of whatever that mist was, my eyes wouldn't focus. What the hell was that stuff? My eyes didn't hurt enough for it to be Mace. I forced my hobbling body up to a kneel and tried to push myself up with my left hand, but the attacker was closing in fast. I gave up on that idea and began

rolling away in-stead, spinning myself around more times than was even necessary. When I had distanced myself about thirty feet from the attacker, I managed to rise onto one knee.

The shadowy figure stood still before me. I could see that it was a person of considerable height, but I couldn't make out the body frame. My vision still wasn't coming back. But that wasn't the only thing that wasn't stable. My feet, my knees, and my head were just as bad. I thought I might collapse any second. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was more like I was falling into something. Yes. To put it simply, I felt . . . sleepy.

The knee that was supporting me collapsed.

Spray anesthetic? And this wasn't your ordinary anti-pervert concoction; this was high-powered stuff. Not only my eyes, but all of my physical faculties had been disabled. Maybe this kind of stuff is common in America, but I had never even laid eyes on it (literally) in Japan.

My assailant approached me, one step at a time. Even with my blurry vision, I could make out the knife in this person's right hand. A knife. Zerozaki Hitoshiki. The Kyoto prowler. My mind was a mess.

"Why?"

"Who? Why? Of course, neither of these things mattered in regards to the current problem at hand."

Even with my mind all fogged up, I knew exactly how bad it would be if I fell asleep at a time like this. It would mean either death or something close enough.

Dammit. This was no time for hesitation, but I just couldn't work up the nerve to do anything that would cause myself harm. I couldn't help but hesitate. Naturally, my attacker approached at a leisurely

pace. I would be asleep in no time anyway. But I knew this would be my one and only opening.

Right hand or left?

I deliberated for only a moment before deciding on the right. "Jesus Christ, man. Who am I, Nenbutsu no Tetsu?" I gripped the thumb on my right hand with my left hand. I hesitated for just one more second, then gave it a yank as hard as I could in the wrong direction.

"*Gyyyyaaaaahhhhh!*" I let out a scream so piercing that even my own ears hurt, and it reverberated throughout all of Kamogawa Park.

It was now either broken or dislocated. Either way, my sleepiness had cleared up. I recollected myself all at once, and my vision, physical functionality, and alertness returned to normal. Pain ran through my entire body as I stood to face my enemy.

My attacker was clad all in black, complete with black ski mask and black leather gloves. No hair was visible. The long black hair I'd seen before was a wig. My vision had restored itself, but it was still hard to make out my assailant's figure against the dark background. This must have been why I thought it was a shadow at first. It occurred to me that the attacker had definitely showed up dressed and prepared foran ambush. This person looked far more like a killer than Zerozaki—and far more like a prowler.

"Dammit . . . who are you?"

Naturally, there was no answer. All I could hear was the attacker's creepy breathing. Whoever it was pointed the knife at me and slowly closed in. I didn't have a single item that might have been used as a weapon, and I had left my cell phone in my room. I couldn't even call for help.

"Well, you gotta do what you gotta do. . . ."

I got into a fighting stance, and began to close in on the distance from my end. Evidently surprised by this action, the one in black came a second late with the knife. I attempted to deal a palm strike to the jaw, which of course missed as the enemy leaped backward and once again brandished the knife at me.

The one in black was the next to make a move. He lunged at me with the knife. But it was the motion of a novice. This person was nothing compared to Zerozaki, and dodging was a simple task. However, as I jerked my body backward, my thumb bumped into the side of my torso. An intense shock of pain shot through me.

!

I regretted breaking it. I probably could have just torn a nail off or something. Or, if I absolutely had to break some-thing, I should have gone with the pinky. Why would I choose the thumb? What was I, an idiot? There's such a thing as limits.

Naturally, the one in black didn't let the opportunity slip away, and gave me a hard shove. Already off balance, I toppled over onto my back. Without sparing a second, the enemy mounted me. I took a moment to reminisce with inappropriate calmness about how this same thing had just happened last month. Now how had I dealt with the situation last time?

Without giving me a moment to think, the knife came down. It was aimed directly at my face—no, my carotid artery. I used every ounce of strength left in me to dodge my head to the right, mostly avoiding the blade. It managed to slice through a single layer of skin. I was bleeding. The one in black pulled the knife back out from the earth of the riverbank it had lodged into, and readied it for another swing. Just as I thought there would be no escape this time, my attacker's hand came to a halt. Looking down at me as if making some observation, my assailant tossed the knife away.

Without any time to contemplate the meaning behind this action, the attacker plunged a fist into my face. The same left cheek from before. The next moment, the opposite cheek took a similar blow. Next, the left cheek took a third blow. Then the right again. The attacker continued this endless bar-rage of punches to my face, leaving no spaces in between.

I had long since stopped thinking about the pain. I could just feel my brain rattling.

. . . . . ,

Suddenly, the pummeling ceased.

But it didn't take long for me to learn that this was no act of mercy. The one in black clamped both hands around my left shoulder. It was easy to guess what the plan was from here. I tried to resist, but my body would not move the way I commanded it. That paralyzing spray had eaten its way into my core. Coupled with the pain, I was sure to pass out any minute.

Except.

Except that at that exact moment, a deathly excruciating pain shot through my left shoulder with a terrible cracking sound, jarring me back to a fully conscious state. The one in black had dislocated my shoulder joint without the slightest hesitation. On top of that, the attacker then began pummeling it.

"*Nggaaaaaahhhh!!!*" It was a shriek from Hell. I had never known my own vocal cords held such destructive force.

Who the hell was this person? What were they doing all of this for? They didn't want to kill me. This wasn't an act of murder; it was a simple act of destruction. To this attacker, I was nothing more than an

object to be dismantled. Something to be pulled apart like a chain-link puzzle.

Next, my assailant went for the right shoulder.

“Ghrr . . .” I had regained consciousness fully. I raised half my body up, shook off the attacker's grip, and swung my fist right into the attacker’s heart. The impact was strangely unsatisfying, as if I’d punched a magazine. That black shirt must have been concealing some kind of protective gear.

Having bashed my already broken thumb, I couldn’t bear to use my right arm anymore. The one in black brushed it aside like it was nothing and gripped my right shoulder firmly again.

I wasn’t lucid enough to shake it off a second time. I heard a dull, cracking sound as if from a great distance. But the pain was right there with me. A torturous pain ran up from both my shoulders into my brain, even managing to penetrate the numbness.

Then, just like before, the attacker began pummeling the newly dislocated joint. And, from there, went straight for my heart—as if exacting revenge. The sound of cracking bone. The impact spread out to my disconnected shoulders, and a dull pain followed an instant behind.

“Uhuhh . . . ahhh . . .”

I gasped for air. The impact of the punch had dealt significant damage to my lungs. Whether that had been my at-tacker’s aim or not, I didn’t know, but either way, it made for a prime opening. The attacker gripped my face by the jaw. Hey, now, hey, now, are you serious? That’s the most painful thing you can do to a person. But there was no time to make inquiries. I thought I ought to chomp down on the attacker's finger, but I let myself hesitate.

The one in black gave a forceful yank on my jaw. There was a far lighter cracking sound than the one from my shoulders, but the pain was incomparably intense. Then, as had become the routine, the attacker gave my dislocated jaw a swift uppercut.

No voice came out. I couldn't even be bothered to scream anymore.

Allow me to correct myself.

This *was* an act of murder. The destructive nature of it was irrelevant. It was clear now that this person was going to torture me to death. They would make me suffer until I was dead.

Dissect me, piece by piece.

The one in black hesitated for a bit, most likely pondering how to inflict the next dose of agony.

From there, the one in black grabbed the wrist of my limp right arm and held it up, gripping the thumb in one hand.

My already broken thumb.

!

Hehehe.

I heard the attacker chuckle.

I was in utter shock. There was nothing as fearsome to me and terrifying in this world as a person who could beat and torture someone this much and still have a good laugh.

The one in black muttered something I couldn't make out, then released my thumb in favor of my index finger. I could tell that the plan was to break it. And not only my index finger. From there, the

attacker would move onto the middle finger, ring finger, pinky, and then the left hand. Then would come my feet. Maybe they were going to break every bone in my entire body. Then they would tear apart the flesh. And then, once I had been thoroughly dismantled, maybe they would be kind enough to kill me.

I had already lost the will to fight back. In fact, I didn't even know why I had tried fighting back in the first place. I should have just let the spray put me to sleep in the very be-ginning. At least then I wouldn't have had to go through all this torture. Why the hell did I break my own thumb? But then again, I probably would have awoken to this pain any-way. I would have gone through the torture either way. If that were the case, then the outcome would have been exactly the same. I had just taken a different route.

This was just like last time—a farce enacted with predestined harmony.

I felt like I was watching myself from afar.

I was watching myself about to be killed from the opposite side of the river.

What was I thinking, seeing myself like that?

Oh, come on, really now.

This is truly ridiculous.

Trivial and pointless.

What a load of nonsense.

"Whattaya doing over theeeeeeeere?!"

A thunderous howl.

My vacant eyes shifted toward the direction of the voice coming from the opposite riverbank. But nobody was there. A small-framed, shadowy figure was charging this way against the river's current.

I didn't even have to wonder who it was. I knew this person as well as I knew myself.

"*Heeeeeeeyyyyy!*"

Zerozaki.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki hollered as he leaped from the river and charged up the bank. The one in black seemed momentarily startled by this new contender, but after assessing the situation, released my finger and backed away from my body. My attacker must have been aware that Zerozaki was not an opponent you could take on from a sitting position.

With a bit of distance remaining between Zerozaki and us, Zerozaki hurled a single drawing knife in this direction. This wasn't aimed at my attacker, but rather a warning used to distance the attacker from me. Having arrived on this side of the riverbed, Zerozaki got between the attacker and me. The one in black went for the knife that had been tossed aside earlier, and brandished it defensively at Zerozaki.

"Hahhh . . ." Zerozaki exhaled deeply as if adjusting his breathing. "Why do you let people bully you like that? Stand up for yourself, man!" he said mockingly. I thought about saying something in response, but with my jaw dislocated, it was impossible.

"Well, whatever. I guess you're the one I should be talking to now," Zerozaki said, facing the one in black. "So what's your deal? You probably don't want to hear this from me, but you know you're

committing a crime, right? Assault and battery, attempted murder. Do you realize that? Are you aware of what's allowed and what's not?"

There were probably any number of comebacks the at-tacker could have made in this situation, but none were spoken.

The one in black took a cautious step backward. It seemed this unknown assailant viewed Zerozaki, in all of his casualness, with his utter lack of caution, as a true threat.

"Hmm. This sack of damaged goods here has some pretty nasty wounds to be attended to, and I'm not really looking to draw any more attention by killing someone, so if you want to run away, feel free," Zerozaki said after a moment's thought. The one in black took another step back, carefully attempting to size up Zerozaki. It seemed they were still trying to make a decision.

"What's the matter? I'm telling you I'll let you go, so hurry up and chase yourself somewhere. Quickly now."

The one in black didn't respond.

Zerozaki let out a deliberate sigh. "If you still want to do this, I'd be happy to kill you. You'll be in pieces before you even feel anything. I'm not such a nice guy that I'd show mercy to someone going out of their own way to get cut. But, hey, at least you'll get to be lucky number thirteen. I'll chop you up and line up the pieces for everyone to gawk at."

And that was the decisive remark.

The one in black spun around and dashed away in the direction of Imadegawa.

"Go on, go on," Zerozaki said, laughing. Then he turned to face me. That tattooed face entered my field of vision, only to go blurry an

instant later. It seemed the anesthetizing effects of the spray had reached a new peak.

“Hm? Hey, don’t go to sleep on me. At least give me your address first.”

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. Of course, my shoulders were both dislocated, so this hurt like a bitch, but at this point, I didn’t even care.

“Ugh . . .” With the last few drops of my consciousness, and through a dislocated jaw, I told him my address.

3

My next memory began Friday the twenty-seventh, at right around nine o’clock a.m.

“Yo. Morning, sunshine.”

Zerozaki was right by my pillow. I looked at his face in a daze, having no idea what was going on. Zerozaki himself, on the other hand, seemed relaxed, and genuinely glad that I had woken up.

“Man, this place is incredible. It was impossible to find from that address. And the people here are crazy. I went to borrow some bandages and stuff from that chick next door, and she wasn’t even surprised by my face. I’ve never met a chick like that. But I’m glad you’re awake. You must've been pretty sleep deprived, huh? I guess you’ve been through a lot.”

“Uhhh . . .”

I planted my right hand down in an attempt to prop myself up. An intense pain ran through me. “Gah!” I reflexively pulled my hand

away and began to fall back down, but some-how managed to catch myself with my left arm.

“Nice one, man. It’s broken, you know. Your finger, I mean. I jammed your jaw and shoulders back in place best I could, but there’s nothing I can do about a broken bone. I did some emergency first aid, but I think you’ll probably want to take a visit to the hospital later.”

Looking at my right hand, I saw that my thumb had been stabilized with a large amount of bandages, wire, and a splint. Though far from orthodox, it did seem as though he had cared for it properly. I could also feel something strange on my face. It seemed my jaw had also been stabilized, with plaster and gauze. Zerozaki must have been taking care of me while I was sleeping.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Forget about it,” he said, waving a hand at me irritably. “But that thumb is looking pretty bad. It’s gonna make life hard, you know,” he teased. I guess one man’s pain is another man’s amusement, killer or not.

“No worries. I’m ambidextrous.”

“Really?”

“Originally I was left-handed, but I corrected it when I was young and became right-handed. But I had a teacher I hated who used to say ‘chopsticks go in your right hand,’ so I switched back to left out of spite. That was back in the third grade.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

I struggled to return myself to full consciousness. I could get up just fine, but my head was swimming.

“Hey, by the way, where’s the Vespa?”

“Huh? What’d you say?”

“Ah, nothing.”

It was probably still sitting abandoned by the bridge in Imadegawa. I just had to go retrieve it at some point. If it hadn’t been towed away, that is. More significant was the fact that Zerozaki had carried me all the way back here on foot with that small body of his. His physical strength was truly admirable.

Zerozaki, meanwhile, didn’t seem to think anything of it, and was as calm as ever.

“But what the hell was that back there? I can’t believe you and I ended in a standoff, and yet you still let a clumsy oaf like that get the better of you,” he said. His reasoning was a little sketchy.

“That thing with you was special. Yeah . . . I mean, kind of.” I lifted myself up, taking care not to do anything to my thumb. “Yesterday . . . wait, was it yesterday? I got a call saying to come to Kamogawa Park. In retrospect, it was an obvious trap, but anyway, I fell for it. Hence, my current situation.”

“Wow. What are you, an idiot?”

Indeed. “Yeah, I know it was dumb,” I said. “But let me ask you something. What are you still doing in Kyoto? Didn’t you leave?”

“Huh? How’d you know?”

“The killings stopped.”

"Ah, right, that. Yeah, I did leave for a while. I got attacked by some weird lady in red. She was like this crazy maniac on speed, man. I hit her with my bike and she kept coming at me like it was nothin'. It's a liter bike, man. What the hell kind of shape is she in? Anyway, she was dead set on catching me, but I was no match for her, so I fled to Osaka. Of course, she came after me. So I came *back* to Kyoto, cuz you know what they say, the darkest place is right under the candlestick. Any-way, so the day I came back, I was trudging around when I heard a howling like a whipped dog. Being the card-carrying dog lover that I am, I couldn't just sit around and listen to that, so I ran toward the direction of the voice only to find that it was you, getting your ass handed to you by that thing in black."

"So that's what happened. I gotcha."

He'd rattled out the second half of the explanation awfully fast, as if he'd gotten tired of explaining. But I basically got the point. Basically, what it came down to was that I'd gotten really, really lucky.

Either that, or the one in black was unlucky.

"But man, who the hell was that red lady, anyway? I thought I had run into the Red Death."

"It's Aikawa-san," I said. It wasn't my way of expressing gratitude, it was just that it seemed unfair to give Aikawa-san information on him and then not show him the same courtesy. Then again, I wasn't sure a guy like me should be using a word like *unfair*.

"Aikawa?" Zerozaki said, his tattoo twisting into a dubious grimace. "Did you just say 'Aikawa'? You mean that was Aikawa Jun?"

"Oh, you know her? I guess that means I don't have to bother explaining, then."

“Nah, I just heard about her from the ‘General,’ that’s all. Dammit, why, of all people, did it have to be Aikawa Jun?” he whined. “There’s no hope now.”

“Is she famous or something?”

“She’s *infamous*. Do you have any idea what they call her? ‘The Sturm and Drang,’ ‘The Mighty Warrior,’ ‘The Laughing Red Tigress,’ ‘The Killer of Mountain Men,’ ‘The Desert Eagle’ . . . They told me not to have anything to do with her.”

“You forgot one.”

“Huh?”

“ ‘Mankind’s Greatest Private Contractor,’ ” I said, to which Zerozaki didn’t respond. His expression was more serious than I’d ever seen him. When confronted with an opponent like Aikawa Jun, even he couldn’t play it casually.

“Shit, man, this is not good. This is just too much of a masterpiece . . .” he muttered to himself. He gave a weak nod. “Well then.” He rose to his feet. “I’m gonna go.”

“What? Already?”

“Yeah. I shouldn’t really be lingering around doing nothing. It looks like I’ve got some things to think over. There's nothing to do here anyway, and you’re really in no shape to be talking at length. Besides, I’m a wanted man right now. I can’t stick around in one place for too long.”

“Ah, okay.”

This was all true. When I gave Aikawa-san a description of Zerozaki, the word must have spread all the way to the police. She wasn’t his

only enemy now. For Zerozaki, spending a whole day in this one room was like stepping into the red zone.

“What if you just turned yourself in?”

“Not a bad idea, but I’m gonna pass on that,” he said with a grin. “Just be sure you take care of *your* problems. I saw it in the paper and all. That Aoii girl you were talking about got killed, huh?”

“Yeah, well.”

“Looks like we’ve both got some shit to sort out.”

“Yeah. This has been the biggest hassle ever.”

“Same here. But hey, that’s life. These are the tracks we’re riding. Anyway, that’s it for me.”

“We probably won’t meet again after this,” I said.

“No doubt,” he said, laughing. “Farewell.”

With that, he left from my room. Left alone, I returned to my futon and lay down. He had either done a fine job of taking care of me, or my wounds hadn’t been that bad to begin with, because I hardly felt any pain. Of course I would prob-ably have to go to the hospital to check out that broken bone.

Right now, though, I needed sleep. Was the anesthetic still active? No, that didn’t seem plausible. So this was just regular old tiredness. Why had I been sleeping so much lately?

“Ah, I get it. I was sleeping, but I wasn’t *asleep*.”

At last, I had reached my limit. I shut my eyes, deciding to put off going to the hospital until after I had slept. I was probably getting

myself in too deep lately. I kept trying not to think about Tomo-chan and Mikoko-chan, but I was thinking about them all the while. That dream I had was sure enough proof of that. I still hadn't figured out a conclusion to this murder case.

For now, I just needed rest. I decided to put off thinking about that phone trap and the one in black until after sleeping.

"Hey."

But right now I wouldn't even be allowed to sleep. I heard knocking, and a voice coming through the door. I got up and hobbled over to answer it. Zerozaki had returned.

"What? Forget something?"

"Yeah, sort of. I was going to tell you one more thing." He entered the room again and sat down cross-legged. I returned to my futon and sat down as well.

"Yeah, what is it? You made such a big show of leaving."

"Well, I forgot about this. What do you want me to do? Hey, check your phone."

"Huh? Why?"

"You got a few calls while you were sleeping."

"Huh. Around what time?"

"Just this morning. It kept going 'beep beep beep beep.' *So* annoying. Isn't that what woke you up?"

I took a look at the phone's call history as I listened to Zerozaki rambling on. The calls had come from a familiar number. I knew I had

seen it before.

“Ahh, right, it was Sasaki-san,” I said, realizing. This number belonged to that detective currently absorbed in a war of attrition, Sasa Sasaki-san. Between eight and nine o’clock this morning, my phone had received seven calls from her number. “I wonder what she wants.”

“I didn’t pick up, so don’t ask me. I shouldn’t be answering your phone, right? If you’re curious, just call her back.”

“I will.”

I entered in her number.

“Who's Sasaki again? I feel like I know that name.”

“I think I mentioned her that time at karaoke. She's that hotshot detective.”

“Ah, right,” he said with a complex expression. The word *detective* probably didn’t sit too well with Zerozaki these days. Of course, it didn’t leave such a great impression on me either.

The signal seemed to connect, and it continued to the dial tone. I waited a few seconds.

“Yeah, Sasa here,” came Sasaki-san's voice.

“Hello, it’s me.”

“What were you doing earlier?”

“Nothing, just sleeping.”

“I see . . . Yeah, that’s fine.” There was something strangely cool and reserved about her. It sounded like she was *forcing* herself to be cool

and reserved. Which meant that right now, she wasn't really cool or reserved at all.

"Sasaki-san, did something happen? Or is there something else you wanted to ask me?"

"Something happened," she said. "Usami Akiharu-san was murdered."

Suddenly.

Everything.

Connected.

"Usami-kun, you say?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Do I seem like the kind of person who would make up a lie like that? This morning a friend discovered the body at school. He's been strangled, just like Emoto-san and Aoii-san. I'm at the scene right now."

Now that she mentioned it, it did sound like she was speaking so as not to disturb the people around her. She was probably surrounded by police officers, medical examiners, and gawking onlookers.

Akiharu-kun.

Hadn't he said he would be next? Oddly, his words had become a reality.

"Really . . ."

But this was probably no simple coincidence. If Akiharu-kun had figured out the truth, then it would make sense that he could foresee his own death. And yet even knowing this, he had let himself be killed all the same.

"I'd like to ask you some things, if you would come . . ."

"Before that," I interrupted, "I want to ask you about Akiharu-kun's body. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead." As if she could sense through my voice alone that something was different about me, she made no objection. "I'll answer anything I can."

"I just have one question. Is there another '*x* over *y*' left behind at the crime scene?"

"Yes," she softly affirmed after a moment of silence. "But this time it's strange. We can't say anything for certain yet, but this time evidence suggests it was written by the victim himself. Yeah. But why do you ask? Have you thought of something? Did you figure out what *x* over *y* means?"

No, that wasn't it.

I had already figured out the meaning of that formula long ago. Or rather, at this point, it *had* no meaning. That wasn't the issue right now.

"No, that's not it. Okay, so should I head down to the police station later?"

"I'd appreciate it. What time is good for you?"

"This afternoon . . . no, this evening."

“Okay, then I’ll—”

I hung up while she was talking. If I hadn’t, I would’ve said something regrettable. I wasn’t so coolheaded myself right now. I threw my cell phone at the floor with a violent force normally unthinkable for a guy like me.

“Hey now, what are you doing?” Zerozaki said in surprise. “Are you crazy? Don’t throw your phone. Look at the poor thing.”

“This is what they call *venting*,” I said dimly. “That is, sup-pressing your anger by taking it out on an inanimate object.”

“Yeah, I know that.” He picked up the phone, checked to see that it wasn’t broken, and then put it down away from me.

“What happened?”

“Akiharu-kun was just murdered.”

“Ah, that’s, wow . . .” he said curiously as if impressed. “That’s the third person, huh? Pretty hot stuff, whoever this is. When’d it happen?”

“I don’t know when he was killed, but they just found the body now. So the murder must have been between Wednesday afternoon and this morning."

“Hmm. That’s quite the masterpiece. Three strangulations in just ten days. That’s crazy. Ah, but I guess I can’t say stuff like that. So what about the killer? Whodunnit?”

Zerozaki asked as if it was the most trivial matter in the world.

I sputtered angrily. The killer? You mean the one who killed Emoto Tomoe who killed Aoii Mikoko, who attacked me in Kamogawa Park,

and now has killed Usami Akiharu?"

"Who else would I mean?"

"It should be obvious." I declared the name with such rigidity that even I was taken aback. "Obviously it was Atemiya Muimi."

Atemiya Muimi, classmate.

8

TRIAL

Mentality

You actually know, don't you?

1

It's not often that I get complimented on my personality even now, but back in the days when those around me still referred to me as a young boy, I suppose I had an abnormally unpleasant personality. To be sure, there was a time when I thought myself highly intelligent and gifted, when I was in love with myself and naturally looked down on those around me. I believed I knew things nobody else knew, I had noticed things nobody else had noticed, and as the years rolled by, I grew arrogant.

That probably explains it.

If I was posed with a puzzling question and couldn't soon find the answer, I would get antsy. That was how capable I thought I was, and it was also true that after managing to wipe all my doubts away simply by thinking about them, I always felt like I had accomplished something remarkable. Like I had become somebody.

However, as I was discovering the answers to a series of difficult questions that emerged—no, *after I finished* answering all of them—I found that I was left with a void.

Everybody else was just going on enjoying their lives without having to do such things. They were living happily without ever having to come up with these answers, or even questions, for that matter.

They laughed, they cried, at times they got angry.

I thought this was because they were ignorant.

I thought they were all just naively frolicking about in a minefield. I thought that one day they would come to curse their own foolishness.

When they stepped on a mine and everything was over, then they'd regret it.

But I was wrong.

I was just some lonely kid living in a world I had made for myself, inventing questions and answering them just to make myself feel better. I seriously thought I could just use theories to compensate for real-life experiences, and I thought that if I wanted, even I could be happy.

I was being a boy incorrectly.

Nevertheless, the world didn't come to an end.

The game went on.

Even thought I was already so behind that there wasn't even a smidgen of a chance of victory, my life went on. There was a period where I considered ending it myself, and in fact I did try to do so, but I even failed at that.

In reality, maybe I wasn't even an onlooker: I was a loser.

I was just a sad, pathetic loser.

And so at some point, I stopped being able to actively pursue answers to my questions. It wasn't that I became passive, it was that I became apathetic toward the questions.

Answers have no real point.

They're vague and ambiguous and unsound, and things are fine that way. In fact, they're better.

Causing real change is a role that should be left up to the true "chosen ones," outstanding individuals like that scarlet Mankind's Greatest, and the Blue Savant, and it was never my responsibility.

It was no job for a common loser. For the comic sidekick.

Being oblivious to the mines, even if you stepped onone—now that was the way to live.

Even if you knew about the mines but pretended you didn't, sooner or later you would really forget about them.

That's what I believe, even if people say you're incurable at that point, that it's just some proposal for compromise, that you're only pretending to be a human being.

That's what I thought, as I looked into the mirror at the me who hadn't lost.

Wasn't it simple?

If I hadn't been a loser, I would've just been a failure.

If being a homicidal monster was the alternative, being a loser was fine.

I'm sure he felt the same way.

If being a loser was the alternative, being a homicidal monster was fine.

Both statements were nonsense.

They were nonsense, and they were masterpieces.

And that was fine. That was enough.

Everything was fine the way it was.

The girl who asked me if I ever felt like damaged goods. The girl who said she liked me. The boy who prophesied that he would be the next to die. And you, who called me clueless.

Okay.

It may not be my role to change things, but ending the nonsense I'm responsible for starting is up to me indeed.

Let's stick to tradition and put a clean end to this.

Muimi-chan.

…

I jammed the stiletto knife Zerozaki had loaned me into the keyhole and jiggled it around. In about a minute, I heard the sound of the bolt unlatching. I gripped the knob and gave it a pull. The chain was up, so the door only moved a few centimeters.

I hesitated for but a moment. I swung the knife in the gap and broke the chain off. The links were more brittle than I expected, and they scattered everywhere, one even hitting me in the face. I didn't care. The door released from its bondage, I pulled it open and entered the room.

The spectacle inside was enough to leave me speechless.

The wallpaper was torn up, with shards of shattered dishes strewn about on the floor. I thought it might be dangerous to remove my shoes, and although I knew it was rude, I entered the room with them still on. Proceeding deeper into the room, the decor only got worse. It was pure destruction. There prob-ably wasn't a single item in the whole room that remained in its original condition, no matter how small or large. Literally everything had been demolished. Clothes torn to confetti and tossed around the room. Broken furniture. Ripped-up books. A shattered television screen. A smashed computer. The filthy, stained carpet. A mirror cracked from the center in an outward wave. An overturned wastebasket. Shards of light-bulbs scattered across the floor. A hamster torn limb from limb. A pillow with the insides on the outside. Vegetables torn to ruin, to the point that they lost all meaning. An over-turned refrigerator. The air conditioner with a giant dent in the middle. A tea table scrawled with disturbing graffiti. A cracked fish tank and nearby dead tropical fish. Writing utensils split in two without a single usable one remaining. A clock that no longer worked. A shredded-up calendar. A strangled teddy bear.

And.

"What are you doing?"

Her, crouched by the window, staring this way with cursing eyes.

Without a doubt, the most broken thing in this room was none other than her.

"Muimi-chan."

No reply.

Only that dreadful gaze, piercing through me like a dagger.

Her hair, that long, brown *sauvage*, had been diced up into something hideous.

Looking a little closer I saw that remnants of that hair were strewn around the room. I never believed that hair was a girl's life, as they say, but there was something terrifying about this all the same.

This was completely her domain. A barrier barely maintaining balance, threatening to break down any minute.

There were curses in the air, and all of them were directed towards me. Muimi-chan's death glare wasn't the only thing piercing through me. Everything in this thoroughly destroyed room was sending ill will, enmity, hostility, and malice directly at me.

It felt like the world itself had become my enemy.

"You know, I'd appreciate if you didn't glare at me like that."

"Shut up," she said in a deep voice. "Why did you come here? How dare you?"

"Relax. I'm not here to save you or anything. I'm not that good a guy, and I'm no protagonist."

I used my right foot to clear a path in the debris on the floor and sat down across from Muimi-chan. I noticed her destroyed cell phone on the floor next to me.

"Aha. I see. So that's why Sasaki-san couldn't get a hold of you. She might come here directly at some point. I guess you can't just sit around here."

"Why did you come here?"

“Basically I’ve already figured it out,” I said with deliberate plainness. Of course there was the fact that it wouldn’t have been very wise to upset her emotions at a time like this, but this was also just about the only voice I could muster in my current state. “I guess you could say my imagination did most of the work. But there are some things I still can’t figure out no matter how I think about them. I wonder if you’d be willing to tell me.”

“. . .”

“I’ll take your silence as a yes.” I paused for a moment. “I’ve got things figured out as far as the part where you at-tacked me. But why did you kill Akiharu-kun? That’s what I don’t understand. There was no reason for you to kill him.”

“Ha. Hahahahahahaha,” she suddenly started cackling maniacally. It was the most expressionless laughter I’d ever heard. Heartless. It was nothing more than a conveyance of her insanity. She shot me another glare. “Look at those wounds.”

“You must be *stupid* setting foot in here with wounds like those. Nobody’s gonna come to your rescue here. Or is your knight in shining armor waiting outside the room?”

“No, nothing like that. That guy’s showing up the other night was just a coincidence to begin with. Don’t worry about him,” I said, recalling the precious night’s events. I touched my thumb and the gauze on my face. Of course my shoulders and jaw were still far from fully recovered. I was in no state to be meeting someone face-to-face.

“At first I wasn’t sure enough to come to a conclusion on the subject. That person in black was wearing a knit ski mask, so they couldn’t have had long hair. So I thought it must not be you, but now that I see you’ve cut your hair, I’m convinced. I don’t suppose that was why you cut it, was it?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

Figures. I shrugged.

“You’re just a more cautious guy than I expected. You cover your tracks. And I couldn’t attack you in your apartment because it’s such a run-down dump with paper-thin walls.”

“Ahh. The perfect environment, huh?”

I tried my best to imitate Aikawa-san’s cynical tone, but I couldn’t really pull it off.

“But using Mikoko-chan’s name to lure me out was a big no-no. Not a very clean method.”

“Don’t you ever say that name.” She shot me the devil’s glare. “You have no right.”

“Hey, thanks.”

“I don’t want to talk to you, but I’ll ask you one thing. Why’d you reject Mikoko?”

“I wasn’t really rejecting her . . .”

“Why!?” She slammed her arm into the wall as hard as she could. The entire room shook under the impact of that merciless fist. I sensed no concern on her behalf regarding the well-being of my body. It wasn’t like she had hit *me*, but it sent a shiver up my back.

Even the homicidal monster was more pleasant company than this destructor.

“Why? Why couldn’t you reciprocate her emotions? It’s not like it was a lot to ask. Why couldn’t you do something that simple? Why was

that the only thing you couldn't do?"

"I asked my question fist. I'd like an answer. I'll ask again, as many times as it takes. Why'd you kill Akiharu-kun? There was no reason for that. Everything else is clear, but that one thing is still completely hazy. I said this before, but I know why you attacked me. You had your reasons. I can understand that. But why did you go kill Akiharu-kun from there?"

"If I answer, you'll answer my question?"

"I promise."

Even then, she continued glaring at me for a while.

Several minutes later . . .

"It's simple," she said. "It felt like the natural thing to do."

"Natural, huh?" I said as I tried to read her expression. "But Akiharu-kun was your friend, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he was a friend. I liked him. Just not to the point that I would never strangle him to death."

There wasn't a single hint of a lie in her words or in her gestures.

"Being friends is no reason not to kill someone. It's just a simple matter of order of priorities." She spoke honestly, from the heart.

I narrowed my eyes at her, but gave a slow nod. Priorities. Friends. Order. Friends. I chewed on each of her words for a while in my head. I searched for the right words with which to respond.

"Or do you mean to tell me you would absolutely never kill a friend? No matter what the reason, you would never do it?"

“Anybody I might kill, I don’t consider a friend.”

“Well, that’s just fucking splendid,” she scoffed. “What a hypocrite. Why couldn’t you have shared a little bit of that phony virtue with Mikoko? It’s your turn to answer.”

I repeated what I wanted to say three times in my head before putting it to my lips.

“Probably because I didn’t like her.”

I thought she was sure to lunge at me and start pummeling me, but she didn’t even move. She just sat and glared at me.

“Oh,” she said softly. “I guess you’re not just some clueless jerk. You’re downright cruel.”

“And if I am?”

“I told you before, didn’t I? I’m certain I told you. If you hurt Mikoko-chan, I’ll never forgive you.”

I narrowed my eyes at her as she seemed ready to explode any minute. I gave another shrug. “So what about you, then? I can’t comprehend it. I understand the philosophy behind your actions, but I don’t know if you can say it was really for Mikoko-chan’s sake.”

“I told you not to say that name. Don’t talk about Mikoko like you know her! You don’t know shit!” Muimi-chan said.“*I* know her. I know everything about her. We’ve been together since elementary school. I know her better than I know myself. If there’s one thing I don’t know, it’s how she fell for a cruel bastard like you.”

“That’s simple,” I responded without hesitation. Having already figured it out, it seemed all too obvious to me. “It was a misconception. An illusion. A deception. A simple error. A

miscalculation. An assumption. Just some darling young girl in love with being in love. She probably just wasn't a very good judge of character."

"Are you done?"

Her rage was already beyond disguising. She was ready to detonate any time now. This was probably about as far as we'd get with just words.

"Actually no, there's one more thing. It's a promise I made to Mikoko-chan, so I'd better uphold to it, Muimi-chan."

My final question.

Can you forgive you own—

"Can you forgive your own existence as a murderer?"

"What's to forgive?!" She had cracked at last. "I haven't done anything wrong! Nothing! There's nothing wrong with what I did for Mikokodel! I'm the one who cares about her the most! I'm not looking for criticism from someone like *you*! It was all for Mikokodel! I'll do anything for her! I would kill or die without a second thought!"

For justice. For faith. For truth.

To save another. For the sake of a friend.

She killed.

"I cared about Mikoko-chan, unlike you! You don't care about anyone, you don't consider anyone else, you just go on living without a care in the world, don't you?! You can't do a single thing for anyone! You're just damaged goods! You don't have a single human emotion inside of you! So you shut your goddamn mouth!"

Because it was for somebody else's sake.

Without hesitation, without deliberation.

Without a hint of uncertainty.

Without even regretting it.

Without ever feeling shame or reflecting on her actions.

She killed.

"If only you hadn't showed up! Then Tomoe and Mikoko and Akiharu and I would still all be living happily! If it weren't for you! We all got along so well! Since elementary school and high school, and even in college! As soon as you appeared we all went to shit!"

Because they were an annoyance.

Because they got in the way. Because they were a hassle. Because they were bothersome.

Because they irritate. Because they're unstable. Because they're revolting.

She killed.

"It was all for Mikoko! She's mine, and I'm hers! We're best friends! I would kill my own parents for her, and she would kill even *you* for me!"

Because it was for someone important.

She would kill anyone.

She would kill any number of people.

Dozens. Hundreds.

Herself or anyone else.

Even a best friend.

“I’m not wrong! I’m right! That’s why I’ll do it again and again! Even if I could go back in time, I would do the same things over again! Mikoko forgives me!”

With no excessive force.

Without going further than intended.

As simply as taking a breath.

Like a prowler and like a monster.

Like damaged goods and like a human failure.

She killed.

“I . . . I forgive myself!” She screamed as she stomped a foot down on the debris-ridden floor.

“Huh.”

As I watched her, my eyes were no doubt extremely calm.

“Are you done?”

She shot me a glare. I didn’t care.

“That’s enough, then. Please, shut up. Your voice is offensive to the ears and your presence offensive to the eyes. So you do whatever you want to do and say whatever you want to say. Great. Does that satisfy you? You’re completely bro-ken. Ruined.”

“Ruined? Me?”

“Exactly what have you done for Mikoko-chan’s sake? You’re just putting the blame on her, aren’t you?”

“Like you know a damned thing.”

I could see that she was struggling to stop herself from lunging forward. If I hadn’t brought up Mikoko’s name, surely she would have.

Right now, Aoii Mikoko was the only thing keeping Muimi-chan together.

“Well . . .” she said in a low voice like a growl from the depths of Hell. “What about *you*?! You don’t feel the least bit responsible for her death?! Answer me!”

“No, I don’t. Not at all. Those who die just die.”

“. . . .”

I could see her turning pale. Her mind was already past the point of enraged. Nevertheless, I made no attempt to cut my speech short. I just continued on, spouting words like a machine.

“I’m not so arrogant that I’d attempt to interfere with people’s lives. People should take responsibility for their own actions. You’re no exception.”

“What’s your problem? How can you think like that? How can you have such a disgusting outlook? You’re nuts. You’re not human.”

“I just don’t approve of people clinging to others to the point that they swallow them up. I’m annoyed by people who live life saying

‘Oh, I did it for this person, I did it for this person, like that’s supposed to grant them full pardon for whatever they do.”

It was like I was looking at myself. “I once said you and Tomoe were similar, but allow me to correct myself,” Muimi-chan said as if cursing the devil himself. “Tomoe was the embodiment of an inferiority complex, keeping herself distant from everyone, but you . . . you’re just plain hostile.”

“Hahh . . .” I let out a deliberate sigh. I couldn’t argue with her, nor did I feel like doing so. What I wanted to do was say, “You *just* realized that?” Things that are similar but not the same are, in the end, different. It was as simple as that.

“Well, whatever. Do what you want. We’re just two people with nothing to do with each other. I don’t have any interest in getting your way, but . . . killing Akiharu-kun was a bad move, Muimi-chan. They’ll be coming to arrest you soon enough. I doubt that’s what Mikoko-chan wanted.”

“I couldn’t care less about the law. So I’ll be arrested. I bet I will. But there’s still some time before that. Plenty of time to make you suffer. To *kill* you.”

Muimi-chan got onto one knee, putting herself at eye level with me. A knife she had apparently been pointing at me for some time now reflected a ray of light and caught my eye. It was the very knife the attacker in black had used that night. The one that had grazed past my carotid artery.

“Nothing’s gonna get in the way this time.”

“What’s going to happen when you kill me?”

“Like I care. Talk all you want, but the time has come to take responsibility for hurting Mikoko.”

“. . . . .”

Oh. I get it.

So even you’ve missed the point here. You’ve been going on and on about how you did it all for Mikoko-chan, it was all for Mikoko-chan, it was all for Mikoko-chan, but that’s just an excuse. A plea. An attempt to defend yourself.

Your actions are spurred by simple jealousy toward me, ordinary remorse for what happened to Mikoko-chan, and your own boring sense of guilt. That’s all.

“Your nonsense is good, Muimi-chan,” I said without even giving heed to the knife in her hand. “So are we going to pick up where we left off last time? You’re going to beat me and beat me and hurt me and hurt me and make me experience pain and suffering, and then kill me off?”

“That’s right.”

“You don’t say.”

I clutched my right index finger in my left hand.

“So, for example, you might break my fingers, like this?” I forced the finger backward, snapping the bone.

There was a sound like a tree branch snapping off.

Muimi-chan’s face froze in shock.

An overwhelming, maddening pain ran through my hand, but I didn’t even flinch as I flashed my broken finger in Muimi-chan’s face.

“Satisified?”

I had nothing to say that.

"You're not, are you? Why would you be satisfied with that? That's not nearly enough to cheer you up. You've hated me and hated me and hated me, so there's no way you're satisfied yet. Because if it's for Mikoko-chan, morals, laws, and common sense don't mean a thing."

"*Rrr. Rrrr.*"

She trembled.

It was the first time I had ever seen her shaking from emotion.

I didn't care about this either.

"I guess the middle finger is next?" I said, clutching my middle finger.

It was as if I were a doll.

That's why I had no nerves.

That's why I had no heart.

That's why I could just snap my own bones.

Crack.

"Ring finger next?"

I bent my ring finger the wrong way.

Pop.

"And finally, the pinky?"

I twisted my pinky around in an impossible direction.

Crack.

“Well, my right hand’s completely destroyed. I won’t be able to defend myself very well now either.”

“Ah . . . ah . . . ah.” The blood was rushing to her face. This wasn’t just fear, but panic. The fundamental sense of horrified anxiety one feels toward something beyond his or her own comprehension. This was a fatal wound of an emotion, far more gripping than anger.

“Shall we continue to the left hand?”

I pointed the four fingers on my left hand toward the floor. From there, I threw all of my body’s weight onto my left arm.

Crack crack crack crack.

It was a satisfying quartet of sounds.

“Why don’t we twist ’em around a bit more?”

Crunch. Crunch crunch crunch.

“Now let’s see if I can still applaud things—“

“Wh . . . what the hell are you doing?!” she screamed. Tossing the knife aside, she grabbed my wrist. “You . . . you’re crazy! What is this?! What are you doing?!”

“I was just saving you the trouble of doing what you were going to do anyway. It’s no different than if you have done it yourself. Or, by your logic, if Mikoko-chan had done it her-self. Right?”

I held my hideously gnarled fingers up before Muimi-chan’s eyes. She reflexively looked away, suggesting that even in her current mental state, she couldn’t bear to look at something so disturbing.

“D . . . doesn’t that hurt?!”

“Meh,” I said casually. “No big deal. Not to me, anyway. No matter how much I get tortured or beaten, I don’t feel a thing. You could even kill me if you wanted. Do whatever. But to me, death would be nothing more than a release.”

“What are you—”

“I’m so damn sick of everything. Of living, of the people around me, the people *not* around me, all of the various intentions that make up this world and all the ones that *don’t*, of you, of Mikoko-chan, and of course of myself. It’s all just a damned headache. I’m the one who’s disgusted here. Living only brings pain. I see no value in this place. Frankly, I don’t give a rat’s ass if the world gets wiped out tomorrow or if I’m wiped out today. In fact, I’d be *glad*. So killing me would be pointless. I wouldn’t have minded of you killed me the other night, either.”

. . . . !

“Still, I’m sure killing me will put your mind at ease. But it won’t amount to revenge or justice or loyalty to a friend. It’s just self-relief. Nothing more than a distraction from the truth. You’ll cheer up, but that’s all. Causing me pain will clear away your jealousy, making me suffer will help you for-get your remorse, and killing me will wipe away your guilt, but that’s all you’ll be doing.”

“You’re wrong!” She clutched her head and shook it back and forth like a madwoman. “You’re wrong! You’re wrong! You’re wrong! Don’t turn this around! You’re so full of shit! I did everything for her, and y —”

“Well then, go ahead and kill me. Kill me with your own hands. The world will just go on.”

Just for yourself.

Without saying it's for anyone else.

No excuses, no pleas, no defenses.

Just kill me by your own will.

Commit your profitless crime.

"*Rrrrrrrrr . . . a*aa*aa*aahaahhhhh!"

She picked up the knife. With a spiteful, demonic glare, she chewed down on her lip as if choking back a curse, and grabbed me by the neck, With her other hand, she dug the edge of the blade one layer of skin deep into my neck, right along that carotid artery.

And she hesitated and waited and deliberated and contemplated.

"*Rrrrrrrrrrrr!"*

And she stayed that way.

. . . . .

I closed my eyes and left it up to time.

But I soon got tired of this as well.

"I wonder what went wrong," I said, casually brushing her hand aside and distancing myself from the knife. I stood up and watched Muimi-chan huddled on the floor groaning for awhile, then gave my back a good stretch.

"When did people stop being able to do things just for themselves, Muimi-chan?"

It was always out of some sense of duty or sense of justice.

Out of some feeling of fellowship or friendship.

“Don’t you think it’s all just nonsense?”

Muimi-chan gave no reply. I wasn’t sure if I should have been asking the question in the first place. I hadn’t done any-thing for anyone else, much less for myself. I had never done anything for anyone.

“So what?” Muimi-chan said, as if looking for some savior. “What could I possibly do for Mikoko? What should I have done for her? What should I do?”

Don’t ask me that.

That just leads to a dead end.

Thinking you can do something for others is nothing more than a happy delusion. But once you realize it’s only a delusion, as you have now, there’s no place left to go. Just like Tomo-chan and I, you’ve got no place left to go. What’s ahead of you now isn’t even despair, but a pitch-black void.

It’s a dead end.

But I had no intention of telling her things we both already knew. Even if she didn’t know, I wasn’t about to go out of my way to tell her.

“To be honest,” I said, turning my back to her, “I came here hoping you’d kill me. I could have you do that. You wanted to kill me and I wanted to be killed. Seemed like a match made in Heaven. So I thought I’d come get it over with already. But I’ve changed my mind. I won’t be killed by someone like you.”

“Then . . .” she said, staring at the floor. I turned toward the entrance of the room in order to avoid eye contact.

Like a stressed-out strand of yarn torn to shreds, she choked out a sentence muddled together with tears and weeping.

“Then kill me now.”

“Not my business. Die yourself,” I replied, and didn’t look back. I had no desire to.

2

“Yo. Is it over?”

As I exited Muimi-chan’s apartment, Zerozaki, leaning against a telephone pole, waved a hand and called out to me. I kept walking oast him without stopping.

“Yeah, it’s over,” I said.

“I’ll be damned,” he said, catching up to me and matching his pace to mine. “Whoa! What the hell happened to your hands?! Am I crazy, or did the number of broken bones multiply by nine?”

“Yup, it did.”

“She broke them? Holy cow, man, Atemiya’s like that Nenbutsu no Tetsu guy! That’s some risky business.”

“Nah, I broke them myself. All of them.”

“Are you crazy? Come to think of it, you did say you were the one who broke your thumb, too, huh? Are you a masochist? Are you a freaking masochist? Doesn’t that hurt? Do you not feel pain? Have you had a lobotomy?”

“It hurts like shit. It hurts so much I can’t even faint. I might cry. I’m actually headed for the hospital right now. We’re near Nishijin

Hospital, right? . . . I'm not really a masochist, no. The situation just called for a little shock treatment, that's all."

"You know, broken bones don't always go back to normal. You may never play baseball again."

"No worries. If it comes to that, I'll just play soccer."

"You've got to be kidding me," he said in awe. "So how'd it go?"

"Well, now it's just a matter of sweeping up the mess. That's Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san's field. I'm sure they'll be thorough about it. Muimi-chan will be arrested, all the facts come to light, and that'll be that."

That is, if Muimi-chan maintained her sanity for that long.

That is, if she was even still alive.

Zerozaki folded his hands behinds his head with a disappointed expression. "Aw, man. That's not dramatic at all. Couldn't it at least have been a little romantic?" he said.

"What can you do? This is reality."

"Mmm. I guess. Say, man. Do you have parents and stuff?"

Zerozaki had suddenly posed a completely unrelated question, but I had a feeling he would ask something like that, so I wasn't surprised.

"Yeah, I do. In Kobe. I think they're still alive and kicking."

"Huh. So are you grateful to them and stuff?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, how do you feel toward them?"

“About what?”

“About bringing you into this world, dammit.”

“What about you, Zerozaki? I guess I probably don’t even have to ask, do I?”

“Answer should be obvious.”

“Yeah, it is.”

For an instant, we shared a glance.

“I’m sorry . . .”

“For being born.”

“Huh. I guess it was not Akutagawa after all,” Zerozaki laughed.

“I like Mushanokôji best.” I didn’t laugh.

“How do you feel about Kikuchi Kan? I’m kind of a big fan.”

“I don’t read him. In fact, I don’t really like reading.”

“Oh yeah, you said that, didn’t you? . . . Huh.” For some reason, he gave a convinced nod. “By the way, how’s about giving me my knife back? I don’t have a whole lot of that type.”

“Oh, this thing? Listen, Zerozaki. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to give this to me, huh? It’s really handy. You can just unlock doors without using anything high-tech.”

“Those things are expensive, jerk. Can you pay me one million five hundred thousand yen right now?”

“Geez, why’s a little steak knife like this so expensive?”

“Cram it. So what’s it gonna be?”

“How about I pay you one hundred and fifty in annual installments?”

“You know, we probably won’t actually meet again.”

“Ah, right.”

With no other alternative, I reluctantly gave him back the knife. He took it by the handle, spun it around, and closed it back inside his vest. Evidently he had knives placed all over his body. I wonder what would happen if he ever fell.

“Well, maybe it doesn’t matter, but there’s still some things that bother me. How’s about answering a few questions?” Zerozaki said.

“Sure. What?”

“It seems to me that when Emoto and that Aoii chick were killed, Atemiya had a solid alibi both times. She was at karaoke the first time and with her the sister the second time. Isn’t that right? I don’t know about Usami and you, but how could she have killed those two girls? And it seems like you realized Atemiya was the killer as soon as that detective called about Usami being killed. And you already seemed to know she was the one who attacked you in Kamogawa Park, too. How the hell did you know it was her? When did you realize that?”

“Hmm. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

Zerozaki scratched his head at me. “What do you mean? Like it was just intuition or something? Oh, or was it because all the other people involved were dead, so it had to be Atemiya by default? Who are you, Kindaichi?”

“No. But do I have to explain? I might get argumentative.”

“Hey. I don’t mind. Come on, you made me tell you all about my prowling exploits. Whatever happened to give and take? Come on, leave me with a good memory.”

“What are you, dying?”

“I might. Some red creature’s been chasing after me.”

Indeed, it was entirely plausible. It was even possible that Aikawa-san would appear before us right this instant. Considering the facts, Zerozaki’s life was like a candlelight flickering in the wind right about now.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. . . . Okay, so how far back should I go?” I said.

“From the beginning, of course. How’d you know Atemiya was the one who killed Emoto, Aoii, and Usami, and attacked you?”

“See, there’s your first mistake,” I said. “Muimi-chan didn’t kill Tomo-chan or Mikoko-chan. She had alibis, so that should be obvious.”

“Wha?” he said, his jaw dropping.

“She killed Akiharu-kun. And she assaulted me. That’s all she did. Oh yeah, and I don’t suppose she’ll be getting her apartment deposit back, but that’s it.”

“Hold on,” he said, spinning around in front of me and grabbing me by the shoulders. He was grinning, but not smiling. “Just a few hours ago, you were going on and on with all that confidence and that matter-of-fact tone about how ‘she killed Emoto Tomoe,’ and ‘she killed Aoii Mikoko,’ and ‘she attacked me in Kamogawa park,’ and ‘she killed Usami Akiharu,’ and ‘it was obviously Atemiya Muimi,’ *were you not*?!”

“Indeed,” I answered plainly. “But you see, the thing about that is I was just telling a confident, matter-of-fact lie. Time was of the essence, so I just kind of glossed over the facts. It’s actually a little more complicated than that.”

“Hang on. So what the hell have I been doing for the past few hours, wondering, ‘How in the world did Atemiya man-age to kill those two? What a puzzling brain-teaser!’?”

“I told you. I’m a liar.”

“I’m going to kill you,” he muttered sinisterly, and returned to my side. I took a step away from him. “Err, all right. Let me rephrase the question, then. So who did kill Emoto? If it wasn’t Atemiya, who was it?”

“Aoii Mikoko.” I answered with her name alone. Zerozaki wasn’t surprised to the point of vocalizing it. Perhaps he’d half been expecting it. But he furrowed his brow at me, crinkling his facial tattoo.

“So then who killed Aoii Mikoko? Don’t tell me you’re the punch line. . . .”

“Nope. That was just a suicide.”

“Suicide?” This time he was clearly surprised. “Aoii killed herself?”

“Yup. That explains why nobody showed up on the surveillance cameras, right? Of course it does; there was no ‘killer.’ Anyway, so Mikoko-chan committed suicide, which made Muimi-chan go bananas and kill Akiharu-kun and try to kill me. But I didn’t want to be killed, so I broke my hand instead. There you have it. QED.”

“You’re using that phrase wrong,” he retorted, then clutched his head in thought. “Hang on, hang on. Explain this to me step-by-step. You

can't just give me a big, crazy summary like that up front."

"Fine, I'll explain it right. Errr, okay, so you understand that Mikoko-chan killed Tomo-chan, right? Okay so far?"

"Yeah. No, wait, not okay. Aren't *you* the one who vouched for Aoii's alibi? Or your neighbor, rather? Don't tell me you and Aoii were in cahoots."

"No. Why are you so suspicious of me? What happened was I was thoroughly tricked that night, and only that night. Miiko-san too. Well, she wasn't tricked, exactly, she just didn't notice."

"What are you talking about?"

"Try thinking about it yourself. Tomo-chan was killed by Mikoko-chan. If you know that, there are only so many possibilities."

"Ahh," he said ponderously. "So you left Emoto's apartment together, right? Then you got a call from Emoto when you were around Nishiôji Nakadachiuri. You walked back to your apartment together, and then you left her with your neighbor, Asano-san. Then the next morning Aoii woke up early, went to your room, then went to Emoto's place. . . . Oh, is that it? When she was supposedly 'discovering' Emoto's body, she was actually killing her?"

"Not likely. That conflicts with the established time of death. So it must have been at night."

"So she snuck out of Asano-san's apartment?"

"Couldn't be. Miiko-san is highly sensitive to noise. She would've been caught. And Miiko-san had no reason to cover for Mikoko-chan."

"Then what was it, some kind of remote-control trick? Then again, this was a strangling, not some sealed-room mystery."

“So there’s only one possible answer left,” I said.

“What? Does it have something to do with that ‘*x* over *y*’ thing?”

“Nope. You don’t need to worry about that. It’s like a side order of fries. Just set it aside.”

“Come one, just tell me already. You sure know how to beat around the bush.”

“It’s simple. There was no point at which Mikoko-chan could have interacted with Tomo-chan once we left her apartment. Which means she must have killed her before we left.”

“Huh? What does that mean?” Zerozaki said. “If that’s the case then all pretenses all crumble. Emoto was killed between the time she called you and three a.m., right?”

“Suppose,” I said, “that that call hadn’t occurred. Then couldn’t Mikoko-chan have killed her?”

“No, it’s still impossible. You left the apartment together.” “Aha. We left together, but not at the exact same time. There was a slight lag. I mean incredibly slight. But I left the room before Mikoko-chan did. As I was leaving, I had to put on my shoes, right? At that time, naturally I wasn’t facing the inside of the room. In other words, I wasn’t facing Mikoko-chan and Tomo-chan’s direction. I was looking at my shoelaces.” I raised a foot to show him. “What’s more, there was a door between the hallway and main room. I couldn’t see what they were doing in there.”

“Wait a minute. There must have been a scream or some kind of noise. Even if it was happening behind you, there’s no way you wouldn’t have noticed someone being killed.”

“If it was a stabbing or a beating, maybe. But a person can’t scream when they’re being strangled. There were noises, but I never would’ve guessed it was the sound of someone being killed. I thought Mikoko-chan had tripped or something.”

“Ahh.” Zerozaki began rubbing his temples. If you tried hard enough, you could see a slight resemblance to Nose Keiko. But you had to really try.

“Wait. It doesn’t take you ten to twenty minutes just to tie your shoes, does it? Supposing what you’re saying is true, even if Aoii did strangle Emoto, she wouldn’t have died that fast. People can live for up to ten minutes without breathing.”

“Zerozaki, could it be that you’re just misunderstanding the situation because you’re a knife expert? Strangle victims don’t all necessarily die from suffocation. They can also die from lack of blood flow to the brain. You just have to pull upward, like this. If you manage to cut off the carotid artery, it takes less than a minute. If you’re good, it only takes a couple dozen seconds.”

“Really?”

“Really. So after that, Mikoko-chan opened the door, looking completely innocent, and came out into the entrance. At that time, she was blocking my view inside, so I couldn’t see anything. Then we left Tomo-chan’s room together and exited the building.”

“Yeah, that all adds up . . .” he said, still seeming dissatisfied. “But that’s all assuming you hadn’t gotten that phone call, right? But in reality, Emoto did call you. That means she was still alive after you left the building. Don’t tell me she came back to life for an instant.”

“You keep making nonsensical predictions. Of course that’s not it. Tomo-chan died instantly. It’s simpler than that. Really simple. If you

just think about it, you'll figure it out. The call was for me, but it wasn't on my phone, right?"

"Right . . . it was Aoii's, wasn't it? But wasn't that because she didn't know your number?"

"Well, let's go back to the basics for a second here. What is the advantage of a cell phone to begin with? It's that it lets you make a call from *anywhere*, is it not? That call didn't necessarily come from Tomo-chan's apartment. And on top of that, phones don't let you see the caller's face, right?"

"So you're saying Aoii had an accomplice? And the accomplice used Emoto's phone to pose as her?"

"No, there wasn't an accomplice. I'm pretty sure this was a spontaneous crime to begin with. The murder weapon seems to indicate that as well."

"You mean the thin cloth?"

"Yeah. Most likely, it was the ribbon from the present Akiharu-kun gave to Tomo-chan. A ribbon would be fairly well cut out for strangling someone. It's flexible and fits to your skin. It works even better than rope. But anyway, considering the murder weapon was just something that happened to be there, not something that had be prepared, it's hard to think this was a premeditated crime."

"Then who made that phone call?"

"Mikoko-chan didn't need an accomplice. She placed the call herself," I said. "She just had to have Tomo-chan's phone in her pocket, and then call her own phone on speed dial. Of course there was nobody talking on the other end, but she just pretended it was a call from Tomo-chan. And then she passed the phone to me."

“But when you were on the phone, didn’t you speak with somebody? Wasn’t she trying to tell you something she had forgotten?”

“Yeah, but that *was* Mikoko-chan. At that time, I was walking a step ahead of her. It was the same thing that happened at the apartment. I didn’t realize that Mikoko-chan was right behind me whispering into Tomo-chan’s phone. By the time I turned back around, she had already slipped it back into her pocket.”

The method of murder and the method of creating an alibi. Both had been extremely risky, without question. If I had just turned my head around on a whim, the whole jig would’ve been up. But if you thought about it, the chances of that happening were fairly low. The risk was big, but the chance of success was extremely high. If you weighed things in terms of value, it was certainly a risk worth taking.

“Anyway, so that gave her an alibi. Then the next day, she went to Tomo-chan’s place, returned the phone, and called the police. Usually they say you shouldn’t trust the one who discovers the body first, but she already had an alibi, and she had probably hidden the murder weapon in her own apartment or something before going back to Tomo-chan’s.”

Of course, Mikoko-chan was the only one who knew all of the minute details, so you’d have to pay her a visit to get the full story. And that sure wasn’t happening. But that was the basic gist of it. I might not have had every single fact right, but it all sounded more or less reasonable.

Mikoko-chan had probably written that “*x* over *y*” formula down at the time she “discovered” the body. The previous night, she had neither the time nor the notion to do such a thing.

“Well, that definitely makes Aoii sound like the killer. But it’s still just a possibility, right? I mean, you don’t have any proof, do you?”

“Well, no. That’s true. Strictly speaking, there’s no proof. To be sure, it could’ve just been some burglar.”

“There must be something. Some sort of peculiarity or something.”

“At any rate, that explains the Tomo-chan incident. Got any other questions?”

“Yeah,” Zerozaki said with a frustrated expression. He looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn’t find the right words. “Nah, forget it,” he said. “Okay, then on to the Aoii incident. Why was it a suicide? Even the police said they thought it was a homicide, right?”

“Well, that gets to be kind of a long story, but her motive for suicide should be obvious, right? After she killed Tomo-chan, her conscience got the best of her.”

“Murderers have a conscience?”

“Not everyone’s like *you*, you know,” I said jokingly. “That’s what was written in her suicide note, anyway.”

“Ah. I guess if it was in her suicide note, that pretty much settles it. It at least proves that Aoii chose death on her own. I sure don’t understand it though. Suicide, that is. I guess there are all sorts of killers in this world. But if she was going to do that, she should’ve just not killed Emoto in the first place. . . . Hey wait, hold on a sec”

“Huh? What?”

“What do you mean, ‘suicide note’?”

“In other words, an essay of sorts that one writes before committing suicide in order to leave something behind in this world. Not to be confused with the will and testament.”

“Thank you, Detective Columbo,” he said, simultaneously kicking me in the hand. Naturally, this was excruciatingly painful since all of my fingers were broken.

“What’re you doing? What if my bones don’t set properly now?”

“Play soccer. So what's up with this suicide note? This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Yeah. You see, before that. . . well, think about it. Didn’t it seem strange in the first place?”

“Didn’t *what* seem strange?”

“What do you think?”

It was the very thing Sasaki-san had pointed out.

“Look at me.”

Me, a loser of a human being who had broken long ago. Who didn’t have a single nerve remaining intact. Who desired death more than anything else.

“Do you really think I would get so sick just from seeing the strangled corpse of somebody I knew?”

“Ah. So you mean, you felt so sick because it wasn’t a murder, but a suicide?”

“No. A corpse is a corpse, whether it was a suicide or homicide.”

He said nothing.

“When I arrived at Mikoko-chan’s place, I pushed the button on the intercom. There was no reply. Realizing, based on various experiences, that this was probably a bad sign, I hurried into her room. And what

did I see? The dead body of Mikoko-chan, who had strangled *herself*, lying on the bed."

Strangled to death.

This was why Tomo-chan had been strangled from behind and Mikoko-chan from the front.

"She strangled herself? Is that even possible?"

"It's actually a fairly common suicide method. Of course, in Mikoko-chan's case, it wasn't her arteries that were cut off, it was her windpipe. It's an extremely agonizing way to go. Your face gets all bloated with blood. It ain't pretty."

You had to be pretty damned determined to choose a death like that.

As for Aoii Mikoko's determination . . .

"So by the bed there was a suicide note. Addressed to me. It had a lot to say. It talked about how she had killed Tomo-chan, and what she wanted me to do from there."

"What she wanted you to do?"

"She didn't want people to think it was a suicide. She didn't mind dying, but she didn't want people to think she was the horrible person who had killed Tomo-chan."

"I'm not following you here. Say it straight, man."

"What I mean is, she asked me to get rid of all the evidence. The neckstrap she had stolen from the scene of the murder, and then of course the suicide note itself as well as the ribbon, which would have given itself away as the weapon with which she had killed both Tomo-chan and herself. And there were some other things as well."

“Ahh, I get it.” Zerozaki slowly nodded and looked up at the sky. “Yeah, it’s starting to click. So you did what she asked. Come to think of it, something did seem strange. I noticed it myself. Something about the time was off. You left your place at eleven o’clock, arrived at Aoii’s place within ten minutes, the cops arrived within another ten minutes, and you arrived at the police station within yet another ten minutes, at which point it was exactly twelve o’clock. That leaves thirty minutes unaccounted for. Were you doing something during those thirty minutes?”

“Yeah. But obviously I didn’t leave Mikoko-chan’s room, or the surveillance camera would've caught me, and obviously I had to have reported it to the police. So what do you think I was doing?”

“And you said you were frisked as you were leaving the apartment, right? Hmm . . . then, could it be . . . oh, man . . . did you *eat* everything?”

Yup, I nodded.

Anyone could’ve guessed by this point.

And this was Zerozaki Hitoshiki, no less.

“You *ate* it all?”

“Yup. It was delicious,” I answered casually. “People who do that are traditionally known as ‘stuffers.’ But that’s not important. At any rate, I can’t eat what I can’t digest, so I had to suppress the urge to vomit as I called the police. I was planning to hold it in until I got home, but I couldn’t make it, and I ended up hurling in the police station.”

“You ate the goddamn evidence . . .” Zerozaki said in awe. “The ribbon, too? Do you realize you ate something that killed two people? That’s *insanity*, man.”

“Yeah, no doubt. I never said I was sane.”

“But why did you go along with Aoii’s request? You could’ve just ignored it, and you wouldn’t have had to cross such a rickety-ass bridge, metaphorically speaking.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I was brooding over some things my-self. You could call it a form of redemption,” I said, breaking eye contact with Zerozaki. “Anyway, that sums up the death of Aoii Mikoko. She killed herself. In reality, the story should have ended here, but . . .”

“But the incidents kept occurring, contrary to expectations, huh?”

“Yup,” I sighed. “That . . . that really was a surprise.”

“So what about Atemiya, then? Why'd she kill Usami?”

“Well, that has to be left up to speculation. I wasn’t involved in that incident at all. But I’ve got a theory that seems to hold water. It’s just your regular, everyday murder case,” I said. “Muimi-chan probably thought something was fishy about Mikoko-chan’s death in the first place. In fact, let’s assume that Mikoko-chan talked to her herself about killing Tomo-chan, and that Muimi-chan subsequently realized that Mikoko-chan’s death was a suicide.”

“Okay.”

“So what did she do?”

For the sake of someone else.

Not for herself.

“What *could* she do for Mikoko-chan? Zerozaki, what would you have done?”

“Nothing. Aoii was already dead.”

Indeed.

Even for someone who was still alive, Zerozaki wouldn’t have done a thing. Nor would I. It was that simple.

“But Muimi-chan tried to do two things. The first one was revenge. The second was to protect Mikoko-chan.”

“By revenge, you mean killing you? Well, I guess you kind of rejected Aoii, after all. Makes sense. Isn’t that exactly what I said? That Aoii had the hots for you?”

“Don’t act like a bigshot about it. Even I realized that.”

“You mean you knew and you were just ignoring it? Man, then you have no right to complain about almost being killed. But what do you mean she was trying to ‘protect’ her? How did killing Usami add up to protecting Aoii?”

“It’s just like what I did. Muimi-chan was trying to guard Mikoko-chan’s honor. If a third murder occurred, nobody

would suspect that the second victim—Mikoko-chan—was actually the one who had killed Tomo-chan, that she had killed a close friend.”

“Okay, fair enough. But why Usami? She could’ve just killed anybody. She didn’t have to kill her own friend.”

“No. She killed him *because* he was a friend. If the third victim had been someone completely unrelated to Tomoe-chan and Mikoko-chan, the police might not even consider it a ‘third incident,’ so to speak. So the most likely candidate for the next victim was either Usami Akiharu or myself. And I know what you’re thinking, Zerozaki.

Why didn't she just kill me, then? Indeed. But I mean it when I say my apartment is ancient. There's no harder place to kill a person."

With walls that thin, even the sound of walking down the hall could be heard from the rooms. Sneaking in, having a scuffle, and killing a person in my apartment were all impossibilities.

"So Usami was the next best thing? But even if Aoii was Atemiya's close friend, Usami was a friend too, right? How could she do that?"

"I had the same doubts myself. Not to mention that Tomo-chan was Muimi-chan's friend as well. I couldn't figure out why Muimi-chan would forgive the person who had killed her. So I asked her. And this was what she said: It was a matter of 'order of priorities.' Basically what that means is that to Muimi-chan, the already deceased Mikoko-chan was worth even more than Akiharu-kun, who was still alive, or Tomo-chan, who had been Mikoko-chan's victim."

"That's terrible. Usami got screwed more than anyone." "Maybe so."

Akiharu-kun had prophesied that he would be next, and claimed he could die happily. Just how much of the truth had he figured out? This was a mystery to me. Was it too romantic to suppose Akiharu-kun had discovered the truth in its entirety and still let Muimi-chan kill him? If that truly was the case, then Usami Akiharu was the only respectable one in this whole series of events.

Namely, because he had fully accepted his friends for who they were.

"Say . . ." Zerozaki stood there in deep thought like a Rodin sculpture for a while, then uncrossed his arms and looked up at me. "I understand the logic and all, but I've got the same doubts I had with Aoii. This is all based on the pretense that Atemiya really did kill him, right?

“Aoii left a suicide note behind, so that’s one thing. But in Atemiya's case, you’ve just got to be some master speculator like Kindaichi or something. You figured it all out just from that one phone call, without even seeing any evidence. Either you just figured Atemiya and you were the only ones left so it had to be her, or I don’t know *what* the hell you did.”

“Do you have some problem with Yokomizo?”

I couldn’t help but sense some hostility in Zerozaki’s numerous references to Kindaichi. Nevertheless, he simply shook his head.

“Nah, not really,” he answered. “But the book jackets are always too scary so I only watch the TV dramas. I don’t really like him or hate him, to be honest.”

“Ah.”

“So is that all it is?”

“No. Think back. Remember what I asked Sasaki-san?”

“Ah, right. Whether that *'x* over *y'* mark was there, right? And? I thought you said that wasn’t important.”

“The meaning of the mark is irrelevant. It was nothing more than random symbols at that point. It only meant some-thing in the case of Tomo-chan’s death. But the fact that the same mark was found at the site of Akiharu-kun’s death suggests something very odd.”

“What?”

“That ‘*x* over *y'* mark found at each crime scene was a secret. It was known only to the police. Sasaki-san didn’t even mention it at first. The only other people who could’ve known about it were you and

me, since we broke into the crime scene, and anyone I happened to ask, 'What do you suppose *x* over *y* means?'."

Namely Aikawa-san, Mikoko-chan, and Muimi-chan.

"There must have been other people who knew about it. People working on the case and such."

"Indeed. There were plenty of people who knew. But Muimi-chan was the only one who thought it was a 'dying message.' "

"Ahh, because the police thought it was the killer's doing. And?"

"In Akiharu-kun's case, Sasaki-san reported that evidence suggested the victim had written the message himself. Why only this time? Most likely because the killer coerced her victim into writing it before killing him, in an effort to emphasize that this was the 'third incident.' "

"And she wouldn't have had that idea in the first place if she hadn't thought the mark was a dying message, huh? So Atemiya didn't know what *'x* over *y'* meant?"

"Probably not."

If she had known the mark's meaning, she probably wouldn't have used it that way.

"And that was enough for you to figure out that Atemiya was the killer?"

"Well, of course it was partially speculation. I kind of figured she seemed the most likely to do such a thing. Even I was impressed by her loyalty to Mikoko-chan."

“No you weren’t,” he laughed. “Man, I’m not trusting a thing you say anymore. You’re not just a passive observer; you’re a freaking liar.”

“I believe I told you that.”

“Don’t flaunt your faults.”

“Yeah, I know I shouldn’t,” I said casually. “Anyway, it looks like you don’t have any other questions. Can we close the books on this case?”

“Not a very grand finale, but . . . hahhh, how do you say it? Hearing the whole story laid out like that makes it seem like such . . .”

“A masterpiece?”

“No, nonsense,” he said, as if he had just heard the most disappointing joke of all time.

I felt pretty much like that myself.

It was something terribly grotesque, terribly warped, terribly vile. It was like a joke, a comical anecdote, an unsightly, unbearable figure.

In the end, there was no way to stop thinking, no matter how much you willed yourself not to. Your brain would keep thinking automatically.

Who and what were in the wrong? That was probably simple enough in and of itself. It was an issue anyone could comprehend, upon which everyone could reach a unanimous agreement, for which everyone would feel sympathy. Some-thing close to us all.

That was what made it so unpleasant.

I don’t know.

If only I could have abandoned everything. How nice that would've been.

"Well, without prying too deep," Zerozaki said, looking off the other way with utter disinterest. "I don't figure you'll give me a straight answer anyway. But . . . eh, forget it."

"What? You're awfully quick to give up."

"Well, I've got a few ideas up my sleeve, but will you tell me one thing, oh babbler of nonsense?"

"What is it, my dear homicidal monster?"

"What are your thoughts?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"I mean, how do you feel about the fact that three people have just died around you?" he said, suddenly growing much more interested. He was like a little boy, happily looking at his own reflection in a mirror. "You had people killing friends, killing themselves, killing *for* their friends, *being* killed for friends, and as a bonus, you were almost killed. So how do you feel about all that?"

. . . . .

It was a straight question that I doubt I could have delivered myself.

I tried to fold my arms and make like I was thinking in order to buy some time, but my broken fingers wouldn't even allow that.

"Zerozaki, here's how I feel about this string of incidents."

"Okay, let's have it."

“I talked a little too much this time. My throat hurts almost as much as my fingers.”

. . . . .

Zerozaki froze. His face twitched for an instant before he exploded into laughter.

“Gahahahahaha! I’ll bet it does,” he said. “In other words, you don’t even care if your friends die, right?”

“No, even a guy like me undergoes some shock at the death of a friend. It’s just that these people hadn’t become friends yet.”

Of the lot of them, I was closest with Emoto Tomoe, and surely that closeness was to blame for why she was the most distant.

I couldn’t respond to Aoii Mikoko’s affection with affection, and Atemiya Muimi’s aggressive displays of emotion were totally foreign to me.

Likewise, Usami Akiharu’s graciousness was something I lacked.

“You live a crippled life,” Zerozaki said.

“Not really.”

“Yes you do. You restrict yourself.”

“Better than having others restrict me. What exactly do you think it means to be free, Zerozaki? Does freedom to you mean killing people?”

“Ahh, my idea of freedom, eh?” he said with a strange snicker. “Well, to be honest, I hate that damn word. I despise it. It gives me goose bumps.”

“Yeah, I don’t like it either.”

“It’s a cheap word in Japan, huh? People just throw it around in any context. They use it like an excuse. You know, like ‘Don’t I at least have the freedom to dye my own hair?’ What a load of crap. But I pretty much just do what I want, whether you call it freedom or not. To hell with being restricted, whether it’s by yourself or others.”

“Fair enough.” I sighed and nodded. “Then I guess if I hadn’t restrained myself, I would’ve been like you.”

“Does that mean if I *had* restrained myself, I would’ve been like *you*?”

How wholly unappealing.

“I think I’ll pass on that.”

“Yeah, that’s a big no thank you.”

Zerozaki laughed, and I didn’t laugh.

As our pointless chatter went on, at some point the hospital appeared before us. Apparently we had been conversing at a standstill for some time now. I hadn’t noticed at all. At this point, I really had been talking too much.

From there, we continued talking about things that had nothing to do with the murders. Things that had nothing to do with anything besides us. For probably two whole hours. Ridiculous things that would serve no purpose in life. Things that would bring neither help nor harm to the world.

Some topics he would bring up.

Some topics I would bring up.

If you had three wishes, what would you wish for? If you found a hundred million yen, how would you spend it? Which is more beautiful, an isosceles triangle or an equilateral? Which is bigger, a kilometer or a kilogram? Would you rather belong to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or the Rosicrucian Order? Is it possible to have a 115-by-l 15 block magic square? What the hell is Eighty-eight Othello, anyhow?

We conversed like two good friends.

But Zerozaki was no friend of mine, and I was no friend of his. We may as well have been talking to ourselves. It was all meaningless, worthless small talk. I thought it neither enjoyable nor unenjoyable. It was an act of reflection on how I'd lived these past nineteen years. A reflection of light. Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

It was a wholly inconceivable chunk of time, but sure enough, the hands of that magical clock slowly made their way to zero.

"Well, that puts my doubts to rest," he then said. "I guess this is farewell."

"Yeah." I agreed with no resistance.

"Nice killing time with ya," Zerozaki said, lifting his rear end off the banister he had been sitting on. "Say," he said, giving me a sideways glance. "You planning on staying in Kyoto permanently?"

"Hard to say. I'm kind of a wanderer, really. I reckon I'll be here as long as I'm in college, but you never know when I might drop out."

"Gotcha. Well, then what's a place you don't think you'll ever go in your whole life?"

"Hmm . . . I doubt I'll ever go to the North or South Pole, among others," I said, giving a stock answer after a moment's thought. "The

one place I definitely don't want to go to is Texas in America. Especially Houston. I'd rather break every damn bone in my body than go back there."

"Huh." He nodded. "I guess I'll go there, then."

"Can you speak English?"

"I went to junior high school. Besides, a knife gets through where words don't. Of course," he said caustically, "*your* knife probably wouldn't."

I shrugged at his biting comment. "Well, I guess we won't meet again."

"Fine by me. I don't really like seeing you anyway."

"Yeah, true enough."

It was probably true. I wouldn't have any desire to see him, nor him to see me. It was nothing more than an impossible chance meeting to begin with, so such was the logical conclusion.

In the end, I posed one final question. I pulled out the deepest, darkest fragment of my being and took a good look at it head-on.

"Tell me, Zerozaki."

"What?"

"Is there someone you love?"

"Hell no, man. Does it look like there is? Incidentally, I hate myself the most. Or maybe you. Why do you ask?"

"I've got someone."

He looked just a bit surprised, but then gave a gloating sneer. “I asked you before and you said, ‘Ehh, I don’t really know,’ you jerkoff.”

“Yeah, I was lying.”

“Oh,” he said. “Well, I guess that’s the difference between you and me.”

“Yeah, guess so.”

“I guess you’d better keep on living, then. Don’t become like me.”

“Same to you.”

He turned his back on me and began walking toward Imadegawa Street. I turned my back on him and began walking toward the hospital reception.

Neither of us said a word, but I’m sure we were thinking the same thing.

“Now then . . .”

To me, this marked the end of the story. But even if a world or two had crumbled down on the other side of the mirror, I could think of at least two people who had no intention of letting things end this way, and there was something depressing about that.

Maybe this too was a form of divine retribution.

“That’s all this damn life is, eh, Human Failure?”

So muttered the “Damaged Goods.”

I was speaking to myself.

Kunagisa Tomo

????

FINAL CHAPTER

A WORLD THAT CAN'T END

With all of my fingers besides the left thumb placed in braces, the doctor told me they would take about two weeks to heal to a point of not interfering with my daily life, as long as I went easy on them. The following day, I headed for Kunagisa's condominium in Shirosaki, the highest-class residential area of Kyoto. I thought it would be nice to show up looking cool on the Vespa I had inherited from Mikoko-chan, but the finger braces wouldn't allow it, so I gave up. It seemed I would have to wait a bit longer before I could enjoy that sweet feeling of going for a spin.

The braces proved to be more of an inconvenience than I had initially expected. At first, I figured, "Oh, so my fingers won't be able to bend as much for a while, big deal," but within the first night alone, I realized that this was going to place a considerable strain on my daily life. Even getting dressed had become a big chore. I realized that this was going to cause me to become even more of a burden to Miiko-san next door, and this launched the beginning of a very pessimistic phase.

And so it was that my mode of transportation this day was my own two feet. Three hours was a bit intense for someone suffering from injuries, and I could've just as easily taken a bus or taxi, but considering the high cost of the medical bills for my finger treatment, I had decided to save my money instead.

"But she is going to be there, right?"

Muttering such things to myself all the while. I eventually arrived in front of Kunagisa's condo. It was a posh, brick building that looked

more like a fortress than a condo. The thirty-first and thirty-second floors both belonged to Kunagisa.

I passed through the gazes of a number of rocklike security guards sitting firm as rocks in the entrance (they knew my face by now) and headed for the elevator lobby. The elevator was already on the first floor before I even pushed the call button.

I went ahead and pushed it, opening the doors, and went inside. I used a key to open the button case, exposing the but-tons for floors thirty-one and thirty-two, and pressed the one for thirty-two.

The sensation of gravity gone awry continued for a whole minute.

I exited the elevator once it stopped and approached the steel door straight ahead of me. As vastly superior as this place was to my own, it still lacked an intercom. Kunagisa almost never received any visitors, so there was no need.

I opened the lock with a key and fingerprint scan, and entered the room.

"Tomooo, it's meee. I'm in your plaaace," I called out as I walked down the hallway (although I didn't feel right calling it just a "hallway." The staircase alone was bigger than my entire place). On the thirty-first floor below, most of the walls had been knocked down to make space for a ridiculously enormous computer, whereas the thirty-second floor was more like a maze, making it easy for me with my poor memory to get mixed up. Now where was that girl?

I realized I should have called her ahead of time, but my fingers were in no condition to be operating a telephone. My left thumb was still functioning normally, of course, so I could have done it with enough effort, but I was in no mood to exert that effort.

“Tomo, where are you?” I continued walking down the hall as I called out again. I began to see bizarre cords and cables of various unknown varieties tangled along the floor. Of course I had set foot in this place any number of times by now, but for a guy like me who didn’t know the first thing about mechanical or electronic engineering, this place was still like a magical kingdom. If I wasn’t careful, I could easily trip on something and fall, so I made sure to take caution as I proceeded.

“Tomo, it’s me. You’re somewhere on here, right?”

“Yo, I’m over here, thisaway, thisaway.”

The responding voice didn’t belong to Kunagisa.

As expected, it was a red voice.

Not that voices have colors.

“Actually I thought you might not be here . . .”

Is life ever that easy?

I continued walking in the direction of the voice until at last arriving in an empty room about ten mats wide. In this disgustingly big mansion of a condo, there were rooms even Kunagisa Tomo couldn’t find a use for. Of course I supposed it was also just a matter of time.

Then again, I guess you need rooms like that if you’re going to have guests over.

“Yo. Long time no see.”

Inside the room, Aikawa-san and . . .

“Wawawawa, it’s Ii-chan!”

Kunagisa Tomo were sitting across from each other, drinking cola out of cans.

She had Hawaiian-blue hair, the small frame of a child, and a 100 percent undiluted smile. It was the first time I had seen her in awhile. Since Golden Week, in fact, so almost a whole month. But it felt like it had been ages.

It was as if I had returned to where I belonged.

Perhaps this was what they called nostalgia.

“Wawawa, Ii-chan, what happened to your hands? Is it just me, or did they get a lot fatter?”

“The skin’s hardening. It’s Flictonic Cliple Weber Syndrome.”

“Ooh, I see.”

“No you don’t. Actually, there was a string of various incidents. Including my face injuries, it’ll be about two weeks until I’m fully recovered.”

“Hawawaa. Wowee, Ii-chan, cooool. You’re dyn-o-mite,Ii-chan, yayyy. Did you have a run-in with Nenbutsu no Tetsu or something?”

“No. Let’s not talk about that guy.” I sat down to join them, effectively forming an isosceles triangle with myself at the peak. My eyes shifted towards the object of my fears.

“Hello, Jun-san.”

“What’s up, Main Character?” She grinned, cola in hand. She looked like she was up to no good, as usual. On the other hand, she seemed to be in surprisingly high spirits. But Aikawa-san’s moods changed like

mountain weather, so it was hard to really pass judgment on such things.

“What are you doing in Kunagisa’s top secret headquarters? Come to find out more about the prowler?”

“No, no, nothing like that. The prowler thing’s been settled for the time being.”

“Really?”

“Yup,” she nodded.

“We were just talking about that now, Ii-chan. You wanna participate too? Three heads are better than two.”

“Nah, not really interested.”

I was lying, though.

Still, I guessed this meant Zerozaki hadn’t gone to America after all. Maybe Aikawa-san had caught up with him at the airport and put an end to things once and for all. If so, he had my condolences. He had had such a gallant departure only to follow it up with a big flop. That’s just too shameful, Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

“Hey, Kunagisa-chan,” Aikawa-san said. “Sorry to do this in your own house, but would you mind leaving us alone for a moment? I’ve got something to talk to Ii-chan about.”

“Hmm?” Kunagisa said, scratching her head. “Is it a *secret* something?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm. Okay.”

She stood up and tip-tapped out of the room. Most likely she would head off to some computer in another room and start working away. Unlike me, whose only way of passing time was Eight Queens, Kunagisa had a near limitless supply of methods.

Left alone with Aikawa-san, I was first to speak. "You know, I can't help but notice you just kicked Kunagisa out."

"Indeed I did. You wouldn't want her to be present when we're having a serious talk, would you?" Aikawa-san said un-apologetically. "You ought to be grateful to me. Don't get so angry. Geez, I set Tomo-chan aside for two seconds and you lose your cool."

"Then why won't we just go somewhere else to talk?"

"No can do. I'm a busy woman. Tomorrow I'm needed in Hokkaido. I'll be heading there as soon as I leave this place. To be honest, I wasn't sure I'd get to see you."

Just lucky, I guess.

"So . . ." Realizing that there was no way to talk my way out of anything with this woman, I gave up and encouraged her to begin. "So what are we talking about this time?"

"First, an update on the Zerozaki case," she said. "I'm sure you're interested to know, right? I won't let you say you're not."

"Well, as much as the next guy, I guess. But what did you mean, it's been 'settled'?"

"Last night, I finally found that little snot. We had a little round two."

"And?"

“We came to a friendly agreement,” she said. “He’ll stop killing people, and in return, I’ll leave him alone. It’s a bargain.”

“Is that good enough?”

“Sure. My job was only to stop the Kyouto prowler. No-body ever said to catch him. To be honest, I’d rather avoid getting into a killfest with the ‘Zerozaki Ichizoku’, so this is good enough for now. For now.”

For now.

I didn’t want to think about the meaning lurking within those words. This was undoubtedly a domain with which I didn’t want to get involved.

“Then I guess that means that at the very least, there won’t be any more prowling incidents in the city of Kyoto huh?”

“Exactly. And if it hadn’t been for your cooperation, it never would’ve come to this conclusion, so I suppose I ought to express my gratitude,” she said, sounding much like an ac-tress.

“Reallyyoudon’tsaythat’sgreatlet’sgogetKunagisa.”

“Hold it right there,” she said, interrupting my attempt to weasel out of a discussion. “You know, I had a nice little chat with Hitoshiki-kun . . .”

“You did?”

“I did,” she said, scooting toward me on her knees. “We talked about you, and you, and you, and you . . . you know, the usual stuff.”

“That’s creepy.”

That bastard. What had he gone and blabbed to her about? To Aikawa-san, of all people. Then again, I did the same thing. Maybe this was what he meant about having "a few ideas up his sleeve."

"But you know," she said, looking truly impressed, "that was some smart detective work you did. Even I was taken aback. Who would've thought that Aoii Mikoko had killed Emoto Tomoe before you even left her apartment, and that her own death was a suicide? I didn't see that coming at all."

"Forgive me if this whole speech sounds staged, Jun-san."

"Don't get so serious. I have no plans to make enemies with you. I wanna be your friend, Ii-chan, really. But you know, I figure I might as well clarify things."

"What things?"

She didn't answer right away. She was silent for a while, as if trying to read my response.

"The details of this string of incidents," she eventually said.

"You mean you're not satisfied with my reasoning again?"

"No, I've got no problem with your reasoning. It's *you* I'm not satisfied with. At all."

". . . ."

"It sounds like you weaseled your way out of explaining a few things to Zerozaki, didn't you?"

"Yes, but they were all little details. Just trivial stuff, stuff you could explain however you want, or conversely that I couldn't even imagine an explanation for. So it doesn't really—"

“For example, the reason Aoii Mikoko killed Emoto Tomoe.”

“Well, that’s . . .”

That was something I hadn’t told Zerozaki. Something I’d left unexplained.

“Or what about the reason that neckstrap was taken from the scene of the crime?”

“Well, I . . .”

“And why would an apathetic boy like you go to all the trouble of making Aoii Mikoko’s suicide look like a homicide, even if it was requested in her suicide note? But what I really want to know most is, just how long did you know about everything?”

. . . .

“You made it sound like you first learned the truth upon reading Aoii Mikoko’s suicide note, but . . . well, that just can’t be, now can it?” she said with a grin. “So when?”

I couldn’t muster an answer.

“As much as I underestimate people, I know you’re pretty hot stuff,” she said. “I certainly don’t believe you didn’t realize the truth at all until seeing that suicide note.”

“You’re overestimating me. I’m not that—“

“Well then, shall I provide more concrete evidence? For example, you said something to Zerozaki along the lines of ‘Seeing the dead body of someone I know isn’t enough to make me feel sick,’ but it seems to me that that’s not the only part of the story that wasn’t very *you*, so to speak.”

“What else is there?” I knew where she was going with this, but I posed the question anyway. “I don’t have a clue what you mean.”

“Go back to when you first heard the facts from Sasaki. She asked you about the phone call you got from Emoto, and what did you say? That it was *definitely* Emoto’s voice. That you never forgot a voice once heard. Or something to that effect. You’ve brought up your terrible memory any number of times by now. So how could you be so sure?” She patted me a couple of times on the shoulder teasingly. “How could that busted memory of yours possibly confirm such a thing? You had only met the girl one time, and this was over the phone, no less. There *is* no way you could’ve confirmed such a thing. Don’t you think that’s why Aoii Mikoko thought to use such a trick in the first place? She was anticipating your lousy memory. At the very least, there’s no way you could say it was ‘definitely’ her voice.”

“And?”

“*And* that means you deliberately lied to Sasaki-san. Now why would you do a thing like that? Well, here’s what I think—you can’t fake something you don’t know about to begin with, but you can fake something you do know about. When Sasaki came and told you about Emoto’s death, *that* was when you realized the truth about Aoii’s trick and that she was the one who had killed Emoto Tomoe, wasn’t it?”

The cat was essentially out of the bag. There was no point in staying silent any longer. Before the eyes of this scarlet, multitalented wonder, such a course of action was more worthless than worthlessness itself.

“I didn’t really have *everything* figured out at that point,” I answered relatively honestly. “I didn’t have any evidence or anything at that point. It was just a guess. It was just a vague idea I had, like, ‘It could have happened like this,’ you know? You certainly couldn’t call it a solid conclusion. But Jun-san, even supposing that were true, that I

had figured everything out at that point . . . is there some problem with that?"

"Indeed there is. A freaking *huge* problem. Now, if you told me you were just lying to cover up a friend, I'd be fine with that. Anybody would tell a lie if it meant saying a friend. But the problem here is that Aoii Mikoko *wasn't* your friend. Regardless of how she felt toward you, you didn't feel anything toward her. She was just an acquaintance. A classmate. Simply put—you weren't covering for her. You were *stalling* her."

Stalling.

And for what purpose did I need that extra time?

To reach a decision.

To give, or to take?

"And then on that particular day, you pointed the finger at her. 'Can you forgive your own existence?' Or something like that."

"You talk as if you had seen it all yourself. Were you watching us, by any chance?"

Come to think of it, hadn't Aikawa-san said something about spotting Mikoko-chan and me that Saturday? But what if she had followed us after that? I may have been able to detect the deadly Zerozaki or Muimi-chan, the novice of novices, but I doubted I would've noticed if Aikawa-san had been on our tail.

And yet Aikawa-san denied it. "No, I wasn't watching you. But I can at least guess what you would've said. I share Zerozaki's opinion—I don't believe for a second that a person capable of murder would let their own conscience drive them to suicide. Anyone likely to hold regrets wouldn't commit the murder in the first place."

“But statistically speaking, a fair percentage of murderers do commit suicide.”

“Statistically speaking? You’ve been around for nearly twenty years and statistics is the best answer you can come up with?” She raised a scoffing eyebrow and snorted at me. “Don’t tell me you believe in something that idiotic. Some-thing that only happens once in a hundred thousand tries happens on the very first try. The first person you ever meet is one in a million. The lower the probability, the more you see it happen. ‘Statistics.’ What a joke. There’s nothing more average than a miracle.”

It was a ridiculously wild view on the subject, but there was no arguing with *the* Aikawa Jun. Speaking from personal experience, she was entirely out of my league.

“But I digress. At any rate, Aoii Mikoko didn’t commit suicide out of guilt. She did it because you *accused* her. Or rather, you *questioned* her. After that, she had no choice other than death.”

Can you forgive your own existence?

I’ll be back tomorrow. Around twelve.

You’ll have your answer then.

“You mean just because I said that? If that alone was enough to activate her conscience, she wouldn’t have committed the crime in the first place,” I said. “And to commit suicide over a thing like that—“

“But don’t you see? Aoii murdered Emoto for you.”

I was speechless.

“Ehh, I guess saying it was ‘for you’ is going a little too far. Aoii made the decision to do it on her own, and you’re not responsible for

anything. Basically it came down to a matter of jealousy, if you want to put it simply."

I didn't answer.

Aikawa-san continued. "Emoto Tomoe never opened her-self up to anybody, never got any closer than she absolutely had to. And yet she spoke quite candidly with you on the very first night you met."

A fatal wound. Damaged goods.

They were similar, but different.

What if Mikoko-chan had been half-awake during that conversation? What if she had been conscious at that time, just as she had been during my conversation with Miiko-san?

"If you consider the facts, it's obvious why she stole that neckstrap too. Why would Aoii need a thing like that? It was a gift from Usami Akiharu. But remember what you said about it? 'It's a good match,' or something to that effect. You, who almost never compliment anybody, went and said that. So Aoii stole it. She didn't *need* it, per se, she simply wanted to take it, and so she snatched it from the crime scene. I suppose this too was an act of jealousy. The point is, Aoii Mikoko couldn't bear the thought that you and Emoto Tomoe were becoming close."

"So that's why she killed her? *That* was her motive? That's idiotic. Can you imagine being killed for a reason like that? That's appalling."

"You're right, it *is* appalling. And that's why you couldn't forgive her, isn't it? She tragically robbed a human being of her life for something so stupid. And so you made her take responsibility for it."

"Do you really think I would do something like that?"

“No I don’t. Not if this had been some random, spontaneous act. If it was just a matter of someone having ‘gone too far’ I’m sure you would’ve just forgiven her and looked the other way. But that’s not what this was. This was a premeditated crime. It wasn’t the ‘power of alcohol’ or something like that. She even had a murder weapon prepared from the very beginning.” She let out a snicker. “I know you don’t really think she used a *ribbon* to do it. Apparently you told Zerozaki the murder weapon was the ribbon from Usami’s gift, but obviously that wasn’t the case.”

“I don’t know about that. It seems like it would’ve made a good—”

“But the neckstrap was the only thing taken from the crime scene, right? It was written down in those police documents. That means the ribbon was still there. Which means that the murder weapon had to be something else, by the pretense that the cloth used in Aoii’s suicide matched the cloth used to kill Emoto. So what does that mean? It means that Aoii Mikoko had already prepared a murder weapon before even arriving at Emoto’s apartment.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean she made a prediction. She could detect the similarities between you and Emoto from the get-go. She sensed something about your ‘aura’, if you will. And if her prediction turned out to be on the mark, she was going to kill Emoto. She had planned it like that from the start. This wasn’t just some gimmick that any old sucker of a college student could’ve thought up off the top of her head.”

“That’s rather laughable,” I said without even cracking a smirk. “She kept going on and on about how they were such great pals, and then she killed over something as trivial as *that*. And what’s worse, I know she wasn’t lying about them being friends. That was no lie, Jun-san. She really did care for Tomoe-chan.”

Just not to the point that she wouldn't kill her.

If she got in the way, Mikoko-chan would kill her without mercy.

Kill.

Die for me.

Truly this girl had nerves of steel.

"So you deliberated for awhile, but ultimately decided to denounce her."

"Denounce her? Just to be clear here, Jun-san . . . I didn't suggest that she kill herself. In fact, I waited until she was in a relaxed state before I even approached her about it, specifically so she wouldn't go overboard and commit suicide or something. At the very least, I left three options for her. She could kill herself, turn herself in, or just pretend she didn't know what I was talking about and never cross paths with me again. As a bonus option, she also could have killed me."

"Weren't you hoping she'd go for the bonus option?"

Yeah, right. I shrugged.

"I had expected her to choose to turn herself in . . . but she didn't. When I went into her room, she was dead. So I . . ."

"So you acted like you didn't know it was suicide. There was nothing about that written in the suicide note, was there? And you're the one who left that '*x* over *y*' mark, aren't you?"

It was true. Mikoko-chan hadn't made any such request. Swallowing everything was all my idea. The fact that she hadn't turned herself in

meant she didn't want people to know what she had done. And so I decided, more or less on a whim, to help out.

And to be honest, I also felt a little responsible.

" 'Responsible', huh . . . personally, I think of that as a word people use when something comes as a complete surprise to them."

"Well, to be sure, I hadn't seen it coming. It *was* a surprise, it really was. I agree with you and Zerozaki that it's not really feasible that a person capable of murder would commit suicide out of guilt. That's why I was surprised to find that she *had* committed suicide. I'm not even sure whether or not it actually was the indigestible objects in my stomach that made me so queasy, Jun-san."

"But it wasn't necessarily guilt that pushed Aoii to suicide. It's possible that she died because you pushed her. Because of what she'd done, you were disgusted with her. She had made an enemy out of you, and in so doing, lost all hope."

"If that's the case, that just makes me even angrier. So she kills one person, and that alone distresses her to the point of *dying*? She wasn't even *qualified* to be a killer."

"Ahh, so *that's* what you meant about feeling responsible. Not for Aoii, but for Emoto . . . I see. Huh . . . an interesting concept. But say, doesn't a person's affection mean anything to you? She may have taken it in a twisted direction, but Aoii really liked you."

"Saying 'I like you so you'd better like me' is just an intimidation tactic. Unfortunately, I'm not some blind reciprocator. People who kill to serve their own passions make me sick."

"Would you say the same thing about Atemiya?" she asked rather politely. "The thing that impresses me the most is that you were able to predict all of this, including its conclusion, from the very beginning.

That's why you implanted that false idea in Atemiya's head about the 'dying message.' You explained to Zerozaki that Atemiya 'misunderstood' the meaning of those markings, but in reality, it was you who caused her to do that. That way, it would be immediately obvious that Atemiya was the culprit if the murders continued even after Aoii's death. Even when you snuck into Emoto's apartment, you weren't looking for clues; you were looking for something that nobody would know about."

"It was just a sort of insurance, I guess. It wasn't all that thoroughly calculated or anything. Don't make it sound like I had everything in the palm of my hand."

In the end, he was the one who had actually done the killing, she was the one who had done the dying, and that girl over there was the one who had committed suicide. I hadn't done a single thing. I hadn't even manipulated anybody. How *could* someone as clueless about people's emotions as me even try to manipulate someone?

Now *that* was nonsense.

"So Sasaki and Kazuhito . . . yesterday they took Atemiya Muimi into custody, but . . . they say she was on the verge of suicide. She was about to jump off the roof of her building, and they managed to rescue her just in time. Apparently she'd completely lost it, and they couldn't even understand the words coming out of her mouth. They're not sure she'll ever be back to normal."

"Really."

"Did you say something to her?"

"No," I answered without hesitation. "Didn't I tell you? I'm not interested in people who kill to serve their own passions."

"I'm pretty sure you said they make you sick."

“You probably misheard me.”

She glared at me in silence for a moment. “Hahh,” she sighed. “Well, either way . . . so that’s why you condemned these girls who each only killed one person, yet completely overlooked the multiple, indiscriminant, merciless killings of Zerozaki? To give or to take, huh? Gee . . . you really are cruel, huh?”

“I get that a lot.”

Aikawa-san swigged down the last remaining drops of her cola, rose to her feet with a grunt, and looked down on me. “Dust to dust . . . well, whatever. When all is said and done, your crimes and your punishments are yours and yours alone. I’m not sure how you see I, but you weren’t in the wrong here. If you can be faulted for anything, it’s that you are who you are. You’re guilty of the crime of being you, and so, too, shall that be your punishment. And I have no intention of get-ting in the way of that. I was just a little curious. So here’s my final question,” she said, sounding much more lighthearted than she had until a few moments ago. But I knew it was when she got like this that she truly shined.

“Sure. what?” I said, just a little bit nervous.

“What was really written on Aoii’s suicide note?”

. . . . “Just one line,” I said.

“Wow. What was it?”

“Forgot. Bad memory.”

And then I remembered:

“ ‘I wanted you to save me.’ “

“That’s a pretty rough line,” she said, laughing. “Still, it’ll stick with you. Her confession to you would’ve made for a nice last memory, but that’s just plain bitter. You’ll never for-get her for the rest of your life now. Maybe that’s what she was shooting for.”

“Not really. I’ll have forgotten it in another three days or so.”

This sounded like bitter retort itself, but I meant it in all honesty, and it would probably come true. My insides were already thoroughly saturated with bad memories. Sure, I may have gained another two or three or four crosses to haul around on my back, but they’d be buried soon enough. That was all there was to it.

“Figures,” Aikawa-san said. She gazed at me for a while before her face grew cynical again. “Say . . . you didn’t really care either way, did you?” she said.

. . . . In regards to what?

There were so many possibilities, I had no idea what she was referring to.

But still.

Whatever the intended question was, there was only one possible answer.

“Nah.”

“Figures,” Aikawa-san said. “Well, I’ll see what I can do about Sasaki, see if I can get her to drop the charges on you.”

“Charges? What charges?”

“Falsifying information in regards to the Emoto case, encouraging Aoii’s suicide, not to mention concealment of evidence, plus

withholding information and having that little rendezvous with Atemiya. Normally they'd have your ass for all that, which I'm sure you were well aware of, but I'll take care of it for you. Although I suppose even if I didn't, Kunagisa probably would. . . . You'd better start doing some favors for some people."

"Sasaki-san said something like that too."

"I'll bet. I taught her that line."

"You don't say."

Lately I'd been up to my ears in debts owed to various people for favors they'd done. And it hadn't even been a full five months since I'd returned to Japan. Would even the remainder of my life be enough time to repay everyone?

I probably didn't have much of a choice in that matter.

"Well, let's do this again," she said.

"We won't have another chance to meet, will we?"

"Oh, I think we will. I have a feeling we'll be meeting again real soon."

"I don't suppose that means you're going to show up again tomorrow to hang out, like last time. . . ."

"I told you, I'm off to Hokkaido tomorrow . . . some real sticky-sounding job. Not sure I'll make it back alive this time. I'm pretty excited."

"You don't die even if you're killed."

"You neither," she said. "Well, so long." With that, she left the guest room. It was an extremely simple farewell, like we really were going

to meet again tomorrow.

And we probably would meet again at some point.

And surely she would once again forcefully expose my in-sides, flashing a cynicism-ridden smile all the while. And no doubt, she would put another end to another story that had already ended.

She would solve what had already been completed,

Complete what was already solved.

Because that was the role of this red contract worker.

Now *that*, *that* was some real grade A.

"Aikawa-san, you just don't know when to quit."

In an uncharacteristic moment, it occurred to me that being killed didn't sound so bad, if she was the one doing the killing.

"Now then . . ."

I stared up at the ceiling. The ceiling that looked to boast twice my height if I jumped with my arms stretched up. Spacially speaking, this room was somewhere between five and ten times the size of my lodge.

That aside.

"I think you can come out now, Kunagisa."

"Gah," leaked a voice from somewhere, but made no effort to show herself. It looked like she intended to continue playing dumb. How could someone so smart be such a knot-head? Then again, it was still a lot better than being dumb *and* a knothead like me.

“If you don’t some out now, you’ll miss your chance. Is that okay?”

“Uni. It’s hard to time these things.”

As she spoke, a single plate opened in the ceiling, and her face peered out. She snickered guiltily. “Teehehehe. You knew all along?”

“Yup-yup. I think Aikawa-san noticed too.”

“Aww. What’s the point of this stupid secret passageway, then?”

In a display of baffling logic, she proceeded to jump down at me as if diving into a swimming pool. I might reiterate at this point that the ceiling was *twice my height when jumping and stretching*. At the same time, I couldn’t just dodge out of the way, so I took the impact straight in the gut.

“Ii-chan, you okay?”

“Not so much . . .” With my fingers broken, I couldn’teven guard myself. I had been reduced to a human cushion. “Tomo . . . please, get off. I think you broke some ribs.”

“I believe I’ll waive that suggestion.” She squeezed up against me, pushing me all the way over. It was a position fairly reminiscent of the one Aikawa-san had put me in several days earlier, but this was much nicer. A heartfelt embrace, if you will.

Squeeze.

“Hee-hee. I missed you! I liked you!”

“Well, I appreciate the ‘I miss you.’ . . .”

She was pure innocence.

She had heard everything I had just discussed with Aikawa-san, and still she hugged me like this.

I had cruelly antagonized two people, and yet completely overlooked a mass murderer. And Kunagisa didn't harbor a single negative sentiment toward me for it.

. . . .

Aikawa-san had been wrong about just one thing.

But it wasn't her fault. She probably just didn't have me fully figured out yet. By no means do I consider myself a deep person, but I do recognize that my sins run so deep there's no way to see all the way to the bottom. The depths of me were invisible, no matter what kind of contract work you did.

The reason I didn't want to have that discussion in front of Kunagisa wasn't because I was afraid of her judging me. It was because I knew she would *never* judge me that I never wanted to expose my ugliness or my ego to her.

Hers was an all-embracing love.

Unwavering, undiluted affection.

If I killed a person directly, she would probably forgive me even then.

She would love me all the same.

To me, that love was just a little too heavy.

I could feel it crushing me.

That wide-open devotion.

It wasn't that I couldn't feel affection toward others. It was that I couldn't receive affection from others.

No matter how much adoration Mikoko-chan showed me, all I could respond with was disdain for a murderer. No matter how much her feelings for me had inspired her actions, all I could see was another homicide.

And thus I was damaged goods.

And thus I was a human failure.

"Nonsense."

"Hmm?" Kunagisa lifted her body up just a bit to give me a puzzled look. "You say something, Ii-chan?"

"Nah, I'm not saying anything."

"Hmm. Ah, that's right. Ii-chan, wanna go on a vacation with me?"

"Vacation? That's pretty rare. I thought you were supposed to be a shut-in."

"Well, actually I don't really wanna go, either, but I'm helping someone out, so I've gotta."

"Ah. Well, okay, let's go. I haven't seen you much lately, anyway."

"Okay!" she said with a gleeful smile. It was the only expression she knew. But it was still more than I was capable of.

Not being able to respond to a smile with a smile . . . it really can give a guy an inferiority complex, eh, Tomoe-chan? I thought with a fair dose of self-deprecation.

"When do we leave?"

“Well, there’s a lot to be taken care of first. Ahh, Professor Kyôichirô’s place is so far. But we’ve got to rescue Satchan. It’d be better to go after your wounds are all healed, so I’m thinking probably around the start of July.”

“Okay, gotcha.”

“Mark your calendar. Ehehee,” she chuckled.

I remembered something. “Hey, Kunagisa. Do you know what ‘*x* over *y*’ means?”

“Huh?” she bent her neck to look up at me again. “What’s that? A formula?”

“A dying message . . . well, not really, but you could think of it as one.”

“Hmm.” She thought for a single second. “Ah, is it in cursive, by any chance?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s simple. You just look at it in the mirror, then rotate it,” she said as if it really was that simple for her.

“Correct.” I said.

What was going through Mikoko-chan’s mind when she left that mark? She had left it by Tomo-chan’s body, just like some kind of dying message. All you could do was speculate, but indeed you could speculate.

Mikoko-chan probably didn’t really want to kill Tomo-chan.

And of course, Muimi-chan didn’t want to kill Akiharu-kun.

“But me . . .”

Maybe I wanted to kill both Mikoko-chan and Muimi-chan, in reality. After all, the me on the other side of the mirror was a murderer.

Either way, I fully accepted those puzzling symbols she had left behind. Why not? Nothing worth holding a grudge over ever made it through the mirror to this side. And the mirror itself had already crumbled.

A whole world had crumbled.

I took a look at Kunagisa.

When would it be my turn to crumble?

That contemptible "soothsayer" had prophesied that it would be another two years. But she was an even bigger liar than I, and I couldn't accept those words as the truth. I doubted my mind would last that long.

Mind aside, what about my heart?

Whatever the case, my time was sure to come.

A time you might call my final judgment.

"Uni? What's wrong, Ii-chan?"

She blinked at me with those big, pure pupils.

That azure hair.

Exactly the same as five years ago.

And now it was five years later.

Sooner or later, the time would come.

When I'd buckle under the weight.

And the urge to destroy her would arise.

Even then, she was sure to forgive me.

Even if she was murdered or destroyed, she would forgive me.

Just as she had done five years ago, with that innocent, beaming smile, as if nothing had even happened.

There's a difference between being forgiven and being saved.

Nonsensical though this may be.

Before these things occurred.

Not to serve your passions. but simply to serve yourself, to do something that *should* be done.

Please.

Quickly.

"Tomo."

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

Just saying.

They were hollow, entirely empty words.

Words anybody, *anybody* could say.

Just substanceless vocabulary.

“And I love *you*.”

Kunagisa laughed.

And that was all there was to it.

Ultimately, that was all.

“*That’s the Ikkun I love*.”

And thus, “*I wanted you to save me*.”

I had just one response to that.

A single phrase I wanted to send to Mikoko-chan.

Likely, they were the same words Tomo-chan had for me.

And indeed, they were suitable.

“Don’t be so spoiled.”

<Easy Love, Easy No> is a BAD ENDING. . . .

AFTERWORD

So you often hear people say, "Don't be choosy about how you achieve your goals," but as a human, I feel we should at least be allowed to choose how we go about achieving some-thing. If you really sit down and think about it, trying to achieve a goal without carefully choosing a method could end up being disastrous. For example, if your ambition is to be-come a professional baseball player, you've got to get there by playing baseball right? If, however, you instead proclaim, "No, I don't want to be choosy about how I achieve this goal! Curse those who dare select their own methods!" and go out and buy a rugby ball, it seems to me that you're more likely to end up becoming a rugby player. Now what if, instead, you were to buy a knife, and what's more, practice swinging it a thousand times a day? Who here among us would take a look at such a person in the park at night and predict that he was destined to become a major leaguer? Of course, I know that's not what this saying is supposed to mean, but I just thought I'd put my own little spin on it.

Meanwhile, the writer of this very book could be thought of as *the* all-star representative player for people who aren't too choosy about their methods, but upon serious contemplation, I'm surprisingly unsure of whether or not I really even chose the goal in the first place. "Hmm, so why is that what you want to do?" people will say, thereby effectively questioning the *purpose of your purpose*, at which point most people are prone to becoming very silent. And should we be even further interrogated, wherein we're confronted about the purpose of the purpose of our purpose, or the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of our purpose, or the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of our purpose, well, at that point we just give up, resulting in a silence to end all silences.

Thinking about it conversely, there's something wholly un-appealing about the idea of a person who *could* provide concrete, logical answers to such questions. ("Well, the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of the purpose of my purpose is this and this and that. Clear enough?"). Humans, in all their humanity, are much more cut out for living their lives constantly mistaking vague, unrealistic illusions for goals and/or methods.

This book, *Zaregoto 2: The Kubishime Romanticist*, sees the appearance of a homicidal monster who's lost sight of his goal and a murderer who can't find a method. This monster and this murderer think to themselves, "This is pretty weird," but they go on committing their acts all the while. The homicidal monster continues exercising his method, and the murderer continues pursuing her goal. Meanwhile, the side character that is our narrator sees these characters and scratches his head, thinking, "They're pretty weird," and yet he goes and projects himself onto them, and in comes the self-hatred. After all, to anyone with ugliness inside themselves, there's no greater displeasure than taking a look in the mirror. Of course, if you don't have a mirror, you can't see yourself at all.

As was the case with the last book, *The Kubikiri Cycle*, there is a ridiculous number of people whose combined strength is to be thanked for the publishing of this novel. Above all others, I am most greatly indebted to my editor, Kastushi Ota-sama, and my illustrator, take. Thank you so much.

NISIOISIN

ABOUT THE CREATORS

Born in 1981, the prolific **NISIOISIN** has already revolutionized the Japanese literary world with his fast-paced, pop culture-fueled novels. He debuted with *The Kubikiri Cycle* in 2002, beginning his seminal *Zaregoto* series, and *Bakemonogatari* was published under Kodansha's popular Kodansha Box imprint. 2007 saw the magnificent conclusion to his twelve-month consecutive serial novel, *Katana-gatari*—for which **NISIOISIN** wrote one novel a month for an entire year—also for *Kodansha Box*. **NISIOISIN** has also created novels based on popular manga franchises: *xxxHOLiC: ANOTHERHOLiC*, based on the series by superstar artist collective CLAMP, and *Death Note Another Note: The Los Angeles BB Murder Cases*, based on Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata's blockbuster series.

Born in 1983, **take** made his debut with the gorgeous, ultramodern illustrations for **NISIOISIN**'s *Zaregoto* series. Just as that novel cemented **NISIOISIN**'s reputation as one of the leading lights of Japanese pop culture, **take**'s illustrations for these best-selling novels made him a star in his own right. His first-class character designs have captured readers' hearts, and he is now ranked as one of the top young illustrators in Japan. **take** loves cats and manga genius Osamu Tezuka.

If you enjoyed this book—and you did, didn't you?—please consider buying it to support its original creators.

Typed out by a few anons — zaregoto.ftp.sh