
Love is Dark
2
Ao Juumonji
Illustration by
BUNBUN


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...Is she...
laughing?
"A bump..."


"I really don't give up easily."
"You're reeeeeeeally quite persistent at times like this, Asumin."


Yukisada
"There's quite a lot here, huh?"
Moena
"We'll quickly get through this amount!"
Asumin
"That's so many calories, Moe!"
Kuchina
"...This...is a first for me."
Sousei
"...Will we be able to eat all this?"
BEEF
Potato Chip Party

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NEW YORK

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Afterword
Yen Newsletter

Ø1

Blood Market Rules

Have you ever heard the rumors about a woman called the Crimson Lady?

She's quite well-known in certain circles, but unless you're a member of the right social class or have ties to someone who is, you could go your entire life without ever once hearing her name.

She was also sometimes simply called "the Lady" or "Lady El."

According to one theory, the true identity of the mysterious lady was Elizabeth Kiraly, the daughter of Laszlo Kiraly, a diplomat from a certain Eastern European country. According to official records, however, she went back to her country thirty-something years ago when her father left his post as a diplomat, and there was no evidence of her returning to Japan since. Her father, Laszlo, passed away soon after they returned home, and the whereabouts of his daughter, Elizabeth, were unknown. At least, according to the official records.

Who—or rather, *what*—in the world is the Lady?

She may have been a mystery, but there was no doubting she existed. The Lady is by no means just a myth.

"What's the situation, Sousei?" his sister asked through the earpiece.

"It seems the third vehicle will be arriving shortly," Sousei quietly replied, peering through his night vision monocular.

Even night vision devices could be bought online for less than twenty thousand yen. This one was small but adequate for Sousei to conduct surveillance on the entrance of the European-style country house standing about 220 yards away.

"The third guest. One forty-seven AM. This should be the last one," his sister said.

"Yes, if the information is correct…"

“Are you doubting my intelligence-gathering abilities?”

“Huh? No, that’s not… Certainly not— Ah, a car is stopping.”

A vehicle had parked in the driveway of the villa. The entire driveway was bright, so Sousei couldn’t see well through his cheap night vision device, but he could still grasp the general situation.

A man in a suit got out of the driver’s seat and opened the back passenger door. Someone wearing a coat and a hat got out of the back seat. They also appeared to be male.

The man wearing the hat headed to the front entrance of the country house, and the man in the suit returned to the driver’s seat. The car took off, leaving the driveway. The door to the front entrance opened, and the man with the hat went inside.

The car appeared to head back the way it had come.

“Sis, the third person has gone inside,” Sousei reported.

“I see. In that case, please begin.”

“Roger.”

Sousei put his night vision device into his backpack and rechecked his equipment, just in case. His clothing, including his ballistic vest, was completely black. His shoelaces were properly tied. He had his pistols, two Ruger LC9s, as well as four backup magazines with nine rounds each. He’d also brought one stun grenade and two knives. Everything was there.

All good.

He took a deep breath. By the time he let it out, his mind was focused.

Sousei made sure of his footing as he advanced step by step. The villa he targeted was located deep within a famous vacation home area in S Prefecture. That part of the mountain was private property, but it was surrounded by a national forest, so it wasn’t easy to enter. The temperature was close to freezing, and it was that time of year when the insects were silent. The sound of a dry branch snapping underfoot could prove fatal.

I have one hundred and twelve lives left. I can’t afford to waste them…

Sousei had the floor plan and guard positioning memorized. The country house had three bedrooms, but it was an older two-story building that wasn’t very spacious. Even so, ten or more guards were stationed around the premises whenever

there was a “special banquet,” like tonight. It also had multiple security systems.

“I’m ready,” Sousei signaled to his sister when he was about fifty yards away from the building. The microphone on his earpiece could pick up voices even quieter than a whisper.

“Wait.”

Sousei stopped in his tracks and waited. He could see the entrance to the country house on the other side of the trees. It was the only spot where the lights were on. Not even a sliver of light leaked out from inside the building.

According to his sister’s research, there were infrared sensors scattered around the villa, as well as a system that detected when any large heat sources came within 150 feet. Both were basically impossible to avoid and would have to be dealt with somehow.

“…Sis?”

“I told you to wait, didn’t I? …Apparently it’s taking a while.”

Sousei’s sister was great at intelligence gathering, but she was no hacker. Out of necessity, she’d hired a professional who could do the job for them discreetly.

But that’s all I know about it. I end up leaving those sorts of things completely up to Sis. There’s just something that makes me think hackers are kind of shady, and I never know whether I can rely on them…

“She says you’ll be good to go in one minute.”

“Understood.”

“Ready in…one minute.”

“…It hasn’t gone down.”

“In ninety seconds.”

“Now it’s going up…”

“She’s the most skilled person I know, a real expert in the field. If she can’t crack it, then this security system is impenetrable.”

“Please tell her to keep at it.”

“Are you trying to be funny?”

“…Of course not. Sorry…”

“Done.”

“Roger that,” Sousei said as he started walking again.

I wonder if it’ll be all right…

Were the security systems and sensors really nonoperational? Sousei felt uneasy, but he had no choice but to

trust that they were. He focused on not making any noise. If they weren't operating like normal, nothing would happen. So far, it seemed to be fine.

Sousei leaned against a tree. There were no more trees beyond that point—only gravel, and then the country house beyond that.

He heard a crunching sound of someone approaching. The guards. Two of them were patrolling around the house.

Sousei eased his face out from behind the tree to take a look.

There he was.

Guard one—G1.

He was wearing a black camo outfit, expensive-looking body armor, and a helmet with an attached headset. In his hands was a short-barreled rifle instead of a handgun.

Probably ex-military or a mercenary…

The type of headset G1 was wearing had a see-through augmented reality display over one eye. Sousei couldn't quite make out his appearance since it was dark, but he had quite an imposing physique. It was possible he wasn't Japanese.

Sousei hid his face behind the tree again. He waited, using the sound of the guard's footsteps to calculate how far away he was. The footsteps got closer, closer, closer, and then finally started to get farther away again.

Now!

Sousei left the shadow of the tree. G1 had his back to him.

He didn't rush headlong at the guard. Instead, Sousei matched his gait and walked over the gravel going at the same pace as the other man, but taking longer strides.

I don't think I'd be able to pull off this kind of stunt if I only had one life. It wouldn't be impossible, but it'd be terrifying…

Sousei still felt fear, of course. In fact, he was more of a wimp than most people.

It sounds good to say that I overcame my fear through training, but it's more like I just got used to it. I built up a tolerance after dying so many times, is all…

In any case, Sousei could be calm yet daring in his movements since dying wasn't the end for him like it was for most people. That was his strength.

My physical abilities are reasonably well honed but still only within normal range. And my intellect is probably average at best. So that's the only strength I have, really…

Sousei finally caught up to G1. He was just in time, too—the guard had started to turn around, as if he'd sensed that something wasn't right.

That was close!

Sousei pushed the guard's chin up with his left hand, forcing his face skyward, then used the knife in his right hand to quickly slit the man's throat.

He'd cut precisely where the guard's vocal cords were. G1 could no longer speak. Sousei thrust his knife into the flailing guard's face, focusing his stabs on the eyes.

G1's body went slack. He wasn't dead yet, but he was barely breathing.

Sousei laid the man on the ground.

"Hrrrk…hrrrk…hrrrk…" G1's sliced throat flapped open and shut, and bright red blood spilled out with each movement. Sousei gently wiped his bloody knife on G1's clothes, and as he did, he got a feeling…a distinct *thump* that reverberated in his core.

One hundred and thirteen.

The muscles in his face relaxed.

…Smiling after killing someone? Come on, I'm not a freak. Well, I am a murderer, though…

Because of the gravel, Sousei couldn't completely erase the sound of his footsteps, so he continued along the outer wall of the building, mimicking G1's pace. Once he turned the next corner, he'd be at the back of the building. He poked his face around the corner.

There he was.

Guard two—G2—was coming his way.

Should I wait and ambush him here?

Sousei wanted to surprise the guard by attacking him from behind, just as he'd done with G1, but that would be difficult. Impossible, even. As he waited, Sousei ran mental simulations of different ways to take out G2. The guard's footsteps were getting closer. It was nearly time. Sousei crouched down so he was almost on one knee.

G2 came around the corner. Sousei thrust his hand up toward the guard's chin, grabbing it with his left hand. Using the knife that had been waiting in his right hand, he stabbed the guard's throat, slicing through it in the same movement, then pushed the man down.

“Hngh, hnghhh…!” G2 gasped as he attempted to shoot at Sousei.

Being shot at would be a pain because of the sound of gunfire and whatnot, so Sousei snatched away the guard’s assault rifle for the time being. All he had to do now was pin the guard down until he choked to death.

“…Hrrrk…hrrrk…hrrrk…”

He felt that familiar *thump*…reverberating deep inside his body.

One hundred and fourteen.

Sousei didn’t smile this time. He stood and took a breath.

“Two people have been taken care of,” he told his sister.

“You really took your time with that. Hurry up.”

Sousei trotted toward the front of the building without responding.

“The electronic lock on the front door has also been deactivated,” she informed him.

Sousei wordlessly opened it, revealing two guards wearing black suits in the atrium-style entrance hall. G3 was a tall blond man, and G4 was a middle-aged Japanese man. G4 was faster to react. He took his gun out and was about to raise it when Sousei lunged at him, grabbing the guard’s right wrist in his left hand and burying his knife into the guard’s throat.

“…Gaagh, ugggh!” G4 yelled. Even fatally wounded, he managed to fire his gun twice, then a third time, hitting the door and the walls. The blond G3 shouted something in English and pointed his gun at Sousei. Based on his actions, he seemed to be violent and easily enraged. He shot at Sousei, who used G4 as a shield.

“Aaghh! Auuughh…”

G4 groaned pitifully every time he was shot, and Sousei rammed him into G3. Sousei forced the pistol out of G4’s grip, readying it in his left hand. He pressed the gun’s muzzle against G3’s body and squeezed the trigger. G3 yelled “Fuck!” or something to that effect, but he quieted down once Sousei emptied the rest of the magazine into him. Sousei threw the two dying guards down on the ground and delivered the finishing blows with his knife.

One-fifteen, one-sixteen…

He stuck his bloody knife into the floor and pulled out his Ruger LC9, and right at that moment, things became even more

chaotic. The entrance hall extended out into a hallway, leading to a staircase up to the second floor and a door that opened into the parlor. First, a fifth guard, G5, shot at him from the top of the stairs. Sousei decided to return fire rather than avoid it. Enemies would probably be closing in on him from multiple directions, so there'd be no end to it if he tried to take evasive maneuvers. The situation would just keep getting worse.

"Ooof…" Sousei was felt an impact in his left shoulder but fired three shots back at G5, sending a shower of lead at his nose. G5 let out a rough scream and lurched backward. Sousei tried tensing his left hand. Somehow, he was able to move it.

The bullet just grazed me. I'm fine…

But it didn't seem like he was.

Two guards came out of the parlor: G6 and G7. They weren't wearing black suits but camo gear, and had handguns rather than assault rifles, most likely because their posts were inside.

Oh no.

The moment that thought went through his mind, Sousei took a few bullets and lost consciousness.

…Crap, that's minus one, so now I'm down to a hundred and fifteen…

Sousei was lying on the floor with his eyes closed when he came back to life. His pistol was in his hand. Barely, though—it was caught on his finger.

The guards were yelling.

"Inform Lady El!"

"An intruder has been eliminated! Ask her for orders!"

"How'd he get into the building?! What happened to security?!"

"Seems we've been hacked! We can't assume this guy's working alone…"

"Was Alpha Team killed?! Bravo Team, check the perimeter!"

"Copy that!"

Bravo Team. They're the ones wearing camo? Two of them are going outside…

Other than Bravo team—G6 and G7, who were leaving—there seemed to be two or three people in the entrance hall. The

man standing near Sousei, G8, was the one who'd given orders to Bravo Team. Sousei didn't know where anyone else was.

He opened his eyes slightly, trying to get his bearings as best as he could without moving his head. G9 was in the hallway. It seemed there was one other person, G10, maybe on the second floor.

"Hey. Hey!" G10 was at the top of the stairs, most likely tending to G5, whom Sousei had shot in the face.

Three people, huh? I have seven bullets left. I'll take everyone out quickly... There's no way I'm gonna let myself die any more than this.

Bravo Team went outside, closing the door behind them.

Sousei gripped his Ruger LC9 firmly in his right hand. He lifted his arm, then used his left hand to support the gun. He aimed at the gap between G8's chin and neck and fired two shots in quick succession.

"Gagh...!" G8 staggered and pressed his left hand to where he'd been shot. Sousei jumped up and kicked the pistol out of his other hand, then aimed at G9 in the hallway and squeezed the trigger. G9 twisted away, flattening himself against the wall. Sousei had missed.

"Huh?! He's still alive...?!" G9 started shooting at Sousei.

"Son of a...!" G10 yelled from the top of the stairs, before also targeting Sousei.

It was a hail of gunfire. Sousei dashed toward the parlor.

"This is turning into quite a production," Sousei heard his sister say with amusement through his earpiece.

She's always so sarcastic about everything...!

Sousei opened the entrance to the parlor and tumbled inside, feeling as if every inch of him had been battered and bruised. He closed the door and dropped to the ground. Above his head, a continuous stream of bullets made their way through the door.

...Where was I hit...?! My right leg...and I think my left arm? But it's not like I can't still move them...

The gunfire stopped.

Sousei stood up and turned to face the door. He readied his gun.

One of the men on the other side—either G9 or G10—grabbed the handle, which made a faint noise. At the same time, Sousei opened up, firing his last four bullets.

“Urghh!”

He heard a man’s groan among the gunfire. It sounded like Sousei had managed to hit someone.

Sousei swapped a fresh magazine into his gun, opened the door, and shot G9, who was hunched over right in front of him. G10, coming down the stairs, was also met with bullets. Sousei emptied his magazine, dealing finishing blows to the not-yet-dead G8, G9, and G10, and then to G5, who was on his dying breath at the top of the stairs.

Okay, plus four, that’s a hundred and nineteen…

His right leg was in a lot of pain. The gunshot wound was in his thigh. It wasn’t bleeding too much, though. His left arm hurt if he tensed it, but it seemed like it should be mostly all right.

As he was crouched at the top of the stairs loading another magazine into his gun, the front door opened. Bravo Team had come back, perhaps sensing that something was amiss. Sousei turned toward the door and opened fire. The camo-wearing G6 and G7 were suited up in body armor—including helmets—so they continued to bravely return Sousei’s fire despite taking multiple hits.

Sousei’s magazine ran out of bullets partway through, so he took out his other Ruger LC9 and started firing that instead. By the time that gun had run out of bullets, G6 and G7 were no longer able to fight back and had collapsed onto the floor.

Sousei must have gotten hit at some point. There was blood in his right eye, partially blinding him. The wound was probably somewhere on his head. Sousei reloaded both pistols, using the last of his spare magazines. He put one of the guns into its holster and held the other at the ready as he prepared to go down the stairs, but he felt horribly lightheaded and unsteady. He also felt nauseous for some reason.

“Sousei?” his sister asked.

“…Yeah. I’m fine.”

“I didn’t ask about that.”

“It’s all going well…”

Sousei went down the stairs to the doorway and finished off the dying Bravo team—G6 and G7—with his knife. *Thump… thump…* The noise echoed inside him.

A hundred… Hundred twenty-one…

“Why not just die and reset?” his sister scoffed.

“…That’s none of your business…”

“Did you just say something?”

“No, nothing…”

Checking his ballistic vest, Sousei saw that it had stopped four bullets. His breathing was ragged. Both inhaling and exhaling were difficult for him. There was a crazy amount of blood. No matter how much he wiped away with his hand, it kept flooding his right eye.

…I won’t die. I won’t…waste lives…

He psyched himself up and headed into the hallway.

It’s not a very big building… The second floor has a bedroom and a bathroom…so the site for the banquet would be…the dining hall…on the first floor…

He almost lost consciousness for a moment, so he leaned against a wall in the hallway.

“Get it…together!” he told himself.

“Oh dear.” His sister gave a throaty chuckle.

…If it was anyone but Sis, I’d be kicking their ass right about now…

Sousei placed his left hand on the wall to support himself as he made his way down the hallway. At the end was a door.

Was that…all the guards…? How many did I kill again…?

He couldn’t remember.

Sousei opened the door.

The living room and connecting dining room made up the biggest room in the building. He wondered if this was *Gothic* style. Maybe Victorian? There were many chandeliers suspended from the ceiling and drapes of black velvet or something similar. The deep red walls were crammed with decorations, including framed pictures, mirrors, and mechanical clocks. With its display cabinets, leather sofa, and matching couch, the room gave off an incredible sense of majesty.

Sitting on the couch was a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman wearing a pure white dress. She had the kind of beauty reminiscent of a French movie actress and a smile like the Mona Lisa.

“Nngh! Nnnngh…!”

The muffled sounds weren’t coming from the beautiful woman on the couch. Something strange had been placed in the center of the room. Was it a stone? It was some kind of platform or altar that appeared to be carved out of rock in a shape

similar to a chair or medical examination table. It was big enough to lay a whole body onto, and had sections that looked like a backrest and armrests.

"—Nnnngh! Ngh! Nnnnnngh…!"

A woman had been made to sit on the platform. She had been gagged and was completely nude, not even wearing underwear. Why was a young woman sitting naked on a strange stone platform? She probably wasn't there because she wanted to be. She'd been restrained with metal fittings and chains attached to the platform, making it impossible for her to move her arms and legs freely. She could barely even twist her body.

"L-Lady El…," a man's voice said.

Three men were huddled together like hamsters in a corner of the room. They were the guests invited to tonight's banquet: a prominent politician from the ruling party who was rumored to be retiring; the CEO of a large, very well-known corporation; and an entrepreneur still in his forties who was much younger than the other two. The three of them were obviously scared stiff. It appeared that it was the entrepreneur, the youngest of the bunch, who had called out to the beautiful woman on the couch.

Lady El.

The Crimson Lady.

She looked at Sousei without blinking. The beauty was so bewitching that it was terrifying in its own way, yet so perfectly still that she didn't even look to be breathing. She was far too unrealistically beautiful for a human. Was she an artificial creation? A work of art, or a sophisticated doll named "The Crimson Lady," perhaps?

Now I'll unmask your true identity…

Sousei gripped his pistol in both hands and aimed for the space between Lady El's eyebrows.

The men all started yelling something.

Lady El remained still.

Sousei squeezed the trigger.

The LC9 fired with a loud bang, sending a bullet right in the middle of Lady El's smooth white forehead. Her head jerked backward from the impact.

"Ah, my lady…!"

The men let out hideous screams.

Sousei pointed his gun at the prominent politician. Eliminating these three men wasn't part of the job, but they were witnesses. At any rate, they couldn't publicly admit that they'd attended one of the Crimson Lady's banquets, so if they died here, it would simply be covered up. The official records would probably say that they passed away suddenly from an illness or something.

Everyone will be eliminated as planned…

When he was about to pull the trigger, Lady El vanished.

"Wha—?!"

She'd moved. Had she gone somewhere else? How? Where?

To the side? She was to his right. Lady El was standing right beside Sousei.

Her smile hadn't changed, but now there was a hole in her forehead—a gunshot wound. Blood was pouring from it, staining her extraordinarily beautiful face and once-white dress.

"Such an uncouth child," she said, inserting her right index finger and thumb into the gunshot wound in her forehead.

Sousei tried to shoot Lady El again, but before he could, she'd already pulled the bullet out from deep within the wound. And that wasn't all. Looking as if she was merely flicking someone in the forehead, Lady El sent the bullet between her fingers flying. For a moment, Sousei saw her right arm become disturbingly muscular, as if it had instantly increased in size.

"Aah!"

The bullet Lady El flicked out like a gunshot had taken out Sousei's right eye. He attempted to fire at the terrifying Crimson Lady regardless, but he couldn't.

What had happened? Had Lady El done something to him? Sousei didn't know. Before he realized what was happening, he slammed into the wall. She'd probably grabbed his arm and thrown him. His consciousness faded.

…Did I…die…?

Sousei wondered if he'd lost another life.

No…

He wasn't dead. He was still alive. Apparently, he had managed to survive. Sousei was lying on the floor, but he had no feeling at all in his right arm and, of course, he couldn't see through his right eye.

…I'm…messed up…

Compared to Sousei, even a worn-out old rag would be more useful for wiping the floor.

“Dear me, what a terrible disruption we’ve had.”

“It seems he’s still a child, but who is he…?”

“Don’t let his appearance fool you. He’s got to be a hitman working for an organization.”

The three men were talking. Sousei could still hear fine, but his vision was in doubt.

“By ‘organization,’ do you mean the Association, or whatever it’s called?”

“He might be from COA. It wouldn’t be the Agency.”

“They actually exist, then? I’ve only heard rumors—”

“That’s because you’re still young.”

“What should we do about the banquet, Lady El?” the CEO of the big corporation asked.

“Do you wish to postpone, gentlemen?” the Crimson Lady asked in return. “It would take some time to find a sacrifice equal to the high-quality maiden I’ve prepared for you tonight.”

“Nngh, nnngh, nnnngh…!” the naked girl cried, thrashing about. Or she would have thrashed about if she hadn’t been so tightly restrained.

“That’s true…”

The prominent politician licked his lips.

Still pretending to be dead, Sousei opened his left eye slightly. Although it was blurry, he could just make out what was going on. The politician crouched down and put his nose close to the girl tied to the platform. He seemed to be smelling her.

“Oooh… Most humans give off an unbelievably horrid stench when they’re exposed to extreme stress, or when they’re in a life-threatening situation. But this one…”

The CEO started doing the same thing next to the politician.

“A fragrant aroma…like a fine wine… No, it’s fresher…”

“Nnngh, nngh, nnnngh…!”

The naked girl must be trying to scream something like “Stop!” or “Help me!”

The entrepreneur didn’t approach her, possibly out of guilt.

“From what I’ve heard, special measures are taken to prepare the sacrifice for the banquet…”

“That’s correct.” Lady El smiled sweetly as she gently stroked the naked girl’s cheek with her fingertips. “This sacrifice was made to eat nothing but a large variety of ripe fruit for ten

months. She was intravenously given the nutrients necessary to keep her healthy."

"Amazing…" The entrepreneur audibly gulped. "She's just like Taoniang, girls who were only allowed to eat peaches, and whose bodily fluids were said to be used as a medicine providing eternal youth and longevity. I thought it was nothing more than an urban legend, but this…"

"Ahh, I can't wait any longer!" the politician said, rubbing his nose against the girl's arm.

Lady El let out a laugh.

"I promise the blood's aroma is nothing compared to its flavor, gentlemen. If there are no objections, then let the banquet commence."

"Nnnngh! Nnnghh! Nnnnnnngh…!"

Seeing what lay in store for her, the naked girl let out an especially loud whimper. It was hard to tell which actually happened first: the men all getting down on their knees and clasping their hands above their heads, or Lady El putting her hands on the girl's neck.

Was it her fingernails? It looked like Lady El used the nails on both of her hands to slice open the maiden's skin. It didn't stop there, though, but went deeper, revealing the flesh and blood vessels underneath, exposing all her veins and arteries. Everything was instantly ripped to shreds. The blood that had just pumped through her heart erupted from her body and rained down in the room.

The maiden's ichor was like boiling, bright red water. The hot blood rain created a red mist that filled the room with a horrendously dense, sweet smell.

Lady El let the immoral, savage rain wash over her head in quiet ecstasy. The three men shuddered violently, each of them delirious with joy.

Sousei also ended up getting some of that blood on him. It was as sweet as sugar water. Feelings of disgust and guilt welled up inside him, but at the same time, he also felt a restless urge, making it almost impossible for him to stay still. If he hadn't been on the brink of death, he probably would've found himself getting much more worked up. He might have even started behaving indecently, much like the politician screeching and tearing at his chest, the CEO violently groping his own crotch, and the entrepreneur repeatedly swinging his hips like an idiot.

…What kind of blood…is this…? A stimulant…? An aphrodisiac…? It's like a narcotic…

Lady El was looking up toward the ceiling with her eyes closed. She opened her mouth, perhaps to drink from the red mist. Sousei felt like he was able to stand, and when he thought about it, he realized it must be because of the blood.

The Crimson Lady…

He'd lost the pistol that had been in his hand, but the other one was still in its holster. His right arm was broken in a few places, and even his tendons seemed to be all messed up. There was no way he'd be able to use that arm. He pulled the LC9 out of its holster with his left hand and used the momentum to jump to his feet.

Lady El was absorbed in showering in and drinking the blood of the sacrificial maiden. Or at least, Sousei thought she was.

"—Nghh…!"

He heard the distinct sound of something breaking, or something being smashed. It was Sousei's left hand—his wrist, caught in Lady El's grasp. When had she gotten so close? He didn't even see her move. A distance of fifteen feet had instantly become zero. How?

And that wasn't all. As she crushed his wrist in her right hand, she used her left to firmly grab his shoulder.

"To be perfectly honest with you—"

The Crimson Lady bared her teeth in a smile, revealing canines long and sharp like fangs. How had this woman spread her name so far and gained a position of so much influence? There were a number of theories: She had been the lover of a politician who'd briefly been appointed as the prime minister; she had distinguished herself as the apprentice of a famous religious leader; or she had originally been a kind of fortune teller… Whatever the case, Lady El had, at some point, started inviting the rich and powerful to the banquets she held.

"—boys like you are more my taste."

She scraped away a large portion of the left side of his neck. At least, that's how it felt to Sousei. In actuality, he'd been bitten. Lady El had sunk her teeth into his neck. His veins had been punctured, and blood was pouring out. Or rather, it was being sucked out with incredible force. She was hungrily lapping up his blood.

“Aaahh… Aaaagghh…” Terribly hoarse sounds escaped Sousei’s lips.

“Ah, you’re so good, darling…,” Lady El said in a sweet voice between the vulgar, indecent, lewd sounds she was making as she drained Sousei. “Your blood is so delicious. It’s wonderful. Oh, darling, I can’t hold back…”

Sousei closed his eyes. There was no strength left in his body, so why wasn’t he falling to the ground? Lady El was holding him up. She was embracing him tightly as she sucked his blood. Actually, the word *suck* was probably too gentle for what she was doing to him. The Crimson Lady was gulping down Sousei’s blood as if she was drinking water with her mouth placed directly over the faucet.

…What is this…? Oh no… I’m gonna die… But…it feels so good…

Apparently, Sousei had died right after that.

Minus one… So I’m down to a hundred and twenty. Crap… Still, though…

Sousei had experienced all sorts of different ways of dying, but that one would go down in the top three for deaths that *weren’t* so bad. That might have been why Sousei didn’t feel like getting up even after he’d come back to life.

Meanwhile, what were Lady El and her three guests doing? They were making slurping, sucking, and splashing sounds as if they were lapping up a liquid.

“Oh my god, it’s so sweet. So sweet…”

“Mmmmm, delectable…”

“This one tastes like life itself…”

Sousei couldn’t see since he had his eyes closed, but the three men were probably shamelessly guzzling blood. The girl must be either dead, dying, or unconscious. The fully grown men were running their tongues all over her body, which was slick with blood.

“…Sousei?” his sister whispered through his earpiece.

He didn’t answer. His sister seemed to get the message and didn’t say anything else.

“When properly prepared, the fresh blood of a maiden will repair your DNA and revitalize your cells,” Lady El said with a

chuckle.

She wasn't that far away from him, probably within about two yards.

"Gentlemen," she continued, "please take your time to thoroughly savor the pleasure that is a by-product of this miraculous rejuvenating, invigorating event."

Sousei stilled his turbulent emotions.

These guys make me sick to my stomach, but it's not good to bring my personal feelings to work…

He'd dispassionately carry out what needed to be done. That's all he had to do. Sousei opened his eyes and looked for his pistols. One was about three feet away, and the other, much farther.

Sousei took the stun grenade out of his backpack. Just as he was about to remove the safety pin, Lady El looked in his direction. Sousei pulled the pin out regardless and gently tossed the stun grenade. He covered his ears and closed his eyes. Stun grenades were designed to be non-lethal, but they did emit a tremendous bang and flash of light.

Sousei paid no attention to the guests. His only target was Lady El, the Crimson Lady. She always held her banquets at night. It was said that no one had ever seen her during the day.

"Oh, you're still alive, darling…!"

That was why people said with conviction that she must be a real-life vampire.

Lady El leaped at Sousei with her fang-like canines bared and her eyes open wide, even though she should have been blinded by the stun grenade. There was an inexplicable red glow in her eyes. Her hair, skin, and once-white dress were all stained with blood, so part of Sousei wanted to say that she was now quite literally the Crimson Lady, but he wasn't so sure. As she tried to bite into her prey, her entire body had become a grotesque mass of muscles, making it hard to describe her with such an elegant-sounding sobriquet.

Lady El embraced Sousei in her arms.

"—Grk…!"

What was with this strength? His body was on the verge of snapping like a twig.

Before Sousei's fragile body shattered, Lady El bit into the left side of his neck. She would be trying to use those canine teeth of hers to pierce the artery there and drink his blood. In fact,

she was already drinking it, draining him with unbelievable force. Sousei probably wouldn't even last ten seconds. He'd die any moment from blood loss.

Right now, this is the only way…

Sousei somehow managed to press the pistol in his right hand into the upper-left side of Lady El's abdomen. Luckily, the muzzle fit into a space between her ribs, and he immediately squeezed the trigger, filling her with bullets.

"Ngh! Aaah! Hyaah! Nooooo…!" Lady El screamed, her body convulsing each time he fired a round into her.

At last, she pushed Sousei away and fell onto her backside.

Sousei collapsed onto the floor. She'd sucked out a fair amount of his blood, and he didn't know if he would be able to stand.

"Eeek…! Aaaah…! Noooooooo…!" Lady El screeched. Sitting with her legs out to the side, she frantically clawed at her chest and the base of her neck.

…It was a gamble, but…

Perhaps Lady El *was* a vampire, in which case she could be eliminated by driving a stake into her heart. Sousei didn't think she was, though.

No matter what kind of *cheat* she had, the Crimson Lady was a living being. Even if she wasn't human, she was still essentially an animal. And if she was an animal, then her brain and heart should be vital organs. That's why Sousei had shot at her head in the beginning. That hadn't been effective, so he'd targeted her heart next. If that didn't work, he would just try something else. Even if Sousei failed, he came back and tried again.

…But I don't want to keep trying again. I don't have infinite lives… The number of lives I have decreases whenever I die…

"Segíts, Apa…!" Lady El screamed in a foreign language. She was probably asking for someone to save her. God, or maybe a parent?

Blood gushed out from her eyes, mouth, nostrils, and ears. Her blood was red. *Bright* red. It bubbled up, as if it was boiling. Steam started to rise from her body, and even that was red.

The blood in her body was *boiling*. When would she pass the critical point? Would it really be all right if he just waited quietly until then?

…There's a remote chance…

Sousei used all his strength to get up.

…this isn't…over yet…

With unsteady fingers, Sousei managed to unsheathe his knife and held it in a reverse grip.

That was when Lady El blew up.

It was a massive explosion, scattering bodily fluids and large chunks of gore around the room that drenched Sousei. It was so hot that it would probably leave burn scars.

"Huuuh?!"

"Wh-wha—?"

"My ladyyy…?!"

It seemed the men crawling around on the ground were still blinded by the stun grenade.

Sousei could only crawl as well. He crept forward, grabbed his other gun, then shot the three men dead, starting with the prominent politician, then the CEO of the major corporation, and finishing with the entrepreneur.

"…Sis?"

"Yeah?"

"It's…over…"

He heard his sister sigh through his earpiece. She must have been disappointed by his performance. He didn't want to be scolded while he was still struggling to catch his breath, so Sousei stuck the muzzle of the gun into his mouth.

Plus four…then minus one…

He squeezed the trigger.

What a waste…

Ø2

You’re Just Like an Ocean Wave

Sousei Takarai wanted to be a normal high school student like everybody else.

Well, I say “normal,” but it’s more like…

The school building was awfully quiet first thing in the morning. It was completely silent, like being in an alternate dimension where the concept of sound didn’t exist.

Sousei stopped in front of Class 2-2’s classroom.

Come to think of it, what even is “normal”? Normal… Normal? Is normal *normal? Normal. Hmm, it’s actually hard to figure out…*

Sousei cleared his throat with a small cough, then breathed in. He closed his eyes and rubbed his eyelids with his fingers. Then he breathed out again.

Sousei’s eyes snapped open, and he opened the door. He finally set foot in the classroom.

She’s here…

The girl he’d been expecting was sitting at the desk by the window at the back of the room, looking outside with her chin propped on her hand, as she always did. And, as always, she was wearing gloves and tights. She usually came to school earlier than anyone else and stayed in the classroom until everyone had left. She’d probably do that today, too.

Sousei stood motionless in the doorway for about ten seconds.

There’s no way she hasn’t noticed me…right?

And yet she was completely unresponsive.

I feel a strange sense of defeat… No, this isn’t about winning or losing…

Sousei went to his desk and sat down. He tried to get her attention by quietly saying “Uh…,” intentionally coughing, and breathing heavily, but she still didn’t move an inch.

“Umm…” Still nothing.

Determined, Sousei decided to greet her.

“Morning, Miss Hitsujimoto…” His voice trailed off at the end, but she still should have heard him. As far as he could tell, she didn’t even twitch.

Huhhh? Is she ignoring me…? No wayyy. After everything that happened, she wouldn’t just…ignore me, right? Nah, no way. Definitely not. Ignoring me would be… I dunno, it just…seems unreasonable with how things were going, I guess? If you think about it normally. “Normally”…

Sousei rubbed the area around his stomach.

Does the word normal *even apply here…? I mean, Hitsujimoto isn’t even normal to begin with. Not that I can talk, though. I guess she doesn’t compare to me…*

“Good morning.”

When she finally replied, Sousei was looking down, staring at his desk.

“Huh?!” He hurriedly returned his gaze to Kuchina.

She was still in the same pose as before, looking outside with her chin on her hand.

…Just now…was I hearing things? Was it an auditory hallucination…? I heard it, though. I did… Or at least, I think I did. But I don’t know if I can confidently say for sure it happened…

After vacillating for a while, Sousei casually stood up and walked to the window. He looked outside, feigning indifference. Then he looked at Kuchina as if it had just happened by chance.

“Morrrning!” he said. He’d tried to be as cheerful as possible, which only ended up making him sound oddly energetic.

…What was with the extra-long “or”? What was that? How embarrassing…

Sousei’s face felt like it was burning. He felt discouraged, but he kept his eyes on Kuchina. They stayed there in silence for twenty-eight seconds.

“Morning.” Her eyes were still looking out the window as usual, but it was unmistakably Kuchina’s voice.

She replied to me properly…so—

He should be satisfied with that.

—I’m not un-*satisfied…but…*

Not knowing what he should do, Sousei started counting in his head again. When he got to twenty-seven, Kuchina stood up

and walked toward the classroom door.

“Huh…?”

Sousei couldn’t believe his eyes.

“M-M-Miss Hitsujimoto? Wh-wh-where are you…?”

Kuchina stopped and looked back, but only for a moment. In that split second, her gaze was so sharp it felt like it would end all one hundred and twenty-three lives inside Sousei.

“I don’t think I need to tell you,” she said.

“Ah… You don’t need—? Well, that’s true… But… Ah… Yeah… You’re right. Of course…”

Kuchina left the classroom.

…Huuuuuuuuuhhh…?

Sousei crouched down with his head in his hands.

“What the hell was that…?”

He couldn’t move.

He could barely keep breathing.

All he could do was wait to heal naturally, like a wild animal that had been seriously wounded.

I’m sure to be able to stand again at some point… For now, I’ll just have to believe that…

Just then, someone came into the classroom.

Hi—

Had Kuchina come back, by any chance?

No.

“Heya,” said Kouichirou Wakuya, whom everyone called Wakkuu.

“You’re early, huh, Takarai? Though I guess I’m also kinda early today… Something wrong?”

“Nah…” Sousei hastily stood up like he was playing a game of leapfrog. “E-everything’s fine. Yeah. Ha-ha-ha… Heh-heh-heh… Yeah… All good…”

Sousei was aware that his behavior was clearly suspicious, and that was exactly how Wakkuu seemed to be looking at him.

“Y-yooo!” Sousei yelled as he saluted Wakkuu. His voice was way too loud and abrupt.

“…Y-yeah.” Wakkuu looked visibly embarrassed. “Y-yooo,” he said, returning a hesitant salute.

It was the worst, most awkward morning ever.

†

That awkwardness dragged on like the aftertaste of an onion that just wouldn't go away. Sousei was washing his hands in the restroom during the break when Yukisada Hayashi appeared in the mirror.

"Aren't you washing your hands too much?"

"Huhhh?!" Sousei repeatedly looked back and forth between his hands and Yukisada's reflection in the mirror. "Aaaah, y-yeah, I guess I am? I see. Ah, yeah, I probably am…"

He turned the tap off and enthusiastically dried his hands on his handkerchief. It seemed he'd kept them under the water for a very long time, just as Yukisada had said. They were ice-cold.



“Ah, I just, yeah, I guess I kind of spaced out there or something…”

As he left the restroom with Yukisada, Sousei noticed that his own footsteps were awfully slow. He usually walked relatively quickly, so why was he dragging his feet?

“Did something happen?” Yukisada asked.

Sousei immediately nodded without thinking.

“Yeah…,” he readily admitted, surprising himself.

Yukisada let out a short laugh that was like a gentle breeze.

“If you want, you can talk to me about it.”

They ended up standing in the hallway to talk. Sousei often chatted with Yukisada, but they usually didn’t talk about this sort of thing. In fact, this was probably the first time.

“Ummm… Uh, yeah, so at cram school— Cram school? Yeah… at cram school, someone happened to…end up in the next seat over, or something. And they started chatting, even though they’d never talked before. Ah, this isn’t about me—”

“Okay, so it’s not about you. It’s about someone else, yeah?”

“Yeah. So anyway, it seemed like they became close and like they were maybe even friends…?”

“It felt like some kind of relationship had been formed?”

“Yeah. And then, what was it? Cram school…? Yeah, at cram school one day, the person in the next seat was suddenly sort of…cold, or indifferent, I guess? Like ignoring them, and stuff…”

“Nothing happened that might have caused it?”

“Well, no, I don’t think so.”

“You can’t think of anything they might’ve done wrong?”

“I…don’t think so? Ah, but it’s not about me, so I can’t say for sure.”

“People’s emotions,” Yukisada said with slightly downcast eyes, “are something that can’t really be understood by anyone except the person they belong to. Even your own emotions can be difficult to understand.”

“Ah… Right. That… Yeah, that’s true.”

“It’s like in thrillers. Or dramas, or movies. Or even novels…”

“Dramas? Huh? Movies…?”

“There’s often a police officer or detective trying to figure out the criminal’s motive for killing someone, right?”

“There is, but…haven’t you gone a bit off topic?”

“It’s just an analogy.” Yukisada looked Sousei in the eyes and smiled.

“…An analogy?” Sousei smiled back, just a little. “Ah. Right. Motive. It’s about their motive. So basically…sometimes it’s unclear why someone did something, even to the person who did it?”

“There are also times when the reason’s obvious, though.” Yukisada shrugged slightly. “Like a hitman who kills for money.”

“…Like a hitman, huh?”

“The reason might be clear if it’s something tangible, but it’s not unusual for things to get quite complicated if it’s psychological, right?”

“Psychological…”

“Something like snapping and committing a crime of passion is different, though, I guess.” Yukisada crossed his arms and tilted his head. “But I’m not the sort of person who gets that angry, so nothing really comes to mind.”

“Ah, well, I’m the same…” Sousei put a hand to his face and cleared his throat. “That story wasn’t about me though…okay?”

“I know,” Yukisada promptly replied.

…It kind of feels like I’ve been caught…

Sousei let out a sigh.

You think you understand them, but you don’t. That’s what people’s feelings are like. Even when you think you know how they feel, you don’t know at all. That’s especially true for Hitsujimoto…

†

Kuchina’s attitude didn’t seem to change.

During their lunch break, Sousei quickly finished his energy bar and chicken, then slipped away from the uncomfortable atmosphere of the classroom.

But that didn’t mean he had anywhere to go. He ended up spacing out from boredom in the corridor between buildings when he saw someone waving out of the corner of his eye.

…Are they waving at me? They’re not, right…?

When he looked in that direction, he saw a female student who was unmistakably waving at him.

“Yoo-hoo, Sousei.”

“Ah…”

Sousei wasn't sure how to respond and ended up making an expression that was a mix between a smile and a frown. Asumi Shiramori saw that and laughed pleasantly. Hina Shigee, often called "Moena," had come along with Asumi, and she also let out a short burst of laughter.

Sousei thought the two of them must have just happened to be passing by, but they unexpectedly stopped next to him and showed no intention of leaving.

"…Uh, ummm, do you have things to do in the gym?" he tried asking them, feeling too awkward to stay silent. Asumi let out another laugh.

"We should be the ones asking you that. How about it, Sousei? What are you doing here?"

"Ah, nothing in particular…"

"We're not really doing anything, either. Right, Moena?"

Moena silently shook her head in agreement, though it was more at a seventy-five-degree angle rather than side-to-side. Moena had a naturally round face, but her cheeks were puffier than usual. She was making a classic pouty face with puffed-out cheeks.

"Moena's still mad. It's kinda hilarious," Asumi said in amusement.

Sousei didn't understand the feeling.

…It's fair enough that Moena's angry after what I did. I really messed up. I can't look her in the face…

He didn't understand. It impressed upon him just how spot-on Yukisada had been. Sousei didn't understand people's feelings. How could something be so complicated and mysterious?

"Shira— Ah—"

"'Asumin'!" Asumi herself swiftly corrected him.

"…A…sumin," Sousei tried his best to correct himself.

"Is it hard for you to call me that?"

"No, it's fine…" Sousei clenched his teeth and shook his head.

I can't. I'm a human who's basically all lies. That's what hurt Shiramori. I don't want to tell any more lies unless it's absolutely necessary. At least, not to her…

"…Well, maybe a bit," he said.

"Hmm, I see." Pouting, she tapped the floor with the heel of her shoe. "But 'Shiramori' makes it sound like we're not friends or something."

“The real question is whether you *are* friends,” Moena said, speaking at last. She was normally so cheerful and friendly toward everyone, but both her words and her tone were barbed.

“No matter how you think about it, we’re friends, aren’t we?” Asumi asked nonchalantly. She might have been acting nonchalant on purpose, or it could just come to her naturally. “After all, we’re in the same class, and we used to date.”

“But I think that’s what the problem is…,” Moena argued.

“Huh? How so?”

“What do you mean, ‘how so?’”

“We broke up, but we became closer while we were going out, right, Sousei?”

“…Aah! Uhhhh…”

She was staring straight at him. Who could deny anything while being looked at like that? Sousei almost impulsively agreed with Asumi, but was letting yourself be pressured into going with the flow really the right thing to do?

…I don’t want to lie. We became closer… We were nothing but classmates to each other before we dated. We didn’t get further apart. We got closer. That’s the truth…

After carefully considering it, Sousei finally nodded. He had no choice but to agree.

“Yes… We did, I guess…”

“You say that,” Moena said, looking away in a huff, “but I don’t think you were really going out long enough to say that, personally.”

Asumi frowned, looking dissatisfied. “You think? It was my first time having a boyfriend, so I don’t really know.”

“…Huh?” Sousei thought he must have misheard. “Y-your first boyfriend…?!” he exclaimed loudly before he could stop himself.

Asumi looked puzzled. “Huh? Yeah, I’d never had a boyfriend before. Why?”

“Wh-why…? I don’t know, I guess it’s just surprising…”

“That’s so biased!” Moena closed the gap between herself and Sousei with such force that it seemed like she was going to grab him by the collar. “Girls as pure and devoted as Asumin are much rarer than you’d think! You don’t get that, even though you say you were dating? I won’t accept it! So, in the end, you don’t actually know anything about Asumin, do you?”

“…I have no excuse. I’m truly, sincerely sorry about all of that…”

“I’ll never forgive you!”

“…I understand. I don’t expect you to forgive me at all…”

“Only a demon or a devil would do something like that!”

“…I have no choice but to accept anything you have to say…”

“Quit it already, Moena!” Asumi stood between them. “You too, Sousei! You don’t need to apologize. It’s not all on you. It was between the two of us, so it’s not a matter of whose fault it is. We’re both to blame.”

No matter how you think about it, the blame falls squarely on me…

Sousei couldn’t help thinking that he was in the wrong, but Asumi didn’t seem to want an apology.

…But I’m only apologizing to make myself feel better…

“Whenever Asumin has a small argument or something,” Moena went on, her cheeks still puffed out, “she always tries to make up with the person right away. She’s quite quick about it, generally. She’ll suddenly say, ‘let’s stop’ right in the middle of a fight.”

“Well, it’d be a waste if we didn’t, right? After all, I really like you, Moena. I love you, even.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“I lo-lo-lo-looooooove you!” Asumi said, hugging Moena.

“—Ah, hey!”

“Moena, nuzzling your cheek feels seriously nice!”

“Nnnghaah, hey, ahh…!” Moena’s face was bright red.

As Sousei watched them—or rather, as he was forced to watch—his face also started to turn red.

Th-this is hard to watch…but it’s not that it’s unpleasant…or exciting. They’re just so peaceful…

Sousei savored a slight sense of elation and an immense serenity at the same time.

How great would it be if the whole world was like this…?

That kind of world would have no savage dark side, and people wouldn’t kill each other. Sousei would be out of a job, but that was fine by him.

Honestly, it would be better if there weren’t any people like me. We shouldn’t exist…

“Geez! I’m banning you from rubbing your cheek on me, Asumin!”

Moena firmly pushed Asumi away, but without using so much force that it would be rough.

“Huh…?” Asumi blinked her large eyes. “Do you really mean that?”

“Yes, I’m serious!”

“Hmphhh…” Asumi distanced herself from Moena with obvious reluctance, but only by about six inches. Eight at the most. “It’d be unbearable if you banned me from nuzzling your cheek, so I’ll try to resist this time…”



Sousei was with Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada up until Shizukamachi Station on the subway where he changed from the Tozai Line to the Namboku Line. As he held on to the hanging strap of the train, all alone, his throat and chest seemed to tighten and he felt as if he was about to start crying. It confused him.

…Huh? What's wrong with me? I was just having lots of fun with everyone, wasn't I? That was the most fun I've ever had. That's right. It was so fun that I thought, "Oh, so this is what fun is." So why…?

By the time he'd gone five stops, from Shizukamachi Station to Sharinchou Station, Sousei had calmed down considerably.

"Hey, didn't I just say you *were* banned?"

"I trust the ban will be lifted sometime soon."

"…Wait a minute… Asumin, what did you mean before when you said '*it'd be a waste*'?"

"What were we talking about, again?" Asumi tilted her head in puzzlement, and Moena face-palmed.

"It was like this…" Sousei felt bad about interrupting, but he took over from Moena and briefly summarized what they'd been talking about just before.

"Ah!" Asumi exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "That! I just meant that I want to spend as much time as possible having fun with the people I really like. That's all."

"…I see," Sousei said, nodding. Inwardly, though, he didn't quite see the connection between Asumi's reply and it being a "waste."

Asumi seemed to catch on to the fact that Sousei didn't understand.

"Well, if you're spending precious time with people you really like, then wouldn't it feel like a waste if you weren't enjoying every minute, every second of that time?"

"That's…" Sousei was speechless. He was surprised at himself for being at a loss for words.

It wasn't that he didn't understand Asumi's way of thinking. In fact, it was simple enough that even Sousei, who didn't understand people's feelings, could comprehend it.

A waste…

Sousei also often felt that things were being wasted. He hadn't used to feel that way, but lately, it had hit him all of a sudden.

His lives. Whenever he died, the number of lives he had remaining decreased. In the past, Sousei had been worried about running out of extra lives, but he'd always known that it would be all right so long as he added more than he lost through work, or at the very least, balanced that number out. Obviously, it was best to increase the number of lives he had as much as possible so he'd have them if he needed them, but he had a fair number accumulated at the moment. He could die a few times and still be fine. That was basically the sense he had.

I wonder... Have I ever had that kind of thought before? That the time I spend with someone I like is so important that I don't want to waste even a second of it...?

He thought he probably hadn't.

Shiramori really loved her father...but he was apparently an outrageous liar. He made her a pinkie-promise to come home, but then left and never came back. Shiramori has experienced losing people she loves. That's probably why she treasures them so much. She has just one life, one chance to live, and that time is limited...

Sousei was different. He didn't have just one life. If he had just one chance to live, it would have been over long ago. He knew how many lives he had left, but how many had he lost up till now? The number didn't immediately come to him. Lives were frivolous to Sousei. Even if he died, he could get a life back by killing someone. Of course, no one besides Sousei could do that. Even Kuchina, who was *abnormal* like Sousei, only had one life.

I guess—

He was just flabbergasted.

—when it comes down to it, the reason why I don't understand people's feelings must be because even when I die, I don't *die...*

Kuchina had invited him to her house in Motomachi, with its parlor-like room in the basement where her adoptive parents were being cryopreserved. Or, more accurately, where the corpses of her adoptive parents were being cryopreserved. The two of them were already dead, yet Kuchina seemed to hope they'd somehow come back to life, even though it was impossible.

...What would that feel like, I wonder. Wanting someone to come back to life, even if they couldn't...

He imagined losing someone. Kuchina, for example, who only had one life.

If that happened, I…

She doesn't move. Her body gradually gets colder. Eventually rigor mortis sets in. She becomes stiff. Even once the rigor mortis wears off and she becomes soft again, her body temperature never returns to normal. Sousei doesn't know her well. He still doesn't. And even if he wants to know more about her, she can't tell him. She's already dead. If he just leaves her, she'll decay. Once she starts decomposing, there's no choice but to cremate her. When he cremates her, all that remains are bones and ashes, and one day she returns to the earth.

The adoptive parents who loved her were already dead. She didn't seem to have any close friends, either. Sousei wanted to be friends with her, but she'd probably reject him. Either way, they were far from being close.

Even if she died, there really wouldn't be many people who'd remember her. She'd be forgotten. The fact that she had existed would fade and eventually disappear.

No, I'd remember her. I would be the only one who didn't forget. But…

Sousei would probably constantly remember her sitting alone in the classroom after school, looking out the window.

Even though she never spoke to anyone, she had a surprising grasp on what was going on with her classmates. She wasn't disinterested in other people—in fact, she was greatly interested in them. It wasn't by choice that she was alone.

She immediately took the lives of anyone who touched her bare skin. It was a terrifying *cheat* that probably frightened her more than anyone else. It wouldn't be as bad if her power only injured people around her whenever she was a little careless or something, but it killed them instantly.

Kuchina was isolating herself to protect the people around her.

If she really wanted to protect them, she should live by herself, not go to school at all, and avoid going outside as much as possible.

Saying that was easy.

…Easy? What's easy *about it? I can't say that at all. Going to school, talking to people, smiling and laughing sometimes—just how much have those sorts of everyday things saved me?*

Hitsujimoto doesn't seem to have anyone to talk to, but at least what she does have is better than nothing. Even just being in a normal environment changes everything. It's so much better...

"Huh? Sousei?" Asumi was bending over and looking up at him.

Apparently, Sousei had lowered his gaze and lost himself in thought.

"...Hm? Wh-what appears to be the problem...?"

"You're speaking all formal again!"

"Ah, s-sorry..."

"That's fine, it's just, Sousei... Are you crying?"

"Am I...?" Sousei touched his face directly under his eyes. It wasn't exactly wet, but it did feel like there was some moisture there. "...Maybe it's because of gravity. P-perhaps water from my tear ducts is leaking out as it's pulled down toward the Earth..."

"Are you all right?" It wasn't Asumi who asked that, but Moena. She even had a concerned, somber expression on her face. If it was an act, it was really quite natural and impressive, but Sousei thought it must be genuine.

Moena is a good person...

Sousei felt deeply moved and on the verge of tears again, so he hastily forced a smile.

"I-I'm fine. I guess I'm feeling a little unwell, or, like, this sort of thing happens occasionally..."

"You mean you cry sometimes?" Asumi asked.

As Sousei was struggling to answer, Moena suddenly took something out of her pocket. "Here," she said, offering it to him. It was a small packet and appeared to be an individually wrapped piece of candy. "Want it?"

"There it is!" Asumi laughed. "Anytime something happens, Moena goes straight to food! She always carries lots around."

"I don't have that much on me! I probably only have five pieces of candy..."

"Five? You're lying! There'd be ten in random pockets!"

"There are about five in my pockets! But more in my bag!"

"But anyway, Sousei, the candy you get from Moena is really strangely delicious. She's super good at picking out snacks."

"Ah, yeah, thanks. I appreciate it..." Sousei had been hesitant, but he decided to take the piece of candy since Moena had kindly offered it to him. The packet said *Fuji Apple*. He opened it

and put the candy in his mouth, and the moment he did, it felt like his eyes were going to pop out.

"…Th-this is…"

Sousei often ate apples. In fact, he ate them pretty much every day. The sweet, tart flavor of the candy was exactly the same as an actual apple.

"This…is candy? No way…"

"It's my current recommendation," Moena said, looking as if she was desperately trying to suppress a grin. She seemed somewhat—or actually, pretty obviously proud. "They're a little expensive, but they're the strongest fruit candy made by a specialty fruit shop. You can only buy them if you go to the store or have them sent to you."

"Hnnngh, I want one, too!" Asumi let out a strange noise and made a bowl with her hands. Moena instantly took a candy out of her pocket.

"For Asumin, I have tochiotome strawberry flavor. You like strawberries, right?"

"I do! Yaaay! I love you, Moena!" Asumi unwrapped the candy and shoved it into her mouth. "It's super strawberry-y! I'm so happy!"

…This one really is super apple-y.

As Sousei savored the Fuji apple candy, he unwittingly found himself on the verge of tears again.

Has Hitsujimoto not even spent one second…doing something like this…?

†

Once class was over, Sousei took his things and left the classroom. Then he killed time wandering around the school.

She'd probably see right through me if I left my bag behind…

He waited for the right moment before returning to the classroom, where Kuchina was looking out the window with her chin propped up on her hand. When Sousei got there, Kuchina's body tensed slightly.

She didn't look at him, but she must've realized who it was.

He hesitated about whether he should put his bag on his own desk or not. After thinking it over for a while, he ended up taking it with him as he slowly walked over to the windows.

She's…noticed me already…right?

Kuchina was stubbornly gazing out the window as she always did. Sousei tried clearing his throat.

Ah, seems like it's on purpose…

His face grew hot. He was incredibly embarrassed. In any case, she didn't move an inch. Sousei felt like squirming.

Is she ignoring meee…?

He was honestly devastated, as well as a little irritated.

Did I really do something that bad? Am I…still doing it? Why do I have to be the one to give in…?

Sousei wanted to look down at the ground, but he wouldn't avert his eyes from her, even if it killed him.

Don't underestimate me. Risking my life on something isn't a big deal to me. It's not like it's the end even if I do die…

That's right. People could accomplish quite a lot when they weren't scared of dying. It was like that phrase, "jump into the deep end." Even if Sousei took a forty-foot dive into water, he'd be fine.

"Miss Hitsuuujimotooo!" Sousei had intended to speak normally, but it had inexplicably come out in a singsong voice. It was so loud that he stunned himself. Unsurprisingly, Kuchina also seemed startled. Her whole body visibly twitched, but she still didn't even glance at him. She must have been extremely determined. She seemed intent to avoid talking to him no matter what.

"…M-Miss…Hitsujimoto? Umm…well, how should I put this…? Uhhh… So, it's fine if we don't…you know…just have n-normal(?) conversation or whatever…straight away. Not that I don't…want that, but…it'd be nice if we could…greet each other casually…or just chat? Or whatever… That would be nice… At least, I think it would be… But I guess it's just me who hopes we could do that… Yeah… If you don't want that…well, that'd just be that…I suppose. But I'd hoped we could…you know? So, well, how do I put this…? I guess I can't beat around the bush. I just have to say it outright… Yeah… So, umm…if possible…I'd like for you to stop ignoring me…I guess? Personally, aah—"

Kuchina had abruptly stood up. Up until then, she'd motionlessly listened as Sousei awkwardly made his point. Or perhaps she hadn't even been listening. But Kuchina took her bag and started walking away.

"Wai—!"

When he followed her, Kuchina showed signs of getting ready to run. Sousei was starting to take it personally. A thought crossed his mind: He needed to show through his actions that he, Sousei Takarai, wasn't scared of her, Kuchina Hitsujimoto, even though he knew about her cheat. He should clearly reiterate that to her. He wanted her to understand that somehow.

He grabbed Kuchina's left arm from behind.

"…!"

"Wait a minute, Miss Hitsujimoto!"

"Let go!"

He hadn't expected what came next.

Considering who he was dealing with, Sousei thought it likely Kuchina would resist. He'd anticipated that much. But he *hadn't* predicted that she'd turn around and headbutt him, smacking into his chin with her forehead.

"Gah…!"

"…Ahhh… Hm…?!"

Sousei opened his eyes to see the ceiling. He'd collapsed on the floor of Class 2-2's classroom. He got up and looked around. There was nobody else there. The desks and chairs around him were in disarray, meaning that Sousei must have knocked them out of place when he'd collapsed.

"Minus one…"

It seemed he'd died and lost a life. He was trembling.

I'm more used to dying than anyone else, but—

Being killed by Kuchina never came with the feeling of actually dying, which was vaguely terrifying. Sousei shook his head.

"…No way. Am I scared? What about it is scary? It's not scary. There's no way it could be. I can't be scared. If I'm scared, then Miss Hitsujimoto and I…"

Even if he wasn't scared, weren't things still the same?

…This is the situation, though. She killed me with a single headbutt, and then just left me here without batting an eyelid…

Sousei picked up his bag, which had fallen on the floor, and left the classroom. The faint hope he'd had was shattered when he finally made it to the school's front entrance.

Perhaps I was a fool…for thinking that Hitsujimoto might have been waiting for me…

His footsteps were extremely slow and heavy as he headed to the subway station. On the way, his phone rang. It was his sister.

"…Hello?"

"You're not home yet? You sure are late today."

"…Yeah, I'm sorry."

"What's wrong?"

"…What do you mean?"

"What do *you* mean, 'What do you mean?' Something's strange with you."

You don't have to tell me that. I know I'm strange.

He wanted to argue back, but even that desire quickly faded.

"Ah, I just, you know, I was somewhere I couldn't really talk," Sousei said, trying to sound more cheerful. "It's fine now. But what's up, Sis? If it's not urgent, could it wait until I get home?"

"…Well, I guess so. Go straight home. Really, you should be doing that without having to be told. You understand that, don't you, Sousei?"

"Yes, I understand. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful next time. I'm hanging up now, but I'll talk to you soon."

Sousei ended the call, and his body immediately felt three or four times heavier.

It kind of feels like I've become a zombie or something…

For the first time in his life, Sousei found himself wondering why subway stations were underground. It was called the *sub*way since it ran underground, so it made sense that the stations would also be underground, but he couldn't help but feel annoyed that it meant he had to go down a set of stairs to get there.

There were already quite a few people waiting in lines on the platform. It was still about five minutes or so before the next train arrived. Sousei couldn't bring himself to wait in line for the train, so he sat down on a bench instead.

Since Sis called me, it probably means we have another job. A "job," huh? What makes it a job? It doesn't matter how you rationalize it, it's just killing people, isn't it? I don't want to do that…

An announcement sounded across the platform to say that a train would be arriving soon. Sousei hugged the bag on his lap and hung his head.

The train approached and stopped at the platform. Sousei needed to stand up and get on it. He knew that, but he was too slow to act.

The train started moving, then left.

…Sis'll be mad at me.

He let out a sigh.

Oh well. It doesn't really matter. I don't care about anything anymore…

Sousei closed his eyes.

Someone sat down next to him.

I couldn't care less…

But even as that thought went through his mind, Sousei's ears pricked up, listening out for the sound of breathing or any other noises.

It could be an enemy… I'm not on a job, though. Right now, I'm just a normal high school student. Ah, but I guess someone acting so depressed like this isn't exactly normal…

Even so, the person sitting next to Sousei was acting quite strangely. Not as strangely as he had just been, but they kept letting out breaths, like they were sighing repeatedly. Every now and then, they also made sounds that weren't quite voiced, as if they were about to speak.

"…Huh?"

A voice that wasn't quite a voice… That seemed familiar. Sousei quickly sat up and looked at the person next to him.

She was in full regalia, complete with scarf and gloves, as she sat next to Sousei and glared straight ahead.

"Ah! Miss Hitsujimoto…?! Uh… Wh-why are you…?!"

Kuchina didn't look at him. She didn't move a muscle. Sousei couldn't move, either.

A train arrived at the platform and the doors opened. Some people got off, others got on. The doors closed and the train took off again.

The platform fell silent once more.

"I'm sorry," Kuchina said very quietly. She was still facing forward. Her gaze was intense, as if she was staring at her archenemy. "I overreacted."

Sousei aggressively shook his head over and over, but Kuchina wasn't looking at him. Though, she could probably still roughly see what he was doing in her peripheral vision.

“It’s no problem,” he said, deciding that he should clarify with words just in case. “I’m fine. Yeah. Something like that is no big deal. It was just once, after all. Well, I guess I wouldn’t be too bothered even if it happened two or three times. Ah, but more importantly, are you all right, Miss Hitsujimoto?”

“…Me.” Her intonation hadn’t gone up at the end, but Kuchina had probably intended to say, “Me?”

Sousei touched his forehead. “Your head. Didn’t it hurt? You didn’t get an injury of some sort? Like a bump?”

“A bump…” Kuchina muttered. She looked down and pulled her scarf up a little.

Her face was covered up to just under her nose, and her shoulders were shaking ever so slightly.

…Is she…laughing?

Sousei had no idea what was funny about it.

Does the word sound funny to her or something? “Bump.” I guess it is kind of a strange word. Bump…

It gradually started to sound somewhat amusing to Sousei as well, but not enough to make him laugh.

I guess Hitsujimoto laughs easily when she’s being herself…

As he was thinking, another announcement played over the PA. A train would be arriving soon. Kuchina stood up from the bench.

Sousei looked up at her.

“Not getting on?” Kuchina asked. Her tone of voice was flat, but at least her gaze wasn’t as sharp anymore.

“N-no, I am,” Sousei stammered, quickly standing up.

The train arrived. The car they got into was relatively empty, with space for one or two people to sit, but Kuchina moved down to the end and stood there without holding onto one of the hanging straps. Sousei stood next to her, grabbing a strap.

He wanted to talk to her about something.

I wonder if she’ll be all right with it…

Sousei looked at Kuchina’s reflection in the window and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn’t figure it out.

…She asked me if I was getting on the train. That means she’s fine with us riding together, right? It means…she’s not bothered by it? I’m not being rejected…

From Tsukasachou, the station closest to their school, Sousei would ride the subway two stops to Shizukamachi, then change

from the Tozai Line to the Namboku Line. They were already almost at Shizukamachi.

Sousei hadn't known until recently, but he and Kuchina actually lived pretty close to one another. The train stopped at Shizukamachi. Sousei started to head toward the train door, but Kuchina stayed where she was.

"Huh…?" Sousei wanted to ask her if she was going to get off there, but he couldn't.

Kuchina shook her head. She probably meant she wasn't going to her house in Sharinchou.

…She probably has work…or something.

As soon as he had that thought, Sousei's chest felt heavy.

I wonder what'll happen if I don't get off here, either.

It was just a passing thought. Sousei had to go home and prepare for that night's job. He had no choice but to get off the train.

Kuchina turned her gaze toward him.

"See you tomorrow," she said in a voice so quiet that it barely made it past the narrow gap between her lips. Sousei would've missed it if he hadn't been actively listening, but nevertheless, he heard it clearly.

"Yeah. See you tomorrow," he replied.

Kuchina nodded to indicate that she'd registered his response.

Sousei hurried off the train, making it out just before the doors closed. As the train started to move, Sousei could see Kuchina through the window touching her hair with downcast eyes. The train departed and was soon out of sight.

Sousei's phone started ringing. It must be his sister.

"Yeah, I'm coming…"

He took out his phone. The black display, which showed the time and incoming call alert, reflected his face like a mirror.

"Ughhh…"

He was repulsed by himself when saw his own scruffy, drooping expression.

Ø3

Mud-Caked Case

The man's name was Anthony Takeda. His mother, Jessica Loan, was American, and his father, Masatoshi Takeda, was Japanese, giving Anthony Japanese citizenship.

He had been born in California and migrated to Japan three years ago. He hadn't left Japan since, at least according to the official records.

He was officially registered as a resident of Osaka, but had no fixed address. Takeda made frequent appearances all over Japan and was often spotted in nightlife districts. His pattern of behavior was to stay in each area for a certain period of time, appear in the nightlife district every night, and then disappear.

"Sis," Sousei said, standing by the side of the road as he pretended to play with his phone.

He was keeping watch on the entrance of a certain multi-tenant building: the New Tougoku Building. From the basement level to seven floors above ground, it was home to a multitude of food and drink establishments, including bars, pubs, traditional Japanese *izakaya*, and "snack" hostess bars targeted at men looking for companionship.

"He's here," Sousei reported.

A tall man had come out from the entrance of the New Tougoku Building. He wasn't alone, but rather accompanied by a small-statured woman wearing flashy clothes. The two of them seemed close; the man walked with his arm around her waist.

"He's with a woman."

"He entered alone, didn't he?" his sister asked.

"Yeah. I'll follow them."

"I wonder if she's his target for tonight."

Sousei started tailing the man and woman without responding to his sister.

Shinjuku Street was quite crowded considering it was almost twelve AM on a weekday. Incidentally, this Shinjuku Street was completely unrelated to the one in Shinjuku, Tokyo. It had simply been named after that famous street and was essentially an imitation of it.

The man, Anthony Takeda, was tall and had a build and facial features that looked quite foreign. Even though he didn't have the kind of appearance that Japanese women generally found attractive, he was still quite handsome. He had been born in the United States and could speak both Japanese and English fluently. Not only was he bilingual, but he also apparently had the gift of gab. Night after night, Takeda would hang around bustling streets, hit on women, eat, drink, talk, dance, or have one-night stands.

"We want to obtain evidence before disposing of him," Sousei's sister said matter-of-factly through his earpiece.

"But…," he replied, being careful not to sound like he was protesting, "does that mean I can't intervene until I've witnessed something conclusive?"

"Is there a problem with that?"

"…No. I wouldn't call it a problem."

"Are you perhaps trying to tell me that you feel uncomfortable silently watching an innocent person get killed?"

"Well, that's not exactly pleasant…"

"We're not champions of justice, Sousei."

"I didn't think we were."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"I haven't thought that even once. It's obvious, isn't it?"

"Anyway, we need to obtain evidence first."

"Yes, Sis."

"You're very rebellious these days, aren't you, Sousei?"

He didn't answer.

Takeda and the woman weren't headed toward a major road. They were flirting and wandering in a direction where the streets were increasingly deserted.

Over that way would be…the hotel district…

There were between eighty and ninety thousand missing-person reports filed with police every year, yet in reality, even more than that went missing. Regardless, there would have been at least twenty thousand missing-person reports filed in just the last three months.

Among those missing people, two of them had been with Takeda before they disappeared: Yuki Ezawa, a twenty-eight-year-old office worker, and Eri Kawanami, a twenty-one-year-old student at a private university. There was video evidence proving Takeda had been with them, so there could be no doubting it.

However, it seemed unlikely that the man Sousei was currently following was the real Anthony Takeda.

A man named Anthony Takeda did actually exist, yet all trace of him had disappeared at least ten years prior. His father had died before Anthony had come to Japan, and although his mother was still alive, she hadn't been in contact with Anthony for a long time.

This Takeda was a fake.

That's what Sousei's sister—or rather, their organization—seemed to believe.

And if this man was an impostor, then someone had come to Japan pretending to be Takeda and became involved in some kind of operation.

It was a creepy thought, but there was precedent for that sort of thing, especially among spies. People from intelligence agencies, as well as undercover agents from terrorist organizations or corporations, would assume the identity of someone else in order to accomplish their mission.

However, Takeda was different. According to the organization's research, he hadn't made any movements that would suggest he might be a spy.

Maybe that man is actually a member of a new group of assassins, the NGS or whatever it's called…

There existed three groups in Japan: the so-called "Agency," which traced its roots back to a secret governmental department under the former Ministry of Home Affairs; the Church of Assassins (COA), which entered Japan from abroad after the war; and the All-Japan Assassin Association, more commonly known as "the Association," which came to prominence in the 1980s. The Agency, COA, and the Association were all professional groups of assassins, meaning they were all in the same business.

The Agency still seemed to have connections with former *zaibatsu* companies and prestigious families. Each group of assassins had different compensation structures and

preferences in the kinds of contracts they undertook, and they each had their own unique rules. However, taking on jobs without going through the organization was the one thing strictly forbidden by all groups.

Of course, other groups of assassins existed outside of the Agency, COA, and the Association. Although the scale of these three major organizations—or "the big three" as they were called—was significantly large in Japan, and they held an overwhelmingly large share of the market, anyone could freely enter the industry if they wished to do so. There were also freelance assassins who didn't belong to any group. Although it was a bit of a mixed bag, even if the majority were basically amateurs, they could call themselves assassins if they received money for killing people. And if assassins banded together, they could form something resembling an organization.

The NGS wasn't a fleeting minor group like that. Although it was considered new in Japan, it was said to be a well-established major group in its home country overseas.

I'm not interested in how that might affect the balance of power, though…

The man and woman were about to reach the hotel district. If they ended up going into a love hotel, Sousei would effectively have no other option but to wait until they came back out.

They might be in there until morning…

Sousei wasn't happy about that. In fact, it would be the worst.

Thinking that Hitsujimoto might also be working somewhere right now is at least a bit…

Was it wrong to feel comforted by the fact that she might also be working?

At any rate, since their jobs were so unique, the nature of the work was what it was.

I guess it's not exactly…inconsiderate…for me to think that. It's not like I'm mocking her or anything. But it's honestly encouraging to think that it's not just me…

Takeda pointed at a love hotel.

…Are they going to go in?

The pair were talking about something. It didn't seem like they were fighting, but the woman did appear reluctant. Takeda tried to pull her toward the hotel, but she resisted.

What's gonna happen now…?

Half hidden in the alleyway, Sousei watched the scene unfold.

Takeda laughed out loud. He spoke to the woman and patted her on the back, possibly trying to placate her.

There weren't many people around since it was a weekday, but it wasn't totally deserted. Sousei figured that nothing should happen in a place like this, yet he'd inevitably get tripped up if he underestimated the situation. Then again, who knew how things would turn out?

Takeda shrugged. Had he given up trying to persuade her?

The two of them seemed to be turning back the way they'd come. Sousei felt a little relieved.

If he'd taken her into the hotel, he'd have plenty of opportunity to…take care of his business while they were inside. Even just having that possibility disappear for now is…

Takeda and the woman left the hotel district and hailed a taxi on the main street. Apparently, Takeda wasn't going with her. The woman got in alone and the taxi took off.

Takeda stood at the side of the road until the taxi disappeared. Then he shrugged again and turned around. Where would he go next?

Sousei also started walking. "Sis?"

"Yeah?"

"He split up with the woman. It appears that things didn't go well."

"He might look for a new target."

"Yeah."

"You sound kind of happy."

"I don't know about that."

"I wonder if you'd say the same thing if you were an honest person."

"…An honest person wouldn't be in this kind of profession."

"That's true."

"But I'm honest with you, Sis…"

"I certainly hope that's the case."

Takeda walked quite quickly, probably because his legs were long and he had a big stride. Sousei had to hurry to keep up with him.

There shouldn't be many bars or anything that way…

Takeda seemed to be leaving the nightlife district. If he continued in that direction, he'd end up in the business district. Past that was an area with lots of high-rise apartment buildings. Could he be heading for a safe house?

“Sis… This guy’s hideout hasn’t been identified, has it?”

“There are no traces of him buying a house or renting a room, and when he stays at a hotel, he uses a fake name and pays in cash.”

Takeda finally set foot in the business district. There were no lights on in any of the windows of the buildings. It was almost completely deserted. And dangerously quiet.

…This isn’t ideal for tailing someone.

Naturally, Sousei was very careful to follow from a safe distance. He had no other option.

I might lose sight of him like this. Then Sis will get mad at me…

Sousei almost inadvertently let out a sigh. Just then, Takeda suddenly went down a lane between two buildings.

His movements just now…

Sousei quickened his pace.

They were unnatural.

Sousei paused just in front of the lane. He glanced down it and saw Takeda from behind. The man was running. Something didn’t feel right.

What’s going on…?

Sousei launched himself down the lane. He immediately lost sight of Takeda, but it seemed he’d just turned left at the end. Sousei broke into a run.

“Sis?”

“What’s up?”

“I think I might’ve been spotted.”

“Idiot.”

“He seems to be trying to shake me off.”

“That seems fishy. Follow him.”

“But what if—?”

“If he attacks you, you can kill him.”

“Understood.”

He had his sister’s permission, meaning he didn’t have to hold back. Sousei turned left, and there Takeda was—or at least, that’s what Sousei thought, but Takeda had disappeared again. He must have escaped down another side street.

As he was running full speed trying to catch up, Sousei realized why he felt so uneasy.

The sound?

Sousei undid the zipper of his jacket. Inside an inner pocket was a holster with a pistol.

This guy's footsteps barely make any sound…

He ran into a side street that was so narrow that it was difficult for cars to pass one another. Old buildings lined both sides of the street, and there were no streetlights, so it was quite dark.

Takeda wasn't here. Where could he be?

Did he get away from me?

In his head, Sousei calculated the length of the side street, both of their speeds, and the distance between him and Takeda.

No, that's not—

He felt something. If he had to say, it almost felt like a presence.

It was above him.

Looking up, he saw something protruding from the outer wall of the building in front of him to his left.

Something? No. Some*one*. It was a person. A human. He couldn't see them clearly since it was dark, but the silhouette was definitely human.

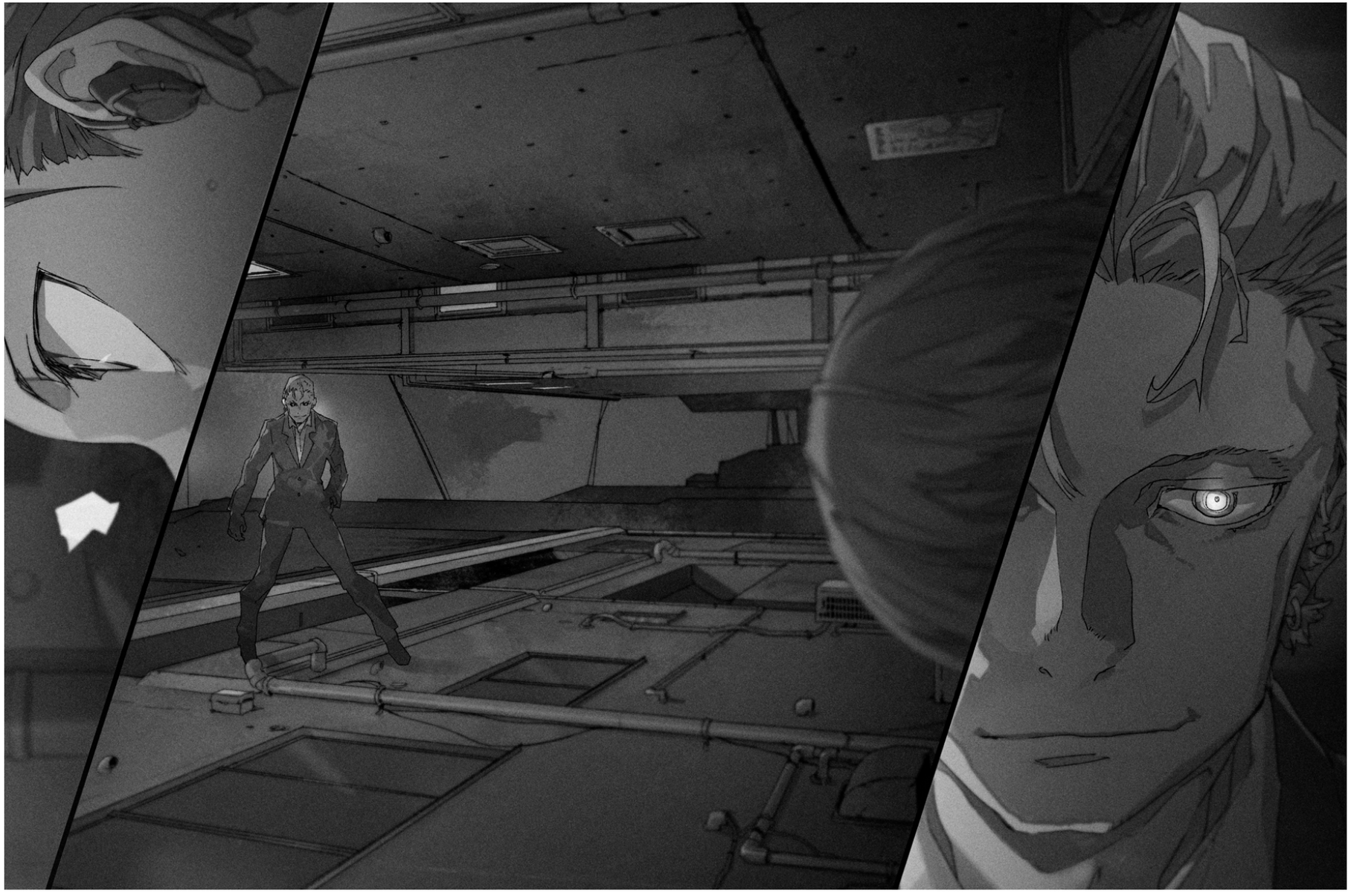
A *person* was growing out of the wall of the building.

Of course, it was impossible for people to grow from buildings. They were just standing there. They stood on the vertical wall between about the second and third floors looking down at Sousei.

…*NGS*…

No Gravity System. NGS for short.

Some members of that organization used a strange cheat to defy gravity. That information was already in Sousei's head—but a picture is worth a thousand words. Some things you can't understand until you see them with your own eyes. In fact, something like this was still impossible to comprehend while seeing it right in front of you. Even if Sousei didn't fully understand it, though, this was work. He had no choice but to act.



Sousei shoved his right hand into his inner pocket. By the time he'd grabbed his suppressed Ruger LC9 from his holster, the person had already started to run diagonally up the vertical wall. He wasn't completely silent, but he barely made any noise. It seemed impossible. He almost looked like he was sliding up the wall, like a bug or a gecko.

Sousei couldn't shoot. Before he could take aim, the guy appeared to reach the roof or escape between the buildings. Sousei couldn't even be certain about that.

Did he…get away?

With his gun still at the ready, Sousei's gaze darted all around him. There was nobody, nothing, anywhere. Sousei wasn't sure if he should go forward or back. As he was still trying to decide, he turned around. Just as he'd expected, nobody was there. There was nothing out of the ordinary.

Don't act in haste at times like this…

If Sousei let the man get away, his sister would give him hell for it later on—though that was also something he shouldn't be thinking about at a time like this. Sousei stayed still until his heart returned to its normal resting rate. He cautiously went back in the direction he'd come from and exited the side street, and it was only then that he returned his pistol to its holster.

He's even more mysterious than expected. NGS might be a harder opponent to deal with than I thought…

Sousei got ready to leave with his jacket still undone.

"…!"

His head. It'd been hit. He'd suffered a blow from something hard, probably from behind.

Sousei lost consciousness, and when he came to, someone was straddling his torso. He was somewhere that wasn't as dark as the side street he'd been in before, and he instantly knew who was on top of him: Takeda.

"What d'you want?!" Takeda demanded.

He had something in his hand—possibly some kind of tool, like a spanner or a wrench. Maybe a monkey wrench with an adjustable screw mechanism. Takeda swung it down toward Sousei's face, and although he tried to protect himself with his hands, Sousei wasn't able to make it in time.

"Who put you up to this?! Whose pulling your strings? Hah! I've always wanted to use that line!" Takeda shouted as he

pummeled Sousei's face with the monkey wrench. He was asking questions, but it didn't seem like he wanted any answers.

…This guy's…merciless…

There was absolutely no hesitation in his attacks. Sousei couldn't tell whether Takeda had gone into a frenzy, was a complete psychopath, or was an experienced killer who'd planned to murder him right from the start.

I can't just let myself die so easily…

Sousei didn't want to reduce the number of lives he had.

…but I don't think I'll be able…to get out of this one…

He'd just have to get killed once and then regain his footing.

That morbidly practical option popped into Sousei's foggy head, which was severely battered and brutally smashed with the monkey wrench. But then something changed.

"Are you still alive?"

Takeda laughed and stopped hitting him. He was doing something. It seemed he was feeling around in Sousei's inner pocket. He grabbed Sousei's gun.

"That's dangerous. This is Japan, ya know? You're no ordinary kid, huh? You from the Association?"

Sousei ignored him. He couldn't bring himself to open his mouth, and he had no obligation to answer any questions.

Takeda pointed the gun at Sousei's forehead.

"You should still be able to talk. Are you from the Association?"

…Shoot me.

Sousei wouldn't confess anything. If Takeda wanted to shoot him, then he should go right ahead. In fact, that was what Sousei wanted him to do. In this situation, all he could do was make Takeda shoot him.

"I was just joking." Takeda laughed again and retracted the gun. "'*Joking*'? Well, I wasn't being serious anyway. You wouldn't confess just because you were being threatened at gunpoint. But I *will* make you talk. We're going to have to change locations. This place is no good."

…Crap… Seriously…?

It wasn't exactly the outcome Sousei had been hoping for. Takeda climbed off of Sousei, then grabbed the strap of the small backpack he was wearing and pulled him up forcefully. He started dragging Sousei somewhere.

“I like cute women, but if necessary, I’ll also do it with men, the elderly, and even children. What was the word again… torture…? Yeah, I think that’s right. *Torture*. Really rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it? It’s such a cool word. I’m good at it, too, torturing people. About as good as killing people.”

“What a nice hobby, huh?” Sousei’s sister whispered through his earpiece.

So his earpiece was still working. It hadn’t fallen out or gotten broken.

…That means…Sis knows pretty much everything…that’s happened…

He couldn’t rely on his sister to help him. She generally didn’t come out to job sites. In fact, he barely even saw her.

Occasionally, Sousei found himself thinking…

…Does Sis…even exist…?

Touka Takarai. His eldest sister. Apparently, they were half-siblings by blood. He’d had another half-sister as well: Riona Takarai. Big sister Riona.

Sousei had killed her with his own hands.

…Father…was kind…to big sister Rio… Only to her…

Riona had had an incredibly weak constitution. Their father had called Riona useless, but he’d still given her a room and allowed her to live in bed. Whenever she fell ill, he called for a doctor to come see her. Riona was the only one he’d treated like that.

Sousei didn’t know all the details. He’d never looked that much into it, but apparently there was a lineage that had been Shinto priests for more than a thousand years, and their father had his big sister Riona with a woman from that family.

…Big sister Rio…was a katashiro*… The gods…if they exist… had been protecting her…*

Anyone who’d wounded her would instantly receive the same wound. If you killed her, you’d die as well.

…Protecting? That doesn’t seem…quite right…

No matter how you looked at it, Riona’s body wouldn’t have let her live a long time. She was the kind of person who’d become ill after being exposed to a little sunlight.

…That was…a curse… Big sister Rio…was cursed…

Even if their father had called her useless, Riona hadn’t been completely powerless. If she wanted to, she could run, jump, and even adequately handle blades, guns, and poison. Riona

had also done jobs at their father's orders. It was nothing short of a mystery to Sousei. How had someone with such a feeble body been able to kill a person?

Killing Riona had been easy, but it meant that he'd also die. That was a problem Sousei had been able to ignore. If he died, the number of lives he had would just decrease by one. That's why killing her had been his job.

…But…did I…really…have to kill…big sister Rio…?

In the end, he had killed Riona because he'd been told to do it by his eldest sister, Touka.

Sousei had submitted to Touka's will.

…Really?

Touka had proposed the idea to Sousei. "We'll kill him," she'd said. That man. Their father. A pure assassin called Venenoza. The Poison King. A killer by nature. The head of a family of assassins. Gouun Takarai. If they had tried to kill him, Riona would have gotten in their way.

…I said…big sis Rio…probably wouldn't disobey…father…

"You take care of Riona," Touka had ordered. That was why Sousei had killed his sister.

Their father had been the king of poison. He was toxic, both physically as well as mentally. Even just approaching him was dangerous.

…That's…why I…

Sousei was sure it was because he was dying.

…No… The one who dealt…the finishing blow…to father…

Did Touka Takarai actually exist?

Sousei was dying, and he wasn't right in the head.

…wasn't…me…

It made him think these kinds of things.

…It was big sis Touka…not me… I'm…not…alone…

"Hey!" someone shouted at him.

It was Takeda's voice. He was hitting Sousei's cheek—his left cheek, probably. Sousei wasn't being dragged anymore. He wasn't horizontal anymore, either. He'd been propped up in a sitting position against a wall or something. Where was he? It was dark. They were pretty much in complete darkness.

"Why did you target me?" Takeda asked.

He tied up Sousei's wrists and ankles with some sort of string. He did it very quickly, obviously used to restraining people.

“Which finger should I start with?” Takeda asked, grabbing the little finger on Sousei’s right hand and bending it backward.

“Aagh…”

The finger broke. And it didn’t end there. Takeda moved Sousei’s right little finger forward and back, left and right. He twisted it round and round.

“Does it hurt? It does, right? I’m sure it does. But the little finger is the least painful. The real pain starts now. Who are you? Tell me. If you do, I’ll put you out of your misery. Don’t you want that?”

Sousei laughed in spite of himself.

“Huuuh?” Takeda seemed offended. He grabbed Sousei’s right ring finger and, in one quick movement, broke it and twisted it around.

“…Uuughaaaghhh…” Naturally, it hurt. There was no way it wouldn’t have.

“How d’you like this?” Takeda squeezed Sousei’s ring finger along with his already-broken little finger, pulling and twisting them violently. How could he do something like that? Sousei let out an animalistic scream. Aah, it hurt.

How many times…?

It hurt terribly, but he still laughed.

How many times do you think I’ve died up till now? How many times have I endured horrific pain…?

“Are you one of *those* guys?” Takeda also let out a laugh, not because it was funny, but because he was frustrated. “A pervert? Are you a pervert?”

What would Takeda do next? Sousei could already tell. Once a man like this lost his cool, he got more emotional. The situation would escalate and eventually go out of control.

“Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…” Sousei laughed.

“Fuck!” Takeda yelled. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” He was probably no longer satisfied with trivial torture like messing around with Sousei’s fingers. This man was obsessively sadistic. He liked hurting others and found it irresistibly enjoyable. Making other people writhe in agony, being the one to cause that suffering—that feeling probably gave Takeda the most pleasure. And to indulge in that pleasure for as long as possible, he tormented others just before they died. At long last, when his victims finally got to the point when they couldn’t even suffer anymore,

he took their lives. That was probably his usual way of doing things.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Takeda repeated as he slammed a monkey wrench into Sousei's head. In that moment, what Takeda was being driven by wasn't pleasure, but intense rage. He'd given in to that rage and was attempting to destroy Sousei, who was already battered.

…He probably…gets off on this as well…that huge…pervert…

Death is the end. Normally, that is.

Sousei Takarai was different.

But that's my only strength…

After he'd come back to life, Sousei once again reflected on this evident truth. Sousei had survived so far by throwing away any lives he could spare. So how would that work now that he was trying to be frugal with his lives?

Something kind of cool, yet kind of lukewarm hit Sousei in the face.

…Is this spit?

It was Takeda. He was muttering abuse and must've spat on Sousei. He'd killed Sousei once. Unsurprisingly, Takeda must have thought that Sousei was still dead and that he'd spat on the face of a corpse.

This guy's the worst.

It was unpleasant, but it was merely the action of someone who was the very picture of a typical bad guy, so Sousei wasn't especially mad.

Takeda sighed and lightly kicked Sousei's right shin. Sousei kept his eyes closed and pretended to be dead.

Takeda probably hadn't planned on me dying…

They weren't indoors, but outside. Worse still, they were in the city. How was Takeda planning to dispose of his corpse? If Sousei were in his shoes, he'd go to his sister, who'd put in a request with a professional connected to their organization.

Would Takeda contact someone, or leave the corpse and run off? Or did he have a technique for disposing of it himself?

"…Hmm?"

Sousei sensed Takeda squatting down. Even though he'd come back to life, Sousei's wrists and ankles were still tied up

with string or zip ties. Before he'd died, he had been sitting on the ground with his back against the outer wall of a building, but now he found himself lying on his right side.

They were in a dark place, an alley between buildings somewhere. Even if Takeda doubted his eyes, he probably couldn't see what the "corpse" looked like in detail. Sousei had probably died with his skull shattered into pieces and his brains spilled out all around him. Although it was dark and he couldn't see well, Takeda might have gotten the feeling that something wasn't quite right. That something felt off.

Sousei opened his eyes slightly. Takeda had a phone in his hand, perhaps planning on using the light. The restraints on Sousei's wrists and ankles were annoying, but he couldn't do anything about them. He squirmed and jumped to his feet, arching his body around Takeda—or rather, coiling around him like a snake.

"What the fuck?! Fuck! Fuck!" Takeda yelled as he tried to shake free. Sousei bit into his windpipe.

"Ohhh! Nooo! Aaahh…"

I didn't want to do something like this…

Sousei honestly resented Takeda. It was because of him that Sousei couldn't use his hands or feet freely, and that his pistol had been stolen. The explosive to blow himself up had long been his last resort, but Sousei had previously used it to end the life of Tousuke Mochizuke, the man with the demon hands. Right now, his teeth were the only weapons he could use.

It's not like I'm a vampire or anything…

Takeda resisted fiercely, of course. Once he realized it would be difficult to quickly shake Sousei off, he stuck his thumbs into Sousei's eyes, easily crushing both of Sousei's eyeballs. But Sousei's jaw didn't slacken. He tore out Takeda's Adam's apple in one bite, and the two of them became entangled and fell onto the ground.

With both his eyes crushed, Sousei couldn't see anything. He could hear a *hrrk, hrrk* sound, as if someone was choking or having trouble breathing. It was Takeda, of course. It wasn't his voice, though, which he probably couldn't use anymore. The source of that strange sound would be his throat. Sousei smiled slightly. Takeda's windpipe had been ripped open, and air was leaking out. *Hrrk, hrrk.* That's what that sound was.

However, Takeda was still alive. He wasn't able to breathe, so he was effectively drowning, and he'd probably soon die that way. But even so, he seized hold of Sousei.

Unable to see anything, Sousei couldn't tell what was going on. It just felt like he was being hugged tightly. Takeda was using both arms and both legs to completely bind him. He was going for Sousei's neck. Sousei was being strangled. Takeda was intending to strangle Sousei to death.

If you're going to do it…then do it. Another minus one… Well, it's all right… With these injuries…I'd have to die anyway… At least do it before you drop dead…

Would Takeda actually be able to kill Sousei before he used up all his strength? It would be a close call.

If I lose lives…I can just get them back by killing…

The suffocating *hyrrk, hyrrk* sound was getting quite weak, and the strength was quickly leaving Takeda's arms.

I guess it's not an easy thing to do…

Ø4

Miserable Cells That Don’t Divide

For a normal, everyday high school student, he was probably up a little too early.

I ended up coming to school first thing in the morning again…

Sousei was trying to be considerate.

Because I can only roughly estimate when Hitsujimoto arrives at school…

He wasn’t trying to get there ahead of her.

Sousei walked along the deserted hallway toward Class 2-2’s classroom.

Being the first to arrive and waiting for Hitsujimoto to come into the classroom would be overdoing it a bit. I mean, something like, “Oh, you’re here,” would be better…

He gradually started to get nervous.

As naturally as possible… Natural, huh…? Isn’t that kind of hard…?

Sousei decided to practice in a quiet voice.

“Oh, morning, Miss Hitsujimoto. You’re early again today, aren’t you? I guess I don’t need to say ‘Oh.’ Morning. You’re early again today, aren’t you, Miss Hitsujimoto? Hmmm… Morning. Morning? Morning. What level of enthusiasm is best? Maybe I should drop ‘You’re early again today, aren’t you?’ Morning. Morning…”

He could already see the classroom in front of him as he practiced.

I’m not mentally prepared yet, though…

And just like that, he’d arrived.

Sousei felt weak in the knees. His throat tightened, and he didn’t feel like he’d be able to speak.

No, I just have to jump right in…

Sousei took the plunge and set foot in the classroom.

There was nobody there. It was completely deserted.

“Whaaat…?!” he inadvertently cried out before noticing a bag hanging from the desk in the back row by the window. There was no mistaking it: That was Kuchina’s desk.

I mean, I looked in her shoe box, and they were there—Hitsujimoto’s outdoor shoes. It did feel weird to stare at a girl’s shoes. Even if I was just checking to see if they were there or not…

Sousei breathed deeply as he walked to his seat. He hung his bag on the hook on his desk, pulled out his chair, and sat down.

Yeah… That’s right. Just because she comes to school before everyone else doesn’t mean she’s just always in the classroom. She probably goes to the toilet and stuff. Right… Yeah…

Sousei put his hands on his knees.

…I have to calm down.

He took another deep breath. And another.

She’ll probably be back soon. Any moment now. This is Hitsujimoto we’re talking about, after all—though I do wonder where she is. She doesn’t seem like she’d have any errands or anything that would take a long time. And she’s almost always in here. It kind of seems like she’d probably hold the record for the longest time spent in the classroom…

Sousei looked around and sighed.

“She’s taking a long time…,” he said out loud.

She’s not coming back at all, though. Hm? How come…? That’s weird…don’t you think? There’s no way that’s the case, right? Huh? Am I wrong about something? No, but…

He could hear footsteps.

Sousei laughed, perhaps out of relief, perhaps happiness. Possibly both.

He sat up straight and waited. Before long, someone from his class entered the room.

“Mohorning.” His classmate gave a unique greeting in a lifeless voice.

“…M-morning,” Sousei said back, forcing a smile awkwardly. “Mishima…”

“Mm…” With shaky steps, his classmate made his way over to the side of the classroom where the windows were, but right at the front. Sousei wanted to face-plant against his desk.

It wasn’t Hitsujimoto… Of course, that’s not Mishima’s fault at all, though…

Yoh Mishima put his bag on his desk and turned to look in Sousei’s direction.

“Did you get up early today, Lil Sou?”

“…Lil Sou?”

“Ah, you don’t like being called that?”

Yoh was a whimsical guy and hard to figure out. The sleeves of his uniform were extremely long. Was that because he was intentionally wearing an oversized jacket, or had he modified it?

“…No, I wouldn’t say that.”

“So I can call you Lil Sou?”

“I guess…”

“Does nobody else call you that?”

“Uh… I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure nobody calls me that…”

“Not used to it?”

“Yeah, probably. I don’t think I’ve ever been called that before.”

“Well then, how about just ‘Sou’?”

“Sou…” Sousei became speechless as he recalled his memories of being in the darkness.

“Sou.”

There was only one person who’d called him that before.

Ukihiko…

He had been Sousei’s half-brother, but more than that, his friend. Or at least, that’s what Ukihiko had called Sousei.

Sousei had never forgotten about Ukihiko. There was no way he could. When he thought about what had happened to Ukihiko, there was no way he’d ever forget.

The last time Sousei had seen him, Ukihiko had been covered in blood and wounds. His face was also a horrible mess.

For the first time in a long time, Sousei recalled what Ukihiko had been like before they’d been closed up in that darkness.

…Mishima is a little…ever so slightly, sort of similar to Ukihiko…

Maybe he was his doppelgänger? No, on second thought, they weren’t similar enough to be called doppelgängers. The similarities between them were pretty much just their narrow faces and gentle demeanors. And their voices. The tone of their voices was somewhat similar as well.

“—Ruh?” Yoh tilted his head and made a strange noise.

Sousei lowered his eyes. “…I guess I feel even more uncomfortable being called Sou, for some reason…”

“So it’d be better to call you Lil Sou?”

“Yeah.”

“Cawww.”

“…Caw?”

“I’m not a crow. But that’s the sound they make.”

“O-okaaay…”

“Hey, is something troubling you, Lil Sou?”

“Th-that’s…” *Pretty much spot on*, Sousei thought, but wasn’t sure if he should openly admit to someone’s face that something was baffling him.

…Mishima’s a little strange…

When Sousei became lost for words, Yoh clapped his hands together, which were hidden in his long sleeves, and gave a cheerful smile.

“Yeah, I think Lil Sou is good.”

…Looks like it’s been approved for some reason…

Sousei didn’t understand what was going on, yet it didn’t annoy him.

Ah, but Mishima doesn’t know anything about me. This is probably the first time we’ve talked this much…

Basically, Yoh Mishima was probably quite eccentric.

“Th-thanks.” Sousei tentatively decided to express his gratitude.

“What’s that all about?” Yoh said with a laugh.

That’s my line…

After that, two, then three girls arrived, followed by Wakkuu.

“Yooo!” Wakkuu saluted.

Sousei immediately saluted and returned with a “Yo!” of his own.

“Nice ‘Yooo’!”

Wakkuu pointed at Sousei and winked happily, but the girls all said, “Saying ‘Yo’ is sooo lame,” and “I’m sick of it already.” Even Yoh made a face and chimed in.

“Wakkuu, don’cha think it’s ’bout time you hang up the spurs on that one?”

“Why ya actin’ like a cowboy all of a sudden…?” The girls found Wakkuu’s comeback hilarious, and even Yoh joined in with the laughter.

She’s taking so long…

Sousei was unable to laugh wholeheartedly.

…Hitsujimoto isn’t coming back…

No matter what the circumstances were, wasn't she taking too long? Or maybe she wasn't. He had no idea what to think.

I can't do this…

Unable to bear it any longer, Sousei stood up and left the classroom, exchanging greetings with Yukisada Hayashi as they ran into each other just outside. Since Sousei was hurrying along aimlessly, his greeting ended up being perfunctory. He knew that Yukisada wouldn't be offended by such a small thing, but still couldn't erase his feelings of guilt.

Ah, I'm acting totally suspicious! But Hitsujimoto is…

Sousei had to deliberately slow down his walking pace, otherwise he'd end up racing down the hallway before he realized it.

Where is she…? Hitsujimoto's probably…hiding somewhere…I guess? Wait a minute, she's hiding? Why? What for? That can't be right. There's no way she'd be hiding, is there? She doesn't hide. Maybe? I have no idea. This is Hitsujimoto, after all. Yeah… That's right. Hitsujimoto is impossible to read. Mishima is pretty mysterious, but Hitsujimoto is from a whole other dimension. Another dimension? I guess that isn't quite right. I'm not sure…

Sousei walked around the school, pretending he was on his way somewhere as he looked around, keeping his eyes peeled for Kuchina. He often had to search for, conduct surveillance on, and tail his targets for work, so he was relatively skilled at creating the appearance that he was just walking somewhere, even when a storm was raging inside his chest.

I guess…she doesn't want to see me after all? But I mean, things seemed quite friendly between us when we said bye at the station yesterday. Friendly? Well, that might be stretching it…but it didn't seem bad. She even said, "See you tomorrow." Is there a reason why she'd be avoiding me? There isn't, is there…?

Sousei would notice Kuchina even if she was right in the corner of his field of vision. There was no way he'd miss her. That wouldn't be a problem.

…But this is where the third-year classrooms are… There's no way Hitsujimoto would be here, right…?

That sort of thing wouldn't have happened if he was calm.

Sousei turned back down the hallway with all of the second-year classrooms. He glanced at Class 2-2, but Kuchina wasn't there. After that, he went past the restrooms, then immediately stopped walking.

…There's also the possibility she isn't feeling well, isn't there? Like…maybe she has a stomachache or something. Hitsujimoto's human, after all. She probably just has an upset stomach. Yeah. Maybe she ate something that upset her stomach, like chili. Chile? Isn't that the name of country? Yeah, I think it's in South America or something. Do they speak English there…? No, I'm guessing it's Spanish. Wait a minute, what am I even thinking about? That has nothing to do with anything…but my stomach kind of hurts now, actually…

Sousei rubbed the area around his solar plexus. Perhaps it was his stomach. It didn't hurt so much as it felt heavy.

Maybe it's stress? I thought I had a high tolerance for stress, though…

Based on the number of students coming and going, it was probably nearly time for school to start. Sousei took his phone out of his pocket and checked it. Just as he thought, the bell was about to ring.

When he returned to Class 2-2's classroom, she was sitting in the back seat by the window.

"…She *is* here…"

It was as if all the bones in his body had simultaneously vanished. Sousei was stricken with such a feeling of weakness that it made him wonder whether he had some sort of strange illness. He crouched down in the doorway.

…This definitely means she's avoiding me…doesn't it…?

†

During class, Sousei tried not to look in Kuchina's direction as much as possible.

If he saw her, he wouldn't be able to get her out of his mind, and his thoughts would wander, wondering about one thing or another.

…That said, it's not as if I can get away with not thinking about her if I don't see her…

Sousei tried to fake being calm. He put all his energy into acting like the Sousei Takarai he always was.

…This is sooo exhausting. It feels like every second shortens my life… No, it actually is *getting shorter…*

At lunchtime, Sousei took an energy bar out of his bag. He'd bought it that morning along with some chicken, which he

didn't really feel like eating. He wasn't the sort of person who ate for the taste, but Sousei thought that eating the chicken right now might make him nauseous.

To be honest, I don't really feel like having this, either…

Sousei took a bite of his crumbling energy bar.

I don't want to eat… I'm not hungry at all…

Before he knew it, he found himself carefully watching Kuchina.

She was acting the same as usual: sitting with her chin propped up on her hand, looking out the window, not touching her lunch.

I wonder if Hitsujimoto eats anything… She must. Right? After all, she's alive. She's skinny, but not overly so… I mean, she's not just skin and bones or anything…so she must eat…

He'd embraced her after school.

…Had that been real? It wasn't a dream…? I've kind of stopped believing it actually happened. Or maybe I don't want to believe it. Almost as if…I feel like I shouldn't have done that. It was so peaceful at school before, and I messed that up. Peace is best…

Sousei's chest tightened, and his stomach felt heavy.

He averted his gaze from Kuchina and instead looked at Yukisada, who was eating rice balls at the desk next to him.

"You've got tuna and cod roe today?"

"Yep," Yukisada said, stuffing the tuna rice ball into his mouth. He looked so happy.

He seems to be really enjoying those rice balls…

It cheered Sousei up.

"You really like rice balls, don't you, Yukisada?"

"Yeah, I love 'em."

"What's the most rice balls you've ever eaten?"

"Huh, I wonder. Maybe about twenty?"

"That many?!"

"I don't have a limit for how many rice balls or pieces of sushi I can eat. I've had about seventy plates at conveyor belt sushi before."

"Seventy…"

"If it's fried rice or curry and rice, I can just keep going. I don't have a limit, so I try not to eat too much."

"You really have that big an appetite, Yukisada?"

"I don't actually eat that much if it's not rice, though. Like, for ramen, I can only eat about five bowls at most."

“…That’s still a lot!”

“You think?”

“You don’t really put on weight, though, do you…?”

“Nah, I do. My weight definitely increases with the amount I eat.”

“Yeah, that figures.”

“But once it comes out, my weight goes back down.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’re not actually putting on any weight…?”

Talking to Yukisada made Sousei’s stomach feel lighter. The chicken would still be a bit difficult to stomach, but he’d probably be able to finish the energy bar.

“A ninja’s secret identity was exposed! Takarai, how’d it happen…?!” Wakkuu suddenly asked.

Apparently, they’d started the Sudden Improv game that had been popular in their class for a little while.

“…Uhhh…mmm… On Sports Day, he accidentally finished the hundred-meter dash in under ten seconds…maybe?”

“He’s just a fast runner!” Wakkuu retorted with a laugh, preventing Sousei’s answer from being a complete flop. “Okay, Hayashi, you’re next! How did the ninja’s secret identity get exposed?!”

“He used his shape-shifting ability to assume the identity of someone else in his class, then happened to run into that person,” Yukisada answered smoothly before chuckling. “I guess that wouldn’t happen though, huh?”

“…Well, I’m no ninja, so I dunno!” Wakkuu said in an exaggerated tone, getting a laugh from everyone.

Yukisada laughed as well. “You’re amazing, Wakkuu. You make it funny even when I miss the mark.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure… Not that I’m saying you always miss the mark!”

“Hee-hee.” Yukisada stifled his laugh with a hand. Something must have tickled his funny bone, because he looked extremely amused, but Sousei didn’t really understand what it could be.

“A question about a ninja whose identity is exposed. Heh-heh…”

…Yukisada is also slightly unusual in some ways.

Most people were probably a little like that.

No two people are exactly the same. It’s not as if everyone’s incredibly unusual, but we’re all different in our own way,

whether big or small. I…want to be as normal as possible at school…but what even is "normal"?

Sousei unintentionally glanced at the desk by the window. He didn't mean to, or have any reason for doing so. He'd just looked over there inadvertently. His gaze had automatically wandered in Kuchina Hitsujimoto's direction.

Am I seriously ill or something…?

Sousei's heart felt like it was constricting tightly, and he fell into despair.

She wasn't there. She wasn't in her seat.

Why else would I be feeling like this…?

Sousei tried to reason with himself.

It's not like Hitsujimoto is just going to sit there all day. Of course she's going to leave her seat. It doesn't matter if she's not there…

It was weirder to be shocked by the fact that she wasn't there. Logically, Sousei knew that. Even so, he pretended to stretch his neck so he could look around the classroom for her. He hadn't thought he'd find her. She wasn't there anymore. She'd definitely gone somewhere.

But no.

She was there. Or maybe it was more accurate to say that she was *still* there. The door at the back of the classroom. She was just about to leave.

Sousei got to his feet despite himself. He'd stood without moving his chair, so his thigh bumped into the desk making a noise and knocking it askew.

Kuchina quietly left the classroom.

"Sousei?" Yukisada asked, looking up at Sousei curiously.

"…Yeah." Sousei nodded vaguely.

Once he sat back down, he noticed that he was squeezing the energy bar he'd started eating. It was slightly crushed out of shape.

"What's wrong?" Yukisada asked.

Sousei said that it was nothing, but he was aware that his words weren't convincing at all. Without pausing, he put the deformed energy bar in his mouth and was surprised by how tasteless it was.

"You know, I've kinda gotten sick of these…"

That was very clearly not the problem.

…So what am I saying…?

He was losing control of himself.

I've just been eating the same boring things all the time, so my nutritional balance must be off…

In fact, he had already lost control. The fact that he was taking his anger out on his innocent energy bar was proof of that.

No, I've been getting all the nutrients I need. I even take supplements…

"…Yeah. Trying to decide on each and every little thing all the time would take time and effort, huh?" Yukisada was talking about something.

"Yeah…" Sousei gave a perfunctory response.

Huh?

He immediately broke out in a sweat.

What were we talking about…? I haven't been listening at all…

"I guess that would prioritize efficiency."

"Ahhh…yeah, probably. Efficiency. That sure is important…"

"Sousei."

Yukisada often smiled. He even had different types of smiles. There was a smile on his face now as well, but he wasn't *smiling*.

"It's probably best not to push yourself too hard, you know?"

"…What…do you mean…?"

"It's probably really exhausting to push yourself so hard and act like it's no big deal, even though you've got so much going on."

The corners of his mouth were raised, and his eyes were narrowed slightly, but it still didn't feel like Yukisada was smiling. Perhaps it was the look in his eyes. It wasn't piercing, just…intense.

"It's noth—"

Sousei's first reaction was to attempt to deceive his friend.

His face twitched and his left eye started to close.

There's no way I could deceive him with how I am at the moment…

Souse rewrapped his unfinished energy bar in its half-ripped packaging and let out a breath.

"…I don't have much of an appetite."

"I guess I don't eat when I don't want to eat," Yukisada said, picking up the cod roe rice ball. "That doesn't happen much, though. I basically always want to eat rice."

†

Even if I push myself, all it does is make me tired…

Sousei left the classroom alone without finishing his lunch.

Still, I can't stop thinking about Hitsujimoto. Walking around looking for her gives me more peace of mind than just sitting still…

With Class 2-2's classroom as his focal point, Sousei moved about the school.

Once, for just a split second, he caught a glimpse of her back at the other end of the hallway, but he immediately lost sight of her. Or maybe it was more accurate to say that she escaped. Sousei had chased after her almost at a run, but he hadn't been able to catch her.

There's no doubt about it…

After many twists and turns, he reached the corridor between the school buildings.

Hitsujimoto is avoiding me…

Sousei placed his hands on the parapet and glanced out at the schoolyard. He felt a lump forming in the back of his throat.

How is crying going to help…?

He sniffled.

Of course, I'm not gonna cry over something like this, but…

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm his mind. He wanted to be free of all his thoughts and desires and reach a state of selflessness.

…It's impossible. I was, you know…getting my hopes up too high in the first place. I was being too optimistic. That's not like me at all. Asking Hitsujimoto to be friends with me? There's no way that would happen. This is me and Hitsujimoto we're talking about! The only friends I even have are the people I chat with a little at school…

His closed eyelids started to twitch convulsively.

How could I ask someone to be friends with me? I don't even have any proper friends, do I? Maybe I never have. Even when Ukihiko said we were friends, I felt like it was kinda different. True, Hitsujimoto and I have similar circumstances because we both have the same kind of unique job. So is it really so strange to think we could be friends…?

Sousei covered his face with his hands. His butt started to gradually lower to the floor. He didn't just end up squatting,

though, but fully sat down.

…There's a limit to how foolish someone can be. Idiot. I'm an idiot. A huge idiot. If I think about it, we probably couldn't become friends because we're both in the same line of work. We can only come to school because we're hiding our true nature as assassins. If it got out, we couldn't just keep pretending to be normal high school students. An assassin being friends with another assassin…? Huh? What would that even look like? What kind of friendship would that be? What a joke… No, you wouldn't laugh at that, would you? That's right. You wouldn't laugh. It's not even the slightest bit amusing. No one would laugh at that. It's too much in bad taste, even for dark humor. If I even have a shard of a human heart left, I wouldn't be able to pretend that two assassins could be friends. Wouldn't that mean… Hitsujimoto is actually the better person for avoiding me? The one who's strange…is me. I've become weird from killing too many people. Unlike Hitsujimoto, I don't have even the slightest sliver of a human heart. I'm a real monster…

"Ah! We found you, Sousei!"

Sousei was pulled out of the bottomless swamp of self-hatred and shame.

"—Huh…?!"

He jumped to his feet and blinked. At the other end of the corridor were Asumi Shiramori and Moena. Asumi was smiling and waving as she walked toward him, while Moena seemed to be accompanying her rather reluctantly.

"Find her, Sousei?"

"…Huh? *Finder*? …What's that?"

"What do you mean, 'what's that'?" Asumi laughed as if Sousei had just delivered an amazing one-liner. When she laughed like that, she looked as dazzlingly bright as the sun, which shouldn't be looked at directly.

Well, I usually can barely look directly at her…

"Did you find her? Miss Hitsujimoto?"

"…Miss Hi—?"

Sousei pressed his right middle finger a little above the space between his eyebrows. What was this gesture he was making? Even Sousei didn't know himself.

Did she say "Miss Hitsujimoto"? Or did my brain just glitch…?

"Mm-hmm," Asumi said with a nod. "Miss Hitsujimoto. You were looking for her, weren't you, Sousei?"

“…Why do you ask?”

“I knew it!” Asumi held her belly and laughed in amusement.

Sousei wanted to ask her something. No, actually, he didn’t want to ask. Or he did feel like asking, but he didn’t have the slightest idea what he should ask.

“Asumi, you’re always…” Moena trailed off. She seemed to be in a bad mood.

Asumi tilted her head to the side. “Always what?”

“Shouldn’t you just leave it be? It has nothing to do with us, after all.”

“Mm…” Asumi gently touched her lower lip. “But we’re friends, so it kind of is my business, isn’t it?”

…Friends.

It made Sousei happy to know that Asumi considered him a friend. It was an honor, and there was no way it wouldn’t fill him with joy. Yet although he was grateful, he also felt apologetic. It made him feel embarrassed to hear that.

“I’m also interested,” Asumi added.

“In what?” Moena asked as she took something out of her pocket. It was probably candy. She unwrapped it and put it in her mouth. The action was so natural that some people might not have even noticed she’d done it.

Sure enough, Asumi continued without pointing out the candy. “I’ve found Miss Hitsujimoto interesting for a while now. I’ve never talked to her, and there is so much about her that’s mysterious.”

“She is mysterious, I’ll give you that. But you can’t even talk to her, can you? She’s scary.” Moena was rolling the candy around inside her mouth as she spoke, but it didn’t affect her speech at all. “Miss Hitsujimoto doesn’t seem to have even one friend.”

“Does she have any?” Asumi turned back to Sousei. “Friends? Miss Hitsujimoto?”

“…Even if you ask me…” Sousei lowered his gaze. “…H-how do I say this? There’s sort of no real way to answer that…”

“Is that right?”

“…I’d…say so. It seems she’s sort of…avoiding me…”

“Did you do something?”

“Uhh… Weeell… I dunno… Hmmm… I’m not sure, honestly…”

“Miss Hitsujimoto,” Moena interrupted, “is often in the classroom by herself after school. I’ve seen her a few times. I

wonder what she does there."

"Yeah, I wonder about that, too...," Sousei said, choosing his words carefully. "...I can't say for sure, either, though. It seems she often stays in the classroom, or almost every day—most days, I guess. As to what she does... Sitting, I suppose...?"

"How mysterious!" Asumi widened her eyes and slapped her cheeks with her hands.

...Is she a fairy? That mannerism of hers is...

The moment Sousei thought, *so cute*, he internally agonized over the immorality of thinking that. Looking at Moena, he saw that her expression had softened, and her face looked quite rosy. She was probably just as overwhelmed by how cute Asumin was.

"Wow! The mysteries keep piling up!" Asumi said.

Sousei hoped she'd stop bouncing around like that.

I really don't mean anything by it...

Sousei pinched the bridge of his nose.

She's just overwhelmingly cute.

"I think I'll try talking to her!" Asumi said suddenly.

Sousei wished she wouldn't just suddenly blurt out something like that.

"Huh...?" It took him completely by surprise. "...You wish to converse...with Shira—? ...*You*, Asumin...?"

"You're speaking so formally again!" Asumi laughed briefly and then nodded. "Yeah. I reckon I'll try to confront Miss Hitsujimoto. You don't think I should?"

"No... It's not that you shouldn't..." Sousei grunted, furrowing his brow. "*Shouldn't*? That's...well, I guess that's not really something for me to decide... I don't really have the authority or the right to have a say in it..."

†

The cute creature in Class 2-2 at Munakami-Chuo High School wasn't just far too adorable—when she decided to take off running, she didn't seem to stop.

Asumi Shiramori was visibly restless during their last class that day. It was honestly the first time Sousei had ever seen a high school student act like that, restlessly glancing at the last row by the window, raising and lowering their shoulders, rocking their body back and forth, and sighing repeatedly. If

you wanted to know the meaning of the word *restless*, watching her would be better than looking the word up in the dictionary. Asumi was truly the embodiment of restlessness. The very essence of it.

…I had no idea being restless could be so cute…

Sousei, on the other hand, was lost in thought.

No, that's not it…

He shook his head. It was clearly something else.

It just seems cute because it's Asumin doing it. If it was me acting all restless, it'd just be really creepy…

Asumi was unmistakably fired up. Would it really be all right for Sousei not to stop her?

…That's the problem. No matter how much I think about it, I just don't know. No, I have no right to stop her, do I? But putting that aside…it would really be better if I did stop her. I should stop her. Because if Asumin tries to talk to her, Hitsujimoto will…

It wasn't as if he couldn't imagine what would happen.

There's an eighty to ninety— No, more like a one hundred percent chance that she'll be cold to Asumin…

He could clearly see how it would go.

Sousei didn't even anticipate there would be any awkward small talk. Asumi would either be ignored or glared at by Kuchina, and even if Kuchina did respond, it was unlikely her response would be anything except rejection.

It'll probably hurt Asumin…

That wasn't all.

…Hitsujimoto will probably be hurt, too.

Her cheat was extremely dangerous, but it wasn't as if she could come right out and reveal the truth. That was why Kuchina had no choice but to reject people without explaining herself. She cut down anyone who approached her with her razor-like gaze and heaped abuse on them. That was the only way she could distance herself from others.

No matter which way it goes, it doesn't seem like it'll end well… I really should just shut it down before it goes any further. I should stop Asumin. Yeah…

It was nearly the end of class. Judging from Asumi's stance, it looked like she was ready to spring into action.

I can still make it. I should stop her. I will stop her. I'll stop Asumin. "Huh, why?" she'll probably ask. She might not

understand, but it's for the best. Both for her own sake, and for Hitsujimoto's…

Sousei made up his mind. And then he instantly started feeling uncertain.

…Maybe it's none of my business. Yeah. It's about what Asumin wants to do, and what she ends up doing. I'd just be interfering. I'm worried about the two of them, but I'm not sure if that's really for their own sakes. Yeah, I'm not confident… I don't think for one second that the thoughts of someone like me could be correct…

Sousei's thoughts were still swirling when the chime rang. Asumi stood up but went, "Ah…!" then sat back down with a red face. Class had finished, but they still had homeroom before they finished school for the day. Their teacher would normally give them some announcements and they'd all say good-bye, and then they'd be done.

Their homeroom teacher, Mr. Oohira, entered the classroom.

"Uhhh, today there isn't…anything in particular I need to tell you," he said in his somewhat distinctive muffled voice.

"No news is good news!" Wakkuu joked, then immediately followed up with, "Unless you're a reporter!"

"So lame," a few people said, heckling playfully as the class burst into laughter.

Wakkuu hasn't been worrying about messing up lately. If he does, he just turns that into a joke as well…

It was no time for Sousei to be impressed by that.

"All right, so…," Mr. Oohira started to say before he was cut off by Tadeshina, the class president.

"Stand! Bow!" she instructed the class.

"Ohhh… Jumping the gun there a bit, Miss Class President…," Mr. Oohira said, hurriedly bowing his head. "Okay, everyone. See you tomorrow!"

"*Sayonara*!" "Nara!" "What's 'Naraaa'?" "It's Naraaa!" "*Sayonara*!"

That was what Class 2-2 repeated almost every day. It had basically become routine. After that, they would place their chairs upside down on their desks, move the desks to the back of the class, and whichever students were in charge of cleaning that day would start cleaning the classroom.

Sousei quickly moved his desk before casting a glance toward the back row by the window.

…She isn't here. Hitsujimoto…

Was it because they were about to start cleaning? Kuchina probably always left the classroom during cleaning time. She should come back once they were done.

She should…

He had a bad feeling for some reason.

“Sousei!” Asumi and Moena hurried over to him once they were done moving their desks. “By any chance, did Miss Hitsujimoto go home already…?”

“N—”

Sousei looked at Kuchina’s desk. Her bag wasn’t there.

“…I…don’t know. Hmmm… Well, it looks like her bag’s gone…”

“Huh?! I just left the room to check, but I didn’t see her at all!” Asumi exclaimed, wide-eyed.

“So fast…,” murmured Moena, before she casually popped something that looked like a candy into her mouth.

…What was that just now? I mean, Moena’s pretty fast herself…

Sousei once again looked at Kuchina’s desk and chair, which had been pushed against the wall.

Hitsujimoto left…

Sousei felt like he’d been completely outsmarted, yet he was relieved at the same time.

I’d been half-intending to stop her…

Perhaps this was better in a way.

“Hmmph…” Asumi crossed her arms with a frown and stood with her legs shoulder-width apart. “Miss Hitsujimoto is basically always in the classroom, yeah? So, maybe she’ll come back if we wait.”

“Nah, she…” *probably won’t*, thought Sousei, but he found it hard to say.

“She won’t come back,” Moena declared, finishing Sousei’s sentence for him. “Miss Hitsujimoto is avoiding you, isn’t she, Takarai? That must be why she left so quickly. I probably would have done the same thing in her position.”

Sousei’s chest suddenly started to ache.

“So it’s my fault…”

“Th-that’s not what I meant,” Moena started to respond, but Asumi cut in.

“It was *you*, Sousei?!” She pointed a finger at him. “Right. It’s definitely your fault! We probably could’ve chatted with her

like normal if she wasn't avoiding you."

"…Mmm, I don't know about 'like normal'…"

"What would you know about Miss Hitsujimoto, Sousei?!"

"You don't know anything about her, either, do you, Asumin?" Moena said.

Asumi had a point.

I'm sure I understand Hitsujimoto better than she does, though… Or at least, I'd like to think I do…

"I feel like Miss Hitsujimoto and I would get along surprisingly well," Asumi said, nodding as if she was certain of it.

What was her reasoning for that? Sousei couldn't even guess.

"…Wh-what makes you think that?"

"Just a hunch," she said simply with a smile. "Like, I played it out in my head during class. It seemed like we'd be able to have a nice time chatting. Miss Hitsujimoto is peculiar or unique or whatever, right? I like people like that. The more I think about it, the more interested in her I become. That sort of thing. Come to think of it, I wonder why we haven't become friends before now."

"Yeah… I wonder…"

Sousei stood there, stunned.

"You see, Takarai?" Moena said with a sigh. "This is the kind of person Asumin is. I had to listen to her go on and on about you like this before. It was crazy."

"What do you mean 'on and on'?!" Asumi pouted and gently elbowed Moena's shoulder. "I just asked you for advice occasionally."

"Four or five times a week isn't 'occasionally,' you know. And it was all 'I said this, and then he replied like that, then we did this, and then that happened.' It was mostly—or actually, entirely—all in your imagination, wasn't it? And it was all weirdly realistic. Didn't I tell you to write a novel or something?"

"You did! I thought I'd give it a go since you said so, and I actually tried writing one. I still have it. Wanna read it?"

"I'd like to, yeah…"

"It's really embarrassing, so no way!"

…I want to read it, too…

Whether or not Asumi had written an actual novel, Sousei was still impressed.

How can anyone be so… How do I put it? …Straightforward? People who are this honest actually exist? She's way too innocent. Is there not even one thing that she's hiding…? And then there's her appearance. There can't be a God, because otherwise someone like Asumi would've never been born. There'd be an uproar with everyone criticizing God for being so unfair…

While Sousei had been busy being deeply impressed by her, Asumi had apparently decided to go home. She and Moena were heading out of the classroom when they turned back and looked questioningly at him.

"What're you going to do, Sousei? Not going home yet?"

"Ah, no. Or, yeah. I'll head home…"

The three of them ended up leaving school together.

Th-this is… It's just like we're…friends.

Was that sort of thing okay for someone like him? Sousei just couldn't get rid of his feeling of guilt.

"I'm a little fired up now!" Asumi declared.

"Huuuh? Cut that out, Asumin…," Moena responded.

"Well, people say that the more obstacles there are, the more passionately love burns."

"It's not love, though, is it?"

"No, I guess not… But it's kind of similar, don't you think?"

Ignoring the gloomy Sousei, Asumi and Moena cheerfully ambled along at the slow speed of about half a mile an hour.

"But you know, love doesn't have to be targeted at the opposite sex, and it isn't just limited to romantic love," said Asumi.

"That's way too broad a way of thinking about it," retorted Moena.

"But isn't the way you feel about delicious things also a kind of love?"

"Nope. It's not."

"Doesn't your heart race when you think about sweets?"

"I meeean, yeah, but…"

"Well, I'm excited now."

"Thinking about Miss Hitsujimoto?"

"Yeah. So, that's why I think it's not an exaggeration to say that this feeling of wanting to be friends with her is a kind of love."

"No way… Love? Isn't that a bit of a stretch…?"

“Miss Hitsujimoto read from the textbook in modern Japanese class once, and now that I think about it, I remember thinking she had a really nice voice.”

“That’s probably a pretty rare case. You’ve got such a good memory, Asumin.”

“Her intonation—I think that’s what it’s called—was kind of flat, but it still went straight to my heart.”

Hitsujimoto’s voice…

Asumi was right about Kuchina’s voice being flat. “Projecting your voice” was when someone spoke in a loud, clear voice from their diaphragm. People like Wakkuu were good at it, but Kuchina didn’t project her voice at all. It was more like a sigh. It didn’t seem like she forced herself to speak like that, though. The sound was difficult to hear, but it didn’t feel fake.

A really nice voice that went straight to the heart, huh…?

Kuchina wasn’t an honest person, and neither was Sousei. The work they did wasn’t honest, either, but Sousei got the feeling that she wasn’t a liar.

When I went to her house in Motomachi, Hitsujimoto told me about her dream…

It was a dream with lots of people in it. People she knew, and people she didn’t—her friends and family. When she touched them, they died. Everyone ran around, frantically trying to escape. Kuchina tried to tell them “It wasn’t on purpose,” as she killed another person, then another. Finally, there was just one person left. Only Kuchina and one other person remained in the world, and she went to kill them.

“Everyone else died because of me. I killed them. I think leaving only you on this earth would actually be crueler. So I have to kill you as well.”

Sousei recalled Kuchina’s words clearly.

“That would be better. If it was only me— If there was no one in the world except me, then there’d be nothing to worry about.”

That hadn’t been a lie. Kuchina really felt that way. That’s what Sousei believed.

…Hitsujimoto makes sure that no one comes near her to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening. She must be so lonely…

Asumi and Moena kept chatting right up until they got to the subway platform. Sousei answered whenever the conversation was directed at him, but otherwise just nodded along.

“We have to come up with a strategy.”

“A strategy for what?”

“For our mission to get closer to Miss Hitsujimoto.”

“Get closer to her…”

“Do you have any good ideas, Sousei?”

“…Uhhh…” Sousei had to come up with something since Asumi had specifically asked him. “Ideas…for a strategy… Hmmm… Yeah… In terms of timing, the morning might be best…”

“Miss Hitsujimoto seems to get up early.”

“She’s probably usually the first to arrive…”

“So we should get up super early and ambush her or something?”

“Well… Yeah, I guess. And without her noticing us, if possible… Like, in a casual way. That’d be quite tricky, though…”

The train arrived and they got on. Sousei would take it two stops to Shizukamachi Station and then change from the Tozai Line to the Namboku Line. Asumi would stay on the Tozai Line.

It was fairly crowded inside the train, with lots of student passengers. Sousei, Asumi, and Moena stood side by side, holding the hanging straps.

“For now, I guess we’ll meet first thing tomorrow morning,” Asumi said, apparently serious about carrying out their “strategy.” “What time is the front door unlocked, Moena?”

“I don’t know, but wouldn’t it be about seven thirty?”

“Then let’s meet up at seven thirty, ’kay?”

“That’s so early! It won’t be enough time to eat a proper breakfast.”

“Is that a make-or-break issue for you, Moena?”

“It’s a matter of life and death.”

“True. How about you, Sousei?”

“Me…?”

In his reflection in the window, Sousei noticed that his mouth had become a diamond shape. His face looked so weird.

“…Too? You want me to go, too…? Seven thirty… That’s no problem for me, but…”

“You wake up early, Sousei?”

“Kind of…”

“I didn’t say it’d be impossible for me!” Moena declared. It seemed she’d be joining them.

That's helpful for me…I guess? Yeah, it definitely is. But will this strategy work? This is Hitsujimoto we're dealing with…

"That said…" Moena gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're reeeeeeeally quite persistent at times like this, Asumin."

"My mom always says that to me," Asumi said, not indifferently, but somewhat proudly. "She says, 'You're so tenacious, Asumi.' I really don't give up easily."

Ø5

Imitation Lovers

Riamu Kinoshita was a Japanese man who'd been born in the United States.

The exact details of his coming to Japan were unclear, but he had begun his activities there approximately three years prior. According to Sousei's sister, during those three years, Kinoshita had been involved in the disappearance of eleven people, three of whom he had apparently killed after receiving requests through illegal websites.

Sousei briefly scanned the small plush toys crammed behind the reinforced glass. A row of crane games lined this corner of the room. The majority of the prizes were products featuring anime and game characters, but that was a world that Sousei wasn't familiar with. He knew the absolute bare minimum. Still, he searched through the prizes in his own way—or so he made it seem.

From where he stood among the crane games, he had a good vantage point of the music game corner. A small-statured man with a mushroom haircut was playing a game there. Sousei wondered what it was. It looked like the man was pressing a keyboard and touching a turntable along with the music.

Earlier, the mushroom-haired man had been dancing along to music. His nimble movements had been quite impressive.

He's so…young. Riamu Kinoshita. The records say he's twenty-seven if I remember right, but he doesn't look it at all. He looks more like a child.

Sousei was in an arcade, tailing and conducting surveillance on a person who appeared to be Riamu Kinoshita.

I mean, he seems to be having so much fun. He's been playing all sorts of games for over an hour already.

"…So what's the situation?" his sister asked through his earpiece.

“I don’t even want to talk about it,” Sousei replied quietly.

“Oh my,” his sister muttered and laughed in amusement. “You’re in a bad mood, aren’t you, Sousei?”

“…Me? No, not at all…”

“The organization thinks he’s also from NGS. Since you went to great pains to get rid of one of their members, you should be able to confirm this.”

“Ah, Sis, I have to get back to work. It looks like there’s movement.”

“Yes, please do.”

“Okay…”

“Make sure to get your priorities straight. I don’t want to have to tell you that, Sousei.”

So don’t *tell me that, then.*

He only thought that, though. Sousei didn’t know how many times, or how many dozen times worse his sister would give it back to him if he argued.

It appeared the mushroom-haired man had finally gotten bored of the music game. What would he play next? He was looking at the coin pusher games. Would he play one of those?

…No.

After aimlessly wandering the arcade for about five minutes, the mushroom-haired man finally left.

The question is whether or not I’ve been noticed…

So far, Riamu Kinoshita hadn’t given any indication that he’d spotted Sousei.

We still don’t even know if he’s actually NGS…

Whether natural or dyed, Kinoshita’s hair was a reddish brown. He was wearing oversized clothes and Hi-Tec sneakers that looked easy to walk in. He wasn’t carrying a bag of any kind.

There were a number of similarly dressed young people in the nightlife district at nine PM.

I guess it’s kind of rare to see someone walking around alone, though…

That was something Sousei also had to be careful of at times. Regardless of age or gender, most people weren’t out alone for such a long period of time. He’d look out of place unless he pretended to be waiting for someone.

That man blends in quite well. He just looks like a young Japanese guy who lives nearby and is used to hanging out here…

If Kinoshita ended up meeting people who seemed like friends and they all went out drinking together or something, Sousei would quickly start feeling foolish about tailing him.

Honestly, I'd prefer that, though…

Sousei had to leave home early the next morning to arrive at school by half past seven.

This isn't the time to be working…

Of course, he couldn't slack off on a job just because he felt that way. NGS member Anthony Takeda had been more formidable than Sousei had thought he'd be, mainly because of the No Gravity System cheat—the ability to defy gravity. It was relatively easy to imagine, and Sousei had thought he'd be able to deal with it somehow, but he'd underestimated it. It was actually quite difficult to handle. It betrayed all the laws of physics that his brain accepted as a given, making things completely different from what he was used to.

From what I observed at the arcade, his footsteps aren't silent and his body movements seem normal…

Could that mushroom-haired man really be NGS?

Sousei was uncertain as he followed Riamu Kinoshita, who went into a batting center.

Going to a batting cage by himself…?

There was nothing else for him to do, so Sousei also went in. It wasn't crowded, but it wasn't empty, either. Kinoshita had already gone into a lane. Sousei took the lane two down from Kinoshita's and picked up a bat.

"Whoa! …Gah! …Ngh! Shit…!" Kinoshita made sounds every time he swung the bat at an incoming ball.

Unlike Sousei, who was just hitting the balls back without really caring, Kinoshita seemed to be having a lot of fun.

And he doesn't speak like a foreigner…

Sousei also occasionally heard Kinoshita laugh. "Yaaay!" he cheered innocently.

He's probably killed over ten people. Eight outside of work. It's possible he kills for fun…

He didn't look like that sort of murderer, but that didn't mean Sousei should conclude that he wasn't, at least for now.

Kinoshita seemed satisfied after hitting sixty balls. He went to the restroom, then left the batting center.

"I wonder where he's going next…," Sousei muttered off-handedly.

Naturally, there was no way his sister wouldn't have heard that.

"No matter where he goes, don't take your eyes off him. Don't force me to remind you of every little thing."

"…Sorry."

"I really wish you were more independent."

"Huh? You mean you want me working on my own?"

"If I weren't around, you'd have to make a living by yourself, wouldn't you?"

"…Well, I guess."

"Wait a minute, did you think I'd always be there to look after you?"

"No, of course not…"

"I just imagined myself still giving you directions when you're a decrepit old man. That's not funny, is it?"

"No, of course it's not…"

Assuming that actually happened, it would be far in the future. *Too* far in the future.

…I'll be independent from Sis, huh? In that case, I'd prefer it to be sooner rather than later. Even tomorrow would be all right with me. Then I could wash my hands of this job and, I guess… graduate from high school and look for a job. I wonder if it'd be better to go to university. I mean, I could also go to a technical college, but tuition fees… What would I do about those? Money. With what I have on hand, I wouldn't be in any immediate trouble. I have a million yen in my bank account. A million yen… How many months could I live off that? Would a year be too difficult? I really don't know…

Kinoshita approached a street corner lined with food and drink establishments. Perhaps he'd go into a bar. There was a staircase next to the street-level entrance, and Kinoshita followed them belowground. A signboard outside seemed to indicate that the name of the place was Club Jeed.

"Sis, he's entered a club."

"Why don't you go in and have some fun as well?"

"Yeah, I suppose I will…," he responded, aware that his sister was being sarcastic.

Sousei walked past the signboard and started going down the stairs. The fluorescent lights were bright pink, and the walls were covered in advertisements. What kind of music was playing? The heavy bass vibrated in the pit of his stomach.

When he opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and went inside, a wall of sound slammed into him. Sousei's earpiece had a noise-canceling function, but he wasn't sure if he should use it. He could adjust the noise cancellation, but it would make it harder for him to pick up any other sounds as well.

It wasn't a large establishment. Only about thirty or forty people were there. Even though it had a flashy name, the inside wasn't anything special. It wasn't much more than a bar with a DJ booth and a small space to dance.

Kinoshita was at the bar, apparently ordering a drink. He took his glass and started dancing along with the music.

Sousei's sister was saying something to him, but he couldn't quite catch it, so he'd have to ignore her for the time being. He tried to stick to the wall as much as possible as he moved about, watching Kinoshita's movements.

I'm out of place here, unsurprisingly…

The DJ was mostly playing hip-hop tracks. Most of the club's patrons were dressed in streetwear, and they were really getting into it.

Kinoshita danced as he gulped down his drink, then went back to the bar and seemed to order another one.

What's so fun about this…?

Kinoshita was in high spirits—almost mysteriously so. At the very least, his behavior made it seem like he was really enjoying himself.

Sousei felt the bartender's gaze on him, so he paid for a random beer.

I'm not going to drink it, though…

He spotted an empty seat at the end of the bar and sat down. The club was quite dark, and the people dancing would hide Sousei from view. Kinoshita hadn't noticed him. Probably.

In the end, Kinoshita was dancing and drinking at Club Jeed for about an hour before he left.

"Sis…"

"Yeah?"

"Is it fun, going out at night by yourself?"

"That'd depend on the person, wouldn't it?"

"…I see. How about for you…?"

"Are you trying to say that my answer was cliché?"

"Sorry…"

His attention was starting to drift. Sousei had to regroup and focus.

But this is rough…

After Club Jeed, Kinoshita wandered around town for about twenty minutes or so before going into a standing-only *izakaya* to eat and drink for about fifty minutes. As if he hadn't already had enough alcohol, he then went into a convenience store and bought a can of *chuhai* with a high alcohol percentage and drank it as he went back to wandering around town.

He's really making the most of his night out by himself…

As he watched Kinoshita, Sousei began to think that maybe people also enjoyed themselves this way.

Alcohol aside, perhaps I'd enjoy it more than I think I would if I gave it a go…

He just couldn't seem to maintain his focus.

I have to get up early tomorrow…

If Kinoshita was going to kill someone, he should just hurry up and do it already. Every so often, that thought would cross Sousei's mind.

…I shouldn't be thinking that. It would be better if everything I'm doing now is all for nothing. I should really be hoping that the organization miscalculated and that this man isn't a killer…

Kinoshita stopped by a mixed-use building, but it seemed he'd just gone in to borrow the restroom. After that, he went into a club with a stricter ID check than Club Jeed. Sousei had a fake passport for these kinds of situations, though. He followed Kinoshita into the club, which was called Kings & Queens. Kinoshita spent about an hour and a half there.

He talked to a few women without seeming at all shy, and he replied to the occasional person who talked to him. That was all.

Something's strange…

As far as Sousei could see, there weren't many people who'd come to Kings & Queens alone, and even fewer people spent their entire time there by themselves. Most had either come with friends or met friends there. Either that or they'd come to make friends, meet people to hang out with, or find a potential lover.

Sousei was a rare exception. So was Kinoshita.

Kinoshita left the club alone and went to another convenience store to buy something.

It's already past two in the morning…

The nightlife district was almost empty by now.

A white plastic shopping bag hung from Kinoshita's right hand as he walked briskly down the middle of the sidewalk.

Will this…end up being an all-nighter?

Sousei braced himself.

Yeah, I'm almost sure of it. Oh well. If I prepare myself for not being able to sleep—or I guess, not going to bed, then it should be all right…

Seeing as they'd made it this far, Sousei would prefer for the night to end without any victims. But if Kinoshita was going to kill someone, he should just do it.

It almost seems like he loves it and he hates it at the same time. Or maybe not…

Where was Kinoshita going? He left the nightlife district. Ahead of them was a park with a pond where you could ride boats. It was a large park that bordered a shrine where huge festivals were often held.

Young men and women were sitting on the guardrail that ran along the street in front of the park. Perhaps they would spend the night talking, drinking, and smoking there.

Kinoshita went into the park. There were quite a few people inside as well. Two men were talking to two women who were sitting on a bench.

Sousei wanted to avoid any public attention. He left the pavement and walked on the outer side of a row of trees.

"Sis?"

"…Whaaat?" she asked sleepily.

That was rare for her, but Sousei wasn't going to point it out. If he said anything, she'd come back at him not dozens, but over a hundred times worse. It wasn't worth it.

Kinoshita stopped walking. He didn't just stand there, though, but squatted. Sousei poked his face out from the shadows of the trees to take a look.

"He's talking to a woman in a park."

"Is the woman alone?"

"Yes."

The woman seemed to be sitting on the ground. She was wearing a long dress with a coat on top. It wasn't particularly flashy or plain. Her outfit was fairly low-key, but her shoulder-

length hair was a mess. Was she drunk? She must have been in her twenties, probably around twenty-five or so.

Kinoshita had crouched in front of the woman and seemed to be saying something. Then he sat down beside her. He took something out of the plastic shopping bag and handed it to her. It was in a plastic bottle, so it was probably a drink.

"What's the situation?" Sousei's sister asked him.

"…His companion appears to be drunk. He's given her water or something to drink."

"Oh my," his sister snickered. "He sure is kind, isn't he?"

Kinoshita sat next to the woman for about thirty minutes or so. What were they talking about? Sousei couldn't catch any of what they were saying, but halfway through, Kinoshita swapped to being the listener.

Eventually he got to his feet, and the woman took his hand and pulled herself up.

"Sis, they're moving."

"Together?"

"Seems so."

By the time they exited the park, the two of them were holding hands. They looked like a happy couple who'd stayed out late, missed the last train, and were trying to walk home.

…I don't think that's what this is, though. It doesn't seem like they'd planned to meet. In fact, that was probably their first time meeting. The woman probably drank too much and was trying to sober up…and Kinoshita hit on her while she was alone in the park. If he was just trying to pick her up, that would be fine, but…

Sousei wondered what was going on.

Kinoshita and the woman took occasional breaks, then started walking again. They came to a crossing where the light was red, but no cars were coming, so they ran across the road, laughing.

They walked like that for two hours.

This—

It would be utterly unbearable unless he suppressed his emotions.

—should be something I'm used to. It's a part of the job. I mean, rather than killing people, I guess it's… No, I really shouldn't be comparing the two…

Before long, it would be morning.

The pair approached an incredibly short tunnel under an overpass that was too low and shabby to even be called that.

This is a bit close…

Sousei wasn't thinking about the distance between him and them. He was being extremely careful to make sure he wouldn't be detected. He was thinking about the distance between the two of them—between Kinoshita and the woman. They weren't just holding hands anymore, but were arm in arm, snuggling together as they walked.

They can do as they like… They can—

In the tunnel, the two of them suddenly stopped walking.

Ahhh…

They turned to each other, then their faces drew close and their mouths made contact.

…What am I being forced to watch…?

Had all his hard work been for nothing?

Where even are we?

They had probably walked about three miles from the park by the nightlife district. Even though they were on the outskirts of the city, it wasn't a rural area, but it was also hard to describe it as part of the city proper. Both the houses and the apartment buildings looked extremely old. There were abandoned houses starting to collapse and vacant lots turning into grassy fields. The residents here had probably moved out until only the elderly remained. In all likelihood, this area would never flourish.

It's probably…not a coincidence. Kinoshita brought her here, to this place…

Kinoshita and the woman were messing around in the tunnel. There was absolutely no one nearby. There was no traffic, either. It was far too quiet, even though it was just before dawn.

It's like a ghost town… Surely it can't be that bad, though.

Eventually, the two of them finally stopped flirting on the street.

And now they're moving again…

The problem was where they were going, or rather, where Kinoshita was going.

They headed down an unpaved side street. As far as Sousei could tell, it didn't go anywhere. A cul-de-sac. Three two-story houses faced the street. The pair went right past the first and

second houses to the third, which was enclosed by a concrete-block enclosure with an iron gate.

Kinoshita opened it. Apparently, it had been unlocked.

Was the woman hesitating about going inside? She clearly didn't know this place. It was probably her first time there, and she might have had a strange feeling about it or thought it was creepy.

Sousei watched from the end of the side street. It wasn't just the house right at the back. All three of them had their lights off. There were no cars parked out front, and grass grew wild all over the place. It definitely didn't seem like anyone lived around there.

Kinoshita was pulling the woman's hand, as if telling her that it was all right. The woman didn't refuse.

"Sis," Sousei said, unable to see the pair once the gate closed. "Kinoshita took the woman inside a house."

"Send me their exact location. Continue surveillance for now."

"Roger," Sousei responded.

He let out a breath.

"…Umm, will I be able to go home?"

"Once we've determined the location, I should be able to handle it from my end."

"Right… Yeah, makes sense…"

"I'm not such a monster that I'd make you miss school, am I?"

Sousei was about to say "You're not?" but he hastily swallowed his words.

"I'm glad you're my big sister," he said instead.

"You're ridiculously bad at sucking up, aren't you?" she said with a laugh.

It might have been a bitter laugh, or maybe she wasn't as bad as she'd led him to believe. Sousei couldn't tell. She was only his half-sister. It was rare for them to even eat together; it had been that way ever since they were children. When was the last time he'd spoken to her face-to-face?

I wonder… When was it…?

He couldn't remember.

Touka Takarai.

What did her face look like? He could only conjure up a vague image in his mind.

I can remember big sister Riona, though…

Ø6

The Wall Is High If You Look Up

Sousei Takarai wanted to be a normal high school student like everybody else.

…Rushing home in the early morning, showering, and going straight to school is definitely not something a normal high school student would do…

Yet when he was away from his loathsome job, he at least wanted to pretend to be a normal high school student.

Ah, but…getting to school this early when I don't have morning practice or anything isn't normal at all, is it…?

Sousei went through the school gate and checked the time on his phone.

Twenty past seven. I'm a bit early…

There wasn't anyone in front of the entrance to the school building. He checked the door just in case, but it wasn't open. No one had unlocked it yet.

Sousei yawned.

…I'm so sleepy. If I don't stay alert, I'll…

It would be bad if he spaced out. Sousei tried thinking about something, but the only things that popped into his head were about work.

Snap out of it…

Sousei shook his head.

Don't think about work. I don't care about that…

Sousei Takarai was a high school student. A normal high school student. Just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill high school student.

"…High school student… A high school student… I'm a high school student… High school student… A high school student… at high school… Duh, of course I'm at high school if I'm a high school student… High school… A high school student at junior high… No, wait. At high school…"

At some point, Sousei's eyes had closed.

"High school student… One high school student… Two high school students… Three high school students… Huh? …That's strange. That doesn't seem right… Five high school students… Or was it four? No, that's not the issue. High school students… What number was I up to again…?"

"Sousei!"

"Whaaauh?!"

Someone had suddenly tapped him on the back, startling him to an extent that had become rare in recent years. Sousei leaped forward and spun around in midair.

Asumi and Moena were there, both of them with their eyes wide open.

"…Sorry, Sousei. You were just mumbling and didn't seem to notice us, so…"

"I mean, your behavior just now was really strange, Takarai, don't you think…?"

"S-s-s-straaange?"

Sousei patted his own arms and belly, then moved his shoulders up and down. It wasn't intentional; his body was moving by itself.

"…Ah, umm, well… G-good mooorning!"

It was a last-ditch effort, and Sousei decisively nodded at them in greeting.

"…Morning," they replied.

"Ah, ha-ha… Uhhh, you see… I kinda, y'know, didn't sleep well today…or yesterday. So I'm probably sleep-deprived. I spaced out a bit… I guess…?"

"Me too!" Asumi nodded enthusiastically. "I was thinking about stuff and got too excited, so I only managed to sleep about six hours."

"…Doesn't that actually mean you slept quite a lot?" Moena asked with a wry smile. Her cheeks were plump, shiny, and healthy-looking again today.

"Six hours is nowhere near enough! If I can, I wanna get nine hours."

"Eight hours is good enough for me. I probably wouldn't be able to sleep nine hours straight."

"No way! If I don't have anything happening, I sleep for like twelve hours straight."

“Twelve hours is half a day, Asumin. Don’t you get hungry and wake up?”

…It’s like they’re living in a different world…

Sousei felt overwhelmed.

Are they talking about an alternate universe where a day is thirty hours or something? Do high school students normally sleep that much…?

“How about you, Sousei?” Asumi asked, “How long do you sleep on average?”

“…Seven and a half hours, I guess?” he replied automatically, trying to maintain his facade.

As soon as the words left his mouth, Sousei felt his chest tighten. He wanted to avoid lying as much as possible.

“Ideally…,” he added, to convince himself it wasn’t a lie anymore.

What a half-assed answer…

“Oh, it looks like the door’s opening,” Moena said, pointing at someone on the other side of the glass door.

A person with a remarkably prominent forehead was about to unlock it. If Sousei remembered right, that man with the forehead was the vice principal.

“What should we do? Wait inside?” Asumi asked Moena and Sousei.

Just as Moena was about to reply, Sousei happened to glance toward the school gate. Rather, he did it because he’d had a premonition, or perhaps because he’d reacted to feeling someone’s gaze on him.

Their school gate couldn’t be locked. There was just a gap in the fence surrounding the school grounds which allowed people and vehicles to pass through.

Right in the middle of that entryway, with just her face exposed, stood a female student with an imposing stance.

What a strong…aura…

Was it an optical illusion? Sousei could see something like an aura emanating from Kuchina’s whole body. It looked just like cold air. The area surrounding her was arctic. The scarf she was wearing completely hid her mouth, so he couldn’t see her expression, but he didn’t think it would be positive.

She’s ready to kill someone…

“It’s Miss Hitsujimoto!” Asumi had also spotted her. “Morning, Miss Hitsujimoto!”

Asumi waved, making Sousei shudder. Couldn't Asumi see that frightening aura? It didn't seem so. Though it wasn't as if Sousei could actually see it, either.

Ah, but…her attitude is visibly unfriendly. The vibe she's giving off seems to say she's gonna devour us or something…

Sousei probably wasn't overthinking it.

"Asumin…," Moena said quietly, gently placing her hand on Asumi's arm. She could probably tell something was wrong with Kuchina from looking at her.

Kuchina Hitsujimoto had indeed repelled others with her intimidating aura, not letting people get close to her. That was her strategy.

From Kuchina's point of view, she'd come to school first thing in the morning as she always did to find her classmates at the front door for some reason. Was it a coincidence? No. They'd called out her name and greeted her. This hadn't happened by chance. So what should she do?

"Huh…?"

Taken by surprise, Kuchina took a hard right turn.

"She's escaping!" Asumi said, taking off at a run.

"Huh…?" Sousei said again.

"…Are we chasing her?" Moena asked, echoing Sousei's thoughts.

Kuchina was already out of sight.

Asumi tried to reach the school gate in a frantic dash.

Sousei exchanged a glance with Moena. They didn't speak, but they'd come to the same conclusion: They couldn't let Asumi go off on her own. They couldn't just leave her to do her own thing. They had no choice.

Sousei ran. Moena followed his lead, but she was slow right off the bat. That couldn't be helped, though. She didn't seem to be particularly athletic. Glancing at her out of the corner of his eye, Sousei got the impression that it wasn't just a matter of Moena being unathletic—she didn't even seem to know how to run properly.

Lift your thighs, Moena! Your legs look like two poles! You're basically just shuffling your feet…!

Sousei felt kind of sorry for Moena. She was shockingly slow.

"It's okay! Leave it to me!" he called out as he passed through the school gate.

“I’m counting on you…!” Moena called back, already struggling.

Sousei was able to catch up to Asumi fairly quickly. Asumi’s running form was much better than Moena’s, but her bag seemed to be getting in the way and her shoes looked difficult to run in.

“You’re so fast, Sousei!”

“I-I’m just average…!”

“Miss Hitsujimoto’s really fast, too, though! You gotta do your best to catch her, Sousei!”

…But what do I do then…? Sousei thought, but he couldn’t go back after coming this far.

“Okay, got it…!”

Sousei sped up, instantly pulling ahead of Asumi. He tried to hold back during PE class, so he hardly ever ran at full speed outside of work or training.

But it’s the morning! After an all-nighter! Near school! What am I doing…?!

Kuchina was a tiny figure in the distance, and Sousei suddenly lost sight of her. She’d turned left.

Are you trying to give me the slip? I won’t let you…!

Sousei had a map of the whole area in his head, even all of the little alleyways.

Anticipating what she’s going to do is tricky, but…!

Sousei predicted Kuchina’s route and used the map in his head to figure out if there was a way he could close the gap between them. Once he’d come up with a potential path, he decided to take it and rushed in that direction.

Hitsujimoto, where are you…? Hitsujimoto… There she is…!

Sousei left the residential street and came out onto a two-lane road to see Kuchina running along the sidewalk on the other side. There were basically no gaps in the cars coming and going, so he wouldn’t be able to cross the road right away. He chased after Kuchina from across the road.

Hitsujimoto really is fast…

The distance between them wasn’t closing at all, so Kuchina was probably running at the same speed as him.

That’s not normal, though! I’m a boy and she’s a girl. Is she really as fast as me…?!

Kuchina looked in Sousei’s direction for a moment, then immediately ran down a side street and disappeared again.

…Crap. What a frustrating defeat… Hmm? A frustrating defeat? Is that what this is? It's not like this is a contest or anything. Yeah, there's no winner and loser here…

He should give up. Go back. Just return to school and tell Asumi and Moena what had happened. Say he hadn't been able to keep up, that he'd lost sight of her. They shouldn't blame him for that.

Even if I do catch her…

What if Sousei chased Kuchina into a dead end or something with no way to escape? What would she do then? Just quietly give in? Really? *Her?*

…I don't know! I don't know anything about Hitsujimoto. But maybe…

She wouldn't just give up like that. She'd try to get out somehow, probably by killing Sousei.

Even if she kills me, I'm fine with that…

Kuchina was trying to throw Sousei off her tail, but she wasn't going too far from the school. It seemed like she wasn't planning to skip her classes.

Even if Hitsujimoto kills me ten or twenty times, I…

Sousei chose his route by predicting Kuchina's movements. Once every few minutes, he'd see her, but then lose sight of her again.

The two of them ran in circles around the school, always keeping within six hundred to a thousand feet of it.

If that's how it's going to be, I'd rather do some easier jobs where I can kill a lot of people. I need to save up lives so it doesn't matter how many times Hitsujimoto kills me…

About forty-five minutes had passed since he'd started chasing her.

…This is pointless.

The traffic light turned red for the direction he needed to go in, and Sousei stopped running.

My brain's not working. I probably haven't seen her for at least five minutes…

Sousei's breathing had become quite heavy, and he was really sweaty. He didn't have a change of clothes, but he did have a towel in his bag, so he could at least wipe the sweat off.

This much exercise after an all-nighter…

When Sousei finally got back to school, Asumi and Moena were waiting for him in front of their classroom. They told him

Kuchina still hadn't arrived.

"Did I do something wrong…?" Asumi asked. Her shoulders drooped sadly, and Moena wordlessly passed her a candy.

She gave a candy to Sousei as well. It was really delicious and tasted like white peach.

Kuchina still hadn't returned even when their homeroom teacher, Mr. Oohira, came to start their morning homeroom.

"Hitsujimoto's absent today…?" Mr. Oohira muttered worriedly in his muffled voice.

I wonder if I did something wrong…

Sousei was also starting to feel guilty.

Mr. Oohira left the classroom. First period would be starting soon.

The door opened just as the chime rang.

"Ah…"

It wasn't just Sousei; a few other students also let out an "Ah…" or "Oh…"

It wasn't their teacher who'd opened the door, but Kuchina.

She closed the door and walked to her seat by the window.

The whole class held their breath. It was rare for Kuchina to be getting this much attention.

"Uhhh…" Wakkuu started to say something, but nothing else came out.

As the silence stretched on, Kuchina got to her seat at the back by the window. She didn't sit down right away, but turned her gaze in Sousei's direction.

Or, rather, it seemed she was looking *at* him.

With her chin raised slightly and her eyes downcast and partially closed, she was *looking down* on Sousei. He shuddered. Sousei thought she might despise him. That wasn't the sort of gaze that people normally used when looking at others, and he couldn't help feeling that she was calling him garbage. Or maybe scum. Probably more like trash. A piece of trash.

Had Sousei really done something so terrible to Kuchina that she would look at him with such contempt? It was just Sousei she was looking at like that, too.

Kuchina directed that gaze at him, and only him, for two or three seconds before sitting down. It was as if she'd declared him the only guilty one.

…Why just me?

Was it because he'd chased her around for forty-five minutes first thing that morning? It was quite a serious offense.

Sousei lay his head on his desk.

…Ahhh, I'm completely guilty…

†

Sousei's psychological shock, fatigue, and drowsiness battled it out during first period, with none emerging victorious in the end. The moment their ten-minute break started, Asumi swiftly stood up, almost making Sousei cry out "Oh god!"

"Wait, Asumin…," Moena said, trying to stop her.

Sousei could only watch.

It's honestly terrifying…

Asumi was brave, unlike Sousei, who was unable to move. She single-mindedly made a beeline and rushed forward. Her target was, of course, the desk right at the back of the room by the window.

As usual, Kuchina Hitsujimoto was looking outside with her chin propped up on her hand.

Asumi stopped suddenly right in front of Kuchina's seat.

"Miss Hitsujimoto!"

To be precise, just before Asumi called out to her, Kuchina had turned toward Asumi with a start.

Whoa…

Sousei clasped his hands together in front of his mouth as in prayer.

Kuchina was just like a cat. Even extremely cautious stray cats sometimes freeze in shock when a car's headlights illuminate them as they're crossing a road. That's exactly what Kuchina reminded Sousei of in that moment.

This isn't good. If she doesn't flee right now, she'll be hit by the car.

Sousei was anxious, but he also found it fascinating since it was so unexpected. What would happen? How was this going to play out? He even felt sorry for Kuchina, who was likely stunned from being confronted by a situation she probably hadn't been expecting.

"Umm, Miss Hitsujimoto," Asumi began, launching into her monologue in a single breath. "About this morning, it seems

might have I startled you, so I'm really sorry about that because it wasn't my intention, and I wanted to apologize…"

Kuchina suddenly slapped her gloved right hand down on the desk.

"Ah…!"

Asumi caught her breath and cowered back.

That's…

Going a bit far, thought Sousei.

You're going to scare people, hitting the desk like that…

He just thought it, though. He couldn't say it out loud.

Hitsujimoto is way too scary…

But for a second or two, Kuchina just looked at the hand with which she'd slapped the desk. Perhaps she hadn't done it on purpose and her hand had just moved unconsciously, or maybe she'd been agitated and impulsively hit the desk, surprising even herself. Even if that was the case, she recovered quickly. Kuchina stood up and glared coldly at Asumi.

"Stay away from me," she said in a low voice. It was completely devoid of passion and sounded like ambient noise.

Anyone would feel a sense of defiance after being so firmly rejected, but when it was declared so calmly, as if the person was just listing facts, you couldn't help but feel powerless.



Kuchina started walking away at a fairly quick pace. It wasn't hard to see that she was trying to escape the classroom after getting flustered.

It must be so difficult for her…

Although Asumi wasn't exactly hanging her head, she was looking down with her chin tucked in. She might have been feeling disheartened. It would be stranger if she wasn't.

"—Wait."

Sousei couldn't believe his ears. *Wait*. Who'd said that? Had someone really said it?

It was Asumi.

"Wait, Miss Hitsujimoto!" Asumi turned and called out again. "Miss Hitsujimoto, wait!"

It was quite the spectacle—though it felt wrong to call it that.

What's going on…?

Kuchina continued walking, but every time Asumi called out her name, she froze for just a split second.

Fascinating…

"Wait a minute, Miss Hitsujimoto…!"

After having her name called out and her body go rigid a third time, Kuchina finally turned around.

"Wh-what is it?!"

She's red…!

Sousei was speechless, and he felt a kind of embarrassment he'd hardly ever felt before. It was faint, but Kuchina's face was slightly red.

Why am I embarrassed…? No, it's not that this is embarrassing…

What was this feeling?

It was similar to frustration, yet completely different at the same time.

…Hitsujimoto's face is going red in front of everyone…

Something was happening. Something unbelievable. Something extraordinary. That much was clear.

"Why?"

Asumi kept calm, despite having brought about such a major incident.

…Why?

Sousei also wanted to ask.

"Wh-why…?" Kuchina looked down, glanced at Asumi, then looked down again. "…What do you mean, 'Why'…?"

Asumi fixed her gaze directly on Kuchina. “You told me to stay away from you. Just now. That’s what you said.”

“…I did.”

“Why? I want to know the reason.”

“…The reason.”

“Because I’m not satisfied with that. I’ve never spoken to you before, but there are all sorts of things I want to try talking with you about, that’s all—yet you tell me to stay away from you?”

“The reason…”

Her breathing was shallow. It seemed she was trying to regain her composure. Kuchina inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled.

…You can do this.

Sousei found himself cheering her on in his mind.

Ah, or am I cheering…for the wrong person?

He wasn’t sure. His thoughts were all over the place, and his mind was a jumble of various emotions.

“…The reason…,” Kuchina said with a slight nod, as if to give herself courage, “…is not something I need to tell you.”

“You might not *need* to tell me, but I want to hear what it is.” Undaunted, Asumi continued her assault. “If you can’t stand the sight of me and have a visceral hatred for me, then, well, I can’t do anything about that. We’re human, so there are always going to be some people you just can’t get along with.”

“I—I…”

Kuchina’s breathing had become shallow again.

You should just say it outright.

Sousei wondered why she didn’t.

Tell her you hate her, even if it’s not true. If you say that…

They say the end justifies the means, right? Kuchina just needed to tell Asumi, whom she’d hardly ever even spoken to, that she hated her. That’s all Kuchina had to do to resolve the situation. It wasn’t that difficult. Just three little words. It was actually incredibly simple.

There’s no way I’d be able to say it, though.

He just couldn’t.

He couldn’t tell someone like Asumi Shiramori that he hated her.

“I—I…” Kuchina’s voice shook. “—don’t h-haaa…”

“Pheeew…!” Asumi suddenly pressed her hands against her head and squeezed her eyes shut. “That’s such a relief! If you

hated me, that'd mean I was really harassing you before and that I'm being a huge pain in the butt. I'm so glad that's not the case…"

"…Ah…" Kuchina was speechless.

She suddenly looked a couple of inches shorter. Was it an illusion? If not, that probably meant she was slumped.

"Asumiiin…," Moena groaned.

Sousei unconsciously unclasped his hands and turned his palms upward.

What is this gesture I'm making…?

Asumi opened her eyes. It looked like there were thousands of stars in each one. She was probably just a bit teary, which is why it looked like they were sparkling. Even Asumi's eyes shouldn't sparkle that much.

"Miss Hitsujimoto…"

Asumi tried to approach Kuchina, but the other girl backed away. Her retreat was meek compared to Asumi's bold advance. When Asumi took a step forward, Kuchina took two steps back. By taking an extra step backward, she was making sure to keep the distance between them. How long would she be able to maintain that distance? It was probably just a matter of time before Asumi closed the gap.

Kuchina stopped moving.

"You're—"

Her voice was uncharacteristically firm. There was a power behind it. It was hard and sharp.

"—just like a child who asks an adult why killing people is wrong."

"Huh?" Asumi's mouth fell open, and she blinked a couple of times. "…A child? Asking an adult? Me?"

"You don't kill people, do you?"

"I…don't. Of course I don't. There's no way I'd—"

"Then stay away from me."

"…What do you mean?" Asumi tilted her head in confusion.

Kuchina continued, unconcerned. "It's just like how you don't have any particular reason for not killing people."

The classroom fell silent. The majority of their classmates had probably been listening intently to their conversation. Some of them must have been intimidated by Kuchina, while most were probably confused like Asumi. Sousei also counted himself among that group.

…That doesn't really make sense. I mean, it doesn't seem to have any logic to it… Huh? So, what's she trying to say? Is the reason you shouldn't kill people somehow connected to why she told Asumi to stay away from her? Aren't those things unrelated? Is there some sort of connection…?

Sousei didn't understand.

Kuchina looked around the classroom, and her eyes suddenly opened wide in surprise, as if she'd just realized something. Her argument was severely lacking and wasn't very persuasive. Maybe that was what she'd noticed.

Her gaze pierced Sousei like a bullet from a Magnum.

"Uhhh…" Sousei was stunned.

Why me…?

Even though she was outright glaring at him, Kuchina's expression was strange. She was clenching her teeth, and her cheeks were slightly puffed out. Was she infuriated? She definitely seemed angry, but Sousei had the feeling that there was more to it. It almost felt like she wanted to complain to him about something.

If you have something to say, then just say it…

He must have been hearing things, but suddenly Souhei felt like he heard her shout, *If only I could!*

Kuchina bolted. She literally ran out of the classroom.

"…Oh my god," Wakkuu muttered. "That was so scary… I might've peed myself a little."

A few people laughed.

But not Sousei.

†

Kuchina returned just before class started. She acted the same as usual after that, constantly looking out the window with her chin propped on her hand. Asumi understandably didn't try approaching her again. Sousei, Asumi, and Moena talked during their lunch break, but all Sousei managed to say were things like, "What should we do now?"

Seriously though, what do we do now…?

There was, in fact, a suggestion from Asumi to go somewhere to have a meeting after school. Sousei couldn't agree to that, though, which he felt really bad about.

I have work, after all…

As he was being jostled by the subway on the way home, his tiredness reached such an extreme that he almost fell asleep while standing up, holding the hanging strap.

As I am now…I've got to take a nap before work, even if it's just for half an hour… Otherwise…

Sousei got off the train at Sharinchou Station and went up the stairs. His legs—or his whole body, rather—felt extremely heavy and slow.

…Was that just an excuse? No, I actually do have work. But they're still having a meeting, even with what happened earlier… What could they be talking about…? I can't believe how tough Asumin is, mentally…

Sousei had avoided attending, but Moena had pretty much been forced into it. The two of them were almost certainly having their meeting around now.

Thanks for your hard work, Moena…

Sousei had left the subway station and was waiting at the traffic lights when he suddenly felt faint.

I kind of just want to collapse right now…

Of course, he couldn't let himself do that. He closed his eyes once, and then forced them back open. He exhaled and shook his head.

As he did that, he heard a ringing in his ears.

No…

That wasn't right.

The ringing wasn't coming from his ears, nor deeper inside, but from behind them. The back of his head was hot. Or was it cold?

There was something behind him.

"Ah…!"

Sousei very nearly jumped out into the road despite the light still being red. He held the back of his head and turned around. He probably should've been expecting it.

There she was, standing in front of him.

She had her scarf pulled up to just under her eyes, wanting to show as little of her face as possible. In that case, it'd probably be better if she wore a balaclava or sunglasses instead.

…Hitsujimoto looks so funny like that.

Should he try saying that to her?

No. There's no way…

This wasn't the right atmosphere to try and joke around to lighten the mood.

"Uh, that's quite dangerous…you know? I came pretty close to maybe getting hit by a car."

"Too bad you weren't."

"…Wha…"

Only a feeble little voice escaped him.

What…is that supposed to mean…?

Sousei felt like yelling.

You run away whenever anyone tries to talk to you! You run away immediately! So why are you here?! You say horrible things like "Get run over by a car"! I mean, you didn't say those words exactly, but it's basically the same! Did I do something that I deserve to be run over for?! Well, I guess I've committed crimes for work, but so have you! Yeah, that's right… No, no, I guess I can't say that…

He felt a bit better after letting out everything he'd been keeping deep down.

"…Uhhh…mmm… Is…something wrong? This is a bit sudden…isn't it?"

"Were you—"

Kuchina's voice was difficult to hear because of her scarf. Sousei wanted to get closer, but he decided not to since she'd probably kill him if he did.

"—the one who arranged for that?"

"Arranged what…? What do you mean 'that'…?"

Not only was she difficult to hear, but Sousei was having trouble comprehending what she was talking about.

"Shiramori," Kuchina lowered her eyes, then corrected herself. "Asumi Shiramori."

"Ah…"

He understood.

It seriously annoyed him.

"Calling her '*that*'…"

"What was *that*?" Kuchina repeated, once again rudely referring to Asumi. She wouldn't make eye contact with Sousei. "What was your goal? It creeped me out. Make it stop."

Why was Kuchina looking down while she was being aggressive? Sousei was getting mixed messages.

"…Even if you ask me to make her stop, what am I supposed to do? I never asked Shiramori to do it, and I don't have the

right to force her to stop."

"You're no help."

"You know…"

"What?"

"Saying I'm no help…" Sousei started, but the words stuck in his throat.

You have no right to say that to me, but…

He'd just had a thought.

Kuchina was blaming him for not being helpful. In other words, didn't that mean she *wanted* his help? She didn't want to get close to Asumi, and since that plan hadn't gone well, she'd come to see Sousei.

Something's troubling Hitsujimoto…so she's coming to me for help.

He may have been giving her too much credit.

I'm just speculating, though. Considering her attitude, her choice of words, and everything else…

There were also things Sousei wanted to say to Kuchina, but he wasn't particularly angry.

Hitsujimoto asked me for help.

It wasn't a bad feeling.

Kuchina wanted to do something about Asumi so badly that she'd asked Sousei for help. She must have felt that stopping Asumi would be that difficult.

"…Plain and simple, Shiramori is interested in you, Miss Hitsujimoto. Honestly, that's all it seems to be. She doesn't have any ulterior motives. Or it's more like there's no way she could do something like that. Shiramori is a really good person…"

"So…" Kuchina took a breath, still looking down. "You're saying we should just get along?"

"I-it's not a big deal, is it? Just being friends with her. You don't even necessarily have to be friends—just chat and make small talk and stuff. You are in the same class after all…"

"Are you telling me to take risks?"

"Just by talking? Is it really that dangerous? Don't you think having one or two people to talk with seems more natural than not associating with anyone at all…?"

"I've been acting unnaturally for ages now, so that's not really a problem."

"But, Miss Hitsujimoto, you don't need to do that, you know? Build a wall around yourse—"

All of a sudden, Kuchina stuck her right hand out toward Sousei, startling him. It was bare. She didn't have her glove on, meaning she must have taken it off at some point.

Sousei jumped backward reflexively—into the road behind him. Brakes screeched. A white SUV that had suddenly hit the brakes and swerved came to a stop just before it mounted the sidewalk.

The driver opened the window and stuck his face out. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?! You got a death wish or something?!"

"Ah! S-sorry…! I'm really sorry…!" Sousei apologized profusely and ran back onto the sidewalk in front of the crossing.

Kuchina had already put her glove back on, and her expression seemed completely composed.

"I wasn't the one who built that wall."

"…Huh?"

"It was there from the start. That wall that no one can climb over."

Kuchina was looking at Sousei, unlike earlier, but she wasn't seeing him. Her eyes were focused, but they weren't forming images. That was the kind of look she had.

It was because there was a wall between them. At least, that's what Kuchina thought. She believed it wholeheartedly.

"But I'm…"

Even if there was a wall, it wasn't something that couldn't be overcome.

If it's me…



Sousei Takarai could climb over that wall since it didn't matter if he was killed.

…I did just dodge her, though. It was so sudden. It would have been all right if I'd been mentally prepared. I-if she did it now, I'd be fine. If anything, it'd feel like I was waiting for it…

He pictured a catcher waiting for a pitcher's throw.

I can stop any ball that comes at m—

Kuchina had moved to take her glove off, and Sousei had jumped despite himself. No—he'd just braced himself. There was no way he'd flinched.

She didn't take her glove off. She'd just been pretending to.

Kuchina turned on her heel and walked briskly away. She was leaving. She'd be gone soon.

I could chase after her. Tell her she can kill me. Say, "I'll be completely fine, so please kill me"…?

Before Kuchina's retreating figure disappeared from view, Sousei's head drooped in disappointment.

…That's not right. No. I can't do that. She'd just think I'm a weirdo…

Ø7

Too Much Bane

The land and the house standing on it belonged to a man named Kenya Satou. Apparently, it was his mother's house, but she had passed away six years ago and left it to him. The property was currently being managed by a local real estate agent. As the owner, Kenya must have wanted to sell it, but he hadn't been able to find a buyer. The other two houses on the same street had also been abandoned under similar circumstances.

Riamu Kinoshita left the house by himself as soon as the sun went down. According to Sousei's sister, no one had been observed entering or leaving the property until then, meaning that the woman who'd gone into the house with him was still there.

"How's it going, Sousei?" his sister asked over his earpiece.

Sousei had already climbed the fence and infiltrated the premises. The completely neglected garden would likely turn into an incredible copse of trees in a few more years. The house itself was also quite dilapidated, but none of the windows were broken. Excluding the small ones fitted with frosted glass, all the windows were locked and had their curtains drawn.

"…Well, I think I can get in."

"Okay. I'll leave it up to you to decide the route."

"Roger."

Sousei went around to the front entrance. From what he could see, the door appeared to have an old-fashioned lock. There was no indication it had been replaced with a more secure one. In that case, picking the lock would be safer and faster than breaking a window to get in.

Calling it "safe" sounds a bit strange, though…

Sousei took a tool from his waist pack and inserted it into the door lock. He had it unlocked in about forty seconds, then put

his tool away and opened the door. The door moved smoothly considering how old it was. Sousei went inside and quietly closed it.

But this is a lousy job…

His sister had made it clear that their top priority was searching the house—which was thought to be Kinoshita's hideout—over observing Sousei's movements.

That said, it's not like any jobs are really enjoyable. Thinking about it logically, the woman from yesterday must still be in the house. Regardless of whether she's unharmed or not…

Neither Sousei nor his sister thought she'd be relaxing in the living room or bedroom.

Obtain evidence…

Riamu Kinoshita was suspected of murdering eleven people in the past three years or so.

Is this going to be the twelfth?

The house's interior was musty and covered in dust. There were no shoes on the cement floor by the entrance, and it looked completely abandoned. Sousei strained his ears. He couldn't hear any sounds. He wasn't sure whether he should use his flashlight, so after a moment he went on in the darkness.

He decided to ignore the stairs leading up to the second floor for the time being. There was a door at the end of the short hallway. Sousei grasped the handle and, by the feel of it, he could tell that the door would probably creak a lot. He opened it carefully.

…Huh? What's that smell…?

Was it perfume? It was sweet like roses and had refreshing citrus notes. If it were just a gentle waft, it probably wouldn't smell bad at all, but this was way too strong.

Sousei opened the door about two-thirds of the way and stepped inside. It was dark. He thought it must be a living-dining area with the kitchen at the back and the Buddhist family altar in the adjoining Japanese-style room.

Not only were the drapes completely drawn, but they also seemed to be sealed up with something. In fact, they probably were. It was too dark. Sousei had no idea where anything was. It was pitch-black.

Sousei took the flashlight out of his fanny pack and turned it on. It was one he'd bought online for four thousand yen, but it

was rechargeable, and the angle and brightness of the beam could be adjusted. It had been a good buy.

A table. Four chairs. A TV stand, but no TV. A kitchen cabinet. A sofa next to the wall.

"…!"

Sousei unintentionally let out a gasp.

The sofa. Someone was sitting there.

There wasn't just one, either, but two.

"Sousei?" his sister called.

He didn't answer.

Sousei cast the light from his flashlight onto the sofa.

People. They were the size and shape of people. Women? Wearing something like underwear—or actually, that was all they were wearing. Both of them.

They weren't moving.

They didn't react at all, even when he pointed the flashlight at them. Neither of them so much as twitched.

"…Sis?"

"Is someone there? Or is it…?"

"Please…just wait a moment."

The two women were maybe in their late teens or early twenties, sitting side by side on the sofa. They didn't seem to be sleeping. Both women had their eyes open and were looking straight ahead.

They were looking, but were they *seeing*?

Sousei walked up to the sofa. Sure enough, the women didn't move a muscle. They probably couldn't move, or maybe *wouldn't* anymore.

One of them had long hair and was of average height and weight. The other was skinny and had a bob cut.

"I was mistaken…"

"About what?"

"It isn't the woman from yesterday."

"Is someone there?"

"No."

Sousei pressed his right palm to the side of the bob-cut woman's slim neck. It was cold. Probably the same temperature as the room.

There was no pulse, of course.

"They're dead. There are two dead women in the living room."

“Neither is the woman from yesterday?” his sister asked calmly.

“No. They’re different.”

He scrutinized their bodies. His sense of unease and hesitation disappeared the moment he’d determined they were corpses.

Is it messed up that I react like this…? I guess it’s a little late to be wondering about that now…

Both of the women had exterior wounds. It looked like they’d been cut with a knife or something similar. There were scars on both sides of their abdomens, extending out from around the bottom of their ribs and continuing down to the area hidden by their underwear. They hadn’t just been cut—they’d also been sewn back up. Their scars hadn’t healed, meaning they were probably new. They’d likely been inflicted post-mortem.

Sousei put his nose near the face of the woman with the bob cut. She smelled of perfume and an acidic chemical smell. Her eyelids appeared to have been sewn open, and when he took a closer look, Sousei noticed her eyes had a strange sheen to them.

“Prosthetic eyes…”

“What’s that?”

“These corpses…appear to have been processed.”

“The woman from yesterday isn’t there, is she?”

“I’ll look for her.”

Sousei pictured the layout of the house in his mind. Did the second floor seem suspicious? Or the bathroom on the first floor? The bathroom would probably be the most convenient place to process corpses. He decided to check the Buddhist altar room adjoining the living room, too, just in case. He’d do that first.

Sousei was about to head there when something made a sound. He held his breath and turned off his flashlight. A noise. What kind of noise was that? He didn’t know, but he’d heard something. It had been faint.

…Above me?

All Sousei could see overhead was the ceiling of the first floor. The second floor was above.

Is someone on the second floor…?

Was it the woman from yesterday? Maybe she wasn’t dead yet, but still alive, restrained upstairs somewhere.

Sousei held the flashlight in his left hand and took his pistol from its holster with his right. He disengaged the safety. The living room door wasn't closed, and he left the room, treading softly.

There weren't any other noises after that. Sousei didn't hear a sound.

He reached the staircase just inside the entrance.

This is kind of…

The stairs were right ahead, but he could barely see five or six steps in front of him.

This feeling I'm getting, it's not good…

Sousei was unsure about what to do. Should he turn on the flashlight and take a look? Wait a little while to see what happened? Bolt up the stairs?

Hesitation is bad…

He placed his left hand, holding the flashlight, on top of his right, which held the grip of his pistol. Then Sousei slowly began to climb the stairs. They were quite steep, most likely because the building was so old.

When Sousei reached the third step, he heard a sound.

Above…

He went to point his gun straight up, but a flash seared his eyes and a blast echoed around him.

…This is the worst…

Apparently, he'd been shot. Possibly multiple times.

Sousei was lying on his back with his legs on the staircase and his head pointed toward the entrance, where people would take off their shoes. Someone had shot at him from the top of the stairs. Sousei had probably died instantly, then fallen backward.

I probably lost my earpiece. Did it fall out, or break…?

That didn't matter right now.

Sousei had died once, been resurrected, and was now playing dead.

Above him. He'd been shot from above. Above? Sousei had been going up the stairs. Above the stairs.

Sousei's pistol was in his hand, his finger lodged between the trigger and the back of the trigger guard.

It was dark. There was no way. Even if he opened his eyes, it was too dark for him to see anything.

How about sounds? He wasn't sure. He couldn't really hear anything.

…Or, no?

He didn't know if it was a sound or not. It was hard to tell, but something was moving. He could sense it.

Something was there.

It was on…the staircase wall?

The right side of the wall facing him? Something was stuck there.

NGS…

No Gravity System.

Sousei hadn't been able to keep up with Anthony Takeda's gravity-defying movements. Even knowing what it was, that would still be difficult. Sousei's eyes weren't used to it, and his brain and body just wouldn't follow it. Someone with good instincts might be able to handle NGS, but Sousei was, unfortunately, just an ordinary guy with a cheat.

Really, I'm way too mediocre…

The organization suspected that Riamu Kinoshita might be a member of NGS just like Anthony Takeda. If Kinoshita had killed three people as a hired killer for the NGS and another eight as a murderer, then Sousei would eliminate him. That was his job this time. If Kinoshita really was with NGS, any surface in the house would be like flat ground to him. He'd easily be able to walk on the walls and stand on the ceiling. Naturally, Sousei would have to account for that.

But Sis said that Kinoshita had left the house…

It was strange. Right. Kinoshita shouldn't be in the house.

It wasn't him. It had to be someone else. An accomplice. Was that it?

The person sticking to the right-hand wall moved, going from the wall to the stairs. They started coming down the stairs, then stopped and looked down at Sousei.

They lightly kicked Sousei's left leg. Were they watching for a reaction?

Not to brag, but I'm pretty good at playing dead…

He continued pretending to be a corpse.

There's an animal that does that, isn't there? The opossum, right? That marsupial that lives in America…

They kicked Sousei again, harder than before.

That's twice now.

Immediately after, he was kicked a third, then a fourth time.

They're really going to town…

The person finally seemed satisfied after kicking Sousei's left leg six times. Sousei thought they'd jump over him, but instead, they slid smoothly along the wall above him. Those movements characteristic of the NGS reminded him of Anthony Takeda.

Sousei's head didn't move, but his eyes were open. He didn't know what the person looked like, but they didn't seem to have a large build. It could be a man or a woman. They were wearing pants and probably didn't have long hair.

…Kinoshita?

They had a similar build.

…It couldn't be, right…?

The presumed member of NGS wasn't heading to the front entrance, but to the hallway. Were they going into the living room? Before they got there, they turned back and looked in Sousei's direction.

But they definitely…look similar…

That silhouette. They were wearing baggy clothes, which was pretty common, but they also had that hairstyle. A mushroom cut.

The mushroom-haired person went into the living room. They didn't close the door behind them. Sousei cautiously moved his legs, which were still on the stairs.

The steps weren't stable. They made a sound, ever so slightly.

It was only a small noise, so he'd be all right. He wouldn't be noticed.

That wasn't how Sousei thought.

He instantly jumped to his feet and charged into the living room. The mushroom-haired person was in front of the sofa. Sousei saw a muzzle flash and heard the *bang* of a gunshot. Almost at the exact same time, Sousei dove to the floor.

It's got to be Kinoshita…!

He hadn't been able to get a good look, but Sousei was certain. He fired back from the prone position, shooting over and over. The person he thought could only be Kinoshita returned fire, letting loose a stream of bullets as he moved. The glass door. The living room had a sliding glass door which

Kinoshita rammed into with his body, smashing through it and going outside.

Sousei stood up and tried to follow Kinoshita.

If he's NGS…

Sousei decided not to go outside the same way. Instead, he went back to the hallway and left through the front door. He went around to the side of the house with the sliding glass door and saw Kinoshita crouching *on the outer wall* of the second floor. Presumably, he'd been planning to shoot Sousei from above as soon as he emerged through the sliding glass door.

He noticed Sousei. As Sousei tried to shoot, Kinoshita ran up the outside wall, getting onto the roof in a heartbeat and disappearing from sight.

If he takes up position on the roof…

That would be bad. He'd have free rein to target Sousei from up there.

Should I go into the house or use the perimeter wall as cover?

Kinoshita immediately started shooting from the roof, robbing Sousei of his options. If Sousei ran to the perimeter wall, he'd be exposed until he got there. He had no choice but to escape into the house.

No sooner was he through the front door than the shooting stopped.

…What do I do?

His magazine wasn't completely empty, but he only had two rounds left. Sousei knelt on one knee in the entryway and swapped out the magazine, then loaded the almost empty one with loose ammunition.

No matter how many abandoned houses are in this area, I'm sure all this shooting's been reported to the police. I've got a suppressor on my gun, but he definitely doesn't…

Sooner or later, the police would arrive. He had to be prepared for that as well.

…This house has a corpse in it. Two, even… And there might be more. There's a bloodstain from when I was shot dead as well. This is bad, for so many reasons…

Sousei figured Kinoshita would come to attack him.

He's killed me once. Does he think he missed and that the shot wasn't lethal, or is he coming up with other possibilities? I'm way too healthy for someone who narrowly survived. Surely he won't

be careless if he feels something's off, right? Or is that just wishful thinking…?

It was only in situations like these that Sousei found himself without his earpiece.

…I have my phone, so I could call and ask Sis for help, but she'll probably get super mad at me…

Sousei readied his gun and stood up. For the moment, there didn't seem to be anything abnormal going on at the front door. Kinoshita might attack from the sliding glass door in the living room, in which case Sousei would find himself being attacked from behind. Where he was now, he had to keep watch on both his front and his back.

The bathroom…

There was a door partway down the hall to the living room. Behind that door should be a toilet and sink connected to a separate room with a shower and bath.

Sousei went down the hallway and opened the bathroom door. His nose was hit by the strong smell of chemicals. He closed the door behind him, shutting himself in.

The door to the shower and bath was made from a semitransparent piece of acrylic. Sousei took out his flashlight and turned it on. When he opened the door to the bath, a strange, foul odor rushed out. It wasn't completely unexpected. To a certain extent, Sousei had mentally prepared himself for something like this, so it hadn't come as a shock.

He illuminated the bathtub with his flashlight. It wasn't empty, but filled with liquid. It didn't seem like regular bathwater, though. It was probably some kind of solution made from a cocktail of chemicals. There was quite a lot of it, too. The woman sitting in the bathtub was soaking in it up to her shoulders.

The solution wasn't transparent. It was tinged slightly red.

The woman was completely naked. She looked to be in her twenties, probably around twenty-five. Shoulder-length hair. He'd seen her before.

She's the woman from yesterday…

Sousei approached the bathtub. The woman's eyes were closed. Her eyelids seemed strange somehow. Perhaps her eyeballs had been gouged out. When Sousei lit up the inside of the bathtub with his flashlight, he saw that the side of her

abdomen had been cut open. That was probably how they'd removed her organs.

In the corner of the room was a big plastic bucket with a lid. Sousei really didn't want to check what was inside.

It seemed Kinoshita didn't use this bathroom to bathe. The small plastic shower chair and bowl next to the tub were probably also used in his "work."

Instead of shampoo, conditioner, and soap, the shelf on the wall contained a lot of *tools*: a coping saw, hammer, kitchen knife, medical scalpel, and a case shaped like a box, among others…

"This is where he works on them…," Sousei muttered to himself.

He wasn't so inexperienced that something like this would make him vomit, but he still felt sick.

I was told that he'd killed eight people outside of work, and there were at least three corpses in this house. He's probably killed more, and he doesn't just kill them—he even takes them apart. This is the handiwork of someone who murders for pleasure. And he's killed so many…

Sousei let out a sigh.

No, this is no time to be sighing. I should be angry at Riamu Kinoshita. He can't get away with this. I have to get rid of him. If I don't do anything, he'll just keep murdering people. That's why I have to kill him. Not to mention, I'm down lives. I need to at least make up for how many I've lost so I can break even…

Kinoshita could attack him at any time. Sousei would lie in wait and kill him.

He left the bath stall and returned to the room with the sink. As Sousei pressed his ear against the door to the hall, he got a strange feeling. What was it?

He used his flashlight to light up the area. Something black was seeping in through the top of the door. Smoke.

"…Does that…smell like something burning?"

Sousei hurried to open the door. That let out a lot more smoke, making him almost choke. The living room. It was going up in flames.

Fire… Someone lit a fire? Who…?

Had some random outsider happened to appear and start a fire? No, that made no sense. In which case, it must have been Kinoshita.

Did he plan to burn down the entire house along with the corpses? That might not have been the only reason. Kinoshita knew that Sousei was in the house.

He wants to burn me to death or smoke me out…

The fire appeared to have started in the living room, meaning that Sousei would have to escape via the front door. Naturally, Kinoshita would have anticipated that, and he'd shoot at Sousei the moment he came out.

Sousei held his breath and burst into the living room. The light from his flashlight was no help at all against the haze. The smoke was awful. Sousei's eyes stung with the heat. The floor near the sliding glass door and the area around the sofa were burning particularly quickly. He started getting cold feet, but there was no other option. He had to go.

Sousei cut across the living room. Fierce flames swirled all around the sliding glass door. He couldn't open his eyes at all and thought the fire might have already started burning his body. He squeezed his eyes shut and plunged into the flames, exiting through the sliding door. As he rolled across the ground, Sousei set his sights on the fence. His clothes were on fire. He could smell burning synthetic fibers and hair, but he hadn't become a ball of flames. He also hadn't breathed in much of the smoke, and his nose and throat seemed fine. Although he was partially covered in soot, he wasn't hurt.

Sousei climbed up the fence and down the other side. That was when he first heard the wailing of the sirens. Police cars. The locals must have reported hearing gunfire.

Avoiding the side street running along the front of three houses—which included Kinoshita's safe house—Sousei made his way into the bushy area behind the properties. Finishing his job was out of the question. Fire trucks would also be arriving before long, so right now, Sousei had no choice but to get out of there.

He decided to avoid the houses that had their lights on, and soon after, he heard the *wee-woo, wee-woo* of fire truck sirens.

Sousei somehow managed to reach a short tunnel beneath a railway track. It was the same tunnel that Kinoshita and the woman had messed around in.

A fire starting in a house that shouldn't have anyone living in it, leading to three burnt corpses being discovered… It seems like this will become quite a major incident.

Sousei exited the tunnel and took out his phone.

I'm going to have to contact Sis after all…

Just before he unlocked his phone, Sousei felt a strong impact against the back of his head.

"Ah…!"

Immediately after, something loomed over both of his shoulders. Were they legs? Something else? No, not something—some*one*. That someone pulled out whatever they'd buried into Sousei's head, then stabbed it back in again.

…Shit, I died…!

When he came back to life, Sousei was lying spread-eagle on the asphalt. He couldn't get up. Rather, he was being held down. It was Kinoshita, straddling him. He was holding a knife in reverse grip and raising it into the air.

"Why won't you die…?!"

Kinoshita swung the knife down. It was double-edged and tapered toward the tip, most likely a Fairbairn–Sykes fighting knife or some other sort of combat knife. It was short and shaped like a dagger.

I do die. I don't want to die anymore…

Sousei desperately evaded, moving his head to the left, and Kinoshita's knife grazed the skin and the side of Sousei's skull.

But…!

"Fuck!" Kinoshita yelled, pulling the knife out and plunging it back down again.

His opponent knew that Sousei wouldn't die even if he killed him. Recovering from this situation would be extremely difficult, but it was no longer an ambush, and the weapon was a knife, not a gun.

As long as I don't die instantly, I'm sure I'll manage somehow…!

"Fuck!" Kinoshita yelled over and over as he relentlessly stabbed at Sousei's head.

Sousei was scared, and it wasn't as if he didn't feel any pain. In fact, it was unbelievably horrible. But scary, painful, and horrible was all it was, Sousei focused on evading Kinoshita's knife so that, as much as possible, it wouldn't strike the middle

of his head. It was a trick that could probably only be performed by Sousei, for whom death wasn't the end.

…I'm just about reaching my limit…

Yet even so, Sousei felt like he was about to lose consciousness.

"Fuck…!"

As Kinoshita brought his knife down for the umpteenth time, Sousei took it in the right side of his forehead. It pierced his skull and went in quite deep.

…I wonder…if this will work…

It really seemed like he might die.

Sousei stopped resisting and let his whole body go slack. The most difficult thing was stopping his breathing.

Kinoshita's body became still. *Did I kill him?* he seemed to ask himself.

The knife was still in Kinoshita's right hand. Sousei grabbed his wrist with both hands, immediately locking the joint.

"—!"

Kinoshita gasped and tried to shake free of Sousei's grip, but with his wrist bent to the limits of its range of motion, he couldn't put much strength into it. He let go of the knife—or more accurately, Kinoshita's fingers slid from the handle because it was slippery with blood. Sousei quickly grabbed it.

Kinoshita was fast, immediately jumping away from Sousei, probably to pull out his gun, but Sousei responded just as fast. He was already on the brink of death. There was no time. To quickly use up what little time he had left, Sousei pulled the knife still stuck in his forehead out a little, adjusted the angle so it was pointing toward the brain stem, then forcefully shoved it back in.

As soon as Sousei came back to life, he jumped up and Kinoshita shot at him. Sousei had been expecting that and jumped aside to evade.

Bang, bang, bang! Kinoshita fired in rapid succession, and Sousei flung the knife in his hand at him. While Kinoshita was busy dodging the knife, Sousei drew his pistol from its holster.

As Sousei tried to aim, Kinoshita entered the tunnel and ran up the wall, shooting as he ran.

That makes this so much harder…!

Sousei temporarily hid himself against the retaining wall on the left-hand side of the tunnel, making it practically impossible for someone inside the tunnel to shoot him. The gunfire stopped.

…I'm dying too much. This is a huge loss, and he's still shooting even though the police are nearby. What is he doing? Is he an idiot? He probably is. Crap, I want to kill him…

Sousei exhaled.

Getting all worked up isn't going to help anything. I'm the real idiot here. Calm down. He's the one who's going to be in trouble if this turns into a serious incident. I should just leave things as they are. I don't care what happens after this. Sis might get angry at me, but I'm used to that. I just do whatever I'm told anyway.

The police car sirens stopped, meaning they'd probably reached the house. He could still hear the fire truck sirens. It sounded like there were a number of vehicles on their way.

This is my chance.

Sousei was about to put his pistol in its holster when he suddenly heard gunfire. A bullet hit the retaining wall right next to him, and either immediately before or immediately after, something hit him in the chest with a *thud*. He was completely taken aback.

"Ugh…?!"

Feeling like he was going to fall over, Sousei lowered his stance and readied his gun.

…I got shot?! My vest…

Sousei was wearing a ballistic vest. If he hadn't been, that shot to the chest probably would have been fatal.

But how…?

Bullets came flying toward him one after another, and Sousei ran along the retaining wall heading away from the main road. It wasn't coming from the tunnel. The shooter was firing from the other side of the road. Sousei had caught a glimpse of them.

"Kinoshita…?!" he blurted out without thinking.

It was impossible. Kinoshita should have been in the tunnel. The shooting ceased, possibly because his opponent had run out of ammo.

The retaining wall was quickly getting lower, so Sousei put his pistol back in its holster and jumped up onto the overpass. As he was about to cross the railroad tracks, he was once again

caught by surprise. Gunfire came from his right, causing pieces of ballast beneath the tracks by his feet to fly into the air.

But how…?

Kinoshita was chasing after Sousei, shooting at him from behind. *That* he understood. But the shot just now had come from the other side of the tunnel.

So Kinoshita, who was supposed to be in the tunnel, teleported to the side of the road in front of the tunnel, shot at me, then quickly moved to the other side of the tunnel and shot at me again…? That doesn't make any sense! Are NGS cheats even able to do something like that…?

Sousei gave up on trying to cross the tracks and rushed along them instead.

Kinoshita didn't shoot.

If he can teleport, he should be trying to go around me and cut me off…!

Sousei looked back. There he was: Kinoshita, running down the railway tracks after Sousei.

I guess that means he can't teleport after all…

What did that mean?

I have no idea…

There was a river up ahead. Sousei was about to reach the railroad bridge.

He could see lights in the distance, kind of like the headlights of a car.

Actually, they probably *were* headlights. Since these were railroad tracks, however, they wouldn't belong to a car, but a train. Without a doubt, those were train headlights.

Will it be enough?! At this distance…

Would Sousei be able to cross the bridge in time, or would he crash head-on into the train? The driver would brake if they saw someone on the tracks, but they probably wouldn't be able to stop in time. If he didn't get out of the way of the train, Sousei would be run over.

I'll gamble on that…!

Sousei quickened his pace. How would Kinoshita escape? Sousei glanced back to check on him, but the other man was still following.

The exposed steel railway bridge was only as wide as a single train car. The train seemed to have closed about half the distance. Its headlights looked extremely close—or did it just

feel that way? It wasn't braking yet. Was the train further away than he'd thought?

Bwooooooooooo! A deafening noise rang out. It was the train's horn. Had they noticed Sousei? The train was braking, its wheels making a scraping sound against the rails.

Sousei sped up. He couldn't run any faster than this. He was at his limit.

The train was rapidly approaching. Sousei covered his face with his hands just in case the driver got a good look at him. He should be able to finish crossing the railway bridge before he was hit. That's what Sousei had predicted.

It was a lot closer than I thought…

He'd miscalculated.

Sousei collapsed between the rails of the tracks. The bridge didn't have a floor, and the railroad ties were arranged in a ladder shape with nothing but empty space between them. Sousei lay on top of them, and not even a second later, the train started passing over him. It had decelerated quite a lot, yet it still made a sound that felt like it would rupture his eardrums. The vibrations were incredible.

The train seemed like it would stop, but it kept going. Sousei lowered his head as much as he could and started crawling forward.

The train eventually stopped, and Sousei made it to the other side of the bridge. Poking his head out from between the rails and the train, he looked up and saw its windows illuminated by electric lights.

Sousei crawled out from underneath the train car, then headed toward the riverbank. He descended a little way down the embankment, which was covered in revetment blocks.

Only a little, though. Sousei went directly under the railway bridge. There were concrete abutments at both ends of the bridge which supported the two main girders. With his back to the abutment, Sousei took his pistol out of its holster. He knelt on one knee and firmly grasped his suppressed LC9 in both hands.



Kinoshita had been chasing Sousei. What would he do after seeing Sousei run directly at a train, making it stop?

…It's a gamble.

Kinoshita was a member of NGS.

No Gravity System.

He could walk vertically up walls and run on them. And not just walls—he could even walk on ceilings.

Had Kinoshita really gone back the way he'd come?

Even when first responders were clearly on the way, Kinoshita had kept firing his gun regardless. The Japanese police force was by no means incompetent. Multiple units had responded already, bringing a large number of officers into the area, and likely more on the way.

If it were Sousei, he wouldn't go back there.

The train had stopped on the bridge. Sousei had caused it to stop. It wouldn't be able to resume right away. They'd have to perform a safety check first.

What would Kinoshita do?

Sousei inhaled quietly, then stopped, holding his breath.

It looked like something was hanging from the left girder, heading toward him.

It was still about sixty-five feet away. There weren't any light fixtures on the railway bridge or around the abutment where Sousei was. There were clouds in the sky and no moon in sight. It was dark. Sousei couldn't even make out the shape of whatever it was that was hanging; it was just clear that it wasn't part of the bridge.

It seemed to be moving.

It was walking. Walking on the girder. No, not on it—under it.

Something like that was impossible.

Impossible, that is, unless they were NGS.

The train on the bridge still hadn't moved yet.

It's risky…

Sousei put his index finger on the trigger of his LC9.

This is a gamble, so there's not much I can do about that.

The silhouette of whatever was walking on the girder came into view.

It was a human, without a doubt. They were walking.

Sousei aimed for the target's chest and squeezed the trigger.

Even though his gun was equipped with a suppressor, it didn't completely eliminate the sound of a gunshot. While it did

reduce the sound considerably and muffle it somewhat, firing a suppressed gun still made a fairly loud noise, the kind of noise that wouldn't be heard in everyday life.

Sousei let off three rounds in a row.

Got him.

That was the impression Sousei got. The target made a motion as if they were lurching backward. Sousei couldn't hear it, but he had a feeling that they'd said something.

"What was that sound…?!" a man shouted from above—most likely the train driver.

The target was *crouching* on the main girder. Sure enough, it seemed Sousei had hit him.

Sousei's heart rate—which had previously been going at about sixty beats per minute—quickly skyrocketed.

I can't stay here.

Sousei put his pistol back in the holster and moved away from the abutment. His target didn't move but stayed there, crouched on the girder.

Should he go up the embankment? He'd probably stand out if he did. Sousei went down to the riverbank instead. He looked back up at the railway bridge. The driver's door opened and someone who appeared to be the driver leaned out. He was using a flashlight to illuminate the area. Sousei would probably be able to escape even if he was spotted, but it would be shameful if someone saw him.

Calling it shameful is putting it mildly…!

The riverbank was overgrown with weeds and shrubs, making it more of a thicket than grassland. Sousei hid in the underbrush. He couldn't see the target on the girder at all from there.

He could hear the sirens of fire trucks and police cars. They were probably on the other side of the river. Or were they on this side?

His heart was pounding like crazy. It was raging so violently that it felt like it'd rip through his chest. Sousei was drenched in sweat. Even now, sweat was gushing out of his armpits. It was a cold, nervous sweat.

Before he knew it, Sousei found himself stooping so low that his hands were nearly touching the ground. Brushing aside the thicket, he moved steadily forward.

…In these kinds of situations, it's best not to move carelessly.

That was right.

Sousei stopped recklessly pushing his way forward. The worst thing would be to panic and make even more mistakes.

Mistakes… Did I make any mistakes? I wonder. I've made so many mistakes that I don't even know what they were. That's how it came to this. My opponent subverts all common sense. Someone who treats corpses like that is really dangerous. Hired killers are more respectable than that. We wouldn't go around shooting in a town unless something major came up, and because of all the shooting, I've died three times, haven't I? …Three times. Three times! This is the worst…

That was when it happened.

From the center of Sousei's body came that sound. It might not actually make a noise, but it felt like it did.

It was a peculiar…*thump.*

He died.

Sousei almost unintentionally burst out laughing. He quickly pressed his hand to his mouth to stifle his laugh.

I did it. I killed him. See? I was right, wasn't I? I thought I'd hit him. Did I get him with all three shots, or maybe two out of the three? He'd felt it. He didn't die straight away, though. Maybe it was his heart, or an aorta, or a pulmonary artery or something. I got him good. Serves him right. He killed me three times. Three! Three times. That's minus two…

He lost all strength in his body.

Minus two, after all this trouble…

Maybe it was because his nerves had calmed, but Sousei's chest ached horribly. Although he had the ballistic vest on, it'd still been a direct hit in the chest. It wouldn't surprise him if he'd fractured a few ribs.

On top of that, his upper left arm also hurt, even though it hadn't concerned him at all until right then. He felt it with his right hand and found that it was bleeding. Apparently, he'd been grazed by a bullet. That said, it wasn't just a scratch, either. He'd probably need stitches.

I should just die…

Sousei shook his head weakly.

No. I'm at minus two. I can't die just because of something like this. I'll just put up with it…

Ø8

Far Removed from That Symbol

Needless to say, Sousei was thoroughly scolded, endlessly berated, and beaten to a pulp by his sister after that.

Even though the lecture was so intense and concentrated that it felt like all the hair on his body might fall out, it didn't last long. Due to Sousei's blunder, his sister needed to arrange for people to take care of all manner of cleanup. It must have been infuriating for her, but dealing with the aftermath was part of the job, and it wasn't Sousei's domain. His sister had been in charge of dividing responsibilities. Sousei wouldn't have a clue about what he should do or how he should do it, and he didn't think his sister would suddenly leave it up to him to take care of. Either way, there was no choice but to have his sister clean up the mess.

Thanks to that, Sousei was able to get about three hours of sleep. It would be hard to call that sufficient, but he didn't have any notable dreams, likely because a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

He felt strangely refreshed when he woke up, but the wound in his left arm that he'd stitched before he went to sleep was aching an awful lot. He'd iced his chest—where his ballistic vest had caught a round—so it hadn't swollen, but it seemed to be in a bad state. Perhaps it was more than a bruise. He'd have to consult his sister if he wanted to get it looked at by a doctor, and he wanted to avoid that if at all possible.

It was frustrating how many problems there were.

The fire was reported on TV and online, as expected. It wouldn't have been so bad if an abandoned house had just burned down, but multiple unidentified corpses had been discovered at the scene. The world was watching and listening. Sousei briefly looked it up on his phone and saw an article about a seventy-year-old woman who'd heard mysterious

gunshots in the area. It would likely cause even more trouble if the news reports kept running the story.

If that means I won't be able to work for a while…I'd be really happy…

Sousei had a quick breakfast to get the necessary nutrients, then disinfected his wounds and changed his bandages. He got dressed and took some painkillers before leaving the house. The pills were over-the-counter medicine that could be bought anywhere, but they took effect almost immediately and didn't make him drowsy. He decided to take the whole box with him.

When he got on the subway, he found himself strangely preoccupied by the newspapers other passengers were reading and any phone screens he happened to catch sight of.

Up till now, there have been cases where work-related… matters…were reported in the news as accidents or illnesses… There have been quite a few—well, quite a lot, actually. I think there were even one or two that turned into unsolved murder cases… Maybe three? But this one…

It seemed to have pretty significant repercussions.

…But you know? If I hadn't killed Kinoshita, there might have been many more victims. And I'm pretty sure I didn't cause any real harm to anyone other than him. Even that major confrontation I got caught up in was Kinoshita's fault. I'm not the bad guy here…though I'm not a good guy, either…

As soon as Sousei arrived at school, a pressing matter was thrust upon him by his classmate in the seat right at the back by the window, resting her chin on her hand.

Asumi had confronted Kuchina again that morning, with Moena tagging along.

Or, more accurately, they'd gone up to her and casually said, "Morning, Miss Hitsujimoto," as if they did it every day, but were completely and utterly ignored.

It was as if Kuchina had surrounded herself with an iron curtain. Though it wasn't visible to the naked eye, it was clearly there.

Wakkuu was talking about the fire and getting the class extremely worked up. "This has gotta be a series of murders! I'm sure of it! It's the work of a cereal killer! Y'know, I've never understood what they have to do with breakfast…"

"It's not 'cereal' as in breakfast, it's 'serial' as in 'series'…," Sousei couldn't help but retort even though he didn't want to

get involved.

“Huuuh?! It’s ‘serial killer’ with an *s*?! I always thought it was ‘cereal killer’ like breakfast! But if I think about it real hard, I guess it wouldn’t make sense to kill cereal! Why would someone even do that?”

The class roared with laughter.

But Sousei found it hard to laugh.

He couldn’t stand being there, so he went to the restroom despite not needing to use the toilet. He washed his hands, since he didn’t need to go, and as he was, Yukisada walked in.

Before he went to do his business, Yukisada stopped and smiled at Sousei through the reflection in the mirror.

“At times like this, don’t you find it hard to figure out if it’s better to ignore the other person, or if you should say something?”

“…Ah.” Sousei unconsciously let out a little laugh. “I do a bit, yeah.”

“Should we say ‘Hello’ or something?”

“I reckon something short like that would be just right, but I feel like we don’t really say ‘hello’ that much…”

“Yeah, I guess not.” Yukisada grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Well then, how about ‘What’s up?’”

“That doesn’t seem like something you’d say.”

“‘*Ciao*’?”

“Like an Italian person…?”

“Here in Japan, I guess we’d say ‘*hai*.’”

“That kind of sounds like ‘hi’ in English though, doesn’t it…?”

“This is pretty tough, huh?” Yukisada laughed as he started washing his hands next to Sousei.

Sousei turned off the tap and dried his hands on his handkerchief. He tilted his head in confusion.

“Hm?”

“Hm?” Yukisada repeated, looking back at Sousei with a puzzled look.

“Uh… Did you just come to wash your hands, Yukisada?”

“Ah.” Yukisada turned the tap off and laughed again. “My mistake.”

†

Around when lunchtime was approaching, the pain from Sousei's wounds got worse. The effect from the painkillers was probably wearing off. When the lunch break started, Sousei quickly devoured his energy bar and chicken, then took some painkillers at the drinking fountain. His phone beeped. When he checked it, he saw he had a message from Asumi.

> Where are you? Can you come talk in the corridor when you're done eating?

"…She did say she doesn't give up easily, didn't she? I'm pretty stubborn myself, and Asumin also seems fairly…or I guess, very…stubborn."

Of course, there was no way he could say no. Sousei sent a reply and was waiting in the corridor when Asumi and Moena showed up. Asumi looked deeply concerned with her brow furrowed. Moena cautioned her about it a few times, saying, "Asumin, wrinkles! You'll get wrinkles," but Asumi didn't seem discouraged in the slightest. On the contrary, she seemed brimming with vitality, almost to the point of overflowing with it.

"Ugh! It feels like we're up against a brick wall here, huh? I've been thinking, and I was wondering if, you know…maybe Miss Hitsujimoto is a germophobe or something!"

"…A germophobe," Sousei parroted back, overwhelmed by Asumi's energy. "Huh? Why…?"

"You don't see it?"

"…Hmmm. I don't…think so?"

"Because Miss Hitsujimoto doesn't want anyone to get near her, right?"

"Well… Yeah, she does say that."

"And she always wears gloves!"

"…She does, yeah."

"Doesn't that seem like something a germophobe would do?"

"When you put it like that…"

Sousei pressed his left hand to his chest. Why had he deliberately gone to the trouble of moving his aching left arm to

press it against his sore chest? Sousei didn't really know himself.

…I know why she doesn't like people getting close to her, and why she wears gloves, but there's no way I can tell them…

A germophobe.

That could be a plausible excuse as well.

But if he went along with that, he'd definitely be lying to Asumi.

"…Well… I'm not sure. To me, that's kind of… I can't really…"

"Doesn't she just hate people?" Moena blurted out. She had something in her mouth, probably candy or some other kind of snack. "I can't comprehend it, but apparently there are some people who just generally hate people."

…That's probably what it looks like, with the way Hitsujimoto is.

Sousei grimaced. His chest and left arm hurt. It wasn't so bad that he couldn't put up with it, but it still hurt.

But that's not the case…

"She doesn't hate me, though," Asumi declared resolutely. "After all, she told me so herself."

"…Asumin." Moena's eyebrows had gone up in the middle. The food in her mouth seemed to be gone. "You do know it's not easy for someone to say they dislike a person right to their face…right?"

"Huh? So how about you, Moena?"

"Me?"

"Do you actually hate me?"

"There's no way I could!"

"I knooow. I really like you, too, Moena."

"…Stop it. It's embarrassing when you say things like that." Moena's cheeks kept getting redder and redder. She was already blushing hard.

Sousei covered the bottom half of his face with his right hand.

Even I feel kind of embarrassed…

Asumi, however, wasn't embarrassed at all. In fact, her expression was serious.

"If someone said they hated me, I'd just think, 'Oh, okay. So that's how it is.' But when that's not the case, suspecting someone might hate just makes me feel awful. It's tiring. I think

I'd probably get all depressed. So Miss Hitsujimoto doesn't hate me. That's what I think."

How…?

Sousei looked down, his hand still covering his mouth. He couldn't look directly at Asumi.

How straightforward can one person be…? But Asumin isn't entirely wrong. Hitsujimoto doesn't hate her, nor does she hate people in general…

He couldn't picture it.

Kuchina Hitsujimoto living a normal student life, surrounded by friends, chatting. Laughing together about all sorts of silly things. Maybe walking around, kidding about with a friend, just like Asumi and Moena did. It wasn't an easy image to conjure up.

"Asumin," Moena said, passing her a candy as if telling her to calm down for a moment.

She gave a candy to Sousei as well, but in a different color. He tore off the wrapper, and as he popped the cantaloupe-flavored candy in his mouth, he experienced a pain that was different to that of his wounds.

Melon flavor… It's sweet… Painfully sweet.

Kuchina probably couldn't accept a candy offered to her by a friend like this without hesitating.

It would be all right. She wore gloves. It wouldn't be a problem as long as she didn't touch anyone with her bare skin.

Sousei could say that sort of thing since he wasn't the one who had that cheat.

Kuchina was born with the power to take people's lives just by touching them. Life and death completely separated her from other people.

The wall.

That wall of hers had undoubtedly been there from the start.

Kuchina's situation was different to Sousei's. Completely different. But Sousei had also come to possess a cheat, regardless of whether or not he liked it, so he could speculate and make educated guesses.

Kuchina must have also tried to grasp the nature of her cheat, just as Sousei had done. Experimenting was the only way to do that. Even if there were records or knowledge available, the only way to determine the nature and limitations of their cheats was through trial and error.

Sousei had been able to do that through repeatedly dying.

What about Kuchina?

…She'd have no choice but to kill. That was the only way to see what would and wouldn't kill someone…

Presumably, Kuchina had figured it out through her work.

For example, she grabs their wrist. They die.

She touches the back of their neck. They die.

She skims their earlobe with her fingertips. They die.

As long as she wears gloves and her hands aren't bare, they won't die even if she touches them.

They won't die…probably.

Really?

No matter what?

No matter how many times she touches them?

What if her gloves frayed?

Was the power constant? Unvarying? Not subject to change?

Perhaps, one day, she'd become able to kill someone even while wearing gloves. Who could say that wouldn't be possible?

It could happen tomorrow. No, it could even happen today.

…That's scary. It's terrifying. It'd be impossible. If it were me, I probably wouldn't be able to leave the house. I'd just shut myself in unless I had work… What sort of a life is that? What would be the point of living? I don't think I'd be able to… But Hitsujimoto comes to school…

"Sousei? What's wrong?" Asumi waved a hand in front of his face.

Sousei was taken aback.

"…Ah. No, i-it's nothing, sorry…"

"But you were making a face like you were really brewing over something…"

Asumi had used a phrase he'd never heard before, and Moena immediately chimed in with, "Do you mean 'brooding'?"

"Ah, that's it! Were you brooding over something?"

"…I was deep in thought…I guess?"

"And?"

"…*And?*"

"Any bright ideas?"

"Nah, not really…"

Sousei groaned. He couldn't imagine Kuchina would soften her stance. It might be better to convince Asumi that it'd be

impossible no matter what they did. Kuchina had told Sousei to stop Asumi. Should he just do what she wanted him to?

I really don't think I'd be able to persuade her, though…

If Asumi gave up, Kuchina would be able to reclaim the quiet life she'd had before, surrounded by that invisible wall, unbothered by other people. A peaceful, solitary life.

…Is that really okay?

"But…," Moena said with a sigh, "even if you don't particularly hate someone, you'd probably find them annoying and get fed up with them if they were super persistent. Or at least, I would."

"Hnngh…" Asumi's shoulders slouched in disappointment. They dropped so much you could physically see the difference in height. "…Yeah, true. I guess I just wanted to try to talk with her, even if it was about something trivial…"

"Hmmm…" Sousei folded his arms, making both his chest and left arm hurt.

But…if we give up just because things aren't going well, nothing changes. Nothing will change—or will it…? Do I want to change things?

He glanced at Asumi and Moena. Sousei had hurt Asumi and outraged Moena. He was in the wrong. It was entirely his fault. He couldn't wash away his feelings of guilt.

But even so, he was chatting with them during their lunch break like this.

If Hitsujimoto were here…

Sousei would be all right. It didn't matter if he wasn't with them. Asumi, Moena, and Kuchina all here, the three of them chatting about something.

It was a pipe dream, given their present situation with Kuchina rejecting Asumi.

I suppose this would definitely count as unnecessary meddling, but…

If Kuchina just accepted them, that day might actually come.

"Maybe I'll…try talking to her…," Sousei said. His lack of confidence was glaringly apparent, and his voice became noticeably weaker.

Asumi and Moena focused their gazes on Sousei. They were probably just looking at him, but he felt like he was coming under heavy fire.

“…I mean, Miss Hitsujimoto might not be willing to listen, but, well…I guess I could just do what I can, and…yeah, maybe try talking to her… Really, though, that’s all it would be…”

“Sousei,” Asumi suddenly placed her hands on his shoulders. The impact reverberated through his wounds, almost making him groan in pain. “Please do! I believe in you, Sousei. I’m counting on you!”

…Even if she believes in me…

The uncomfortably close proximity, along with everything else, was very distressing.

“…All right.”

For Sousei, it took all his effort just to respond at a volume barely within the audible range for humans.

Still, I…want things to change with Hitsujimoto…

†

The strategy was simple.

They wouldn’t let Kuchina sense any kind of movement from them. In other words, they would pretend they’d given up for the time being. Essentially, they would act like “normal.”

After school, Sousei would proceed as usual and leave the classroom quickly. He’d also get Asumi and Moena to go home at a suitable time.

Sousei would leave the school for a bit and waste time. After a while, he’d go back to the classroom, and if Kuchina was there, he’d carry out the plan. If she was still wary of them and had left school already, they’d do the same thing the next day.

If they repeated that patiently, an opportunity would eventually arise.

…That’s what I’d thought anyway…

He couldn’t read her.

The classroom door had a window in it. Sousei was looking through it to see inside.

She was there.

Sitting at the very back by the window, her chin propped up on her hand.

I thought she’d probably go home today…

All things considered, Sousei had expected her to stay on high alert for a week to ten days, or tomorrow and the next few days at the very least.

His prediction had been completely off.

Crap. I thought for sure she wouldn't be here, which is why… Ah, my heart's pounding…

His pulse had quickened, and the bruise on his chest ached.

Sousei wanted to turn back, but of course he couldn't do that.

At times like this…

In his experience, the more he hesitated, the harder it would become to get his body to move.

Sousei opened the classroom door.

Normally, Kuchina Hitsujimoto wouldn't respond. She'd be looking out the window without moving an inch.

Today was different. She turned to face him. It was instantaneous. She'd started moving before Sousei had even fully opened the door.

Almost as if she'd been waiting for him.

That's probably not true, though…

As if she'd decided to do it ahead of time, Kuchina grabbed the bag hanging from her desk and stood up.

"Wai— Miss H…"

Sousei was panicking—the complete opposite of Kuchina. The classroom had two doors, one at the front and one at the back. Sousei had come in through the front one, and Kuchina was heading for the door at the back. Yet even so, Sousei opened his arms wide across the front door.

"W-w-wait, Miss Hitsujimoto, ummm…"

She looked at him and stopped in her tracks. Her eyes were trapezoidal. They weren't perfect trapezoids, but Sousei got the impression they were close to that shape. It was probably the result of Kuchina widening her eyes and then frowning. It seemed like she was both surprised and perplexed, almost certainly because Sousei was trying to block her way.

At the front door.

Even though she'd been going to exit through the back door.

"Ah…!" Flames were erupting from Sousei's face. That's how hot it felt. "Uhhhh…"

He was acutely aware that he was doing something rather foolish. He knew it all too well. He needed to either recover or correct it, so with his arms still spread wide, he began to walk sideways. If he continued moving like this until he reached the back door, he'd end up blocking her path. That had been his original intention all along. Due to a slight miscalculation, he'd

just ended up doing something incomprehensible and meaningless.

Kuchina followed him with her trapezoidal eyes. She didn't avert her gaze from him until he finally arrived in front of the door at the back of the room.

"…Wait," Sousei said, deciding to start again with renewed determination. If possible, he wanted to pretend *that* hadn't actually just happened. He tried to act as if he'd been at the back of the room from the very beginning.

"Miss Hitsujimoto, would you please wait?"

She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they weren't trapezoids anymore, but semicircles with the top parts missing.

It was the look of someone who was utterly dumbfounded.

"What are you telling me to wait for?"

"I—I was hoping you'd hear what I have to say…"

"Not here."

"…Huh?"

"It'd be just the two of us here."

"Just…the two of us?"

"I'd probably kill you again."

"Ahhh…" Sousei lowered his gaze. He didn't know if he should nod. "…Outside, then."

"Yeah," Kuchina responded without nodding.

Hm…?

Sousei tilted his head a little to the side.

"Really? Huh? You don't mind…?"

"What are you doing?" Kuchina gestured to the right with her chin. "You're in the way. Move."

"…S-sorry," Sousei said, moving aside.

Kuchina opened the door and left the classroom. Sousei hurried after.

It didn't seem like she was planning to run away. She was walking at a pace that wasn't particularly fast or slow, and Sousei followed her quietly.

They changed their shoes at the school entrance, went outside, and then passed through the gate.

It was only then that Sousei realized.

…We're outside already.

Sousei cleared his throat, trying to indicate to Kuchina walking ahead of him that they were already outside. She was

pretending not to notice.

"Umm, Miss Hitsujimoto…?"

"What?" She didn't turn around or slow down, but she at least responded.

…Seriously? Is that really something to get so happy about…?

Sousei cleared his throat again.

"So, uh, can I…talk? I'd sort of…appreciate it if you'd listen to me."

"If you want to talk, then go ahead."

"It's just that, like this…from behind, it's hard to talk…kinda."

"Is that so?"

"…You don't think so?"

"Not really."

"But human ears have a hard time hearing sound coming from behind them…don't they?"

Was Sousei's voice difficult for her to hear, as he'd assumed? Or did she have no intention of listening anyway? Kuchina didn't utter another word after that, and before he knew it, they were already approaching the subway station.

"M-Miss Hitsujimoto?!" he said loudly.

Kuchina finally stopped.

"What?"

She didn't turn around. It wasn't so much that there *was* a wall, but that *she* was the wall. Kuchina Hitsujimoto seemed to be that wall herself. That was how it felt to Sousei.

"…After this, what…are you going to do?"

"I'm leaving."

"You're…going home?"

"That has nothing to do with you."

"Uhhh… But that's not what we agreed…"

"You asked me to listen, and I said you could talk if you wanted."

"Wa… Bu— I… I thought we'd talk in a more relaxed situation, or more relaxed environment, or something. So that's why… Umm… P-please! Could we go somewhere, like a café or a fast-food place or something, just for ten, or even five minutes?!"

"I don't eat or drink outside."

"But that's…! How come?"

Kuchina sighed in disappointment. It was also a little aggressive. Her sigh seemed to be saying, *You've let me down,*

Sousei Takarai.

"It's difficult to ensure safety."

"…Safety… Ah… I see. Yeah. I get that that, but…"

Sousei and Kuchina were in the same profession. People who were in their line of work had to be adequately cautious about safety. Assassins could be killed at any moment. Right now, they could be someone else's targets.

…I was poisoned once, wasn't I? …By Hitsujimoto. We have to be careful if there's a chance we're being targeted… Perhaps she's suspicious of me? She thinks I might be targeting her? No way…

"I wouldn't do that, you know. I have no reason to…"

"What wouldn't you do?"

"…It's all right, you know? If you feel that worried, I can taste test things for you to check for poison."

"Like I made you do that time," Kuchina said, the corners of her lips slightly lifting.

She had made him drink poisoned water at her house in Motomachi.

"I'd do it more…rigorously, so we wouldn't be deceived. I could take a bite or a sip of something, make sure that it's fine, and if it is…"

"You want me to have something you've put your mouth on?"

"No, that's not… Well, I guess that is kind of what it is. Is that what I was saying? Yeah, I guess so. That's a bad idea. I mean, what's the word…? Hygienically?"

"Are you really that unhygienic?"

"…I try to be clean, you know. I do the absolute best I can… Ummm, are you making fun of me?"

"No."

Kuchina was looking at him with her eyes half-closed. What could she be thinking about? How was she feeling? Sousei found it impossible to gauge.

…But Hitsujimoto is talking with me.

That was a ray of hope. A lifeline. He couldn't let it be severed. He needed to find a way to keep the conversation going.

"Aaah, yeah, ummm… Isn't there something? You know, uhhh… F-food. Or drinks, either way. Something you like…? Do you have a favorite food? Like…sweets, maybe?

"I don't eat sweets."

"Huh? Why not?"

"…I haven't really eaten them before."

"Oh, I see," Sousei mumbled.

That hit him close to home, and he felt a strong pang of sympathy.

I suppose I could just eat delicious things all the time…but I somehow can't bring myself to do that. I wonder if Hitsujimoto is the same way…

"…B-but isn't there anything? Food you like or dislike, I mean. If you're not really into sweet things, then maybe salty things? Or…sour things? Or spicy?"

"Salty…" Kuchina's eyes flickered for a moment. Something had probably just come to her.

Salty things… Soy sauce? Salt? Miso? Those are all condiments, aren't they? No, some kind of actual food…

Sousei wanted to throw up his hands and give in already.

I forgot I'm ignorant about food. Too ignorant. Someone like Moena would probably know a lot more. Nah, it's not like I don't know anything at all… When it comes to salty things…

"Fry…" Sousei started to say, but he didn't immediately know where he was going with it.

…Fry? Small fry? Why do people call kids that? Where does the 'fry' come from? No, that's not right. Fried…food. Some kind of fried food. What, though? Fried fish? I don't think I've had that before. Fried… What's normally fried…? Fried shrimp, maybe?

That seemed like it might be good. Fried shrimp. As foods went, it was pretty mainstream, and it was even something they might have had during school lunch. Sousei had probably eaten it before, too, though he had no memory of it.

When I had soba noodles with tempura with Asumin, that shrimp tempura was really good, so I'm sure it'd be good with fried shrimp, too. Do they have it with fried shrimp? Is that a thing? Yeah, I'm sure it is. Hang on. I wonder if soba noodles with tempura is also considered salty. Noodles are usually salty, aren't they? They seem popular, too. Maybe ramen or something…

"Chips," Kuchina said.

She spoke facing to the side for some reason. Her voice was quiet yet clear, but it still took Sousei about three seconds to register what she'd said.

"…Chips? Like, potato chips? Chips…"

"Fries," Kuchina said, still facing sideways. "…French fries."

“French fries!” he yelled without thinking. “Ahhh! French fries, huh? French fries are delicious, aren’t they? Well, I don’t really eat them often, or I guess I’ve only eaten them a handful of times in my life, but they’re salty and they taste like fried potatoes. Like salt. And potatoes… I guess that’s obvious, though…”

“I’ve never had them before.”

“You haven’t?!”

“But…” Kuchina glanced downward and to the side. She probably wasn’t looking at anything down there. Perhaps she was trying to unearth something that couldn’t be seen, like a buried memory. “There were food stalls set up somewhere…at some kind of festival. The smell of chips…or maybe they were french fries. I remember that…”

Sousei also remembered something. He’d had a similar experience.

It was after he’d killed his father. He’d never been free to do what he wanted until then. For the first time in his life, he’d gone to a festival that was regularly held at the local shrine. His sister had given him permission to go, which was unusual for her. The sun had been setting. It was dark. Sousei’s eyes glittered seeing the rows of food stalls. He had a single five-thousand-yen note in his wallet. He could eat anything with that. He could even buy toys. Corn dogs. Grilled chicken yakitori skewers. *Oden* stew. Battered *takoyaki* balls. Candy apples. Chocolate-covered bananas. Cotton candy. And…french fries.

All of the food he saw around him stimulated his appetite. He wanted to try his luck at the lottery game where he could win prizes, and he was confident he could do the target shooting games. All of the toys—none of which he understood how to use—looked like treasures to him, and he wanted them so badly he could taste it. Yet when he returned home, the five-thousand-yen note was still in his wallet.

“Did you have fun, Sousei?” he remembered his sister asking.

Sousei remembered lying to her.

“Yeah, Sis. It was lots of fun.”

Looking back on it, it had just been so painful. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the children who’d died in that darkness, and Ukihiko, who he’d killed with his own hands. He didn’t really think about the people his sister ordered him to kill—the kind of people who became his targets for work

deserved to die, so they didn't matter to him. Where in the world was suitable for Sousei Takarai, who could kill people without batting an eyelid?

"We should eat some," he said to Kuchina.

It wasn't that Sousei had mustered up his courage, but that he'd been backed into a corner with no other choice. In that state of mind, Sousei stepped forward and grabbed Kuchina's left wrist.

Her whole body stiffened. He wasn't touching her bare skin, just her arm above the cuff of her sleeve. However, even if she'd been wearing a short-sleeved shirt, he probably would have done the same thing, even if it meant he'd lose a life.

"Let's go eat some french fries right now."

Kuchina didn't answer. Her pupils went so wide that her eyes looked like two holes. Was she just surprised? Or maybe she was frightened. In any case, she didn't try to shake free from his grasp.

"We could go to a hamburger joint, or a family restaurant or something. There should be one around here…"

Sousei looked around. About a hundred feet down the street on the other side of the road was a sign for a famous family restaurant chain.

Directly in front of it was a bus stop. People were lining up there, presumably waiting for a bus. There probably weren't even ten people, but around seven or eight. Sousei couldn't believe his eyes.

"Ngh…" Kuchina let out a quiet sound.

Sousei had been extremely startled and squeezed her wrist.

"Ah, sorry…!" he immediately apologized and loosened his grip, but he didn't let go.

Kuchina glared at him. Sousei felt intimidated, but he managed to withstand it. Something about the bus stop was weighing on him, and he glanced toward it.

They were gone.

They'd been there just a second ago.

In the line of people waiting for the bus had been a person with a mushroom haircut. They'd been looking at Sousei. He wasn't sure if their eyes had met, but the person had definitely been facing his way.

Riamu Kinoshita.

There was no way.

Kinoshita should be dead. Sousei had killed him. There was absolutely no way he had been mistaken about the feeling he got when he stole a life.

Perhaps it had just been someone who looked like Kinoshita. It was a very distinctive hairstyle, but it wasn't so rare that Sousei hardly ever saw it. The same went for his build and clothes.

One thing was strange, though.

Not a single person lining up at the bus stop at that moment resembled Kinoshita.

But…they were there before…

In which case, had they left? Or had he just been seeing things?

Where had the person resembling Kinoshita been standing in the line? They hadn't been at the front, nor at the back. Maybe around second or third in line?

"Let go," said a low voice that seemed to be rising up from the depths of the earth.

Looking at her, Sousei saw a clear readiness to kill in Kuchina's gaze. It seemed like she was threatening to kill him. She would hunt down her prey and make sure they were dead. She would finish the job. It was the deadly character of a professional assassin.

…She's serious. Hitsujimoto…

Sousei made a decision.

"Chi-chiii-chiiips…!"

If she was going to kill him, she should just go ahead and do it. Despite being filled with determination, he still ended up stammering.

Kuchina's eyes were still filled with killing intent as she tried to somehow get her left arm free from Sousei's right hand. Sousei stubbornly resisted, as if saying there was no way he'd let her.

In a contest of pure strength, Sousei naturally had the advantage. The bruise on his chest still ached, but it didn't bother him at all.

"Chiii…ps! Chiiiiips…!

"Hngh…!" Kuchina's face had turned red.

Was she in pain? Sousei was tugging her arm a lot. There was no way it wouldn't hurt.

…You might as well just kill me. Please…?!

Sousei was also determined. At this point, he wouldn't be able to let go.

"Chiii…ps… Chiiiiips…"

But was it really so important that he couldn't give in? Kuchina's entire face was bright red and all scrunched up, and her lips were tightly pursed. She was trying her best to resist.

Any more than this, and…

Sousei would fold just before he got his way.

"Not today," Kuchina forced out.

…Not "today"?

Stunned, Sousei removed his hand as he thought back over Kuchina's words.

So does that mean…?

Kuchina turned her back to him and lowered her gaze. Her shoulders were shaking.

"Uh…"

Was she crying? Sousei wondered for a second if he'd made her cry.

No… I don't…think so…?

Kuchina made intermittent sounds that were too soft for him to make out. And her shoulders—or actually, her back, moved up and down along with the noises.

It looked like she was crying, but it could also be interpreted as a completely different emotion.

…Is she laughing?

However, it didn't last long—probably about five seconds at the most. She let out a sigh, nodded as if to say "I'm all right now," then half turned her face toward him.

"See you tomorrow."

"…Oh," Sousei blurted out. "Yeah, see you tomorrow."

"I never knew you were a chicken," Kuchina said before walking away.

She didn't go down to the subway station, though. Where could she be going?

"A chicken…?"

Why had she said that just as she was leaving?

"Ohh. Chiiips…"

It finally clicked.

I kept saying "chiii, chiiiips." I guess that does kind of sound like a chicken…

So she hadn't been crying after all.

She’d been laughing.

Ø9

If We Have Tomorrow

He was dreaming.

It was a dream he'd had more times than he could count over many years. So even asleep, he instantly recognized it as a dream.

It was a dream about that darkness, where he and children in similar situations to him had killed one another.

They didn't *all* kill one another, though. He quieted his breathing, waiting for it to stop. He'd be killed, too, eventually, but that would be at the end. Everyone else would kill each other, and then the survivor would kill him. Then everything would be over.

That's how it was supposed to be. He didn't think there was anything wrong with it.

Ah, Ukihiko.

I'd never imagined you'd be the one to survive until the end.

I'd never imagined you'd ask me to kill you.

Even though this is just a dream, no matter how many times I kill you, I still can't stand it.

There's just one other person besides you, Ukihiko, who I regret laying my hands on.

Riona Takarai. Big sister Rio.

"Do you intend to kill Father no matter what?" Rio asked him, her book face down on her lap. She looked so fragile that it seemed like just the weight of the book could break her like a twig.

"It's bad luck for family to kill each other," she continued.

"I've already decided."

The lace curtains swayed. The window was open slightly.

Rio was sitting quietly with her back resting against a stack of cushions on her bed.

"Why are you protecting Father, big sister Rio?"

“Because he’s family.”

“Think about what he’s done to us.”

“It was rough, wasn’t it, Sousei?”

Wasn’t that obvious? It didn’t need to be said.

He attacked his sister in a fit of rage. When he pinned her on the ground and looked down at her, she was smiling. It was a terribly sad smile. Her younger brother was going to kill her, but that wasn’t why she was sad. She pitied her brother.

“I love you,” she said, reaching out her paper-thin hands and stroking his cheek with her bony fingertips. “I love Touka and father, too. We’re family.”

“I don’t understand, Rio.”

“I guess it can’t be helped,” she said, and closed her eyes.

Sousei had planned to strangle her, but her neck was too thin. So thin that it seemed like his hands would easily crush it. He didn’t have the guts to kill his sister that way. He inevitably picked up a cushion and pressed it against his sister’s face. She couldn’t breathe. Sousei, similarly, stopped being able to breathe. His sister was a *katashiro*, and the daughter of a renowned priestess by their father. Anyone who harmed her would be harmed in turn. If his sister suffered, he suffered the same way. If she died, he died as well.

“It can’t be helped.”

“It can’t be helped.”

“It can’t be helped.”

Those words echo repeatedly.

Their father, Venenoza, was the king of poison. His very existence was a poison that killed people. His bodily fluids were toxic, and even his breath was extremely dangerous. Venenoza was well acquainted with every kind of poison known to man. He used these poisons on Sousei, causing him to sweat abnormally, vomit, get headaches and stomachaches, become dizzy, have respiratory problems, spasm, and made his internal organs fail, killing him over and over again. Fourteen times. Yes—fourteen times. Venenoza tormented his son to his heart’s content, killing him fourteen times. During that time, Sousei heard his sister’s words over and over. “It can’t be helped.” “It can’t be helped.”

“It’s because you dare to defy me, imbecile. Learn your place,” his father sneered.

The words his sister left him with felt heavier to Sousei than the ridicule from his father. So it didn't bother him. The fourteen deaths his father dealt him were nothing compared to the one time he died for killing his sister. Even when his father finally made a mistake that he'd never made before, there was no joy in it for Sousei. Not in the slightest. It simply felt as if things went according to plan.

"You looked, didn't you, Father?"

Sousei's other sister had been waiting for an opportune moment.

She had been aiming for the time when their father was repeatedly killing her younger brother—when her brother was being killed over and over by their father. That had been their plan. Perhaps the ever-cautious Venenoza was overconfident, careless, not paying attention, or getting bored of poisoning his son to death. He looked directly at Sousei's sister, who suddenly appeared in front of him.

He looked directly into Touka Takarai's eyes.

"Aaagh!" their father cried. Venenoza really did scream quite nicely.

Sousei also heard Rio's voice. "It can't be helped."

Just a second was enough. Just looking at each other for a fraction of a second was enough to make him crumble. Touka's eyes made him shatter into smithereens. They didn't turn people to stone, like the three Gorgon sisters in Greek mythology. She was born with some kind of extraordinary evil power dwelling in her eyes. It crushed the psyche of anyone who met her gaze. People called it the "evil eye," or the "malevolent stare."

"Aaagh! Aaah!"

"It can't be helped."

"Raah! Aaagh!"

"It can't be helped."

His father screamed, and his sister Rio's voice echoed, even though she was supposed to be dead. Even though Sousei killed her with his own hands. Sousei's father tore at his face with his hands, covered in his son's blood and the poisons secreting from his own body. He thrust the fingers on his right hand into his nostrils and churned them around. He tore off his lips with his left hand. He lurched backward and thrashed about. He

shoves his fist into the back of his throat while trying to bite off his wrist.

“It can’t be helped,” “It can’t be helped,” Rio was saying somewhere. It can’t be helped. She’s right: It can’t be helped.

Aha-ha! Ha-ha! Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

Touka was cackling. She laughed wildly. She laughed while digging her fingers into her own eye sockets for some unknown reason. Roaring with laughter, she tried to gouge out her own eyes. The ultimate weapon she was born with. The eyes that frightened even Venenoza.

Sis?

Big sister Touka?

What are you doing, big sis Touka?

“Raaaaaaaaaaaghhh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaghhhhh!”

“Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-hah! Aha-ha-ha! Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-hah!”

“It can’t be helped.”

Why? Big sister Rio? Why…?

“Because we’re family,” Rio whispered clearly into his ear. Even though he killed her with his own hands.

Is she here? Big sister Rio?

He looked for her but couldn’t see her anywhere. The only people there were his father, who was losing his mind and trying to suffocate himself, his other sister, laughing with amusement and proudly holding up the two eyeballs she gouged out of herself, and Sousei.

But he could still hear her voice.

“…It’s bad luck for family to kill each other.”

He woke up.

Sousei sat up in bed and looked around the room. That voice was ingrained in his ears.

The voice of his big sister, Rio.

The door. There was something dark and cold lurking in front of the door. It might vanish into mist if he opened the drapes.

Sousei threw off his cotton blanket, damp with night sweat, and got out of bed. He approached the door. The dark thing was still there. *Someone* was still there.

Suddenly, he heard a voice coming from behind him. He couldn't quite make it out, but it was Rio's voice. Sousei turned around, but she wasn't there. No one was. And nothing looked out the ordinary.

When he turned back to the door, the dark thing had disappeared.

"Big sister Rio…"

Riona Takarai had died. Sousei had killed her, and he had died as well. He'd checked when he came back to life. Rio hadn't been breathing. Her heart had stopped. It hadn't been his sister anymore, but something just *shaped* like her. His sister's corpse.

I don't know if I got that *feeling or not…*

Sousei had killed his sister.

But he didn't know if he'd actually stolen her life. He'd died at the same time she had. Was that the only reason he didn't know whether he'd had that feeling or not?

Sousei had killed his sister and died. Normally, that would mean he'd come out even, but he didn't include his sister's life in his number of lives. He didn't see that as adding a life because there had been no proof.

I don't think Rio is dead…

Perhaps it was her soul, or she'd taken a spiritual form. Riona Takarai had separated from her physical body and was still alive.

Big sister Touka, who landed the finishing blow on Father…had her evil eyes taken away from her. She was punished. I suspect that might have been the work of big sister Rio…

†

Sousei calmed down quite a lot while he was showering and eating breakfast.

I have that dream a lot. Even if it was a little unusual and the first time I've seen that version, it's still just one variation of the same dream. It's probably because I saw that hallucination of Kinoshita…

His older sister—not Rio, of course, but his *other* older sister—was apparently scrambling to get the situation under control. Touka had contacted him the night before to give him strict orders to carry on with his usual daily life. He apparently

wouldn't be able to work for the time being. For that, Sousei was grateful.

There had been no reports of anybody finding a corpse resembling Kinoshita. According to his sister, when they spoke, even the organization hadn't found the body yet.

There had only ever been one time when Sousei hadn't had that feeling after killing someone: when he'd killed his sister Rio.

He was concerned about the issue with the corpse, but Sousei had brought down Kinoshita. He was dead. That fact wouldn't change, no matter what anyone said.

I did what I was supposed to do. I did my job, just as Sis told me to.

They simply hadn't been able to find the body yet.

It was pretty tough. I don't know what happened after that, but it's not worth worrying about…

Sousei got dressed and left the house.

His sister had ordered him to live his life normally.

Outside of work, Sousei Takarai was a completely normal high school student. That was how he wanted it and how it should be.

The previous night, Sousei had also been contacted by someone other than his sister: Asumi. She'd sent him a message on the app they used. Sousei hadn't realized this before, but the app had the ability to make group chats, and they'd created a group consisting of Asumi, Moena, and Sousei. The name they'd decided on was the "Potato Party," for obvious reasons. Asumi had come up with it.

The Potato Party had agreed to act normally that morning.

Sousei arrived at school at a time that wasn't particularly early or late. About half of his classmates were already in the classroom. He said a normal hello to Asumi and Moena, who were already there, then returned Wakkuu's "Yo!" with a level of intensity that could be considered normal. Kuchina was sitting at the back by the window, her chin propped up on her hand. He felt a little relieved.

Yoh Mishima stumbled over, waving his long sleeves around. "Mohorning, Lil Sou."

"…Morning, Mishima."

"I prefer Mishii or Yoshii."

"Huh…?"

“I would have preferred Mishii or Yoshii…”

For some reason, Yoh repeated the exact same thing but in past tense. His shoulders drooped, making the already long sleeves of his uniform appear even longer. He looked extremely despondent. It seemed he didn’t like being called Mishima.

“…Mi— Yo… Nah… Mishii, good morning.”

Yoh gave a wide grin. “Mohorning.”

…What was that all about? Sousei wondered, but Yoh had a smile that captivated people. Sousei was fine with calling him Mishii if he was going to smile like that.

It’s a little embarrassing, though…

Later on, Yoh’s name came up when Sousei was talking to Yukisada.

“Mishii’s a funny guy, huh?”

“…Ah, you call him Mishii as well, Yukisada?”

“I used to call him Mishima before, but he seemed kind of sad about that.”

“He told me he preferred Mishii or Yoshii, but I didn’t know which one to use…”

“Well, it’s ‘Yoshii’ from ‘Yoh,’ or ‘Mishii’ from ‘Mishima.’ That’s all.”

“Ohh, it’s from his first and last names. I see. That makes sense…”

“Maybe you chose based on whether it was his surname or his first name,” Yukisada said with a chuckle. His intuition was strangely good at times. The two of them weren’t so close that they hung out after school or anything, but he understood Sousei’s personality.

It would be scary if he was my enemy, but as a friend…

Sousei was lost in thought during class and noticed that he felt internally conflicted about something.

It goes without saying, but I can’t open up to anyone about my work. That’s a part of myself that I have to keep hidden. I have to put on the mask of a normal high school student, and I can’t let anyone catch on that it’s only a mask, obviously. I’d be in so much trouble if anyone found out about my job. If things go wrong, they’d have to be silenced…

Of course, Sousei wouldn’t want to do it, but his sister would probably have a different opinion on the matter.

…This is just a hypothetical, but if someone did *have to be silenced and Sis ordered me to get rid of them…to get rid of a*

friend, I…

Would he obediently do as he was told? Or would he disobey his sister?

I don't like either option. I have to make sure I'm not caught so it doesn't come to that. But…I like the strangely sharp Yukisada. And although Mishima—Mishii—gets real buddy-buddy real fast and confuses me a bit, he's kinda fascinating. And even with everything that's happened between us, Asumin still wants to be my friend. I truly have nothing but gratitude for her… No, not just gratitude. If possible, I want to stay friends with her.

Sousei told himself he shouldn't take risks if he could help it. It would be better if he did his best not to let people get close to him. He should be distancing himself from others like Kuchina Hitsujimoto was, for his own sake and for the sake of others.

I know that… Or at least, I thought I knew that, but…

It might be too much for someone like Sousei Takarai to hope for. He should know his limitations.

Seriously, I don't want to keep living like this with no one to understand me. That's not living. There's no point in living like that…

Kuchina was looking out the window with her chin propped on her hand.

Wouldn't Hitsujimoto feel the same way…?

As soon as lunch break began, he started walking toward Kuchina's desk. Asumi and Moena held their breaths as they watched. The Potato Party had decided in advance that this was what they'd do.

Kuchina didn't move. Their classmates were getting their lunches. Some of them took out lunch boxes they'd brought to school, while others were heading to the cafeteria to buy food.

"Miss Hitsujimoto."

She didn't move a muscle. They'd expected that, though. Sousei wasn't shaken, just nervous.

He'd been nervous for a while.

As a matter of fact, his heart had been racing for a long time now.

"How about today?" he asked, being careful to keep his voice steady.

A part of Kuchina's body tensed slightly. Was it her head? Her shoulders? Her arms? Sousei couldn't tell exactly, but she'd definitely reacted.

“Do you want to go eat french fries?”

He thought his voice might have gone a bit higher.

Kuchina sighed and didn’t so much as look in his direction.

†

“Listen carefully, Sousei,” his sister warned him over the phone that night. “This is the greatest crisis we’ve ever faced. While you’re pretending to be a carefree high school student, people are running around everywhere doing all sorts of different things. Who brought about this catastrophe? It was *you*, Sousei. You need to be aware of your responsibilities.”

As his sister berated him, Sousei’s heart tightened, his stomach clenched, and he found it difficult to breathe. That was a conditioned response. His sister had conditioned him over time so her threats made him tremble and he had no choice but to obey. He was just like Pavlov’s dog.

Even though Sousei knew what was happening, he would still obey like a faithful pet if his sister assigned a job to him.

However, the current conditions weren’t conducive to work.

An abandoned house had burned down and three charred corpses were discovered, two of which had been identified. Even though the corpses were burned, that hadn’t been the cause of death for any of them; they had been dead before the fire started, and residents in the area had heard what sounded like gunshots at the time. During the on-site investigation, a number of objects that resembled bullets had been found, and immediately after the fire had started, someone had forced a train to make an emergency stop on the railway bridge. Witness reports from the train driver and multiple passengers said that they’d also heard something that sounded like gunfire.

Riamu Kinoshita was presumed to be dead, but his corpse hadn’t been found.

His sister wasn’t wrong: Sousei had been the one who caused this chaotic and troubling situation. He was probably deeply inconveniencing the organization. It was no wonder she was so angry.

Sousei suffered when his sister scolded him. It wasn’t just mental anguish, but physical pain, and there was nothing he could do about it.

But the situation wasn’t as bad as his sister made it out to be.

He didn’t have to work.

He wouldn’t have to do the loathsome job of laying the groundwork to kill someone and then executing them.

And he also had the Potato Party.

Asumin: Meow?
Moenan: What’s that? “Meow”? What’s that mean??
Asumin: Doesn’t really mean anything mew
Moenan: “Mew”…?
Asumin: Anyway, I wanna make Miss Hitsujimoto try fries
Moenan: Not “make” her try them, but “let” her try them… At least, that’s how I feel…
Asumin: Oh yeah, right!

…I don’t really get what they mean…

Sousei was creeping himself out by grinning like an idiot in bed.

Feeling restless, he got up and started doing squats with his phone in one hand. His chest hurt. The bruises hadn’t healed yet. There was no way they’d heal that quickly.

Asumin: If we’re talking about who has the best fries, it’s gotta be Mickey D’s
Moenan: Yeah, they’re pretty good. I like the fries at MOS Burger better tho
Asumin: Those potatoes at Saizeriya are really yummy, don’t you think??
Moenan: Those aren’t fries, but they are really nummy!
Asumin: There it is! Moena’s signature “nummy”!
Moenan: Does it have to be fries, Takarai?

“—Whoa?! They’re asking me…?!”

Sousei stopped doing squats. He used the flick input on his keyboard to type, but his finger was shaking.

Sousei: I’m not certain. I only inquired about fries at food establishments.
Asumin: You sound like a businessman!
Moenan: There are lots of other yummy ways to eat potatoes other than fries tho, right?
Asumin: Yeah, there are!
Moenan: Like potato chips are crazy delicious
Asumin: I like the pizza pie flavor ones
Moenan: Don’t say pizza pie
Sousei: There are pizza pie flavored potato chips?
Asumin: Yeah! You didn’t know?
Sousei: I was not aware of them…
Moenan: There are all sorts of different flavors. Most of them are delicious, and some are so good you won’t even believe it
Asumin: I know there are loads of flavors, but I haven’t got to try that many of them!
Moenan: You should try them all!
Asumin: Meowkay! Now I wanna eat chips! Potato chips, potato chips, potato chips!
Moenan: We could have a potato chip party
Asumin: I second that!
Moenan: I’ll handpick a few types that everyone can eat together. And I’ll get some disposable chopsticks
Sousei: What are the chopsticks for?
Moenan: So our hands don’t get all sticky. They’re a must-have for any potato chip party
Asumin: That’s really smart, Moena!
Moenan: Nah, this is normal
Asumin: I love ya, Moena
Moenan: Stopppp…

Asumi sent a sticker of a cat-like character blowing a kiss. Moena must have been really embarrassed about that. Sousei squirmed as well, but not because it was painful to watch. The opposite, in fact. Though…he certainly was in pain. He placed his phone on the floor and started doing push-ups with just his uninjured right arm.

"What the hell is this feeling…?!"

Asumin: Wanna have a potato chip party??
Moenan: Yeah!
Asumin: We'll decide on a budget and split the costs?
Moenan: We could just have it in the classroom after school
Asumin: Hmmm, how should we invite Miss Hitsujimoto?

This wasn't the time to speedrun one-arm push-ups. After all, it was aggravating his wounds. It would probably be better not to move his body too much.

Sousei picked up his phone and sat on his knees on the floor.

This might not be the case, but Hitsujimoto probably wouldn't really be against it…at least, I don't think she would. She just needs an opening. Like an excuse she can give herself. Something that convinces her she had no other choice…

Sousei: Would you mind at all if I enlisted the help of a friend?
Asumin: What one?
Moenan: "What"…?
Asumin: My bad! I meant "Which one?" Who you gonna ask?
Sousei: Yukisada Hayashi.
Asumin: Ahh, Hayashi
Moenan: You're pretty close with Hayashi, huh?

Asumin: I have no objections
Moenan: Me neither. That shouldn't be a problem
Asumin: What do you want his help with?
Sousei: Just a small favor.
Asumin: You have a plan??
Sousei: I do. Please wait a moment while I get in contact with Yukisada.

Sousei started typing a message to send Yukisada, but he had trouble explaining himself properly and deleted it partway through. He tapped the icon to call him instead, and the dial tone rang.

But…if I think about it, do we really need Yukisada's help? I feel like Asumin, Moena, and I could probably handle it with just the three of us—

Yukisada answered almost immediately. "Hello? Is that you, Sousei?"

"Yeah…," he replied, laughing inexplicably.

"Huh? What is it?"

"Oh… It's just… Yeah. I guess…I'm just happy you picked up."

"Ah. Yeah, me too."

"You are?"

"Yeah. We only ever talk at school, so it was like, 'Oh, he's actually calling me!'" Yukisada gave a hearty chuckle.

"Yeah… I guess you're right." Sousei felt like laughing again. He thought it would be weird to just keep laughing, but he couldn't hold it back.

It's not a matter of needing his help or not.

It was much simpler than that.

It's just that I wanted my friend—I wanted Yukisada—to help me.

†

There were concerning factors. Several of them.

They were dealing with someone who was difficult to get along with in the first place, and there weren't any foolproof methods. They'd do everything they could to prepare, and if

they weren't successful, they'd deal with that when the time came.

Class had long since ended. The only people left at school were there for clubs, student committee activities, or regularly stayed back to chat with friends after school.

There was currently only one student in Class 2-2's classroom.

Kuchina Hitsujimoto.

They had confirmed that.

Everyone was already in position.

Sousei and Asumi were near the front door of the classroom, and Yukisada and Moena were waiting just to the side of the back door. They were just waiting to put the plan into motion.

…Or rather, I just have to start it.

Sousei was incredibly nervous, as expected. He was biting and lightly licking his lower lip. Yukisada looked at Sousei and snickered. He was on standby by the back door so he could burst into the classroom at any time. Moena stuck her face out from behind him and puffed out her cheeks as if asking him what he was waiting for.

"Sousei," Asumi whispered to him from behind.

She pressed his back gently, and Sousei nodded.

He opened the classroom door and went inside. Kuchina's desk was right at the back by the window. She wasn't resting her chin on her hand, but had laid her gloved hands on top of her desk and was looking out the window.

She didn't react until Yukisada opened the door at the back of the classroom. Kuchina looked at the back door, then glared at Sousei.

It was a piercing gaze. Yet she had one eyebrow raised higher than the other, and although her jaw was relaxed, her mouth was slightly pursed.

Kuchina was probably surprised and confused. She almost certainly wanted to blame Sousei for whatever was going on and ask what it was all about. And why were there *four* people?

Kuchina started to stand up but stopped in a half-standing position.

Sousei and Asumi were blocking the front door, as were Yukisada and Moena with the back door. That didn't mean they were completely closed off, though; there were only two people standing at each door. As a barricade, it was far from perfect. It

could be penetrated. Kuchina could break through it if she pushed past both people, or even just one of the two.

"…Coward," she said quietly.

Sousei felt sorry for her. He was exploiting her weakness. It was no wonder she was blaming him.

It wouldn't be so bad if it was just Sousei, but Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada were there as well. Always fearing the worst, Kuchina wouldn't be able to shove past them, push them out of her way with her hands, or kick them. Sousei felt certain about that. She wouldn't choose to use force.

"M-Miss Hitsujimoto!" Sousei called out, his voice cracking.

"Pfft!" Yukisada nearly burst out laughing.

Asumi and Moena held up the reusable shopping bags they had in their hands and spoke at the same time. "Let's have a potato chip party!"

Kuchina had probably never heard the phrase "potato chip party" before and had no idea what they were talking about. The anger and surprise quickly disappeared from her face, leaving only confusion.

Asumi and Moena rushed toward Kuchina's desk. Sousei and Yukisada exchanged looks and stayed by the doors, just in case.

Asumi and Moena set up for the potato chip party with incredible speed. They pushed together some of the desks near Kuchina's and arranged four chairs by them. They took all sorts of different kinds of potato chips out of their bags and placed them on the desks.

"What is this…?" Kuchina mumbled as she sat back down in her chair. She might not have been able to maintain her half-standing pose any longer, but she shouldn't be so weak as to reply like that. Perhaps she'd given in or simply had no energy left.

"Potato chip party," Moena said, holding out a pair of wooden chopsticks in a paper wrapper.

Kuchina stared at the chopsticks as if they were something unknown to her.

Yukisada closed the door. He looked at Sousei as he walked toward Kuchina's desk and smiled when their eyes met. His expression seemed to be saying, *It's probably all right now.*

Sousei closed the other door.

It didn't seem like Kuchina was ever going to take the chopsticks, so Moena placed them on her desk. Moena also

passed chopsticks to Asumi and Yukisada, and then gave some to Sousei before he sat down.

Kuchina and Asumi were sitting across from each other with two desks between them. Next to Asumi was Moena, and across from Moena to the left was Yukisada. Sousei sat next to Yukisada, across from Kuchina and to the right.

Yukisada's eyes widened. "There's quite a lot here, huh?"

"I selected eight different flavors," Moena said, confidently puffing out her chest with pride. "The standard lightly salted; salt and nori seaweed; consommé, of course; pizza, Asumin's top pick; black pepper, representing a harder style of chip; the not-to-be-forgotten wasabi and beef; premium authentic sea salt; and *Karamucho*, which I prefer to call 'deliciously spicy' rather than 'super spicy.' We had even more candidates, but this is it for today!"

"…Will we be able to eat all this?" Sousei asked, gently couching his reservations, but Moena snorted.

"You're underestimating potato chips, Takarai. We'll get through this in no time! I could probably finish all this by myself."

"That's so many calories, Moe!" Asumi cried.

Yukisada laughed. "I'd also probably be able to get through them all if I tried."

"You eat that much, Hayashi?!" Moena asked, staring intently at Yukisada who nodded calmly.

"Yeah, more or less."

"I never knew you had such a big appetite, Hayashi," Asumi said, impressed, as she went to open the bag of pizza chips. Moena hurriedly stopped her.

"Aaah, wait a sec, Asumin! Those ones have a really strong flavor! We should start off with the lightly salted ones!"

"Ohh. Right."

"Leave the order to me. Miss Hitsujimoto, your chopsticks!"

Perhaps she was overwhelmed by Moena's menacing expression, but Kuchina finally picked up her chopsticks.

Asumi and Yukisada ripped open the paper packaging and took out their chopsticks. Sousei watched Kuchina as he tore open the end of his chopsticks packet.

Kuchina was expressionless. She stared vacantly at her chopsticks.

Moena suddenly took the chopsticks from her, and a chill went through Sousei's body. Kuchina was stunned.

Moena swiftly ripped open the packet, positioned the chopsticks so they would be easy to take out, then returned them to Kuchina.

…Oh, it's because Hitsujimoto's wearing gloves…

Moena was being considerate of that. She'd probably thought it would be difficult to tear open the paper packet with gloves on.

Moena was already opening the bag of lightly salted potato chips.

"All right, they're open! Eat up, Miss Hitsujimoto!"

"…Me?"

Kuchina looked at Sousei. Her gaze seemed to be pleading for help. It didn't seem like there was a wall between them at that moment. No matter how he thought about it, those weren't the eyes of a person isolated behind tall walls. Sousei also felt that perhaps she herself had been the wall. It had probably been a terrible misunderstanding.

Sousei nodded.

"You're the reason that we're having this potato chip party. Come to think of it, you said you've never had french fries before, but have you had potato chips?"

"…This…is a first for me."

Kuchina took the wooden chopsticks out of their paper packet. She pulled them apart very slowly and neatly. She didn't seem to be hesitating anymore. Kuchina didn't select a large chip, but instead picked up a rather small one from the bag Moena had opened and put it in her mouth. There was a faint crunching sound as it broke, and she closed her eyes as she chewed discreetly. At last, she swallowed.

Sousei was only looking at Kuchina. He wondered what kind of expressions were on Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada's faces. He was curious about what everyone was thinking. But he couldn't take his eyes off Kuchina.

He didn't even blink. His eyes were dry and sore, but he put up with it.

"It's salty," she said before letting out a breath. "…Salty and delicious."

Moena did a fist pump with her free hand. Asumi's dazzling smile seemed to radiate light as she reached out with her

chopsticks.

"I'll have some, too!" she said.

"I guess I will, too, then," chimed in Yukisada. "Let's dig in!"

Moena showcased her quick chopstick skills, eating one chip and then another in rapid succession before saying, "Whoa, these really are good…!"

Kuchina's eyes were still closed. Keeping her in his field of vision, Sousei tasted one of the lightly salted potato chips. An electric current ran from his tongue to the rest of his body.

"…It's salty and delicious…"

"That's the same thing Kuchina said," Yukisada commented with a chuckle.

Moena opened the salt and nori and consommé flavors.

"Try comparing the different flavors!" she urged.

Asumi and Yukisada started taking the salty nori seaweed and consommé flavored chips, and it was only then that Kuchina finally opened her eyes. She timidly took another lightly salted chip with her chopsticks, lifted it to her mouth, and closed her eyes. Moena glanced at Kuchina, and her face softened.

Perhaps…it's difficult for Kuchina to take a chip when everyone's eating the lightly salted ones. Is that why Moena opened some other bags…?

"Consommé is amazing!" Asumi noisily kicked her feet against the floor. "Consommé! Miss Hitsujimoto, you should try the consommé ones too!"

At Asumi's suggestion, Kuchina gently picked up a consommé flavored chip with her chopsticks. She ate it, then closed her eyes again.

"…This one…has a different taste," she said.

"It does, doesn't it! Isn't it super yummy?!"

"…It's yummy," Kuchina agreed.

"Right?!"

"…It's yummy," Kuchina repeated.

"I really like the salt and nori ones," Yukisada said as he munched on a chip. "Probably because they taste a bit like rice balls. I could eat so many of these."

"Shall we move on to the next flavor?" Moena asked.

She opened the bag of pizza flavor chips, instantly releasing a rich aroma that smelled unmistakably of cheese. Sousei involuntarily leaned back, letting out an "Ohhh…"

“About time!” Asumi clapped her hands in delight.

Kuchina frowned and blinked rapidly. The smell was actually quite jarring, and Yukisada audibly sniffed it in.

“Yep, smells like pizza pie,” he said.

“Don’t say ‘pizza pie’!” Moena retorted as she ate the salt and nori chips.

“I can’t wait any longer!” Asumi said before attacking the pizza-flavored potato chips. She ate three—no, four chips in rapid succession. “Wah! This is it! This is the one! I could eat these for every meal!”

“Wouldn’t that give you indigestion…?” Sousei asked.

Asumi forcefully shook her head. “Not at all! I have a second stomach for potato chips!”

“…If it’s a separate stomach, you’d still have to eat other food, too, right?”

“I mean, I think these pizza-flavored chips could be my staple food. I know I just said it’s a second stomach, but still.”

Kuchina was reaching toward the pizza chips, but the tips of her chopsticks were trembling slightly. The flavor seemed quite overwhelming, after all. Sousei was also hesitant to try them.

Kuchina blinked once. Her eyes suddenly became more focused, and her chopsticks stopped trembling. She picked up a pizza flavored chip and smoothly guided it to her mouth. Her eyes instantly widened, and she inhaled through her nose.

…What’s gonna happen?

Sousei held his breath and watched.

Is she okay? Can she handle it? Or…?

Kuchina closed her eyes and slowly chewed the chip.

How is it…?!

Kuchina opened her eyes wide.

“They’re really yummy.”

“Victory!” Asumi shouted with delight and made a *V* sign with her left hand.

It wasn’t exactly clear what she meant by “victory,” but Kuchina had praised Asumi’s favorite chips, which must have made her tremendously happy.

“We still have lots more to go!” Moena continued opening the bags one after another. “Eat, eat! Eat them all up!”

He’d thought it was too much by any stretch of the imagination, but Sousei seemed to have underestimated the stomachs of high school students. Come to think of it, Sousei

himself was a second-year high school student with a naturally healthy appetite. Although he usually didn't eat much greasy food, whenever he did, it went down easily. Even though all they had was potato chips, there were eight different flavors so they wouldn't get bored. After eating from one bag, you'd find yourself wanting one from a different bag. Sousei also discovered the wonder of combining flavors; eating flavor A after flavor B could make it taste twice as delicious.



“Still… I never expected us to finish them all in half an hour…”

The potato chip bags were completely empty. Every single one. All eight bags.

“You know, I just had a thought,” Yukisada said with a smile. “Potato chips might be good to have with rice. We could crush them up and sprinkle them on top like *furikake* seasoning.”

“That’s a great idea!” Moena exclaimed, pointing at Yukisada. “I’ll try it out right away, during dinner.”

“Whaaaaa?!” Asumi’s eyes bulged. There was something small stuck near her lip; seaweed, probably. “After eating all these potato chips, you’re also going to sprinkle some over your dinner tonight?!”

The small piece of nori was stuck quite low on her right cheek. Moena wouldn’t be able to see if from her position sitting next to Asumi.

I wonder if I…should point it out…

However, as Sousei sat there unable to act on that thought, Kuchina spoke.

“Shiramori.”

“Hmm?” Asumi turned to face Kuchina and tilted her head slightly. Kuchina pointed her index finger to the lower area of her own left cheek.

“You have something stuck to your face.”

“Huh? Here?” Using Kuchina like a mirror, Asumi was immediately able to find it. “Oh, it’s a little bit of seaweed! Thanks, Miss Hitsujimoto!”

Kuchina looked down and shook her head. The sun had long since set, and the classroom was getting dark.

“Oh, right, should we turn the lights on?” Moena asked. She started to get out of her chair, but Yukisada stopped her.

“I’ll—”

Just then, Kuchina stood up. Her bag was in her hand. Without anybody realizing it, she had neatly placed the chopsticks she’d been using back in their package and placed them on her desk.

“Shiramori, Shigee, Hayashi.”

Kuchina said the three names in order. She was looking downward, but she was trying to look them in the face. Sousei could tell from the slight change in her posture each time she said someone’s name.

“Takarai.”

She said Sousei’s name last. For a fleeting instant, so short it could barely even be called a moment, her gaze skimmed across him.

“Thank you. I’m sorry. I’ll be leaving now. Good-bye.”

Nobody said anything. Kuchina started walking away before anyone could open their mouth. She walked quickly, almost at a run.

Just before Kuchina opened the door at the back of the classroom and left, Asumi called out to her and waved.

“Bye-bye, Miss Hitsujimoto! See you later!”

Kuchina closed the door at the same time Asumi finished speaking.

Asumi lowered her arm. She was still looking at the closed door.

Moena nodded. “…Well, we got to have a potato chip party.”

“And I got to come too,” Yukisada said with his ever-pleasant smile.

“Yeah…” Without noticing, Sousei had started pressing down on his left arm with his right hand. “We really did it…”

†



I didn't think I was that lonely anymore…

That thought went through his mind as he went through the ticket gate. That was how he realized.

Lonely… Am I lonely? Yeah. I'm lonely…

He'd never hung out with friends after school like that before. And, thinking about it, it might never happen again.

People die… I'm an assassin.

Step by step, Sousei went up the stairs to the surface.

At that very moment, his phone could ring and his sister could give him an order to kill someone else.

I wouldn't refuse. I couldn't. I'll kill again… I might be killed, and that's all right. I can still be killed another hundred and nineteen times. I have lives to spare. I won't die even if I'm killed…

He got to the top of the stairs and found himself outside. The cold night air clung to his skin. The streetlights felt so far away, even though the one right next to him was casting its light around his feet.

I don't believe that at all. I've never died after my lives ran out. I might think it's okay and die, and then that could be the end. I'm ready. I've died enough. I've died so many times that it's not normal. If the next time I die is the end, so be it. Even if there's no tomorrow for me, I'm glad this was the end. We were able to have a potato chip party…

He suddenly remembered that he was waiting at the traffic lights.

The pedestrian light in front of him was green. When had it changed?

Pedestrians were passing him and crossing the road. There weren't many people coming from the other direction.

However, Sousei wasn't the only person standing still at the crosswalk.

There was someone behind him.

No way…

An image of the ghost he'd seen flickered across the back of his mind.

Sousei turned around.

He probably would have been less surprised if it had been a ghost. He also wondered if it might have been a hallucination, but when he looked again, she was still there.

"Miss Hitsujimoto…?"

Her gaze was lowered, and the scarf covering her mouth moved slightly. She might have been trying to say something, but he couldn't hear what.

"Uhh, wh…what's wrong?

"I didn't tidy up."

Considering how difficult her voice was to hear, it was nothing short of a miracle that he'd managed to catch what she'd said.

"…Huh? What do you mean?"

"I was the first to leave. I didn't tidy up. I have to apologize."

"Ohhh…"

Sousei and the others had cleaned up the empty potato chip bags and used chopsticks. That was what Kuchina seemed to be talking about.

"Ah, yeah… Well, it didn't seem like anyone was bothered by it…"

"It's bothering me."

"Then…why don't you talk to them tomorrow? You'll probably see them at school."

"Tell them for me."

"…Sure, I guess."

"There's no guarantee," Kuchina added before pulling her scarf up higher.

There's no guarantee that she'll be able to tell them herself…

She could have simply meant that she didn't have the confidence to talk to Asumi and everyone else directly. She could just say, "Sorry about yesterday" after greeting them in the morning, but even that would be a huge hurdle for her.

Or maybe that wasn't it. Maybe she wanted to say it, but there was a possibility she wouldn't be able to.

Barring any unforeseen circumstances, normal high school students always had tomorrow. Those unforeseen circumstances rarely ever occurred, so most people could ignore them. In fact, most high school students probably never thought about things like the possibility of not being able to see their friends the next day.

But…for us, there's no guarantee…

The next day, he might not exist anymore. That was a very possible reality for people in Sousei's line of work.

"Miss Hitsujimoto?"

"What?"

“Did you have fun today?”

Sousei was willing to wait for as long as it took her to respond, but it turned out he didn’t have to wait long.

“I did,” she said without meeting his gaze. Her voice was muffled and low, but she still answered clearly.

“That’s good,” he said, believing it from the bottom of his heart. “I did, too. I had a lot of fun. But even though it was so much fun, I found it hard to leave everyone. It was lonely…and scary.”

She raised her eyes and looked at him. Sousei exhaled a cloud of mist into the night. He looked straight at Kuchina through the wisps of white.

“I get scared when I do something fun. There’s a chance it’ll never happen again, and I convince myself it probably won’t. That there’s no way… But even if it doesn’t happen a second time, I still have those memories. I think that’s better than nothing. Yet sometimes I think it might have been best if those things never happened in the first place… I don’t want to remember, ‘Ah, that was a lot of fun’…because, after all, nothing will be that much fun again. It’s just futile and painful. But… today was fun. I don’t regret it. That might be the only potato chip party we ever have. We might never do it again. But still, it was nice. I was able to have a fun time with you…with everyone. Even though it makes me feel lonely thinking that it’s over, it was still so much fun.”

“They were yummy,” Kuchina said. She was probably smiling. If she lowered her scarf, the corners of her mouth would probably be curled up in a smile. “The potato chips. I won’t forget them.”

Let’s do it again.

We can have a potato chip party anytime.

It would have been so nice if he’d been able to say that.

I know…

That might have been the first and last potato chip party they’d ever have. Sousei had killed too many people to believe that there might be a second time.

There was something else he hadn’t told Kuchina before. Something he couldn’t tell her.

When he was on a job, Sousei’s brain switched to autopilot. His top priorities were killing his target and not letting people find his identity. There were lives that Sousei could have saved,

like the woman Riamu Kinoshita had murdered. It wasn't that he *couldn't* have saved her, but that he *hadn't*.

Sousei considered himself a deeply sinful person.

He couldn't say that his heart ached. If it did, then he wouldn't be able to stand by and watch someone be killed. There was no way Sousei Takarai had a human heart, so he couldn't feel emotions like enjoyment, loneliness, and sadness in the same way a decent person would. His emotions were fakes. If he didn't have a human heart, he wasn't human.

Sousei Takarai wanted to be a normal high school student like everybody else, yet all he was doing was *pretending* to be a normal high school student.

He was playing make-believe as a human.

What about you, Miss Hitsujimoto…?

She and Sousei had something in common.

Sousei might be able to understand her. And she might be able to understand Sousei, who didn't have a human heart and was just pretending to be human. She might understand this inhuman person who saw hallucinations or ghosts of people he'd killed with his own hands.

"Ah…!"

The ghost was there, far behind Kuchina.

There was a convenience store near the subway station entrance, and it was just in front of that.

It had a mushroom haircut and was wearing something that looked like an oversized jacket and cargo pants. It was facing their direction. Or actually, it was clearly looking at Sousei.

It wasn't a ghost or a hallucination.

"Kinoshita…," Sousei couldn't help but murmur.

Riamu Kinoshita.

The man pressed his right thumb to his neck and drew it to the side.

"…Kinoshita," Kuchina quietly said his name.

Kinoshita turned around. He didn't run, but walked slowly, inviting Sousei to follow.

"I'm sorry, Miss Hitsujimoto…!"

Sousei ran past Kuchina. He looked back as he went past the convenience store. Kuchina was still there, looking in Sousei's direction.

"Sorry!" he apologized again, even though she probably wouldn't be able to hear him.

He ran as fast as he could. The wound on his left arm wasn't too bad, but the bruise on his chest ached every time his feet hit the ground.

Kinoshita turned the corner. Sousei was about six seconds behind him. They hadn't gotten separated. Kinoshita was running *on the ground* and seemed to be telling Sousei, "Come with me."

Did he have some sort of plan? There was no way he'd appear in front of Sousei without a purpose.

But I killed him…! So why…?! No…

That didn't matter. There was no point even thinking about it right now.

Sharinchou was a residential area. There was a circular road with large stores along it about 550 yards away, but that was in a different direction—the complete opposite direction.

There was a fair amount of traffic, because it was rush hour. Commuters and students filled the street. Kinoshita, followed by Sousei, passed a woman who looked to be in her thirties. The commotion startled her.

Kinoshita ran past a municipal housing complex with white four-story apartments, four on each block. Sousei wondered if Kinoshita would enter the premises, but he didn't.

From there, they passed through a block crammed with private houses and into one lined with apartment buildings, where Kinoshita cut across the road and down a side street. If they continued straight, there would be a park to the left. It was a large park, big enough for people to play baseball in.

Guess not…!

Kinoshita didn't even look at the park. One block ahead of them—not on the left, but on the right—was a school.

An elementary school.

Kinoshita swiftly climbed the fence post. On the other side of the fence was the schoolyard. There weren't any lights on in the school building, nor in any of the outlying buildings or the gym. There was nobody there. The school was deserted.

Kinoshita reached the top of the fence. He didn't jump down, but *ran* down. It shouldn't be possible, but this guy was from the NGS—No Gravity System. Perhaps instead of defying gravity, they could alter it. It was an unbelievable cheat.

Sousei continued running parallel to the fence. It was made of wire mesh that went up about six and a half feet, then had

about twenty-six feet of netting above that. It wouldn't be impossible to climb, but it would take time, and he would be defenseless while he did. The fence stretched around the schoolyard and ended at a low concrete wall. Sousei could jump over that.

Kinoshita cut across the schoolyard, heading toward the main building.

Sousei took out his phone and called his sister. She answered as soon as it started ringing.

"Sousei? What's going on?"

"Kinoshita is here."

"Huh?"

"I killed him, but he's alive."

"Are you certain? You're in pursuit?"

"Yes. I'm currently at an elementary school in Sharinchou—" Sousei vaulted onto the concrete wall and down the other side.

"You're at an elementary school?"

"Yeah, but there's no one here anymore. Ah, there might be security cameras…"

"Those can be dealt with. It'd be troublesome if you get inside and set off a sensor, though. If it's just camera footage, that can be manipulated."

Sousei had ended up having to circle around to the side of the school building in order to avoid the fence. He hurried toward the schoolyard behind it, but Kinoshita was nowhere to be found. There was a door at the back of the building, but it wasn't open. The windows showed no sign of being disturbed, either.

"…He's not here. Where'd he go?"

"The enemy is aware of you, right?"

"To be honest, he led me here… I can't believe he's still alive."

"Eliminate him."

"…I was on my way home from school. I don't have any weapons on me."

"It seems you're enjoying your school life, huh? I'm so glad." His sister laughed cheerfully. It was sarcastic, of course.

"Yeah, well, it's all thanks to you…," responded Sousei.

"The enemy should have weapons. You can steal one of theirs."

"…That's easier said than done."

“If Kinoshita is alive, that means there’s a high possibility he’s figured out your power. Even an idiot like you should understand how dangerous that is.”

“I’m…basically naked.”

“He probably isn’t aware that you’re Samael the Angel of Death from the Church of Assassins. If he is, that’d be really bad. Either way, no matter how many times you end up dying, you need to take out Kinoshita. Without fail. Immediately.”

“Roger,” Sousei said. He hung up and put his phone away.

It’s time to work.

He took a breath.

I’m taking care of an unfinished job. That’s all.

Sousei made a full loop of the school building and the gymnasium, making sure to check the positions of the security cameras. He probably didn’t need to worry about those, though, since his sister had said she’d take care of them. The L-shaped school building was three stories high, and the separate gymnasium building was slightly shorter than that. He paid particular attention to the windows, exterior walls, and roof.

…Not here.

Had Kinoshita left Sousei and run off? That was hard to imagine. He was probably hiding somewhere or moving around so he wouldn’t be found as he watched Sousei’s movements.

The elementary school building had a clock tower. It was about twenty feet tall and rose from the corner of the L-shaped building. It was an empty structure. There was an opening on the western wall of the clock tower, which people could use to see into the tower during the day. He could also tell it had no ceiling and that it was completely open inside.

Kinoshita lured me all the way here.

Sousei placed his bag on the ground and began climbing the exterior wall of the gymnasium, as it looked easier to climb than the school building.

He jumped from the roof of the gymnasium to the roof of the school building. The gymnasium roof was curved, while the school building roof was flat. He was easily able to get to the opening in the clock tower.

Into the lion’s den…

It was a trap.

There was a high chance that Kinoshita was waiting to ambush him inside the clock tower.

What kind of tricks would Kinoshita use? Sousei wasn't certain, but even if he could predict them, he wouldn't be able to launch a preemptive attack without a weapon. He had to be on the defensive first. From there, his only option would be to counterattack.

That's my specialty, isn't it?

This wasn't a game—it was a fight to the death. It wasn't usually possible to win the battle but lose the war, or the other way round. Killing your opponent was normally the end of it. That was the rule.

Sousei, who was different from normal people and *could* die, was the exception to that rule. That was his strength. It was his only strength, though.

If he kept going another foot and a half or so, he'd be inside the clock tower.

Sousei entered the clock tower on his second step.

He'd anticipated something coming at him.

Above. But not directly above. Something came flying at him from three o'clock high. There was no sound of gunfire. It wasn't a bullet.

Sousei ran to the left and leaned against the north interior wall of the clock tower. He heard the sound of hard objects hitting one another. Many times.

Sousei sidestepped left along the wall. Something grazed his right temple and hit the wall behind him just as Sousei turned his head to the left. If he hadn't done that, it would have hit his right cheek. His right ear got cut a little. Had it been a blade?

Kinoshita was moving.

He was flinging blades while moving along the interior wall of the clock tower. Only the two squares of night sky through the open roof and the gap in the western wall stood out brightly. Everything else was dark. Could Kinoshita see him?

"Ngh…!"

Something stabbed him just above his left collarbone. As he pulled it out with his right hand, he jumped not to the left, but to the right. The object he'd pulled out was a small knife without a guard. A throwing knife?

It might have been because Sousei was now holding one, but the throwing knives suddenly stopped flying toward him. If Kinoshita had thrown another, Sousei had been planning to throw one back in the direction it had come from.

He's reading my movements…

Where was Kinoshita? Sousei didn't know. He couldn't sense anything at all.

But he's…figured out my location. I'm sure of it.

There were no gunshots. Did he not have a gun or bullets? Or was he not planning to shoot Sousei? The roar of gunfire in a residential area wouldn't be a good idea. Did that mean Kinoshita had at least that much discretion? Or perhaps he was trying to make Sousei think he *wouldn't* shoot.

He's not going to shoot me.

Sousei decided to make an educated guess.

Kinoshita wouldn't have thought that he'd be able to settle things with small throwing knives. They were likely just a diversion.

He'd had the kind of double-edged knife used by special forces in the United Kingdom and United States, and he seemed to be quite accustomed to using it.

…The endgame is going to be close combat.

Sousei adjusted his grip on the throwing knife and took a fighting stance. The knife had no guard, and he couldn't expect it to be particularly sharp. It wasn't too different from a fruit knife. Still, it was better than nothing.

He pinned down my movements. He should be coming to attack…

Where?

Where was he?

Trying to close in on Sousei.

Perhaps even getting closer to him already.

Sousei couldn't sense anything. Was Kinoshita really able to erase his presence so completely?

Above…

It was a gut feeling. Or perhaps it was Sousei's experience or the memory of being ambushed by Kinoshita from above that spurred him into action. Sousei swung the throwing knife upward at an angle. It cut through the air about sixteen inches directly above his head. The air was all it cut.

"Ah…"

But there was a sound like someone catching their breath.

He was there. Kinoshita. Sousei couldn't see since it was so dark, but Kinoshita had probably been *walking on the walls* trying to approach him. No, he was already close. Very close.

He attacked. Was it a knife? Sousei tried to fight back by lunging out with his own weapon.

“…Huh…?!”

He barely managed to counterattack, but that… It was different. What Kinoshita had swung down at him wasn’t a knife. It was something else entirely. What was it? It wasn’t a blade. The next attack didn’t come from above but from the side. He was attacked by the thing from the left. He couldn’t dodge it, and it sunk into his left cheek.

“Gah!”

Sousei instantly threw himself to the ground. Was it a blunt object? Probably some kind of hammer. Sousei’s cheekbone might have been shattered.

The walls. Kinoshita could freely walk or run on them. Sousei had to get away from the walls. But even if he got away from them, it didn’t mean he could escape from Kinoshita. Vertical walls and horizontal floors were all the same to him.

Sousei jumped to his feet, but as soon as he did, he received a crushing blow to the outer part of his right ankle, then his right knee. He couldn’t keep standing and fell toward the opening in the wall, the impact reverberating sharply, heavily in the bruise on his chest.

Regardless, Sousei crawled toward the opening. As he tried to crawl forward, Kinoshita pummeled him with the blunt object.

The throwing knife had disappeared somewhere. Sousei couldn’t look down toward the ground, though. He had to protect himself.

Sousei turned sideways with his left arm down and curled his body into a ball. When he tried to protect his head with his right arm, his shoulder, elbow, and wrist on that side of his body were pummeled by the blunt object. In a heartbeat, his right arm had become completely unusable.

“Ah-ha!” Kinoshita cried.

He was laughing.

Wha…?

Sousei thought it was strange, but he had bigger problems to deal with at that moment. His enemy’s weapon was a blunt object, like a hammer. It wasn’t big. The handle was about twelve inches long. A small hammer with a metal head. Kinoshita was using that hammer to beat the shit out of Sousei, but wasn’t exactly showering him with blows. It was the joints.

Kinoshita wasn't hitting anywhere and everywhere, but was aiming at his joints.

Sousei's left arm was still under his body. His right arm was unusable. It wasn't just his shoulder, elbow, and wrist—even his fingers had been struck by the hammer. Moving them properly would be out of the question. He couldn't move them at all.

How were his legs? Both of his knees were pretty thoroughly broken, but they weren't completely shattered. He could still move them a little, but they might not be of any use.

Shit… Shit, shit, shit, shit shit shit shit shit shit…

It hurt. It hurt as if his brain was being directly messed around with, even though the brain itself doesn't have any pain receptors. Where did it hurt? Where was the pain coming from? He didn't know. In any case, it hurt. Electrical signals travel through the spinal cord to the brain and are perceived as pain. Ultimately, it's the brain that creates the sensation of pain. That was why his brain hurt. It was the only way Sousei could perceive it in that moment.

The pain was affecting his ability to think. He was pushing the pain aside to think, trying to somehow form coherent thoughts.

I have to die.

That's right.

Dying is the only option.

How?

…I'll use it.

What?

My concealed weapon.

Sousei Takarai was pretending to be a normal high school student. He didn't carry weapons on him unless he was working. Normal high school students didn't carry things like weapons. The ice pick-shaped tool which was hidden in the sleeve of his school uniform jacket was different. It wasn't a weapon. It wasn't that it couldn't be used to kill people, but he didn't use it for that. It wasn't a tool for murder.

His right hand wouldn't move. He'd use his left. His left arm was protected under his body. His left hand would move. Would it be possible for him to get to his left sleeve? It didn't seem like he'd be able to take out the concealed weapon he'd planted there. In that case, he'd have to go with the right sleeve. He had a concealed weapon in that sleeve as well, but it was heavy. His

body was heavy. It was getting in his way. His left arm was under his body.

He needed to get on his back. That was it. He needed to get on his back. He tried to roll his body over to the right.

“Hee-hee, hah…!”

The enemy let out a strained laugh and swung the hammer down.

The hammer slammed into the center of Sousei’s chest.

His head went blank. Or perhaps it became pitch-black. Or complete darkness.

…Death…?

Had he died?

No…

He hadn’t.

He was still alive. He hadn’t died, unfortunately.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…”

Someone laughed. Who was laughing?

Who…?

He didn’t know. That was strange.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee…”

That voice.

…A woman…?

That’s right. The voice. That voice was…

Kinoshita…?

No. Sousei remembered the voice that had yelled “Fuck! Fuck!” He remembered Riamu Kinoshita’s voice.

“You killed my brother.”

This voice was different. It was a woman’s voice.

“Fuck you!” she screamed, swinging the hammer.

“Aaaaaaaaarrrrrgggghhh…!”

The sound Sousei let out was more of an agonized groan than a scream. It was a distinctly hopeless cry of pain. His lower abdomen. He’d been hit in the groin. A vital area, especially for men. It wasn’t necessarily fatal, but it was a horrifyingly vital area.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…”

It was a strange laugh. The woman might have been trying to hold back a burst of laughter. She was trying to stifle it but couldn’t hold it back.

“I don’t know who you are, but…” she said, tapping Sousei’s head with her hammer, “I won’t kill you. Even if I do, you won’t

die, right? I'll take you alive."

...Two of them...

At some point, Sousei had been turned onto his back.

There were two of them... There were two Riamu Kinoshitas from the start...

His left arm moved. He could move it.

Her brother... The one I killed...was her...

There were two Kinoshitas.

Two people who looked like carbon copies of each other. Brother and sister.

But even so, they looked way too similar. Perhaps they had been twins? Fraternal twins, since they were different sexes.

...That makes sense... So...that's why...

Kinoshita was supposed to have left his hideout that day, but had been inside for some reason. It wasn't that he'd teleported. The brother had gone out, but the sister had stayed at the hideout. Maybe she'd called him back, or perhaps he'd sensed something was off and returned to the house. Sousei had killed the brother. The sister had probably hidden or buried her brother's corpse, and that's why they hadn't been able to find it.

"Hey...," Sousei called to Kinoshita's sister, then opened his mouth wide. He stuck his tongue out at her.

He wasn't making fun of her about anything. If he bit off his tongue, he'd suffocate unless he was treated quickly.

"Hah-hah!"

She let out a short laugh, then buried the hammer in Sousei's mouth. She hadn't hit him with it, but instead turned the head sideways and shoved it into his mouth. His tongue was half crushed by the hammer.

He wouldn't be able to bite his tongue off to kill himself like this. It was an unreliable method in any case.

Sousei reached his left hand toward his right arm to take the concealed weapon from that sleeve, but he had absolutely no feeling in his right arm. He had no idea where his right arm was. It seemed *farther away* than he thought. He wouldn't be able to reach it by just stretching his left hand a little. It would be impossible unless he turned his body over to the right. Or pulled his right arm closer. His left hand, or rather, his right arm wasn't doing what Sousei wanted it to.

Why not? Move. Move like you're supposed to. Please move.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Sousei had been noticed while he was moving sluggishly. Kinoshita's sister pulled the hammer out of his mouth and brought it down hard on Sousei's left arm with the skill of a carpenter hitting a nail. Hitting many nails in deeply and precisely. In no time at all, Sousei's left arm had been reduced to merely an object that produced pain.

"Well…"

She looked down at Sousei and turned the hammer around. The inside of the clock tower should have been pitch-black, but Sousei could vaguely see the face of Kinoshita's sister. Perhaps it was being illuminated by the tiny amount of light shining in through the opening.

"…I have no choice but to talk to the professor…"

She was muttering something, but Sousei was only able to catch the word "professor."

Is this what it comes down to? That's disappointing. This is the end? These injuries are horrible. I might die if I'm not treated for them. If I die, I could just do it again. I'll have more chances until I've died a hundred and nineteen more times. What would that be like? Isn't it possible that she'd keep on torturing me, neither letting me live nor die? If that's the case, I'd prefer to die a hundred and nineteen times and get it over with. I'm okay with it being the end. There were fun things, too. I had fun today. Asumin. Moena. Yukisada. And Hitsujimoto. Thank you. Good-bye. Ah, I kind of sound like Hitsujimoto. Thank you, everyone. I'm sorry I couldn't say good-bye. I'll be the first to go. Good-bye. Is this the end? The end. The thought of that makes me both happy and sad. I wanted to have another potato chip party. I wish I could have seen you tomorrow. I wanted to say, "I had fun yesterday," but that'll never happen. That day will never come. There's no tomorrow for me.

Sousei's mind raced.

It was fun. It was too much fun. This is punishment for that. It's my punishment. It can't be helped. That's what Rio said. That's right. It can't be helped. I shouldn't have killed her. Not just Rio. There were probably other people I've killed that I shouldn't have. Lots of people who I could've saved, but abandoned. That's why this is happening. I'm being punished. But please let it just be me. I'll take my punishment, so please let tomorrow come for Hitsujimoto. I won't be able to go to school anymore, but just think that I've got a cold or something and don't worry about me.

Asumin and Moena will probably talk to you, so try to say something back without being shy, Miss Hitsujimoto. You can take it one step at a time, but try talking about the potato chip party with Yukisada as well. Ah, I would have liked to have been there, too.

"There are no options."

Hitsujimoto.

"Not for you."

Why?

He could hear Kuchina's voice.

Kinoshita's sister had fallen like a lifeless ragdoll. Kuchina was standing behind her, holding her right hand in front of her body. Her white hand. It was bare. She wasn't wearing her gloves. Had she touched Kinoshita's sister with that hand? Perhaps she'd touched the back of her neck or something.

Oh, Kuchina was holding two bags. One of them was her own. The other one probably belonged to someone else.

Kuchina walked around the fallen body of Kinoshita's sister and approached Sousei. She squatted and looked at him. Looked down at him.

Stared at him with those eyes.

"Will those injuries heal if you die?" Kuchina asked in a low, flat voice.

Would he be able to speak in this state? Could he form words? He wasn't certain, but he said, "Yes."

"I see."

Her white hand drew closer. Her hand covered his eyes.

And then Sousei literally came back to life.

Kinoshita's sister was dead by his feet, and there was a bag by his hand. It was Sousei's.

Kuchina wasn't there. She had killed Kinoshita's sister, then Sousei, and left.

If he went after her, he might be able to see her leaving, but he didn't plan to do that. He looked up at the square of night sky at the top of the clock tower and mumbled something.

"See you tomorrow."

118 LIVES
LEFT.

CONTINUE?

Afterword

In this novel, various characters appear just for the main character to get rid of them.

When I wrote the manuscript for the first novel, I thought:

“Th-this…isn’t great, right? Isn’t it kind of a waste?”

Mochizuke from Volume 1 is the kind of character that I really like.

But as soon as he makes his entrance, he exits again.

How cruel…

It’s way too heartless, if you can call it that.

That sort of thing…

Is it destiny?

I’m not sure.

The characters that I worked so hard to come up with keep disappearing.

It’s painful.

Or rather, I’m going to have to squeeze out some more.

It’s tough…

For me, it’s a practical problem, but I wonder how it is for you as the reader.

Just as you think, “This character is interesting…,” they disappear.

How is that?

Well, it’s that kind of a novel, so it can’t really be helped.

Besides, there might be some characters later on who will survive.

That’s a possibility.

At any rate, I want to keep writing this series. I ask for your continued support so I can keep writing it for as long as possible.

By the way, no matter how many times I write an afterword, I’m still not good at it.

Ao Juumonji

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