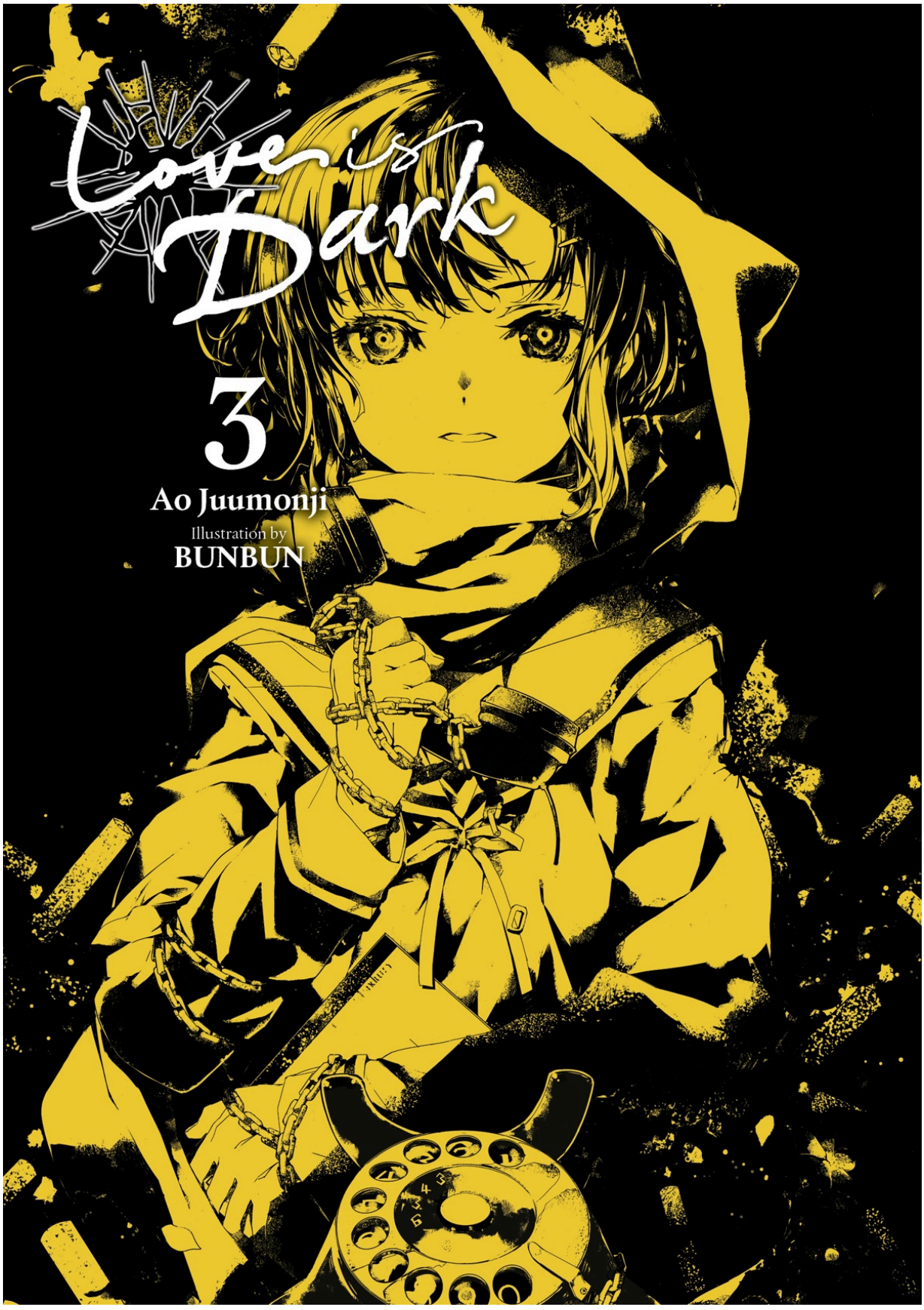

Love is Dark
3
Ao Juumonji
Illustration by
BUNBUN


Love is Dark
3
Ao Juumonji
Illustration by
BUNBUN




"Nghaaah..."
"Takarai!"
"Left leg...!"
The tric
Swing you
At the sam
the horizont
Then wrap you
Since it's you, S
e able to d


"I..."
There she was, surrounded by the starry glow. She slowly looked around at the sea of countless lights, trying to etch every single one into her heart. It probably wasn't just the dazzling scenery, but everything that was there in that moment.
"I'll remember this sight for the rest of my life."
"Me too."

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[redacted]

Love is Dark

3

Ao Juumonji

Illustrated by

BUNBUN

YEN ON

NEW YORK



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Ao Juumonji
Translation by Zoe Womack
Cover art by BUNBUN
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Afterword
Yen Newsletter

Ø1

Sending My Heart

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

It's not one-on-one. It's a group chat…

He found himself sitting in the traditional Japanese way, on his knees, in the middle of his room. His sister had been ordering him to sit like that as punishment for a long time, so it had become second nature to him.

Sousei stood up.

The display of the phone clenched in his hand was black. Pitch black.

He tapped the screen to unlock it, and the "Potato Party" group chat appeared.

It's a group chat…but I get nervous about bringing something up myself. I can't help it…

Before long, Sousei started doing squats.

I wonder if I'd be annoying them. I can't help thinking I would be. Asumin and Moena might be busy. They might be studying or something. Or…what else? Maybe watching TV or a movie? Playing video games? They're probably doing something. They must be, if they're not sleeping… Are they already asleep? Right. Yeah. That's also a possibility…

It was after nine PM. The sun had set while Sousei had been hesitating, and it was already late.

Even if they aren't fast asleep, they might be dozing off in bed. Getting a message notification at a time like that would startle them, which is bad for their hearts. They could get annoyed, and that could lead to a spiral of self-loathing… Or maybe not. Neither Asumin nor Moena seems to have that kind of a personality… But still, you never know, right? Yeah. You never know…

Sousei's heart was pounding, and his T-shirt was soaked with sweat.

I don't want to disturb them. All I'm doing is trying to avoid that, right? I don't want them to hate me. Well, I guess that's *also a part of it… How do I put it? It feels wrong for someone like me to bother people like Asumin or Moena. Like it's unforgivable or something…*

The speed with which Sousei was bending and stretching gradually increased. He was already drenched in sweat, but he felt fine. He could keep doing squats for five or six hours without a break.

Apart from the *cheat* he'd acquired, Sousei Takarai was utterly ordinary. He didn't have any talents whatsoever—a fact his work had painfully impressed upon him.

He would never be a top athlete or fighter if he didn't have the aptitude for it. However, Sousei had never gotten any serious illnesses, and even if he was injured, he'd heal if he died and came back to life. That alone meant he could afford to push himself to extremes. And he at least had stamina from diligently doing basic exercises like squats.

Am I worrying about it too much? I'm probably worrying too much, right? Even I can tell that. Messages are different from phone calls. If it's not a good time to reply, you can just do it later. That's the benefit of messaging apps. I haven't really used them much before, so I'm new to all this…but Asumin and Moena must use them all the time. They're probably well aware of that sort of thing, so I don't need to think about it so much—I know *all that!*

Sousei put his phone on the floor and swapped over to doing push-ups.

"*Hff, hah, hff, hah, hff, hah, hff, hah, hff, hah, hff…!* Argh, stop! Stop that! You're putting it off! You're training so you can put it off…!"

He stopped doing push-ups, grabbed his phone, and sat on his knees on the sweat-drenched floor. The display had gone black again. Pitch black. He tapped the screen to unlock it.

"I should just come right out and say it normally…"

His fingers moved, entering the words.

"Normally…"

Sousei hurriedly deleted the message he'd just typed out.

"Normal…"

He puzzled over it.

"'Normal'… What does that even *mean*?" A low groan escaped his lips. "It's so hard. I mean…it's hard to know, right? What would a 'normal' message even be like? The more I think about it, the less sure I am…"

Time had stopped.

Sousei shook his head, sending out a spray of anxious sweat.

"No, it hasn't. Time doesn't stop. It's still going, still ticking away even while I'm doing this. I just have to send a message already. We have school tomorrow. I have to do it today. That's right. Yeah. Even if I send a 'normal' message like the ones I always send, I should put everything I've got into it. I mean, that's all I can do…"

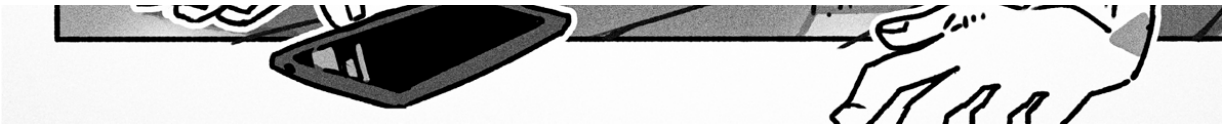
Sousei strengthened his resolve and started typing. He wasn't satisfied with the wording. He wanted to rewrite it. But if he did, he'd never stop.

"I'm sending it…okay? I'm gonna do it. I will. Do it. Send—"

Sousei: There is a matter regarding Miss Hitsujimoto about which I wish to inform you. Would that be agreeable?

It was marked as “Read” straightaway.
“Oh…” Sousei’s eyes bulged.





Asumin: “Would that be agreeable?” …LOL
Moenan: Yes, it’s quite agreeable lol

This reaction…

It wasn’t bad. At least both Asumi and Moena were awake. Sousei typed out his next message.

Sousei: Perhaps my message was quite rigid and formal. For that, I sincerely apologize.
Asumin: No need to apologize!
Moenan: Sorry for teasing
Sousei: Not at all
Sousei: It is not an issue in the slightest.

They’re—

All the sweating had cooled Sousei’s body, but the corners of his eyes prickled with warmth.

—so kind… Both of them…

Asumin: So?
Moenan: What’d you wanna tell us?
Sousei: Actually
Sousei: I have been requested by Miss Hitsujimoto to pass on a message.
Moenan: Huh? Takarai?
Asumin: You know Miss Hitsujimoto’s number??

"—!"

Sousei caught his breath.

R-right. If I say I have a message, of course they'll want to know how I got it… And yet, I hadn't expected this in the slightest. I'm so stupid…but I just have to be honest…

Sousei: No

Sousei: I am not aware of her contact details or any such thing.

Asumin: So you met up??

Asumin: With Miss Hitsujimoto??

Asumin: Where??

Asumin: When??

Moenan: Asumin…

Moenan: Quit interrogating him Asumin: But…!

Sousei: It was after the potato chip party Sousei: Miss Hitsujimoto and I live in the same neighborhood.

Sousei: Allow me to correct myself. We do not live close enough to each other to call it the same neighborhood.

Sousei: We use the same train station.

Asumin: And??

Sousei: We met in front of the station.

Asumin: By chance??

Sousei: She jas

Sousei: My apologies.

Sousei: She has something that she wishes to convey, and asked me to be the massager Sousei: Wait
Moena: Calm down!

Moena sent a sticker of a character of some kind holding out what looked to be a cup of green tea.

Sh-she's right. I need to calm down…

Sousei closed his eyes for a few seconds and took a breath in.

Sousei: I have calmed myself.
Sousei: Miss Hitsujimoto wished for me to apologize on her behalf.
Asumin: Why??? The potato chip party was fun, right…?
Sousei: She asks that you forgive her for leaving first and being the only one who did not tidy up.
Moenan: Oh, that?
Asumin: It's totally fine!
Moenan: Right?
Moena: But I guess it's been bothering her…
Asumin: Huh…? You think?
Moenan: I don't think it's unusual. That stuff bugs responsible types Asumin: So I'm not responsible? …Is that what you're saying?
Moenan: I'd call you easygoing, Asumin Asumin: Is that a compliment??

Moenan: Yeah, definitely
Asumin: Yay! I'm so happy!

Sousei noticed the muscles in his face relaxing.
How heartwarming…

Sousei: Miss Hitsujimoto
Sousei: also said that the potato chips were extremely delicious, and that she won't forget them.
Asumin: She won't forget them???
Sousei: Yes. That's what she said.
Asumin: Okay
Moenan: Okay
Asumin: Jinx… LOL
Moenan: That's great. Sounds like it's a fond memory Asumin: Yeah
Asumin: I wish to partake in a potato chip party again Moenan: What's with the old timey talk? lol
Asumin: Let us partake!
Moenan: We probably could whenever we feel like it… We're in the same class Asumin: So true! We could also do a non-potato chip party
Moenan: What kinda party should we have? I guess that'll depend on Miss Hitsujimoto…
Asumin: I wonder what she likes Asumin: FOOD

Moenan: What's with the all caps? lol Asumin: No particular reason! I can't help but grin whenever I remember Miss Hitsujimoto eating…
Moenan: Aah… Me too
Moenan: She was so cute, wasn't she?
Asumin: She was vera cute!
Moenan: What's "vera"? LOL
Asumin: Like "very," I guess?

Sousei started typing out a message to agree, but deleted it when he realized what he was doing. Instead, he quietly muttered to himself in his room.

"She really was *vera* cute, huh…"

Asumi and Moena were still continuing the conversation. There was likely no profound meaning in what either of them was saying. The conversation could be considered frivolous, but that kind of communication surely had a purpose. Perhaps communication itself had value?

Maybe this kind of thing is also what it means to be "normal"…?

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

I guess it's normal to have some friends, even if it's not a lot, and be reasonably well-adjusted…

Sousei gave a nod. "I'll have to thank Miss Hitsujimoto."

Who knows what would have happened if she hadn't shown up at that elementary school clock tower?

He didn't know whether Riamu Kinoshita's sister would have taken all of his lives, but she probably would have taken quite a few. It was possible she would have killed Sousei 118 times, and he really would've died.

Sousei owed Kuchina his life. Naturally, he was grateful for that, so he wanted to express his gratitude in words.

"I have to say 'Thank you' to her properly."

†

It was as sunny and clear as a morning could be.

Say it.

Sousei Takarai was heading to school with purpose in his heart.

Say "Thank you" to Miss Hitsujimoto. Then…yeah. I also have to tell her I gave her message to Asumin and Moena.

He'd also considered getting to school first thing that morning and ambushing her, but Sousei wanted to approach the situation as naturally as possible. Kuchina was normally the first person to arrive at the classroom. If Sousei aimed to be second or third, then it shouldn't be too unnatural.

I just happened to wake up early. I left home a bit early. So now I'm arriving early. Yeah. That happens. It's definitely something that happens. It's natural. I can do this. I really feel like I can.

He wasn't hesitant—if anything, he was elated. At least until he left the subway station. The closer he got to school, the heavier his steps became.

…She's not going to avoid me again, is she?

Sousei tried to laugh it off, telling himself surely that wouldn't happen, but his face just twitched.

This is Miss Hitsujimoto we're talking about, after all. I mean, I'm pretty sure there's no reason for her to avoid me, but there's always a chance she might do it anyway. In fact, it seems just like something she'd do…

By the time he passed through the school gate, Sousei had readied himself.

Considering who I'm dealing with, she'll probably avoid me. And that'll be that. There's nothing I can do about it. Is *there anything I*

can do about it? Maybe, but it's Miss Hitsujimoto. I can't let every little thing like that shock me. Yeah…

There was a shift in his way of thinking.

It's all right. Don't worry, it's fine. It's not a big deal if I mentally prepare myself. If I go in expecting her to avoid me, it won't cause much damage.

It was still early, so the shoe cubby area was deserted. Sousei deliberately didn't check Kuchina's shoe cubby. She was probably at school already, but he was sure she'd avoid him. They wouldn't be able to talk properly face-to-face, in which case, it wouldn't ultimately matter whether she came to school or not.

That approach puts my mind at ease.

Sousei hummed as he changed his shoes.

That's positive thinking. Or I guess negative thinking…?

Taking a negative, backward sort of perspective at least let him relax. Still humming to himself, Sousei went to move away from the shoes.

"Something fun happen?"

Sousei hadn't expected anyone to speak to him, and he let out a strange squeak and jumped back. She stepped silently out from the shadow of the shoe boxes. Sousei backed away even more and almost stepped out of the shoe-changing area but managed to stop himself just in time.

"Ah…! Wha…?"

Why was she at the shoe cubbies?

Right here, in front of him?

She was wearing gloves. That was the first thing Sousei checked.

—Is she going to kill me…?! No… No way…

It might sound silly, but he couldn't dismiss it as just a wild thought.

After all, Sousei had experienced it firsthand. She'd killed him many times over. This girl had the power to steal people's lives far too easily; all she had to do was take off her gloves and touch

Sousei with her bare hands, and he'd die. As far as he could tell, she'd been waiting to ambush him. It was a surprise attack. That was the only conclusion Sousei could come to.

—It must be. Right…? A surprise attack…? But why? Why do it at school? She wouldn't, would she? No matter how Miss Hitsujimoto is. Uh, so what is it? Why's she here? What's going on…?

"I heard humming," Kuchina said in a flat voice, her eyes lowered. "Or something that sounded like humming. Sorry if I misheard."

"Ah, nah…" Sousei wildly shook his head and his hands. "Y-you didn't mishear… I was humming, but it doesn't mean something fun happened. Oh, but the potato chip party was fun! Did we already talk about that? Oh, we did, didn't we? On the day…"

"We did."

Kuchina nodded in agreement, and the phrase that Asumi had used in their group chat suddenly popped into the back of Sousei's mind.

She really was "vera cute"…

That was how Asumi described how Kuchina had looked while eating chips, saying that "vera" meant "very."

Mm, but it feels slightly different from "very cute." Vera cute…

The way Kuchina had used her chopsticks was incredibly careful and delicate. Perhaps it was a slight exaggeration, but her handling of the disposable wooden chopsticks had made them look like an expensive lacquered set. She'd chosen potato chips that were a good size to fit easily into her mouth, and her movements had been unassuming, even elegant in a way. She had been discreet when she chewed, then closed her eyes and thoughtfully, deliberately savored the flavor.

What is it? It's almost like she's in a state of mindlessness. Like she resembles a small animal eating nuts or berries more than a person… No, that's not it. It's something else… What could it be, though? In any case, she's vera cute…

Kuchina looked up at Sousei and tilted her head just slightly.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Noooooothing?! N-n-nothing's wrong… I just…"

Sousei desperately wanted to do squats.

Of course, I won't, though…

It would obviously be bizarre if he suddenly started doing squats right then. Objectively, that was something only a weirdo would do.

It's a mystery even to me why I'm so desperate to do squats…

As a last resort, Sousei took a few deep breaths—or at least, that was his intention. Instead, he found himself unable to, and he ended up needing to take several quick gasps of air.

Kuchina frowned. "All right."

She hadn't phrased it as a question, but she was asking him if he was okay. He'd worried her. Apparently, Sousei looked so bad that now she was worried about him.

"I… I-I-I'm…I'm all right…" Sousei struck his chest with his fist a few times. This action also seemed like it might fall into the category of eccentric behavior, but it was probably better than continuous rapid breathing or doing squats.

"—Aaah! That's right! Ummm, th-thanks! I wanted to give you my thanks—I mean, I have to give you my thanks, as a person! I couldn't say it before—or I guess I mean to say I didn't—so thank you, Miss Hitsujimoto. It's thanks to you that, y'know…"

"Thanks?" Kuchina muttered and turned to the side. "For what?"

"Huuuh?! You know, back then…"

Sousei looked around. He couldn't see any other students, but he couldn't say for sure that someone wasn't changing their shoes somewhere in the spacious shoe cubby area. That would be perfectly reasonable.

"Y-you saved me, so…I mean, I owe you my life…"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, looking in a different direction. Now she wasn't facing the side, but partly behind her. It seemed Kuchina was determined to do whatever it took to act like she didn't know what he was talking about.

I'm starting to get annoyed…

Sousei trembled.

What's with her? She is *vera cute, though…*

Asumi Shiramori, the person who'd praised Kuchina as being "vera cute," was also incredibly cute, but in a different way. Just how were they different?

Miss Hitsujimoto doesn't seem to be doing it on purpose at all… That said, I don't get the feeling that Asumin does, either… So what could it be? The categories seem fundamentally different somehow…

Ferocious wild beasts might occasionally do something that makes them look cute, for instance. Naturally, they have no interest in flattery or charm; the human observer simply perceives them as being cute. That's all it is.

For some reason, whenever I see Miss Hitsujimoto, I feel a strong desire to— Protect her.

Where was that feeling coming from?

No matter the cost, he had to protect her.

However, the fact was that *she* had saved *Sousei*. Kuchina didn't need him to protect her; she wasn't that weak. In fact, she was strong. If they ever became enemies, she'd be an extremely dangerous adversary.

Not only did she have that frightening *cheat*, but she also had exceptional physical abilities and an ability to gauge risk. A serious match against her wouldn't be all too different from facing a brown bear in the mountains without any weapons. In other words, she was akin to a ferocious wild beast. However, they weren't on a remote mountain, in the jungles of the Amazon, or on a savanna—they were at school. Would a terrifying wild animal be roaming around inside a high school attended by humans? No way. At least, not normally.

And on top of that, she's cute. Or vera cute, I guess. It's unthinkable…

"The matter in question…," Kuchina said, still facing diagonally backward. "Did you convey it?"

"Huh…?"

Sousei recovered his senses. He'd been staring at Kuchina the entire time, but his thoughts had wandered far away. Although he had been thinking about her.

Did I convey the matter in question? Oh, right, that! She asked me to—

Sousei nodded forcefully.

"Y-yeah." He nodded five times in quick succession, which made his neck hurt a bit. "I told them. The two of them. In a message. They didn't mind. Neither of them did."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Sousei nodded again, then pressed the back of his neck.

No matter how you look at it, I'm nodding way too much, aren't I…?

Kuchina finally turned back around to face forward.

"That's good."

It looked like she let out a small breath. She seemed relieved. So did Sousei.

"They said they wanted to do it again," he said. "Another potato chip party! Oh, it doesn't have to be just potato chips, though. Other things would be okay, too."

Kuchina looked down and tightly pursed her lips. Sousei blanched.

Am I speaking too loudly or something? Am I being too hyper? Talking too much? Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself or overstepping… Did I screw up…?

He wanted to beat his head against the corner of the shoe cubbies.

I won't, though…

Of course he wouldn't. If he hit his head against the corner of the shoe cubbies, he'd probably bleed quite a lot. Not if the cubbies were made of tofu, but as it was, this would be an amazing act of self-harm. No—it wouldn't be "amazing" at all. It'd be a huge inconvenience.

Kuchina seemed bewildered, and it was Sousei's fault. He'd upset her.

"Aaaah, umm, that is, you know, uh, I didn't mean…"

As Sousei was attempting to explain himself—without any basis whatsoever to do so—a flat "Mohorning" came from behind him. Or rather, it sort of drifted over. When Sousei looked over his shoulder, a boy from his class was walking toward him, his overly long sleeves swaying. As always, his steps were unsteady.

"…Good morning, Mishima. I mean, Mishii— Ah!"

Sousei hurriedly faced forward again, but Kuchina was gone. She'd left.

"Uh, wai— Miss Hi…"

He tried looking around, but she'd disappeared without a trace.

I only looked away for a few seconds…

"What's wrong, Lil Sou?" Yoh Mishima asked as he changed his shoes.

"Nah, it's…nothing…" Sousei shook his head, and Yoh smiled weakly.

"You're making a strange face…"

Yeah, I probably am…

Sousei noticed he had his right eye closed, and the left corner of his lips was drooped. What was causing that, he really couldn't say.

Yoh casually ambled over and gently placed a hand, hidden by his sleeve, on Sousei's shoulder.

"I don't really know what's going on. But, Lil Sou…"

He mouthed the last two words:

Cheer up.

It was extremely difficult to understand what his classmate was thinking, but it seemed he was trying to be considerate in his own way. Sousei used all his strength to nod.

"…Okay."

†

Kuchina Hitsujimoto had never once considered wanting to be a normal high school student.

That's impossible.

The hallway was noisy in the morning, filled with the voices and laughter of high school students.

Kuchina hung her head slightly as she walked, trying her best not to look directly at their faces. Even if she didn't look properly, she could still grasp what was happening around her. It would naturally be impossible in a situation where people were pressing up against one another, but even with her eyes closed, Kuchina could move through a bit of a crowd without bumping into anyone. It wasn't a *cheat*; she'd received training in basic martial arts and behavioral techniques. She'd been forced to get training. On top of that, it was a skill she'd acquired naturally. For her, it was necessary.

If she couldn't do at least this much as a bare minimum, she might unintentionally kill people.

I don't want to see them…

She was especially bad with people's smiles.

What's so much fun?

She was sure it would be fun.

If she could live in a carefree way like they did.

…I'm jealous.

She wouldn't say that aloud. She didn't have anyone to say it to. Still, Kuchina was aware of it.

I'm jealous of them. I might even hate them. I can kill normal people with the slightest of touches whenever I want…and even if I don't want to. I'm— A monster.

When had she started seeing herself that way?

It's ridiculous for a monster like me to feel jealousy and hatred…

Even Kuchina felt like she was beyond help.

"So yesterday, right? My sister—"

A female student was deep in conversation with a friend by the wall in the hallway—Tsugumi Udou, a girl who'd been in the same

class as Kuchina during first year. Now, Tsugumi was in Class 2-3, the one next to Kuchina's.

"Which one of your sisters?" Tsugumi's friend asked.

Kuchina had never been in the same class as that girl before, but she was pretty sure she was in Class 2-1. She seemed really close with Tsugumi, and the two of them often chatted in the hallway.

"Oh, my second youngest sister," replied Tsugumi.

She was the second oldest of five girls. The oldest was in university and would be graduating the following year. The third oldest was in her final year of junior high school, the fourth oldest was in her second year of junior high, and the youngest should be in the third grade of elementary school.

"Misa?" her friend said, referring to Tsugumi's fourth oldest sister by name.

Kuchina recalled Tsugumi saying that Misa—whose actual name was Misaki—was a member of the track team. She was energetic and had a really dark tan. It wasn't just that she was fast; she also had very long legs. They seriously took up about half of her body, and she was pretty.

Why do I know that?

She'd never spoken to Tsugumi before, but Kuchina could distinctly remember what she had said about her sister. She hated that about herself.

Kuchina went down the hallway lined with second-year classrooms and descended the stairs.

Last spring, Tsugumi had been surrounded by friends in the classroom. They were having a competition about who had the most siblings, and no one had beaten Tsugumi with her four sisters. Someone had said how amazing it was that her family had five kids, but Tsugumi had gotten angry and argued back, saying, "Some families have even more! My family hardly even counts as being large." "No way, you definitely have a large family," they'd replied, and everyone had laughed.

I used to want a sister…

Kuchina remembered a time when she'd thought that.

It was because I was alone. I was always alone, and I'll always be alone…

It was unfair. She didn't have anything or anyone.

Even if it's not fair, it probably is.

A boy and a girl came up the stairs. They weren't walking arm in arm, but they were leaning on each other. They were probably going out. Neither of them turned toward Kuchina, and she moved to the side of the stairs before they saw her. They glanced at her as they passed, as if they'd only just noticed her presence.

My mother died because I was born. I don't know what happened to my father. I'm a murderer because I'm like this. What happened to Katsuhiko and Yoshimi is because I tried to quit my job. It's only fair… I don't have the right to be happy…

Kuchina regretted it.

It was fun with Takarai and Shiramori. And Shigee. And Hayashi. And me. It was the first time in my life I was able to spend time like that.

The sweeter the memory, the bitterer the regrets that were stuck in her mind, until they became unbearable.

Ah… That's what it is…

At some point, she'd remembered something that man had said to her when she was caged.

It wasn't a metaphor—Kuchina had literally been imprisoned. She'd been locked inside a strong, steel cage installed in a room. Within that cage was another smaller cage, which could be unlocked using an external mechanism to allow Kuchina to go in and out of it. The person taking care of her would enter the small cage, place Kuchina's food and water on the floor, then leave again right away.

Once a day, or sometimes every few days, that man would show his face.

He ordered the person taking care of Kuchina to put a white plate of food into the small cage. Kuchina hadn't known it at the

time, but it was shortcake. She'd gotten down on her hands and knees and put her face close to the plate, smelling the food. Her mouth had quickly filled with saliva.

"*You want to eat it, Kuchina?*" the man had asked.

Kuchina had nodded immediately.

If she was being honest, she wanted to eat anything as long as it was edible. Kuchina was usually starving and thirsty. She didn't receive food or drinks for *free*. It was always in exchange for something. She wasn't allowed even a single mouthful of water if she didn't do what the people taking care of her, her trainers, or her master said.

Yet that food was extraordinarily appealing. It was completely different from the hard bread, thin rice porridge, salty soup, lukewarm water, foul-smelling white drink, and strange-tasting pills she was usually given. Even the grilled meat she very rarely got, which was the most satisfying of all, didn't stimulate her appetite anywhere nearly as much as this.

"*Do you really?*" the man asked with a smile.

"*I wonder if it's all right to eat.*

"*…Really?*

"*You know, Kuchina…*

"*It's delicious.*

"*To tell you the truth, I also really like it.*

"*The man's an amazing pâtissier. You probably don't understand. I doubt you know that word: 'pâtissier.' It's French. It's someone who makes desserts.*

"*He's an acquaintance of mine. I might even call him a friend. All the desserts he makes are the best.*

"*I'm no gourmet or connoisseur, but I do have my preferences and my own evaluation criteria. I can judge whether that person has talent or not.*

"*That man is extremely talented. He has good taste. He might even be a genius.*

"*It's all right, Kuchina…*

"You can eat it if you want to. I won't berate you if you do.

"But is it all right?

"Is it really?

"Before you eat it, I want you to think about one thing.

"If you do *eat it…*

"I promise you'll want to eat it again. You'll crave it so much that you won't be able to stand it. You'll probably do anything to get it.

"You might think that's impossible.

"…You'd be wrong.

"You can take a gamble.

"If you win, I'll make any wish you have come true. But I won't lose. I know that.

"I know. So…

"Think about that one thing:

"Is it really all right?"

The conversation had happened quite a long time ago, when Kuchina had still been very young. She hadn't clearly understood what that man was trying to say. She'd only known one thing for sure: If she ate the food, something terrible would happen. No matter how much she wanted to eat it, she mustn't. So she restrained herself.

"*I don't want it*," Kuchina had told him.

The man's entire face had broken into a smile.

"That's okay."

Good, Kuchina had thought. *I was right. I won't be punished.*

I shouldn't have eaten it…

Yet despite that, she'd ended up devouring it—not the shortcake, but the potato chips.

"If you do *eat it—"*

The man was laughing.

"—I promise you'll want to eat it again. You'll crave it so much that you won't be able to stand it. You'll probably do anything to get it."

He'd been right: She shouldn't have eaten it.

"—I know that."

He'd seen right through her.

"I know."

He'd seen everything.

Even now, she couldn't escape from that man.

Kuchina had been heading toward the shoe cubbies when it suddenly felt like her heart had burst. The shock was strong enough to make her think it might have.

Asumi Shiramori and Hina Shigee were walking toward her.

Kuchina immediately tried to turn around and go back the way she'd come, but just then— "Oh!" Asumi hopped a little ways off the ground and waved. "Morning, Miss Hitsujimoto!"

"…"

She should just pretend that she couldn't hear or see them and feign ignorance.

But she was too late.

Kuchina was frozen in place. She stared at Asumi and Moena, her eyes wide.

"Miss Hitsujimoto?" Asumi said, tilting her head with her hand still raised.

Moena frowned, looking equally puzzled.

Why…? I didn't notice them first?

They weren't trained. It would be one thing if they were professionals, but for two completely normal people to get the upper hand on her was a terrible blunder. How had something like this happened? Under the right conditions, she might not have been able to recover if this had happened at work.

Kuchina backed away.

I should at least greet them…

Right. She should just say "Good morning" or something. Then she'd be able to leave. It was no big deal. She could do it. Even Kuchina Hitsujimoto could give a greeting— *It's impossible.*

She didn't think it would end with just a greeting. Asumi was an incredibly friendly girl—almost frighteningly so. *She* was frightening.

This feeling Kuchina had was unmistakably fear.

Her relationship with Sousei Takarai was also complicated, but things wouldn't have turned out this way if she'd just been dealing with him.

Asumi Shiramori—now that she was involved, the situation was a huge bother.

Kuchina clenched her teeth. Asumi seemed unsure about whether or not to lower the hand she'd been waving with, and she was avoiding eye contact, screwing up her face slightly. What was that facial expression? Was it discomfort? It couldn't be delight. Was she sad? It could definitely be taken that way. Someone had upset Asumi. In that case, there was only one culprit—Kuchina herself.

She couldn't stand it. Kuchina decisively turned her back on Asumi and Moena. Her footsteps sounded extremely loud as she walked—no, ran away.

She felt an unbearable urge to look back.

Why?

Asumi wouldn't be following her. She wouldn't come chasing her. She was bound to be taken aback. She might be angry. Definitely annoyed.

She hates me…

That was what Kuchina wanted. If Asumi hated her, it would simplify the situation. She probably wouldn't get involved with Kuchina again, and neither would her friend Moena. Yukisada Hayashi was kind of like a hanger-on, so she didn't have to consider him. Sousei would probably say something, but she could just kill him if he was alone with her.

Takarai won't die even if I kill him. I could just keep killing him until he stops coming near me. Until he gives up. Until he hates me…

Why did she feel that way?

Asumi Shiramori likely hated her now.

What did it matter if Sousei Takarai did as well?

Yet thinking about that made her chest ache. Not just her chest, either—a sort of numbing pain was running through her body.

"If you do *eat it, I promise you'll want to eat it again."*

She had to admit he'd been right.

"I know that. I know."

Perhaps that man even knew that, right now, she was wandering aimlessly around school.

There's no way… There shouldn't be…

For one thing, he'd never mentioned anything about Sousei Takarai. There's no way he wouldn't have said something if he knew.

Maybe he's just choosing to stay silent…

Kuchina stopped in the hallway of the building with special-purpose classrooms. She wasn't out of breath, but she was suffocating. It felt like her neck was being strangled.

It's because that man says things that are so misleading… He does it on purpose. He makes you suspicious and anxious, then tries to manipulate and control you…

That was his strategy. He didn't get his own hands dirty, but he used other people for everything. That's why he tamed them. Made deals. Threats. He used whatever means necessary and everything at his disposal.

The hallway was empty. The bell would be ringing soon. Kuchina needed to get back to the classroom before morning homeroom began. It would be fine if she arrived just in time. Otherwise, Asumi or Sousei might say something to her.

But Shiramori probably hates me, so—

Her chest ached again. Asumi's sad-looking face appeared in the back of her mind.

I'm sorry…

She closed her eyes.

I'm sure I'll dream tonight… I'll dream of killing Shiramori and Shigee. They're different from Takarai. If I kill them just once, then that's it. That goes without saying. It's pretty likely that I'll kill the two of them. I should keep my distance. I shouldn't approach them;

there's no way. That was careless. It was a mistake. It's all my fault. I'm sorry…

Kuchina opened her eyes again and looked behind her. She'd sensed something. Before she turned around, she had thought there was no way that could be the case. The hallway was quiet. Kuchina would have noticed if someone was walking toward her. She was no amateur.

It was a male student. His eyes were narrowed, and there was a slight smile in the corners of his mouth.

In a word, the impression he gave off was *neat*. In two, it was *too neat*.

As far as Kuchina knew, his hairstyle never changed at all. She'd never even seen him with a pimple, either. There were boys who wore something like perfume, probably because they were concerned about body odor or smelling sweaty, but he didn't seem to smell like anything.

"Miss Hitsujimoto," Yukisada Hayashi said, bending his neck just a little.

Kuchina carefully watched his every move with extreme caution. She didn't do it intentionally, though. It was unconscious.

I can't kill him.

Of course, she had no reason to take the life of a classmate. Kuchina just had a habit of sorting people based on whether or not she could kill them, so this thought wasn't unusual for her.

She was surprised by the conclusion she came to watching him.

Yukisada Hayashi was just standing there not doing anything. His arms and legs were straight, as was his posture. He was almost like a scarecrow. Defenseless.

Yet he had no openings.

She wouldn't kill him, not even in the worst-case scenario. Yet for some reason, it didn't seem like she'd be *able* to.

Yukisada snorted.

"You're running away again?"

Kuchina felt dizzy. Her face was hot. The blood had gone to her head.

Well, should *I kill him…?*

She wasn't serious. The thought had just flitted across her mind. She should simply ignore him and leave.

"I'm not running away."

For some reason, she couldn't stand to remain silent. She had to at least say something back.

"That so?" Yukisada said with a casual shrug.

That was all. He backed down without a fight and turned around.

As Kuchina watched him walk off, she suddenly felt like she could kill him at any time. She could silently approach him and touch the nape of his neck or somewhere else. She'd considered it many times. There was no way she could see herself failing.

In the meantime, Yukisada had gone down the stairs and out of sight.

Just now… Was that because of my mental condition? It warped my judgment…

She certainly hadn't been calm.

If I'm losing my composure, even with people I can easily kill…

Kuchina leaned against the wall.

Anyone who could easily kill people and *keep* their composure wasn't a decent person.

I've never once thought I'm a decent person. Not for one second…

The bell would be ringing soon. Kuchina didn't want to face Asumi or Sousei, but she still intended to go to the classroom.

"What was that all about…?"

†

During lunchtime, there were a reasonable number of students walking up and down the roofed walkway between school buildings.

The weather was nice, so there were also quite a few people playing ball games and enjoying themselves on the school field, which was visible from the walkway. Others—including Sousei Takarai, Asumi Shiramori, Hina Shigee, aka Moena, and Yukisada Hayashi—were chatting on the parapet, leaning against it or propping their heads on their hands.

"I wonder what we should do…," Asumi said, resting against the wall with her gaze lowered.

Seriously, what should we do…?

Sousei also wanted to make a constructive suggestion, but he couldn't think of anything at all.

"Yeahhh…" Acknowledging what Asumi had said was the best he could do.

"Miss Hitsujimoto just disappears, doesn't she?" Yukisada said, his tone flippant.

Sousei looked over at Yukisada, sitting beside him, to see that he was watching the school field. There was even a smile on his face.

"She's only ever in her seat during class," Yukisada continued. "Even before, as soon as lunch break started, she was gone. She was so fast."

"…It kinda seems like you're finding this amusing, Yukisada…"

"Really?" He looked at Sousei out of the corner of his eye and covered his mouth with his hand. "I don't think I am."

"You always seem like you're having fun, Hayashi," Moena said, sounding somewhat discontent.

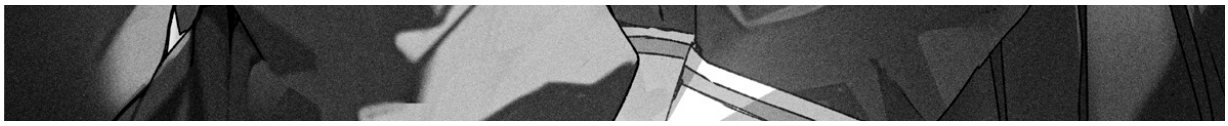
Yukisada nodded. "Because I am, pretty much every day. In fact, I want to know if you think there are that many things that *aren't* fun."

"There are, though!" Moena puffed out her shiny cheeks. "Like a few weeks ago, someone said the name of one of my favorite candies on TV, and then it all got sold out! I put in an order online once a month, but I haven't been able to buy it at all since then! That snack is one of my super staples, and now their sales in

eastern Japan have been put on hold! It's nothing short of a tragedy! A huge tragedy!"

"It's always food with you!" Asumi pointed out, and Moena proudly put her hands on her hips.





“So? What about it?! You want a candy?!”

“I dooo!”

“Okay!”

Without wasting a second, Moena took a candy out of her pocket and passed it to Asumi. And then she gave one to Sousei and Yukisada as well.

“Here you go, Takarai! And one for you, too, Hayashi!”

Asumi, Sousei, and Yukisada all thanked her and removed the transparent wrappers. The candy that day were shaped like fruit: Asumi’s was strawberry, Sousei’s was raspberry, and Yukisada’s was lemon.

“Huh? I’ve never seen this candy before.”

Asumi put the strawberry candy in her mouth, and her eyes went wide.

“Whoa! It’s so good!”

Yukisada ate the lemon candy and nodded in agreement.

“The flavor isn’t really like candy, but a little different, isn’t it?”

The one Sousei had been given was less a raspberry-flavored candy than a candy that tasted like an actual raspberry.

“It’s delicious…”

“They’re German candies,” Moena said with satisfaction. “They’re sold in jars, which is cute, but they taste a bit different from Japanese candies, don’t they? Of course, the ones we have here are yummy, too. I mean, Japanese candy is the most delicious in the world. It’s not just our candy, either.”

“In jars?” Yukisada dropped his gaze to the transparent film wrapper in his hand. “Then what’s this?”

“I wrapped them,” Moena said, swiftly collecting the wrapper from Yukisada’s hand. She promptly grabbed Sousei’s and Asumi’s as well, quickly folded them, and stuffed them into her pocket.

“Thanks. You’re so conscientious, aren’t you, Shigee?” Yukisada said with a smile, and Moena looked away.

"I just do it because I like to! After all, I want to eat yummy things, and I want to let other people eat them, too! Also, could you stop calling me Shigee? That's my surname, but I'm more used to being called Moena. I'm quite fond of that nickname."

"In that case, can I call you Moena as well?" asked Yukisada.

"I wouldn't have said that if you weren't allowed."

"Oh yeah. That's true, Moena."

"You're just going to refer to me so casually all of a sudden…?"

"Shouldn't I have?" Yukisada said calmly.

Moena stared at Yukisada with a look on her face that seemed to say, "You're unbelievable!" but she soon averted her gaze.

"It's fine…"

Well, when you think about it, it's a little weird to speak politely when you're using someone's nickname…

Sousei titled his head.

Or is it…? I don't know. I'm kind of reluctant to refer to people casually, so I still speak politely even though I call her "Moena." I still haven't gotten used to calling Shiramori "Asumin," either…

"Oh, right." Asumi took her phone out of her skirt pocket. "Do you have LINE, Hayashi? We made a group called 'Potato Party.' Wanna join?"

"You made it for the potato chip party?"

Yukisada took out his phone. Moena took hers out, too, so Sousei copied them. It wasn't long before he knew Yukisada had joined their Potato Party group chat.

Yukisada Hayashi: Hello everyone.

Asumin: Hello!

Moenan: Heyyy

Sousei: Thank you for your continued participation.

"You're so formal, Sousei!" Asumi said with a laugh.

Moena gave a wry smile.

"Takarai is past the point of politeness. It seems like he's doing it as a joke now!"

"…That is by no means my intention."

Sousei lowered his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger. He hadn't meant to, but he'd still sounded really polite, so he immediately rephrased it.

"I don't mean to, at all…"

Yukisada Hayashi: Sousei's so serious. Though, personally, I think that's a good thing.

"That's not the sort of thing you'd say in a message, is it? Not when the person is right there…"

"Huh?" Yukisada chuckled. "So should I have complimented you to your face?"

"Nah, that's not what I—"

"Hayashi, you're so fast at typing!" Moena exclaimed, her eyes wide.

"It's kind of my specialty," Yukisada said as he swiped his phone.

Yukisada Hayashi: Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers

Yukisada Hayashi: A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked

Yukisada Hayashi: If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers

Yukisada Hayashi: Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?

Yukisada had sent those messages to the group chat in approximately one second.

Moena's mouth gaped open.

"That's amazing…!"

"Hrmm."

Asumi's expression suddenly clouded over, and she fiddled with her phone. She seemed to be typing something.

Asumin: I guess Miss Hitsujimoto probably won't join the Potato Party
Asumin: It'd be nice if she did though…

"With messages, you can say things that are hard to say out loud, huh?" Yukisada said smoothly.

Yukisada Hayashi: I wonder if Miss Hitsujimoto has a cell phone in the first place.
Yukisada Hayashi: I've never seen her using one.

Based on the time stamps of the messages, it seemed Yukisada had typed them at the same time as he was talking. He was pretty talented.

"…I'm not sure." Sousei searched his memories. "I haven't seen her using one, either…I don't think?"

Surely, she'd have a smartphone or similar sort of device.

She should have one she uses for work calls and things… I wonder how Miss Hitsujimoto receives jobs. She's a high school student, so wouldn't it be difficult to do everything by herself…?

"This isn't a job that I do because I like it."

That was what she'd told him.

"I've been forced to do it. I had no choice but to do it. Same as now."

She had a master of sorts who was forcing her. Based on her cheat, her role was probably to execute tasks for them.

The phone I have is a modified one Sis arranged for me. That said, work communications could be done through a secure line on a dedicated device used only for that purpose…

Yukisada Hayashi: How about we start by checking whether Miss Hitsujimoto has a cell phone?

Yukisada Hayashi: It's a normal question to ask, so I think the bar's relatively low.

"Fine by me," Moena agreed.

When she'd given everyone a candy earlier, she hadn't had one herself. Now, however, there was a bulge in her right cheek. There was a good chance it was a candy in there. When had she put it in her mouth? Sousei hadn't noticed at all.

"Okay, let's do that, then!" Asumi's face was faintly flushed. Her enthusiasm was amazing. Her eyes sparkled so brightly, it was almost hard to believe, and it was even difficult to look at them directly. Sousei couldn't suppress the feeling that someone like him had no right to gaze upon them, but he couldn't help himself.

Yukisada Hayashi: After school, maybe?

Yukisada Hayashi: Actually, after classes have finished but before end-of-school homeroom might be best.

Yukisada Hayashi: Miss Hitsujimoto seems likely to leave the classroom as soon as homeroom ends.

Sousei started typing a message saying, *I see*, but stopped partway through.

"…How about speaking, Yukisada?"

"Heh-heh." Yukisada gave a low chuckle and put his phone away. After he took his hand out of his pocket, the group chat received some new messages.

Yukisada Hayashi: Sorry about that.
Yukisada Hayashi: We should speak when we can, huh?
Yukisada Hayashi: I'll be careful about that from now on.

"What the?!" Asumi yelled, and Moena blinked several times and looked at her phone again.

"How'd you do that…?!" asked Sousei.

Yukisada put his index finger against his lips.

"It's a secret."

†

Sixth period was English. Their teacher, Ms. Yoshihara, always ended the lesson just before the bell rang and quickly left the classroom.

She closed the textbook. It was nearly time.

Sousei quickly exchanged glances with Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada.

"<That's all for today,>" Ms. Yoshihara announced in English, using her usual phrase to wrap up the lesson. The next moment, she tucked the textbook and other teaching materials under her arm and moved away from the teacher's desk.

Sousei immediately stood up. Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada followed suit at almost the exact same time.

When he turned to look at the seat right at the back of the classroom by the window, Kuchina Hitsujimoto was no longer there.

"No wayyy…," Sousei murmured inadvertently.

Ms. Yoshihara opened the classroom door at the front of the room. She hadn't left yet. But she was just about to.

Kuchina had placed her hand on the door at the back of the room. And she was holding her bag.

"Wai—" Sousei tried to call out to stop her, but Kuchina had already opened the door and dashed out into the hallway.

"<Yes?>" Ms. Yoshihara asked, turning around.

"Uh, no…" Sousei almost said "not you" on reflex. That would be such a rude thing to say to a teacher. "I-it's nothing…"

Ms. Yoshihara looked dubious, but she left the room without saying anything else.

Asumi and Moena were staring in stunned disbelief at the wide-open door at the back of the classroom. Yukisada approached the door, glanced outside, then turned back to Sousei and shook his head.

"Whaaat…?" Sousei sat—or rather, slumped—back down in his chair. "We still have end-of-school homeroom…"

†

When their homeroom teacher, Mr. Oohira, noticed Kuchina Hitsujimoto's absence, he asked the Class 2-2 students about it in his somewhat distinctive muffled voice.

"Huuuh…? What happened to Hitsujimoto…? Does anyone know…?"

"Seems she went home for some reason. She left school early, or only a few minutes ago, actually," replied Kouichirou Wakuya with a half smile. For Wakkuu, who didn't know the circumstances, Kuchina's behavior probably seemed sudden and incomprehensible.

"I seeee…" Mr. Oohira scratched his head. He seemed more disappointed than confused, as well as extremely concerned. He wasn't the type to actively engage with his students, but his good-natured personality was revealed through his demeanor.

According to the rumors, Mr. Oohira had been through a lot. His wife had a chronic illness, and he had apparently taken on the responsibility of single-handedly caring for their three (or maybe four) children.

Despite nobody saying anything, Sousei and his friends all stayed behind in the classroom after school.

Sousei's body felt heavy as he sat down in his seat, and Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada all gathered around him.

"She saw right through us, didn't she?" Yukisada said, standing in front of Sousei's desk. He had his arms folded, and there was an unusually thoughtful expression on his face.

"Miss Hitsujimoto sure is sharp…," said Asumi. For some reason, she was sitting back-to-back in a single chair with Moena. Sousei wondered if they weren't cramped like that. "She's really intuitive or something. How did she figure it out? It's a mystery."

"Hmmm… *Is* it a mystery, though?" Moena asked, tilting her head. "I mean, Takarai and Hayashi are one thing, but Asumin, you kept glancing at Miss Hitsujimoto."

"Huh? Really? I did?"

"You sure did. It wasn't even a few times, either—you were looking *way* too much."

"You were doing it like once every ten seconds." Yukisada chuckled.

Asumi raised her eyebrows. "I wasn't looking *that* much! I might have done it a few times, though…"

"A few times?"

"Maybe like every fifteen minutes? At most, probably every ten—five minutes…?"

"Even every five minutes is enough for Miss Hitsujimoto to get suspicious." Moena pulled candies out of her pocket with a frightfully practiced motion and passed one each to Asumi, Yukisada, and Sousei. These were different from the candies she'd given them during their lunch break.

"…Throat lozenges?"

The wrappers said SUMO CITRUS HONEY THROAT LOZENGE. Sumo Citrus was a kind of orange or mandarin. Sousei had never tried one before, but he'd heard about them.

He immediately tore off the wrapper and popped the candy in his mouth. It had a mild, refreshingly sour citrus flavor and a distinctive, luxurious sweetness. The medicinal taste suggested they would also soothe his throat, but it wasn't strong enough to bother him. In fact, it added just the right amount of spice.

"I could get addicted to these…"

"They're good, aren't they?" Moena held out her hand, and Sousei automatically placed the empty wrapper in her palm. Moena also collected Asumi's wrapper and put them in her pocket.

"You too, Hayashi—"

"Hang on." Yukisada took out his phone. He put the candy wrapper on Sousei's desk then pointed his phone at it, and the camera made a shutter noise. "So I can buy these later."

"They're sold at convenience stores and stuff, so they're easy to find." Moena took the wrapper Yukisada had placed on the desk and crumpled it in her hand. "They're pretty cheap, too. I highly recommend them. No matter how many you eat, you don't get tired of them."

"Thanks," Yukisada said with a smile, and Moena looked away.

"—Hnnngh." Asumi suddenly looked up at the ceiling and kicked her legs around noisily. "After all that, I really wonder if Miss Hitsujimoto does have a phone. Maybe she doesn't. I think she'd tell us if we ask, but we haven't had the chance. Ugggghhhh…"

"That Miss Hitsujimoto sure is serious about running away from us, huh?" Yukisada rolled the candy around in his mouth. "It'll probably be difficult to catch her unless we get serious, too."

"You think we should 'get serious'…?" Sousei let out a laugh that wasn't bitter or forced—it sounded more like "Eh?" Even he had no idea why he was laughing.

…I mean, I chased her around fairly seriously for forty-five minutes first thing this morning, and I still wasn't able to catch her…

He wanted to put his head on his desk. Or more accurately, bang his forehead against it.

I won't, though…

Sousei glanced idly toward the open classroom door. The moment he did, he realized something: He hadn't done it *idly* at all. He'd sensed something. Someone was going to come into the classroom.

—Miss Hitsujimoto?

Sousei stood up abruptly.

Guess not…

There was no reason why it would've been her.

Sousei's shoulders slumped so dramatically he felt he might dislocate them, surprising the small-statured girl who'd just come in. She was wearing glasses and had her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail.

"Wha…?" the girl said, taking half a step backward. "…What? What's wrong?"

"Aaah, Class President!" Asumi waved, a huge smile spread across her face.

"Do you have work to do or something, Tadecchi?" Moena asked.

Iori Tadeshina, the president of Class 2-2, adjusted the frames of her glasses with her finger.

"Yeah, kind of. Mr. Oohira asked me to do something."

"Thanks for all your hard work," Yukisada said with a smile.

"Not at all," Iori said offhandedly. "All I'm doing is carrying out my duties. It's not anything you should be thanking me for. You all look like you're having fun, which is good, but don't stay in the classroom too late. This isn't a playground, you know."

"Okaaaaay!" Asumi replied cheerfully, but Moena seemed a little hurt.

"Tadecchi, every single word you say is so harsh. I don't think what you're saying is wrong, but if you're not a little more mindful about how you say it, you're going to make enemies."

"I appreciate your concern, Hina Shigee," Iori immediately retorted, "but as you pointed out, I haven't said anything wrong, have I? If someone gets angry and decides to be my enemy over that, then they're welcome to it."

"There she goes again…" Moena sighed. Asumi hugged her gently from behind.

Apparently, Moena and Iori had known each other since before they started high school. The class president was considered an honor student—both by herself and by others—and everyone relied on her. She had a strong sense of responsibility, a sturdy character, and a dependable nature, but she also had a prickly side that put off some of the students.

"There's no need to worry about me," Iori said, lifting her chin and looking down at Moena. "Everything is perfectly fine and dandy. Even if I'm shunned or despised, I walk my own path. That's how I live my life."

"Oh, I see!" Moena replied, raising her voice. Her lips were quivering. "You want a candy?" Offering a candy to the president despite her obvious anger was a very Moena thing to do.

"I won't let your generosity go to waste!" Without hesitation, the president stepped forward to accept the throat lozenge from Moena. Sousei couldn't understand the class president's mindset, either.

She's going to take it…?

"Yeeeeeah!"

But at that moment, Wakkuu burst into the classroom. He gave his usual "Yooo!" and salute-like gesture, and the situation started to descend into chaos.

"…Y-yo…" Although he was confused—or *because* he was so confused, probably—Sousei automatically returned the greeting with a "Yo" of his own.

Beaming, Wakkuu gave a sharp thumbs-up, then saluted again.

"Yoooooo again…!"

"You're so noisy!" Iori was about to throw the candy she'd received from Moena at Wakkuu, but she stopped herself at the last moment.

"I know, right…?" Moena said in agreement as she took out another candy. "Want one?" she asked Wakkuu.

"I'll take it, muscle-ertainly I will! Like the wind! Hustle, whoosh…!" As he ran up to Moena, Wakkuu let out a stream of words that both made sense and made no sense whatsoever. He knelt down in front of her and accepted the throat lozenge, holding it reverently above his head. "Heaven be praised! At this very moment, my throat was starting to hurt slightly after being overworked all day today! As expected of you, Moena! What a considerate demon you are! Hup! Or perhaps I should call you a demon lord! You're a gift to mankind! A president…!"

"Ha-ha-ha…" Yukisada let out a laugh. But given Yukisada was usually so carefree, the exasperation in it was noticeable.

Wakkuu stood as he tore the candy wrapper off. He tossed the lozenge up and, without missing his mark, caught it in his mouth.

"*Delicioso.* You're the best!" He winked at Moena.

"Ah, every single thing about you is annoying…!" Iori said, holding her head in her hands.

She's not wrong…

Deep down, Sousei couldn't help but agree.

Wakkuu's funny, though… And he's a good guy…

"I'm annoying…?" Wakkuu's eyes bulged so much that it seemed his eyeballs would pop out. It just lasted a moment, though. His

expression quickly turned serious, as if he'd just realized something. He lowered his head with a chuckle, and a bashful expression appeared on his face. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I mean, this sort of thing would get in people's way if I did it at home. When I say 'this sort of thing,' I guess I'm talking about myself. That's not good. I shouldn't put myself down. Self-respect, self-respect. Gotta have pride, all the time, have some ego, do the tango. Wow, that doesn't make sense even to me…"

"Still…aren't you a little *too* hyper, Wakkuu?" Asumi asked, looked slightly taken aback.

Now that you mention it…

Wakkuu was full of energy. It wouldn't even be an exaggeration to call him the embodiment of energy. He threw around jokes about every little thing, seized every opportunity to bring up an exciting topic of conversation, and dragged everyone into constant improv comedy games, creating a whirlwind of laughter every single day.

But I feel like he's not usually this crazy…right?

"Hngh-hee." Wakkuu let out a strange laugh and spun in place. "You noticed? Yeah, I'm super hyped up. You know why? I guess you don't. That's okay, I'll tell you. The…reason…is…!"

Iori inexplicably put her hands over both ears and shut her mouth tight.

Wakkuu put a hand to his chest and looked at the class president. Even though he was wide awake, he was wearing the expression of one having a pleasant dream.

"It's Tadeshina's fault—or really, I should say it's *thanks* to Tadeshina. When I'm near her, I always feel more energized. Ac-tu-ally. I was waiting for her outside the teachers' room, but she managed to give me the slip. So of course my energy levels spiked when I came back to the classroom and Tadeshina was here, right?"

"…Hmm?" Asumi said, puffing her cheeks out. "What do you mean?"

"It kind of seems like an explanation, but not really." It seemed it hadn't really made sense to Moena, either.

"When you're near the class president, your energy levels…" Sousei tried to make sense of Wakkuu's words. "…Like a sacred power spot? Or something? No, that can't be right. The president is a person, not a place…"

"Do you *like* the president, Wakkuu?" Yukisada asked, and before Wakkuu could answer, Iori let out a loud "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh…!" still blocking her ears.

"Right!" Wakkuu turned to face Yukisada and made a V sign with his fingers. "By the way, that's 'right' as in 'correct,' not like 'left and right.' In other words…you got it!"

"He hasn't 'got it'!" Iori pointed at Wakkuu. Even her ears were bright red, and her glasses were slightly askew. "This scoundrel is simply amusing himself! He's making fun of me! Even you should know that when it comes to this miscreant, anything goes as long as he finds it funny! That's the kind of person he is! He makes people the butt of his jokes! It's completely, extremely annoying! It's outrageous!"

As soon as Iori said that, Wakkuu's eyebrows turned down in a worried sort of way.

"No, no, no, you've got it all wrong, Tadeshina! I mean, it's true I think everything's better when it's funny, but I never thought about making you the butt of a joke, not even a tiny bit! These feelings of love are true-blue *jimami* tofu!"

"Why are you randomly bringing up a local peanut dish from Okinawa and Kagoshima?! That sort of thing is exactly why I can't take you at your word!"

"Because of *that*?! I don't even have a comeback if that's what's bothering you! I'm serious, I really like you, Tadeshina! That was my way of subtly hinting we should go to Okinawa together and eat some authentic *jimami* tofu!"

"You're kidding if you think I'll go on some pre-wedding trip or whatever with you! You repulsive, dissolute pervert!"

"I'm sorryyyy! I just got carried away. Since it's way too soon for a trip together, how about going on a little date with me this weekend? We could even start dating!"

"I refuse! I mean, I've already flat-out refused so many times already!"

"I don't give up in the slightest, you know?! Because, as I said, I really like you, Tadeshina!" Wakkuu paused for a moment, then shouted, "I like you a lot!" Then, after another pause, "I love you!"

Asumi made a sound somewhere between "Uhhh…" and "Urgh…" Yukisada clapped three times, but his intent in doing so was unclear.

"Seriously…?" Moena said. She might have been asking Wakkuu or perhaps Iori. Maybe both of them.

"Of course I'm serious!" Wakkuu answered immediately and emphatically. He seemed a little offended.

"What is that supposed to mean?!" Iori said. She was more than just a little upset, but quite clearly outraged. "Are you trying to say I'm not worthy of being loved by someone, so it's inconceivable that Wakuya would have feelings for me?! You are so rude, Hina!"

"I just wasn't expecting it, is all…," Moena said, struggling to get the words out. It was clear to see she was shaking quite a lot. "… Uhhhh, are you serious, Wakkuu? You like Tadecchi? Since when…?"

"Hmm." Wakkuu counted off on his fingers. "Since about ten days ago? Maybe? It was love at first sight. Or I guess not. Of course, I knew Tadeshina already. What was it? It happened so fast. I thought, like, 'Oh, she's cute… I might like her…,' you know? The love train suddenly pulled up, and once you get on, there's no getting off. Since then, I've been fiercely pursuing her. Full steam ahead! It feels like no one can stop me. Even though I keep getting rejected. Even though I've been rejected every day. The first time did get me down. But then you know what? I gradually recovered. I'm amazing, aren't I? Don't you think I have a mindset of steel?"

"What should I do?!" Iori exclaimed. She hugged her shoulders with both hands and squirmed as if she couldn't stand it. "I've said

over and over again that I don't plan to date anyone until the time comes! Why doesn't he get that?!"

"…Ummm." Sousei timidly raised a hand.

Iori instantly fixed her posture and readjusted the positioning of her glasses as she turned toward Sousei.

"Yes, Takarai? What is it?"

"…That's we—"

"…We? We *what*?"

"No, it's not that…" Sousei had been about to say, "That's weird."

She gives off the impression of being very serious and having good leadership skills, but Tadeshina is actually quite weird. I don't mean that in a bad way, either. She's sort of…interesting…in a good way…

Sousei cleared his throat and asked a new question. "Uhh, what did you mean just now when you said, 'Until the time comes'…?"

"I mean when I feel like I want to get married. It's not like I have a specific time frame in mind, but I want to study medieval Japanese history in university, so I'm also planning to do graduate school. I want to research historical documents. I don't have time to waste on romance."

"You've really thought a lot about the future, huh…?"

"Of course I have. This is the only life I'll ever get. How could I not think about it?"

"That's another thing I like about you. I think it's really cool." Wakkuu closed his eyes and nodded to himself. "The more I get to know you, the more I like you. Also, I wonder if that means you don't hate me, but you just don't want to get married right now. Well, we can't get married yet anyway, right? So putting that aside, if you don't necessarily hate me, then it makes me think I've still got a chance. If it's for you, Tadeshina, I'll do my best not to get in the way of your studies. I think I can do that, right?"

"Wakkuu!" Asumi did a fist pump. "Hang in there!"

"Oh! Thanks, Asumin! I'll try even harder!"

"Please don't say something so irresponsible, Shiramori! This guy gets carried away far too easily!" Iori yelled, pointing at Wakkuu.

Wakkuu put his hands up and shook his head. "I won't get carried away! I won't! I'll make sure of it. I promise, Tadeshina. Like I said, I like you more than anyone else, so all I ask is that you don't reject my feelings, okay? You don't have to accept the way I feel, but just let me keep liking you."

"…I—I mean… It's not like I have any right to tell a person what to do with their heart…"

"Nobody does, right? A person's heart belongs only to them."

"I guess you're right about that…"

"I like you, Tadeshina, and I'll chase after you of my own accord. Don't worry about me."

"You say not to worry, but still…"

"Even if you never see me the same way, I'll be completely fine. After all, I've got a super-strong mindset of steel. By the way, what were you guys doing, Takarai? Having a classroom gossip session? This an after-school chat group? Were you in the middle of hosting some sort of speaking event?"

"We were just chatting about Miss Hitsujimoto—" Asumi cut herself off and let out an "Oops." She opened her eyes wide. "I just blurted it out accidentally!"

Iori frowned, her lips turning down at the corners.

"Miss Hitsujimoto? Has something happened with her again? She went home before end-of-school homeroom, and she wasn't in the classroom during lunchtime. She was acting kind of funny."

"Oh, don't tell me…" Wakkuu looked around at Sousei and everyone else. "Were you having a strategy meeting to try to further your ultimate goal of becoming friends with Hitsujimoto?"

"How did you know that?!" Asumi shouted.

It's not like we were really keeping it a secret, so I guess it's fine. Still…

Even Wakkuu had seen through their plans.

That said, although he appeared to be a lighthearted, easygoing guy—and there were definitely aspects of his behavior that reflected that—Wakkuu had keen observation skills. What's more, he also had the gift of gab and was extraordinarily witty.

"Long story short…," Yukisada said, then actually managed to explain the situation quite succinctly. "We want to contact Miss Hitsujimoto, but we're not sure if she even has a phone, and we don't have many chances to speak to her. So we're wondering what we should do."

"Why not write a letter?" Iori casually suggested. "You could put it in her shoe box or inside her desk. That won't work if she has absolutely no intention of reading it and just throws it away, but if she doesn't feel too strongly about it, she'd probably at least give it a skim, right?"

Wakkuu snapped his fingers. "A love letter! That's good! I should write one, too. You'd at least read it, wouldn't you?"

"I'd correct it word by word and cover it in red ink!"

"You'd return it as a prized possession covered in your own handwriting, Tadeshina? That makes me so happy!"

"What a ridiculously positive, strong-willed guy…," Moena muttered quietly.

Wakkuu was truly amazing. Sousei wanted to follow his example.

That's probably not possible…

Sousei put that thought to the side for now and exchanged a look with Asumi.

"A letter…"

"A letter!"

Asumi also seemed to have been taken by surprise. They'd never even thought about that, probably because they were so fixated on modern conveniences like smartphones.

Iori walked over to her seat and took something out of her bag.

"I have stationery and envelopes if you need them. I always have some on hand, but I don't need them for anything, really. You

can have them if you'd like. Here."

As she'd been talking, Iori had placed a light blue letter set on Sousei's desk. She was being incredibly kind and not in the least bit pushy. Iori was also an amazing person—if in an entirely different way from Wakkuu.

"Thank you very much, Class President…" Sousei bowed his head meekly, and the corners of the president's mouth relaxed into a slight smile.

"You're welcome."

"Just to let you guys know!" Wakkuu chimed in. "Tadeshina is fine with everyone calling her 'Class President,' but since that isn't her name, it does seem to bother her a bit. Just something to keep in mind!"

"Really?!" Asumi asked, jumping up slightly.

"Tadecchi is rather delicate, you know," Moena said with a shrug of her shoulders. "Unlike me."

"It's not like it bothers me that much…," Iori Tadeshina—who apparently didn't like being called "Class President"—said, looking down and fidgeting.

"So I guess we should call you Tadecchi," Yukisada said with a smile, and Iori's head jerked up.

"I don't want you calling me that, either! The only person who calls me by my elementary school nickname is Hina!"

Ø2

Wretched Wizards

Tohru Hakayama, also known as GD, was troubled by an uncomfortable pain in his head. It was a strange feeling, as if his brain was being touched by some sort of foreign object, but it was something Hakayama was intimately familiar with by now.

He'd suffered this mysterious pain when he was seven, in the autumn of his first year of elementary school. As far as he could recall, that was the first time it had happened. The inside of his head had felt strange. It had hurt. He'd felt sick. Hakayama had complained about it, and his homeroom teacher, Ms. Namerikawa, had been so worried about him that he'd taken the young Hakayama to the school nurse herself. At the time, Ms. Namerikawa was twenty-six, had a bob cut, and was quite plump, particularly around her ample bosom.

Years later, when he was in fifth grade, Hakayama would be nicknamed "Professor Perv." Even as a first-grader, however, he'd already taken a special interest in the opposite sex. Ms. Namerikawa had been his first love. He hadn't hesitated to use any means to gain her favor, and throughout his life, there had been very few people he hadn't been able to manipulate if he put his mind to it. Ms. Namerikawa had undoubtedly favored the young Hakayama. While he was grateful for his good fortune, being able to experience her

soft touch, he shuddered at the unusual discomfort that never seemed to go away.

This is some horrible illness, isn't it? I'm going to die.

Despite being in the first grade of elementary school, Hakayama had even resigned himself to an early death. He'd spent about an hour in bed at the nurse's office before his parents had come to take him to the hospital. A doctor examined him and prescribed some medicine, but even that hadn't stopped the pain. Ms. Namerikawa had gone to the trouble of visiting him that evening and held his hand for a while, but the uncomfortable pain in Hakayama's head hadn't let up.

He hadn't been able to sleep that night, and before dawn, the Hakayama household received a phone call.

It was news that his grandmother had been rushed to the hospital with a sudden illness.

As a younger woman, Hakayama's grandmother had transitioned from working as a tour bus guide to working in the nighttime entertainment industry, making a name for herself under an alias at an establishment in Ginza. Eventually, she'd caught the eye of a yakuza boss known by everyone in that world and become his mistress. After going through many twists and turns in life, she'd married Hakayama's grandfather, a post office clerk—but even after that, she'd continued to lead an eventful life and had apparently even frequently run away from their home, leaving behind her daughter, Hakayama's mother. But when Tohru, her first grandchild, had been born, she'd doted on him. Hakayama could still vividly recall the warmth of his grandmother's body, her scent, her heartbeat, and the sounds of her breathing as she'd held him while they slept. Hakayama had, without a doubt, been a grandma's boy.

About an hour after the phone call informing them of his grandmother's condition, the foreign object in the young Hakayama's head disappeared as if it had never existed in the first place.

Oh. She's dead.

Grandma died.

He didn’t know how or why he knew, but Hakayama was certain of it. And it turned out he was right.

After several similar occurrences, Hakayama realized something.

The sensation of having a foreign object in his head and the pain it brought on—which was clearly different from a regular headache and could only be described as “unique”—was him having a *bad feeling*. That said, it was too accurate to simply call it a “feeling.” Whenever he was tormented by that strange sensation, something bad would inevitably happen. In most cases, someone would die. And the people who lost their lives tended to be those who Hakayama didn’t want to die.

It wasn’t too bad if other people died. Even if it was painful, he could come to terms with it. But the next one to die could be Hakayama himself. He couldn’t afford to ignore his *bad feelings*. When a foreign object appeared in his head, it was a sign that things would turn out badly if they stayed as they were. A sign that he had to change something.

Because of that, Hakayama had repeatedly postponed a meeting he’d originally planned for two weeks earlier. He’d also changed the location from the first hideout to a classy teppanyaki restaurant that could be reserved for private use, to the second hideout, and finally to the third hideout, where he currently was. Each time something changed, the thing in Hakayama’s head changed with it, becoming a sledgehammer, a wok, a barbell, a sashimi knife, and a long nail, among other things. The appearance of the object was just a metaphor, but after many years of experience, Hakayama was able to get a rough mental picture of it. The bigger and more dangerous the object was, the *worse* his feeling was. In other words, the more severe the upcoming crisis would be.

The third hideout was a former sheet metal factory in the suburbs. Seven or eight highly polished classic cars were parked inside, and the space was furnished with a leather sofa from Baxter—a high-end furniture company—and a marble coffee table that was

either Cappellini or Cassina. It also had a bar and a kitchen with an extra-large fridge.

As soon as Hakayama had decided to have the meeting at the third hideout on that particular night, the thing in his head had become a packet of natto. His mother had eaten natto every day without fail, but his grandmother had despised it, saying that she wouldn't eat those awful smelly fermented soybeans even if it killed her.

It was natto. Probably. Since it was packaged, he didn't actually know whether what was inside really was natto. It didn't smell like anything. It was just a mental image based on his experience, but he thought it was *probably* natto. He didn't know what to think of this particular thing in his head.

Even now, as he was sitting down for a meeting with the "Big Five" lieutenants of the Scarecrows criminal organization—a group that committed every evil deed imaginable—Hakayama was still trying to figure it out.

"GD."

The guy who'd called out to Hakayama wore a suit and sunglasses and was making a cocktail at the bar. Yuuki Kimokawa was a man who liked flashy things. His gray striped suit and dark red tie were annoyingly shiny, and the frames of his light-colored sunglasses were studded with diamonds. His hair, which was slicked back and set in place with hair products, also shone brightly. His appearance may have looked foolish, but he was actually quite astute and cautious. Once, he'd confessed that the time it took for him to recite the multiplication tables slowed down when he was drunk, and the look on his face had been surprisingly serious. The cocktail he was making was probably nonalcoholic.

"It's been a month and a half since the last job," Kimokawa said. "Seems like it's about time we made some more money, right?"

As Hakayama remained silent, sunk deep into the Baxter sofa, the man sitting next to him banged his fists together loudly.

"Damn right. We always do a job every couple months."

Shiro had a shaved head and was dressed in a hoodie, sweatpants, and sneakers. He was short, at just under five-five, but he looked much bigger. His hands were huge, with fingers as fat as zucchinis and palms so thick, they resembled floor cushions.

When he was in his teens, Shiro had made his debut in the underground fighting scene and, after a string of consecutive victories, had gone over to the United States by himself to compete in the famous QFC fighting tournament. He'd won two matches back-to-back, then killed his opponent in the ring during the third and lost by disqualification. After his contract was canceled and he returned to Japan, he'd wreaked havoc in every type of underground fighting competition there was, racking up experience in actual combat against fighters who were equally fierce and had just as little concern for their lives. The man was a hardcore battle junkie.

"What's next? What're we gonna hit? I don't wanna do something boring. If we're gonna do it, it's gotta be a challenge."

He smirked, revealing titanium teeth that shone with a dull gleam as a blue vein rose to the surface of his forehead. Shiro was a true close-quarters fighter who loved a brawl. He didn't have a single one of his own teeth left. Normally, ceramic and other artificial teeth would be anchored to the bone with titanium screws, but Shiro had insisted on having his teeth be made completely out of titanium.

Every time he saw Shiro's titanium teeth, the same thought went through Hakayama's mind: *This guy's seriously crazy.* Shiro always aimed to keep his body fat at five percent, and when he stripped down, you could almost see every one of his muscles. He took pride in his unbelievable physique, but it had gone beyond being impressive and was now just creepy. It was repulsive, even.

"The last one was…," pondered a woman with a shaved head, placing her hand on the hood of a classic car. Midori. She was wearing a black MA-1 bomber jacket over a tank top, skinny jeans, and crimson stiletto heels, and she always had a whip hanging at her side. It was clear to see that this woman wasn't respectable. Although Midori looked scary simply by having her head shaved, she

also had a tattoo of an anime girl across her bald scalp. Hakayama wasn't interested and didn't really know much about it, but the picture was of a character called Magical Girl Matomato, or Momimomi, or Memomimo. Something like that. Of all the tattoos he'd seen, this one was particularly odd.

"The independent crime gang…Poraigon? Is that what it was called? The head of that gang, this guy Mutou, well, seems he was the kid of the Komamushi group leader, Ikoma or whatever. But Ikoma didn't recognize him as his kid."

"Ahh, the man you tortured and killed, Midori?" Kimokawa asked with a smile, taking a sip of his nonalcoholic cocktail. "Kouhei Mutou. Little Master Mutou. Well, he grew into a man with 450 million yen in hand. Even his old man, Ikoma, the head of the gang, must have been happy with him, don't you think? Thanks to him, we were able to get that 450 million. It's actually hard for the yakuza to move hundreds of millions of yen around these days. The only ones making real money are the handful of people right at the top."

"Kyahaa!" Midori suddenly let out a strange squeal and started touching herself between the legs. "Mutooou. He was *fun*, wasn't he? Right at the end. I shoved all *sorts* of things in all *sorts* of holes other than his mouth. And when I asked him whether it felt good, you know what he said?! 'Help me!' or some shit like that! What the hell, right?! I told him he should say, 'This is amaaazing!' And that guy, right?! He actually says it: 'This is amaaaazing!' He was so full of shit! Though just remembering it feels amaaazing for me. I tell ya, Mutou, a legend was created in those final moments of his! If he'd survived, I would've kept him as a pet. But he was already on the brink of death, wasn't he? He asked me to save him! As if that would ever happen! He should've known that, at least!"

Midori jumped onto the roof of the classic car and burst into a high-pitched cackle. The car was a silver Chevrolet Corvette C3. Although it wasn't particularly expensive, Hakayama couldn't understand the mindset of someone who would put her feet on it like that for no reason. But Midori probably just wasn't thinking at

all. She was ridiculously callous and would calmly commit acts of cruelty for her own pleasure. There definitely weren't many people like her. She had to be handled with care, but she was useful, which was why she was in the group.

Kimokawa and Shiro were roaring with laughter along with Midori. One was the type to commit intellectual, nonviolent crimes, while the other was addicted to violence. But in a way, they weren't all that different. Kimokawa and Shiro wouldn't engage in violent, disorderly behavior out in broad daylight on the street—but that was only because getting chased by the police would be a hassle, so they chose self-control. If not for that, though, who knew what they'd do?

Even the structure of their brains was fundamentally different from ordinary civilians. Although the environment they'd been born into and grown up in had something to do with it, Hakayama thought the majority of it came from their innate dispositions. A group of people like Midori, Kimokawa, and Shiro were bound to become criminals. No one could stop that. They were innately evil people.

Sitting on a second Baxter leather sofa were Hyougo Kurojima, who was silently doing maintenance on his modified gun, and Benny, who had his arms crossed and his eyes closed. Kurojima and Benny were a different species from Midori, Kimokawa, and Shiro.

Kurojima always wore camouflage clothing, a bandanna wrapped around his head, and big, black-framed glasses. Even from just a glance, you could tell he was a military enthusiast and gun fanatic—and an obsessive one, at that.

The Glock 17 he was currently reassembling was a gun he'd modified from a commercially sold replica to make it capable of firing live rounds. And it wasn't just his own gun, either. The Colt Government hidden in Kimokawa's inner pocket, along with the majority of the guns belonging to the members of the Scarecrows, had been made by Kurojima. He even manufactured the bullets himself. He'd also done enough test-firing to be a good shot.

According to Kurojima, even if it was called “test-firing,” you couldn’t tell if a gun was good or bad just from shooting at a target—for hunting guns, you should shoot an animal. For combat guns, you should shoot a person. There was no point in shooting people who were tied up and couldn’t move, as you wouldn’t know whether the gun would actually be useful in a fight, whether it could incapacitate an enemy, and whether, if necessary, it could shoot to kill.

Kurojima was an extreme gun enthusiast. He’d been born in the wrong country, so he had no choice but to break the law to pursue his love of guns. Modifying guns and making bullets cost money, which had led him to getting involved in illegal sales, and he’d also played at being an assassin to test-fire his guns. He used to live with his parents, but when they tried to turn their son in to the police for his illegal activities, Kurojima had apparently shot them dead and buried them.

Before long, he’d become well known in the underground world. Hakayama had also dealt with him a few times before. When Hakayama had formed the Scarecrows, he had invited the man to join despite thinking it was a long shot—and to his unbelievable surprise, Kurojima had agreed.

Why had he done that?

Hakayama was truly curious, but he hadn’t asked. When they met up, he’d shaken Kurojima’s hand, given him a hug, and whispered in his ear, “You’ll add the strength of a hundred people.” Kurojima had just responded with a murmured “Yeah,” his face going a little red. He was clearly a useful man, yet he was also a typical lone wolf. Hakayama thought he was probably suffering from loneliness.

Kurojima was an unattractive, eccentric person, but there was also a cute side to him.

“Poraigon, huh…?” Benny muttered quietly with his eyes slightly open. Unlike Kurojima, there wasn’t anything charming about him.

"It was such a boring job, huh? There wasn't anyone worth cutting down."

Benny had long hair and a beard. He was wearing an aloha shirt, shorts, and low-top sneakers. Apparently, his face and figure had been slimmer in his younger days, but everything had started to sag once he passed forty. He seemed to be trying to act like a cool middle-aged man, but instead, he just came off as an old man who didn't act his age. However, his thick, monolid eyes didn't give off that same impression, and he had a piercing gaze. His big, brawny build gave him an intimidating physical presence.

Benny always made sure to have his two beloved swords within reach: a long *uchigatana* and short *wakizashi*, replicas of the famous Yamanbagiri Kunihiro and Honebami Toushirou made by a contemporary swordsmith. According to Benny, he'd had them made by an exceptionally skilled master craftsman.

"It doesn't really matter if it's boring," Kimokawa said, flippantly holding up his cocktail glass. "The most important thing is profit, after all. Last time, we each got sixty million, and the rest we gave to the underlings. If you think of it as a job we do once every two months, it's not so bad that we should be pessimistic, yet it's not so good that we should be satisfied with it, either. This time, I want a big score."

"More than cash, I wanna crush someone strong!" Shiro said, loudly thumping his right fist into his thigh.

Midori started waving her whip around from the roof of the Corvette. The look in her eyes was dangerous. It always was, but it was even more intense than usual. Wild.

"I neeeed to get laid sooo baaad! I wanna fuck, fuck, fuck like craaaaazy…!"

Midori didn't use any drugs. She hardly even drank alcohol. She claimed she didn't need it, since every time her mood improved, a huge amount of endorphins were released in her brain, making her extremely high.

She kept swinging her whip around, violently thrusting her hips back and forward.

"While we're at it, I wanna get money, too, yeeeah…! Moneyyyy! Money, money, moneyyyy! Gimmeee! Aaaaaah, I wanna live somewhere like Macao and get serviced by men and women and just keep goin' at it till I'm a goddamn mummy husk…!"

"But wouldn't you get fed up of that kinda thing pretty quickly?" Kimokawa asked.

"Probably, yeeeeeeeeah…!" Midori cried.

"You're so noisy…," Kurojima grumbled, gazing at the Glock 17 he'd just finished putting back together. Midori used the handle of her whip like a microphone and started singing horrifying death metal vocals while head banging. Kimokawa danced, and Shiro cheered Midori on from where he stood. Hakayama and Benny were likely the only ones who'd heard Kurojima's quiet voice.

Benny looked at Hakayama as if he wanted to say something like, "You're the leader; do something about them." While he understood Benny's feelings, these weren't the kind of people who'd quietly obey if Hakayama tried to get them under control. Besides, Midori, Shiro, and Kimokawa were different from Kurojima, who was generally happy as long as he was fiddling with his modified guns, and Benny, who as well as being a master swordsman, was also a dissolute playboy. The multiple changes to the meeting had stressed the three of them out, so it was better for them to horse around a bit and let off some steam. Hakayama didn't want to get dragged into it, but he could tolerate just leaving them be. At any rate, the thing he was bothered by was the foreign object in his head.

Natto. There's no doubt about it—the thing inside my head is a packet of natto.

As long as there was a foreign object in his head, there was a high probability that something bad was going to happen. The question, however, was *what*.

Hakayama hated natto. It made him want to throw up. That said, he hadn't had it in a long time. His tastes had changed quite a

lot from when he was a kid; he didn't dislike bitter things like bitter melon and ginkgo nuts, and more pungent foods like Camembert and blue cheese were some of his favorites. If he tried natto, he might be surprisingly fine with it. It would be a lie to say that he never felt even the slightest temptation to give natto another chance.

Was the packet of natto really a threat? Or before that, should he be questioning whether the contents of the white packet was actually natto?

In any case, the existence of that foreign object in Hakayama's head was undeniable. It was a kind of *bad feeling*. If he was to take every possible precaution, they probably shouldn't even be having this meeting, but they couldn't keep putting off preparations for their next job if they wanted it to be successful. They did jobs only once every couple of months. They didn't want to mess it up, and they couldn't cancel it. Kurojima and Benny might not have been too bad, but Midori and Shiro probably wouldn't have accepted it. If Midori and Shiro decided to make an example of Hakayama, Kimokawa would likely side with the two of them.

They were on a deadline. He had no choice but to start working on their next job with the strange thing in his head still there.

Hakayama softly cleared his throat. He crossed his legs and looked up at the ceiling of the abandoned factory. He had to get them to listen to him without offending the noisy Midori, Kimokawa, and Shiro. It was hard work leading a group of eccentric psychos who all had criminal records, but that was precisely Hakayama's area of expertise and his chance to show off his skills.

"We're going to attack villains," Hakayama said with a slight smile.

Kimokawa was the first to react.

"Attacking villains, huh?" Kimokawa was notoriously evil and had made his way up in the ranks by committing deception, fraud, every type of scam, and blackmail. He even acknowledged that he himself was a villain by nature. "Well, the money those villains have hoarded

is so dirty, they can't even use it unless they launder it. And it goes without saying that they can't call the police if they're attacked. They'll be protecting themselves in the way bad guys tend to do, but we've got our connections and information networks." Kimokawa tapped the edge of his glass to his temple. "That's what sets us apart from garden-variety small-time villains."

"And most importantly, we've got this, right?" Shiro chimed in, shadowboxing. He threw a series of light jabs while breathing out in short, rapid breaths. If Hakayama took even one of those blows, he'd be out cold. In the United States, Shiro had fought a pair of street-fighting twins who were over six-seven, and the tale of how he'd beaten them both to a pulp was legendary. "In the end, power is what's important."

"Power…?!" Midori screamed as she stamped her feet in frustration on the Corvette roof. "Blood luuust! Braaavery! Energyyy…! I wanna sleep in your womb tonight! Have a nice day…! Yeeeeeeaaaah…!"

Once the skinhead woman was completely high, it wasn't an easy task to get her to listen. However, if he managed to win over Kimokawa and Shiro, Midori would probably calm down before long.

"At any rate…," Hakayama said, looking around at his troublesome yet cheerful companions. "No matter the reason, it's going to be villains who we attack. Do you know what the world calls people who mercilessly beat up villains?"

Benny let out a snort. "The good guys?"

"Exactly." Hakayama clapped his hands together. "The good guys. We'll be heroes. If the world's got a light side and a dark side, then we're in the dark—which makes us dark heroes."

Kimokawa put his glass down on the bar and snorted, but the simple-natured Shiro seemed to have taken a liking to Hakayama's joke.

"Dark heroes… Don't mind the sound of that…!" His punching sped up even more, and the sharpness of his footwork increased.

“Heroooo…! I wanna fuck a herooo…!” Midori yelled out randomly, then jumped down from the Corvette, which was a good sign. After going on a rampage, she normally clung to Benny or Hakayama and was disgustingly affectionate toward them. She called this her “kitty mode,” and she was relatively calm and quiet during this time.

Kurojima was about to disassemble the Glock 17 he’d just reassembled.

The packet of natto in Hakayama’s head was a cause for concern, but it seemed like he’d be able to start proper discussions about the job.

“My chosen dark heroes, listen and rejoice, for the mission this time will be—”

But just as Hakayama tried to begin the discussions in a deliberate, theatrical way, Benny grabbed his beloved Yamanbagiri Kunihiro *uchigatana* and rose from the sofa. Kurojima stopped taking his Glock 17 apart. Shiro glared at the back entrance, and Midori yelled angrily, her eyes wide.

“Aaaaaaah?! What the heck…?!”

“Shut up,” Benny growled threateningly. He gripped the handle of Yamanbagiri Kunihiro in his right hand and pressed his left against the sheath. “I heard something just now.”

“Yeah,” Hakayama murmured in agreement as he reached for the gun in his inner pocket, though he hadn’t actually heard anything. To be precise, he felt like he’d heard something, but he’d assumed it was just in his mind. The sword master Benny had said that he’d heard it, though, and he had keener senses than Hakayama, so he probably hadn’t imagined it.

Kimokawa had disappeared. He was probably squatting down to hide behind the bar. That was the kind of person he was. Hakayama could read his behavior—after all, the two of them were birds of a feather.

That said, Kimokawa had killed numerous people, while Hakayama hadn’t needed to get directly involved even once up until

that point. But Hakayama had had far more people killed. And in emergencies, Hakayama had a "bug" in his head that warned him of danger.

He felt a stench right at the back of his nose. The foreign object in his mind. The white packet was opening.

It was natto, just as he'd assumed. This must be the *bad feeling* he'd had.

A loud sound rang out, then another and another in succession. He could hear voices. They weren't coming from inside the factory, but from outside.

"Gunfire," declared Benny, drawing Yamanbagiri Kunihiro from its sheath and tucking his large *wakizashi*, Honebami Toushirou, into his belt. Kurojima released the safety on his Glock 17, pulled back the slide, and chambered the first round.

Hakayama also had a gun. It was a gold Beretta M92 with a scarecrow insignia embossed on the grip. For the time being, he simply took it out. The embossed part of the grip could be removed, and the scarecrow was the fifth one he'd had. Hakayama replaced it every time he created a new organization.

The door at the back of the factory opened.

"Gyumpii!" shouted Midori, calling out to the man who'd just come in through the back door. He was tall and always wore a white turtleneck sweater, no matter the season. He also had his head shaved, perhaps following Midori's example.

"Ah, ma'am…!" Gyumpii was holding a modified gun in his right hand and pressing down on his stomach with his left.

It was red—blood. He was bleeding. Had he been shot?

"We're under attack. Three d—"

Gyumpii just managed to get out "—ead…!" before he jumped to the side. No—he hadn't jumped. Someone had forced their way in through the back door and kicked Gyumpii aside.

They were dressed all in black with a balaclava, and not very big. Holding a short-barreled pistol in each hand, the assailant shot

Gyumpii, who'd collapsed on the concrete floor, then quickly got down low and started firing.

"There's no way it's just one guy…!" Hakayama yelled as he squatted down and concealed himself between the leather sofa and the coffee table.

Kurojima returned fire using the sofa's backrest as a shield. Shiro and Benny moved away from the sofa, likely trying to approach the assailant. Those two tended to believe that as long as they weren't standing still, it was unlikely that a bullet from a handgun would hit them. Midori would probably be hiding in the shadows of the classic cars. Even though her bald, "Magical Girl Memomimo"–tattooed head was completely devoid of common sense, Midori wasn't reckless enough to rush into the middle of a gunfight. And Kimokawa wouldn't have moved from the bar yet.

While Kurojima was holding the assailant's attention by returning fire, Shiro and Benny would instantly close in and take them down. Kurojima, Shiro, and Benny could easily improvise and pull off that sort of teamwork among the three of them. Midori was incredibly useful when it came to intimidation tactics, free-for-all fights, and torture; Kimokawa was responsible for the safe and anything that required deception; and Hakayama was the coordinator who made plans and handled all adjustments. Even the underlings they had gathered were reasonably clever, loyal, and tough both mentally and physically, so they wouldn't be crushed by the sense of guilt from committing crimes. They weren't a particularly large-scale group, but the Scarecrows were a good team. Of all the organizations Hakayama had created up to then, they were the strongest, most nefarious, and best at making money.

The assailant stopped shooting for a moment, then immediately started up again.

"Aaaah…?"

Without thinking, Hakayama dropped to the floor and covered his head with his arms. The gunfire didn't stop. And the time

between each shot was so short, it was practically continuous. It wasn't from a handgun.

"A machine gun…?!"

"It's a submachine gun! An MP9…!" Kurojima couldn't return fire, either. Even the firearms fanatic likely hadn't been subjected to such a barrage before. Of course, Hakayama hadn't, either.

"This is *Japan*…!"

The natto in his head formed strings as it stretched, sticky and foul-smelling. Was Tohru Hakayama going to die that night?

He was going to get killed because of natto. Death by natto. He couldn't accept that. He didn't want to die yet and couldn't stand the idea of *natto* being the thing that killed him. Hakayama crawled along the ground and stuck his head out from behind the sofa.

The gunfire stopped.

"Benny…!" Hakayama yelled in triumph. Shiro wasn't closing in on the assailant, but Benny had just slashed through their Ruger MP9 submachine gun with Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, putting so much force into the swing of his sword that his right knee made contact with his chest.

Benny immediately tried to decapitate the assailant but was unable to, likely prevented by their cervical vertebrae. However, he immediately pulled his sword from their neck and stabbed it into the assailant's chest. Knowing Benny, the sword had probably gone straight through their heart.

"Ugh!" the assailant grunted, finally making a noise that sounded like a voice. A man?

Benny put his right foot on the man's abdomen and kicked him over, pulling out Yamanbagiri Kunihiro. Bright red blood poured from the wound like a small fountain, albeit one that instantly lost its momentum.

"Who is this guy?" Benny asked, flicking the blood off his sword and lightly kicking the assailant's left leg. The man didn't even twitch.

Hakayama stood up, and Kimokawa also stuck his head out from behind the bar. "Does it matter, Benny? Everyone and everything's the same if you kill them…"

"Ba-ha-ha-ha!" Midori laughed and jumped onto the hood of one of the classic cars. "Your balls've probably been on the line too many times to remember, huh?! What kinda balls we talkin' about?! Y'know, those ones you've all got! The sorta kind I don't have! I wanna get me some!"

Kurojima sat on the sofa and put bullets into the clip of his Glock 17, while Shiro had adopted a fighting stance.

"I really wanted to beat him to a pulp…," he said, sounding discontent. But just when he went to throw a punch in the air—

The assailant abruptly got up, holding a pistol in his hand. It wasn't the MP9, of course, which Benny had slashed through. The assailant must have had another gun he'd drawn at some point. When had he done that? In fact, Benny hadn't just cut through the MP9—he'd also cut down the assailant. Or rather, stabbed him to death.

He should be dead. Benny had stabbed him in the heart, and the assailant had died. Yet despite that, the assailant pointed his gun at Benny and fired. Three rounds: one each in the stomach, chest, and forehead.

"Kah…" Benny might have been trying to say something. He'd started to speak, but only managed to get out that one syllable. Even before Benny's body hit the ground, the assailant was down on one knee and turned to aim at Shiro. The bullets tore into his face.

†

I've died once, but I've gotten rid of five people so far…

Sousei aimed and fired at the head of the short-haired underground fighter, whose name he remembered as being Shiro or something. He let off two rounds.

Number six.

He wasn't able to grasp what exactly happened the moment his shots hit their mark, but the one thing he knew for sure was that Shiro hadn't died instantly. Sousei hadn't felt that familiar *thump* reverberating in his body.

"Hraaah daaah yaaarh…!"

Still, Sousei had never expected Shiro to leap at him and yell incomprehensibly. Would anybody really take two bullets to the face and still try to come at you with a punch?

Is this a cheat…?!

Sousei was flustered, but his body moved by itself. He didn't run away; he counterattacked. He still had his gun readied, so all he had to do was shoot at Shiro, who was coming straight for him.

"Drgh, dah, brgh—"

Sousei stopped Shiro's charge by putting another two shots in his chest. The wounds were obviously fatal, but his opponent only staggered without going down. However, it wasn't some kind of cheat. Sousei hadn't received any information like that, and he'd figured out the reason the headshots hadn't killed Shiro.

His teeth…!

He had false teeth? It looked like they were made from metal. Sousei saw himself reflected in Shiro's incisors, which had dents in them from his first two shots.

"Benny! Shiro…!" someone shouted. The voice came from the sofa, likely Tohru Hakayama. This job was to wipe out the Scarecrows criminal organization, but above all, he had to make sure he took down the Big Five lieutenants and their leader, Hakayama.

Still, I can't try to rush this.

How many people were still inside the factory? Sousei tried to get a read on the situation. There was one man at the bar—the flamboyantly dressed con artist, Yuuki Kimokawa. Two more were by the sofas. The man wearing camouflage clothes, a bandanna, and glasses was the arms dealer Hyougo Kurojima. The Glock 17 in his hand was probably one he'd modified himself. The other wore an expensive-looking down jacket and slim fit pants and had slicked-

back hair. Tohru Hakayama. He was holding a tacky, shiny gold Beretta that Sousei had already seen in pictures. There was one more person, a woman with a shaved head who'd jumped down from a car and hidden. She went by "Midori" on the streets, but her real name was Yoshiko Watanabe. She was a vicious woman who'd killed another student in her class when she was ten. She had spent some time in a special juvenile detention center that had comprehensive medical, mental health, and rehabilitative programs, but since her release, she'd apparently murdered at least thirty more people. When detectives had tried to arrest her, she'd captured them, imprisoned them, and then tortured them to death before she fled. With such horrifying legends behind her, it went without saying that she was a wanted criminal.

Kurojima moved to shoot at Sousei.

"Uurrrgggh aaarrrggh…!"

At the same time, however, Shiro started to hurl himself at Sousei. Sousei met the attack with two shots to the man's forehead, then headed straight to the bar. The *thump* sound reverberated in the center of his body.

That's plus five.

Kurojima was a good shot. He was missing because Sousei was running at full speed, but otherwise, he would probably hit.

"Ah, fuck…!"

Kimokawa poked his head and shoulders out from behind the bar and turned his gun on Sousei. *A Colt Government?* Sousei thought, but he charged in regardless.

Kimokawa was holding the gun a strange way, with the barrel down and his elbow sticking out. He wasn't even holding his gun with both hands. He shot three rounds, but the bullets flew off in the wrong direction. Kimokawa panicked and pulled his head back in, but by then, Sousei had already reached the bar. The magazine in his Ruger LC9 was empty, so he put it back in its holster and swapped it for his knife as he went around the corner of the bar.

"—Fuck you…!" Kimokawa yelled, sitting on his behind as if his legs had given out on him. Yet he'd managed to use his left hand to properly support the gun he was holding in his right. He wasn't sticking his elbows out, either, this time. At least now, his shots would fire straight. However, Sousei was under no obligation to wait for Kimokawa to pull the trigger.

With his left hand, Sousei grabbed Kimokawa's right arm, twisted it behind him, and immediately pinned him to the ground. Then, he stabbed the knife in his right hand into Kimokawa's chest as Kimokawa desperately offloaded his gun toward the ceiling. Unconcerned, Sousei pulled his knife out and stabbed Kimokawa five more times until his body went limp. He hadn't died yet, but he was no longer conscious.

They're pretty strong as bad guys go, but they aren't in the same profession as me, and they're not combat professionals of some sort, like ex-military. Plus, they don't have any cheats.

Sousei put his knife away and took the Colt Government out of Kimokawa's hand.

This is a good job.

Kurojima's gunfire stopped.

"Kimokawaaa…!" It was Hakayama's voice.

Sousei stuck half of his face out from the side of the bar. There was no sign of anyone near the sofas or around the parked cars. As he hid behind the bar, Sousei ejected the magazine from the Colt Government. Part of it was transparent.

The magazine's pretty high quality. It seems like a remodeled gun, so is this handmade as well? Three rounds left.

As Sousei reattached the magazine, the usual *thump* sound reverberated in his chest. Kimokawa had died.

Plus six.

Sousei took his empty Ruger LC9 out of its holster and swapped the magazines. Then, with the Ruger in his right hand and the Colt Government in his left, he took a quick breath. He dashed out from behind the bar, and Kurojima immediately started shooting. As he

ran, Sousei fired off three successive shots from the Colt Government, then threw it away. He dove into a corner where the cars were lined up, and he heard Hakayama shout, "Midori, he went your way!" Midori didn't respond. She might have been keeping quiet so she didn't reveal her location to Sousei.

Kurojima was shooting at him sporadically. Sousei kept his head down as he weaved his way between the cars, occasionally peeking through the gaps underneath in search of Midori.

Not there…

The sounds of gunfire paused. Kurojima was probably changing magazines or guns. Sousei stopped moving.

She still hasn't come out shooting… She's taking her time.

He heard footsteps.

She moved? Is she gonna come and attack me…?

The footsteps were getting closer. It didn't seem to be one person, but two at least. The sounds were different. One set sounded like sneakers of some sort, while the other was harder. Dress shoes. No, high heels?

With his back to the car door, Sousei squatted down. He readied his Ruger LC9, holding it firmly in both hands. He could hear one set of footsteps coming from the left and the sounds of the high heels coming from the right. Two people. Kurojima and Midori perhaps. Midori had been hiding where Sousei currently was near the cars—or at least that's what he'd thought. Had he been mistaken? Midori might have moved near the sofas, where Hakayama and Kurojima were, while Sousei had been taking care of Kimokawa, and then she'd come to attack him with Kurojima.

Hakayama hadn't come out from his hiding spot. If Sousei had trouble quickly disposing of Kurojima and Midori, Hakayama might just flee. He'd drifted from one organization to another like that for a while. Even when the teams or groups he'd formed were repeatedly destroyed or faced annihilation, Hakayama alone had always survived. That was another reason for his nickname *GD*.

Ever since he'd been in his late teens, Hakayama had made a living murdering and robbing as part of a group, and he'd caused a considerable number of deaths. He had also lost a lot of comrades. And yet Hakayama had hardly ever—maybe never—gotten his own hands dirty. He wasn't a murderer, but the road he walked was littered with corpses. The number of graves kept increasing the longer he survived.

Hence his nickname *GD*—"Grave Digger."

As a rare breed of coward and an extremely despicable man, Tohru Hakayama was both feared and respected by criminals.

Kurojima first.

Sousei had a number of reasons to consider, but he made his decision in a second. He pointed his gun to the left. Kurojima jumped out from the back end of a car, and as he did, the gun in his hands—some sort of assault rifle by the looks of it—fired off a spray of bullets.

—He can even modify…a gun like that…?

Sousei wasn't certain how many bullets he'd taken. Luckily, however, it was enough that he'd died instantly.

He had fallen face up, not letting go of his weapon.

When Sousei opened his eyes, he saw the muzzle of a gun trained on him from point-blank range. Kurojima wasn't convinced that he was dead. He was half crouching with an assault rifle pointed at Sousei's face.

Well, I did *die once…*

Sousei started to raise his Ruger LC9, and Kurojima flinched, immediately pulling the trigger of his own gun. Thanks to Kurojima being startled, Sousei managed to avoid dying again. Holding his Ruger LC9 in both hands, he pushed the barrel of the assault rifle to his left, then blew out the area just below Kurojima's chin with his first shot. Kurojima let out some kind of noise and lurched backward, and as Sousei got up, he put another two bullets into Kurojima.

—I hear high heels…behind me…!

When he turned around, something hit Sousei hard in the face.

"Gah…!"

"Hee-hee-hee…!" a woman laughed. Midori? The blow had knocked Sousei's balaclava askew. He had less than half of his field of vision and couldn't see well. Something wrapped tightly around his wrists, and he was pulled down from behind.

A whip…?!

Sousei threw his body to the concrete floor without fighting back.

"Assassiiin…!"

Midori kicked Sousei's hand. He couldn't tell if it was his left or his right. It was a brutal kick that was stronger than he would have expected from a woman. He couldn't afford let go of his gun, but it had gone flying somewhere.

Before he knew it, the whip was no longer wrapped around his wrists.

"Take this! And this, and this, and this, and this, and this and this, and thiiis…!" While Sousei was still face down, Midori kicked him several times with her sharp high heels, then started whipping him. "Hya-ha-ha, take that, you piece of shit! And this, and that, and that…!"

Sousei clenched his teeth, curled into as tight a ball as he could, and used his arms to protect his head. While he was at it, he adjusted the position of his balaclava. It really hurt, but it wasn't unbearable. And although it was tough to endure, it wasn't enough to knock him out. Not at that moment, at least.

"Don't kill that guy, Midori! I want to investigate his background…!"

It was Hakayama. Judging from the sound of his voice, he'd moved away from the sofa.

"Background? What's thaaat…?!" Midori said, kicking Sousei's butt.

"Hnnngh…" Sousei couldn't help but let out a groan. That had been too much. Had she kicked him in the butt or in the groin? It

was near his genitals—pretty much right at his genitals.

"Background! Background! Background! Oh, you mean where his back's on the ground…?! Hya-hya-hya!" Midori persistently attacked that same spot. It was horrible. He couldn't take it anymore. It was really bad. What the hell was she doing?

"Hnnngh haaaah…!"

He knew he shouldn't during a job, but against his better judgment, Sousei snapped.

He didn't have a clue how he'd tackled Midori and pushed her down, but when he recovered his senses, Sousei was straddling Midori and strangling her with both hands. She had a surprisingly thin neck. Her head was clean-shaven, as small as a child's and tattooed with Magical Girl Memomimo.

"Stop that, ya impotent bastard… It hurts… I'll drill a hole in your ass… Rip your balls off and kill yoooou!"

Midori was scrabbling to tear Sousei's hands away from her neck. It wasn't a very good way to handle the current situation of almost being strangled to death. Yet even in that state, just as she was about to pass out, Midori seemed to realize there was a more effective method. She tried to reach out toward Sousei's face, intending to shove her fingers in his eyes.

In that moment, Sousei became calm. His hands left her neck.

"—Hrrk!" Midori reflexively breathed in and choked. Sousei immediately pressed down on Midori's neck with his left hand and put his body weight into it.

"Ack!"

Midori again became unable to breathe. Sousei was using only one hand now, unlike earlier, and Midori resumed her efforts to peel Sousei's hands off her neck.

It's no use.

Sousei struck Midori's forehead with his right fist, using the side of the palm just below the bottom knuckle of his little finger. He pummeled her repeatedly, and as soon as her eyes rolled back, he pulled out his knife. Midori was likely still conscious when Sousei

thrust his knife into her right eyeball. He pushed the knife in with all his strength, breaking through the bone at the back of her eye socket to reach the brain. At that angle, he'd damage the brain stem.

The life quickly drained from Midori's body, and the usual *thump* sound reverberated in Sousei's core. When Sousei pulled the knife out, he felt the *thump* once more. Kurojima had probably taken his last breath.

Plus two… But I died once before that, so…

He didn't want to keep sitting on top of Midori's corpse, but when he tried to stand, the intense pain in his crotch returned. Sousei took a strained breath in. The pain was definitely coming from his genitals, but it extended all the way to his extremities. Had he shattered a bone? Or crushed or ruptured something? It might not be in his genitals, either. Maybe his tailbone, pubic bone, or some other bone in his pelvis had been fractured, or even broken.

Sousei got down on his hands and knees on top of the deceased Midori. He flexed and relaxed different parts of his body, trying to steady his breathing as he tried to sense more people inside the factory. Where was Hakayama? Was he still there? The worst thing would be if he'd already escaped. Or maybe he was currently trying to get away stealthily.

"Mi… Midori…?" It was Hakayama's voice.

Hakayama was still in this factory somewhere.

While it didn't exactly redouble his courage, Sousei was filled with a determination to see the job through. If he couldn't finish it because he was in too much pain, he could just die once. He'd killed a fair number of people today. He'd worked hard to accumulate the lives he had, but he couldn't make the foolish mistake of letting his prey escape just because he was unwilling to use up one of them. As long as he had a surplus of lives, he should make the most of his one and only strength—being able to die when necessity arose.

Sousei swapped his knife to his left hand. His Ruger LC9 had rolled a little ways away. When he tried to pick it up, his crotch hurt

horribly.

"…*This* is supposed to be natto?!" Hakayama said under his breath. He had spoken in a low voice, so Sousei hadn't been able to catch it clearly.

Natto? Did I hear that right…?

Sousei suppressed the excruciating pain that seemed like it was going to tear his body apart, picked up his Ruger LC9, and stood slowly. The black car nearby seemed old yet well maintained, and it had distinctively shaped headlights. It was probably a sports car called the Fairlady Z.

Sousei peeked out slightly from behind the car's low roof and looked around the inside of the factory.

Hakayama… Where is he?

The sofas, Sousei's intuition answered. Hakayama likely hadn't moved since Sousei had broken into the factory. He'd bought time by having his accomplices fight back, probably wary of getting shot from behind if he made a bad attempt at trying to flee. He seemed to be waiting for something.

Hakayama and his group had originally intended to hold their meeting at another location but had changed their plans several times. The old sheet metal factory they were in was located outside the city limits, and although a quarry and a sawmill were nearby, there was very little traffic at night. They were apparently owned by a businessman Kimokawa had dirt on.

Sousei had snuck into the factory through the back entrance and taken care of the four people who'd been on guard duty.

The front shutters had been closed, and an abandoned bus, a prefab shack, and three parked cars were sitting by the entrance. There had been two people in the abandoned bus and more inside the prefab shack. If Sousei had dealt with them first, he would've been noticed by the four people at the back door as well as Hakayama and everyone else inside the factory, so there was a high probability his attack would fail. So instead, he'd decided to come through the back door and quickly massacre Hakayama and

everyone else. He could deal with the people at the front of the building afterward, and even if they escaped, they were just underlings. If the lieutenants and their leader, Hakayama, all disappeared from the world, the Scarecrows would collapse.

What Hakayama must desperately want right now…is a scapegoat, a sacrificial pawn, or just someone he can use.

The back door burst open, and a man wearing a down vest peeked in. His face was covered in piercings, and he had no eyebrows. He was holding a handgun.

"Mr. Hakayama, what's— Huh…?!" The man with the piercings took in the terrible sight and pulled back the slide on his handgun.

"Kenchi, how many people are left outside?!" Hakayama shouted. He didn't show himself, but he was likely hiding behind the sofa.

The pierced man he'd called Kenchi readied his gun and looked around restlessly.

"Right, uhh, six, including me—"

"Gather everyone! And call for backup! Don't move from there! Is anyone else nearby?!"

"Oh, yeah, outside."

"Get them inside now!"

"Hey, everyone! Get in here!" Kenchi called out. Sousei firmly gripped his Ruger LC9 and used the roof of the Fairlady Z to aim. His target was quite far away, but Sousei didn't often miss if he took careful aim. He squeezed the trigger.

"Gah…!" Kenchi staggered. The bullet had hit him in the chest, but he wasn't dead. He leaned against the open door, managing to prop his body up.

"Kenchi!"

"Kenchi…!"

Multiple shouts could be heard from outside. That was when Hakayama poked his face out from behind the backrest of the sofa. He was looking toward Kenchi at the back door.

Sousei aimed and fired at Hakayama. When his first shot hit the sofa, Hakayama promptly concealed himself again. Sousei moved toward the back door as he fired a second and a third shot. The impact of his feet against the ground passed through his groin and seemed to explode out the top of his head. It caused him an extraordinary amount of pain, transforming into a fury that directly fueled his violent desire to kill.

God, it hurts. It hurts so bad. Ow ow ow ow. Die. I'm gonna kill him. Owww, damn that hurts! I'm gonna kill them all!

A potbellied man came in from the back door and tried to drag Kenchi outside. Sousei shot at him twice with his Ruger LC9 but missed. He was out of bullets, and the gun's slide stayed locked open.

Potbelly carried Kenchi outside. A first, then a second and a third man, all carrying guns, rushed into the factory to take their places.

Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit!

Sousei hid in the shadow of a car and took a stun grenade out of his backpack. The men approached, firing their guns, and Sousei let out a breath. He pulled the pin out, threw the stun grenade toward the back door, and closed his eyes. He saw a flicker of a flash behind his eyelids. The screams from the group mixed with the sounds of the explosion.

Sousei opened his eyes and glanced at the men panicking in the smoke by the back entrance, then he set his sights on the sofa. He didn't run but walked quickly, which didn't hurt as much. The pain wasn't bad enough to kill him, at least.

He thrust an empty magazine into his pocket and loaded a new one into his Ruger LC9. The *thump* sound rang out in the center of his body. Kenchi had probably taken his last breath.

A coffee table that looked like it was made from marble sat between the two large leather sofas. Sousei went to the nearer of the two sofas and walked around the back of it, then the side, but there was no sign of anyone.

Remaining calm, he looked around the inside of the factory. Then he got down on one knee to check under the coffee table. And there he was.

A down jacket. Slim-fit pants. Slightly messy, combed-back hair. Hakayama was lying on his side with his body raised slightly, though not so much that he'd bump his head on the table.

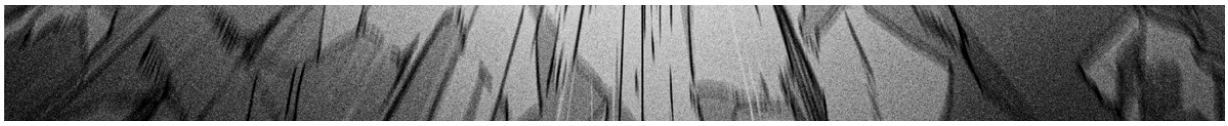
They made eye contact.

Hakayama was holding his gold Beretta. His entire face was drawn tight, a cold sweat drenched his body, and the muzzle of his Beretta shook. Even like this, would Hakayama still pull the trigger? Needless to say, Sousei would.

They might end up shooting each other at the same time—not that Sousei minded if that happened. Even if Hakayama's bullet hit first, it wouldn't be a big problem. If possible, Sousei would prefer to be killed in one shot, but it was probably better not to set his hopes too high. The end result would be the same, in any case.

Hakayama made a small squeak, then steadied the gun with his left hand. He was lying on his left side, so by lifting that arm, his head hit the underside of the coffee table, making him lose his balance slightly. It didn't seem likely Hakayama would be able to shoot first. Sousei started to pull the trigger of his Ruger LC9.





"You know the man with demon hands, don't you?"

Who'd said that? It hadn't been Hakayama. He wasn't saying anything. The voice had come from behind Sousei.

Demon hands…

It didn't matter. He should deal with Hakayama first, regardless.

Tousuke Mochizuke?

The Crusher?

Crap.

Sousei hadn't immediately done what he should have. He couldn't.

Hakayama took advantage of that opportunity. The moment Sousei became unsettled by the mysterious voice, Hakayama's wide eyes suddenly narrowed. Confronted with the threat of death, Hakayama's entire body should have been tense, but in that crucial moment, he relaxed and fired his Beretta. It was as if he'd suddenly transformed into a skilled assassin.

"…!"

By the time Sousei thought it might hit him right between the eyebrows, he was already losing consciousness.

Sousei was in pain when he came back to life. A man with a narrow face and shaggy hair was stepping on his throat.

Wh… What the—? Who is this guy…? Or I guess I should be asking—

Why was the man naked? He wasn't wearing anything. Not even underwear. Meaning Sousei could see some things he'd rather not.

He's huge…!

That was neither here nor there. Or rather, Sousei had bigger problems at the moment.

"Whoa. That's amazing." The corners of the naked man's mouth lifted so higher than should have been possible. "What *are* you? You don't die? You came back to life? You a zombie? Really reeeeally?"

The man's pupils were tiny. Was he smiling? Despite his handsome facial features, there was something wild about his expression that made a person's hair stand on end.

"Huuuh, zombie boy? Lil hit maaaaan. Or should I call you an assassin? Lil assassin zombie punk. Give me an honest answer. Yeah? You know about the man with demon hands, don'tcha?"

"Ugh… Ngh…"

Sousei pretended to be trying to answer but unable to due to having his throat stepped on, he briefly glanced under the coffee table. Hakayama wasn't there. Had he run away as soon as he'd shot Sousei dead? Who was this naked man? Was he a member of the Scarecrows? There hadn't been any information about a man like him in the briefing documents Sousei had been given by his sister.

"Hey, hey, hey, heyyyyy. Answer me, lil assassin zombie."

"I'm…telling…you…" Actually, he wasn't just pretending not to be able to answer. That was also the reality.

"Hey, lil assassiin…" The naked man crouched down and put more weight on Sousei's throat, then reached out his right hand. Was he after his balaclava? He was probably planning to take it off and get a look at Sousei's face.

"Hurry up, idiot!"

He heard Hakayama's voice. It had come from the back door. It was just for a second, but the naked man's attention turned away from Sousei.

Now.

Even before that thought went through his mind, Sousei had thrown up both of his legs and twisted them around the naked man's right leg. At the same time, he wrapped his arms around the man's right ankle and got him in an ankle hold.

"Ohh…?!" The naked man seemed like he was going to fall backward, but he braced himself with his left leg. Sousei twisted the naked man's right ankle even farther. He had him.

"Hngh…!"

The naked man's face distorted—and the next moment something happened to him. The color—*his* color—changed. The naked man *changed color*. It wasn't just his skin, either—his eyeballs, hair, and everything else completely changed. Until just seconds ago, his skin color had been typical of an Asian man, not much different from Sousei's, and he'd had black hair. Now, however, his entire body was the color of steel. It even shone. And it was as hard as metal.

Metal…?!

Sousei instantly moved away from the naked man. He'd let go of his Ruger LC9 when he died, and it had fallen onto the floor. He pounced on his gun, picked it up, then ran straight for the back door.

"Hey, wait…!" the naked man shouted, but Sousei paid no attention to him.

He couldn't see Hakayama anywhere inside the factory, so he thought maybe he'd gone outside through the back door. There weren't any other underlings, and the back door was closed. Hakayama was more important than the naked man. Not killing Hakayama was out of the question.

As Sousei feigned opening the door, he glanced back to see that the naked man had returned to normal. He wasn't shiny anymore, nor the color of steel, but a normal human color. Naturally, he'd been chasing Sousei, and the distance between them was about ten feet.

Sousei pointed his gun at the naked man, who stopped in his tracks. He fired three shots, all of them direct hits.

Yet despite taking three rounds to the chest, the naked man didn't even flinch. Three faint marks could be seen on his skin, presumably where the bullets had hit him. They couldn't be called gunshot wounds, let alone bullet holes. His body was hard, just as Sousei had thought it would be. Still, he hadn't expected it to stop a bullet.

He'd done it again. The naked man had turned to steel from his head to his toes.

It had taken only a split second, from just before Sousei had fired his gun to immediately afterward. If the naked man had been even slightly later in turning to steel, he might not have escaped unharmed.

Guns won't work if he turns to steel… What a crazy cheat.

Sousei opened the door and went outside.

"Hey!"

The naked man's voice was cut off by the door closing, and Sousei could hear the sounds of a car engine in its place. There was an SUV by the back entrance, but nobody was in it. If he remembered right, there had been three cars parked in front of the factory. It must be one of those. Rather, judging from the sounds, it seemed like there were two cars moving, not just one.

And here I thought this job would be easy money…!

His throat hurt. Sousei coughed as he ran down the side of the factory.

The back door opened behind him. It was probably the naked man.

By the time he reached the front of the factory, the cars were already pulling out. Two cars—the third wasn't moving. They were going around the abandoned bus on their way to leaving the factory.

Sousei chased after them at full speed until they got to the road, then readied his gun. The taillights of the two cars still looked large. They weren't that far away yet.

If I shoot out a tire…

It was dark, and the cars were moving. It was a tough shot, and if he did make it, it would probably be a fluke. He also didn't know which car Hakayama was in. What's more, as well as the two sets of taillights growing distant, there was also a set of headlights approaching.

Sousei quickly made his way into the thicket opposite the factory. Hakayama had mentioned calling for backup, so the approaching car might belong to the Scarecrows. Or it might not. Either way, it was best for Sousei to lie low for the time being.

He got away from me. I let Hakayama escape…

It was the naked man's fault.

Seriously, what's up with that guy? Why's he randomly naked?

The car he'd seen earlier passed by the front of the factory. It apparently didn't belong to the Scarecrows.

Sousei was in a thicket that was just a little shorter than him. From there, he couldn't get a clear view of what was happening around the factory and could only barely make out the road from between the plants. There were no streetlights nearby. It was too dark.

The naked man…?

Someone was standing at the side of the road. Was it the naked man? Sousei couldn't tell. He couldn't see clearly. He wasn't certain whether it was even a person.

"*Sousei*," his sister called out to him through his earpiece. He stopped himself just before he replied. That wouldn't have been good. It would be bad to speak now.

The assassin—that naked man… He asked if I knew the man with demon hands… If I knew Mochizuke. No, he told *me that I knew him. What's that all about…? The naked man must know Mochizuke as well. Is he a fellow assassin…?*

Sousei held his breath and strained his eyes.

Someone was standing by the roadside—or at least, that's what it looked like.

The naked man… He's not just some pervert. He appeared suddenly. Where was he? Hiding? I didn't notice at all. And he also… hardened. That cheat. Is he a fellow assassin? One with a cheat? Mochizuke. The man with demon hands. Crusher. If the naked guy's an assassin, too, then it wouldn't be weird for him to have known Tousuke Mochizuke. Still…

Judging from the silhouette, there was a high probability that it was a person standing by the side of the road.

The naked man also knows that I took out Mochizuke. Or at least it seems he suspects it. Is that why he's targeting me…? I'm

being targeted…

Sousei didn't take his eyes off the figure by the side of the road for a single moment. He could even say with absolute certainty that he hadn't so much as blinked.

Despite that, it disappeared suddenly. Or perhaps he should say *they* disappeared.

In any case, whatever it had been wasn't there anymore. It had vanished in the blink of an eye.

…An optical illusion? Is that what it was? No… It wasn't. Someone was there. I think…it was the naked man. Probably. He appeared from out of nowhere, then suddenly vanished…

Sousei strained his ears. Could he hear anything? The sound of a twig breaking; something brushing against a branch; the undergrowth being stepped on? No, nothing like that. It seemed Sousei was the only one in the thicket. No one else. Or at least, there wasn't anyone moving around inside the thicket. No one was closing in on him. Not at that moment.

The naked man had disappeared, but that didn't mean Sousei could breathe easier. He might reappear. He might still be searching for Sousei.

I was attacked right in the middle of a job killing Hakayama and his lieutenants. Was it a coincidence? That naked man… How much does he know about me…?

Ø3

My Sheep

Kuchina Hitsujimoto liked the route from the sparsely crowded subway station to the school. Not many people took that route, but it wasn't as if nobody did. There were also vehicles passing by. However, there was no need for her to sharpen her senses and keep watch in all directions. It was only during this time, when she walked to school alone, that she felt liberated. As long as she wasn't interrupted by something unusual, that is.

She didn't encounter anyone until she passed through the school gate. The front entrance had only recently been unlocked, so that was to be expected.

Why do I have to feel relieved about something like that…?

There were no people by the shoe cubbies, either. However, that didn't mean they weren't hiding. She couldn't let her guard down yet.

Why do I even do that?

On edge, Kuchina searched for any signs of another person as she walked forward and finally made it to her shoe box.

Their shoe boxes were split into two shelves. Students usually put their indoor shoes on the top shelf and their outdoor shoes on the bottom. Kuchina reached out toward the pair of shoes on the top shelf.

"…!"

Her breath caught in her throat.

Something had been placed on top of her indoor shoes. It looked like it was made of paper. An envelope?

Kuchina picked up the light blue envelope. It didn't have a stamp on it. That probably should have been obvious. This wasn't a mailbox, after all. Only the name of the person it was addressed to was written on it with what looked like a black ballpoint pen.

Miss Kuchina Hitsujimoto

The penmanship was crisp and neat, if not the pinnacle of skill. However, there were parts that were disproportionate or shaky. Whoever wrote it had likely been nervous.

When she turned it over, she saw the sender's name on the back.

Sousei Takarai
and everyone else concerned

"…Everyone else…concerned…?"

She had somewhat expected it to be from Sousei even before confirming his name on the back of the envelope, but the little addendum had taken her by surprise.

Kuchina hesitated for about five seconds before finally putting the envelope in her bag and changing her shoes. As she headed to her classroom, she kept wondering what the letter inside her bag could be about.

It appears to be a letter addressed to me, so normally, people would just open it and read it… I should read it…right? The letter? But what's it about? I don't think…I've ever received a letter before. Could this possibly be the first letter I've ever gotten…? In my life?

My first letter… I can't remember ever getting one… I feel like I haven't, and this is my first. And of all things…"and everyone else concerned"? What's that mean? Shiramori and Shigee maybe? Mr. Takarai wrote a letter on behalf of everyone—is that what it means? Why a letter? Hardly anybody writes letters anymore… They don't know my contact details. Is that why…they wrote a letter? Is this a joke…? Wouldn't people normally just give up? I can't believe they wrote a letter…

While she had been lost in thought, Kuchina arrived at the classroom. Nobody else was inside. She was the first to get there. But just as she was about to step through the doorway, Kuchina turned around.

Next thing she knew, she was holed up in a toilet stall.

What am I doing…?

Sitting on the toilet lid, she buried the bottom half of her face in the scarf around her neck and hugged her bag as she thought things through.

Huh…?

She took the envelope out of her bag and wondered what to do.

Should I read it…? Why?

Kuchina sighed.

Fine. I probably should. I should read it…

The envelope was sealed with a round flower sticker.

What is this?

What kind of flower was it?

It had a bunch of small, light purple petals.

…A lilac?

It didn't matter.

However, the plain light blue envelope was one thing, but flower stickers and lilacs just didn't seem like Sousei Takarai's thing at all. Someone else must have provided those.

Kuchina went about to peel off the sticker, but it would be difficult with her gloves on. She let out a breath and took her gloves

off, then peeled off the sticker and opened the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of letter paper, which, naturally, was also light blue.

After putting her gloves back on, Kuchina unfolded the letter.

Humblest of greetings.
We trust that you have been well.

…Humblest of greetings?
Kuchina frowned and continued reading.

Thank you very much for making time in your busy schedule to participate in our potato chip party the other day. Seeing as it was our first time holding such an event, we believe there may have been some shortcomings on our part, and we sincerely hope that you can kindly forgive any inconveniences. Nevertheless, it turned out to be an extremely enjoyable gathering thanks to your presence, and we are all truly delighted you decided to attend.

This is stupidly formal… Still…
Some of the expressions in parts were unrefined or unnatural, and the writing was even stiffer than the name on the envelope. Sousei must have been quite tense when he wrote it.

I have been given the honor of composing this letter as we have something we wish to inquire of you: Are you in possession of a smartphone, Miss Hitsujimoto?

Using a social media application called LINE, we have formed a group chat for the purpose of planning and implementing potato chip parties. We would like to invite you to this group chat as well, Miss Hitsujimoto. Please note that we came to this decision as a consensus.

It would be most splendid if we were able to receive your response.

I sincerely apologize for the poor quality of my handwriting.

We humbly ask for your continued affiliation and cooperation with us.

Yours sincerely,

Under that were four names: Sousei Takarai, Asumi Shiramori, Hina Shigee, and Yukisada Hayashi. It looked like they had each signed it themselves, as the handwriting was different. Asumi's handwriting was cute, and Moena's was dynamic but well balanced. Yukisada might have studied calligraphy, as his was the most beautiful.

Kuchina reread the letter many times.

After that, she folded it and put it back inside the envelope, which she returned to her bag.

She absentmindedly rummaged around in her bag for something —but then suddenly stopped.

…What…am I looking for?

Kuchina spaced out for a few seconds, then took out a small notepad and her pencil case.

The notepad had a solid white cover with pages that could be easily torn out. It had caught her eye for some reason while she was buying notebooks to use at school, so she'd ended up buying it at the same time.

After she bought it, she had tried tearing out a page. She just wrote on it to test it out and then burned the page to get rid of it. She hadn't used the notepad since. After all, Kuchina didn't take notes. Any matters she couldn't afford to forget, she just remembered using the memory techniques she'd been taught. Writing things down could end up as evidence.

For those reasons, Kuchina didn't have anything she needed the notepad for. She had thought she might never use it.

It was unnecessary, but it wasn't clutter. Kuchina tried not to keep things she didn't need. That notepad was one of the few exceptions.

Kuchina took a ballpoint pen out of her pencil case and tore a page from her notepad. Even with her gloves on, she didn't have any trouble ripping it out. It came out easily and neatly.

†

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

I think that all the time, but…

On mornings like this, he couldn't help but wish even harder for it.

I want to wash my hands of that kind of work and live an honest life…

As he was holding the hanging strap on the subway, for a second—just for a second—he lost consciousness.

Even when the train stopped at Tsukasachou and the doors opened, Sousei didn't let go of the strap for two or three seconds. He wasn't sleeping, though, just spacing out.

After he went through the ticket gate, someone said something to him, and he gave a half-hearted reply. He went up to street level and tried to remember who it had been, but he couldn't say.

His head shouldn't be this foggy just from one all-nighter. He'd committed the huge mistake of letting his main target, Tohru Hakayama, escape, and there was a good chance the mysterious naked man might still be in the area.

Sousei had also wanted to run away like Hakayama had, but he hadn't been able to. Someone might have reported the damage to the police if the scene hadn't been cleaned up by morning, and putting a request in to the cleaners was his sister's job. That meant

he couldn't hide his mistakes from her, so he'd had to confess his failure. He'd expected her to get angry—and in fact, she'd been furious.

He couldn't care less anymore. It didn't matter. But if he told her that was how he truly felt, his sister would kick his butt. In the end, Sousei had had no choice but to sit there and take the lecture. The job wasn't over. He hadn't been able to finish it. He'd probably have to find Hakayama somehow and finish him off. There was also the issue of the naked man. Just who was he? Sousei would have to find out and get rid of him, too. He'd have to kill him.

Sousei wasn't physically tired, but mentally, he was exhausted. Thanks to that, he'd ended up leaving the house late. It seemed like he'd be able to avoid being late to class, but he couldn't shake the feeling there was something he was forgetting.

At the shoe cubbies, he put his hand on his indoor shoes and tried to remember.

What is it…?

Sousei crouched down.

—What am I forgetting…?

Before he realized it, he'd closed his eyes.

There's still time…

Time for what, though?

I don't know…

He was holding something in his hand. He opened his eyes to check. Even that seemed unbearably bothersome to Sousei in the moment. It was his own hand. He shouldn't have to *look* at it to know what he was holding. There was no way he didn't know what was in it.

…Shoes. That's it. Right. It's shoes. Uhhh… Huh? But I'm wearing shoes. I'm not barefoot. Ah… Is it because I haven't taken them off? That's right. I was going to change my shoes. These must be my indoor shoes…

"*Fwaaah*… Mohorning, Lil Sou…"

Someone was approaching him, their shoes making pitter-patter sounds on the floor. Sousei mustered up all his strength to open his eyelids and look up. Yoh Mishima was waving with his too-long sleeves. It looked like he'd just arrived at school.

"…Morning, Mishima. I mean, Mishii."

"You voice sounds all scratchy…" Yoh grabbed his indoor shoes, his sleeves still covering his hands.

He doesn't roll them up…

Sousei absentmindedly watched Yoh change his shoes.

"Hrrrn…?" Yoh tilted his head and blinked in surprise. It was only then that Sousei realized.

"…I have to change my shoes, too."

"Are you still half asleep, Lil Sou…?"

"Nah… It's not that…"

Sousei slowly changed his shoes and put his outdoor pair in his shoe box.

He tried to remember something, but he couldn't.

…What could it be?

Yoh patted Sousei's shoulder with a hand completely hidden by his sleeve.

"Shall we go to the classroom…?"

"…Yeah. Let's."

Sousei walked alongside Yoh. It might have been because Yoh seemed to sway as he walked, but Sousei also felt his steps become a little unsteady. He was really having trouble walking in a straight line.

"You sleep deprived, Lil Sou?"

"…Mm. Yeah…I guess so. A little…"

"Me toooo! What a coincidence!"

"…You seem pretty lively, Mishii…"

"I'm sooo sleepy. I often help my father with work at night, though, so I'm used to it."

"Huh? You do…?"

"I guess it's sort of a family business."

"Oh, so it's like you're self-employed…? That's really admirable of you, helping out with your family's business."

"It's admirable, huuuh? Yaaay! I got a compliment!"

"…But, Mishii, don't you always come to school early?"

"I ended up being late today because a crush job came in."

"You mean a *rush* job…?"

"Yeah, that. There was still a lot to do, though, so I had to leave partway through. Dad told me to go to school."

"That sucks…"

"Sex… Sucks and sex. Don't you think they sound kinda similar?"

"Yeah…"

Just as Sousei and Yoh got to their classroom, the bell rang.

"Yooo!" Kouichirou Wakuya called out. Wakkuu had given his salute-like gesture, so Sousei desperately returned the salute with all his might.

"Yooo…!"

Doing that ended up repelling the majority of his classmates, but Wakkuu only gave him a thumbs-up and a wink.

"Nice 'yooo'! I could really feel your ultra soul in it!"

"Sousei?! I thought you were going to be away today!" Asumi had apparently been worried about him. How could he make her worry like that?

"Takarai." Moena held up her phone.

Sousei needed a little time to figure out what she was trying to say. Was it the group chat? He'd gone home to change his clothes and was sure he'd checked his notifications before taking a shower, but he probably hadn't looked at his phone since.

"You look really sleepy. Are you all right?" Yukisada asked. So even he was concerned about Sousei.

Sousei wanted to assure him that he was perfectly hale and hearty, but he didn't have the confidence to do that, so he ended up giving an ambiguous "Kinda…" in response.

Before he got to his desk, Sousei glanced at the seat at the back of the classroom by the window. Kuchina was looking outside with

her chin on her hand.

What was it…?

He felt like he'd be able to remember. Like he *had* to remember.

Sousei put his bag on his desk, pulled his chair out, and sat down.

Their homeroom teacher, Mr. Oohira, entered the classroom, but all he got out was "Now, let's get—" before Tadeshina gave the command.

"Stand. Bow."

"Mooorning." "Mor-mooor." "Morning grande!" "What is that?!" "Hey heyyy."

The students each called out a greeting. Standing half-heartedly out of his chair, Sousei also murmured a feeble "Good morning."

"You're too quick, everyone…" Mr. Oohira was baffled as always, even though it happened every morning.

Sousei sat back down and sighed. He had to check his phone. He couldn't do it now, though. Morning homeroom was starting. He'd do it after.

Umm, other than that…

His bag was on top of his desk.

Right… That's it. My notebooks and textbooks and stuff…

Sousei went to open his bag. That had been his intention at least, but for some reason or other, he'd stuck his hand into his desk. Something was in there. His fingertips brushed against it. It was thin. Probably a piece of paper.

Sousei pinched the object between his fingers, and sure enough, it was a piece of paper. It wasn't especially big, so it didn't seem to be a worksheet or anything like that, and it seemed to be folded in half.

Mr. Oohira was in the middle of saying something.

Sousei took the piece of paper out from inside his desk. It looked like an A6 page from a notepad that had been folded in half. He opened it.

I don’t have a cell phone.

That’s all that was written on it, in small, delicate writing.

“This is…” Sousei couldn’t help but let out a murmur, and the students around him reacted as if to say, “Huh? What is it?” Sousei looked down and rounded his back to hide the piece of paper in his right hand.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Takarai?” Mr. Oohira called out to him.

“…N-n-n-nothing…”

“I see… Well, as long as you’re okay.”

Mr. Oohira picked up where he’d left off. What was he talking about? Sousei hadn’t been listening properly in the first place, and he wasn’t taking any of it in.

The message written on the piece of paper was only short. However, Sousei saw something else on the bottom right of the page. It was a little bigger than the writing, yet too small to be called a picture. It was probably some kind of symbol.

A sheep…?

It was probably meant to be a sheep. Its body was covered in fluffy wool, and its bald face was looking forward. It *was* a sheep.

Miss Hitsujimoto…

Sousei stared at the small drawing. When and where had she drawn it? And why had she drawn something like this?

Because hitsuji *in her name means “sheep”…*

Before he knew it, Sousei was trembling. The corners of his eyes prickled. He could feel the waterworks coming on.

That letter…

Sousei had written a letter and put it inside Kuchina’s shoe box. He hadn’t forgotten about it, of course, but he was tired and hadn’t slept so it hadn’t come to mind.

She replied… I didn’t think she would. I hadn’t really expected her to…

Sousei glanced at the seat at the back by the window. Sure enough, Kuchina was looking out the window.

He stared at the note again.

It's a sheep…

He remembered the sight of her dreary house in Motomachi, which contained hardly any furniture. In contrast to that, the frozen basement looked like a normal living room that a family would live in. The only difference was that her adoptive parents, sitting side by side on the sofa, were dead.

Miss Hitsujimoto drew a picture of a sheep…

For some reason, it didn't seem like the first time she'd drawn this symbol. Was it a good drawing or not? Sousei had no artistic sense, so it was difficult for him to tell, but he didn't think it felt crude or awkward. She must have drawn it at least a few times before.

Kuchina had cared about Katsuhiko and Yoshimi Hitsujimoto, who were in her basement room. In fact, she still did. The couple might not be her biological parents, but they were her adoptive parents, and her surname had come from them. Perhaps that was why. Maybe she had an emotional attachment to the name *Hitsujimoto*.

It was just an assumption, but Sousei thought that Kuchina had probably drawn a sheep many times in her life up until that point. She used that sheep drawing instead of a signature.

…It's enough to make you cry, isn't it?

Sousei desperately held back his tears. He was sure he was feeling like this only because he was sleep-deprived and exhausted—even though he thought it would be stranger *not* to cry over something like this. But suddenly breaking down in tears during morning homeroom would be weird. Fairly, incredibly weird.

—So Hitsujimoto doesn't have a smartphone…

†

As soon as class ended, Kuchina immediately disappeared from the classroom. She'd return just before the next class started. She did the same thing during their lunch break. The moment their morning classes had finished—actually, just before they finished—Kuchina had stood up from her desk and left the room even before the teacher. It was only afterward that Sousei realized he'd forgotten to buy lunch.

"Aaah… I don't have any food…"

Sousei held his head in his hands, and when he put his face flat against the desk, Wakkuu invited him to go to the school store. The school store was in one corner of the entrance hall, and there was already a long line out the front. At Wakkuu's recommendation, Sousei bought a grilled chicken bento box that cost 400 yen.

"It's crazy good luck that the super-popular grilled chicken bento box wasn't sold out yet! You should be happy, Takarai! This means good things will definitely happen to you! Lots of good things!" Wakkuu exclaimed, slapping Sousei's back a few times.

It just feels like I burned all my luck on a grilled chicken bento box for no particular reason…

But Wakkuu, who didn't seem to show even the slightest hint of worry, had still lifted Sousei's spirits. After Sousei returned to his desk and opened the lid of his bento box, he had a sudden thought.

"…It was the last one, wasn't it?"

"Huh? What was?" Yukisada asked, stuffing his mouth with rice balls in the seat next to Sousei. Today, they were filled with Nanko pickled plum and spicy cod roe. He seemed to be eating the spicy cod roe first.





"Uh, the grilled chicken bento."

"That's the one you got?"

"Yeah."

A little distance away, Wakkuu was chatting to some people while attempting to place his 100-yen fried chicken karaage on top of his 300-yen omurice.

"The karaage omurice is complete! Looks dee-lish—hey!" Wakkuu seemed to notice Sousei looking at him, because he stood up and said, "How is it?! The grilled chicken! Is it good, Takarai?!"

"Uh, I was just about to take a bite…"

"Oh, right, right, right! Now that I think about it, I haven't eaten yet, either! But, Takarai, you always have energy bars and chicken, don't you? You really take your protein seriously! Grilled chicken is high in protein, isn't it? I mean, it's chicken. I'm sure it is! Ah, and I have eggs and karaage, which are also high in protein, right?!"

"That's right… Yeah. Eggs have lots of protein, and the karaage is chicken, so…"

"Yeah, so I might really pack on the muscles, huh? Oh damn, maybe I'll get buff! You think by tomorrow?! Yeah, I'll probably be buff tomorrow!"

"I don't think it happens overnight…"

"Persistence is power, after all! If I eat a lot of protein every day, I'll get one buff in one day, then two buff, then three buff! Wait, what the hell am I even talking about…?!"

The classroom burst out in laughter.

Yukisada gave a chuckle. "I'm sure they let you have that last one, Sousei. You haven't seemed your normal self ever since this morning. Maybe they thought you might cheer up a bit if you ate that grilled chicken bento."

"…Right."

The chicken *was* extremely delicious and juicy. It was also quite substantial. The meat alone would provide around fifty grams of protein.

Asumi, Moena, Yukisada, and Sousei got together after they'd finished eating. Asumi and Moena shared a single chair, sitting back-to-back. Asumi seemed to like sitting that way. Moena put up a show of being annoyed, but she actually didn't seem to mind it all that much.

"So? What happened?" Asumi pestered.

Sousei took the note he'd been keeping safe in the inner pocket of his school uniform. He'd already sent a message to the Potato Party group chat about the note, but they'd decided to look at it together in person during their lunch break. At Asumi and Moena's request, Sousei had kept the contents of Kuchina's reply a secret.

Asumi and Moena huddled together, staring intently at the note Sousei had handed them.

"It's so short… I see. So Miss Hitsujimoto doesn't use a smartphone…" Moena frowned, but almost immediately after, she let out a "Hm?" and her eyes went wide.

"Huh? This here…," Asumi said, her eyes perfect circles.

"What is it?" Yukisada asked, looking confused, so Asumi showed him the note. "Ohh…" A smile rose to his lips. "It's a sheep."

"Right?!" Asumi's face also broke into a smile. "It's a little sheep! Is it Miss Hitsujimoto's signature? It's so cute! And isn't it so much cuter thinking that Miss Hitsujimoto drew this?!"

"It's kind of surprising," Moena said, taking a candy out of her pocket and quickly popping it in her mouth. As always, her movements were so natural that they were easy to miss. "This might sound like a mean thing to say, but she doesn't really seem the sort of person to draw a picture on a letter, does she? I mean, even I don't do that. Want a candy?"

"Uh, sure…"

The blueberry candy she gave Sousei had a pleasant taste with a hint of a refreshing herbal flavor that made it perfect for after a meal.

"Hey, can I take a picture of this?" Asumi had barely finished asking her question before she took out her phone and

photographed the note from Kuchina. “It’s so cute! I’m gonna save this forever!”

“Good idea! Me too!” Moena took her own picture of the note.

“I guess I will, too.” Even Yukisada had joined in.

Somehow succumbing to peer pressure, Sousei got his phone ready as well. “Uh, me too…”

“Wouldn’t it be better if you just kept the original, Sousei?” Asumi said, holding out the note.

“Oh! Right… Yeah…” He hesitated, so Asumi forced the note on him.

“You have to keep this, Sousei. After all, you’re the one who wrote the original letter. Miss Hitsujimoto wrote it for you. We know that because of the sheep drawing.”

“…That’s… You’re right.” Sousei took another moment to memorize the message and the small sheep, then carefully folded it along the crease. He was about to put it back into the inner pocket of his uniform, but he felt the gazes of Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada on him. Perhaps it would be better to put the note in his desk. That would be careless, though. He couldn’t bring himself to do it. Sousei lightly cleared his throat and, as he’d originally intended to do, put the letter back into his inner pocket.

“But, well, the fact that she doesn’t have a smartphone…it’s kind of surprising…isn’t it…?”

“Hmmm…” Moena let out a murmur. “People who don’t have one might not be in the majority, but they do cost a certain amount per month. Plus, you have to buy the device itself. I used hand-me-downs from my parents until I got to high school.”

Moena’s comment was reasonable for a normal high school student, but Sousei had been thinking about something else.

Work would really be inconvenient without a tool for communication. I guess it’s possible she has something like that, but maybe it’s strictly for work, and she can’t use it for personal stuff…

“Back in the days before cell phones,” Yukisada said, looking at his own phone, “you could only communicate using landlines and

letters and stuff. Now it's hard to imagine life without smartphones since we all have them and take them for granted."

Asumi filled her mouth with air, inflating her cheeks and even puffing out the area under her nose. "Hmmph. Either way, if Miss Hitsujimoto doesn't have a smartphone, she can't join the Potato Party group chat, can she? It's physically impossible. What should we do…?"

"At times like these—" Moena stood up, leaving the chair to Asumi. "Tadecchi, we wanna ask your advice about something!"

"What?! Where'd that come from?!" With her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, the class president—the pride of Class 2-2—was apparently spending her lunch break reading.

Iori Tadeshina placed the book she'd been reading face down on her desk, stood up from her chair, and glared at Moena through her black-framed glasses.

"I was just in the middle of rereading *Battlefields of the Common Soldier*, so if you have something to ask me, please make it quick! Honestly! After yesterday, and now today, what in the world is going on with you?!" She'd raised her voice, and every step she took seemed angry, but Iori didn't make Moena go over to her. Instead, she came to join them.

"So what is it?! Out with it! Hurry up!" She adjusted her glasses, put her hands on her hips, and puffed out her chest. The way she was glaring at Sousei's group may have seemed high-and-mighty, but her actions showed incredible kindness.

Tadeshina really is…such a good person…

Sousei felt himself starting to well up with tears.

I can't… Am I tired? …Well, I am exhausted… And sleepy…

"So…" Moena took Iori's hand and had her sit in an empty chair. "About yesterday. We got a reply to our letter. It seems Miss Hitsujimoto doesn't have a smartphone."

"Cell phones are convenient, but they're also harmful. As long as it doesn't bother you, then it's fine not to have one."

"Do you not have a phone, Tadecchi?"

"I do. However, I limit the amount of time I use it, and I don't rely on it to easily look up every little thing. Doing that makes you stupid."

"That's kinda harsh…"

"I'm just stating the facts. If you rely on external devices for functions you'd normally utilize your mind for, such as memory and information processing, those parts of your brain are bound to deteriorate, meaning you'll become dumber. So? What will you do about it? You're saying you want to exchange information with Miss Hitsujimoto, who has a hard time holding everyday conversations? And that you want to do it without talking to her directly? Communicating through letters is quite indirect, isn't it? And that would basically be one-on-one. In that case, oh, maybe something like an exchange diary?"

"An exchange—"

Moena and Asumi traded glances.

"—diary!"

"Oh yeah…," Yukisada murmured, sounding impressed. Sousei, on the other hand, was in a daze.

An exchange diary…

Two or more people would share a diary, with each person writing down what happened that day, their thoughts, and any messages to the other people, then reading what the others wrote. Naturally, Sousei didn't have any experience writing in an exchange diary. He'd never had any reason to. Even the term *exchange diary* was something he felt he hadn't heard in a long time.

"An exchange diary!" Moena repeated before grasping Iori's hand. "Come to think of it, I had one of those in elementary school! With you, Tadecchi!"

"…Y-yes. I'd be lying if I denied it, so what else can I say? Would you please let go of my hand?"

"Your entries were always so long, but mine got shorter and shorter every time. I started feeling kinda bad about that and finally gave up."

"It's fine, really! It was a bother for me, too! Now, would you please let go of my hand?"

"Ah, I miss that. You wrote about a book you recommended, didn't you, Tadecchi? And I borrowed it from the library and read it."

"I can't believe you still remember that! It's fine, so would you please let go of my hand?!"

"I still have it—the exchange diary with you, Tadecchi. It's in my desk drawer."

"Whaaat…?! Are you an idiot?! Throw that away already! That's something I want to forget!"

"I wanna seeee!" Asumi started causing an uproar, and Iori shouted at her.

"Please don't try to violate people's privacy just to satisfy your own curiosity! Forget privacy, it wouldn't be a stretch to even call it a violation of human rights! Let go already, Hina!" Iori finally managed to free herself from Moena's grip. "You shall dispose of the exchange diary in question immediately! Got that?!"

"Huh…?" Moena lowered her eyes, looking discontented and a bit sad. "You want to throw it away? In that case, can't we look at it together one more time before I do? It's a keepsake, you know."

"That's the same thing as asking me to cut my stomach open. Are you telling me to kill myself?"

"That's a bit of an overexaggeration…," Sousei said without thinking. Needless to say, this earned him a glare from Iori, and he cowered back. "…Sorry."

"By the way, do you have something to use as a diary?" Iori asked, looking around at them. She didn't wait for a reply. "You don't, do you? If you don't mind using a notebook, why not get a blank one and use that? Oh, I'm guessing you don't have one. Fine, I guess it can't be helped."

She let out a sigh and walked determinedly back to her desk, where she took something out of her bag. It looked like a notebook. Iori soon returned and placed the notebook on Sousei's desk.

"I just happen to have a spare notebook, so I'll give it to you. You can use this if you want."

"Whoa." Yukisada's eyes widened, and he clapped his hands. Moena and Asumi hugged Iori.

"Tadecchi!"

"You're the best, Iorin!"

"S-stop that. Don't be absurd… I-Iorin?!" Iori's face turned bright red, and her glasses slipped out of place.

Asumi rubbed her cheek against Iori's. "Iorin because you're Iori! You don't like it?"

"…I-it's not that I don't like it, it's just… I don't dislike it, but… Ugh, it's fine! Is that bad?!"

"It's not bad at all! Thanks, Iorin. I'll buy a new notebook and give it to you when I see you next!"

"I—I don't need one, because I'm not lending this to you. I'm *giving* it to you… I-it's only a notebook… Just think of it as a…a present or something…"

"In that case, I'll give you a present in return!"

"…Y-you'll give me…a present in return…?" Iori's head was spinning, it seemed. She looked unsteady on her feet, but there was no worry she might fall over because she was being held up by Asumi and Moena, who were hugging her. However, her face was so flushed, it was a wonder why steam wasn't rising from it. It looked like any second now, she'd boil over.

"…L-let go of me," Iori said. "Please. I want to go back to my book. I want to keep reading. Please."

Asumi and Moena listened to her pleas and released Iori, who took a deep breath as she adjusted her glasses. She took a permanent marker out of her pocket and put it on the desk next to the notebook.

"You can use this to write the title. Please return my permanent marker when you're finished using it. I'm going back to my reading now. I hope it all goes well."

Needless to say, Sousei and his friends bowed deeply in thanks to Iori as she walked away.

"Can I write the title?" Asumi asked, and no other volunteers came forward. "Okay, then—" She picked up the permanent marker and, one by one, wrote the letters neatly and carefully on the cover.

Potato Party Exchange Diary

"Inside, we'll write the date, then divide the page into five parts. Next…" Having used one before, Moena quickly laid out the formatting of the exchange diary. All Sousei and the others had to do was follow along.

I wonder if Hitsujimoto will write in it…

However, that wasn't Sousei's only cause for concern.

I'll be writing in it, too. I wonder what I should write…

†

Kuchina Hitsujimoto had gotten herself wrapped up in something troublesome. Until just recently, she'd never expected to find herself in a situation like this.

Nothing should have happened…

Within the school, there were very few places in which Kuchina had never set foot—likely just the boys' toilets and changing rooms, and the rooms for all the clubs that didn't have female members.

My goal…

When she started high school, Kuchina had decided to set foot in all the areas that weren't prohibited to girls by the time she graduated.

It was my only one.

There were also rooms in the school that were locked and usually off-limits to students. That made it somewhat more difficult for Kuchina to complete her goal, but it was possible for her to break in using work-related skills. Of course, she couldn't let anyone catch wind of the fact that someone was up to something unusual. The most important thing was to proceed discreetly to avoid raising suspicion.

She was going to know things that nobody else did about that school, which she'd never be returning to after she graduated. Of course, she'd keep contact with both her teachers and her

classmates to an absolute minimum during her three years there. She couldn't afford to make any connections. Kuchina wouldn't be leaving anything behind at the school. She couldn't. However, the memories of it would be left inside her.

With just memories, I'll…

Kuchina put her bag on her shoulder and walked down the empty hallway. Classes had finished, but the school wasn't completely empty. There were still a lot of club activities going on at that time, and most of the teachers were still working. The janitors were busy with the inspection, maintenance, and cleaning of the school's facilities and equipment. If Kuchina sensed anyone, she'd either leave the area or hide to avoid encountering them. And if that wasn't possible, she'd just casually pass by unnoticed. That was her specialty. It didn't make any difference if she was there or not. Her footsteps made no sound. She was a ghost. That was fine with her.

It's all Sousei Takarai's fault.

Nothing would have happened if she hadn't been in the same class as him.

Against all odds, a classmate was in the same line of work as her.

It wasn't the kind of profession where workers were a dime a dozen. If they lived near each other, there was a chance they'd be competing over the same jobs. And if they went to the same school, it wasn't out of the question that, one day, they might end up with the same target.

If I hadn't met Takarai…

Kuchina returned to Class 2-2's classroom. She checked that nobody was inside before she went in, thinking she might be ambushed. It was a necessary precaution while she was working, but she didn't want to have to do it at school.

I didn't want anything to happen.

Kuchina sat down in her seat at the back by the window. She placed her bag on the desk and rested her chin on top of it.

She closed her eyes.

Kuchina could instantly recall all of her classmates' names and faces. She knew where everyone's seat was. She could even roughly remember their voices, how they sat, how they stood, and how they walked—the results of the memory and observation skills she'd developed through her job. They also came in handy outside of work. The ghostly Kuchina Hitsujimoto stealthily spied on her classmates and etched them into her mind. Occasionally, she told her adoptive parents about them in the basement room…"*Today, Wakuya from my class started saying one-liners during break time. At first, no one laughed at all, but then when he repeated them, someone laughed, then someone else did, and pretty soon, everyone was laughing… They didn't stop laughing even when class started, so of course the teacher told them off and everyone went quiet for a bit, but then Hada suddenly burst out laughing, and she's usually really quiet and doesn't talk much, but when she started laughing, everyone else joined in, and Class President Tadeshina got angry, and Wakuya got down to kneel on the floor, and in the end, even the teacher seemed to find it funny, so it turned into such a big thing. Even I felt like I was going to laugh. Wakuya's one-liners weren't even funny…"*

Although she didn't know anything about the boys and girls in her class, Kuchina had been trying to understand them. It had been a huge miscalculation. There was a big difference between observing someone and interacting with them directly.

I didn't want to know about them.

Kuchina opened her eyes. Outside the window, the sky was slowly turning dark.

It would have been better if I hadn't known.

She reached inside her desk. In elementary school, her teacher had repeatedly instructed them to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything before going home. Each time, her classmates had all put their hands in their desks and felt around to make sure they had everything. Kuchina had imitated them. She'd done the same thing

as everybody else. That had made her happy. There were so few things she had in common with her classmates.

Inside her desk, she found something that felt like a notebook. There wasn't anything else. There was no way it could be something she'd forgotten. She'd put all of her study materials away in her bag.

Kuchina pulled it out of her desk. The notebook itself was an ordinary college-ruled one.

POTATO PARTY EXCHANGE DIARY was written on the front in permanent marker.

"…Huh?"

With the notebook on top of her bag in front of her, Kuchina's thoughts came to a stop for about ten seconds.

Her brain finally started working again. She realized that must be the title. Kuchina traced the words POTATO PARTY EXCHANGE DIARY with the index finger of her gloved right hand. It looked like a girl's handwriting.

Shiramori or Shigee…?

Those two names came to mind right away. She whispered the words on the notebook.

"Exchange…diary…"

Exchange diaries had been popular among the girls when she was in fourth grade. She'd been jealous of them. Kuchina wasn't able to have something like an exchange diary with anyone. Everyone had been told that Kuchina had a unique illness. She always wore gloves and a mask and showed almost no skin, which seemed creepy to the other elementary school students. Some of them had even whispered things like, "You shouldn't go near her. You'll catch her disease." Occasionally, one of the other kids would talk to her, but Kuchina rejected them and kept her distance. She was scared, worried that something might happen.

An exchange diary. This is like a dream within a dream…

Ukako. That was the imaginary friend Kuchina had thought up when she was a child. She'd given her a name that sounded unrealistic. She had started an exchange diary with Ukako. Of

course, Ukako didn't exist, so Kuchina could only write it by herself. She would complain, and Ukako would compliment her.

Kuchina was so grateful to have Ukako. *Thank you.*

You're welcome. We'll always be friends, Ukako would write.

Friends. Thank you. I only have you, Ukako. You're my one friend. Thank you for being my friend.

She wondered what Ukako would write, but no matter how hard she thought about it, she didn't know and couldn't write anymore. Using a pair of scissors, Kuchina cut up the diary she'd asked her adoptive mother to buy for her to use as an exchange diary. She cut it up into tiny pieces and threw it away. When she did, she also threw away her imaginary friend. For a long time, she'd forgotten about her.

"No…"

Kuchina had tried to forget about her, but Ukako never really disappeared. They'd never met. There was no way even *for* them to meet, but Kuchina could still remember her face and re-create her voice. Ukako had criticized Kuchina. *Are you forgetting about me? How could you forget me? Aren't we friends? Didn't you say I was all you had? Liar. I thought we'd always be friends. I believed you. Traitor. You're the worst. You should die.*

At some point, Kuchina had forgotten about Ukako. And she'd just remembered her now.

She started to open the notebook. Her breathing became shallow. She was nervous.

I don't want to look inside.

"Liar," Ukako was saying. Kuchina couldn't remember her face nor recall her voice. Ukako had never existed in the first place. She had no right to criticize Kuchina. She wasn't Kuchina's friend. Kuchina didn't have any friends. Not now, not in the past, and not in the future.

Why?

Kuchina opened the cover.

Even though I don't want to look…

In the top left of the first page was the date, written in pencil. The notebook was college ruled, with thirty horizontal lines 9/32 of an inch apart. Every sixth line had been traced over in ballpoint pen, dividing the page into five sections.

This is a bit sudden…but we decided to start an exchange diary!

I guess we can just feel free to write about whatever we want?

It's the first day, so for now I'll keep it…not complicated. I wasn't sure which prefix to use before "complicated"…

Anyway!

This was Asumin!

I'm bad at sticking to writing a diary for more than a couple of days, but since this is an exchange diary, maybe I'll be able to keep it up longer.

When it comes to Swiss roll, you can't go wrong with chocolate, don't you think?

It's simple and light, so it feels like it has zero calories, but that's a trap. It's scary!

Once you've written in the diary, you can pass it on to another member, put it in their desk, or leave it in their shoe box.

It's up to you!

Hina Shigee

Hello.
This is Yukisada Hayashi.
What kind of rice ball fillings does everyone like?
I like everything.
Maybe I just like rice balls.
I really like rice balls.

My name is Sousei Takarai.
This is my first exchange diary, so please forgive me, however I am unsure as to what to write.
For rice balls, I enjoy fillings such as red salmon.
At the school store today, I purchased the grilled chicken bento box recommended to me by Wakkuu.
It was extremely delicious, in case you wished to know.

"—Pffft…!" Kuchina almost burst out laughing.

Takarai said his name at the start, but then signed it again at the end…

She read through the four diary entries three more times. The page was divided into five, meaning one of the sets of six rows was blank.

Kuchina pressed the tip of her finger to the empty section.

This spot…is for me? They want me to write something? What should I write…?

Ø4

Cursed Fate

Kuchina Hitsujimoto was perplexed. In turmoil, even.

"I have work today…"

When she spoke, her breath appeared as a pure white cloud.

Kuchina raised her face. Katsuhiko and Yoshimi Hitsujimoto were sitting on the sofa in front of her. Their complexions didn't look too good. It was because the living room was a little dark, and the lighting was a bluish-white color. Not because the two of them were frozen. Not because the blood wasn't circulating in their faces. The room was underground, sealed tight with an electronic lock and temperature controlled. Yet it was still their living room. The cupboards, the table, the chair Kuchina was sitting on, the TV, the TV stand, and the sofa her parents were sitting on were all exactly the same as they had been long ago. Everything was from the living room of the house the three of them used to live in. They definitely weren't in a mortuary in the basement. They were in the family's living room.

Kuchina had decided to think that way. She was trying to believe it.

"Mom, Dad, what should I do?"

Her parents didn't answer.

They must have been deep in thought.

"It's tough, isn't it, getting asked for advice? But it's tough for me, too. I have work, but all I can think about is the diary…"

"*But isn't that a good thing?*" came her adoptive father's voice.

"*Yes, doing something like an exchange diary with friends seems like fun*," her adoptive mother said with a smile.

"…Friends."

"*They* are *your friends, aren't they?"*

"Ah, your dad doesn't really get it, but you wouldn't have an exchange diary if you weren't friends, would you?"

"We wouldn't have an exchange diary if we weren't friends…"

"That's good, isn't it?"

"You've made some friends, Kuchina."

"I…have friends…"

"Your mother's mentioned it a few times now, hasn't she? That you should try to make some friends at school?"

"You always said you couldn't because it was dangerous."

"I think it should be fine as long as you're careful."

"Once she makes up her mind, she won't change it no matter what you say. Kuchina sure can be stubborn."

"An exchange diary…with friends…"

"It doesn't matter what you write, so how about just trying to write something?"

"It's a diary, isn't it? You could write about what happened today."

"Today…" Kuchina glanced at the table. The notebook with POTATO PARTY EXCHANGE DIARY written on the cover was sitting on top of it. "I have work soon."

Her adoptive parents didn't say anything.

Tell me what to do.

Say something.

Don't just stay silent.

Kuchina didn't say these thoughts out loud.

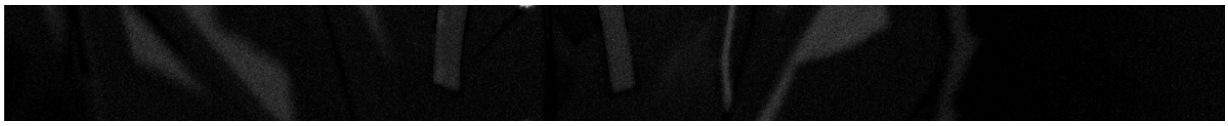
It's cold…

The air here was frigid.

Kuchina shook her head. She stood and reached for the notebook.

She could hear something. It sounded like a bell.





I shouldn't be able to hear that…

The walls and ceiling of the underground room were reinforced to insulate it. That also meant it was almost completely soundproof, and you could barely hear anything going on outside.

Even so, Kuchina felt like she could hear that noise.

She covered her ears with her gloved hands.

"I can still hear it…"

She couldn't escape. No matter where she went, it would keep following her.

Ever since I can remember—ever since I was born, I guess—I've been held captive by that man and locked inside a cage. This is where I belong…

Kuchina took her hands away from her ears. She couldn't actually hear the bell-like ring of the telephone. It didn't reach the basement. Yet it was ringing somewhere far away.

She set the notebook on the table and left the underground room empty-handed without even saying good-bye to her parents.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

The phone was ringing.

Kuchina quickly went up the stairs.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

She got to the top of the staircase. Kuchina looked at the living room, which had the lights on, and the adjoining kitchen.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring—

The ringing stopped.

Kuchina made her way to the kitchen. An old black rotary-dial telephone occupied a spot on the counter. It had been ringing until just a moment ago.

She grabbed the phone cable connecting it to the wall. Perhaps she should just pull it out. Tear it free. If she did that, the phone wouldn't ring. She wouldn't have to answer it or hear that man's

voice. She didn't want to hear it. The timbre of his voice. That terribly slow way he spoke. The way he paused between words. His strangely tepid tone of voice.

"There's one thing you should know."

That was his pet phrase.

"There's one thing you need to remember."

She'd heard it over and over.

"There's one thing it seems you don't understand."

Over, and over, and over.

"There's one thing…"

"There's one thing…"

"There's one thing…"

"There's one thing…"

There *wasn't* just one thing, though. He'd already said that countless times. That man had an endless number of "one things" that had built up within Kuchina. Now that she thought about it, it seemed like that man had said everything was "one thing" at some point, or at least connected everything to one of his "one things." Before she knew it, her head was full of them.

The black rotary-dial telephone shook and started ringing again.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

"*Why don't you try making some friends at school?*" her adoptive mother had said.

Kuchina had considered it.

"*I can't. It's dangerous*," she had responded.

Because she'd been told by that man.

"There's one thing you need to remember.

"You mustn't even think about doing something like making friends. It's dangerous. You understand that, don't you?"

"That wasn't me."

Kuchina had bluntly rejected her mom's suggestion. But it hadn't been her idea.

"It wasn't…"

It was that man.

Kuchina Hitsujimoto had been made by that man.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

The ringing of the black rotary-dial telephone wouldn't stop. Kuchina was still holding on tight to the phone cord. She should pull it out. Tearing it out would be difficult. Not impossible. Actually, it would be quite easy. But it was scary. She couldn't go that far. Even though she could. No, she couldn't. She should at least pull it out.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

She wanted to make the ringing stop. She could do it if she wanted to. But what would it mean? If she continued ignoring the phone, what would that man do? Kuchina knew, of course. That man showed no mercy to those who disobeyed him. Kuchina had already learned that lesson. She'd lost her adoptive parents. They hadn't been killed before being frozen. The cold was what killed them. That man had said it would be all right. He'd given his word. He'd told her, "Even though they're frozen like this, that doesn't mean they're completely dead. They may look dead, and they're in a state infinitesimally close to death, but they can still be revived. Don't tell me you think I'm lying."

"There's one thing you should know.

"I also lie sometimes. As a way to succeed in life.

"However, although I might say I can't do something when I actually can, that doesn't work the same way in reverse. I never say that I can do something when I actually can't.

"If I tell you I can do something, then I can."

—That's a lie.

Kuchina didn't believe what that man said.

It's definitely a lie.

Despite that, she couldn't throw away the hope that her mom and dad might be able to come back to life.

Because that man said he can…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring—

The ringing stopped.

Kuchina let got of the phone cord. It was hard to breathe. Her chest felt tight. She clenched her teeth and inhaled through her nose. She had to brace her legs; otherwise, they'd go out from under her. Her vision blurred, and she felt like she was going to faint.

I've done something terrible.

She had ignored the phone. Twice.

"Argh…"

Possibly more than twice. The phone might have rung before that as well. Maybe it was three times or even more.

"It's the diary's…the exchange diary's…"

Kuchina started coughing violently.

It's the exchange diary's fault. It was forced on me. I couldn't make a normal decision. I have work today. That's why the phone was ringing. I knew that, but I still…

There was something stuck in her throat.

Takarai. If I hadn't met Sousei Takarai, this never would have happened…

"*They* are *your friends, aren't they?*" her adoptive mother had asked with a smile in her eyes.

"*You made some friends, Kuchina*," her father had said, grinning with his arms crossed as if he couldn't contain his emotions.

"No."

Kuchina seized the phone cord extending from the black rotary-dial telephone and yanked it out of the wall as hard as she could.

If the phone rings again… No, like this…

It didn't solve the problem. Even Kuchina knew that much. The phone wouldn't ring with the cord removed, but that man would still get mad at Kuchina for not answering it. He wasn't the kind of man

who outwardly showed his emotions. From the limitless number of that man's "one things" buried within Kuchina, one raised its head.

"There's one thing you should remember.

"I'm not mad. I'm not going to take my anger out on you. I'm just showing you what you did was wrong. You need to be able to make that distinction."

Kuchina crouched by the wall and plugged the phone cord back in. She hadn't answered it at least twice, possibly even more. She hadn't wanted to answer it. She didn't want to speak to that man. It would be better if he didn't call her. She wished he wouldn't call. Yet despite thinking that, Kuchina stood there with her hands on the kitchen counter staring at the phone. Waiting for it to ring. She wished it would hurry up. She wanted it to ring as soon as possible. She was waiting for it in anticipation. She would apologize to that man. She'd been in the basement, seeing her adoptive parents. It was an easy mistake to make. Would he forgive her if she gave that excuse? She had no clue. Regardless, she had to apologize. That man would probably drive another new "one thing" into Kuchina. It was a punishment. He might say he was going to dispose of her parents—two people who were important to her, who weren't yet completely dead and who it was still possible to bring back to life. He might tell Kuchina she wasn't allowed to go to school anymore. Even though she'd met Sousei Takarai and made friends. Even though they'd been about to start an exchange diary. No. They weren't friends. She shouldn't think of them as friends. After all, she couldn't make friends. She shouldn't be secretly hanging on to the letter from Sousei Takarai. She should dispose of it immediately. She needed to return the exchange diary. She might not be able to.

Kuchina was sweating. The air conditioner wasn't on. The temperature in the house wasn't much different from outside. She took a bottle of mineral water out of the fridge and a glass off the shelf, then poured herself about half a cup of water and drank it slowly. When she'd finished, she remembered another one of that man's "one things."

"There's one thing you should know.

"You need to be careful you don't get dehydrated. Even being just a little dehydrated can lead to decreased athletic and cognitive abilities. It can make you emotionally unstable and impair your ability to make calm judgments."

Kuchina placed the empty glass in the sink. She glanced at the black rotary-dial telephone on top of the counter. It still hadn't rung.

She heard the sound of the front door being unlocked. Someone had opened it and was coming inside.

The door closed. The person took their shoes off.

Kuchina waited. She considered taking her gloves off, but abandoned that idea. The person had appeared in the living room. It was a tall woman, at about five-seven. Her blond hair was cut in a bob, and she was wearing a jet-black dress. It looked like her natural hair, but it had likely been bleached and dyed. Despite her appearance, the look on her face was like that of a savage raccoon dog. Her lips were red, coated in lipstick reminiscent of the color of fresh blood.

She was wearing long black gloves and holding a bouquet of flowers. Kuchina wondered what kind of flowers they were. The white petals were shaped like teardrops.

"…Silence." The woman stopped just in front of the kitchen and narrowed her eyes slightly. Kuchina silently looked back at her. The woman glanced at the black rotary-dial telephone. "The Great Lord is suspicious. Why didn't you answer the phone?"

But rather than answering, Kuchina said the woman's name.

"Ruran Hinoura."

Although she'd just had a glass of water, the inside of her mouth was dry.

Ruran Hinoura licked her crimson lips a bit. Then she giggled. "Don't think that someone like you is allowed to say my name, Silence."

"What should I call you, then?"

"Call me Flame Empress, with fear and awe in your voice."

"That's a strange name."

"Hold your tongue, Silence." The smile didn't leave Ruran's face. What was so amusing? She probably wasn't getting any pleasure out of this. She was that man's attendant—or at least she acted like she was. She did that intentionally. Even if she didn't know his true motives. She imitated the man. She was far more hotheaded than he was. If anything, she seemed to be an extremely emotional type of person but was forcing herself to act composed.

It's all right.

She was much easier to deal with than that man.

"What do you want?"

"I asked you a question, didn't I? Why didn't you answer the phone?"

"I tried to."

"Why weren't you able to?"

"That sort of thing happens sometimes."

"I'm sure it hasn't happened at all until now."

"It just hasn't happened at all until now."

"It would be best if it doesn't happen a second time, Silence. I'm saying this for your own good. It doesn't matter to me if it happens again." Ruran put the tip of her nose close to the petals. "I wonder, do you know this flower? Don't you think it looks pretty?"

Kuchina was about to shake her head when it happened.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring…

The rotary-dial telephone started ringing.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrrrring-brrrrrring…

"Answer it," Ruran said, gesturing with her chin toward the phone.

Kuchina hesitated. It felt like she'd be obeying Ruran's order, which she was opposed to. Still, in any case, she had to answer the phone. That was why Ruran had given the order in the first place. Kuchina had no choice but to do what she said. Ruran wanted her to feel humiliated.

With feigned calmness, Kuchina picked up the phone receiver and put it to her ear.

That man was on the other end of the phone. The only people who could use that line were him or his representative—and she was right there. Kuchina didn't think that Ruran Hinoura had decided by herself to come to the house. That man had instructed her to. Ruran was there on his behalf.

The man didn't speak. What did that mean? Kuchina had an idea.

"Hello."

She had to speak first. That man was demanding it. He was giving her an order by not saying a word.

"This is Silence."

That wasn't Kuchina's name but simply a code word. A tool for her job.

"Great Lord."

That wasn't that man's name but a title of respect within the faction he led. Kuchina didn't respect him She didn't have even the slightest bit of respect for him in any sense of the word. She had no desire to use such a title for him. Yet she also had no choice.

Every time she called herself "Silence," every time she called that man "Great Lord," she was reminded: *I'm a trained animal.*

Kuchina Hitsujimoto didn't have a shred of autonomy.

I'm nothing but that man's lackey.

"Hello."

Great Lord Furuhiko Kagemiya's voice had no distinctive qualities. It was easy to understand, without sounding at all intimidating. Most people who heard it would probably imagine he was smiling.

In fact, the man—who was relatively small in stature and neither young nor that old—always had a cheerful expression on his face. His appearance and demeanor didn't at all suit the grandiose, likely fake name "Great Lord Furuhiko Kagemiya." He wouldn't look out of

place taking a stroll through the park in the sun. He wouldn't even catch your eye if you were shopping at the supermarket.

"It's me. Is Ruran there?"

"Yes."

"I wonder, are you replying to me?"

"Yes…Great Lord."

"I see."

"Should I give the phone…to her?"

"Give the phone to whom?"

"To Ruran…Hinoura."

"Hm? Give it to whom?"

"…To the Flame Empress."

"That won't be necessary. Ruran is there, isn't she?"

"Yes, Great Lord."

"There's one thing you should think about, Silence. Why would Ruran be there? She's there because you didn't answer the phone. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

"Yes…Great Lord."

"Indeed, that is *why Ruran's there. But why, I wonder. You didn't answer the phone. I called three times, you know. Just how much time was that? Of course I would ask Ruran to go there. When do you think I might have asked her to go?"*

"Well…"

"From when and where did Ruran leave to go there? Perhaps she was already very close. If that was the case, maybe it's just a coincidence. What do you think?"

"…It's not…a coincidence."

"You're probably right, Silence. You didn't answer the phone. You didn't even attempt to answer it. Did you not plan on answering, right from the start? When was *the start? I wonder. Let's say I asked Ruran to go there. When would I have done that?"*

"When…?"

"There's one thing you should try to think about, Silence. You didn't answer the phone. So I made a request to Ruran. Do you

really think that's what happened? Does something about that seem strange to you?"

"Something…strange…"

"Perhaps someone anticipated you might not answer the phone, and perhaps they prepared for that ahead of time. Even though you've never failed to answer the phone before. That's right. It had never happened, not even once, until now."

"…I'm sorry."

"I wonder, are you apologizing to me*, Silence?"*

"I'm sorry, Great Lord."

"There's one thing I want to tell you. There's this saying. It's well-known, so you might know it: 'If an apology was good enough, we wouldn't need the police.' What's wrong, Silence? That was the part where you should have laughed. The police, of all things! I guess it wasn't that funny. Your reaction was underwhelming. Sorry. I'm bad at telling jokes."

"…Not at all, Great Lord."

"Anyway, I have a job for you, Silence. It's the matter we discussed. You have all the information in your head, don't you?"

"Yes, Great Lord."

"Knowing you, I expect there to be no mistakes. Carry it out according to plan."

"Yes, Great Lord."

"I trust you. I value your work ethic highly and believe you worthy of that trust. I have faith in you."

"…Thank you, Great Lord."

"Kuchina."

He said her name.

Kuchina couldn't help but shudder.

"After we've finished with this phone call, you should drink a glass of water. You have to watch out that you don't get dehydrated. You know that, right?"

"Yes, Great Lord."

"I'm counting on you. And be very careful. This is only because you complete your jobs without incident."

"…I understand. Thank you, Great Lord." As soon as the words "Great Lord" left her mouth, Kuchina hung up the phone.

She returned the receiver to its cradle and took the bottle of mineral water out of the fridge. The glass she had used before was still in the sink. Kuchina half filled it again and drank it unhurriedly. She took her gloves off, put some dishwashing detergent on a sponge, and washed the glass. After that, she wiped the glass with a rag, dried her hands, then put her gloves back on. Once she was done, she threw the rag away in the trash can. She'd have to dispose of it later.

"You mustn't forget to be grateful, Silence."

Ruran had taken the glove off her right hand at some point. She was holding the bouquet of snowdrops in her left.

"You owe the Great Lord everything. Keep that in mind."

She stroked a white petal with her right index finger, and a trail of smoke immediately rose into the air. The fire started at a single point on the petal and spread rapidly, growing in intensity. Ruran swapped the burning bouquet to her right hand—but by that stage, it was no longer a bouquet. Just flames and ashes.

Ruran crushed in her fist the final small flame that remained, opened her hand, and blew it away.

Ash danced in the air.

"I'm glad it didn't end up burning this house down. I've known Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto since I was a child. I have feelings, too, you know, Silence."

Kuchina held her tongue.

Ruran gave a slight smile, then left the living room. The next time she spoke, it was from the entryway.

"There's one thing you should know. In the language of flowers, snowdrops symbolize hope, consolation, and one more thing. Do you know what that is?"

Kuchina stayed still until she couldn’t sense Ruran’s presence anymore.

Before she left the house, Kuchina went down to the basement and picked up the exchange diary. She went up to the second floor, where she put it in her bag and changed into black casual clothes.

Kuchina had memorized all the information about the job’s time frame, topography, target, and all people involved. She still had time, so she stopped at a bookstore on her way to the subway station. She’d used the store a few times before, so she was able to roughly guess the location of the book she was looking for. Kuchina picked up an illustrated guide to flowers and their meanings, and she opened it.

According to the illustrated guide, snowdrops symbolized three things in the language of flowers, just as Ruran had said: Hope.

Consolation.

And wishing for a person’s death.

Kuchina closed the guide and returned it to the shelf.

As she was about to leave the store, she got the feeling she was being watched. She passed through the automatic doors of the bookstore without stopping, then turned and glanced back inside the store through the closing doors.

A slender woman with long hair and big sunglasses was looking at her.

That’s…

The woman had entered Kuchina’s field of vision for only a brief moment. Her facial features were hard to make out because of the sunglasses, but Kuchina remembered her physique. She was wearing a long beige trench coat, although she was quite thin. Her head was small. She might have been taller than the average Japanese woman, but she wasn’t as tall as Ruran. However, her body shape left an impression. It could hardly be called common.

I’ve seen her before.

Kuchina walked the route to the subway station at her usual pace. If she didn’t consciously control her speed, she’d probably end

up hurrying.

The woman with the sunglasses. From what I remember, this is the third time I've seen her.

Her hairstyle changed every time. It was probably only the length that stayed the same. Her clothes were different. So were the times and places Kuchina had seen her.

Could she be a subordinate of Great Lord Furuhiko Kagemiya? Did he have people working under him that Kuchina didn't know about? It wouldn't be strange if there were. That man had probably asked the woman to keep Kuchina under surveillance.

Kuchina casually glanced at her surroundings. No matter how many times she checked, the woman in sunglasses was nowhere to be seen. Was she not tailing Kuchina? Maybe she wasn't surveilling her. Had Kuchina just happened to encounter the same woman in different places multiple times? Was that all there was to it?

It's not…a coincidence…

"There's one thing you should know."

That man's "one things" were warnings.

Even if it seemed like a coincidence, there was no such thing as coincidences in this world.

People who lacked attention, observation, or analytical skills failed to see the inevitability in things. At times like these, people foolishly used the convenient word *coincidence*.

Kuchina felt nauseous.

How long would it take for her to search through all of that man's "one things" and erase them one by one? What would be left over afterward? Would Kuchina even exist anymore?

Ø5

For Us, Whose Days Are Changing

Sousei Takarai wanted to become a normal, everyday high school student. He had no plans to go to university. He wouldn't even go to a trade school or try looking for jobs. Once he graduated from high school, he'd likely focus solely on his main occupation.

His sister had once told him that he wouldn't be settling down in one spot, but moving around as needed for his jobs. She'd said that would be the most logical thing to do. If he considered it solely from a work point of view, she was probably right. His sister might have intended for Sousei to do that after he graduated. Once his sister decided something, Sousei couldn't disobey her. He'd have no choice but to go along with it. High school life would be his last chance. While he was a high school student, he could get a taste of a normal life.

With the Scarecrows job, Sousei had let Tohru Hakayama get away, meaning it was still ongoing. Sousei's chances of finding him were extremely slim if he was looking by himself, so his sister was taking care of that. She seemed to be doing everything she possibly could to track him down, and as soon as she did, she'd give Sousei his orders. He couldn't relax, but he also couldn't take on any other jobs in the meantime, so all he could do was prepare.

That day, Sousei woke up after it started getting light outside. He'd been able to sleep soundly without any nightmares, probably

due to being so sleep deprived. He figured out just how much he could move his body so he wouldn't be left fatigued, then replenished his fluids with a protein drink. He did a load of laundry, took a shower, did some quick maintenance on his firearms, and got dressed.

There were certain things he had to do every morning, but he deliberately didn't have a fixed order to do them in. While turning things into a routine had its advantages, it also had downsides. The more people streamlined their actions, the less they used their brains, and if their routine got disrupted, it could lead to anxiety or anger, and even cause them to lose their presence of mind. If someone's ability to adapt to circumstances dulled, it could be fatal. In Sousei's case, he'd be able to recover after losing a life or two, but he didn't want to die for no good reason. He had numerous lives, but they definitely weren't unlimited.

As he had a simple breakfast of fruit, canned tuna, yogurt, and vegetable juice, his phone kept buzzing with notifications. In the Potato Party group chat, Asumi and Moena had said good morning and were chatting about the exchange diary. Soon after, Yukisada joined in as well.

The die has been cast…

Drinking his vegetable juice, Sousei tilted his head to the side.

Is that right? Die? Dice? Do you "cast" dice…? Well, anyway, it all depends on Miss Hitsujimoto now. There's no point in thinking about it or wondering how it's going to turn out. But I just can't help thinking about it…

He didn't know what to say, but he felt like he shouldn't stay silent, either, so Sousei said good morning to everyone, then reacted to some of Asumi and Moena's messages.

Ah, but I'm getting all nervous for some reason…

Sousei finished his breakfast, tidied up, and hung his washing to dry, all while frequently checking his phone. There weren't many messages from Yukisada, but Asumi and Moena sent an awful lot.

The two of them were probably feeling restless, wondering what Kuchina would do.

I get that. I really do…

After hesitating for a while, Sousei left the house at a time that wasn't too early or too late. He considered stopping at the convenience store to buy lunch but decided not to.

The school store isn't bad, either. I'm a little concerned about it nutritionally, but it'll be fine if I supplement it with breakfast and dinner. From now on, I might get lunch from the school store. Yeah, that seems like something a normal high school student would do…

When he was halfway down the stairs to the subway station, Sousei's phone rang. His sister was calling, and for a moment, Sousei felt like ignoring it. It was just a fleeting thought that flitted through the back of his mind. Even if he let it ring through once, his sister would keep calling, and Sousei would eventually give in. Besides, he was scared of her retaliating against him. He had no choice but to answer.

"Hello…?" Sousei answered it as he walked slowly down the stairs.

"You're on your way to school, aren't you?"

"Ah, yeah…"

He'd been having a nice morning, but his mood suddenly crashed all the way to rock bottom.

This is about work…isn't it? It must be. There's no other reason why she'd call. Did she find Hakayama already? That coward. Run away. Keep running. Run until you get away. Or is it about the naked man? Either way, I don't want to hear about it…

"—Uh…Sis?" He might not want to hear it, but his sister wasn't saying anything, so he had no choice but to ask. "Umm… Was there something? I mean, you wouldn't call if there wasn't, so…"

He heard what sounded like a sigh on the other end of the phone.

"Am I not allowed to call you unless it's about work?"

"…Th-that's not what I…"

He'd reached the bottom of the stairs. Sousei moved closer to the wall so he wouldn't get in the way of people passing by.

"That's not what I meant… But you don't usually contact me without a reason…right?"

"You and I are half siblings."

"…Yeah?"

"I've tried to choose the best path for you, in my own way. Do you not understand why? It's because you're my little brother."

"The best…"

"Seems like you have a complaint."

"No…"

"I was hardly even able to go to school. Father hired a tutor when I was five. I made that smart-ass commit suicide, which wasn't good. I was still young then. I didn't think I needed someone to teach me things. I was smart, so I didn't need it. I brought it on myself in a way. Honestly, I regret it. That's why I made you go to school. I even made you study for the entrance exam, didn't I? Do you think you can make some good memories by the time you graduate?"

"Uhh…well…I guess. Kind of…"

"That's good. Even one good memory is better than none at all, right? But you know, Sousei, you should keep all the important things hidden away in your heart or shut away in the back of your mind. You mustn't keep tangible things. They're bound to break."

"Tangible…things…?"

"People and things can all break. Your enemies will take advantage of that. Memories are fine, because they won't cause any harm whether you forget them or not."

—What about Sis?

Sousei couldn't ask her that question.

Tangible things. People. They'd be taken advantage of. So in my case, what about Sis? Or me as her younger brother…?

For some time now, Sousei's sister had hardly ever seen him in person. Even on the phone, she basically talked only about matters

related to work. Sousei just did as his sister said. He worked like an employee bound by a contract, acting as his sister's arms and legs. As her brother, did Sousei truly care for his sister? He honestly didn't know. He did what he was told because he had no other choice.

What would Sousei do if, for example, his sister were to disappear? Would he quit his job? Would he kill people for money if the organization asked him to? He wouldn't know until the time came. He would probably be unsure what to do at first, but he'd be free from his sister.

If she was killed, Sousei might be sad, but he'd also be able to start making his own decisions.

I'm…her younger brother. It might be heartless of me, but…

If his sister was taken hostage and someone demanded he give them Asumi or Moena in exchange, what would Sousei do?

…I probably wouldn't choose Sis.

For Sousei Takarai, his sister—the person called Tohka Takarai—was not a crucial weakness.

Did Sis do that on purpose…?

"I'm going to make you an appointment," his sister said, suddenly changing the topic.

"…What? An appointment…?"

"At the dentist."

"Uh… Huh? Why?"

"Just in case. Putting together everything you've said, it might become necessary."

"…Did you figure something out?"

"Not yet. I'll let you know the date and time when I've set it up."

"…Okay."

"And enjoy your school life as much as you can, Sousei."

"What's that?"

"…Nothing." His sister let out a breath. *"See ya."*

And with that, she hung up.

Sousei put his phone away, went through the ticket gates, and got on the subway. He gazed absentmindedly at his reflection in the

train car window.

We don't look similar at all.

Were they really siblings? Sousei and his sister didn't look anything like each other. His sister had lost both her eyes, and ever since, she'd always worn eye patches or sunglasses. He'd never been able to look her in the eyes, so he didn't really know her face. Sousei still couldn't look directly at her even after she lost her eyesight. However, she didn't bear any resemblance to Sousei. He'd never once felt they were similar.

Was it because they were only half siblings? They had different mothers, after all. Was that why they looked so different?

Sousei got off at Tsukasachou Station and headed to school. He checked to see whether Kuchina's shoes were in the cubby and saw her outdoor shoes were there. It seemed she'd already arrived. Sousei's shoe box contained only his indoor shoes. A tiny part of him had hoped the exchange diary might be inside, so he was a little disappointed.

Don't feel disappointed…

There were five people in Class 2-2's classroom, including Yoh Mishima and Iori Tadeshina. Sousei greeted his classmates, and after checking that Kuchina's bag was hanging from her desk, he sat down in his seat. Yoh sashayed over to him waving his too-long sleeves.

"Lil Souuuu."

"Mishii… What's up?"

"Nothing. I was just saying your name."

"…Okay."

Even though he said nothing was up, Yoh sat perched on the empty chair at the desk next to Sousei's. Sousei opened his bag and was about to take out his textbooks, notebooks, and other things he needed, but he found it difficult since Yoh was staring at him.

"Uhhh… What is it?"

"Nothiiing."

"…Really?"

"Yeaaah." Yoh's long sleeves swayed as he nodded.

"Heh-hem."

Sousei heard someone clear their throat, and he turned to look in the direction it had come from. Apparently, the source was Iori. She was sitting up straight in her chair, and she glanced over her shoulder at him.

"…Wh-what is it?" Sousei asked, and Iori softly tapped her desk.

"I just happened to…accidentally catch a glimpse inside your desk. Given the circumstances, I couldn't help but be curious…" Iori spoke in a low voice, as if she felt awkward. She cleared her throat again.

"—Oh?"

Sousei reached inside his desk.

There it was. It felt like a notebook—or rather, it *was* a notebook.

"School sure is fun, isn't it?" Yoh started singing in a mysterious tune. "School…is fuuun! Schooool…is fuuun!"

It made sense for Iori to know what was in the notebook, but did Yoh know as well? Sousei didn't dwell on it, but he couldn't help wondering.

"School…is fuuun! Schooool…is fuuun!" Yoh continued singing. Sousei almost started singing along with him.

—No, no way, it's too early to know for sure yet… We don't yet know whether Hitsujimoto wrote anything or not. Maybe she's just returning it without writing anything inside. That's definitely something she'd do…!

"School…is fuuun! Schooool…is fuuun!" Yoh was still singing.

Am I allowed to look…? Is it okay if I check it myself first? Wouldn't it be better if we all looked at it together? Right. It's an exchange diary. It's not just for me. I should wait until everyone gets here so we can all look together. That would be…scarier. What if she hasn't written anything?

It would be a shock, to say the least.

Still, it would be understandable. They had forced this exchange diary on her without asking her first. Was she under any obligation to respond? No. Of course not. It would still be a shock, though. Would Sousei be able to handle that by himself? If the four of them were there, maybe the impact would be distributed, and they could endure it together.

"But I'm so curious…!" Sousei inadvertently blurted out—rather loudly. Shouted, really.

He pulled the notebook out of his desk and opened it without checking the cover, then read over the messages that Asumi, Moena, Yukisada, and he had each written in pencil the day before.

The space underneath wasn't blank. There was something written there, in that handwriting. Small and with close attention to detail, and in pencil.

There was no mistaking it. Sousei could tell instantly. It was her handwriting.

"Hooo…" Sousei closed his eyes and shut the notebook.

"What does that mean?!" Iori asked, having apparently stood up from her chair.

Sousei shook his head. "…Ahhh." He couldn't find the words.

"What is that, by the way?" Yoh asked.

So he didn't know…?

Well, it wasn't strange that Yoh hadn't known, but then what had he been so excited about just before? What was he so excited about?

Mishii is a mystery…

Sousei tried to regain his composure by thinking about Yoh—but in the middle of doing that, he noticed he'd stopped breathing. That wasn't good. If he didn't start breathing again, Sousei would end up suffocating before he could do anything about his mental state.

"What happened?!" It seemed like Iori wasn't been able to stand it anymore, because she ran over to him. Sousei sensed Iori getting closer from her footsteps, the vibrations, and the airflow. He still hadn't opened his eyes. He carefully breathed out, then back in.

"What is it?!"

"…She wro—"

That was all Sousei was able to say.

She wrote…something… I didn't read it, though…

He still couldn't produce proper human sounds. He didn't have the confidence. Instead, he nodded a few times.

"I see," Iori responded, then let out a sigh. "Isn't that good? I was just worried since your reaction was extremely weird. I…I say 'worried,' but I just mean in a general sense. A normal amount. Please don't get the wrong idea. Well, in any case…it's good, isn't it?" With that, Iori returned to her seat.

When Sousei finally opened his eyes slightly, Yoh was waving his overly long sleeves.

"That's so greeeat!" Yoh said.

"…Y-yeah."

"You're not gonna take another look at it?"

"Oh… Maybe…I should. Yeah…"

"What is it anyway? Oh. It says it's an exchange diary. 'Potato Party'?"

"Well, uhhh… It's sorta hard to explain…"

"I don't really get it, but I'm happy for you, Lil Sou." Yoh smiled at Sousei, then he stood up and teetered around nearby.

"Hm-hm-hmmm-hmmm," he hummed as he moved about. It looked like he might have been dancing.

With his back to Sousei, Yoh gradually moved farther and farther away. Iori seemed to be reading. No other classmates were coming to talk to Sousei. They weren't even looking at him. Even if they weren't aware of the situation, Sousei's actions had undoubtedly been quite peculiar, as Iori had pointed out. They might have been interested and keeping to themselves or deliberately ignoring him, but his classmates were all being considerate and feigning indifference.

Sousei opened the notebook again.

Uncomplicated.

I've never tried a Swiss roll before.

I like cod roe rice balls. I haven't had any for a while.

Lots of people are lined up at the school store.

And at the bottom was that same drawing—a fluffy body and a bald face looking forward. Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth that connected to its nose.

Miss Hitsujimoto…

†

Kuchina's house in Motomachi was one of the properties owned by Great Lord Furuhiko Kagemiya under his various names. Apparently, Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto had lived there in the past. Great Lord Kagemiya had frozen them in the basement and told Kuchina she could use the house freely as a base for communications. However, this was *that man* she was dealing with. Any order he gave was likely half a trap. Kuchina had found dozens of surveillance cameras, listening devices, infrared sensors, and noise detectors, and she removed all of them. She'd checked many times since then but hadn't found any signs of new devices having been installed. That man hadn't brought the matter up, either—but that didn't mean Kuchina could relax. It would definitely be a mistake to let her guard down. If he felt it was necessary, that man would put Kuchina under close observation.

He demanded loyalty from the people in his faction. They had to demonstrate and prove their loyalty by completing the jobs they were assigned.

"Nothing…" Kuchina looked absentmindedly at the black rotary-dial telephone on the kitchen counter. "I can't find any listening devices, cameras, or sensors."

She'd known that man was going to call, and she still hadn't answered. That had been a very dangerous thing to do. She knew

that, yet she'd still crossed that deadly bridge.

Even if she ignored the ringing a few times, Kuchina knew she'd probably pick up eventually. She had anticipated that. She couldn't rebel against him in the end. If she did, that man would harm Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto, and they wouldn't be able to come back to life. They'd die for real.

However, that man wouldn't overlook Kuchina's offense. He would find some way to punish her, most likely by restricting her freedom.

I was prepared for that.

Maybe Kuchina had even hoped for it to happen.

It might be better for her not to have this temporary freedom.

I can't do anything as long as that man is around…

It was hard to imagine that Great Lord Furuhiko Kagemiya had any sense of morals whatsoever. While Kuchina might not be in any position to comment on other people, that man was, without a doubt, abnormal. He wasn't someone who killed for pleasure, but murder wasn't a taboo to him. For that same reason, he didn't find any joy in it, either. If it was necessary, he could kill anyone, anytime, anywhere, as often as needed. And if not, he wouldn't go out of his way to kill anyone.

If it became necessary, that man would even mobilize his people and have them eliminate innocent high school students.

That's why it's better they don't get involved with me…

As Kuchina Hitsujimoto had always thought, she couldn't let herself associate with anyone. Not even if she wished she could. Maybe she'd wanted it to be that way. *Don't do anything weird. Don't think any more than you have to.* If that man threatened her, even indirectly, she'd just put up with it.

Is that man…not monitoring me…?

Kuchina bit her bottom lip and shook her head. She was jumping to conclusions. Even without a device, he might be keeping an eye on Kuchina's movements through some other means. He'd gathered people with unique talents like Kuchina and Ruran Hinoura, so

maybe he had someone helping him who could see from far away or read people's thoughts.

She was concerned about the woman in sunglasses. Had she been following her? Kuchina had been considering that possibility for a long time. On school days, she tried to spend as long as possible on the school grounds. School was the only ordinary part of her life—which in and of itself made it an out-of-the-ordinary experience that was difficult for her to obtain. It let her forget the stench of blood that surrounded her work. Surely that man's influence didn't reach inside the school, too.

There might be a spy…

Kuchina had tried not to be suspicious up until now. If she started doubting people, she'd never stop. Everyone would start looking like that man's spy.

Even if I assume Takarai is the only person it couldn't really be…

He was a fellow assassin. It was clear he belonged to a different group than Great Lord Furuhiko Kagemiya's faction, which Kuchina was a part of. In fact, he was probably a business rival.

In which case, how about the other students?

Say, for example…Hayashi.

He'd spoken to her in the hallway. Kuchina had instantly come to the conclusion that she couldn't kill him. He'd stood there like a scarecrow, smiling pleasantly with no body odor and not allowing anyone else to sense him.

Is he just a normal high school student…?

It might just be a coincidence, but Yukisada Hayashi had been close to Sousei Takarai from the start. And Sousei had turned out to be a fellow assassin. Due to his connection to Sousei, Yukisada had also participated in the potato chip party that day. Perhaps it had been pure chance, but he'd spoken to her in the hallway.

"—*You're running away again?"* Yukisada had said to Kuchina.

He'd said "again."

…Is Hayashi…monitoring me? Is he a spy planted by that man…?

If that hypothesis was correct, he would know almost everything Kuchina did. That man would know about her behavior at the potato chip party and what she'd written in the exchange diary. She knew what it would mean.

But what about other people?

The reason Kuchina had for suspecting Hayashi was trivial, so she might already be reaching. In fact, a total lack of suspicious qualities might actually make a person seem *more* suspicious. A spy who was suspicious would be useless. What Kuchina should be wary of were spies who didn't seem like spies at all.

In that case, there would be no end to the list of suspects. She couldn't even say with absolute certainty that Sousei Takarai was innocent. He was a fellow assassin in her class, and their targets had overlapped by chance. What if that wasn't the case, though, and that man had set it all up? Had Sousei been sent to the same high school that Kuchina had enrolled in? Had he been monitoring her all along? Deceiving her under that man's orders?

There's no way—

Could she be certain of that?

I saved…Takarai.

Concerned about him, Kuchina had followed Sousei to an elementary school clock tower, where she'd found him backed into a corner. He'd been trying to take down a target and encountered more difficulty than expected, or so she'd believed. Had that all been an act?

…I'm becoming paranoid. Everything seems suspicious. Maybe that's exactly what he intended.

Kuchina didn't believe that man. There was no way she could. She didn't have any loyalty to him. However, if she had obediently done what he said, Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto wouldn't have met that horrible fate. The three of them would have been able to live together.

Carrot and stick…

Kuchina had wanted a family. That man had given her Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto.

Why had Kuchina said she wanted to quit her job? She shouldn't have been having such thoughts. If she hadn't gone against that man, they would still be alive.

Alive— No, Mom and Dad…aren't dead…

Right. She should apologize to that man. She would never disobey him again. She'd work hard, bow down in front of him and swear it—anything. If she demonstrated loyalty, that man might reward her, and he'd probably give her something she wanted.

I might be able to see Mom and Dad again.

They weren't dead.

That man had guaranteed it. He'd said they had been perfectly frozen and were just asleep.

She didn't believe it. There was no way she could believe it. She just wanted to.

She wanted to believe that man.

"I'll do my job properly," Kuchina murmured.

That man was listening somewhere. She had searched around quite a lot, and there weren't any listening devices, but even if that man couldn't hear her voice, she got the feeling he was still listening. She wanted to be heard.

"I'll do my job."

Kuchina took her bag from the corner of the living room and went out the door. Her house in Motomachi was in a high-end residential area called Yamanote. Doing her best to avoid the glow of the streetlights, she went down the gentle decline of the hill and arrived at the shopping district around the subway station. The corner in front of it had a row of old mixed-use buildings and dilapidated apartment complexes.

Kuchina went into a café called Poppy on the first floor of one of the buildings. The doorbell rang when she entered, but the hunched-over elderly shop owner didn't even look at her. Kuchina was the only customer. There was music playing, but all Kuchina could tell

was that it was a foreign song. She sat at a table in the back. The elderly owner hadn't moved an inch, and he was wearing thick glasses. His eyesight must be really bad. Kuchina wondered if he might be hard of hearing as well, but when she said, "Coffee, please," he replied with a simple "All right" after a few seconds. He began to grind the beans with a creaking, hand-cranked coffee grinder.

Kuchina took the notebook and her pencil case out of her bag. She knew it would take quite a while before the elderly shop owner brought her coffee over. The café was open both late at night and early in the morning, and it was sometimes closed during the day. Whenever she visited, there were only ever one or two customers, if any, and all of them were about as old as the elderly shop owner. Yet despite the passage of time, the inside of the store was free of dust.

Kuchina opened the notebook.

Cod roe!

I really like cod roe pasta. Cod roe spaghetti!

I make it myself, too, but it tastes different somehow from how it is at restaurants. I wonder why.

At night, before I go to bed, I watch videos and stretch and stuff.

The other day, I tried to do a back hip circle at the park, but I couldn't…

This was Asumin!

Swiss rolls are a required subject for humankind! It's fundamental.

I'll make you try some next time, so be prepared.

I'm eternally unable to decide whether to buy the no-bake cheesecake Mont Blanc or the regular Mont Blanc.

I end up getting both anyway, but the order you eat them in is important, too!

Hina Shigee

Hello.

This is Yukisada Hayashi.

I asked everyone a question, but the only people to give a clear answer were Sousei and Miss Hitsujimoto.

Red salmon and cod roe are both classically delicious, aren't they?

Bonito flake and cheese rice balls are best if you buy the fresh handmade ones at the store or if you roll your own.

I went to the school store again today and tried the omurice-karaage combination.

The flavors were rich, and it was extremely satisfying.

Next, I think I might try either the hamburger steak bento or the curry bento.

I have heard that if you preorder, you can purchase the A, B, or C bento lunches, which come with lots of side dishes.

I am considering ordering one next time.

Once she'd finished reading, Kuchina glanced at the counter. The elderly shop owner was still preparing her coffee.

She took a mechanical pencil and eraser out of her pencil case, then reread the four diary entries one more time. There were a lot of food-related topics, but since Kuchina wasn't picky about meals, she couldn't think of anything worth writing about.

Cod roe…spaghetti? I've heard of that. But I don't think…I've eaten it before. Is it similar to cod roe rice balls? It is cod roe, after all. Mont Blanc…is a type of cake? It's also the name of a mountain. It's the highest mountain in the Alps, if I'm not mistaken. No-bake cheesecake… Isn't Mont Blanc made with chestnut? Bonito flake and cheese. Cheese. And bonito flakes. Fresh? Roll…your own? Well, I guess, they are *rice "balls." So you make them by rolling them? Hayashi makes rice balls himself?*

It was pretty easy to imagine Yukisada Hayashi standing next to a steaming rice cooker with his sleeves rolled up, pressing the hot white rice into balls.

He might be…a spy…

Kuchina softly let out a breath.

I'll worry about that when the time comes.

It wasn't confirmed. It might be that man's intention to make Kuchina descend into paranoia, so for now, she should pretend not to have noticed or be suspicious of anything. Yukisada wasn't a spy.

Until he shows his true colors…

The kettle let out a shrill whistle; the water had boiled. The elderly owner turned off the stove and picked up the kettle. It seemed like the water would be too hot to use right after it boiled, so he held the kettle for a while to let it cool down a bit. The coffee wasn't ready yet.

Miss Shiramori watches videos and stretches… A back hip circle at the park…?

Asumi Shiramori's long, slender limbs came to Kuchina's mind. Her athletic ability was about average, but once she learned how to use her body, something like a back hip circle should be easy for her.

I could teach her…

Kuchina frowned.

No. I can't do something that dangerous. No way…

It should be fine as long as she was wearing gloves. Even if she touched Asumi. She knew that. Yet she still didn't fully believe that absolutely nothing would go wrong if she touched someone through her gloves. Anything could happen.

The school store—

As soon as lunch break started, students crowded around the front of the school store, jostling each other and forming lines without anyone cutting in. Kuchina could never take part in that.

Just once should be fine…

She couldn't think like that. Couldn't hope for that.

What should I write…?

†

After school, Sousei went to the nearby park, having been invited by Asumi and Moena. The three of them had asked Yukisada as well, but he'd turned them down, saying he had things to do. Yukisada had seemed incredibly apologetic about it, and even more disappointed.

Asumi had put on a pair of tracksuit pants under her school skirt and was standing in front of the horizontal bar, ready to go.

"Here!" Moena handed out candies to Asumi and Sousei. They had black wrappers with the words **1,000x Energy Candy** written in yellow and white lettering.

"Don't you think these look kinda suspicious…?" Asumi said as she tore the wrapper off and put the light green candy in her mouth. "Oooh! It's sour and sweet."

Sousei also took a taste of the 1,000x Energy Candy.

"Yeah, it's sweet and sour…"

"Don't you think it's more 'sour and sweet' than 'sweet and sour'?" Asumi said as she gripped the horizontal bar with both hands and moved her body back and forth.

"Ahh…" Sousei nodded. "Because the sourness comes first, then the sweetness…? Is that what you mean?"

"Yeah! Exactly! Agh, my hair!"

"Here you go." Moena held out a hair tie. Asumi took it and used it to pull her hair back.

"All right, let's do this!"

"They're full of citric acid and stuff—simple but seriously effective," Moena said, giving a thumbs-up, and Asumi enthusiastically grabbed the horizontal bar.

"Hyaaaah…!" She lifted her right leg, then bent her arms to pull her body to the bar, but it didn't reach her abdomen. "Nnnngyaaaah…!" She tried to lift herself up from that position, but it seemed impossible.

"…It might be better to start again," Sousei offered hesitantly.

Asumi straightened out her arms with a "Gaaah!" then lowered her body to the ground. She crouched down, still gripping the bar with her arms outstretched.

"It's no good. I can't do it at all…"

"Well, that was your first try."

Moena looked at her phone. She'd taken a photo of the exchange diary at lunch, so she was probably checking that. Sousei had burned those words into his memory. Kuchina must have written them either yesterday or before school today, and he had read over them countless times, even memorizing their positions on the page.

"Umm, I'll read it once more, just in case." As Moena read it out, the exchange diary page appeared vividly in Sousei's mind.

The trick to back hip circles:
Swing your legs up high.

At the same time, pull your body to the horizontal bar with your arms.

Then wrap your whole body around the bar.

Since it's you, Shiramori, I'm sure you'll soon be able to do it if you practice.

Naturally, a sheep had been drawn at the end. After reading that advice from Kuchina, Asumi had been inspired to do a successful back hip circle no matter what.

"Okaaay!" Asumi stood up and exhaled forcefully. "This is me we're talking about. With a little practice, I'll be able to do it…!"

First, she swung her right leg up.

"…And at the same tiiime…!"

She had to pull her body to the bar with both arms, but she'd missed the correct timing the moment she said, "And at the same time…"

"Nnngh…"

Asumi's abdomen didn't make contact with the horizontal bar that time, either. She stretched her arms out and squatted again.

"…Argh, shit! I can't do it…"

"Language, Asumin…," Moena chided her, and Asumi scrunched up her face.

"But I could do it when I was little…"

"Huh? You could?"

"…Maybe once? I'm sure. At least…I feel like I did…but maybe it's just my imagination. Maybe I unconsciously faked the memory and made myself out to be better than I was…"

"Hmmm… Our bodies would have been, you know, lighter when we were in elementary and junior high school. Even I was lighter back then, Asumin, but you were probably even lighter than me, huh?"

"I was like a stick. Mom used to say I looked like a laundry pole."

"U-um…"

Sousei felt nervous, but he boldly interrupted. After all, Asumi seemed like she was motivated. It wasn't that Kuchina's advice was off the mark, but it was probably a little vague.

"At the start, you should put your legs more, kind of…"

"My legs? Like what?"

"Uhhh." Sousei put his right leg back and his left leg forward. "Then do this." He swung his right leg up from behind.

Asumi copied Sousei and positioned her left leg in front of her right.

"…Huh? Did I have my legs together before?"

"Pretty much, yeah. If you keep your right leg back, it's easier to get the momentum to swing it up—or rather, kick it up."

"I see! What else? What else?"

"Mmm, how should I put this…? Miss Hitsujimoto wrote that you should 'swing them up high,' didn't she?"

"She did."

"Well, so instead of kicking your right leg forward, it's like you're kicking the horizontal bar above you… I mean, you shouldn't actually kick the bar, but imagine hitting your thigh against it. And try to pull your body up to it and kick out at the same time—"

"Hey, Takarai, wouldn't it be easier to understand if you just showed us?" Moena suggested.

That was reasonable. The problem was whether Sousei could demonstrate a simple gymnastics move like the back hip circle in a way that would be easy to understand.

"I'll give it a go, then…"

The park they were in had a set of three horizontal bars at slightly different heights that were all connected together. Asumi was using the middle bar, which was also at the middle height, so Sousei decided to use the highest one.

He tried doing a back hip circle and was able to pull it off easily.

"That's amazing, Sousei!"

"Damn! You did that so easily!"

Being praised by Asumi and Moena wasn't unpleasant, but it was embarrassing. It was just a back hip circle, after all.

"…Ah, nah, it's nothing… Still, did it help?"

"Hmm…" Asumi tilted her head. "So maybe I don't need to use as much strength? About as much as you used…?"

"It makes me think I'll never be able to do one ever," Moena said nonchalantly. Sure enough, Sousei's easy-peasy demonstration wasn't a good example to learn from.

"So, well…it's more about direction and timing than strength. You're right about not needing to use much strength…"

"Direction and timing…?" Asumi didn't seem to be getting it. But then, she had an idea. "I just remembered, when I did back a hip circle at elementary school, wasn't I supported by the teacher?"

"You were!" Moena exclaimed. She made a gesture that looked like she was carrying a straw bale on her shoulder.

That's how you support someone doing a back hip circle…?

Sousei inwardly questioned it, and Asumi's eyes widened.

"Hey, Moena, weren't you lifted up way too high?!"

"I couldn't get up by myself at all! I was so stiff, I ended up joking that I must be a tuna!"

"Tuna?! A frozen one?!"

"Does it matter if it was frozen or fresh?! Anyway, I couldn't do it even with support, but you'll be all right, won't you, Asumin? Help her out, Takarai."

"…Oh, okay," he replied, then quickly pointed at himself. "Huh? *Me…?*"

"You think I'd be able to support her?" Moena asked, gesturing to herself. "That'd be dangerous for Asumin, wouldn't it? We don't want to get her hurt. So that just leaves you."

"…Yeah, I guess…" For some reason, Sousei had been focused on what to do if his sister contacted him. She could call him at any time. While that worry was always there and he hadn't forgotten about it, Sousei wondered why he had to think about his sister or work right at that moment.

"I'm quite big and brawny, you know," Asumi said. "You good, Sousei?" She was about to start another back hip circle.

"…Um, yeah…" As Sousei tried to get into position to support Asumi, he also worried about his sister and work, and he pondered what Asumi considered "big and brawny."

Asumin is tall, but I don't think I'd call her big and brawny…

Despite how he looked, Sousei was much more built than the average high school boy. Lifting up one or two Asumi Shiramoris was no big deal. He could easily support her without issue.

"Ummm… Whenever you're ready."

"A'ight!" Asumi had probably been trying to say "All right." She lifted her right leg and tried to pull her body to the horizontal bar with both her arms. So far, she was doing better than before and was almost able to touch her abdomen to the bar. Sousei reflexively placed his right hand on her hip, thinking he'd managed to keep physical contact to a minimum.

"Ngh, hya…" Shiramori was about to hook her body around the horizontal bar.

"Left leg…!" Sousei called out, and Asumi released a sharp breath, her left leg flailing.

"Takarai!" Moena called out, as if urging him to do something about it. It was overwhelming, but Sousei pressed his left hand against Asumi's left thigh.

—It's through her tracksuit pants, so it's fine…!

It was by no means sexual harassment. That involved pestering someone in an inappropriate way while at work or school—which they weren't, and he definitely wasn't harassing Asumi. Just helping with her back hip circles.

"Nghaaah…" Asumi hung from the horizontal bar, with the bar pressed against her hips. In that moment, Sousei quickly removed his hands from her.

"Oh, lift your head up!"

"Whoa!" Asumi rotated her body and lifted her head higher. "—Huh?! I did iiit!"

"On the first go!" Moena clapped. "Amazing, Takarai! You did a great job supporting her!"

"…Ah, nah, not really…," Sousei said, his palms raised for some reason. It seemed they'd stayed like that even after he'd finished supporting Asumi. Maybe he was trying to prove he had nothing to hide.

All I did was support her when I was asked. We're…friends, and I have no ulterior motives. It's probably weirder that I'm so conscious of something like that, but I mean…

"Okay!" Asumi got down from the horizontal bar. "I'll keep at it until I can do it without any support! Sousei, could you help me a few more times?!"

—It makes sense that neither of us has any ulterior motives.

Until recently, Sousei had never engaged with others in this way before. He wasn't accustomed to it at all. That's why he was conflicted by these strange thoughts.

I'll help her perfect her back hip circle. That's what this is all for…!

Sousei lowered his hands, assumed a stance like a wrestler, and nodded emphatically.

"Sure! Ready when you are!"

"Here I gooooo."

"You can do it, Asumin!"

"Nghaaah…!"

†

Yesterday, Sousei and Moena helped me practice back hip circles at the park!

Thanks to Miss Hitsujimoto's advice…

I did it! I learned how to do a back hip circle!

I'm so happy! Thank you!

Next time, I want us to go to the park together so I can show you. I'll practice every day so I don't forget how to do it!

It sounds like every day is gonna be tough… This was Asumin!

Well done, Asumin! I'll never be able to do a back hip circle ever!

I'm still traumatized by my 6th grade elementary school sports festival. I tripped during the 100-meter race and got a nosebleed in front of the entire school.

But after that, for the first time in my life, I ate at a regular, non-conveyor-belt sushi restaurant and made a full recovery.

I really thought I wanted to be a sushi chef.

For my elementary school graduation essay, we answered the question, "If you could be reborn as anything, what would you want to be?" I said I wanted to be a hamburger steak.

Hina Shigee

I’m disappointed I couldn’t go to your back hip circle practice.

This is Yukisada Hayashi.

On the horizontal bar, I could probably teach you all the way up to a forward giant.

Release moves would probably be too dangerous.

I made rice ball ochazuke for dinner yesterday.

Grilled rice ball ochazuke is delicious, too.

Although I did not do much, I was given the opportunity to help Asumin’s back hip circle practice.

Upon reflection, I wonder if I could have provided more effective assistance.

Today, I purchased the A lunch bento box, having preordered it at the school store.

It was packed with potato croquettes, hamburger steak, grilled salmon, little frankfurters, spaghetti Napolitan, and rice.

As a side note, the B lunch is health-oriented, while the C lunch is also known as the “mega-sized bento box.”

Congratulations on your back hip circle.

Thinking about it, a forward giant seems difficult.

The idea of being reborn as a hamburger steak has never occurred to me before.

You would see what it was like to get eaten.

Between A, B, and C, I think the B lunch is best.

Sousei gazed at the sheep Kuchina had drawn at the end of her diary entry. It was the final class for the day, but Sousei was mostly spending the time rereading the entries and thinking about what to write for today. He'd hidden the notebook in his desk and had been occasionally taking it out to glance through so he wouldn't get told off by the teacher. If he really wanted to, Sousei could leave and enter the classroom without being noticed by the teacher.

That wouldn't be good, though. No. It wouldn't. But it's unavoidable, right…?

Sousei turned the page of the notebook. Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada had all already finished their diary entries for that day.

Thanks!

First thing this morning, I tried doing a back hip circle in the park near my house, and I did it!

Come to think of it, the Aurora Light Show has started, hasn't it?

I haven't gone to see it in a few years.

It'd be nice if we all went together!

This was Asumin!

For some reason, I suddenly decided I wanted to lose weight, so I thought I'd take up walking, but with my past injury…

Ever since I dislocated my shoulder in the sandbox in kindergarten, it's been impossible for me to do any real exercise.

Green tea ochazuke using grilled rice balls sounds amazing. I want a bowl full of it.

I haven't been to the Aurora Light Show recently, either.

They set up food stalls, too. Sorry for always thinking with my stomach.

This is Yukisada Hayashi.

Is it really that difficult to do a forward giant? All you have to do is spin around without releasing your grip.

Is it because it's scary?

I've never gone to see the Aurora Light Show.

They do it in Shizukamachi around this time of year, right?

I heard that a long time ago, it was called the White Light Show instead of the Aurora Light Show. I want to go.

The Aurora Light Show…

It was an annual event held at the Greenbelt that intersected the road in front of Shizukamachi City Hall. The Greenbelt was a space lined with trees between two roads, which was often used as a plaza and park. At the Aurora Light Show, the entire area was beautifully decorated with lights, and it was said to attract spectators even from outside the city.

Sousei had seen it before. He hadn't gone to see the light show but had done a job near the Greenbelt when the event had been going on.

That's my one and only memory related to the Aurora Light Show…

For a normal, everyday high school student, that seemed questionable.

However, when it came down to it, that was just what Sousei *wanted* to be. He wasn't a normal, everyday high schooler at all.

Sousei put the notebook on his desk. He didn't try to hide it with his textbook, but he thought it very unlikely that the teacher would question him if he acted confidently.

I've only seen the Aurora Light Show once, a few years ago.

Since forward giants are dangerous, I think it would be better to try either a backward or forward somersault next.

Today, I preordered and tried the B lunch.

It was light and refreshing, and included grilled mackerel, chicken katsu with plum and perilla leaves, and thick, deep-fried tofu in the style of sweet and sour pork.

I want to go to the Aurora Light Show.

…"I want to go."

After stressing about it for a while, Sousei chose to copy that phrase from Yukisada.

Ah, but isn't that kind of…forward? I mean… Hmm, I'm not sure. There seems to be a bit of a difference between Yukisada writing "I want to go" and me writing the same thing… But what is it exactly? Do you think it seems a bit, I dunno…unpleasant? Or something? Unpleasant…? Even though all I said was that I want to go with everyone— Ah, that's it, I should write "with everyone." Yeah. I want to go with everyone. It'll be a good memory…

Sousei erased the "I want to go" part and rewrote it as "I definitely want to go with everyone."

"Definitely"…?

He'd naturally expressed such a strong desire.

He wondered if he should tone it down a bit. Maybe the "definitely" was unnecessary.

But…I definitely *feel that way…*

Sousei kept going back and forth until the end of class, but he decided not to erase "definitely" and left it as it was.

Just before Mr. Oohira came to start end-of-school homeroom, Asumi sent a message to the Potato Party group chat. It was a short message asking if Sousei had finished writing in the diary. Instead of replying, he nodded at Asumi, who was looking at him.

After giving the daily announcements, Mr. Oohira said, "All right, so—"

But that was all he managed to say before Iori cut him off.

"Staaand! Bow!"

"Ohhh… Jumping the gun there a bit, Miss Class President…" Mr. Oohira hurriedly bowed his head. "Okay, everyone. See you tomorrow!"

"Sayonara!" "Nara!" "What's 'naraaa'?" "It's naraaa!" *"Sayonara!"*

Each student said whatever greeting they felt like, put their chairs upside down on their desks, and started moving them to the back of the classroom. Sousei also put his bag on his shoulder and picked his desk up. The exchange diary was in his bag. After the students on duty had finished cleaning, he'd return to the classroom and put the exchange diary in Kuchina's desk. Until then, he'd kill time with Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada in the corridor between the school buildings. They hadn't arranged to do that, but that was what they usually ended up doing.

I'm really a high school student, huh?

Thinking about that stirred up some deep emotions. Sousei Takarai wanted to become a normal, everyday high school student. He'd been trying to play the part, but his social interactions had been limited to school and almost nonexistent outside of it. He had honestly never dreamed he'd be able to lead a typical high school life.

Yet here I am…

Sousei intentionally left the classroom without checking what his friends were doing. If he went to the corridor, someone would probably show up. If they didn't, he could always call or text.

I hope I don't get a call from Sis…

That was the one thing he was worried about.

Today's Friday, after all…

He couldn't think there'd be nothing. He shouldn't think that way. It was better for him to be prepared.

I'll worry about that when it happens—

"Takarai."

"Eek!"

Sousei jumped up and spun almost 180 degrees in midair. He was in the hallway. Of course—the school hallway. And on top of that, he wasn't even that far away from Class 2-2's classroom. Some students were heading for the entrance to go home while others were off to their club activities. Sousei had been about to go to the corridor between the school buildings. He may have been thinking

about going to the restroom on the way there—or he might not have been—but regardless, he'd been caught completely off guard. He hadn't imagined in the slightest that she might call out to stop him.

"Oh, ah, hee…vuh…hoh…"

"…Heave-ho," muttered Kuchina Hitsujimoto with a frown.

Sousei was baffled by the strange phrase. "Huh? Heave-ho…? Like when you pick up something heavy?"

"You said it."

"I did?!"

"You said, 'Heave-ho.'"

"Y-you're kidding…"

"It's true."

"…I…see. Uh… I didn't mean anything in particular by it. Probably. Or I guess I must've unconsciously made noises that just happened to turn into 'heave-ho'…"

"Into 'heave-ho,' of all things."

"Y-yeah. For some reason, they turned into 'heave-ho,' of all things…"

"Heave-ho…" Kuchina lowered her gaze. It looked like she was trying to hold something in. But she soon looked up at Sousei through her lashes and reached out her right hand. She was wearing gloves, of course.

"That."

"*…That?*" Sousei pressed a hand to the back of his neck.

"That"…?

What could Kuchina be referring to when she said "that"? *That.* That? What did *that* mean? Sousei desperately racked his brain, but he had no idea what she meant.

"Like I said." Kuchina lowered her eyes. "…That."

It seemed to be extremely difficult for her to say. She didn't want to name whatever she was talking about. Sousei wondered why. She was holding out her hand. What was going on? Did she want something from Sousei?

"Give it to me." Is that what she's saying…? Miss Hitsujimoto is asking me for—

Sousei's eyes went wide.

"Ohh!"

He hurriedly took the exchange diary out of his bag. As soon as he did, it was snatched away. Without waiting a second, Kuchina turned on her heel, the exchange diary hugged to her chest in both arms, and walked away without a word.

Sousei's mind went blank for at least ten seconds. Kuchina had called out to stop him. Even just that was a big deal in itself. But the true groundbreaking event had happened after that.

Miss Hitsujimoto wanted the exchange diary from me…

Had that really just happened? He couldn't believe it. Sousei searched inside his bag. He couldn't find the exchange diary. Sure enough, he'd given it to her.

"Wow, I'm kinda…"

Sousei looked up at the ceiling.

I have no words…

His phone vibrated in his pocket, but Sousei was still basking in a kind of afterglow over what had just happened. It was on silent, so he didn't realize it was a phone call at first, and he thought it must be a group chat notification.

After a few seconds, Sousei realized someone was calling him, and he turned pale.

"Ugh…" He let out a short groan and took out his phone.

It's Sis…

This wouldn't be the kind of conversation he should have standing in the middle of the hallway. Sousei started walking, then put the phone to his ear.

"…Yeah?"

"Sousei. Are you still at school?"

"Uh… Mm."

"You're mumbling."

"Because I'm at school…"

"I was able to get a dentist appointment for you. Endou Dental Clinic in Yakatamachi, four thirty this afternoon."

"…Will I make it?"

"You will if you leave now, right? Don't make Dr. Magamo wait."

"…Roger."

"I'll follow up later with the plan for after that."

"Ah, after that…? So we do have something. I should've guessed…"

"Is there something you want to say?"

"No. Nothing. Anyway, I'll leave now."

"That would be best."

"Okay…"

Sousei ended the call and quickened his pace. For some reason, he felt a desperate urge to run, but he restrained himself and opened the group chat as he walked quickly toward the front entrance. He had to send an important message to everyone.

Mmmm… No, I'll do that after…

Ø6

Bad Feeling

The parking lot of the Endou Dental Clinic in Yakatamachi was empty, and there was a sign on the automatic doors saying they were closed. Yet the doors still admitted Sousei into the clinic. There was nobody in the waiting room, nor anybody at the reception desk. The fluorescent lights were off, and the drapes were shut.

He went down the hallway next to the reception desk and found three consultation rooms in a row, all equipped with dental chairs. In the spacious room right at the back, a woman with hair dyed bright pink was waiting with her arms folded. She was wearing a white doctor's gown under a long black coat. She didn't quite look like a doctor.

"Welcome, kiddo."

"…It's been a long time, Dr. Magamo," Sousei said with a bow.

Magamo Sakashiranami nodded toward the dental chair.

"Shall we get it over and done with right away?"

"Yes please…" Sousei put his bag down and sat in the dental chair.

Dr. Magamo turned her back to him as she prepared something. The room had an impressive desk, which must have been used by the director of the clinic, and arranged on top of it were a wide variety of ominous-looking items. Near the desk was a sturdy suitcase, which Dr. Magamo always carried with her wherever she

went. Inside it were not only tools that violated the law, but some that were beyond the reach of the law.

"Things must be tough for you, too, huh?"

"…Ah, no. Not really. It's nothing compared to you, Dr. Magamo…"

"I just do as I please, though, you know? Even if I get a job, I'll refuse it if I don't feel like doing it."

"That's…nice. Yeah. Or… How should I put it…?"

"You're jealous?"

"…Yeah. Kinda…"

"It's all right, you know?" Dr. Magamo's shoulders shook as she laughed. "I won't rat you out to Tohka, you hear?"

Magamo had a medical license. She was a highly respected doctor specializing in neurosurgery. She had gotten most of her experience in the United States and still received requests from hospitals both within Japan and overseas, performing dozens of surgeries a month.

However, she wasn't just a doctor.

"Just so you know, I'm not giving you any anesthesia, okay?" Dr. Magamo took off her long coat and hung it over the director's chair. There were black lines on her white doctor's gown. It was quite short. Too short, in fact. She was wearing thigh-high stockings attached to a garter belt.

Sousei lay down on the dental chair and let out a breath.

"…You've never once given me anesthesia."

"Dentistry isn't my area of expertise, but I'll try to make it as painless as possible, okay?"

Dr. Magamo had dental drills and other tools arranged on the instrument tray, and she pressed a button to make the chair recline. She adjusted the height, and a bright light came on overhead. Dr. Magamo had put on white medical gloves and was wearing a mask.

"Now, can you say 'ah' for me?"

"…Just straight into it? No gargling or anything…?"

"You're so particular, aren't you?"

"Aren't *you* being a bit too careless…? You're a neurosurgeon, after all, Dr. Magamo…"

"The *family business* is more of a hobby, you know?" Dr. Magamo smiled. "Well, kiddo, killing you doesn't actually kill you, so you'll be fine, right?"

†

Simply put, it was a red-light district.

There was no distinction between day and night there. Crowded restaurants and shops with protruding roofs, awnings, and waterproof sheets to protect against rain encroached the narrow streets, creating a dim atmosphere even in broad daylight. Many shops were open for business all day long, their lights never going out because there were always customers. As long as you could put up with the rats and bugs, you could fill your stomach and even have a drink for just a few hundred yen. There were clothing and shoe shops with unknown suppliers, thrift stores with mountains of dirty rags and pieces of cloth, and secondhand bookstores. You could easily get your hands on cheap moonshine, bootleg cigarettes, and counterfeit goods—things you'd never find in department stores, mass-market retailers, or regular shopping districts. If you saw a row of laptops in the dark, that was somewhere you could gamble. Online casinos were illegal, of course, but some things in this district were more important than respecting the law. As for what those things were, only the locals or frequent visitors knew.

The area had once been called Ochiudodani, which had then changed to Ochiya, but its name had disappeared from maps after the Act on Indication of Residential Address in 1962. Yet despite this, the area was still referred to as "Ochiya" or "Occha" to this day.

Although it was a district, nobody really knew where Ochiya started and ended. Some people said Ochiya had shrunk over time, while others said it had expanded. According to one theory, the area grew when the economy was in the gutter, and it shrank during

times of global economic prosperity. Ochiya was just like a living thing.

…A can… It's a can this time, huh? A can… It's not a can of beer or juice… A can of what? Canned food…?

Tohru Hakayama had been hiding out in Ochiya for the past two days. He had heard the rumors about the place, but this was his first time setting foot there. He was sitting in the end seat of a food stall, eating a dark, lumpy dish that could only be called oden in name and drinking what seemed more like diluted rubbing alcohol than any sort of actual alcoholic beverage. The stall was surprisingly quite pleasant—if Hakayama didn't count the awful, horribly uncomfortable stools that didn't have a scrap of cushioning, the putrid body odor of the customer sitting next to him, who looked like he was on the brink of death, and the constant worry over where the chain-smoking, eighty-something-year-old store owner's cigarette ashes might land.

All said, even if he was just having a drink to relax, Hakayama had chosen pretty much the worst place to have it in. Everything had given him a *bad feeling*, though, so he only had the foreign object in his head to blame.

Whenever he stepped into a proper town, where ordinary people tamed by society lived, a monster rampaged inside Hakayama's head. The monster could destroy the world a hundred times over and still not be satisfied, and it brought on headaches, chills, nausea, stomachaches, and toothaches, all wrapped up in a single, overwhelming pain.

No matter which hideout Hakayama went to, the monster wouldn't leave. He'd considered escaping to somewhere farther away, like Okinawa or Hokkaido, but even just thinking about it made the monster more violent, and the thought of fleeing overseas had caused it to roar in anger.

Hakayama had been at a complete loss as to what to do, when he'd suddenly remembered a certain saying:

If you descend into Ochiya, your life is over.

In that moment, the monster had broken into a wide smile—that is, assuming you could call an expression that makes a person's blood run cold a *smile.*

Hakayama had thrown off his Scarecrow underlings who'd been following him and entered Ochiya alone. When he did, the monster in his head disappeared, but something he couldn't quite put his finger on remained. The problem now was what that thing was.

Would Tohru Hakayama's devil's luck run out, leaving him to die in Ochiya?

Or would he narrowly escape with his life, as he had with the natto packet?

Either way, the only thing he could rely on was the ever-changing foreign object in his head. Hakayama had a decent amount of money, so even if he couldn't eat B-grade gourmet fare, he wanted to at least eat C-grade food and drink *korui shochu* or the type of synthetic alcohol that was used for cooking sake. However, whenever he tried to choose a seemingly decent restaurant in Ochiya, the foreign object in his head would take on a threatening shape and begin to exude an ominous aura. Sometimes, it even brought about physical pain.

Canned food, huh…?

Hakayama took a small sip of the watered-down alcohol and grimaced.

The problem is what's inside.

Hakayama had disposed of all his clothes and accessories before entering Ochiya, dressing instead in a hoodie, a jacket that had a shape he didn't really know how to describe, a cap with a mysterious logo, denim jeans that didn't look new, and cheap sneakers. He didn't think he'd stand out, even in Ochiya. Still, he couldn't help thinking he looked a bit too clean. The average age of the people in Ochiya was high. Hakayama was definitely on the younger side of the distribution, but there wasn't much he could do about that. He wasn't the youngest, and even children weren't that uncommon. He'd heard stories of homeless orphans who lived by scavenging

leftovers. Those Ochiya kids would soon scatter around the country as genuine criminals.

Couldn't I win over the kids from Ochiya and turn them into fearless soldiers…? Benny. Kurojima. Shiro. Midori. They're all dead. There's no point in going to the trouble of rebuilding the Scarecrows when there's only small fry left. They were good pawns, though, each crazy in their own way and unafraid of anything… That's right. I need soldiers. I followed my bad feeling *and it led me to Ochiya. Is it telling me to make a comeback here? Maybe the can's full of all my dreams. I just transferred hundreds of millions of yen to my bank accounts in Singapore and Luxembourg, and I also have around five hundred million in cryptocurrency. There's no need to panic. I just have to settle down and think. I'm not the kinda guy who'd let it end here. It's too bad about Benny and the others, but they're in the ground, and I'm not. The number of graves has increased again. But none of them are mine. That's the main thing. Ochiya here is worse than a graveyard, but it's also where I'll make my comeback.*

Hakayama used his chopsticks to pick up a dark lump from the badly chipped plate. It didn't look like vegetables or meat, but when he sniffed it, it smelled like something resembling food. He put it in his mouth.

It's so bitter…

Or was it salty? And the more he chewed, the more a rich umami flavor emerged. It wasn't something a human would eat by choice, nor was it something any animal would show an interest in.

What is *this…?*

Hakayama washed down the remains of the dark lump in his mouth with the diluted rubbing alcohol. He almost started having a coughing fit, but the aftertaste of the dark lump disappeared. Maybe it was the sterilizing effect of the alcohol.

"Feh-feh-feh-feh." The eighty-plus-year-old store owner let out a strange sound as he blew out cigarette smoke. Hakayama tried to ask what the black lumps on his plate were by pointing at them with the tips of his chopsticks.

That was when it happened.

Canned food…

The foreign object started shaking inside his skull. Or maybe not his skull—maybe it was buried inside his brain. The can was directly activating his neurons, and while the sensation was completely different from pain, he could only describe it as unpleasant.

Hakayama put his chopsticks down and stood up, taking a 500-yen coin from his jeans pocket and placing it on the counter. Among the food stalls that served unidentifiable food and drink in Ochiya, it was extremely rare to see a 1000-yen note, and just as rare that a single 500-yen coin wouldn't be enough to cover it.

"Thanks for the meal."

"Feh-feh-feh." The store owner was probably laughing amid the cigarette smoke, and he moved his hands, covered by driving gloves. What could he possibly be trying to say?

Hakayama didn't have a clue, but he said, "Keep the change," as he left the stall.

"*Feh-feh-feh*," the owner laughed again.

Ochiya's Yatai Street was smoky. Each food stall was only half full of customers at best, but they all looked crowded because they were tangled together like a melee of dragons and tigers. Hakayama went down Yatai Street, stepping over fallen stools and plastic beer cases and kicking aside sheets of cardboard. He couldn't push aside customers, even by accident. Drunken patrons and hot-tempered Ochiya residents wouldn't stay silent if they were given a reason to fight. Many of them lived as if they might not see the next day. If it came to it, they'd put their lives on the line and start a fight over something like whether or not they were pushed, which often resulted in fatalities. Nobody in Ochiya would report anything to the police, even if one or two people died, and the police wouldn't go to the trouble of checking it out. The corpses disappeared unnoticed. Dead people—especially the recently dead—were quite useful, and there was no shortage of people willing to make a deal for them.

Occasionally, the scramble to claim corpses also resulted in an increase in supply.

Canned food…

Hakayama was still struggling to grasp the true meaning of the foreign object shaking inside his head.

That's what it is, right?

Did it mean that danger was approaching? Was it the assailant who'd attacked their hideout and killed Benny and the others? The assassin who hadn't died even when he was killed, like a zombie? Had he followed Hakayama? He didn't know. He hadn't noticed anyone suspicious. The can in his head had shaken. He wasn't certain whether that was what it actually was, but he knew he shouldn't ignore whatever was in his head. There was definitely something there. Something was going to happen. He couldn't stay where he was. His *bad feeling* was propelling him to move.

†

Did he notice me…? I don't think I gave myself away…

Sousei had found his target on Yatai Street in the notorious Ochiya, in the middle of a meal. He hadn't particularly seemed to be paying attention to his surroundings, but Sousei still watched him from a distance, just in case. According to Sousei's sister, he was moving alone, though that didn't necessarily mean he didn't have any accomplices nearby.

Ochiya was unbelievably squalid and full of trash. Visibility was extremely poor. That meant it would be difficult for someone to notice Sousei, but the same went for the target and any accomplices he might have. It was important for Sousei to proceed carefully.

Sousei maintained a distance of more than thirty feet between himself and the target. The space between the stalls was extremely narrow, so hiding and peering around corners, he could just barely keep watch on his target up ahead. The target wouldn't be able to

spot Sousei unless he turned around and focused on Sousei's exact location.

He hadn't looked at Sousei even once.

But even so, he abruptly stood up and left the stall.

"What's he doing, Sousei?" his sister asked through his earpiece.

"…I wonder."

That was all Sousei could say in response. On Yatai Street, where he could hardly even walk in a straight line, Sousei's had his hands full just trying to track the target without losing sight of him.

Can't she just let me focus on work…?

As soon as that thought went through his head, his sister spoke again.

"Focus, please."

…I am, though. Or at least I'm trying to…

He suppressed that thought and was just about to say "Okay" when his sister hit the nail on the head.

"But you probably want to tell me you're already doing that."

"…That's…"

—right. If he could say that, then maybe it would cheer him up a little. But in any case, it seemed like the target was trying to leave Yatai Street.

"The key is to cut yourself off from any idle thoughts. Otherwise, you might find yourself being tripped up on this job."

I know, I know…

If he flippantly talked back to his sister, not only would he have to deal with her return fire, but he'd probably fully lose his composure.

…And if I said I never had any idle thoughts, well, I guess…

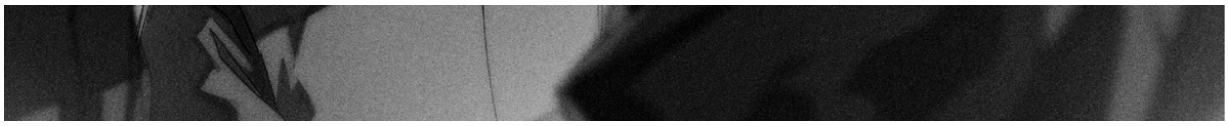
The image of Kuchina Hitsujimoto coming to get the Potato Party exchange diary from him occasionally flitted through Sousei's mind when he wasn't expecting it. He couldn't say something like that.

I would have put it in her desk anyway, which is basically the same as giving it to someone by hand… Is that all there was to it? Was she just focused on efficiency? Or maybe Miss Hitsujimoto just

needed to go home early, so she wanted to get it sooner. Hmm, but it feels different than that somehow…

The target left Yatai Street. The only maps of Ochiya that Sousei had been able to get his hands on were either old ones or rough sketches based off aerial photographs. He remembered those sketches, so he had a general idea of the layout of the area. Beyond Yatai Street was a densely packed cluster of stores piled high with used electrical appliances and parts, tools, hardware, and scrap metal among other things. The area was commonly called Electric Town. There was a legend that an old man named Higasan lived there, and that he could repair anything from toys to refrigerators, from computers to smartphones.





Maybe Miss Hitsujimoto actually really looks forward to the exchange diary… It almost seemed like she was excited. Maybe she came to get it so she could read it sooner…? I always struggle with what to write in it, but reading it is fun. I mean, the writing part is difficult, but I don't dislike it. It's different from just keeping a diary by yourself to read… Is it because there are other people involved that it's, I dunno…more rewarding…or something? Miss Hitsujimoto might feel that way, too, surprisingly…

Once the target had entered Electric Town, he stopped in front of a few stores to look at the merchandise, maybe casually trying to decide whether one shop was better than another. There were some other people in the crowd doing the same sort of thing, so the target was likely trying to blend in with the Electric Town vibe.

I hope Miss Hitsujimoto looks forward to it, too—to the exchange diary. Honestly, I never even thought about that, did I? An exchange diary? Who would've believed it? I never thought I'd be keeping an exchange diary in high school. But when you actually do it, it's sort of…profound, right? It's completely different from talking to someone directly, and it's also unlike having a conversation on LINE. You can't write that much, but maybe that's actually good in a way…

The target went into a store and suddenly disappeared from sight. Sousei wanted to chase after him, but most of the stores in Electric Town were just a single room with merchandise displayed on both sides. The shopkeeper stayed in the back of the shop—lived there, actually. The stores only had a front entrance and no back door.

Sousei waited calmly and quietly in the shadows, and the target eventually came back out. He looked around in all directions, probably suspecting he was being followed, but he didn't seem to have noticed Sousei.

The next time I'll be able to read Miss Hitsujimoto's diary entry will be Monday…

Sousei realized that he was eagerly awaiting that moment himself.

"Idle thoughts," his sister muttered in an unusually low voice, and Sousei immediately cleared his throat.

"…I'm in pursuit."

"That so?"

"Yeah."

Since entering Electric Town, the target had been wandering around aimlessly. It seemed he hadn't found any proof he was actually being followed, and maybe he was starting to let his guard down again.

Good. If he keeps that up—

Sousei shouldn't be thinking that. He shouldn't expect anything. He should just be tailing his target indifferently, as if that was his only goal.

"Sousei."

"Yes?"

"I'm going to say it again, but if you spot an opening, you can do it in Ochiya. We'll let the residents handle the cleanup."

"Yeah, I know."

"Clear your mind of idle thoughts."

As if he could just do something like that.

Sousei started to give a retort, but he swallowed it back down.

"…Roger."

"Timing is everything."

"I know."

The target was heading toward Iro, the neighborhood that bordered Electric Town. Iro was a nickname for the seedier area of the red-light district. It was a hotbed for the sex trade, and it also had a smattering of simple lodgings.

The time was 11:43 PM. It was almost midnight.

Is this where he's holed up…?

It was definitely possible. The target might have lodgings somewhere in Iro. Or maybe he was just planning to spend the night

there.

Well, if that's the case…

Sousei had to make sure he took care of this tonight. It was better not to have such a rigid plan. If he got lucky, he might also have the option of attacking the target while he was asleep, so if there was somewhere he was staying regularly, Sousei wanted to locate it. The more options he had, the better.

This really isn't a good place for someone underage like me…

Sousei had a similar build to the target. At a glance, they shouldn't seem too different in terms of age or appearance. He could probably stay inconspicuous in a red-light district.

Still, I'm reluctant to…

Iro was a lot darker than Electric Town. Bare light bulbs and light fixtures that looked like lanterns were hung here and there, and men and women stood along the narrow streets. The glow of cigarette embers looked like fireflies.

The target was about to reach Iro.

So we're going in there, are we?

Why should it matter? He'd mentally prepared himself. It didn't mean anything.

Sousei quietly slipped into a secondhand electronics store he'd been about to pass by. He probably appeared calm on the surface, but in reality, his heart was pounding.

The target had suddenly turned around just before stepping into Iro.

…Was I noticed?

Sousei pretended to be looking for one of those big boxy TVs, or a radio with an antenna, or something else there.

I don't know. I can't really say. Maybe he just decided not to go there…

Sousei's heart rate soon calmed down.

For some strange reason that eluded even him, he felt unusually calm.

He could see everything clearly, all the way to the periphery of his vision, and distinguish different sounds from both nearby and far away.

The target was nothing but a despicable coward who had the devil's luck. That was all Sousei had thought of him, given what he knew of Tohru Hakayama. However, actually facing him had changed that impression. He was cautious, shrewd, and undoubtedly cunning, but not a coward. Rather than taking safety measures to make sure nothing went wrong, he seemed to be incredibly skilled at walking along a tightrope. Even in a minefield with the group he'd put together, Hakayama alone had somehow avoided stepping on any, as if he was the only one who could see them.

The land mines were buried and hidden. Yet somehow, he knew where they were.

Was it possible that he felt something?

Could he have precognition abilities, for example?

Sousei couldn't claim that something like precognition was ridiculous. People like him and Kuchina Hitsujimoto existed, after all.

However, that didn't mean that Hakayama's life of villainy had all been smooth sailing. In fact, it had been very tumultuous. He had narrowly escaped death on multiple occasions, and many of his accomplices had died. Apparently, some of them had even been shot dead in his place.

Hakayama couldn't avoid danger—not completely anyway.

Hakayama had had more than one extremely close brush with death, yet he'd always survived.

For some reason, it was only ever him.

Hakayama didn't have precognitive abilities. At the very least, he couldn't see the future clearly.

Did he have a good nose for things? His instincts were much sharper than an ordinary person's. He was sensitive to any danger approaching him.

I won't kill him.

Sousei turned to look at a small, slightly rounded television. There was an opening in it that looked like it would fit a cassette tape or something similar. It didn't seem like a normal television set.

I won't kill…

Hakayama had turned back, so he would soon pass this secondhand electronics store.

…Tohru Hakayama.

There was no way that Sousei Takarai, who wanted to be a normal, everyday high school student, would kill Tohru Hakayama.

Therefore, there was no lethal danger to Hakayama's person.

When Sousei looked toward the back of the store, he saw the owner—whose face was about seventy percent covered with white hair and a white beard stained yellow from age—looking at him with clouded eyes. His jaw was moving. Was he eating something?

He was sitting cross-legged on top of a moldy tatami mat in front of a small charcoal grill. What was he grilling? It just looked like burnt charcoal, but it smelled faintly like squid. Dried cuttlefish maybe? Or the remnants of one?

A person passed by the front of the store. Sousei listened to the footsteps. It was Hakayama; he was sure of it.

The owner spat something on the floor, and Sousei left the store.

Hakayama was about ten feet in front of Sousei, who closed the distance between them.

If I pull a gun out, Hakayama will notice—

Of course, he had no intention of killing him, so he wouldn't do that. He'd never do something like that.

Sousei put the index and middle fingers of his right hand together and stuck them into Hakayama's back.

"—!"

Hakayama jumped and was about to turn around.

"Don't look at me. Don't stop. Keep walking. That's right. Just like that."

"…Seriously?"

Hakayama clicked his tongue as he walked. He seemed surprised, and he was probably shaken, but he hadn't lost his composure. At the very least, he didn't seem to think he'd be killed immediately. Had he realized that it wasn't a handgun sticking into his back, but a pair of fingers? It was hard to say. He simply believed he could get through this, that he would be fine, that he wouldn't die. Was he a hopeless optimist? Or did he have his own evidence to support his belief? He'd probably had a premonition of a future where he wouldn't die.

"Who are you?" Hakayama asked. "You seem young. Where are you planning on taking me? Are we leaving Ochiya?"

Sousei didn't answer. He had no intention of killing Hakayama whatsoever, but neither did he have any obligation to chat with him.

"Don't get lost. I don't really know the roads here, either. Of all places, why here? It's terrible, isn't it? Talk about a fall from grace."

What did he mean by "here" of all places? Sousei wanted to ask, but of course, he remained silent. If Hakayama had had a premonition of a future in which he wouldn't die, Sousei couldn't even think about disturbing it.

Hakayama walked forward determinedly, and the people on the streets of Ochiya distanced themselves from him and Sousei.

It seemed that something would happen if Sousei decided to kill Hakayama. *Something* would happen—and Hakayama would sense it before Sousei did.

"Hey? Don't you think there's a better way? I'm good at coming up with creative solutions. I can solve anything. It might take time or require some sacrifices, but surprisingly, nothing's impossible."

There seemed to be more to what he was saying, but also not. What was Hakayama's goal? Did he even have one?

It was a bizarre situation.

Hakayama was heading back toward Yatai Street.

"Hey? Is there anything troubling you? Let me hear it. You're young, aren't you? You're probably younger than me. Quite a bit

younger, actually. You don't seem like a hired gun. Is this your *job*? You kill for work?"

"He sure is noisy, isn't he…?"

Sousei's earpiece had the ability to pick up outside noise. His sister was probably getting tired of hearing Hakayama's chitchat.

"So we're the same, huh?" Hakayama let out a dry laugh, but he didn't stop. Sousei had ordered him to keep walking. Hakayama was still complying.

Sousei was just a little frustrated.

Was Hakayama trying to mess with his head? Trying to confuse him?

"Ah…" Hakayama stopped just before Yatai Street. Before Sousei could warn him not to, Hakayama clicked his tongue and muttered, "This brat." A child had cut right in front of him. Judging from the kid's build, they were about five or six years old. They were filthy and covered in soot, making it impossible to determine their gender. Maybe the child's home had burned down, leaving them with nowhere to go. The whites of their eyes shone brightly as they glared at Hakayama.

"Fuck you!" the child shouted at Hakayama in a high-pitched voice.

"You know…" Hakayama started to say something back.

Sousei heard his sister gasp through his earpiece.

With his right index and middle fingers still sticking into Hakayama's back, Sousei used his left hand to take out his gun.

This is a gamble…

"Whoa!" the child yelled.

"Huuh?!" Hakayama turned to look back.

"He's got his whole dick out…!"

Sousei wasn't especially surprised by the words that came out of the child's mouth, because it was something he'd accounted for in advance. Although he hadn't expected a child to say it like that.

"You know, don't you?"

The owner of the voice wasn't directly behind Sousei. He was diagonally behind him to the right, less than three feet away. More like a foot and change.

Sousei pulled the trigger of his gun. Aiming for Hakayama's head was impossible; sending a bullet through Hakayama's kidneys was the best option. But the moment the gun went off, the person who had his "whole dick out" grabbed Sousei's head and pulled him to the ground. The shot didn't hit where Sousei wanted, but it did hit.

"—Agh…!" Hakayama let out a short scream.

"Gun!" the child cried. Both Electric Town and Yatai Street were instantly thrown into chaos. The naked man was straddling Sousei.

"Hey there, zombie boy!"

He had a narrow face and shaggy hair, so he could be called attractive, but his pupils were small. Too small.

"Seems they took the bait," his sister said through his earpiece.

That's right. Sousei had been bait. The naked man had been sure to attack again—both Sousei and his sister had anticipated that. And they'd been right. Not that Sousei was enjoying it at all.

"Lil hit maaan!"

He pulled Sousei's cap off and grabbed his hair in his left hand, then punched him in the chin with his right. It was a powerful it, and Sousei felt his brain shaking. Violently. But even so, Sousei had managed to hold on to his gun, and he got off a second shot.

The naked man's body had changed just before Sousei pulled the trigger. His skin, even his eyeballs and hair, had turned to some sort of steel-like material— No, it wasn't *like* steel. He'd turned *into* steel. Where had Sousei's bullets hit? He didn't know, but it seemed that they had just ricocheted off of him.

Makes sense…

It was as he'd expected, yet also unexpected. The naked man spread his arms wide, still turned to steel.

He can move while he's like that…?!

That said, the steel man's movements were clearly slow. He looked like he was saying "Bring it on," but he didn't speak.

Sousei quickly glanced around. Hakayama was staggering toward Yatai Street, a hand pressed against his back. It wasn't the steel man Sousei had shot at, but Hakayama. Although he wasn't in the best of positions, Sousei gripped his pistol in both hands and fired again.

"—Gah…?!"

He'd hit Hakayama with another shot. Sousei couldn't confirm it, but he must have got him in the backside or leg. By that time, the steel naked man had returned to just being the regular naked man.

"Heyyy!" he yelled, wrenching the gun from Sousei's hands. Sousei thought the man was going to shoot him, but he didn't. "Right now! You're dealin' with me! Get it?! Huuuh…?!" The naked man repeatedly slammed the butt of Sousei's gun into his face.

He just won't stop…

Sousei soon lost about 80 percent of his vision. He didn't know if his eyeballs had been damaged, or if the bones around them had been broken or pulverized. He could think with some difficulty but only in fragments. He could barely breathe. His nose had been crushed, and he couldn't move his chin.

"The maaan! With demon haaands…! Ya know him, don'tcha?! Damn zombie boyyy! You did it, didn'tcha?! Didn'tcha?! Huuuuh…?!"

This guy…

He was crazy.

He was asking Sousei questions; did he want answers?

How did he expect Sousei to answer?

He physically couldn't.

Not in his current situation.

Oh, cra—

"Huuuuuuuh?! Heeeeeeeeyyy…!"

Sousei had died once, but even though he'd come back to life, he couldn't see anything.

"Ahh…!"

Sousei let out a cry of agony.

My eyes…

They'd been gouged out. Both of them. No—there was something stabbing into them. Fingers, maybe? Thumbs? The naked man was grinding both of his thumbs into Sousei's eyes.

"That's amaaazing! Amazing! You're amazing, zombie boy! You had a booboo, but it got allll better, didn't it? That's so crazy, so interesting, so fas-ci-nat-ing, ain't it? So much fun…!"

That…

Sousei tried to fight back, but he heard a cracking sound from somewhere—actually, it was reverberating all the way inside his body. The naked man had likely pierced through the back of Sousei's eyes with his thumbs and crushed the bones around his eye sockets.

…hur—

"—Aaaaaggghhhaaaaaggghhhaaaaaggghhh."

When Sousei died and came back to life again, he found his mouth wide open. He hadn't done it of his own volition, of course. Sousei had died. He'd been killed. He'd been dead—thanks to the naked man, although that didn't need to be said. He had hooked his fingers on both hands around Sousei's top and bottom teeth, and was forcing his mouth open.

"This is greeeat, I can keep breaking you as much as I want, zombie boy. I like ya, I reeeeeally like ya, I'm gonna fall head over heels for ya, lil hit maaaaan. Assassin boyyyy. I love love love love love love love love luuuuuhhh…!" The naked man's pupils were getting smaller and smaller, like two tiny pinpricks. Was it even possible for pupils to contract that much? The naked man was crying. He was sobbing his eyes out. "Luuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuhhhhvvvv yooooooouuuuuu…!"

With a horrifying sound, Sousei's jaw came off, and his muscles or tendons—he wasn't sure what; maybe it was just everything simultaneously—were torn apart.

"AGH, agh, AGH, AGH, agh, AGH, agh," was all Sousei could manage to get out.

What a monster…

Surprisingly, there was no pain. It was possible the shock was more than his brain could handle. It didn't hurt, but neither could Sousei just remain calm. He was still in a good position. He'd been killed twice now, but he hadn't used up all his lives. He still had plenty. He'd already made up his mind and braced for a sizable loss. It would be a waste, but there was no other way.

The naked man was straddling Sousei's abdomen.

"AGH, ahAGH, aaagh…" The strength left Sousei's body, and he let out a pitiful wail. His eyes weren't focusing, either.

However, this was all just an act.

"Hee-hee-hee…!"

The naked man grabbed Sousei's head with both of his bloodstained hands. He lifted it up and seemed to try to take a bite out of Sousei's nose. He really wasn't normal. Before the man could bite him, Sousei put all his strength into his fist and punched the man hard in the crotch.

"Ooof…" The naked man raised his hips slightly, and he let out a groan. Right after that, he turned to steel. Maybe he was trying to prevent another attack to a vulnerable spot, or maybe that was a reflex. Either way, he'd been straddling Sousei, but he had lifted his hips enough to open up a gap.

Like an eel, Sousei slithered out from under the naked man and rolled from his back onto his stomach. He crawled forward, stood up, then broke into a run. He sprinted into Yatai Street without turning back, knocking over a large pot in one of the food stalls and shoving multiple people going past him. The residents of Ochiya screamed when they saw a boy with his jaw torn off and dangling, and they ran around in a panic, trying to get away.

"Heeeeey, wait…!" the naked man moaned. He was pursuing Sousei— —But the second that thought went through Sousei's mind, he felt an impact on his back, and he went flying forward. Did he just get dropkicked or something?

Sousei bowled into multiple stools. The teppanyaki griddle of the food stall he'd collided with tipped over, scattering a mixture of fried yakisoba noodles and savory okonomiyaki pancakes all around, with many of them falling on Sousei himself. The smell of the thick sauce was more intense than the heat.

"Answer me alreadyyy, ya damn zombiiie…!" The naked man rushed toward him, and Sousei's neck bent at a sharp angle. Was he stepping on his head? The naked man had jumped on top of him, and Sousei's neck had snapped with a *crack*.

He couldn't move. His body—he couldn't move any part of it. This was bad. The vertebrae in his neck had been damaged. It wouldn't surprise him if his whole body was paralyzed now. In fact, it probably was.

There's no way…for me…to answer…

"Take this…!"

The naked man jumped on Sousei's head again.

Ah—

As soon as he came back to life, Sousei tried to blindly jump to his feet and start running.

"Ohhh…!"

The naked man grabbed his left hand, and Sousei forcefully pulled himself free, breaking a few bones in his fingers. The twisting didn't do any favors for his wrist, either. Sousei ran at full speed regardless, forcing his way through the gaps between the food stalls. Yatai Street's almost completely dark back alleys were muddy and filled with a foul smell that made him think of dirty public restrooms.

Sousei cut through an alley and made it back to Electric Town. Ochiya was noisy, with residents running every which way, but the naked man was nowhere to be seen.

"Sis…," Sousei called out quietly before realizing that his earpiece was missing. The backpack he'd put his weapons in was also gone. He didn't know when he'd last had it on his back. He was wearing slightly oversized pants and ankle holsters on both legs. The

Ruger LC9 that Sousei often used was small, so he could keep it in his ankle holster. He had a knife in his right ankle holster and the Ruger in his left. Those were the only weapons he had on him.

Sousei left them where they were for now and continued making his way through Electric Town searching for the naked man.

Did he give up…?

No way.

Sousei didn't think he would.

Electric Town was quiet. The customers had fled, and the owners of all the stores had retreated inside and weren't coming out.

Iro came into view. It was dark, unlike Electric Town, making the boundary between the two areas clear. There were people near the entrance of Iro. They wore clothes in painfully bright shades of red, green, blue, and purple; had faces caked in makeup; and were wearing strange nets or artificial flowers in their hair. There were both women and men. All of them probably worked in Iro. They stood there, watching nosily.

Sousei quickly crouched down and took his Ruger LC9 from his ankle holster.

"Get lost! You wanna die?!" he yelled, pointing his gun at them. The onlookers ran into Iro, responding with complaints and jeers all the while.

—He's here.

Sousei could feel the other man's presence. There was no other way to describe it.

Sousei turned around and readied his gun. The ring and pinkie fingers on his left hand hurt, and he couldn't move them properly. His left wrist seemed fine somehow. It seemed like it would be difficult for him to shoot just using his left hand, but if he could support it with his right, it wouldn't be much of a problem.

Electric Town seemed the same as usual but with no people.

"You're here, aren't you?" Sousei said, slowly moving the muzzle of his gun. "I know you are…" There didn't seem to be anyone within

his field of vision. “I just can’t *see* you.”

“Hee-hee…”

Someone had laughed. It hadn’t been loud. Had it come from far away?

Or had it been right near him?

—So I was right?

When Sousei had attacked the Scarecrows’ hideout, the naked man had appeared from out of nowhere. Hakayama had been hiding under the impressive marble table, and Sousei had visually confirmed the situation inside the factory before finding him. He remembered it clearly. The naked man hadn’t been there. There hadn’t been a single person who was in a position to take him by surprise.

Yet the naked man had suddenly appeared. Could he have teleported?

While that was a possibility, it was more likely that the naked man *hadn’t* appeared suddenly but had *already been there*. Sousei just hadn’t been able to *see* him.

Turning himself into steel wasn’t the only thing that guy could do.

He could make himself disappear.

Someone had been standing by the side of the road after Hakayama had gotten in the car and escaped from the hideout. Sousei hadn’t been able to see clearly since it was dark, but it had looked like the silhouette of a person. Then it had suddenly disappeared.

There was other supporting evidence. The guy was naked. He could turn his entire body into steel, but what would happen if he was wearing clothes? Would the change not affect his clothes? But even if that were the case, he wouldn’t have to be completely naked just to turn into steel. The only thing that would happen is that his clothes would get ripped if he was shot or cut. There were also risks involved with being naked. His vulnerable spots were completely out in the open. From an evolutionary standpoint, humans hadn’t started

wearing clothing solely for temperature regulation—they also served as basic protective gear.

However, what if that guy had been invisible until the moment he suddenly appeared?

Just like how he could turn completely to steel, from his skin and hair to his eyeballs, perhaps he could also become completely transparent. And maybe his clothes didn't disappear.

It wasn't an entirely outlandish idea.

These kinds of things could happen in the world Sousei lived in.

A thought went through his mind, not for the first time:

What is this world coming to?

"This is the worst," Sousei muttered.

"Don't you mean the best?" a voice said.

Something touched Sousei's right hand. It was him. The naked man was trying to grab Sousei's wrist, likely planning to twist it and steal his gun. It all happened in an instant. Without any warning, the man's entire body became visible. Sousei had been prepared for that. He bit down, picturing himself squeezing his upper and lower second molars together on the right side of his mouth. He'd had something implanted there by Magamo Sakashiranami at Endou Dental Clinic. According to his sister, it was a very expensive item that couldn't be obtained through ordinary means. Only Dr. Magamo—a traveling doctor whose family business was in the black market trade—dealt in miniature explosives.

Sousei triggered the explosive and died instantly.

When he came back to life, the entire area was thick with smoke, and dust floated all around. It looked like the goods in nearby stores had been destroyed and sent flying in all directions, and walls and roofs had been blown off, but although the shops had been damaged, nobody had been around. It didn't seem like anyone had been killed or even injured.

Sousei's upper half was mostly naked, but his pants and shoes had kept their original shape. He got up and took the knife out of his

right ankle holster.

The naked man was crawling along toward the darkness of Iro. Naturally, he hadn't escaped unscathed. The lower half of his body was relatively fine, but his right arm was missing from the elbow down, and his left arm ended at his wrist.

Sousei walked up to him and grabbed the man's tangled hair—which peeled off along with the skin on his head, causing him to cry out in pain. Sousei threw aside the scalp with hair on it and, instead, pinned him down by the scruff of the neck. He put his knee between the naked man's shoulder blades and pressed down with his body weight. The man flailed around for a moment, but it was incredibly weak. He soon stopped resisting.

"Are you affiliated with the man with demon hands—Tousuke Mochizuke?"

"…Ugh…unh…ooh…"

The man's face was angled a little to the right—though it might not be quite accurate to call it a face anymore. It was a mass of hideously burned flesh with white bones peeking through, and he didn't have eyeballs. He had some teeth left, but Sousei didn't know whether he'd be able to speak in this state. It would be pretty difficult, at least.

"Answer me. Are you affiliated with Tousuke Mochizuke?"

"…Urgh…"

"Either way, it doesn't matter to me."

Sousei shoved his knife into the man's spinal cord. In a few seconds, the *thump* sound reverberated through Sousei's body.

I wanted to find out his true identity, but I honestly don't think he'd reveal that at a time like this…

The naked man had asked Sousei questions but then killed him several times without letting him answer.

That made me pretty angry.

Sousei pulled out his knife and exhaled.

His motive for targeting me was probably to take revenge for Tousuke Mochizuke. Was he Mochizuke's associate or friend? They

didn't look alike, but maybe they were brothers or something. He might have been involved in the job to take out the Scarecrows. It's possible he was also the one who leaked the information about Hakayama being in Ochiya. Well, in any case, it doesn't matter…

Sousei stood up and, before the thought even crossed his mind of what he should do next, started looking around for his backpack. Inside it were weapons and a spare communication device that had only the bare minimum functionality. His phone had gone flying when he'd blown himself up, but it didn't matter since he regularly backed up his data.

"I'll see it through to the end. After all, a job's a job…"

†

Tohru Hakayama felt a sense of despair at the indifference of the people of Ochiya. His back and left leg had been shot, and he'd lost quite a lot of blood. His back wound in particular wouldn't stop bleeding. Yet not only would nobody help him, but they all actively avoided him. Thanks to that, all Hakayama could do was drag his wounded left leg along behind him as he somehow managed to walk. It hurt so bad, he thought it would drive him crazy, and he wanted to take a break somewhere, but he wouldn't get better by resting. His left leg wasn't too bad, but the bullet in his back seemed lodged in there, which wasn't a good sign at all.

When he said the pain would drive him crazy, he meant that the can of food in his head was shaking violently, like it was floating around in boiling water.

It was strange, this situation. Why canned food, of all things? It should have transformed into something more dangerous.

For Hakayama, that was the only source of support he could rely on.

If it's canned food, I might not die… But I can't really see a version of this where I don't…

In any case, he couldn't expect anything from Ochiya. After all, hope wasn't found in a place like that.

Hakayama made his way to a parking lot surrounded by old apartment blocks and houses, and he got down on his hands and knees between a small red car and a black sedan. He wanted to lie down, but that was out of the question since he'd been shot in the back. There was no feeling in his left leg, only pain.

It hurt.

He was in unbearable pain.

But becoming unable to feel that pain would be worse.

He left Ochiya for the time being. He was still near it, but he wasn't in Ochiya anymore.

Is this where I die…?

Hakayama feebly shook his head.

No… I…won't die… There's no way I'll die…from something like canned food…

The can of food was shaking around in his soft, wrinkled brain.

He could hear footsteps.

The canned food rattled as it shook.

"Ahhh…"

Had someone used a can opener? The lid of the can was about to open by itself.

"Tohru Hakayama."

Someone called out his name and kicked him in the side, just below his right armpit.

"Ughaaah!" The moment he was flipped over and his back hit the asphalt, Hakayama experienced a primal pain unlike anything he'd ever felt before. It was so intense that it threatened his human dignity. He would do anything to make it stop. He was even willing to give up his life. Dying would be better. However, as he lay on his back, helpless and looking up at the young man, Hakayama gathered all his strength and raised his hands.

"…S-save me…please… I'm begging you…"

He couldn’t see the other man’s face. He could just tell that it was the one who tried to kill him in Ochiya. He’d shot him twice. And because of that, Hakayama was on the verge of death. This was probably the same young man who’d attacked their hideout. Hakayama hated him. Thanks to him, everything was ruined. He was about to lose everything.

The man was holding a gun in his right hand. The muzzle looked like it had a silencer attached, and it was pointed at Hakayama. He was going to shoot him in the forehead and kill him.

“I also…i-investigated you…you know. Th-there are too many r-reasons…why you might…be targeted…but, yeah…that’s right… you’re…”

The man started to move his index finger toward the trigger. He could have shot Hakayama long before now, but he still hadn’t.

The can inside his head shook violently, and the lid opened with a hissing sound.

“Ugh…!” exclaimed Hakayama before he could stop himself.

He was talking about the contents of the can. It wasn’t fully open yet—the lid had just opened slightly—but even so, it was overflowing with a strong stench.

“…Huh?” The man’s index finger stopped.

“Oh, it’s nothing…”

The smell was enough to make Hakayama dizzy. He remembered smelling this odor before. It was surströmming—a well-known Swedish type of canned herring said to be the smelliest food in the world. He couldn’t remember when, but one of Hakayama’s associates had bought it and opened it for some reason. There was no doubt about it. It was the stench of herring that had been salted and fermented thoroughly. The foreign object in his head was surströmming. Just what could that mean?

“A C… Cee… C… Ceeee…” Hakayama moved his mouth, all the while desperately trying not to breathe through his nose.

Hakayama was a man who had committed a wide range of crimes, resulting in his having a vast network and connections all

over the place. He had lots of information sources, but he'd been on the run after his life had been targeted. If he was too conspicuous with his digging, others might sniff him out.

There was only one information broker he could rely on—a freelancer, unaffiliated with any organization. He was eccentric, and the fee he charged for information was staggeringly high.

"A COA…assassin, aren't you? That's what you are…right…?"

That was what Hakayama had found out when he'd consulted that information broker.

He'd assumed it was a major player, judging by the methods they'd used, and it hadn't seemed like the Association or the Agency.

That was the only piece of information he'd received after transferring 3,300,000 yen to the specified account.

After all that, the foreign object in his head had been surströmming, with enough stench for a lifetime.

"C…COA, right? That's where you're from…yeah?"

The man put his index finger on the trigger, but Hakayama still wasn't giving up.

"I can provide information. To the COA. *Valuable* information… It's true. Please don't kill me. I—I can be useful. I-I'm begging you…"

The man took his finger off the trigger and took something out of his left pocket. Was it a small cell phone? He put it to his ear.

"—Yes. That's right. He's saying he can provide information. Yeah…"

He was talking to someone—maybe someone higher up the chain.

"If we leave him here, he'll die. Yeah. I don't think he'll last long. All right."

The "he" who wouldn't last long was definitely Hakayama. Sure enough, his wounds weren't shallow. If the bullet in his back had damaged an organ, he'd be in danger unless he received help quickly. He had also lost a lot of blood, and it felt like his body was starting to go cold. The pain had started to subside.

"Roger," the man said, then put his phone away in his pocket.

He placed his left hand over his right, which was holding his gun.

Hakayama closed his eyes.

Before he knew it, the foreign object in his head had completely disappeared.

He almost wanted to laugh, but he resisted the urge.

"Someone's coming to get you," the man said. "Let's hope you're still breathing by the time they get here."

Ø7

I Won’t Forget This Night of Falling Stars

Monday morning was quite cold, but the weather was nice. It was sunny, and there wasn’t any wind. Sousei arrived at school early and glanced at Kuchina’s shoe box. Her outdoor shoes were there. It seemed she was at school already, just as he’d thought. That put his mind at ease.

Sousei headed to the classroom. Since it was so cold outside, the inside of the school felt warm to him, maybe even a little hot. He went up the stairs and saw a girl standing outside Class 2-2 with her back against the wall. She was wearing a scarf and gloves. Sousei wondered whether she was hot like that. She was holding what looked like a notebook to her chest. It was definitely a notebook.

Even when Sousei approached, she didn’t look at him.

“Good morning, Miss Hitsujimoto,” he said to her. She finally looked at him. Just for a second. She glanced at him, lowered her gaze, then returned his “Good morning” in a low mumble.

“Oh—”

Sousei had been about to mention the notebook she was hugging, but she held it out just before he did.

“Here.”

“…Ahh,” was all Sousei could say. All the strength seemed to leave his body at his own spinelessness, but he still somehow managed to take the notebook from her. He should probably say

thank you, right? Sousei hesitated. *Thank you.* What would he be thankful for? He wasn't certain, but he definitely felt a sense of gratitude inside him. Kuchina had handed him the exchange diary first thing in the morning. He was grateful for that.

"Later," she said, and briskly walked away. She didn't enter the classroom. She'd probably go off somewhere, then return before morning homeroom started.

Sousei opened the notebook. His eyes were greeted by the sheep Kuchina had drawn at the end of her section. Below Sousei's message, she had written the following:

After a back hip circle, I think a backward somersault would be best.

Swimming is an exercise that doesn't put too much of a burden on your body.

I don't really know anything about the Aurora Light Show.

I assume it's light decorations in an aurora.

Is it something anyone can go to?

†

That evening, at Café Poppy, on the boundary between Yamanote and the shopping district, the music playing was from somewhere in Brazil. The elderly shop owner was taking his time brewing the coffee Kuchina had ordered. There was one other customer today—an old woman, who was sitting at the counter. She and the elderly shop owner occasionally exchanged a few quiet words, but Kuchina could hardly hear what the two of them were talking about from her seat at a table in the back. The old woman was wearing a lint-covered robe over her sleepwear. A worn-out coat, which she'd probably been wearing over her robe, was hanging over the back of her chair.

The old woman seemed to have said something along the lines of "I can't deal with it anymore," to which it looked like the owner had replied, "Oh yeah?"

Kuchina lowered her gaze to the notebook she had open on the table.

Anyone can go to the Aurora Light Show!

And there aren't any entrance fees (?) or whatever, because there isn't an entrance or exit.

They decorate the entire Shizukamachi Greenbelt with lights.

Now I really can't wait to go!

Shall we all go together?

This was Asumin!

I wonder if there's a nickname for the Aurora Light Show.

The Auroshow…or something? Maybe not.

It's a really long name, but everyone just calls it the "Aurora Light Show," don't they?

There'll be a store selling takoyaki. It's a famous place that's been around for ages. It's really yummy.

Now I really want to eat some… I want to go.

Moena

This is Yukisada Hayashi.

"Aurora Light Show" doesn't really get abbreviated.

It seems like some people call it "Greora," though.

Maybe because it's the Aurora Light Show and it's held in the Greenbelt?

If everyone's going together, I'll adjust my schedule.

I propose we all go to see the Aurora Light Show together.

I hope you will please forgive my rudeness at this sudden suggestion.

I would very much appreciate it if everyone informed me of their schedules.

If there are no outstanding issues, would this weekend be a suitable time?

I sincerely ask for you to consider this matter.

Sousei Takarai

This weekend…

Kuchina let out a sigh.

Am I…wondering whether or not I can go…?

With her gloved index finger, she traced where Sousei had written, *If there are no outstanding issues*.

Outstanding issues…

It wasn't as if she had *no* issues with it. It was only natural for Kuchina to think that way. She knew that something like this had the potential to cause problems. Someone could be a spy for Great Lord Kagemiya. She hadn't seen the woman in sunglasses since the bookstore, but she couldn't rule out the possibility that she was being watched. In any case, if she went to the Aurora Light Show with her classmates after school, it would likely come to the attention of Great Lord Kagemiya. She should prepare herself for that at the very least.

That man will find out…

It was too late for that.

He probably saw through everything.

…Really? Am I sure about that?

She honestly didn't know.

Sometimes, that man would hint that he knew everything about Kuchina. He'd even stated it outright before.

He had never ordered her around at school. Instead, he'd exerted psychological pressure on her with his behavior, expecting Kuchina to understand without being told. That was his way of doing things.

There was no need for her to be told that she mustn't offend that man. She needed to know her place and exercise self-restraint. If she did that, he wouldn't take advantage of her weaknesses.

Kuchina snapped out of her thoughts when she heard the clattering sound of the elderly shop owner bringing over a coffee cup and saucer. She looked up and saw him hunched over, trying to get out from behind the counter where the old woman was sitting. His knees seemed to be causing him trouble, and he was practically shuffling. It looked dangerous, but Kuchina waited patiently. The owner finally reached Kuchina's seat and placed the coffee cup and saucer on the table with trembling hands.

"Thank you very much," Kuchina said, and about two-thirds of the elderly shop owner's wrinkled face scrunched up into what was probably a smile.

Kuchina took a sip of her coffee. It wasn't hot, but lukewarm. Not bitter, and she could even taste some sweetness, but that, too, vanished quickly. Only the aroma lingered.

I'm being controlled by that man… I'm letting *him control me.*

She didn't want to be controlled. Of course she didn't. Kuchina was being manipulated by that man. She was completely under his control. That's what she'd been compelled to believe.

Mom, Dad…

Kuchina called out to Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto, who were sleeping in the basement room.

I want to be free.

What would the two of them say?

…They don't have to say anything. Mom and Dad were kind to me. Just that is enough. I'll decide things that concern me by myself.

Kuchina took a mechanical pencil and eraser out of her pencil case. She took another sip of the elderly shop owner's coffee. She couldn't tell if the taste was good or bad, but it calmed her heart. She gripped the pencil.

Greora.

Sounds similar to “remora.”

I

She hadn’t lifted her pencil once up to that point.

Kuchina’s heart was pounding violently. Her chest became extremely tight and stiff, and her breathing came shallowly. There wasn’t enough oxygen, even though, of course, that was her imagination. She placed her pencil on the table and reached for the eraser.

The faces of Asumi Shiramori and Hina Shigee came to mind.

Yukisada Hayashi.

And finally, Sousei Takarai.

That man might try to take them as hostages. I need to change my attitude before he actually does take a hostage; otherwise, he can’t predict what might happen to them. That’s what he said. That’s his usual tactic. His usual trick. He thinks that as long as he threatens me, I’ll do what he says. That’s how it’s always been.

Kuchina picked up her mechanical pencil again.

I won’t fall for that same trick. If he tries to threaten me again, I won’t forgive him. Killing that man will be difficult. How should I deal with him?

I can destroy the things that belong to him. I can kill his underlings. I’ll destroy everything, kill everyone. Great Lord Furuhiko Kagemiya…I am not that man’s slave.

Kuchina’s heart rate returned to normal, and she continued writing.

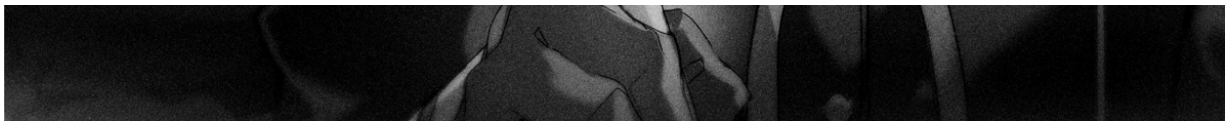
I want to see the Aurora Light Show.

†

Let’s go, then! Let’s go to the Aurora Light Show!

All of us together!!





Anytime is fine by me. Maybe the weekend's best? I'll come any day!

Timewise, I'll be okay as long as it doesn't get too late.

As long as I get home by 10, it's all good!

This was Asumin!

As of now, I'm free any day of the week, as well.

It's a light show, so it'll start after it gets dark.

It gets dark enough just after 5, and after school on Friday seems good.

I'll do whatever works for everyone else.

Let's eat Takopacchan takoyaki!

Moena

This is Yukisada Hayashi.

Is Takopacchan the name of a takoyaki shop?

I can also go anytime this week.

If we go together straight after school, we wouldn’t have to worry about meeting up, so that’d be easier.

I wonder if there’ll be a rice ball stall.

I hope that this message finds you all in good happiness and health.

In regard to the scheduling of the Aurora Light Show, there are no issues on my end.

I am able to accommodate any necessary adjustments.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

I have plans on the weekend.
I can go after school on Thursday.
I'm sorry if something urgent comes up.

†

He hoped nothing urgent would come up.

Sousei wished that from the bottom of his heart. Even though he didn't have a shred of faith, he still prayed.

She had plans on the weekend—probably work. Sousei often also found himself tied up with work from Friday night through to the weekend.

He was almost certain that the "something urgent" Kuchina referred to was work. He didn't want to have to cancel plans because of a sudden work call of all things.

Just in case, Sousei asked his sister not to schedule any jobs for Thursday evening. He pleaded, in fact, from the bottom of his heart. He didn't hide anything. After school on Thursday, he wanted to go to Shizukamachi with his friends to see the Aurora Light Show in the Greenbelt. He was honest about it. He even told her the names of the friends he was going with. Would his sister agree to his request? Negotiations would probably be difficult, but Sousei was fine having to promise something in exchange if it came to that. He was prepared to pay any price. But it had ended anticlimactically, with his sister easily granting him permission.

He hoped nothing would happen until after school on Thursday. However, since that seemed impossible, he mentally prepared himself. No matter what happened, he wouldn't be disappointed. He'd deal with it when the time came.

He wasn't scared.

No matter how afraid he might be, there was nothing Sousei could do about it. Not a single thing.

So he prayed, even though he didn't have any deities to offer his prayers to.

He chose to focus his energy on that, rather than being afraid.

†

"Uhhhh… Sooo, I gueeess…there's nothing else for todayyy…"

In his somewhat distinctive muffled voice, Mr. Oohira finished giving that day's announcements to the students of Class 2-2.

It was almost time. After this, he'd say, "All right, so…," and the class president, Iori Tadeshina, would give the command. It was the way it always went—but this Thursday was a little different.

"All—"

Mr. Oohira only got out the "All" from "All right" before Iori cut him off. She had enthusiastically stood up as if she'd been waiting for that moment.

"Stand! Bow!"

Her voice was much stronger and sharper than usual. Iori's timing wasn't what the students, Sousei included, had been expecting, so no one reacted right away. Even Mr. Oohira seemed taken aback.

"…Whoa. A-aren't you jumping the gun there a bit, Miss Class President…?"

"That's—"

Iori looked flustered for a second, but she quickly adjusted her glasses and recovered.

"—not the case, by any means!"

"Ohh. I—I see…" Mr. Oohira bobbed his head. "Okay, everyone. See you tomorrow."

"Sayonara!" "Nara!" "Deer!" "Dear?!" "Nara deer!" *"Sayonara!"*

The students said bye to each other, making silly comments and comebacks as they put their chairs upside down on top of their

desks. Sousei put his bag over his shoulder, picked up his desk, and carried it to the back of the room along with all the others.

He glanced at the windowed side of the classroom, but Kuchina wasn't there, which made him worry a little.

…It's all right, Sousei told himself and left the classroom.

Kuchina was standing with her back against the wall. Half of her face was buried under her tightly wound scarf, and she was holding her bag with both of her gloved hands.

"Hey…," he called out ambiguously, and Kuchina gave him a slight nod. It was such a subtle movement that it could easily have been mistaken for a trick of the light.

Sousei gently rested the back of his head against the wall next to Kuchina.

"T-today…"

"What?"

"Uh… Yeah… Well…"

I've been looking forward to it.

Why couldn't he just say that?

Asumi and Moena dashed out of the classroom.

"Yaaay!" Asumi was already bursting with excitement, and her cheeks were flushed.

"What's with the 'yaaay,' Asumin…?" Moena was a little taken aback. She looked around. "Where's Hayashi?"

"He should be coming soon, I think…" Even Sousei was surprised by how quiet his voice was. It sounded like a whisper.

Yukisada came out of the classroom and waved at them with a refreshing smile.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting."

"Huh? We weren't waiting at all!" Asumi laughed. She seemed to have a lot of energy. It was actually a little strange.

Moena gave a nervous laugh. "Did you sleep last night, Asumin?" she asked.

Asumi opened her eyes wide. "I slept!"

"…Oh, you did?"

"Yeah. I was super excited, and thought I might not be able to, but next thing I knew, it was morning. I didn't even dream! I woke up busting to use the toilet!"

"Asumiiin…"

"Hm? Gaaah! I shouldn't have mentioned my bathroom habits, huh? But my bladder was just so full—fuller than it had ever been before in my life!" Asumi covered her mouth with her hands and squeezed her eyes shut. "Hyaaah! What am I saying? I can't believe I just said that…!"

"Ba-ha-ha!" Yukisada roared. He was always laughing in all different kinds of ways, but he was laughing even harder than normal. It was contagious, and it almost infected Sousei as well.

He saw that Kuchina was looking toward the ground. And that wasn't all. Her shoulders were shaking slightly, as if she was trying to suppress something.

Moena patted Asumi's lower back.

"Calm down a bit, Asumin. At this rate, you're gonna tire yourself out before we even get there."

"Hmmm, yeah, I'll come down." Asumi tilted her head. "…Huh? Came down? Hmm? Cam…down? What…?"

"Honestly! It's 'clam down'!" Moena tried to correct her but got it wrong as well. "—Huh?! Now I can't say it for some reason! Ca-r-m, no, that's wrong…"

"Ha-hah!" Yukisada doubled over and clutched his stomach, looking like he was in pain as he laughed like an idiot.

"No, uh, it's 'can down'—" Sousei also ended up saying it completely wrong as well. That's when Kuchina muttered something quietly, as if she'd just had a thought.

"Condolences."

That one word had tremendous power in making them explode with laughter. What was so funny about it? Sousei had no idea. The reason it had all started was because Asumi just happened to trip over saying "calm down," but it was funny regardless, and they couldn't help laughing.

Asumi was laughing so much that her face became bright red and sweaty. Moena cried, "I can't take it anymore!" and ended up squatting down on the floor. Yukisada's eyes were brimming with tears. It wasn't outrageously funny, but they couldn't stop for some reason, and sometimes laughing too much brought tears to a person's eyes.

Kuchina was hugging her bag and covering her face with both of her gloved hands, but she couldn't hide it. She was laughing as well.

"Hey! What's goin' on?! What're you guys doin' out here?" asked Kouichirou Wakuya, aka Wakkuu, tapping Sousei on the shoulder.

Sousei tried to explain what had happened. "Oh, umm, she tried to say 'c-condo,' no, that's not it—" But he stumbled right from the start.

"Ba-hah!" Yukisada let out a short, sharp burst of laughter, Asumi let out a strange squeak, and Moena banged her fist on the floor. Kuchina shook her head as if saying it would be impossible to explain.

"Wait a… Huh?! What?! What the…?!" Even Wakkuu, who usually jumped in on anything, was flustered, as if it was impossible to understand.

"I know school's over, but what's with all the commotion?!" Iori scolded them. "You're in the way! People are trying to get past!"

Sousei hurriedly bowed his head in apology. "My aboronies…," he said, failing to pronounce *apologies* properly. The resulting *aboronies* seemed to be a huge hit with Wakkuu.

"Aborrr." Wakkuu pointed at Sousei and looked like he was about to say something, but all that came out of his mouth was a "Pohhh!" of laughter that sounded like a blank being fired.

"Pohhh…" Iori's eyes widened, and she closed her mouth, her cheeks instantly puffing up like balloons. She tried to hold it in, but air burst from her nose with a "Hmph!" The dam had burst.

"Ah…!" Asumi screamed as she laughed, almost out of breath. "I-I-I'm gonna die…!"

Sousei and everyone else continued laughing for several minutes after that. Even after they'd arrived at the shoe cubbies and were changing their shoes, someone would suddenly remember what happened and start another bout of laughter or try to say, "Let's calm down," and almost mispronounce it again, throwing them into critical condition yet again. However, they had to band together and try as hard as possible not to laugh as they left the school. Everyone was in agreement on that point. They hadn't decided on it after a discussion, but if they continued on like this, there would be no end to it. At the rate they'd been going, someone might actually pull an abdominal muscle.

"Huh?" Just as they passed through the school gate, Wakkuu looked at Sousei and the others. "Now that I think about it, are you guys off doing something now? The five of you are all together. What'd you call yourselves? The Potato Party? Are you all going somewhere?"

"Sure are!" Asumi raised her right hand high in the air and snapped her fingers. "The Aurora Light Show!"

"Huh…?" Iori was startled.

Wait, Tadeshina's here, too…

It was only then that Sousei thought about it.

Well, of course she is. She was here before. Yeah. Ever since the incident in the hallway, she's always been here. But it seemed so natural, I didn't think anything of it.

"Seriously?!" Wakkuu glanced at Iori, who was cowering next to him for some reason, then looked at Sousei. Next, he shifted his gaze between Asumi, Moena, Yukisada, and finally Kuchina, who was walking a little ways behind everyone else. "Damn, seriously? Huh. What's that? An amazing coincidence? No way. Not Friday or Saturday, but today? Thursday Greora? That's crazy. What an amazing coincidence, huh…?"

"Ye—" Iori, once again under Wakkuu's gaze, started to say something, but she cut herself off and looked down. "…Wh-what… coincidence…are…ta…buh…huh…?" Iori seemed like she was trying

to say something, but it was completely incomprehensible. That wasn't like her.

"Oh!" Moena pressed a hand to her mouth.

"Hm?" Asumi tilted her head in confusion, or rather, it went completely horizontally.

"The two of you"—Yukisada directed his gaze at Wakkuu and Iori—"are going somewhere together? Actually, since you said it's an amazing coincidence, does that mean you're going to the Aurora Light Show?"

Iori let out a deep breath, as if she was trying to concentrate her energy in her core.

"Yep!" Wakkuu answered immediately, flashing a flawless, toothy smile. "We are, actually. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea, so I'll just say that I'm the one who invited her. I was quite forceful and persistent about it. And Tadeshina said okay, as long as it was on Thursday and she was home by seven thirty. So that's how it is. Tadeshina and I are heading off now to see the illumination of the Aurora Light Show at the Greenbelt! It'll be an execution!"

"…There's going to an execution?" Kuchina said quietly. Of course, Wakkuu still heard it.

"Yeah, an execution! Wait, an *execution*?! That sounds like a bad omen! Am I going to be executed?! Hang on—I was the one who said it, wasn't I?! No, no, there's not going to be an execution. There's no way. An execution… You won't execute me, will you, Tadeshina?! You won't…right?"

"Why would *I* have to execute you?! For crying out loud, you're always saying the stupidest things—if I had to pick one thing, *that* would be your crime!"

"Daaamn! I've been declared guilty! I probably am, though!" Wakkuu was clearly in high spirits.

"Oh, so this is a date?" Yukisada asked. He nodded with a look of satisfaction on his face, which enraged Iori.

"A d-d-d-d-date…?! Wh-wh-wh-*who* is going on a date with *whom*…?"

“You, Tadecchi, with Wakkuu, ri—?” But before Moena could finish what she was saying, Iori snapped at her.

“That’s not what this is!”

Of course, Iori didn’t actually bite Moena, but she closed the gap between them so violently that she very well could have.

“Wakuya and I are just going to see the Aurora Light Show, which I have not seen in the past few years, and everyone in my family is busy, so when I mentioned that, Wakuya said he’s free today and invited me to go with him, and since I’m not particularly busy on Thursdays, I thought it would be rude for me to refuse without a reason to, so I—!”

“I know, I know. There, there.” Moena patted Iori’s head, and Iori shook Moena’s hand off.

“Don’t pet me!”

“That’s great, Wakkuu!” Asumi held out her hand, and Wakkuu responded by giving her a high five.

“I’m glad I was born…! I’m so happy! Life is wonderful…!”

“In that case—” Kuchina mumbled from under her scarf.

“…Huh? What?” Sousei asked. Kuchina shook her head and lowered her gaze. The gesture seemed to say, “It’s nothing,” but she’d said, “In that case.” Sousei had definitely heard that.

“Umm… If there’s, you know, if there’s something—”

“…It’s just…”

“Y-yeah? Just what…?”

“The two of them.”

“…The two of them?”

“Wakuya and Tadeshina.”

“Oh. Yeah?”

“I mean… It would be better with just the two of them.”

“Huh…?”

“Since it’s special… It’s a date.”

“Ohh!” Sousei wasn’t the only one who’d caught on. Asumi, Moena, and Yukisada had also been listening carefully.

"That's true." Yukisada glanced at the group, which had a fair number of people, and Moena gave a wry smile.

"If we go like this…"

"Right, it's just as Miss Hitsujimoto said…" Asumi put her hands together in apology. "Sorry, Iorin! We weren't being considerate!"

"That's none of your business, I already *telled* you that!" Iori was so agitated, it seemed like steam was going to start rising from her ears—which was probably why she'd said a word that wasn't a word.

"Ohhh—" Wakkuu pressed a hand to his chest as if he had just been shot. "So cute. That was so cute just now…"

"Wh-wh-wh-what was?!"

"The bit where you said I '*telled* you'…"

"I didn't say any such thing, I'm *tellin´* you!"

"'*Tellin´* you.' So cute…"

"I'm going home!" Iori tried to run off in a rage, but Asumi and Moena held her back, Wakkuu apologized, and Yukisada and even Sousei—though he couldn't do much—tried to calm her down. It was more than a small quarrel, yet they somehow managed to get it under control. If Iori really had gone home, Wakkuu would probably have felt incredibly dejected. The resulting vibes would have had an effect on everyone else's morale, too.

In the end, they calmed Iori down by saying it was definitely not a date, and they all decided to head to Greenbelt together. They took the subway from Tsukasachou Station to Shizukamachi Station. It was only two stations, so they got there in no time.

Shizukamachi was a transfer station for the Tozai and Namboku Lines on the subway. As they left through the ticket gate, the underground shopping area called Colorful Town spread out before them. The area around the subway station had once been fairly lively, but now, due to the bustling Kawaramachi area, it was dominated by office buildings. They lined the entirety of Central Street, from the subway station to Kawaramachi, while government

offices monopolized the road in front of the City Hall, to the northeast of Central Street.

Together, the group strolled through the Colorful Town underground shopping area. They could have gone up to ground level, but there was an underground passage from the center of Colorful Town that led to the road in front of City Hall. It was just after sunset and still too early to enjoy the light show, so they thought they'd kill some time.

"I don't really come to Colorful Town much," Asumi said, gazing inquisitively at the shops in the underground shopping area. "I wonder when I came here last."

"Wasn't there a bookstore around here?" Moena asked as she looked around restlessly.

Iori pointed ahead of them. "The bookstore is that way. On the opposite side."

"Oh, it is? Do you come to Colorful Town often, Tadecchi?"

"Just occasionally, to look for books."

"You really like books, huh, Tadecchi?"

"Huh?" Wakkuu butted in. "You come here to look for *books*? Why don't you go to a library or something? What do you mean?"

"Different bookstores have different selections, you know," Iori said, sounding slightly indignant. "I go around to different places in the city to find what I need."

"Whoa! Isn't that a lot of work?! Or is that why you like it?"

"Well, yeah, I guess…"

"I buy books online," Yukisada said, using his hands to mimic using a phone. "Mostly e-books."

"I definitely prefer print books. There are studies that say you retain information better. And I believe you lose something when you're not holding and reading a book in your hands."

"I prefer paper books, too," Asumi said, nodding enthusiastically. "I mostly read manga, though. It's just too small reading it on your phone, don't you think? You can't really see the pictures or any of the details."

“Can’t you zoom in?” Moena asked, making a pinching-out motion with her thumb and forefinger.

Asumi frowned. “Isn’t that annoying to do all the time, though? And don’t you think it sort of disrupts the flow?”

“Reading flow is important.”

“It really is! We’re totally on the same page, Iorin!”

“Me too, me too! Reading flow is super important! So that means I’m also on the same page as you, right, Tadeshina?!” Wakkuu immediately cut in.

Iori glared at him, vertical lines appearing between her eyebrows.

“I don’t know about that…”

“We are. We are, I’m telling you. And even if we weren’t, I could make it so we were. They don’t call me the human fabric softener for nothing.”

“You do know that fabric softener is an oil-based liquid used to soften clothes, don’t you?”

“Huuuh? So does that mean I’d be softening other people up…?”

“That’d be a good thing, right?” Moena chuckled. “Tadecchi is such a square. Making her a little softer ’round the edges would definitely make life a whole lot easier.”

“Who are you calling a square?!”

“Oh…” Kuchina let out an extremely quiet sound. Wondering what it could be, Sousei looked in the direction of her gaze to a store a little ahead of them and to the right.

They made eye contact. She’d spotted something, and that particular store had caught her attention. What kind of store was it, and why was she interested in it? Sousei had a pretty good idea. If she pointed the store out, it would probably become a topic of discussion among everyone. She might have imagined that kind of a scenario unfolding as well, but she couldn’t say it. Sousei somehow understood that feeling.

“Oh!” Asumi pointed to the store. “Hayashi, it’s a rice ball store! You like rice balls, right?!”

“No way.” Yukisada approached the store as if he was being sucked toward it.

Sousei checked how Kuchina was doing. Her mouth was hidden by her scarf, so he could only see her eyes. What was she thinking? How was she feeling? Her expression wasn’t stern, and she even looked relieved. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to say anything, but Asumi had spotted the store in her place, so they hadn’t missed it as they went past. Maybe that’s why Kuchina was relieved.

“They look sooo gooood.” Yukisada leaned forward and peered into the display case lined with a wide variety of different types of rice balls. Asumi and Moena stood on either side of him.

“Oooo, Hayashi, they have them. Bonito flake and cheese rice balls!”

“Freshly made?! Are these freshly made?!” Moena asked. The lady at the counter told them that they’d just been made and were still warm.

“Tadeshina! Let’s take a look, as well!” Wakkuu urged Iori, and the two of them also crowded around the display case.

Sousei was about to call out to Kuchina, but there was no need for that. She went over to Yukisada, and everyone else crowded around the front of the store. She made sure to leave plenty of distance between herself and everyone else, but she still peered through the gaps between her classmates to check out the contents of the display case.

“Oh no…” Moena pressed her stomach. “My stomach’s started growling. I was planning to eat a lot at the food stalls, but I might not be able to say no to this…”

Asumi sighed deeply.

“Looking at them makes you want to eat them, huh? But each one is so biiig. All of them are. If we eat these, we might not be able to eat anything else. But they look so good…”

“Nah, that won’t be a problem. They’re rice balls. You don’t have to worry.” With a certain calm—or perhaps aloofness—Yukisada

began to explain a strange theory he had. "You can eat as many rice balls as you want, you know. They're easy to digest, so the more you eat, the more it promotes digestion, which actually makes you hungrier. That's why you can keep eating more and more of them. By the way, do you know why rice balls haven't spread all across the world despite being so delicious? It's because it would lead to a food crisis. Once they got a taste for rice balls, everyone would eat them endlessly. Rice balls might be the ultimate weapon that leads the world to ruin. But since they're so delicious, I think we should eat them whenever we can. There's no way I can stop eating them now. I think I'll go with *sujiko* salmon roe, tuna, and of course, bonito flake and cheese."

"You're gonna have *three*?!" Asumi jumped in surprise.

Yukisada seemed a little distressed. "Yeah. It's heartbreaking, I know, but I'll leave it at three. Normally, I'd be able to eat five, ten, or however many, but I'll make do with three for today. We can come again. And we've got the Aurora Light Show soon."

"…Mmm, I guess I'll have two, then…" Moena squirmed. "No, no, just one! Two this size would definitely feel like a proper meal. And this is supposed to be a snack. I better just get one…"

"So me, I'm gonna get one with no filling! One salted rice ball, pleeeeeease…!" Wakkuu said, ordering from the lady at the counter. Yukisada's eyes suddenly opened wide.

"Not bad, Wakkuu. You get it, huh?"

"Heh!" Wakkuu gave a thumbs-up and winked. He quickly paid and took the salted rice ball wrapped in plastic wrap. He immediately peeled off the plastic and sank his teeth into the rice ball.

"So fast…" Iori recoiled and took half a step backward.

"Mmmmm…!" Wakkuu moaned and took a few more big bites, finishing off the rather large rice ball in five mouthfuls. "Yummmmmmmmm…! I'm so glad to be Japanese! The base flavors that transcend deliciousness. It works better than an energy drink, yeeeeeah…!"

"Tch…!" Moena's patience seemed to have reached a limit, because she stretched her back and leaned over the display case. "Pickled plum and— No, just one pickled plum rice ball! Please!"

"I'll have cod roe!" Asumi raised a finger and made her order, then turned around. "How about you, Miss Hitsujimoto? Do you want a cod roe rice ball? You haven't had one in a while, right?"

When Yukisada had asked about rice ball fillings in their exchange diary, Kuchina's answer had been, "I like cod roe rice balls." Asumi had probably remembered that. Sousei hadn't forgotten; it just hadn't come to him straightaway. He was slightly frustrated about that.

Kuchina stood dazed for a couple of seconds, as if she'd been caught off guard. Then, rather than nodding, she lowered her head slightly. It was confirmation—that much was clear—but what was she saying yes to exactly? That she hadn't had one in a while, or the question before that?

Before Asumi could clarify with another question, Kuchina spoke again.

"I'll have one." Her voice was remarkably clear for someone who usually spoke in a breathy, almost whispered tone. "I'll have a cod roe rice ball."

"All right!" Asumi turned back to the woman at the counter. "Two cod roe rice balls, please!"

Kuchina started getting flustered. She watched Asumi pay the cost of two cod roe rice balls without hesitation, and she was probably unsure of how to handle it. It seemed she'd brought along some money just in case. Kuchina took a trifold wallet out of her bag, checked the price in the display, and took out a few coins.

"Here you go, Miss Hitsujimoto." Asumi handed one of the cling-film-wrapped rice balls to Kuchina.

Kuchina looked just like she was standing on the edge of a steep cliff. She was incredibly nervous. It shouldn't be a problem since she was wearing gloves, but she still seemed to be anxious.

Asumi tilted her head questioningly, and in that moment, Kuchina quickly swiped the rice ball from Asumi's hand.

"Your hand," Kuchina said to the dumbfounded Asumi.

"…Huh?" Asumi turned over the hand she'd just been holding the rice ball in, holding it out with her palm up. Kuchina put coins in her hand with a speed that didn't seem humanly possible.

"Whoa…" Asumi put her face closer to the coins resting on her palm, making herself go cross-eyed.

Kuchina hung her bag from her elbow and held the rice ball up above her head with both hands, as if she'd received a great offering.

"Thank you."

"…It's nothing." Asumi shook her head, then smiled kindly.

Iori didn't buy a rice ball, claiming she wanted to be hungry for dinner when she got home. Sousei got a red salmon rice ball. Eating while they walked through the underground shopping area would be rude. They could take the rice balls with them to the Greenbelt, but since they were freshly made, it would probably be better to eat them while they were still warm. The rice ball store had a cozy little eat-in area, so they sat there to eat. Wakkuu had already finished his one salted rice ball and chatted with Iori about something, but it seemed watching everyone else eat had made him hungry, too. He ended up buying a bonito flake and cheese rice ball and eating that one in about five bites, as well.

Kuchina opened her mouth slightly and rhythmically pecked at the cod roe rice ball. After doing that a few times, she closed her mouth and chewed.

"Cod roe is delicious, huh?!" Asumi said, hoping someone would agree with her. With a serious expression, Kuchina nodded a few times while chewing her cod roe rice ball.

The group left the rice ball store and entered the underground passage that would take them from near the center of Colorful Town to the road in front of City Hall. Once they'd left the underground passage and gone up a set of stairs to ground level, they saw that it

had already become quite dark outside. The temperature had also dropped, and their breaths looked like foggy white soap bubbles as they headed toward the Greenbelt.

As soon as they were able to see the light show ahead of them, Wakkuu started making a ruckus.

"Look! Everyone! Those are the lights we've come here to seeee…!"

"You're getting way too excited! Aren't you embarrassed?!" Iori whacked Wakkuu on the shoulder, and he danced wildly.

"Woo-hoo! It's not embarrassing getting called out by you, Tadeshina! It's the best!"

"Ahh, it's so pretty!" Asumi's eyes sparkled like a starry night sky. "The colors are amazing! Red and blue and green and white!"

"Was the Aurora Light Show always this extravagant?" Moena seemed to be cold, because she hooked her right arm around Asumi's left and clung tightly to her as they walked. "I kind of remember it being kind of lackluster…"

"I looked into it a bit, and they apparently add a few more light sculptures each year," Yukisada said. According to him, a few years previously, an up-and-coming sculptor had created a limited-time monument using lights. Since then, young artists and local sculptors had started displaying their various light sculptures, which were shown a lot on social media and received positive reviews.

When they finally arrived at the Greenbelt, they were greeted by a shining gate. The entire Greenbelt district appeared to be faintly floating, illuminated by the blue lights. The venue for the Aurora Light Show would be in front of them once they passed that gate of light.

"I'm going inside…"

Sousei lost his words. He had done a job in the Greenbelt area during the Aurora Light Show before. At that time, he had seen the venue from the outside, and he remembered thinking that it was incredibly bright. That was the extent of it. However, going inside the venue was like stepping into a whole different world. There were

no other lights inside except the ones used in the show. Normally the plaza could be used freely by the public and had a decent amount of outdoor lighting, but it was currently turned off. The LED lights weren't strong enough to illuminate their surroundings, so Sousei and his friends couldn't see the ground under their feet very clearly. Despite the abundance of different-colored lights, it was dark.

Flowers of light were blooming all around them.

Some were in the shape of giant teddy bears.

Using some kind of device, the fountain in the plaza wasn't spouting water, but lights.

With the lawn as the canvas, lights had been used to draw both still and moving images.

In a corner referred to as the Aurora Zoo, lions, tigers, giraffes, elephants, and other animals were depicted three-dimensionally.

While all the wonderful designs had been elaborately thought out, the crown jewel was the symbol of the Aurora Light Show—the Tower of Light.

Although it was called a "tower," it seemed to be modeled after the world tree, which held up the heavens and connected it to the underworld. Or perhaps the huge tree was the world itself. It didn't exist in reality, of course—only as a concept in myths.

The Tower of Light was sixty-five feet high and shaped like a giant umbrella. It somewhat resembled a Christmas tree, but instead of decorating a fir tree, the lights were installed over a metal frame that had been constructed specifically for the event, giving it a completely different look.

When they went underneath the umbrella of the Tower of Light, Sousei and his friends were shown an illusion of being showered by countless stars. Part of the light show wasn't fixed in place but was constantly swaying, which made a huge impact. Although they couldn't see them, there seemed to be wind chimes hung high above them, making tinkling sounds. If they had been told that it was the

sounds of falling stars, they probably would have accepted it without question.

Asumi jumped up and reached out with her hands.

"It seems like you can touch them, but you can't!"

"It really does!" Moena stood on her tiptoes and extended her hands directly above her.

Iori opened her mouth a little and gazed at the sparkling Tower of Light.

Wakkuu wasn't looking up, but to the side, single-mindedly watching Iori.

"*Ananieya*," Yukisada mumbled next to Sousei.

"Huh?" Sousei cocked his head, and Yukisada gave a slight shrug and smiled.

"It means something like, 'how beautiful.'"

"…Huh?"

"It's a phrase from old Japanese."

"Did you learn it from classical literature?"

"I wonder."

"What does that mean?" Sousei laughed. Yukisada was making a strange face, and Sousei couldn't tell if he was joking.

Kuchina was standing a little apart from everyone else, looking up at the cascading lights. Even though she was standing apart from them, she was only about six feet away, so she didn't give off the impression that she was standing alone. She pushed her scarf down to her chin and tilted her head left and right, blinking. She appeared to be curious about the illusion created by the miraculous light show and was trying to uncover the source of the mystery.

An innocent expression was spread across her face. She waved her gloved left hand in front of her eyes. Perhaps she had hoped the gesture would allow her to see what was invisible and solve the mystery. Or maybe she didn't have a real reason.

"Miss Hitsujimoto," Sousei called out to her, but Kuchina didn't turn to look at him—because she was *already* looking at him.

"I…"

There she was, surrounded by the starry glow. She slowly looked around at the sea of countless lights, trying to etch every single one into her heart. It probably wasn't just the dazzling scenery, but everything that was there in that moment.

"I'll remember this sight for the rest of my life."

"Me too," Sousei said, nodding.

For some reason, Ukihiko's face came to mind.

Ukihiko had died in that darkness, by Sousei's own hand. Before he died, he'd lost an arm, both of his ears had been cut off, and his left eyeball had been scooped out. But that wasn't the version of Ukihiko that appeared in Sousei's mind. For some reason, Sousei saw Ukihiko from when he hadn't been hurt by anyone and was healthy and full of life.

Ukihiko really should have survived. Back then, he should have killed Sousei instead of making Sousei kill him. Ukihiko had been seriously injured and on the brink of death, but that didn't matter. If he had killed Sousei, the matter would have been solved. Afterward, dying once would have healed all his wounds, and he would have just lost a single life.

Sousei Takarai felt that his lives were not his own. They should have belonged to Ukihiko. Sousei was wrongfully using them to live. He wanted to return them to Ukihiko someday. But he had no idea how to do that.

He had always felt like he owed Ukihiko an apology.

A failure of a human like Sousei shouldn't have survived.

But, Ukihiko, I…

He had met her and encountered a sight he'd remember for the rest of his life.

In this moment, a thought went through his mind:

I'm glad. I really am glad I survived in your place. Though I can't ask you to forgive me…

People could come and go through the Tower of Light as they pleased, and since it was the symbol of the Aurora Light Show, more and more people were flocking to see it.

"Oh yeah. Hey, everyone, why don't we take a photo together?!" Asumi called out, waving the hand that was holding her phone.

Sousei met Kuchina's gaze, and she started walking. It seemed she was consenting to being in the photo. That was slightly unexpected.

It was then that Sousei saw something over her shoulder—or rather, some*one*. That hairstyle—a mushroom haircut. They were standing nearby, wearing an oversized down jacket. Kuchina had her back to them. They were only about five yards away.

How had that person gotten so close without Sousei noticing? The down jacket had a hood. Perhaps they'd entered the area under the Tower of Light with the hood up, and it was only when they'd put it down that Sousei had noticed that distinctive haircut. It wasn't just the hair; Sousei remembered the face, too.

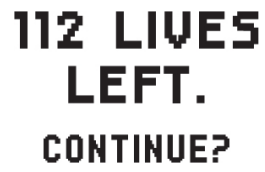
"Kinoshita…," Sousei muttered, causing Kuchina to stop in her tracks. But how?

It was Riamu Kinoshita. He had been one of a pair of boy-girl fraternal twins. Sousei had shot down Riamu, then been attacked by the sister; Kuchina had saved him from her. The brother's corpse had never been found, but he'd definitely died. Sousei knew that. He could feel it whenever he took a life.

Kinoshita was expressionless. He didn't say anything. Silently, he took three long strides forward, simultaneously unfastening his down jacket with his left hand. He was holding what looked like a short pole in his right hand. Surely it wasn't some kind of weapon. But that wasn't all.

Under his down jacket, Kinoshita had a number of strange objects attached to his body. There were several vertical cylinders attached in a row across his abdomen, with a cord coming out of them connected to some kind of device. The digital display on the device showed a sequence of numbers in red. There were four digits. A four-digit number? No—there was a colon dividing them. It read 00:04. Was it a time? A second later, it changed to 00:03. Not three minutes, then.

Three seconds remaining.



Afterword

As I was brainstorming ideas for Volume 3, I felt a thrill in my chest when I came up with this story development.

I'm generally a rather calm person (or, I guess, someone who doesn't have much energy), so I try to live my life crawling along the ground as quietly as possible, but I felt excited, which is unusual for someone like me.

After discussing the cover with my editor and finalizing the concept, and once the illustrations from BUNBUN started coming in and the design was solidified, I couldn't help but become increasingly excited for the finished product.

The story is heading in a slightly unsettling direction, but I already have several alternative plans for what lies ahead, and in fact, I've already started writing the continuation on my own.

With that said, as I put my pen down for the time being, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and love to my editor Suzuki, illustrator BUNBUN, designer Tsuyoshi Kusano, everyone involved in the production of this book, and all of you who are reading this novel. I would be delighted to meet you all again in the next volume.

Ao Juumonji

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