
Mizuki Mizushiro
x
Namanie
PSYCHO LOVE COMEDY
2
MURDER PRINCESS AND THE SUMMER DEATH CAMP
PUBLIC MORA
COMMITTE
PSYCOME


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2
MURDER PRINCESS AND
THE SUMMER DEATH CAMP


"WE WILL BE WORKING TO ENSURE THAT ALL OF YOU FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS ARE ABLE TO ENJOY THE PRISON CAMPOUT A BIT—AS WELL AS TO HELP EACH OF YOU REFORM QUICKLY, DAY BY DAY."
Introduction
DEPARTURE CEREMONY
"SHOULD YOU HAVE ANY CONCERNS, PLEASE DO NOT HESITATE TO CONSULT WITH US!"



Gothic Sick Amplifier

CONCERNING THAT LADY, THE SERIAL KILLER

DAY ONE IN HELL



THE MURDERERS OF PURGATORIUM REMEDIAL ACADEMY 2


THE DARK GRAY METAL WAS AWASH IN MOONLIGHT, SHINING WETLY.
"GOODNESS NO, MISS HIKAWA. PLANNING TO KILL YOU? OH MY! I WOULD NEVER..."
PUBLIC MORAL COMMITTEE
Knockin' on Hell's Door
LIFE IS SHORT—KILL 'EM, GIRLS
CONTINUED: DAY TWO IN PURGATORY

PSYCOME

2

MURDER PRINCESS AND THE SUMMER DEATH CAMP

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YEN ON
NEW YORK

Contents



PSYCHO LOVE COMEDY



"Hey, you bastard pigs!" The Lolita's lisping voice resounded through the spacious, graffiti-covered gymnasium.

The teacher with a bobbed haircut and charmingly childish face—and a very small brand-name suit—gazed down upon the gym floor from atop the stage. Her name was Hijiri Kurumiya, and she narrowed her eyes with a sinister laugh.

The coed class of thirty-one stood assembled in formation, looking up at a teacher who could have been a grade-schooler. The students, clad in black-and-white striped tracksuits, answered Kurumiya's address with a unified "Yes, ma'am!"

Rather than a teacher and her students, they looked just like a jailer and her prisoners...

"Already three months have passed since you enrolled here at Purgatorium Remedial Academy. Even you bitches, who were nothing but garbage when you first arrived...haven't you been beaten into a fine shape? If we exclude that piggy who hasn't matured at all—the trashy bastard with the Mohawk hair—no one was even late today. A fine performance. Hee-hee-hee... For now, I think I'll give you passing marks."

As she finished speaking, Kurumiya swung the iron pipe she had resting on her shoulders in a downward arc, spraying stuck-on gore upon the cheeks of a male student in the front row—Kyousuke Kamiya.

However, Kyousuke did not move. Without changing their facial expressions in the least, he and the other students called out in

unison, “Thank you, ma’am!” and weathered Kurumiya’s violent gaze.

After a scornful laugh, Kurumiya replaced the iron pipe on her shoulder with an indignant snort. “But that’s, how do I say…*uninteresting*. Obedience is good, but there are those who think you have become too docile. You assholes almost certainly think so, too, hm? With us teachers as your opponents, you’re thinking, ‘If I shut up and keep obeying orders,’ ‘If I don’t defy them,’ ‘If I abide by the rules,’ it’ll be fine. That attitude isn’t wrong. It’s absolutely correct. And yet—”

Suddenly, Kurumiya’s whole demeanor changed. The playful joy disappeared from her face, and coldhearted anger ignited in her eyes.

“That approach, that way of thinking—it’s halfhearted. If you just do this and that, you’ll be fine… Is that what you think? You mustn’t go too far in that direction, or you’ll spoil and rot. Such an attitude is nothing but superficial servility. Looking in your eyes, it’s immediately obvious; your eyes, looking at me: the fear and awe suspended in them is diluted. It’s a far cry from when you first came here, that much is clear! As your respect for me weakens, so, too, will your feelings of loyalty. Though you wear the outer shells of good boys and girls, if you don’t change at the root, we can’t say that you are truly reformed. As such, I now have the pleasure of opening this special event!”

From some hidden pocket, Kurumiya produced a 7-by-10-inch booklet. On the dark red cover, scrawled in exaggerated print, was:

Purgatorium Remedial Academy
Prison Camping Trip Guidebook

Not regular camping—“prison camping.” Departure for this two-night, three-day off-campus school excursion was the reason that Kyousuke and the other first-year students had been ordered to gather

so early in the morning—they had been assembled in the gymnasium since 5:30 AM.

Behind Kyousuke, a very sleepy yawn floated through the air.

"The purpose of this camping trip is to grind away at your resolve in a harsh environment, to plant the roots of fear in your pathetic hearts, and to instill some loyalty into you bastards who have gotten used to daily life at the academy and begun to slack off. For the next three days, commanding you piggies will be me, the instructor for first-year Class A, and—"

"Me, the instructor for first-year Class B, Kirito Busujima."

Opening his mouth to interrupt Kurumiya was an unattractive middle-aged man in a shabby suit. His jacket was worn out and his shirt was wrinkled, and he had bags under his eyes. This man Busujima, who had appeared quietly from offstage, self-consciously stroked the stubble on his chin as he spoke.

"So sorry, Miss Kurumiya... My dear 'friend' got off to somewhere... I was searching for him. Oh, I do hope to find him safe and sound! That's why, well...how much have you explained so far? I wouldn't want to make you do all the talking, so I'll take it from here. After all, *you are my senior* in age and rank. Please, leave the rest to me, your junio—"

"—Commanding you will be me, the instructor for first-year Class A, and the members of the Public Morals Committee here at Purgatorium Remedial Academy. We're really going to drag you about, so prepare yourselves!"

"Oh my, are you ignoring me? How cruel. What's more, I was just excluded without hesitation, wasn't I?" Busujima's expression glazed over. Not only his proposal but his very existence had been coldly dismissed.

After glancing at the man in irritation, Kurumiya continued as if

nothing had happened. “The Public Morals Committee at this school is composed of high-achieving students from the upper classes, a select committee—in other words, elite and model prisoners. During this campout, they will act as our eyes and ears and assist us in your training. Well, then, allow me to introduce them—the ones looking after you first-year bastards—without delay: the members of the Public Morals Committee.”

As soon as Kurumiya finished speaking, the uniformed figures of several young men and women stepped onto the stage from the wing opposite Busujima.

Each wore the regulation summer uniform: short-sleeved shirts and vests, with black-and-white striped ties for the boys and ribbons for the girls. But affixed to the left arm of each student was a yellow armband reading “Public Morals Committee.”

Standing at the ready behind Kurumiya, the students lined up next to one another, eight in total. There was a slim, slit-eyed young man, and another who was large and muscular. There was a young woman wearing silver-rimmed glasses with her hair in braids, and a tough-looking girl whose skirt extended down to her ankles.

One stood out from all the others: the pretty female student standing to the far right. She had long, honey-colored hair; emerald-green eyes; and deathly, snow-white skin. This lovely girl, whose appearance made one think of a high-quality bisque doll, took one step forward from the line and slowly bowed, her movements elegant and refined.

“How do you do, new students? I am Saki Shamaya of third-year Class A at Purgatorium Remedial Academy—and the chair of the Public Morals Committee. Born abroad and raised in Japan, I have a French-American mother and a purely Japanese father. I am seventeen years old. Lovely to meet you all.”

Shamaya smiled gently as she finished her polite self-introduction. She seemed to be every bit the lady—it was as if countless flower buds

had burst into bloom, surrounding her at their center.

The male students were a given, but even the female students were fascinated, totally captivated. Kyousuke also unintentionally let slip an expression of wonder: "...Ohh."

It was unthinkable that, at this institution filled with the helplessly abnormal, one could find the owner of such a radiant smile. It was like finding a diamond in the rough, or meeting Buddha in hell.

Her emerald-colored eyes, clearly given to her by her mother, were so beautiful one could mistake them for actual jewels, and her looks, coupled with the air of feminine modesty that she engendered, gave one the acute sense that she possessed a sound, intelligent mind.

But at the same time, I can feel something terrifying at my back—

"...Tch." Behind him, someone clicked their tongue audibly.

Could what I keep feeling be bloodlust...? But I don't understand why that would be...

Shamaya's fluent speech reached Kyousuke's ears through his confusion. "As the Public Morals Committee, our duty is to act as support for Miss Kurumiya. However, we committee members absolutely never engage in violent conduct. We will be working to ensure that all of you first-year students are able to enjoy the prison campout a bit—as well as to help each of you reform quickly, day by day. We will work earnestly, and with wholehearted devotion. Should you have any concerns, please do not hesitate to consult with us!" The hearts and minds of the freshmen were utterly enraptured as Shamaya laughed gently and smoothed her hair.

Not a single student was looking at Busujima, crouched on the edge of the stage grumbling complaints to himself. "Support for Miss Kurumiya... Wait, what about me? Where's my support? Why is everyone excluding me...? Isn't it cruel?" He really was a pitiful teacher.

Shamaya had completely seized the atmosphere. Her juniors gazed passionately up at her from below the stage, and she flashed them her charming smile until all were satisfied—or she would have, had she not been interrupted.

"Oh, I almost forgot... You freshmen bastards should follow Shamaya's example verrrrrry closely! If you need a reason, it's because she is the *psycho serial killer who boasts the highest kill count in her year*, feared as the inhuman 'Murder Princess' since she first enrolled here—once a problem child even among problem children. Hee-hee-hee!"

This announcement from Kurumiya brought everyone's thoughts to a screeching halt.

...Top of her year? Psycho serial killer? What the hell?

"Employing varied methods, selecting varied targets, and acting in varied locations...she's a diversified *serial* murderer. With hardly any commonalities to link each individual incident, her crimes were not thought to have been committed by the same person. Her twentieth and twenty-first victims were her very own father and mother. After Shamaya was arrested for this act of parricide, it came to light that one incident after another was carried out by Shamaya's own hand. At the time of her arrest, she was thought to have killed only two people, but in reality it was ascertained that she was a *rare, bizarre serial killer who had murdered twenty-one people*! Considering that the culprit was an adolescent girl who had yet to turn fourteen, that fact was deemed too sensational. Consequently, the truth was never made public, and she was consigned here at this academy under a veil of total secrecy."

Wait a minute, what did she just say? Twenty-one people?

No matter what Kurumiya said, that seemed impossible. Even Kyousuke's supposed kill count of twelve people was unimaginable, but Shamaya's was nearly twice that. Surely this had to be some kind

of joke. There was no way that this beautiful upperclassman was the Murder Princess who had murdered twenty-one people.

Shamaya herself spoke then, shocked:

"You mustn't lay it all in the open like that."

...She acknowledged it like it's an ordinary thing.

The image of Shamaya that Kyousuke held in his mind—of a tenderhearted senior with a warm smile—was smashed to smithereens.

The other students evidently felt the same way, as some ducked down and clutched at their chests, or tore at their hair, or restrained their left arms, shouting, "Gaaaaaahhh!! Calm down! Calm down, Azrael!" and so on; they were overwhelmed with shock. Somewhere behind Kyousuke, someone could be heard muttering, "...Pathetic, you idiots."

Undaunted by the uproar, Shamaya pulled out a megaphone and raised her voice. "Just a—Everyone, calm down! P-please calm down! It is certainly true that I once killed twenty-one people with my own hands. That is the unmistakable truth. —How. Ev. Er! I have made a fresh start in life. I have reformed! The person you see before you was able to become a noble lady! All of this is thanks to the teachers'...no, to Miss Kurumiya's diligent discipline, by which my mind and body have become clean and upright!" Shamaya's eyes sparkled as she brought her hand to her chest for emphasis.

From the wings, the voice of Busujima, who had disappeared offstage without anyone noticing, was audible. "...A teacher addressed her just now, so why did she go out of her way to correct her? Could this be bullying?" No one paid any attention.

Kurumiya watched with a grin as Shamaya frantically tried to explain.

The other members of the Public Morals Committee, on the other hand, were altogether unresponsive. With straight backs they stared rigidly ahead, standing at attention, barely even blinking. In that state they looked just like statues. Like mannequins, they gave off an uncanny, intimidating air.

"So please, everyone, be at peace! No matter how many people you may have killed...there is a path back! It is possible to take responsibility for the crimes you have committed, and keep walking! Yes, it's true...no matter how many people you many have killed!"

—And then, suddenly, Kyousuke's and Shamaya's eyes met.

"……?!"

As Shamaya smiled, she narrowed her emerald eyes at the open-mouthed Kyousuke. Her tender expression seemed to be trying to convey the following:

You needn't worry, Mr. Kamiya! Even I, who killed twenty-one people, was able to reform. You can certainly do it, too! Do your best, together with us!

"……"

Feeling dejected, Kyousuke averted his eyes from Shamaya's intense gaze. From behind him, someone spoke up. "...Isn't that great, Kyousuke? You're so popular." When Kyousuke looked over his shoulder, the beautiful girl with rust-red colored hair and eyes, who was glaring reproachfully, quickly turned her face away and forced out a yawn.

Purgatorium Remedial Academy—an abnormal school built to house *underage murderers*. Kyousuke, thrown in here on a false accusation of being the Warehouse Butcher, responsible for the mass murder of twelve young men, had little hope of finding any peace in this mad prison school.

Drawn like flies to a crime he hadn't even committed, sick, strange people worked their way into his life, one after the other.

And with that welcome, they embarked on the two-night, three-day prison camping trip.

I'm sure this will be nothing but trouble—again, Kyousuke lamented, already looking to the heavens for aid.

Gothic Sick Amplifier

CONCERNING THAT LADY, THE SERIAL KILLER

DAY ONE IN HELL

05:30	**Departure Ceremony** Departure for the Prison Campout of sweat, tears, and bloody vomit. ♪
10:00	**House of Limbo—Arrival**
10:15	**Entering Limbo Ceremony**
12:30	**Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering** Let's atone for our sins in the form of a game!
16:10	**Condemnation** Letting loose with jeers like "Kill. 'Em. Now!" is prohibited.
18:00	**Inferno Campfire** Let's endure everything except for fatal burns.
20:10	**Hell of Boiling Water—Bathing** Men and women separate. Don't peek no matter what! (Especially the men. Especially freshman Class A Kyousuke Kamiya.)
22:00	**Lockdown/Lights-out**

Gothic Sick Amplifier

CONCERNING THAT LADY, THE SERIAL KILLER

DAY ONE IN HELL

Purgatorium Remedial Academy was a boarding school built on a distant, solitary island.

Ordinarily, students were absolutely restricted from leaving, and a band of thick forest stretched out beyond the concrete walls and fences that surrounded the school grounds. Down a well-worn forest path packed with the green of trees on all sides as far as they could see, Kyousuke and the others kept running, huffing and puffing. Forced to carry heavy rucksacks, they were headed for the camp accommodations—the House of Limbo.

"Let's go, let's go, let's goooooo! Look lively, piggies! Any of you bastards fall behind my pace, I'll give you a good whipping! Run, run, ruuuuuun until you puke blood!"

Bringing up the rear, Kurumiya brandished her iron pipe, spurring the students on.

Running a good distance ahead of her, Kyousuke stared at the backs of the members of the Public Morals Committee, who led the students. In all there were four of them, running along indifferently without even breathing hard.

Saki Shamaya's figure was not among them.

Most likely, she was behind Kyousuke and the rest of first-year

Class A, alongside the Public Morals Committee as it led first-year Class B. “Killing twenty-one people is too awful! And a Public Morals Committee chairperson… She must be the top killer at the academy,” Kyousuke mumbled to himself, temporarily relieved by the thought of the distance between them.

“…I know, right? She’s got to be one of the top ten killers in the world!” Kyousuke’s grumbling was immediately answered. When he looked, the female student running next to him, with her rust-red ponytail swinging—Eiri Akabane—was twisting her mouth downward in a frown. “…Moreover, she’s a serial killer, right? If she was a mass killer or a spree killer, that would be one thing, but a serial killer who took out twenty-one people? She’s gotta be in the top five.”

—As Eiri had said, among murderers who kill large numbers of people, supposedly three types exist:

First are the *mass murderers*. These are the killers who murder a large number of people all at once and in one location. The false accusation that Kyousuke had been saddled with and shooting rampage incidents qualified as this type.

Next are the *spree killers*. These killers carry out murders in two or more locations within a short period of time. The name *spree* means “merrymaking,” and likewise, these crimes are transient. Many of these killers are also indiscriminate in their targets.

And lastly, there are the *serial killers*. These killers carry out their murders one at a time rather than all at once, and they blend in with the rest of society between kills, appearing to live otherwise normal lives.

Though many of these psychopaths manage to hide their twisted dispositions and bizarre obsessions, in most cases some common feature links their victims and methods. It’s said that the shorter the interval between kills, the easier it is to catch the culprit, especially because, unlike with mass murderers and spree killers, the number of victims a serial killer claims often decreases over time.

“But the association between the incidents that that girl caused was too tenuous, so the investigation must have been rough going. Plus, she was extremely practical about it. The idea that such a girl has killed twenty-one people... Even now, I halfway can’t believe it. She’s not all that much older than me, and she has the air of an amateur—”

As she spoke, Eiri grasped the cords of her rucksack tightly. Eiri, who was known as the Scarlet Slasher, was in reality not just a murderer, but a professional killer—an *assassin*. Despite that fact, she was *unable to kill people*, so to Eiri, Shamaya—who had been able to kill twenty-one people as an ordinary citizen—must have been a difficult creature to understand. In Eiri’s severe eyes floated the lights of suspicion and fear, envy and aspiration.

In an effort to cheer up Eiri, Kyousuke replied in the most lively voice he could muster: “B-but wait! She’s already completely rehabilitated, so we should be fine!”

“I sure hope so...” Eiri gave a clipped answer and fell silent. The song of the madly singing cicadas poured down on them from the green canopy above. After running in silence for a moment, Eiri added, “By the way, Kyousuke...”

Feeling her gaze weigh heavy on him, he turned to face her. “... What is it?”

Eiri’s half-lidded eyes were turned toward him, and her voice was bitter. “You know, I saw you. At the departure ceremony, you were gawking over that girl, weren’t you?”

“Huh? Gawking? You... What are you saying?” Kyousuke asked back, surprised by the cross-examination. Eiri pursed her lips.

“...Nothing. Only, I was just thinking...as long as your companion is a beautiful girl, you can get it up even if she’s killed twenty-one people.”

“Wait, hang on. I didn’t know that at first, did I? I didn’t know that she’d murdered twenty-one people and all that. Once I learned that,

of course I—"

"Of course. In other words, you were swooning over her at first, right? ...Okay, I understand completely." Eiri's rust-red eyes narrowed.

An unpleasant sweat appeared on Kyousuke's forehead. "That was a leading question!! Now, the thing is...see, on seeing such a beautiful, and moreover incredibly gentle-looking upperclassman, any man would be touched emotionally. Or rather, his heart would be set aflutter—"

"……What?" Eiri's eyes narrowed further, taking on a turbulent light.

The sweat streamed out of Kyousuke's forehead, heavy drops rolling down his face. "……Wh-what is it?"

"Nothing." With that nonchalant reply, the girl turned away and quickened her pace. Overtaking her companion, she swiftly moved ahead.

As Eiri left him behind, she muttered to herself, "Hmph...so Kyousuke goes for that type...hm!" but it was largely inaudible.

"She's probably saying 'just die' or something like that..."

Confused, Kyousuke stared after Eiri's form as it grew distant. "What is she even mad about?"

"Hahh...hah...heh...heh...I'm done for...no moooooore!"

There was a new girl beside him now, gasping for breath as she chased after the leaders. A female student with short, lightly bouncing chestnut hair—it was Maina Igarashi.

Flailing her small arms and legs, Maina was obviously pushing herself to the limit. "Ha-ha, heee...ha-ha, heeeeee...*gasp*...*pant*..." She could barely breathe, let alone talk.

Kyousuke smiled wryly and slowed his pace. “Looks like you’re having a hard time, Maina. I’ll run with you, so let’s do our best!”

“Eeh?! Oh, y-yeah…thank you! Heh…hah…”

Her pained expression softened as she smiled, but before long she looked troubled again. Maina huffed and puffed, earnestly pumping her arms and legs. Breathing too quickly, she soon began to gasp for oxygen.

“Uh…it’s not good if you inhale too often! You know about the Lamaze technique, right? The one pregnant women use when they’re giving birth? Like that, you need a rhythm—”

“*Ha, ha, huuu…ha, ha, huuu…*”

“Whoa, you’re good! Just like that! *Ha, ha, huuu!*”

“*Ha, ha, huuu…ha, ha, huuu…*”

“That’s it, that’s it! Do your best, Maina! *Ha, ha, huuu!*”

“*Ha, ha, huuu*—It-it’s coming out!”

“What is?!”

“Hey, you theeeeeere! What are you chitchattering on about?! If you’ve got time to move your mouths, move your legs fasteeer! Do you want to have this shoved up your pudendaaa?! I’ll make you pregnant with fear! With feeeeeeaaaaaar!” Kurumiya’s angry roar echoed off the trees.

Somehow, it seemed that their pace had slowed quite a bit, and just behind them, Kurumiya was in hot pursuit, hoisting the iron pipe overhead in a fit of rage.

Maina jumped up with a shriek and cried, “Nyooooooooooooooooo!! My chastity! At least leave me my chastityyyyyy!! H-hellllllllllllp!!” She sped up to escape from

Kurumiya, shrieking all the while.

Kicking around the fallen foliage and rocks on the forest path, Maina passed Eiri—who turned her head in surprise—and was just about to overtake the upperclassmen members of the Public Morals Committee who were leading the way when—

"Whooooooaaaaaa!!"

—She fell with great force.

A committee member in a long skirt jumped out of the way at the last moment, narrowly avoiding a nasty crash. "Whoa…wh-what the hell?!"

On the other hand, Maina's classmates—wearing stunned expressions that read "…not again!"—watched Maina, prostrate on the ground, as they passed her by.

"Oh my gosh…are you all right?!"

"H-hey…you okay?!"

Rushing over in a panic were Eiri and Kyousuke. Maina groggily pushed herself from the dirt.

"Y-yeah. No problem…*hack, cough*," she offered, brushing the grit from her face.

But as she was about to start running again, Maina abruptly paused. "Huh? It hurts… I skinned my knees. Ouch, ow."

Holding her right knee—which she had been about to step out on—she came to a halt, eyes filling with tears. It was evident now that she also had small cuts and scrapes on her face.

Seeing her like this, Kyousuke sprang into action. "…Okay, up you go."

"Whaa?! Kyou-Kyousuke?! Wh-wwwwha-what are you…"

“Hm? Ah, well…I just thought it would be easier like this. Do you mind?” Kyousuke scooped her up in his arms. Carrying Maina with both hands, he broke into a run. In her surprise, Maina curled her body up into a tight little ball.

“Uh, no…I don’t exactly, well…I don’t mind, but…isn’t this hard on you, Kyousuke? Uh, um…I must be heavy… Oh dear…” Maina’s flustered face was flushed bright red from ear to ear.

Kyousuke chuckled; it seemed Maina couldn’t help but be embarrassed. “You’re not heavy at all, so I’m fine! I have confidence in my abilities. It’s no big thing to run while holding one little girl. As long as you don’t object, Maina?”

“……?!”

Maina opened her eyes wide, then hung her head. After twisting around in his arms like she was flustered, she bashfully said, “N-no, I don’t object…”

Smiling wryly, Kyousuke adjusted his grip. Trying to soften the jostling as much as he could, he dashed down the rugged forest trail. Timidly, Maina looked at Kyousuke with upturned eyes.

“Um, well…thank you vewy much!”

“I said it was fine. I’m our squad leader after all. It’s natural that I would help a member of the team.”

“……”

Behind Kyousuke, still carrying Maina, Eiri sullenly kept silent.

Eiri and Maina and one more—the male student who had been picking fights with their teacher since the early morning, and had been beaten nearly to death so many times since the start of things—these three were Kyousuke’s “Class A Squad Four.”

“Anyway, Eiri, what have you been mad about this whole time?”

"...Huh? I'm not mad about anything, not really. Just die already."

"Y-you are mad, aren't you...? What is it, you want me to carry you, too?

"Ugh...of course not, perv!"

Opening her sleepy eyes wide, Eiri surged ahead of Kyousuke and Maina with a shout: "What are you, stupid?!"

A sullen aura of irritation trailed behind her rapidly departing figure.

"It-it was a joke! ...Wow, she looked at me like she was looking at a bug."

"Ohh, I'm sorry, Eiri..."

"Why are *you* apologizing, Maina?"

"Eeh?! Ah...! I-it's nothing! No reason!"

Maina shook her head in a panic. Kyousuke was all the more puzzled.

Three months had passed since they entered Purgatorium Remedial Academy. Kyousuke felt that he had grown quite close to Maina, while sometimes it seemed like Eiri snapped at him even more sharply than before. With no memory of what he might have done to upset her, Kyousuke was left bewildered by her behavior.

Maybe I...offended her somehow? Watching Eiri continue her silent, solitary run down the forest path, he scratched the back of his head. It was the first week of July. The temperature had gradually begun to climb, but Eiri's cold attitude toward Kyousuke showed no sign of warming.

X X X

It had been an hour and a half since they'd departed from the academy, and the class was taking a break in a shaded clearing. According to the schedule written in the guidebook, it looked like they had to keep running for almost two more hours. The interminable distance was almost enough to make one consider trying a shortcut.

Shucking off his rucksack, Kyousuke took a seat on the rough ground.

Maina, who had begun running on her own two legs halfway through, collapsed on the spot, dabbing at her sweat with a pale pink hand towel. "*Hahh, hah*...I'm exhausted. Plus the path kept getting steeper and steeper."

"...It's a bigger island than we thought, isn't it?" Eiri responded academically. "Probably because there are other facilities here besides the academy." She seemed to be absorbed in surveying their surroundings, which were thick with dense vegetation.

Having been born into a family of professional killers, Eiri had undergone rigorous training from a very early age. A run in the forest, even under these conditions, seemed trivial for her. Not a single drop of sweat moistened her handsome face.

Why was an assassin like Eiri here, rubbing shoulders with common murderers?

The truth about the Purgatorium Remedial Academy was that it was a *vocational school for killers* that trained them to become professional hitmen. Even after graduation, they were not released back into decent society, but forced into the criminal underworld.

—But most of the students didn't know the truth.

This was likely so that these killers, with their twisted natures, could first be thoroughly molded to the academy's purposes. And Kyousuke, who had learned the truth from Eiri three months ago, had been absolutely forbidden by Kurumiya to speak to anyone else about it.

For that reason, Eiri had informed Maina only of the fact that she was "an assassin who can't kill people," and had not gone so far as to reveal the true nature of the academy. In other words, among the first-year students, there were only three who knew the truth at this juncture. Kyousuke, Eiri, and—

"Guess whoo-oo?!"

Suddenly, someone embraced Kyousuke from behind with a gentle *squish*. The bulges that pressed against him were luxuriously soft and overwhelmingly voluminous. The sound of strange breathing —"*kksshh*"—whispered in his ear.

Kyousuke answered, feigning astonishment. "Who could it be...? You...must be Renko."

"Final answer?"

"Yes, yes, final answer."

"....."

"....."

"...Correct! You're right on the money, Kyousuke. Incredible, you got it right away, didn't you?! As your reward, I will give you my melons. As might be expected, given the gas mask, they're not muskmelons; they're 'maskmelons'! They're of the highest grade! Moreover, there are two of them! Go ahead and enjoy your fill. They're so sweet, they'll melt away all your inhibitions."

As she spoke, this girl who had flown at him—Renko Hikawa—began rubbing her abundant breasts against him. Squeezing him tightly...her arms wrapped around him...*squish squish*...

"Die."

Eiri swung her rucksack in a wide arc.

"Wahg?!"

Renko quickly separated from Kyousuke as one of the rucksack's metal fixtures struck Kyousuke's eyeball.

"My eye! My eeeyyyeeeeee!!"

"...Tch. You dodged it. You're so annoying. Piss off, Big Boobs." Ignoring Kyousuke, who had fallen clutching his eye, Eiri glared resentfully at the giantess.

In response, Renko—*the girl wearing the jet-black gas mask*—let a sigh escape from her exhaust port ("*Kksshh...*") and shrugged her shoulders in an exaggerated gesture. "Ever since we met, you say 'die' or 'piss off' with no warning... It's so cruel! It makes me wonder if small-chested girls also have a small capacity for love. It's because of that, that you will always and forever be small-breasted!"

Renko thrust out her huge, protruding bust, obvious even under her loose-fitting jersey, and looked triumphantly at Eiri—or rather, at her totally flat chest.

A vein on Eiri's forehead began to bulge.

"Well, then, a girl with inflated boobs must have an inflated attitude as well. Wouldn't you like me to lop off those troublesome lumps for you so that you can become nice and slender? Let's slice 'em off, fatty!"

"Oh, too bad! Turns out I'm not fat at all. I've got so much more to offer than just these babies, you know. I have a tiny, nipped-in waist and beautiful, supple legs—I dare say even more so than you, Eiri!"

"...You crazy? Aside from your bust, do you think you're any match for me? You're so naive, you simpleton. Too much nourishment has been going to your boobs; it must not be making it up to your brain."

"Please calm down, you two!" Maina wailed, looking back and forth between the two girls, flustered.

“Yeah, cut it out…and, somebody, please show a little concern for me,” Kyousuke complained, brushing himself off as he stood.

Renko raised her voice hysterically as she shouted his name, just as he’d asked. She ran up to him, swinging her chest back and forth conspicuously. “Are you all right?! You jumped in front of that blow for me just now, didn’t you…?”

“No way! You dodged it, so I had to eat rucksack.”

“…Yeah, thanks. You’re so nice, Kyousuke. I love you!”

“Listen when other people taaaaaalk!” *She’s probably listening to music, as usual.* He could hear the faint noise leaking from her chunky black headphones.

“…Anyway, what brought you over here? Is it okay that you’re not eating with your squad mates?” Kyousuke asked while tearing the fawning Renko off of him.

Renko nodded yes, pointing to an opening between the trees. “I found a nice hidden spot nearby. Since I went to the trouble, I thought the two of us could eat breakfast together. If you like, you can eat my melons! In place of dessert, that is. *Kksshh*.”

“Shut up! Who would be alone with you?!” he shouted. Kyousuke breathed a deep sigh from the bottom of his gut.

This gas mask girl, Renko, was a creature artificially engineered to be the perfect murderer. When she removed the gas mask that acted as her “limiter,” she became a *killing machine* whose every single thought and feeling culminated in the act of killing. Kyousuke was perhaps the only person who she absolutely could not kill.

—So long as he *did not love her in return*.

That was why, for the past three months, Renko had been trying to get Kyousuke to fall in love with her of his own free will, and mostly by overwhelming him physically. She had been taking a proactive

approach.

If he ever acceded to Renko's romantic overtures—after his chastity was snatched away and his heart stolen by her body—right then and there she would be able to pluck away his life.

She had the gas mask equipped twenty-four hours a day, but underneath she was an unbelievably beautiful girl.

—That was why...

"Yeah, don't say stupid things! If you're going, I'm coming with you. I don't know what you're planning, but I can't let you make a move on Kyousuke... I can't let you kill him, absolutely not."

—That was why he was grateful when the others intervened.

Renko's shoulders drooped with a "*kksshh*" under Eiri's harsh glare. "Ohh...are you cock-blocking me again, Eiri? Prattling on about this and that, you must be taking aim at Kyousuke, too... I mean, I don't mind either way; I'll have plenty of other chances. So this morning, let's have a friendly breakfast party! It's fine with me if we all go together!" As if a switch had been flipped, Renko clapped her hands together, did an about-face, and began walking away.

Glaring at her back, Eiri grumbled, "...Huh? I'm not taking aim, though."

"Sure," Kyousuke agreed with a sarcastic smile. "Though it's not like you could go through with killing me, even if you did."

For some reason, Eiri turned her scornful glare upon him. "...She wasn't talking about trying to take your *life*, moron."

Yet more abuse heaped upon him. Looking indignant, Eiri started walking, following behind Renko.

"'M-moron'...? I don't follow your meaning. You must really hate me, is that it?"

“Oh, no… Don’t worry about it, Eiri…” Maina consoled.

“Wait, I’m the one you should be saying that to, aren’t I? Why are you telling Eiri not to worry?”

“Eeh?! Ah, well…it’s, it’s nothing! Nothing at all! Uh, um… Let’s get going, too!! We’ll lose sight of them!” Maina waved her hands in a fluster, then took off after the other two in a frantic escape.

“Uh…h-hey! What the hell was that, you guys?! Geez…”

Kyousuke, who was quickly being left behind, frowned, scratched his head, and adjusted his rucksack.

X X X

With Renko leading the way, the group soon arrived at a small stream running through the middle of the forest. Large stones were scattered about the bank, and the slowly flowing water was as clear as crystal.

“Whoa…! What a lucky find.”

“*Kksshh*. I know, right? It’s at the head of an animal trail, so I think it will be hard for anyone else to realize it’s here.”

It was just as Renko had said: While it was no more than a five-minutes walk from where they had begun, there was now no sign of any other people. It was an ideal location to leisurely let your hair down and relax.

“Okay, then, let’s get straight to the food! We haven’t eaten anything since this morning.”

“That’s right. I’m starving! …Where should we eat?”

“…How about that big rock over there? It looks like the view’s not bad, either.”

The three of them—Kyousuke, Maina, and Eiri—were so engrossed in choosing a spot that they almost didn't notice Renko behind them.

"Maaan, this gas mask is such a hindrance. Oof, come on...!" Renko, who had tossed aside her rucksack, was carefully removing her clothes. She placed both hands on the hem of her jersey, and without hesitation lifted it up.

"....."

What the hell is she doing all of a sudden?

With Kyousuke and the others looking on in astonishment, Renko finished removing her top. Turning her back to the sparkling water, she threw out her chest with pride.

"Ta-daaaaaa! How do you like my sexy bathing suit form?!"

Renko, clad in a black bikini, struck a cheerful pose.

Her porcelain skin shone under the rays of the summer sun. Her long legs drew elegant lines, her narrow waist was accented by her charming navel, and more eye-catching than anything else, her voluptuous bosom looked as though it might spill out at any moment. The valley formed between her breasts was deep and inviting, and though only a small part of the overall picture, it was truly the best part.

"*Kksshh*. You're all gaping. Could it be that my boobs are too amazing, and you've been instantly bewitched? Oh nooo, these are certainly frightening weapons, if I say so myself!" Bubbling with pride, Renko placed her hands on her breasts.

Looking directly at her, Kyousuke mumbled:

"...If only the gas mask wasn't there."

The moment his eyes moved from Renko's tantalizing body to the

ominous gas mask covering her face, the passion raging through his own body rapidly cooled.

"Whaa?!" Renko complained as Kyousuke relaxed, released from various types of "stiffening."

In an effort to emphasize her boobs, she leaned forward into a photogravure pose.

"Loook, boobs! Booooooobs! Big, huge boobies!"

One after another, she assumed a series of sexy poses: She folded her arms behind her head, she pushed her boobs together with both hands, she shook her captivating bust like jelly…

"_____"

"…*Kksshh*…*kksshh*…Wh-why…why in the world aren't you enchanted by meeeeeee?! I'm trying so hard, too, it's so mean of you…*sniffle*." Faced with an absolute stonewall from her companions, Renko sank to her knees, crestfallen.

Kyousuke gently laid a hand on her slightly trembling shoulder. "It's because you're…you're wearing the gas mask."

As soon as Kyousuke murmured this, Renko's trembling came to an abrupt stop. Placing both hands on the stream bank, she hung her head deeply, falling into silence with a hollow "*Kksshh*…"

"Oh, dear. Uh, umm… Don't worry about it, Renko!"

"How pathetic, you worthless pair of boobs! That bust you're so proud of amounts to nothing after all."

Maina tried her best to comfort Renko while Eiri took the opportunity to gloat.

Kyousuke, faced with this unfortunate situation, cleared his throat. "…Ahem. Well, the thing is…of course I think your breasts are

amazing! They're not just big, they've got a lovely shape, and they're soft, but still pert... They're ridiculously attractive, and I want to do ridiculous things with them! They're the kind of rack that drives a person crazy! So cheer up, Renko—okay?"

"Weirdo." "What a perv!" "A perrrrrrv!"

"Huh?" Kyousuke's attempt to lift Renko's spirits had only drawn the ire of the three girls. Eiri's glare was particularly icy even for her, readily chilling him to the bone.

"Is that how you really feel? Disgusting! Allow me to scorn you from the bottom of my heart."

"....."

—Several minutes had passed. Kyousuke sat on the stream bank with his arms around his knees, stuffing his mouth with rice balls. He wiped at his damp eyes between relishing bites of salty rice.



* * *

"How about some dessert?"

"—Wha?!"

Suddenly, a pair of huge breasts, barely covered by a black bikini, filled his vision. Kyousuke spat and sputtered in surprise, showering the abundant twin peaks with small grains of rice.

"A-a lot...came out, didn't it?"

"Don't say weird things while you're squirming around like that! What do you want, anyway?" Kyousuke, whose emotional scars had not yet healed, wiped his mouth and stared at the black gas mask in irritation.

Renko scratched her cheek with a "*kksshh*" and sat down next to him. "Sorry, sorry. I just thought you might be feeling down. I'm really sorry about before, okay? To tell you the truth, I was really happy about what you said, but I just picked up on the mood of the situation and tried to join in with everyone making fun of you."

"...What kind of mood? Thanks to you I'm eating lunch alone, you jerk."

Maina and Eiri were happily eating together at a spot quite a distance from the rock where Kyousuke sat. As he looked over, his eyes met with Eiri's, but she quickly turned away, spurning him.

"Oh my..." Renko smiled bitterly. "Looks like everyone hates you now, doesn't it, Kyousuke?"

"And whose fault is that...? Really, what am I supposed to do *now*?" Kyousuke held his forehead and groaned. Renko drew her body closer to him.

"What are you supposed to do...? What do you *want* to do,

Kyousuke?"

"...Huh?"

"Earlier, you said it yourself, didn't you? You want to do ridiculous things with me... That's what you said. —And you can! I want you to do them to me...! I want to be driven crazy by your hands, and drive you crazy, too."

"What? No, come on... Wait, Renko! All of a sudden, what are you —?"

"'*What*'? Whatever I want, of course. *Kksshh*. As long as it's something you want, I'll do anything." Moving around from beside him to right in front of him, Renko straddled Kyousuke's knees. She bent forward, pressing in on him even as he tried to back away.

"...Oh, come to think of it, my chest is still covered in rice, isn't it? You're the one who got me dirty, so you clean me up, Kyousuke... Won't you take responsibility?" Placing her hands on Kyousuke's shoulders, she waved her breasts, indeed covered in sticky grains of rice, right before his eyes.

The gas mask was out of his field of vision, so the sight was pure bliss—the destructive force of it was extraordinary. "E-even if you tell me to, I... H-how would I even do that?"

"Do it however you like! You could brush it off with your hands...or pick up the grains with your fingers...or lick them up with your tongue. It's even okay if you get lost in the moment and end up doing this...and that..."

"....."

"Well, what are you gonna do? No one's watching. I won't kill you even if you touch my boobs. 'When she sets a meal before you...' How does it go? '...You can taste to your heart's content'!"

Faced with Renko's sweet seduction, Kyousuke gulped, hard. Surely

just touching her chest didn't count as "falling in love"... And since she was trying so hard, just a little... If it was just a little bit, while he was removing the rice—

"...Oh? This is a great spot!"

A familiar voice, soft and feminine, filled the air.

Kyousuke, who had extended a hand toward Renko's breasts, snapped out of his trance and looked toward the source of the voice: the animal trail leading to the stream bed. At the head of it was—

"If only we had found this earlier, we could have taken our meal here at our leisure... It's got plenty of green space, and the refreshing sound of water. Here, even my pure heart may be washed cleaner."

A female student with honey-colored hair stood in the sunlight. She was a shapely, beautiful girl with outstanding style who somehow reminded Kyousuke of both Eiri and Renko at once, as though she were a sort of impossible combination of the two. On her graceful arm, she wore a yellow armband.

"Public Morals Committee chair...Saki Shamaya..."

As if in response to the words that had slipped thoughtlessly from Kyousuke's mouth, the female student—Shamaya—turned toward him. Her typically downcast eyes opened wide as she took in Renko, dressed in a bikini and gas mask, and Kyousuke, who was frozen in place with his hand still extended toward her chest.

In an instant, Shamaya's previously gentle eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Whatever are you two doing in such a place?"

"U-um... This is, well, uhhh—"

"We thought we'd do some of this, some of that, and a bit of the other thing, too!"

"Oh yeah, that's totally it! For dessert, I thought I'd have some of

her delicious ‘maskmelons’... Nooooooot!”

“_____”

Renko saluted energetically. Kyousuke, caught up in her enthusiasm, took the opportunity for a quick jab. Opposite them, Shamaya was expressionless. Her doll-like beauty made it extremely unnerving. Fixed under her unpleasant gaze, Kyousuke began to sweat from every pore.

“That’s not it... See, well... There was a stream nearby, and we thought that while we were having breakfast we might play in the water, um...to wash off the sweat from running, and refresh...ha-ha-ha!” As Kyousuke scrambled to explain the situation, Shamaya closed her eyes.

She took a breath, raising her eyes to scrutinize Kyousuke again. “What’s this, oh-ho-ho...! So it was like that, was it? I thought for sure that you were trying to meet secretly and turn your basest carnal desires on this gas mask–wearing girl’s breasts as you pleased, rubbing them and kneading them, XXXing, and XXing, and Xing her XXX! I’m so glad I was mistaken...so glad. I do beg your pardon! Oh-ho-ho-ho.” After firing off a rapid succession of profanity in her elegant, aristocratic voice, she brought her hand to her lips and smiled.

“.....”

Kyousuke and Renko were both speechless, staring at Shamaya, who stood grinning at them, clad in an aura of grace and innocence—the offensive stench of suspicion that hung around her must have been Kyousuke’s imagination.

“...Oh? It’s just about time. We must not be late for our scheduled departure. The itinerary of the prison camping trip is planned down to the minute, so...please comply! Well, then, I’ll be going now. Another time, when we have the leeway, I would like to speak with you at leisure, first-year Class A Kyousuke Kamiya. Adieu.”

"……?!"

He had never introduced himself, but she had addressed him by his full name when she curtsied. His gaze fixed on her elegant retreating figure, Kyousuke found himself entirely unable to move.

Beside him, Renko folded her arms. "*Kksshh*. Geez, come on! Will you cut it out already, Kyousuke? How popular can you be with girls? If the field is full of love rivals, the game won't be any fun… Though, that's all the more reason to make you fall for me, isn't it? I'm so looking forward to this three-day, two-night prison camping trip! *Kakksshh*."

X X X

After the break, they continued running nonstop for about two hours. From the forest path they turned onto a steep mountain trail, and at last, they reached the House of Limbo, a small campsite standing quietly in the middle of nature.

After taking a group photo at the training plaza, everyone moved in groups to the detention center.

When they finished the simple imprisonment ceremony, the students received their luggage, packed with changes of clothes and other essentials, and went to their respective rooms—or rather, to their cells. There were shared cells and single-person cells; Kyousuke had been assigned a single.

In a sparsely furnished room that was largely identical to the ones in the student dorms, Kyousuke settled onto a simple pipe-frame bed and flipped through the prison camping guidebook. Staring at the open pages, on which the plans for the next three days were written, a grimace spread across his face.

"After this is lunch and…'Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering'? What the heck is that? Followed by 'Inferno Campfire,' 'Hell of Boiling Water,' 'Heart Attack/Test of Courage,' 'Hellfire

Barbecue,' and—Okay, that's enough. I'm getting depressed just reading it."

He closed the guidebook and threw himself down on the bed. His body was exhausted from nonstop running over rugged trails, and he was just about to fall asleep...

"Pardon me, but might this be Mr. Kyousuke Kamiya's room?"

Just as Kyousuke's consciousness was about to cut out, a supple and somewhat familiar voice blew away any chance of sleep.

"……?!"

He sprang up quickly, looking at the door. Standing between him and the dark gray iron bars was the person he had feared it might be —Saki Shamaya.

Her emerald eyes, fringed with long eyelashes, met Kyousuke's.

A moment passed, and then: "Ex...e-e-e-exhibitionisssttt!! Shameleeeeeesss!" Shamaya screamed, her cheeks flushing brilliant red.

"Wha?! N-no way! I just, my jersey was soaked in sweat, so—"

"That's no excuse! Please, clothe yourself! Quickly! My eyes have been defiled!"

"Uh...s-sure...sorry."

Hurt by Shamaya's choice of words, Kyousuke hastily searched for his jacket. Since it was soaked with sweat from a long period of running, he had flung off the top of his tracksuit and was naked above the waist. He pulled his school uniform shirt out of his gym bag at the side of the bed, and slipped it on instead.

As he finished fastening all of his shirt buttons from top to bottom, Kyousuke spoke up. "...I put on a shirt. Sorry for *defiling* your eyes."

Peering from between fingers spread over her eyes, Shamaya sighed. "...Th-that was certainly an unexpected surprise... Really, as soon as we meet, you're trying to give me a heart attack! R-repulsive... I could well be on my deathbed from the shock, you know!!"

"S-sorry... I'll be careful from now on, seriously." Kyousuke had done nothing but apologize from the start, and still she didn't seem quite satisfied. *Though, no matter the circumstance, isn't it going a little too far to say things like "defiling my eyes" and "repulsive"...?* "Anyway, you seem to know all about me. I don't remember introducing myself, though."

"Hm? Oh, beg your pardon... I have been hearing stories about you for quite some time now. I understand that after you locked twelve girls up in an abandoned warehouse, you used a variety of methods to kill every single one of them, and then went on to engage in necrophili—"

"I never did that! The ones I killed were all guys! Men!" Of course, he hadn't killed twelve men, either, but he couldn't let an even worse rumor spread.

At his protests, Shamaya relaxed her stiff facial expression. "What's that, so your opponents were men... Wait, men? Ah—you...d-did that to members of your own sex?! Y-you're a h-h-homosexuaaaaaal?!"

"Noooooo! That's not what I meeaannnttt!!" Kyousuke roared. Shamaya had gone pale and was trembling. *—What is her deal? She's got a screw loose, or maybe you could say she's soft in the head.* He was more than a little tired of being insulted so soon after meeting.

Pulling himself together, Kyousuke asked, "Anyway, what's the matter? You took the trouble to come to my room."

"...Hm? Oh, well, I didn't particularly have any business with you. I just wanted to talk with you...with the person who has killed more people than any other freshman."

"Ah, yeah...I am number one after all."

"Yes, that's what I've heard. A *butcher* who's killed as many as twelve people is incredibly rare. When I first heard it, I doubted my own ears."

"Oh, totallyyy. Because there are like no people who have killed that many, right?" Kyousuke asked, sarcastically. *Except the one right in front of me now. The Murder Princess, who murdered twenty-one, nearly twice my number.* Holding back his biting retort, Kyousuke only mumbled to himself, "Twenty-one people, huh..."

In truth, among Kyousuke and the other first-year students, a psycho killer who had butchered hundreds of people was lurking, someone against whom Shamaya and others could not possibly be compared.

Earlier, when he had asked the killer herself, it had seemed that, publicly at least, she would only say, "I only killed one person." But then, she was a very peculiar, very special creature, so that was not really much of a surprise.

As he sat lost in thought, Shamaya, who had already invaded his room, took Kyousuke's hand. Drawing her face up close enough to touch the tip of his nose with her own, she began speaking passionately: "Mr. Kamiya...I want to rehabilitate you, no matter what! Certainly, I think that as you are now, you are inhumanly heinous, brutally sadistic, relentlessly cruel, obscenely debauched, fucking shit-waste lower-than-garbage scum... So was I, and so was everyone else."

That's going a bit far. And yet, that is how she used to be. Scary.

"—How. Ev. Er! It's not too late. Just as I was born again as a virginal lady, chastely pure, flawlessly upright, magnificently lovely..."

You're exaggerating too much. How much can one person like herself?

"...You, too, can undoubtedly be reborn! It would be difficult on your own, but at the academy you have the members of the Public Morals Committee, as well as the fantastic teachers, to help. Surely we can rehabilitate your warped nature... That is what I believe!" Shamaya's dazzlingly beautiful eyes twinkled, as if to emphasize her point.

What a pain; she sure put it bluntly. But there was no malice in what Shamaya had said, and she truly seemed to be offering well-intentioned advice.

However, Kyousuke had been falsely accused and was really an ordinary guy who had never killed even a single person. There was nothing warped in his nature to rehabilitate. Her concern was entirely misplaced. *Be that as it may, I can't possibly tell her that...*

"Ah, yeah...y-you're right! Wooow. I, too, want to quickly become a pure and upright citizen like yooou, Miss Shamaya! Ha-ha-ha..." Kyousuke's face twitched only slightly as he forced a laugh.

"Oh...is that really so? Oh-ho-ho. A 'pure and upright citizen,' you embarrass me. A 'pure and upright citizen,' really. Oh-ho-ho-ho." Perhaps because she was pleased by Kyousuke's words, Shamaya brought her hand to her cheek and wriggled her body bashfully.

Kyousuke continued to laugh in harmony with her, even as he cursed his luck.

Great, I've gotten involved with yet another crazy girl—looks like I'm in for more trouble.

X X X

"...Oh? That was nice, wasn't it?"

They were in the House of Limbo's "cafeteria." Eiri, who had finished listening to the basics of the story, gave a nonchalant answer and quickly resumed her meal. Kyousuke looked across the table at

her, surprised at her lack of reaction.

"No way, it's not nice at all! And is that all you have to say?"

"...So what if it is?"

"I-I see..."

That's the end of that conversation. Looking around for help, Kyousuke's gaze shifted to the girl in the seat next to Eiri.

"E-Eiri's really irritated, oh me, oh my..."

Maina was completely dispirited. There was no way he could rely on her for backup.

Kyousuke had grown more and more melancholy himself. He rubbed his stomach, frowning at his lack of appetite.

They were in the middle of having lunch, seated at tables where they had assembled by squad, but Eiri had been acting strange from the very start. *Could she still be holding a grudge about the incident by the stream...?*

The expression in her eyes as she rudely continued eating seemed supernaturally sharp. The ominous aura rising off of Eiri had left her surrounded by a conspicuous ring of empty seats. Kyousuke and the others kept silent as the girl seethed with anger.

"Hey, Kyousuke! Long time no see! *Kksshh*."

From overhead, a cheerful voice. *Renko*. The muffled phonemes and sounds of exhaust were enough to identify her.

"Long time...? Didn't we just get into it back at the stream bank?"

Smiling bitterly, Kyousuke lifted his head to face the unexpected visitor.

"No way! It's been more than three hours since that, hasn't it?

From my perspective, every second of every minute that I can't be with you is an eternity! Ohh, I wanted to see you, Kyousukeeeeee! I like you so, so, so much! I love you!" Waving her hands in his direction, Renko dispatched her passionate love call.

Next to the gas mask, high up and far away, was—

"Waah, Renko, really. You're so assertive. Tee-hee-hee!"

Six feet tall and three feet wide, barely squeezed into her uniform, a female student *wearing a flour sack on her head* towered over him, carrying Renko on her shoulders.

"...Wha? ...I mean, whaaaaaattt?!"

Kyousuke did a prompt double take, struck dumb with shock, just as when he had first met Renko. Eiri and Maina also sat slack-jawed, food entirely forgotten.

Contrary to her grim outer appearance, the female student wearing the flour sack flapped her hands back and forth in a cutesy gesture, and squirmed at Renko's words. That hoarse, unisex voice. And that uniform, filled to bursting. Kyousuke felt like he was having déjà vu.

This flour sack–wearing girl, could it be—?

"...Bob."

He couldn't confirm the namesake haircut, but from the two peepholes cut in the front of the sack, the girl's big round eyes peered at him questioningly.

"...Bob?"

"Ah!! Um, well..."

"Bob" was a nickname that Kyousuke had decided to give her in his own mind, and not her actual name at all.

Renko, who was seated on "Bob's" shoulders, tilted her head in confusion. "...Hm? Who is that? Her name's nothing like that. She's in first-year Class B, my classmate and member of my squad—"

"No, he's right. I am Bob. I have no other name, just...Bob."

"Whaaaaaat, no way!! You were Bob this whole time?!"

Bob nodded, holding tight to Renko's legs as she flailed in surprise, nearly hard enough to fall off of Bob's shoulders. Her round eyes, visible through the peepholes, were completely clear. "Yeah...at least, that's my name in front of Kamiya, okay? Earlier, when I confessed my love to him and was rejected, I lost all self-control from the shock and went on a bit of a rampage, remember? ...Since then, I haven't been able to face Kamiya. That's why it's okay. I'm fine being Bob. I'm Bob, with no other name. Bob, who's fine being Renko's good friend who supports her love!"

"Bob..."

Both Renko and Kyousuke were touched by Bob's brisk declaration. Carrying the shame of her past disgrace, she had decided quickly to step aside, and was now lending her former rival Renko her full support as a close friend... What a ridiculously nice person!

As Kyousuke stood, wiping the tears that had pooled in the corners of his eyes, he turned to face Bob. "Is that so...? I understand, Bob. But I'm the one who should apologize for my behavior up until now. I misunderstood you, judging you only from your outward appearance... It's a pleasure meet you...again. Let's be friends!" Looking up and smiling at her sack-covered face, Kyousuke extended a hand in friendship.

After blinking in surprise with her round, peephole eyes, Bob cordially replied, "...Sure, pleased to meet you," and grasped Kyousuke's hand, when—

"*Nom*."

"Ooooooowwwwww!!"

—The figure that had suddenly interrupted them pushed aside Bob's arm and *bit into* Kyousuke's. Surprised by the abrupt stabs of pain, Kyousuke shouted. A little late, Bob and Renko also screamed.

"Uh...hey! Don't do that, Chihiro!"

"Wha?! What are you doing to Kyousuke, Chihiro? Didn't you promise not to eat him?!"

The female student clinging to Kyousuke's arm—the one that Bob and Renko were calling "Chihiro"—moved her mouth with intense concentration. "...*Nomnom*..." She had a small body and long black hair, and her blood-red eyes were narrowed in apparent joy as she chewed and sucked on Kyousuke's upper arm. "...Whoaaa. Dewishish. *Nomnom*. Mmmmmm."

"Uh, this girl is really... There's no helping it, I guess!" Bob, hurriedly crouching down, carefully pried the little girl—pried Chihiro—off of Kyousuke's arm, and scolded her with a bop on the head.

Renko, who slid smoothly down Bob's body and disembarked, also put her hands on Kyousuke's arm and scolded Chihiro, who sat looking at her enviously. "Chihiro! What happened to the promise you made me?! You promised you wouldn't eat Kyousuke until *after* I've killed him, didn't yooouuu?! You told me stiff rigor mortis meat was fine..."

—Hang on, what kind of promise was this? I never heard anything about this!

"I didn't even eat him...I just tasted. I controlled...myself!"

Looking Chihiro over as she sat staring at Renko with her cheeks puffed out, Kyousuke came to remember Chihiro clearly. She was one of the many girls who had made a romantic confession to him when the school year had begun three months ago. She was some kind of cannibal girl who had pushed him down and cried out, "I'll eat you...

We'll become one," and actually tried to devour him.

Faced with another unexpected person, Kyousuke's voice slipped out in surprise. "You're the one from that time—"

"...Yeah. First-year, Class B, Chihiro Andou. I'm fourteen. It's been a while, Kyousuke!" She grinned widely, showing off well-developed canine teeth.

"U-uh...sure has?" Kyousuke had begun backing away, rubbing at the tooth marks left on his arm. He looked toward Renko's gas mask. "Ohh...could it be, that she's also in your same squad?"

"Yep, you got it. Me, Bob, Chihiro, and—"

"Hee-hee-hee...I grow tired of waiting, Kyousuke Kamiya! I have an audience with you once again, at this very hour!"

At that moment, interrupting Renko's roll call, a theatrical voice filled the room.

When they looked, on the other side of the table stood a male student covering the right half of his face with his left arm, which was wrapped in black bandages. He wore a bold smile, and his whole body leaned slightly to the left.

"My name is Kuuga Makyouin! You should etch it into your very soul... It is the name of the person who will consign you to oblivion on the evening of the coming apocalypse! Hee-hee-hee...! My left arm Azrael is aching for you, Kyousuke Kamiya! It is saying, 'I want to present you with a requiem,' and 'I want to offer a tribute of red spider lilies that go by the name Despair'... Can you hear it?"

"...Uh, okay. I'll introduce you. This is Michirou Suzuki, first-year Class B! He doesn't seem to have any friends in our class, so I was glad I could get him to make friends with me. *Kksshh*."

The young man fixed his gaze on Renko, who had made this

announcement quite indifferently. “Quiet, you! Silence! Never by that name... It is no more than the name of the vessel into which my spirit was summoned when my soul manifested in this transient reality from the *netherworld!* The true name of my noble soul is Kuuga Mak—”

“...Michirou, hun? I understand that you’re happy to be able to tell all this to Kamiya, but if you don’t get it over with, I’m going to get mad. Our lunch time is limited, so hurry up and sit down so we can all relax and eat our meal.”

“...Oh, okay.”

At the threat from Bob, Kuuga Makyouin—or rather, Michirou—instantly gave up all pretensions of grandeur and sank into his seat. As he did, Eiri glanced in his direction, nearly sending him into a panic. “Eeek!! S-sorry!”

You’re too jittery, Kuuga Makyouin...

Crawling under the table to resurface next to Michirou, Chihiro tried to encourage him. “...Don’t worry about it.”

Renko sat next to Kyousuke. Next to Renko, Bob occupied two seats, and had resumed eating. Chowing down on her maggot risotto (salty porridge)—the first thing on the menu since they reached the House of Limbo—Bob started up a boisterous, friendly conversation.

“By the way, you’re Eiri...is that right? Your skin is so lovely, darling! And your makeup looks natural, so skillful. What foundation do you use? How about mascara?”

“.....Huh? Uh, umm—”

“Eee! Oh, your nails are so cuuute. Eiri dear, you are sooo fashionable!”

“Oh...a-am I? Not really...well...th-thanks.”

Sticking her spoon under the flour sack as she ate, Bob chattered on merrily. Initially confused by the discrepancy between Bob's bizarre appearance and her behavior, Eiri's prickly attitude gradually softened.

Watching the two of them discussing beauty and fashion, Renko laughed. "*Kksshh*. Yep yep, looks like lots of fun! We may be in separate squads, but I'm glad that during the Prison Camp we can all get along together!" She took out her black drinking tube and attached it to the right cheek of her gas mask.

Next to Renko, who had begun sucking up her risotto like a drink through the tube, Kyousuke nodded. "Yeah, you're right. Let's all get along! Your squad members all seem like great people, huh?"

"*Kksshh*. Don't they? This is the group that was out of place even in Class B, though, like the leftovers."

At Renko's words, Kyousuke smiled wryly. "I see." *It's probably precisely because you're so out of place in that weird class that we somehow make a good match*.

Kyousuke and the others within the Purgatorium Remedial Academy were still leading extremely strange, isolated existences—

X X X

[Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering]

Each squad will compete for the best time in reaching all of the designated points.

The checkpoints number seven in total.

They are: Gluttony, Lust, Envy, Greed, Wrath, Sloth, and Pride.

When a squad reaches a checkpoint with all members present, the Public Morals Committee member on duty will void one of the seven *P* stamps marked on the Deadly Sins Card held by the squad leader.

The *P* stands for “Peccati”—“sin” in Italian—and each stamp’s depiction represents one of the seven deadly sins.

Participants must reach the goal at the mountain’s summit with all seven Ps voided to clear this game.

Terrible condemnation awaits the squad with the worst completion time, so prepare yourselves.

Further, should you lose your Deadly Sins Card along the way—or if even one squad member goes missing—your squad will be immediately disqualified and subject to compulsory condemnation.

The slowest squad will be receiving the same condemnation as those who are disqualified.

Those are the basic rules. From this moment, you have twelve hours and thirty minutes.

Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering—START.

X X X

“‘Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering,’ huh…” Kyousuke muttered to himself, looking over the Deadly Sins Card that hung about his neck.

They had been handed white cards filled with multicolored stamps, been informed of the rules in the training plaza, and brought here. Currently, Kyousuke and the others stood at the foot of a steep mountain that towered over a forest not too far from the House of Limbo. Fifteen minutes had already passed since the game had begun, signaled by a high-pitched whistle from each of the Public Morals Committee members’ fixed positions.

“Oh dear, oh my, wh-wwwh-what’ll we do… Oh no.”

“What’ll we do? …Well, there’s nothing *to* do but go across, is there?”

Kyousuke and the others stood before a deep ravine. Peering down the cliffside, Maina's body trembled. The river running along the bottom of the canyon appeared to be an impossible distance away.

Across this ravine stretched a single rickety bridge that seemed as if it might snap any minute. It swayed and groaned ominously in the fierce wind over a span from which there quite clearly could be no rescue if one were to fall. Sloth, which Kyousuke and the others had chosen as their first goal, was across that bridge.

They had checked the surrounding area to be sure—there was no other path to the checkpoint. As Eiri had said, there was nothing to do but cross the bridge...

"It's okay, Maina! If it looks too hard, I can carry you."

"Eh?! Uh, um...well, see...I'm fine!" Despite what she had said, Maina certainly didn't seem fine, as she stared at the bridge, quaking.

"...Don't work yourself up too much, okay?" Kyousuke scratched the back of his head, preparing to offer Maina a lift on his shoulders.

"Hyeeeaaahhh! What an easy victory this iiiiiis! Gya-ha-ha!"

Wrapped in full-body bandages, a male student sporting a bright red Mohawk charged full speed at the bridge.

He was the final member of their group, and had previously been resting, as Kurumiya had been beating the hell out of him since first thing in the morning.

"Wait, idiot! What are you thinking, dashing out there by yourself?!"

"……?!"

As Eiri shouted an angry warning, Kyousuke's imagination conjured an image of his Mohawk-headed classmate bravely tackling the bridge, treading overenthusiastically on the scaffolding, and

falling headlong down to the ravine floor. Not to mention:

"If even one squad member goes missing, your squad will be immediately disqualified and subject to compulsory condemnation."

"Hey, Mohawk! Wait uuuuuuup!"

"Bwuh?!"

Kyousuke forcefully stopped Mohawk, who had tried to slip past them, with a lariat. The impact of Kyousuke's arm against his Adam's apple sent Mohawk sprawling in an impromptu somersault. He hit the ground hard and stopped moving.

"*Phew*... Man, that was close. You nearly died there!"

"...Isn't he dead?"

"H-he might be dead..."

Peering down at Mohawk, who lay twitching with his eyes rolled back, Eiri and Maina mumbled to each other.

"No, he's gotta be alive... It's Mohawk, after all."

"...You're right. He's alive... It is Mohawk, after all."

"Oh dearie me, but, but, of course... Yep, he's alive. It is Mr. Mohawk, after all."

"That's right, we only have to reach the checkpoint 'with all squad members present,' right? I don't see any problem with carrying him with us unconscious."

Nodding, Kyousuke lifted Mohawk onto his back with a grunt. ...*Heavy!* Crossing the bridge like this would be dangerous, but still much safer than if Mohawk were to wake up. *If we let him go, he's sure to raise hell*... "Well, then...what do you think, Maina? If you like, after I leave him on the other side, I can come back and carry you over."

“Uh…no, I’m fine! I’ll try my best!” She shook her head at Kyousuke’s considerate offer, clenching her fists tightly. Although she still looked anxious, perhaps Maina’s fears had been allayed by Mohawk’s reckless enthusiasm, for her trembling had somewhat steadied.

“If it gets too hard, just ask!” Kyousuke announced, and turned toward the bridge.

“…Okay. Well, let’s cross carefully.”

Kyousuke placed a foot on one weather-beaten, half-rotted log. With his left hand grasping the rope that acted as a handrail, and his right hand supporting Mohawk, Kyousuke began to move forward. Behind him followed Maina, and Eiri brought up the rear.

They advanced step by step across the loose scaffolding, trying to avoid the large gaps that yawned between rungs, each one big enough for their shoes to slip through sideways. The bridge swayed under their unsteady feet, chunks of loose bark falling to the distant ground below…

“Ah…eeeeeeeeek!!” At a sudden fierce gust of wind, Maina clung to the ropes, crouching in place. Large teardrops appeared in the corners of her tightly shut eyes.

“…Hey, are you really all right? I could also carry you if you want…,” Eiri offered anxiously. She hadn’t even bothered to grab hold of the rope, and was striding across the rickety bridge as though she were walking on solid ground, even occasionally letting a yawn slip out.

As composed as she was, it seemed that she could easily carry Maina on her back. Maina, however, would not hear of it.

“I’m fine, Eiri! I-I’ll c-cross…b-by m-myself…” Still gripping the side ropes with both hands, she stood unsteadily. “I-I alone must… drag my feet…by myself!” Pursing her lips, and trying to control her

body's trembling, she looked onward with determined eyes.

"Maina..."

"...Okay, I understand. Well, it's only a little bit further, so let's do our best."

Kyousuke was deeply moved by Maina's courage, and even Eiri smiled. Certain that she could continue, they turned again to face their goal.

"Hey, hey, heeey! That wouldn't be Mr. Kamiyaaa there, wooould it?"

On the opposite cliff stood a familiar young man, a beautiful boy with light brown hair, who was in the same class as Kyousuke and the others. It was Shinji Saotome.

"Huuuh? Oh, it really is him! What a surprise! Ha-ha-ha! You're laaaaate!!"

"Hee, hee-hee...skirts fluttering in the wind...showing panties, showing panties...Hee, hee-hee-hee!" Arata Oonogi, wearing dreadlocks and sunglasses, and Kagerou Usami, the small hunchback, stood beside him.

There was a girl with them as well. Clinging to Shinji's arm, she pointed a finger at Kyousuke and the others. "Kya-ha-ha! They're, like, totally screwed now, this is sooo funny! Ah-mazing! For real, though, they're, like, weirdly cute! Kya-ha-ha! No waaay. Like, seriously no way!"

"What's with her...? Was she in our class?" Kyousuke asked.

"...I wonder? It seems like someone that dumb would be more memorable, though."

"Oh dear! Wh-what should we do...? I can't understand what she's saying at all!"

It seemed somehow that this cackling girl was a classmate of theirs. With her garish makeup, bleached hair, and impressively poor vocabulary, she was obviously a ditzy airhead.

"Heh-heh. That's right. I agree. Hee-hee-hee... I can't understand you too well, though."

No way, don't tell me you can't understand her, either. Seriously, what the hell is her deal...?

Still pointing at Kyousuke and the others, who stood gaping in astonishment, the ditzy girl suddenly spat out some more words: "... Oh! I just got a super-great, totally awesome ideaaa." And the three boys gathered around her and began whispering about something.

Hugging her back as she snuggled against him, Shinji responded to the girl's gibberish as if he understood her perfectly. "...Yes... Yes, good... Oh, definitely!" Shinji nodded several times before clearing his throat dramatically, a self-satisfied grin plastered across his face.

"Okay, listen up, everyone! I cannot bring myself to stand silently by and watch as all of you desperately cross this bridge in spite of your fears... That's my view. As poor as our abilities are, I want us to render whatever 'assistance' we can offer, to the best of our abilities!"



* * *

After the four of them had all bowed stiffly in unison, Shinji and his lackeys squatted low to the ground and began to gather something up. *"Assistance"? ...What are they trying to start here?* Before long, Shinji and the others stood spread out in a line, holding piles of pebbles in their arms.

"...Wha?! No way, they're—"

"Go for it, go for it, go for it, go for iiiiiiiiiiiittt!!"

Aiming at Kyousuke and the others near the middle of the bridge, they began throwing pebbles, which were plentiful underfoot, as quickly as they could get their hands on them. To make things worse, they all had good aim.

Kyousuke let go of the ropes with a shout of alarm and turned, interposing Mohawk between his back and the rain of pebbles.

Maina shrieked and huddled down again.

"Tch... Really, how irritating!" Eiri scolded as she moved gracefully across the logs, dodging the flying rocks. "Didn't I tell you not to get involved with us again?!"

Shinji made a repugnant face, like he really wanted to hit her. "I'm not laying a hand on yooouu! I'm just throwing stooones! Heh-heh..." He hurled insults alongside his pebbles like a child.

Eiri's eyes were filled with murderous intent, the vein on her forehead bulging with anger. "Oh, I see... You want me to butcher you after all, is that it?" Glaring at Shinji, who was still roaring with laughter, she pulled into a tight crouch. The nails that decorated the tips of her fingers glittered as they caught the sun's rays. "...If that's the case, then I'll give you just what you wish for."

As she spit the words, Eiri kicked off the planks, instantly

accelerating. Dashing nimbly across the remainder of the rickety bridge, she clearly aimed to attack at the end of her charge.

"You there, cease immediately!"

Behind Shinji and his group, a huge shadow leaped out of the depths of the dense forest, smashing Dreadlocks on the back of the head, hard. "Bwuh?!" Oonogi's cackling halted with a grunt as his face sunk into the ground, an instant KO.

Usami, who had turned his head at the interruption, let out a yelp. "Gyah!!"

A small shadow sprang at him and pushed him down to the ground. From that position, the shadow bit him. "*Nom!*"

"Gyeeeaaaaaahhh!!"

Usami let out an earsplitting scream. The midnight menace didn't let go at all. Its jaws were latched on to the nape of his neck, completely pinning him down.

"What?! Who the hell're these guys? Seriously uncool. You're totally pissing me off—ooph!!" A sharp uppercut connected with the frantic girl's chin, sending her sprawling.

Standing over her triumphantly, right arm hoisted in the air, was someone in a black gas mask. And finally—

"Hee-hee-hee...! Bad form, putting on a tough front. I'm sorry to say that from now on the stage is reserved for the main characters. And so we implore you to make your exit. ...Hm, no, we're not going to take your lives. Your insignificant souls cannot possibly gratify the tongue of the One-Winged Angel of Death, so we'll leave you... You may prostrate yourselves and beg for forgiveness! Hee-hee-hee...ha-ha-ha...haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Loud laughter echoed off the trees as Shinji turned. "Ah, you're..."

He was surprised. “Aren’t you Michirou from Class B? Are you still doing that act?” Shinji shrugged his shoulders, chiding.

Carried away by the speech of his alter ego, Kuuga Makyouin, Michirou’s face was now tainted with shame and resentment. “… What did you say, you bastard? Are you mocking me? Hee-hee-hee… fine, then. I’ll carve you up before you know what happened. I’ll engrave stigmata by the name of trauma onto your stunted soul!”

“Ah, sure, sure. If there’s anything there to carve up, then carve away. Come on now!”

“……Hey.”

Tapped lightly on the shoulder, Shinji turned around, looking annoyed. “Yes? What is it? Right now I’m busy with Mr. Michirou—”

“Do you really want to die that badly?”

“Bwah!!”

Shinji turned just as a high-powered kick from Eiri collided with his face. Sent flying by the force of the blow, he smashed into one of the bridge posts and crumpled.

“…Hmph. You can just die, you perverted asshole.”

“Striped panties…is it? Hee-hee-hee…I see, not bad—”

“You can die, too!”

“Gwaaaaaahhh!!”

Michirou, sent flying by a follow-up kick, landed on top of Shinji and promptly passed out.

Bob, who had taken down Oonogi, smiled bitterly. “Oh my…” She approached Eiri, who stood looking indignant. “That Michirou was a secret pervert all along, hmmm? Tee-hee-hee.”

"...Yuck. As I thought, Kyousuke's flesh is...best." Chihiro, who had been chewing on Usami, wiped her red-stained mouth and joined Bob and Eiri. Usami lay stretched out on the ground, bleeding from the neck.

Leaping over his body with an "oof," Renko, who had taken down the ditzy girl, approached the bridge, waving her hands energetically. "Heeey, Kyousukeee! Mainaaa! Is everyone okay? *Kksshh*."

Recognizing the voice, Kyousuke and Maina felt immediately exhausted. "Yeah, we're fine. Thanks to you... We're coming over there now, so wait for us." Quickening their pace, they hustled across the remaining half of the bridge.

X X X

"...Okay! That's the first checkpoint clear."

Kyousuke and the others nodded in satisfaction as they checked their card, on which one of the seven stamps—in the shape of a deformed bear—had been crossed out.

According to the Public Morals Committee member on duty at the checkpoint, the bear symbolized the sin of sloth, and its opposing virtue was courage. By courageously crossing the dangerous bridge, they had purified themselves of sloth, and the Peccati stamp representing the sin had been canceled out. Or so they had been told.

Besides the bear, each card bore the seal of a snake, fox, wolf, goat, and lion, and as the teams reached each checkpoint, each corresponding stamp would be canceled out.

"Are there really six left...? That last one took so long..."

"I know...*kksshh*. Hey, if we all work together, it'll be an easy victory!" Renko flashed the rock-and-roll sign at Kyousuke, who was walking next to her.

Following behind them, Bob smiled and said, "Tee-hee-hee, you're

right, an easy victory!"

Maina, who was riding on Bob's shoulders, clapped her hands together. "Things are looking good, everyone!"

Behind them, Eiri leafed through the red rules booklet. "...Hm. I've reviewed the rules printed in the guidebook, and nowhere is it written that we can't collaborate with other squads. It also doesn't say that we can't interfere with other squads."

I see. That was how Kyousuke and his group had been allowed to join forces with Renko's team.

At Eiri's words, Michirou nodded assent and smiled wickedly. "Hee-hee-hee... Be that as it may, that was an amusing blunder. Showing contempt for their opponents, they were planning to obstruct our way...but they met the opposite fate! Certainly that never occurred to them. Already now, our triumph is as good as assured! We can win this, we can! Hee-hee-hee...mua-ha-ha...haaa-ha—!"

"Shut up."

"……S-sorry."

"Well, it certainly would be good if we won. I mean, it would be good if we didn't lose. Since only the lowest-ranked group is knocked out...if we can completely crush one squad, then we should have plenty of leeway without worrying about the time." Returning the closed guidebook to her rucksack, Eiri let out a yawn.

Meanwhile Michirou, dispirited, shrank under Eiri's glare. He had been talking about Shinji's group...

When Kyousuke and the others had crossed back over the bridge on their way out from the checkpoint, the four of them had just started regaining consciousness, so Renko had taken it upon herself to beat them down again.

Her relentless attacks had been cold-blooded and demonically

brutal. Shinji's group were getting their just desserts for what they had done, so Kyousuke and the others turned a blind eye to the carnage.

We don't want to come in last and get condemned, after all.

"But be on your guard... If even one of us dies, we're out—that's how it goes... Oh, but if you die, Kyousuke, I'll eat you up! I won't leave even one bone behind...completely gone!" Chihiro, who had moved underfoot without anyone noticing, snickered and bared her canine teeth.

"...O-oh." Kyousuke shuddered, to which Renko quickly interceded:

"Don't worry, Kyousuke's not going to die! Because I will absolutely not allow him to be killed! I promised you, didn't I, Kyousuke? That I would get your heart and your life... I won't let anyone or anything else snatch it away!" She crossed her arms tight. Through the cardigan that she wore over her blouse, soft things were perceptible...

"O-oh...thank you. That's reassuring. Ha-ha-ha..." Kyousuke had begun to sweat profusely.

Eiri spoke loudly enough to reach Kyousuke through his grinning haze. "...Tch. Though it might be better if you died."

"Huh?! P-please don't kill me!"

"Not you."

Michirou dived for cover, and Eiri let out a sigh, disgusted with him.

A large hand came down on her shoulder. "You're having a hard time, too, huh, Eiri dear...?" Bob offered. "I understand your feelings, though, because long ago I also had those same thoughts. Now I am cheering on my friend—acting as number one supporter of Renko's love—but I'd like to support you, too. If you have anything you want to talk about, you can tell me anytime, okay?"

"……Wha? Ah-hah…what are you saying? I don't understand you at all."

"Tee-hee-hee. It's all right, I understand everything."

"That's right! Do your best, Eiri! Even though you don't have boobs!"

"……"

Bob chuckled suggestively, and Maina cheered enthusiastically. Eiri, whose expression was sullen, clenched her fists and kept silent. Michirou scooted away again…keeping his distance.

"…What are they all talking about?"

"Hm, I wonder? *Kksshh*. It looks like everybody's having fun together, so let's have our own conversation, shall we? …Kyousuke, how many children do you want?"

"What the hell're you on about all of a sudden?!" He had involuntarily imagined Renko holding a baby. The baby, wrapped in a clean towel, was—wearing a black gas mask. "Oh nooo, you shouldn't have a gas mask when you're just born!"

"…What're *you* on about?"

Chatting and laughing, the group headed for the next checkpoint.

Even Mohawk, still asleep on Kyousuke's back, muttered dreamily:

"Hyea-haa…hit me harder, Kurumiya sweetieee…"

X X X

"Myyy, that was interesting wasn't it? The Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering, I mean. It was really thrilling! Isn't it great that we were able to clear it safely? *Kksshh*." Stretching, Renko cheerfully waved her Deadly Sins Card. The seven stamps on the

white piece of paper had each been crossed out with an *X*.

About three hours had passed since the expedition had begun—Kyousuke's and Renko's two squads together had conquered each checkpoint admirably. Now, they were heading toward the goal point summit.

"Yeah, that's right...it turned out well. We almost died several times, but..." Kyousuke wiped the sweat from his forehead.

The path leading to each checkpoint had been incredibly challenging. They had fumbled their way through a pitch-black limestone cave, scaled a sheer cliff with no lifelines, been hunted by a sixty-five-foot anaconda, and swum across a bottomless swamp inhabited by countless leeches—all in all, it had been an extremely dangerous journey.

That not one of them had fallen victim to the perils was nearly a miracle. Kyousuke and the others hiking up the mountain path were thoroughly worn out—the only one of them with any energy left was Renko. Mohawk, who had played an important dual role as both shield and human sacrifice, was on the verge of death, his body covered in cuts and bruises. He hung limply from Kyousuke's back, eyes rolled back in his head.

"Phew, I'm tired...I'm ridiculously tired. I want to get back and rest soon..."

"Whatever happened to character building?"

"...Hee-hee-hee. My name is Kuuga Makyouin. Lucifer, who, along with the One-Winged Angel of Death, was cast out from heaven into hell by the gods who fear excessively mighty magical powers..." The haggard Michirou, apparently taking up the flag of Kuuga once again, had recovered enough energy to strike a dramatic pose.

Maina had come down from her shoulder ride, and was now walking on her own two feet. "Oh dearie me...! W-we're gonna *make* it!" she announced as she rewound Michirou's bandages where they

had come undone.

Bob smiled underneath her flour sack. "...Goodness gracious."

"Kyousuke! I can see it! Look, there's some meat standing over there."

"It's not meat, it's a person—oh, right. Is that Mr. Busujima?"

Chihiro pointed ahead, to a hanging placard with "GOAL" written on it. Underneath it, an unappealing man in a shabby suit—Kirito Busujima, the homeroom teacher for first-year Class B—stood idle.

When he realized that Kyousuke and the others were approaching, Busujima forced a smile onto his bored-looking face. "Ah, you finally made it! *You are the last two squads!*"

"What...did you say?"

He had said something that they couldn't ignore. Everyone stopped in their tracks.

...The last squads? He couldn't mean...us? No, that's impossible. Sure, we took our time a little bit along the way, but the lowest-ranked group has to be Shinji's. We made sure of it...

"...Hm? Could I be mistaken? Let's see... In total there were eight squads, two squads from Class B were disqualified due to injuries to a squad member—one squad from Class A lost their Deadly Sins Card and was disqualified... No, it all adds up. Your two squads are the only ones left. Hurry!" Busujima spoke casually, but it was the student lurking behind him who caught their eyes.

Shinji, looking completely drained of all life, leered at them bitterly. "You really did a number on us, huh... When we were beat down by you all, we unfortunately lost our Deadly Sins Card. Thanks to you, we were forcibly disqualified... See what you've done!"

That moment, the rules of the Seven Deadly Sins Atonement

Orienteering exercise floated up in the minds of Kyousuke and the others: *Should you lose your Deadly Sins Card along the way—or if even one squad member goes missing—your squad will be immediately disqualified and subject to compulsory condemnation.* And—

The squad with the worst completion time excepting those squads who are disqualified *will also receive the same condemnation.*

"……!"

Suddenly, an enormous figure moved at the edge of Kyousuke's vision. The ground shook as the figure stepped forward—

Wham!

The figure slammed downward with a meaty fist.

"Gah?!" Kyousuke, with the unconscious Mohawk still tied to his back, took a sudden blow to his human shield and was thrown forward. After flying through the air for several yards, he landed on Mohawak. "Ugh!!"

Kyousuke rolled to minimize the impact of the landing and rose back up in the next breath—

"…Wha?!"

"Arrgghhh!!"

Again, he took the full force of a heavy blow, this time to the front. Fresh blood danced through the air, and his bones were crushed.

"……Please don't think poorly of me!" the enormous figure's gravelly voice pleaded as she followed through with her right fist. Underneath the flour sack, round, deep-set eyes stared at Kyousuke.

"Bob… Y-you…?!" Kyousuke opened his eyes wide in surprise. Mohawk, still unconscious and acting as a human shield, had caught

the third impact of Bob's manly fist, and was foaming at the mouth.

From Bob's eyes, which were locked on Kyousuke, tears poured freely. "Yesterday's friends are today's enemies. I'm sorry, I don't want my squad members to be condemned."

"......?!"

Having come to their senses, everyone standing there realized what they had to do: To avoid coming in last, to escape condemnation, only one group could remain.

"So, for the sake of my group members, *I will smash all of you.*"

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!" Letting out a warcry, Michirou leaped upon Eiri, who happened to be closest to him.

"...Tch!!" The girl avoided him nimbly, and the two of them passed without touching. Eiri snapped into a midheight kick by way of response.

Taking this blow to the stomach, Michirou collapsed on the spot. In the very next instant, however, his eyes snapped open. "I got iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiittt!"

"Huh?! Wait...kyaaaaaaaaaahhh!!"

Michirou had grasped Eiri's foot in both hands and was trying to force her down. Overwhelmed, Eiri shook as she resisted. But, unable to correct her stance, she was soon twisted to the ground.

"Eiri?! Ohhhhhhh deaaaaaar—meagh!!"

Chihiro had latched on to Maina's calf with a "*Nom!*" as she tried to rush over to Eiri. The unexpected bite threw Maina off balance.

"Whoooooaaaaaa!!" Her left leg captured, Maina tumbled end over end, with Chihiro still attached, in an energetic and magnificent somersault.

“Aaaauugghh!!”

Following through as though finishing an ax kick, Maina slammed her leg into the ground. Chihiro, who was still clinging to her, was crushed between Maina’s foot and the hard dirt.

“Wha…Chi-Chihiro?! That just now, what the—”

“Please don’t think badly of me!”

Bob, astonished by Maina’s clumsiness, offered Kyousuke an opening. Once he saw it, he couldn’t turn a blind eye to it. Tossing aside Mohawk, who was on the verge of death anyway, Kyousuke focused on the enormous body before his eyes; into the center of it, he slammed a full-force gazelle punch. His fist struck home on the beefy body protected by thick fat.

“Eeeaagh!!”

Bob’s enormous shape went flying, kicking up a cloud of dust as it bounded along the ground, until finally it came to a stop at Renko’s feet. Renko, meanwhile, stood dumbfounded as her teammate bled from beneath her flour sack.

“Bob?!” Renko shouted, embracing her upper body. “Are you alive?! Bob! Booooooobbb?!”

“……R-Renko.”

“Bob! Th-thank goodness…you’re alive—”

“Run.”

“Huh?”

“Run, I said! Don’t waste my…everyone’s sacrifice…don’t…”

“……?!”

Renko shook with a start.

Immediately, Eiri's strained voice came through: "What are you daydreaming about, Kyousuke?! You run, too! Quickly! Get the Deadly Sins Card to the goal before Renko does—Wha?! Wait...wh-where are you touching?! You pervert! S-stop... If you don't cut that out, I'll murder you. Ahh!" Even with blood streaming from his nose, Michirou eagerly grabbed on to Eiri's leg and wouldn't let go while she urged Kyousuke onward with a beet red face.

"Michirou, you..."

You're in such an enviable position! Switch with me!

As Kyousuke was making this mental demand, a black gas mask dashed past him. Hanging from Renko's neck was a Deadly Sins Card. While Kyousuke had been distracted by Michirou's courageous flare, Renko had left Bob and taken off running.

Coming back to his senses, Kyousuke rushed after her. "Wait for me, Renkooooooooo!"

"No way! I don't want to be condemned! *Kksshh! Ka-kksshh!*"

The two of them sprinted desperately for the finish line, where Busujima was waiting. They ran madly, scrambling to be first to reach the summit that was still dozens of yards away. "Oh, incredible. Isn't this a majorly close contest... Do your best, both of you! If you lose, fear and condemnation await yoouuu! Con-dem-na-tion! Whoever touches my hand first, even by a second, is the winner. Come on, just a little further! Puuuuuushhh!" Having stepped away from the placard, Busujima was holding his hand out across the finish line.

Whoever reached that hand first would be the winner—Kyousuke and Renko were neck and neck, each trying to knock the other down, crashing against each other at full speed.

"Urrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaahhh! You're gonna looooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

The two roared in unison from the bottom of their guts.

The goal point—Busujima's outstretched hand—drew near. Bob, Eiri, Michirou, Maina, Chihiro—they all held their breath, watching attentively for the outcome of the contest.

Kyousuke and Renko. The hands of the two squad captains, from whose necks hung the Deadly Sins Cards, nearly simultaneously stretched out toward Busujima's open palm…

Under the summer sky, the sound of a high-pitched whistle echoed through the forest, signaling the end of the matchup.

At 3:45 PM, the Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering finished peacefully.

X X X

"…And that's how it is, yes. Everyone, you worked very hard. I really believe that you tried your best! I thought at least one of you would wind up dead, but although there were many casualties, everyone returned alive. My goodness, you did so well!"

With a fresh smile that did not match his haggard face, Busujima clapped his hands.

Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering was over, and Kyousuke and the other students had gathered on the training plaza. The lone clapping of one person gradually abated—then abruptly ceased.

Busujima, the smile gone from his face, looked gloomy. "… However, unfortunately, in this absurdly merciless world, it is not possible for us to be evaluated solely on doing our best. Great efforts go unrewarded; we are betrayed by our hopes, the fruits of our repeated labors, and any happiness we manage to capture… And on any given day, out of nowhere, a person's life might be snatched away by murderers such as yourselves. It's that kind of world. How

cruel!"

"....."

Sitting before Busujima, who continued voicing his laments, were a number of students, their knees tucked under them on the bare dirt. One, two, three, four...in total there were fourteen students. Excepting those bearing serious injuries and the ones who had fallen along the way, these were the students in squads that had been disqualified and the one with the worst completion time.

Standing in front of them, looking down at the girls especially, Busujima droned on. Yet one part of his back, covered by his worn-out suit, suddenly *swelled up.*

"...Eeek!!" Surrounding the victims who were about to be condemned were student observers. A boy from Class B, who was on the side where he could see Busujima's back, let slip a frightened, high-pitched shriek.

A strange bulge had emerged from Busujima's back. It was about the size of a handball and was squirming restlessly. Then, it divided into two and slowly began to travel. From his back to the tops of his shoulders...from his shoulders down his arms...

Waiting in the corner of the training grounds, Kurumiya watched with a grin.

"Certainly, you all tried very hard. I do appreciate your efforts. I am a gentle man after all. But regrettably, the world is a cruel place... Particularly, the world that you all are living in now is especially so. That is what I am going to teach you. Effort with no results is worthless; completely meaningless, as it does not produce outcomes. In other words, losers like you bastards—*are lower than scum in this world.*"

Busujima turned the somber atmosphere on its head. Both of his sleeves now dangled loosely, and from the inside of each one fell a mass: one bluish purple, one yellow.

Thud.

Wriggling on the ground were two snakes. They were about the same thickness as Kurumiya's iron pipes, and their bodies were twice as long. Geometric patterns ran over their brightly colored scales like tattoos.

"Well, then, everyone. In accordance with the schedule in your guidebooks, following the Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering, let's move on to the 'public atonement' portion for the condemned, shall we? Student observers, you should not view this as if it is happening to someone else. You are next! For if you are careless, they will come gobble you up!"

Busujima's transformation affected more than just his demeanor, and it spread through his whole body. On his back, his shoulders, his upper arms, his forearms—countless bulges of various sizes appeared.

They moved over his waist, his rear, his thighs, his ankles, all squirming relentlessly. Crawling around underneath his suit, they converged at the exits and rushed out into the world. Busujima's slimy eyes calculated their targets.

Turning to face the students—who were panicking, shaking, crying, screaming, and trying to run away before his eyes—he pronounced, "...Well, then, everyone. I have kept you waiting far too long." He smiled coldly.

"Starting now, the public disciplining of the condemned... Let the 'Venom Opera' begin!"

He let loose his swarm of domesticated deadly weapons, and sent them forth.

From his suit collar, from the sleeves of his shirt, from the hems of his pants—all at once came snakes, frogs, lizards, leeches, centipedes, spiders, bees, caterpillars—

“Wha…eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeekkk!!”

In waves, the swarm rushed over the students like an avalanche. The squirming creatures all sported sharp fangs, claws, and stingers that pierced and scratched at every centimeter of exposed flesh.

“……?!”

The students on the receiving end of this assault underwent an infinite variety of transformations: Those bitten by snakes fell down on the spot holding their throats, and began convulsing violently. The bodies of those caught by lizards stiffened up like stones, and became unable to move. Those stung by bees let out earsplitting shrieks and writhed about in agony.

The pandemonium was like a portrait of hell. The vermin flitted about the training grounds while the students screamed and ran around trying to escape—only to thrust themselves into the mass of spectators, sending the whole area into an uproar.

Watching this terrible spectacle in evident amusement was Kurumiya. “Hee-hee-hee… The Venom Opera—Kirito Busujima uses venomous animals. He keeps countless numbers of toxic animals concealed all over his body, and employs his perfectly trained horde with complete mastery… The effects of their blended venoms, prepared by Busujima himself, are delightfully varied. Neurotoxins, paralytic agents, hemorrhagins, sleeping poisons, laughing poisons and aphrodisiacs, poisons that make you unable to stop hiccupping, even poisons that make you speak archaically—he even has ridiculous things like that. By injecting several different types of poison into his targets, he blends the toxins inside their body, and is able to induce even more transfigurations… Hee-hee-hee. At a glance, he seems like a boring, awful man, but in truth, he’s even more of a sadist than me, that bastard! His own poisons—he delights in forcing transformation on his prey, turning them into props for his dramas; he derives utmost pleasure from it…as both director and audience.”

As Kurumiya calmly explained the situation, the students were

being overwhelmed, their suffering continuing. In the center of the training plaza, where students and animals were jumbled together, Shinji screamed, “Somebody...somebody, help—*hic*. Please help—*hic*. P-prithee helpeth meeeeeeeee—*hic!*”—all while cradling the limp body of the ditzy girl in his arms. He was stung by a bee on the back of the neck, and instantly grabbed his throat and fainted in agony.

“...Hm. My, can such things happen? Well, even if they get too carried away and an unexpected chain reaction occurs, that’s just how it goes. I shall show forgiveness at this point. Depending on the poison, if you don’t inject the antidote promptly, you will actually die —uh, huh? Oh myyy!” Looking around the grounds, which had fallen silent, Busujima nodded. His blank, normally unchanging eyes twinkled. Drawing his gaze, which was tinted with surprise and curiosity, was—

“Only one child showing no signs of poisoning, hm... Oh, I see. Regular poisons have nearly no effect on you! Your immunity is too strong. The weak poisons that I use for discipline need to be stronger to work on you. Well, well, what’s to be done with you?”

“.....*Kksshh*.”

Though surrounded by vermin, one female student remained seated on the ground, maintaining her posture. The girl wearing the black gas mask, who had been defeated by Kyousuke at the last second, and the leader of the squad with the worst completion time—it was Renko.

“I’m sorry...I’m sorry, everyone... If only I weren’t so worthless...*sob*.” In front of the repenting Renko lay the bodies of her tragic squad mates. Beset by a swarm of mosquitoes, scratching furiously at his skin and muttering, “Itchy, itchy, itchy, itchy, it’s so itchyyy!” was Michirou. Paralyzed faceup, not moving in the slightest, and with a huge lizard on her face, was Chihiro. Finally, flopping about like a fish and shaking the very ground with her convulsions was Bob.

Busujima took a few steps toward Renko, who sat trembling as she stared at the bodies of her squad mates. Gas mask hanging down in shame, she mumbled frailly, “I can’t believe it. My breasts got in the way. They were shaking, so it was hard to run. It hurt; they’re heavy... If only my boobs weren’t so big... If only they were tiny like Eiri’s! I would have won, one hundred percent guaranteed. I would have won! *Kksshh*...”

Yes: What had decided the outcome of the contest had been Renko’s enormous breasts.

Behind Kyousuke, who stood quietly viewing the public discipline, Eiri sneered. “...Serves you right.”

Looking down on Renko, who was staring dejectedly at her own chest, Busujima stroked his unshaven chin. “...My goodness, how pitiful. But you don’t have to feel that sad about it, do you? Enormous breasts are wonderful—they’re priceless. There you have the dreams of men, full of romance! So please, cheer up. And please provide energy to the lower halves of men’s bodies with your fantastic melons—okay?”

Okay? You can’t say that!

“...What the hell is with that guy? He should just die.”

“...I should discipline *him* instead.”

Eiri and Kurumiya, the two with tiny chests, seethed with anger.

“Well, since that’s how it is, let me ask one thing of you, my friend.”

From Busujima’s right sleeve (while he looked down at Renko’s chest), a new animal peeked out. It was a snake with electric-pink scales and a heart-shaped violet pattern. Holding this snake, which had slithered down his wrist and appeared at his fingertips, Busujima approached Renko.

Likely owing to an instinctive fear, Renko screamed and fell

backward. “M-Mr. B-Busujima…wh-wwwwh-what is that?!”

“A Pink Killer—his name’s Loverboy.”

“L-loverboy?!”

“Yes. He’s my dear friend. You can tell by the body coloration that he’s a male. Since my partial-strength poisons don’t seem to have any effect on you, I’ve decided to try this exceptionally strong—and yet not deadly—venom. I think it’s perfect for you in your present state.”

“M-Mr. B-Busujima…wh-what kind of poison is it…?”

“I wonder… Seeing is believing. Don’t think about it, feel it—you’ll understand as you try it out with your own body, yes. I’ll let you feel it fully!”

“Ah…”

He held the venomous snake—Loverboy—out toward the retreating girl. It reared its heart-shaped head back and then, a moment later, sprang out to strike at her, a full-force attack.

“Ah…aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!”

Renko’s scream roared through the training plaza.

And so the curtain came down on this Venom Opera.

X X X

“_____”

The House of Limbo, in the cafeteria. As at lunch, Kyousuke and the others were gathered together by squad, eating a meal.

In the somber, wake-like atmosphere, all of them carried on eating their “Satanic Swine Barbeque.”

"...Come on, cheer up." Unable to stand the gloom, Kyousuke tried to get a response out of Renko. His classmate sat across from him, facedown on the table, her gas mask hidden from sight.

Draped in a thin cardigan, her slender shoulders twitched occasionally, and groaning could be heard. Her masked face was hidden under her folded arms. "*Sob*...I can't believe I had to suffer through something so awful...! Waaahhh! I'm so embarrassed. How can I ever show my face in public again...? *Kksshh...ka-kksshh*."

"Well, you didn't really show it in the first place. But what can I say...I mean...d-don't worry about it?" Kyousuke was disarmed by her voice, which sounded weaker than he'd ever heard.

Even the usually snappy Eiri spoke uncomfortably. "Whining and moaning...pull it together! The way you're acting, you're making this horrible food taste even worse."

Maina, sitting next to Renko, stroked the gas mask–wearing girl's head silently.

Renko's other squad mates—Bob, Chihiro, and Michirou—were resting in the infirmary. Most of the other students who had been on the receiving end of Busujima's "public discipline" were absent. Their conditions didn't seem to be serious, but after being injected with antidotes to Busujima's poison cocktails, they needed time to rest and recover. With fewer students, the cafeteria was much quieter than normal, and Kyousuke and the others took the opportunity to search for the words to comfort Renko.

"Begging your pardon! Please excuse me as I take this seat."

A gentle voice, out of place in the gloomy atmosphere, interrupted the silence.

A young lady, accompanied by the sweet aroma of honey, had taken the seat next to Kyousuke. When he turned his head in confusion, he saw a bright, smiling face.

“How do you do, Mr. Kamiya—and his bunch of merry friends! Nice to meet you all. I am Saki Shamaya of the third-year Class A, chair of the Public Morals Committee. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

Eiri raised her eyebrows. “…Merry friends?”

Maina nervously returned the greeting. “Ah…a p-pleasure!”

Renko lifted her gas mask. “…Hm?”

“First of all, everyone…you worked very hard on the Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering. I know that it was quite an intense exercise, so I’m glad that you all returned unharmed.” Placing a hand on her chest, Shamaya breathed a sigh of relief.

Plated in front of her, still sizzling from the skillet, was a thick T-bone steak. There was no comparing it to the grilled “meat” that Kyousuke and the others were choking down; it even smelled luxurious. This was just another example of the disparity in social standing that existed between the Public Morals Committee and ordinary students.

As she cut into the perfectly cooked beef using an ornate silver fork and knife, Shamaya continued speaking in her refined accent. Maina, who was holding a thin strip of pork between her plastic chopsticks, gulped. “…W-wow, that looks delicious.”

“Among other things, that last one-on-one fight for the finish… That made my heart leap! There was no way to predict which one of you would lose and be condemned… It was so thrilling and tense! Thank you for allowing me to see that incredible contest!”

“…D-don’t mention it.”

It may have been interesting to watch from a third-person perspective, but for those involved it had been a desperate, painful struggle. No one seemed to know quite how to react to her enthusiastic tone. Kyousuke and his group, who had won, were fine hearing about it. The problem was—

"Is that so? Was it interesting? I'm so glad...*kksshh!*"

—Renko was sitting right there. Renko, who had, just a little while ago, suffered through miserable torment because of that contest. Her muffled groans sounded uncharacteristically sullen. However...

"Oh-ho-ho, yes, it really was wonderful! Especially right after the contest was settled, when you crumpled down to the ground, I could see your glittering tears. Despite the fact that you were wearing a gas mask, I could see them clearly! I myself began to tear up in sympathy... 'How pathetic,' I thought! The breasts which you had seemed so proud of just this morning at the stream bank—to think that, on the very same day, they would bring about such a tragedy! How cruel, how pitiful, how laughable... From the bottom of my heart, I felt sympathy for you. I felt so bad... Oh, you truly are pitiable!" Shamaya blotted at the tears that had welled up in the corners of her eyes with a white lace handkerchief.

Her words couldn't be interpreted as simple sarcasm, but her phrasing somehow incorporated a nuance of ridicule. Was it spontaneous? Or was it on purpose...?

There was a *click* sound from around the temple of the gas mask.

Shamaya did not notice. Dabbing at her cheeks, she continued speaking: "Oh, you must excuse me... However, you all should know that the difficulties, hardships, and disgraces that you have undergone are leading the way toward a shining future. Your stagnant souls, and warped natures, and rotten morals...we shall cleanse them, purify them. In order to complete your splendid rehabilitation, the teachers will crack the whip. It's the whip of love! ...So please cheer up, Miss Gas Mask. Your filthy soul is one step closer to purification, in equal proportion to the pain you've suffered. That's how I think about it. ... Come now, wipe those tears! Raise your head, puff up your chest and look ahead, then take a step forward! Walk down the shining road that connects you to your newly rehabilitated future!"

"Yep, she can die."

"...You said it, she can die all right."

Renko and Eiri spit out their retorts in sync.

"Wha...?" Shamaya—with her hands pressed together as if in prayer, looking off into the air with glittering eyes—gasped in bewilderment. She bit her lip hard. "I see, this is... You two seem to be quite seriously ill. Perhaps Mr. Kamiya is acting as a negative influence... Your minds are seriously twisted."

"Huh? My fault?"

No way, I was just sitting here quietly and I got pulled into it... Shamaya on his left, Eiri on his right, Renko in front of him. It all left Kyousuke in the middle while tension filled the air between the three young women.

What is this, a bed of nails...?

"Waaahhh..." Next to Renko, Maina had curled herself into a tight ball.

"Our minds are 'twisted,' huh...? Aren't you the one whose mind is *twisted*, saying such a thing? One person's fault is another person's lesson, so how about rehabilitating your own mind first?"

At Renko's provocation, Shamaya's eyebrows twitched. "...My mind is *twisted*? It is decidedly no such thing! After all, I am a Public Morals Committee member. Hand selected and approved by the teachers as an elite student—a representative of other elites! If by any chance my mind were to bear some sinful stain, that would be a stain on the whole Public Morals Committee. Why, it would be a stain on the teachers as well! Such a thing cannot be! Therefore, I must at all times have an affectionate heart and a mind that is as pure as the Virgin Mary, reacting to everything with tolerance and acceptance..."

"Stuuupid, stuuupid! Shamaya, you dumb bunny! Stuuupid, stuuupid! Nyyyah!"

“Yes, I react with tolerance and accept—Who are you calling a dumb bunny?!” Shamaya snapped at Renko, who had been hurling the childish insults.

Renko laughed triumphantly. “*Kksshh!* Whoa whoa whoa! Wasn’t it ‘I must at all times have an affectionate heart (ha!) and a mind that is as pure as the Virgin Mary (ha!), reacting to everything with tolerance (ha!) and accepting all things (ha!),’ Shamaya sweetie?”

“...Sweetie? Oh, oh-ho-ho... Please address your upperclassmen appropriately! And I’ll thank you to cease that poor mimicry.”

“My goodness, I beg your pardon! Heavens, I just got caught up in the moment. I’ll thank you to forgive me, Miss Shamaya sweetie! Oh-ho-*kksshh!*”

“_____”

All expression vanished from Shamaya’s face as she stared at Renko.

Eiri snickered.

“Oh deaaaar, don’t laugh, Eiri! Don’t—”

“Yes, Miss Eiri. No matter how much of a noble (ha!) elite student (ha!) who must at all times have an affectionate heart (ha!) and a mind that is as pure as the Virgin Mary (ha!), reacting to everything with tolerance (ha!) and accepting all things (ha!) dear sweet Miss Shamaya may be, there is a limit! I’m going to become cross any time now! Extremely, absurdly huffy, I say.”

“Huff?! Huff...puff...”

“_____”

Even Maina was holding back laughter as Renko continued her incorrigible farce.

The light went out of Shamaya's eyes as she watched everyone. Making fists around her knife and fork...

"That's enough, you guys!!" Kyousuke interjected. "Making fun of your elders—"

"Oh...oh-ho...oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Shamaya, who had hung her head when Kyousuke scolded them, began to shake and tremble, and when she lifted her face, she wore a wide smile. It was a top-notch smile, the likes of which could unquestionably set the minds of those who saw it at ease.

"...Oh-ho-ho! You ladies are quite amusing! A bit too amusing; I forgot myself for a moment. Certainly, we should speak again... However, you must pardon me; I'll be taking my leave now, as there is much to prepare. Won't you please enjoy the rest of your meal?" Saying this, Shamaya rose from her seat. The whole time she spoke, her face stayed frozen like a serene mask.

Renko tilted her head. "...Prepare? Preparations to kill us, could it be? *Kksshh*."

"Oh-ho-ho...surely you jest. Preliminary preparations for the next item on the program—the campfire! We Public Morals Committee members are always busy with one thing or another. Speaking of which, I must bid you all adieu... Oh, and by the way, I will allow you, in the gas mask, to finish my meal. Please, relish it without restraint!" Leaving behind these kind words and the untouched portion of her steak, Shamaya calmly walked away.

Renko gave a long, mechanical sigh and stared at the meat, which had been cut into bite-sized pieces. "I can't eat something solid like this with my mask on... Is she trying to harass me?"

"Mmm..."

"But, since she already gave it to me, I guess I'll give it to Maina."

"Really?! Thank you so much! ...What about everyone else?"

"...I don't need it."

"I'm fine, too... Somehow my appetite just disappeared." As he answered, Kyousuke held his abdomen. From the first to the last, the whole situation had made his stomach turn sour.

Kyousuke, whose heart had been pounding when he thought Shamaya might flip out, glared at Renko and the others with reproach. "You guys please behave yourselves next time! I don't think you've forgotten, but I'll say it just in case... That girl has killed twenty-one people... She's the former Murder Princess!

"...*Former*. Now she's rehabilitated, isn't she?"

"Yeah, according to her! *Kksshh*. She had a very familiar smell to her... I bet if we'd prodded a little more strongly, you know, given her the old in-and-out, she would have shown us a different face."

"Don't say 'the old in-and-out.'" Kyousuke gave a strained smile. "Good grief, girl."

Shamaya had an eerie, even frightening air about her. But now that Renko had calmed down, everyone seemed to have returned to their usual demeanors and begun to energetically consume their meals.

"Ohhh, so tender! The juice is overflowing..." Maina held her cheeks while, next to her, Renko sipped a jelly pack with a "*Sluuurp... sluuurp...*" Even Eiri relaxed and resumed eating, and for the first time in a long time, a harmonious atmosphere hung over the group.

In this pleasant atmosphere, Kyousuke recalled the prison camping schedule.

"After this, a campfire is scheduled. 'Inferno Campfire,' huh? 'Inferno'...that's like the fires of hell and purgatory or whatever, right? I wonder how it's different from a regular campfire..."

X X X

The world blazed scarlet.

Boisterous laughter roared through the darkness, through a sea of drifting sparks.

“Hya-haaaaaa! Sterilize the fiiiiiiiiiiiilth!”

A large man with a red Mohawk waved a massive flamethrower, dousing a village in fire. On his fiendish, piercing-riddled face was an expression of wild ecstasy. Shuddering in fear of this brutal visitor, people ran about trying to escape, like scattering baby spiders. Mohawk relentlessly poured the baptismal flame over the buildings and their inhabitants alike.

“Eeeeeekkk! Grandpa…Grandpaaa!” Kneeling before an old man who had been “sterilized” by the flamethrower, a young girl screamed in grief.

Perhaps she had tripped while escaping—his body, which he had thrown on top of the young girl, hoping to protect her, was engulfed in the violence of the flamethrower, and set ablaze.

“Grandpa…Grandpa! Waaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!” The girl, who had had one of her blood relatives snatched away before her eyes, wept and wailed. Tears cascading from her eyes, she faced the still-burning corpse, and started to crawl closer. The flamethrower was thrust before her nose.

A cruel, smiling face, illuminated by the fire, looked down at the girl as she raised her eyes, her slim shoulders trembling. As his smile intensified at the sight of the girl attempting to retreat, Mohawk brought his finger to the trigger without hesitation.

“—That’s far enough.” Suddenly a different voice, deeper than Mohawk’s, cut through the hazy darkness.

His fun interrupted, Mohawk turned around to look behind him.

“Huuuh?”

Standing there was a boy wearing a worn-out overcoat.

“What the hell, you bastard... Do you want me to burn you to death? Are you suicidal, hmmm?”

“Suicidal? No way! I’m a nomadic wanderer. I roam this land on foot seeking strong people, and drink the blood of the warriors I kill... I’m a common, nameless killer.” Sharp eyes peered out from under the hood, piercing the villain of conflagration. By his side, this newcomer held loosely in one hand eleven multicolored Mohawks —*eleven freshly severed heads*.

“...Hyah?” Perplexed, Mohawk watched the youth toss the grisly display before him; his gaze remained fixed on the remains of his compatriots.

“You’re the only one left! Will you let me collect your Mohawk, too?” As he removed his hood, the youth’s ferocious eyes fixed on his last quarry.

Mohawk flinched, just barely, before recovering his bravado. “You bastard! How dare you do this to my dear Mohawk family... I-I won’t forgive this! If you want forgiveness, you must be purified by my own hand!! Otherwise...” Letting go of the flamethrower, he grabbed the girl, who had been trying to quietly slip away in the disturbance. He pinned her hands behind her back and pulled a knife from his breast pocket. He pressed the blade against her throat with a grin. “I don’t care what happens to this little lady! Gya-ha-ha!”

“.....”

The youth’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Ee...eee...eeeeeeeeeeeekkk!! Save me! Please save meeeeee! My life! Just spare my liiiiiiiiiiife!” Captured in his muscular arms, the girl wept and pleaded.

Looking back at her trembling eyes, the youth spoke, his voice icy. “Hm…you idiot. Did you think you could subdue me with such a poor threat? This is the end of the century. Order has been broken, public morals are disturbed, and in this society where justice has rotted away, it’s survival of the fittest! A simple and clear world where the weak are only fit for death, and the strong survive. I won’t be the slightest bit agitated if you kill that girl. I’m a coldhearted killer myself, because in this world where everything is dying, I am the wandering *demonic killer* who puts everything to death—uh, hey. Wait just a second. You bastard…what are you doing to *Maina*, Mohawk?”

Suddenly going off script, the wandering demonic killer—Kyousuke—glared at Mohawk. Before his anger-filled gaze was the girl—Maina, who was wearing a white dress, and Mohawk, who had her arms pinned behind her. Mohawk was groping her, using the scene for cover.

“Hya-ha-ha! You’re surprisingly well developed for such a tiny thing, aren’t ya, little missy!”

“Eeeeeek!! Wh-wwwwh-what are you doing?! St-stop that! Sto… Noooooooooooo!!” Maina screamed and struggled, but he restrained her with one arm, preventing escape, and groped her body all over.

A vein bulged on Kyousuke’s forehead. He cracked the knuckles in his fists.

“Hya-ha! This clumsy girl is mine!”

“Mohawk.”

“…Hya-ha?”

“This time I’m really going to kill you, once and for aaaaaaaaaaalll!!”

“Hurk!!”

Taking a fist to the nose, Mohawk went flying, scattering the eleven freshly severed Mohawked heads—stage props made from paper and clay—and plunged into the flames that surrounded them.

"Owowowowow!!"

From off stage, Kurumiya rushed over to the agonized Mohawk, carrying a bucket.

"What the! H-hurry up and extinguish the... Whaaaaaaaaat?!

"Hyuh? Waaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

Kurumiya swung the bucket, splashing Mohawk with its contents. It was not water but rather a large quantity of oil.

Body ablaze from head to toe, Mohawk rolled around on the ground. Meanwhile, Kurumiya wiped the sweat from her brow. "...*Phew*. Looks like I managed to get to you in time...good."

"It's no good, Miss Kurumiya! It's not the least bit good! Public Morals Committee members, hurry! Please quickly extinguish the fire." Said members sprang into action at Busujima's instruction, surrounding Mohawk with fire extinguishers in hand and activating them all at once.

Enveloped in the cloud of white dust, Eiri, who was watching the situation with microphone in hand, yawned slightly—"...*Fwah*"—only to resume narrating in a bored monotone.

"...The end. This concludes the performance by Class A Squad Four —our 'End of the World' skit."

Applause echoed around the fire pit. Kyousuke and his group stood in the center, surrounded by students, who were themselves surrounded by brightly blazing flames.

They were not sitting around the campfire, but *encircled by it*. This was it, the Inferno Campfire. The temperature was high enough to

burn the skin, and the air was so hot that just breathing seemed to scald the lungs.

Kyousuke huffed a sigh of relief, having somehow survived their "performance" in this extreme environment. Looking sideways as Mohawk—who was white from the top of his head to the tips of his toes—was loaded onto a stretcher and hauled away, Kyousuke extended a hand to poor Maina. "You had a terrible time, didn't you, Maina...? Can you stand?"

"Ah...y-yes...sorry. Oh dear."

"...Tch. For once, I thought he was being serious about acting...and then this! Time after time, he really won't learn his lesson no matter how many times he's taught. That asshole. I hope he never comes back again."

Their skit concluded, Kyousuke and the others met up with Eiri, who had been in charge of narration, and returned to their own spots. The flames roared behind them; it was incredibly hot.

Sweating bullets, they drank greedily from their water bottles.

In the center of the circle, Shamaya moved the show along. "Thank you very much, everyone in Class A Squad Four. You were able to present the cruelty exuding from the wandering demonic killer quite realistically. As one would expect from true killers! Well, then...let's move on to the final squad. From Class B Squad Four, we'll have—

"—the 'Murder Rap.'"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the pounding rhythm of a drumbeat echoed through the circle. Four students, wearing their school tracksuits, simultaneously leaped up and walked toward the center of the fire pit, clapping to the beat.

"Don, don, tcha! Don, don, tcha!"

In turn, the sound of a bass also entered the mix, though no

instruments were visible. However, one of the students—the female student wearing a black gas mask—was holding a mic up to her mouth. The drum and bass sounds seemed to be originating from her. She was beatboxing.

Before long the four of them arrived in the center of the stage, and after a harsh record scratch, their musical performance stopped with a sound like a machine shutting down, and they all froze on the spot.

After a brief silence came the sound of heavy breathing. "*Kksshhhh…*"

Renko raised a middle finger at Kyousuke and the rest of the audience:

"Let's kill."

The next instant, a violent rush of sound engulfed the fire pit like a storm. The forceful drumbeat and intense bass sounded as if she was actually playing real instruments, even weaving in the stiff sounds of record scratches. With this blast of noise, the four of them, who had been standing stock-still, explosively came alive.

From among them, Renko leaped forward first and began to perform a rap.

"YO! Bursting on stage surrounded by hot flames! I'm black mask GMK! A public nuisance psychopath! I'll kill you on the spot if you cross my path! I'll blast you with my best rhymes! Charging in with words like knives! It's our live show you're listening to! If you want to be killed, it's no takedown, come on!"

Beckoning to the audience with her raised middle finger, Renko—GMK—returned to the lineup. Her every movement was wickedly cool.

Next up, stepping forward to take the center, was an especially enormous female student wearing a flour sack on her head. She

stomped hard, and as the ground shook, she began to sing in a deep voice that contrasted with GMK's.

"Hey! The ground is shaking, creating a very flashy sensation! When I come calling I make waves, like major devastation! I'm eight-hundred-pound Bob, with a sack on my head! With my megaton press I'll crush you dead! I hide my complex face with a bag! HA-HA! I'll smash the skull of anyone who laughs! BAM! Bam bam bam bam, go around smashing! A juggernaut that swallows up everything! I'll get your heart, too!!"

Using her intimidating stature to maximum effect, Bob—Sack-Head Bob—finished her frightful rap and returned to the group, signaling another fluid MC changeup.

The girl who next stepped forward, slowly and quietly, seemed Bob's exact opposite. Licking her lips with a tongue that was the same bright red as her eyes, the petite student let out her words in a mumbling whisper tone.

"YO! I'll devour every last one of y'all! I'm chika-chika-Chihiro the cannibal! I'm a dangerous, hazardous, people-chomping little bitch! Let's start the carnival! I'm sicker than Hannibal! We'll turn it up till everyone is dead on their feet! You're prisoners to my devilish rhythm! And I'm a slave to your meat!"

In contrast to her sweet voice, Chihiro—chika-chika-Chihiro—had dark eyes and sharp canine teeth. It was weird and more than a little scary that she had sung her whole verse without ever moving her gaze from Kyousuke...

However, singing along with the human beatbox GMK, each of their skillful verses hit the crowd like a wave, carrying the audience away. Most of the students had stood up, and were pumping their fists in the air, chanting in unison.

"Mur-der rap! Mur-der rap!"

"Yeah! Stab to death, beat to death, strangle, poison! We'll stop your heartbeat!"

"Mur-der rap! Mur-der rap!"

"Come on! Shooting death, ran over, drowning death, burned to death! You stop our heartbeats!"

I'm not sure how singing the praises of murder at a murderer rehabilitation school is supposed to be instructive... Nobody else seemed to care, though. The enthusiasm in the fire pit was really heating up.

Kuuga Makyouin, aka Michirou, the final squad member, had not yet performed a solo rap, and was only striking poses to the beat. It wasn't clear what his purpose was for being there, but watching him off to the side, he was hitting one pose after another, like a dancer—a curious sight.

Even the flames in the background seemed more energetic, casting their four shadows in wavy silhouettes. Before long—

"...Fuck you very much."

With four middle fingers raised, the performance came to an abrupt stop. Having concluded their first song, GMK and the others received a standing ovation. They waited for the applause of the excited students to subside.



"...What, do you still have breath left in you? If so, allow us to deliver the final blow. Next is—"

That moment, she was about to yell out the title call.

"....." Suddenly, GMK fell silent. Her body swayed back and forth, around and around and around until—*crash!*

She collapsed on the spot.

"GMKaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyy?!"

The screams of the students echoed over the flames.

Lying faceup, GMK—Renko—repeated a refrain of shallow breathing, "*Kksshh...kksshh...*," and did not make any movement to rise.

Kurumiya trotted over to check Renko's condition, and gasped in surprise. She waved her iron pipe toward the students who were concerned about GMK's well-being. "...It's heatstroke. It looks like she got too excited, wearing her mask in this damned heat."

X X X

Even after Renko had been carried away on a stretcher, the Inferno Campfire continued into the night. Everyone enthusiastically sang the school song in a death metal growl, they performed acts of "recreational" penance, they appreciated the aesthetics of the Inferno Fire Dance performed by the Public Morals Committee...

And then, at last, the final program. Awaiting the totally exhausted students was—

—a completely ordinary folk dance.

The students formed a circle and danced along to a familiar, middle tempo song—an ordinary rendition of "Oklahoma Mixer." Mingling

with the teachers and Public Morals Committee members, they took hands in couples, and harmoniously tapped out the steps.

"...*Fwah*." In the midst of it all, a female student, arms folded in to show her frank refusal to participate, paced about, yawning derisively. No question about it: It was Eiri Akabane.

Each male student who was paired with Eiri cowered under her intimidating glare, before moving on to their next partner, dismayed and confused. Then the cycle repeated. It was pathetic to watch. As she once again unfastened her loosely folded arms and rubbed her heavy eyelids...

"What are you doing? Let's dance!" Kyousuke, who was her next partner, grabbed Eiri's left hand without hesitation.

Eiri, who shook with a start, looked at Kyousuke in a panic. "..... Ah."

Kyousuke gripped her hand tightly as she promptly tried to shake him off. The nails applied to the tips of Eiri's fingers dug into Kyousuke's palm—

But that was all. The knives normally mounted on the tips of her nails—the Japanese blades disguised as nail art, Eiri's secret weapon as an assassin—did not slice through Kyousuke's hand.

At the present time, she didn't have them equipped. Three months ago, when she had helped Kyousuke fight off a group of murderers, their existence had been revealed, and she could not continue wearing them. "When a secret weapon is found out, it loses its usefulness," Eiri had said.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was wearing them. Even though Eiri had bowed her head when Kyousuke had taken her hand, she was now fidgeting restlessly. The movements of her feet as she performed the dance steps were also surprisingly clumsy.

Eiri glanced with half-open eyes at Kyousuke, who unconsciously

let out a strained laugh. “...What?”

“Nothing,” Kyousuke responded, looking over his shoulder into her glaring eyes. “I was just thinking that you’re pretty unsophisticated is all.”

“...Huh? What is that, are you trying to pick a fight?”

“Not at all. It’s cute.”

“.....?!”

Eiri’s cheeks suddenly flushed red. Her face, which had been listless, softened happily—or did it? The instant he thought that it might have, she screwed it back up in a scowl and turned her head.

“...Hmph! Wh-what are you saying? Are you stupid? You womanizer.” She stared at the ground as she spat out accusations.

“W-womanizer? You shouldn’t say scandalous things.”

“...I didn’t! I just said the truth.”

With that, the two gave up on exchanging words and continued dancing in silence. Even in the heat from the flames that filled the area, Eiri’s supple fingers were noticeably warm, and slightly sweaty.

Under the starry sky illuminated a tangerine orange, the seconds seemed to stretch on and on and on.

“Well, see you.”

They bowed slightly. It was time to change partners, time for their hands to let go.

“...I’m sorry, Kyousuke,” Eiri whispered in a vanishing voice.

“Huh? Wh-what—” Kyousuke tried to ask what she had meant, but the flow of the dance had already carried her away, allowing no answer.

While he grasped the hand of his next partner, Kyousuke glanced over at Eiri. She had folded her arms again, wrapping herself in an aura of intimidating solitude.

"Heh-heh. Good evening, Miss Eiri. Won't you please dance with me?"

"Re. Ject. Ed."

"Huh?!"

The partner who was extending his arm with a smiling face was—Eiri kicked upward with all her strength into Shinji's crotch. Holding his demolished nether region, Shinji crumbled to the ground.

Eiri clicked her tongue in irritation, "...Tch," and walked off by herself. Her profile, staring off into the distance to avoid meeting Kyousuke's eye, formed a familiar, sullen pout.

X X X

"Damn that's hot!!"

With the campfire finished, it was now bath time.

As soon as he dipped a foot into the bathtub, Kyousuke jumped from the scalding heat.

The tips of his toes smarted. It seemed like they might have been burned.

The temperature of the water was 150 degrees. And when he decided to give up on getting in the bath and tried turning on the shower—"Damn it!!"—it, too, was hot enough to make Kyousuke curse and writhe in pain.

Standing in the center of the overly wide bathroom, he found himself at a loss. "...What should I do?" He wanted to wash away the sweat that had been pouring off of him like a waterfall all day, but

since the water was way too hot, he couldn't even shower satisfactorily. *For now, I guess I'll just wet a towel and wipe my body down*, Kyousuke thought and again headed for the bathtub.

"Yoo-hoo! Hellooo! I'm coming in now, okay?"

The sliding door at the entrance rattled open, and someone entered the bathroom. The voice was unmistakably feminine, a clear soprano. This was, of course, not a mixed-gender bath.

The voice had a familiar ring to it. It had been three months since Kyousuke had heard that voice, but he remembered. Reminiscent of unclouded glass, or maybe a frozen river, it was a bright, clear voice.

It was truly beautiful, and every hair on Kyousuke's body stood on end as the blood drained from his stiff face. *...I have a bad feeling about this. The worst possible feeling.* With wooden movements, he turned to look behind him. There stood—

"Yoo-hoo! Kyousuke! Have I kept you waiting? It's your beloved Renkoooo! Hee-hee-hee!" She was unbelievably beautiful, the gas mask nowhere to be seen. Aside from a single bath towel, she was in an immodest state.

"Wha...what did you come in here for?! This is the men's bath, you know!!"

Renko, her silver-colored hair tied up, stared at Kyousuke with a wide smile as he tried to hide the key parts of his nude body with a washbasin. Laughter, unfiltered by any exhaust ports, spilled from her lush, cherry-blossom pink lips. "Heh-heh. You ask what I'm here for, even though you surely already know... Since I went to the trouble of getting us alone, I came to do the kinds of things that we can do only when it's just the two of us, Kyousuke!" Renko's bewitching words echoed through the large, otherwise-empty bathhouse.

The students had been assigned to bathe one room at a time, so

Kyousuke, who had a single room, had come alone.

And it was only toward Kyousuke that Renko could not embrace her innate murderous impulse. In other words, if she was alone together with him, even if she removed her gas mask—her limiter—Renko would *not* rush to commit murder.

"I asked Miss Kurumiya, and she agreed to remove my mask. I have no intention of wasting this chance! I'm going to let you fully savor it... I'm going to use all of my charms to make you fall madly in love! Starting not with your heart but your body. Hee-hee-hee!"

"...Kurumiya." Kyousuke spat out the loathsome name. *She knew this would happen, and still intentionally unfastened her safety device?!*

Renko slowly approached Kyousuke, who was searching the bathroom for an escape route. Her body, covered only by the thin towel, was so alluring it made him dizzy, and even though he tried with all his willpower to avert his gaze, it had a gravitational pull that he could absolutely not resist.

The appeal of her abundant breasts went without saying, but there was also great beauty in the shapely curves of her body line, and in the softness of her skin, which all seemed even more fantastically pale and smooth next to the cloth of the bath towel. Her face emphasized all her other charms a hundred times over; she was a perfect model of absolute beauty...

"Uh...d-don't come over heeeeeere!" Turning on his heel to escape from Renko, Kyousuke leaped into the steaming tub behind him. As he splashed into the scalding water, a red-hot rush of pain assaulted him from head to toe.

He clenched his teeth and endured the agony. It felt like he was being boiled alive, but thanks to the pain, the passionate desires that seeing Renko had aroused completely evaporated. He closed his eyes, back still turned to Renko, and sat down inside the bathtub.

"...What on earth are you doing? Jumping into the bathtub is definitely a breach of etiquette. First you have to rinse your body with hot water, then gently slip into the tub." She picked up the washbasin that Kyousuke had dropped, and he could hear the sound of her filling it with hot water.

Renko didn't seem to feel the heat in the slightest. She slipped into the tub, sending out gentle ripples, and slid over to Kyousuke, who was chanting the Heart Sutra.

"When the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was practicing the profound perfection of wisdom, he perceived clearly that all five skandhas are empty, and thus overcame hardship and suffering—"

"Really...you don't need to be that frightened. There's nothing to worry about. It's not like I'm going to suddenly attack and eat you or something. For something like this, the process is important, right? First, we need to close the distance between us, don't we? The distance between our hearts, and the distance between our bodies..."

From behind Kyousuke, there was the sound of rustling cloth. Kyousuke knew exactly what it was. The only thing Renko had been wearing was a single thin bath towel. If she had taken that off, then that meant—

"……?!"

At that moment, the carnal desires that had been quieted by the heat of the water returned, surging up like rushing water. His pulse raced. *I want to turn around. I want to turn around right now.* Despite the power of his desires, Kyousuke managed to hold on to some semblance of reason, and squeezed his eyes shut tighter than before.

Squish.

Something soft pressed against his back.

"Aaaaaahhh!!"

Renko had embraced him.

She laughed impishly at Kyousuke, who couldn't help but scream. "Hee-hee-hee! There's nothing between us now... How do you like it? Doesn't it feel good? It feels good to me, Kyousuke. Your back is so rugged and firm... Like this, I can feel the strong rhythm of your heart... *Thump, thump*... Like that! Oh, I wish I could stop that heartbeat, even for just a moment! I don't want to hand it over to anyone else. Not by anybody else but by my own hand... I want to stop your heart!"

Whispering close to his ear, Renko squeezed him tightly. Her arms encircled Kyousuke's neck, strangling him, and the two soft bulges were squashed against his back.

With nothing covering them, Renko's breasts felt unbelievably nice and delicate, and Kyousuke could feel his willpower ebbing. *Crap! If this keeps up, I'm really going to go off. If I push Renko away and she doesn't resist*— he thought, but his body was frozen stiff.

Breathing gently in Kyousuke's ear, Renko whispered seductively. "Hey, Kyousuke...your skin is really warm. I wonder if it's because of Busujima's poisons? Inside, my body is tingling... The tingling has gotten really strong with you, the one I love, sitting naked before my eyes. It feels like my head is going to melt..."

As she spoke, Renko began to move slowly, rubbing her bare breasts against his back. The two bountiful bulges pressed between their bodies, deforming softly in the depressions between his muscles as she stroked them up and down, right and left on Kyousuke's back. Renko sighed lasciviously, rubbing her cheek against him as she had her chest.

"Ahh...hot...stop...quickly, stop, Kyousuke...with your hands, quickly...!"

"_____"

Kyousuke answered Renko's request with silence. His breathing had

become ragged. As the speed at which she moved her body slowed, the pointed tips of the bulges that rubbed against his back—

Aahh…this is no good. I think I'm dead.

And then, finally, Kyousuke burst.

Staring at the ceiling with lifeless eyes, a faint smile crept across his lips.

—I'm spouting fresh blood.

The whole surface of the wall behind the bathtub was stained with crimson. His limbs hung limply as Kyousuke sagged in the water. Bright red blood pooled around his partially submerged face.

"Kyousuke?! Oh nooo, Kyousuke…Kyousuke! He…sprang a nosebleed and collapsed!" Renko's hysterical shout sounded very far away. With his face still in the water, still gushing blood from his nose, Kyousuke felt his consciousness begin to fade.

Renko rushed to lift him up out of the water, trying to pull him out of the tub. As she did, Kyousuke's face was pressed softly into her naked breasts.

"—Mmph?!"

"Kyousukeeeeee?!"

A surge of blood, and a resounding soprano scream.

Kyousuke's memory cut out there.

X X X

"That was seriously awful, geez…"

Several tens of minutes later: Uninjured and conscious once again, Kyousuke walked down the deserted corridor that led from the

infirmary to his room. He grumbled as he changed the tissues stuffed up his nose. “Renko, you idiot, you went too far... Show some damn restraint.”

The incident in the bathroom replayed vividly in his mind...

“No, no! Stop it, Kyousuke.” He shook his head vigorously, to throw out the mental images. “You can’t afford to lose any more blood today...” He was already feeling slightly anemic. Kyousuke quickened his pace, wanting nothing more than to rest.

“Whoa whoa whoa, now! Who could that be but Mr. Kamiya, just out of the bath!”

The tiresome trio awaited him by the corner near the stairs. It was the three of them—Shinji, Usami, and Oonogi. Dressed in their uniforms with tracksuits and towels in hand, they must have been headed for the bath. No sooner had they recognized Kyousuke, however, than Usami and Oonogi nimbly moved to surround him.

“Yo, Kamiya! We got you alone for once, huh? What the hell’s up with those nose plugs? Was the bath too hot, and the blood rushed to your head? Ha-ha-ha, that’s rich! What an idiot, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hee-hee-hee...anemia leads to liver... Gouge out the liver, make him eat it...hee-hee-hee-hee!”

Oonogi pointed and laughed at the tissues stuffed up his nose, and Usami moved in from behind to stroke Kyousuke’s abdomen. Shinji’s facial expression implied something unsavory.

“Well, we owe you our thanks. You really helped us out during the Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering. Yes, very much so...hee-hee-hee. Did the bath feel good?” Despite his broad grin, there was nothing friendly in Shinji’s eyes.

After they had been beaten down during the Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering and lost their Deadly Sins Card, Shinji had met with Busujima’s discipline, and then been kicked in the crotch by

Eiri. He was probably stressed out.

Th-this is not good...they're practically drooling at the thought of killing me, aren't they? This is really bad... Kyousuke briskly scratched his damp head and forced an insincere smile. "Uh, yeah...it was a good bath. It's superhot, though. Be careful you don't get burned! Well, then, I'll be going this wa—"

"Now, now! What's the hurry, Mr. Kamiya?"

Before Kyousuke could make an exit, he found his escape blocked. Stuck between a wall on the left and Oonogi on the right, Shinji in front and Usami behind, Kyousuke was boxed in. His pulse quickened.

"H-hey...you're wasting your bath time, you know?"

"Oh, I'm not worried about that, Mr. Kamiya... We'll be finished soon enough anyway. Heh-heh..." Shinji handed his tracksuit to Oonogi and, holding the ends of his towel with both now-free hands, looped it around Kyousuke's neck. "As I promised Miss Eiri, I won't raise a hand to you! Not a hand...you see?"

The strangler's pale brown eyes narrowed as he crossed the towel over Kyousuke's throat.

Crap. By now Kyousuke had surmised his opponent's intentions, but faster than he could react, Shinji prepared to yank the noose tight.

"You there! Whatever are you doing?"

At the sudden sound of a girl's voice, the four boys froze.

When they looked, behind Shinji—almost near enough to touch him—stood a female student with honey-colored hair. They had noticed neither her presence in the corridor, nor her quick approach. It was like she had materialized in the few seconds that everyone was focused on Shinji's hands...

“Wha—?!” Startled, Shinji leaped away, letting go of the towel.

Moving nimbly, the female student—the beautiful girl wearing a yellow armband emblazoned with the words *Public Morals Committee*, placed herself between them, as if to protect Kyousuke, and faced Shinji.

“Good evening, first-years. I believe this is the first time we have met. I am Saki Shamaya, third-year Class A and Public Morals Committee chair. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Miss Sha-Shamaya…” Kyousuke stammered, eyes wide.

Shamaya gave him a perfectly composed smile. “How do you do, Mr. Kamiya? Are these gentlemen your friends, by chance?” She looked pointedly at Shinji, Usami, and Oonogi in turn.

“Huh? Uh, no…I wouldn’t say they’re friends. Rather…how to put it —”

“Best friends! We’re his best friends! Hee-hee-hee…” Seizing the opportunity presented by Kyousuke’s hesitation, Shinji cut in on the conversation with this outrageous lie.

“…You’re…best friends?” Shamaya was suspicious.

Shinji nodded his head reassuringly. “That’s right!” He flashed Shamaya an affable grin. “Lovely to meet you, miss. I’m Shinji Saotome, in the same classroom as Mr. Kamiya. At any rate, you’re really beautiful, aren’t you! Too beautiful, even. Why, for a moment I thought you might be an angel!”

“Well…!” Shamaya held her blushing cheeks in delight. Shinji’s white teeth gleamed.

…Shinji, you bastard. You started in with the flattery just at the critical moment.

Oonogi, thinking to take advantage of this turn of events, shouted

out his own self-introduction. “I’m a dear friend, too! Best friend Arata Oonogi! Pleased to meet you, Miss Shamaya!” He wore a grungy, lascivious smirk.

The tense atmosphere in the corridor had completely evaporated.

“Oh-ho-ho! Is that how it is? It’s so nice that you are close friends.” Smiling, Shamaya nodded satisfactorily. And then, as if she had suddenly remembered something important, she continued, “By the way...

“Why, then, were you preparing to strangle your best friend?”

Her tone had instantly changed; it was soft and delicate and refined as before, but now carried a dreadful quality that seemed to crush any hope of argument. Shinji’s and Oonogi’s smiles stiffened, and the air was once again tense.

“Eh? N-no, Miss... Strangling would be—”

“You did do it, of course?”

“...Yes, I did. But we were only playing around—”

“However, you did indeed start to strangle him?”

“...Yes, I did.”

Her curt words cut through Shinji’s smooth talk, and his eyes darted around the hall. Shamaya put her left hand on her hip, and pointed her right index finger at Shinji.

“Listen up, Mr. Saotome! Whatever the reason, you tried to strangle Mr. Kamiya... It’s not your motive but your conduct that is the problem. You must show self-control, self-discipline, self-admonition! This was only the first time, so I shall overlook it, but...next time, I will be forced to take appropriate action! Do you understand?”

Thoroughly scolded, Shinji hung his head dejectedly. “...I’m sorry.”

Dropping her hand, Shamaya nodded in apparent satisfaction. “Oh-ho-ho! The important thing is that you recognize your mistake. Violence will not be tolerated, you see… Yes, violence is completely unacceptable. Even supposing you did have some kind of reason—”

“Hee-hee-hee…upperclassman panties…Public Morals Committee members also wear black and white stripes…hee-hee-hee.” Usami, who had crept around behind Shamaya, chose that moment to lift up her skirt, boldly exposing her undergarments to all, and brought his face near—

“Gyah!!” Instantly, the sole of an indoor slipper caved in Usami’s face. His small frame tumbled through the air, spraying the walls with blood. After tumbling thirty feet or more down the corridor, he finally came to a stop.

—The atmosphere also stopped dead.

“…M-Miss Shamaya?” Still hugging the wall, as he’d done to avoid Usami’s flight path, Kyousuke looked back at her.

Shamaya stood there silently, her left leg—which had delivered the blow with menacing speed—neatly back in place, as if nothing had happened. Eventually, a dry laugh, “Oh-ho-ho,” slipped from her lips. “…What’s this? Oh, goodness me! I reacted entirely by reflex… You have my sincerest apologies! I have no ill will against you! No ill will at all!”

Lying faceup, Usami convulsed, blood gushing from his broken nose—he was out cold. This was the power of her full-force backward kick.

“Huh?!” Shinji and Oonogi shouted in unison.

Turning to face them, Shamaya said by way of apology, “Because that gentleman crept up behind me so silently…I instantly moved to eliminate him, acting on an *imprinted conditioned reflex*. In other words, that was an accident just now! An accident! I absolutely never exercise violence because I want to! That’s why…”

“However, miss, no matter what reasons you might have...” Shinji began back-talking. “Violence is forbidden, you just said—”

“—What’s that?”

“Eee!! N-nnn-nothing at aaaaaaall!” With a squeal, Shinji leaped into Oonogi’s arms.

“You don’t have to be scared, it’s okay!” Shamaya’s voice was soft and kindly; she hoped to set the two of them at ease. They held on to each other and trembled. “Certainly, I am the former Murder Princess. However, I have been rehabilitated. Of course I do not commit murder, nor engage in cannibalism... I will not even exercise violence of my own volition! I certainly don’t hang people upside down while they’re still alive, and flay them with a knife, and pour hydrochloric acid into a hole I put in their cranium with an electric drill! I don’t even properly prepare human bodies by draining the blood from them, then dismantling and preserving them and savoring them in a meunière or fried cutlet! And then, and then—”

“S-sss-sorry! We’re sorryyyyyyyyy...!”

“...Hm?”

Shuddering as Shamaya began to speak with a certain enthusiasm in her voice, Shinji and Oonogi had prostrated themselves on the floor before fleeing in a full-speed dash. Slipping past the wide-eyed Shamaya, they picked up Usami and disappeared as fast as they could, leaving behind only Shamaya and Kyousuke.

“H-how unreasonable... I said I wasn’t going to do anything to them. What rude boys!” Placing her hands on her hips, Shamaya looked genuinely offended, though Kyousuke thought that Shinji’s and Oonogi’s reactions had been more than reasonable. He certainly would have taken any chance to escape.

What did she mean by “imprinted conditioned reflex”? Scary! She’s already at the level of a professional killer! And the murders she committed are definitely awful! I really don’t want to get too deeply

involved with this one…

X X X

"That was certainly something of a calamity, wasn't it, Mr. Kamiya?" Walking side by side with Kyousuke, Shamaya spoke in an anxious voice. She had insisted on escorting him back to his room.

"You said it…" With a bitter smile, Kyousuke surreptitiously let out a sigh. Speaking of calamities…the current situation certainly qualified.

She's not going to start anything with you! She's the Public Morals Committee chair after all, so there's nothing to worry about…right? Thinking back on the incident a short while ago, he waited to see what the dazzling Shamaya would do.

The corridor was deserted aside from the two of them, and a deep silence had settled in. *Is it my imagination, or are we purposely taking a detour to pass through an area with few people—*

"Mr. Kyousuke Kamiya."

"Y-yes?!" His voice cracked as he answered, surprised to be addressed by his full name.

Her eyes, like precious emeralds, observed Kyousuke in silence.

"……?!" The twinkle in her eyes took Kyousuke's breath away.

"You…you've killed twelve people, is that right?" she asked. The sound of her voice was as gentle as ever, but her tone was probing, quizzical. *As if to ask, "Did you really do it?"*

"Yeah. I did, but…wh-what's the matter all of a sudden?" He could feel the sweat running down his back.

In reality he hadn't even killed one person, but the fact that he had been sent to the academy on a false charge was something that he

revealed only to those people who were very close to him. He had no intention of revealing it to her.

Kyousuke was trying to dodge the question, but Shamaya shook her head and said, “It’s rather unexpected that you have killed so many, as I had believed you to be a decent person. Even when I tried walking with you in this deserted place, you did not engage in any suspicious conduct.” She sighed. Of course: She had chosen this path not so that she could start something with Kyousuke, but so that she could confirm that he would not start anything with *her*.

Kyousuke stared at Shamaya in profile, feeling like a complete fool. This girl—the Murder Princess who had killed twenty-one people—gazed ahead with clear eyes. From her lips, words spilled softly, as though she were speaking only to herself.

“I am told that, for the most part, those who perpetrate abnormal crimes, such as mass killings, are the products of abnormal environments. Excessive abuse and chastisement, physical violence, sexual violence, withholding of affection... Those kinds of abnormal homes raise individuals with abnormal spirits, who tend toward abnormal behavior—*or so I am told*. This may be true of most killers who go down in history for their crimes, or who end up enrolled at this academy. When I listen to everyone talk about their past, even though it has nothing to do with me, their experiences all feel unbearable.”

Hand on her chest, Shamaya continued: “I was different. I was born and raised in quite a mundane household. With a full-blooded Japanese father, and a French-American mother...their relationship was harmonious, and they raised me, their only child, with great care and affection. Both of my parents were often busy with work, and they took many business trips, and we moved frequently. But, nevertheless, they took vacations for my birthdays and made time to celebrate for me. I think they were perfect, wonderful parents. Thanks to them I was raised soundly, and my personal relations were also satisfactory. Truly...they were great people.”

Speaking with her eyes closed, Shamaya's expression was calm. The warmth she felt for her family was radiant. It was exactly why she was so frightening. According to the story that Kurumiya had told during the departure ceremony, Shamaya had killed those very same parents with her own hands. Which would be one thing if the environment in which she had been born and raised was abnormal; however, Shamaya had said that hers had been completely normal. Normal, with no complaints to speak of.

...If that was the case, then why? What could have warped Shamaya, and driven her to commit such terrible crimes?

Kyousuke was about to voice the question, when Shamaya smiled meaningfully. "Before you ask, I have a question for you: Do you like your family?"

"Uh..." The moment she asked, one person filled Kyousuke's mind. He hadn't seen her for over half a year, but her appearance, and voice, and gestures, and scent, the flavor of her cooking, and her smiling face, everything, all of it—he remembered it clearly, almost too vividly.

All the more because they had been separated, Kyousuke felt how much he cherished her. "...Yeah, I like them. Although, like you, Miss Shamaya, my parents are extremely busy. I have a sister two years younger than me, and she's incredibly important to me."

"My, is that so? You have a sister complex, do you?"

"Ha-ha...probably. I'm always causing her trouble, and I'm no match for her." Kyousuke brushed his cheek bashfully. Thinking about it, this was the first time he had really discussed the subject of his family here at the academy. As Shamaya had said, everyone seemed to have had a hard time in one way or another... The number of students who, like Kyousuke and Shamaya, had been born and raised in normal circumstances, was likely very small.

"Oh-ho-ho. It seems that somehow the two of us have a mutual bond, no?"

Shamaya smiled broadly, as if she had read his thoughts.

"M-mutual bond..."

Even if that's a joke, give me a break. Kyousuke was a mundane, ordinary person from a mundane, ordinary family. Not a murderer. They had both been born and raised in normal families—but Shamaya, *the Murder Princess who killed twenty-one people*, was fundamentally different. Though, he could not possibly tell her the truth...

Shamaya peered at Kyousuke with her dazzling eyes. "Mr. Kamiya...I have become very interested in you. You are different from the others. I feel *something*. I want to know more... I want you to tell me."

"_____"

At a loss for words, Kyousuke stood, frozen.

After staring at him wordlessly for a short while, Shamaya quickly turned her gaze away. "...In any case, it's time for good boys and girls to get to bed." They had finally arrived at one of the single cells—she was pointing at Kyousuke's room. "I'm going to go take my bath now, so I will take my leave here."

"Uh...y-yes of course! Thank you for going out of your way to accompany me." Still bewildered, Kyousuke bowed his head.

Shamaya gave him another smile. "You needn't thank me. Oh-ho-ho...let's speak again, shall we? I'm looking forward to it! Relax and rest your body tonight, and please give it your best again tomorrow, okay? Well, then, Mr. Kamiya, have a good night, and pleasant dreams."

She curtsied, lifting her skirt by the hem, before leaving. Some time after her retreating figure had disappeared, and the sound of her footsteps could no longer be heard, Kyousuke allowed himself to relax.

"*Sigh*...paired up with a serial killer, huh? Give me a break. My life span is shrinking by the day." *Especially after she asked me, "Did you kill twelve people?" My heart was racing the whole time! I think I might have overdone it a little...*

But it seemed like she had taken a strange interest in him. One way or another, in the end, Shamaya's reasons for committing murder were still unclear.

"Can there really be two more days left of this...? After a first day like this, it's going to be hard going. I'm begging here, please don't let this trouble continue any further!" Praying to anyone who would listen, he threw himself down on the bed.

Mind and body at their limits, Kyousuke soon fell into a deep sleep—

Purgatorium Remedial Academy's Prison Camping Trip.

The hellish first day somehow came to a quiet (?) end.

Unbreakable Breakdown

PEACE BREAKER / TROUBLEMAKER

DAY TWO IN PURGATORY

04:30	**Get Up**
05:00	**Morning Fatigue Duty**
09:30	**Organize Luggage / Clean** Leave both your room and your mind cleaner than when you arrived!
10:40	**Outdoor Cooking** If you injure someone else, you will become a curry ingredient.
14:00	**Woodland Exploration** If you feel like killing yourself, go ahead.
16:30	**Piranha Catching Tournament**
19:30	**Heart Attack / Test of Courage** Take care that you don't become a ghost.
20:30	**Chaos Bath Tournament**
22:00	**Lockdown/Lights-Out**

Unbreakable Breakdown

PEACE BREAKER / TROUBLEMAKER

DAY TWO IN PURGATORY

The morning of the second day dawned with clear weather, the same as the day before. Soon after waking, the students performed rigorous fatigue duty out in the woods: picking up garbage in the forest, doing laundry in a waterfall, weeding while climbing a precipitous cliff, repairing the bridge across a vast ravine… When they had finished Kurumiya's foot massage and other assorted tasks, Kyousuke and the others finally sat down to a meal.

Breakfast for the freshmen students was the usual "garbage": neatly assembled leftovers from the previous day. The menu for the teachers and the members of the Public Morals Committee, on the other hand…

"Good morning, first-year students. Thank you for your efforts at your morning fatigue duties."

Shamaya, who visited Kyousuke's table wearing a dazzling smile as bright as the sun's rays, set down the plate that she held in her hand. On the spotless white plate were arranged a freshly baked croissant and soft-cooked omelette, as well as hot entrées and a cold ham salad, among other things. It was a luxurious buffet-style breakfast plate. The numerous dishes, rich in variety with a focus on Western cuisine, were lined up in a row atop a table covered in a white cloth.

Kyousuke and the other first-year students were not even permitted to touch it.

“L-looks delicious…mmm.” Maina looked like she was about to start drooling. Her dish—something resembling fried rice, which was made by throwing random ingredients together—spilled from her spoon as she gazed upon Shamaya’s plate. Everyone’s stomachs growled.

“Oh my, oh-ho-ho. What a sweet young lady. Do allow me to impose myself and sit next to you?” Smiling, Shamaya sat opposite Kyousuke—to the right of Maina.

To the left and right of Kyousuke, respectively, sat Renko and Eiri, who had been carrying on a huge argument from earlier that morning concerning the relative merits of large versus small breasts.

The two of them looked momentarily at Shamaya as she made her entrance, but then immediately turned back to each other and continued their conversation, acting as though everything was fine.

Shamaya’s expression stiffened. “You might have returned my greeting, at least… Well, it’s no matter.” She took a long, graceful sip of her cappuccino before turning to Maina, who looked nervous. “Come to think of it, I have yet to learn your name. What do you go by?”

“Eee?! Ah, umm…I-I am…Mainya Igarachi!”

“Well! What a lovely name, Miss Mainya Igarachi. Oh-ho-ho.”

“Eee?! Ah, ahm…that’s not it, my name is Myai…Mainya Igarachi…Igarashi…it’s Maina Igarashi! Oh dear.”

“My, is that so? And I of all people did you the discourtesy of mispronouncing it… At any rate, are you quite all right? You seem to have developed some sort of speech impediment.”

“You seem to have some sort of brain impediment.”

“—What was that?”

“Nothing.” Eiri turned away as if nothing had happened.

Shamaya looked at her in annoyance but quickly recovered, clearing her throat. “Anyway…Mr. Kamiya! Did you sleep well last night? I was so very hot, I ended up waking up several times. Thanks to that, today my skintone is—”

“Heyheyheyhey, look, Kyousuke, at my smooth skin! I’m not wearing any makeup, but isn’t it so pretty? *Kksshh*. It’s altogether different from the skin of mature women like our upperclassman here, so smooth, and firm, and very glossy! Just like a baby’s. Waaah! Soothe me, Kyousuke!”

“Owing to the mask, we cannot see your face at all, you know!” Shamaya snapped, the smile never leaving her face. “It’s your mental age, rather than your skin age, that is just like a baby’s, is it not?”

Maina shrieked nervously as Shamaya forcefully stabbed a Vienna sausage with her fork.

“……”

Kyousuke, too, was feeling nervous. Shamaya’s eyes were not smiling as they reflected Renko and Eiri. The glimpse of the Murder Princess that he had seen in his upperclassman the previous night passed through Kyousuke’s mind.

“H-hey…you guys, stop behaving that way toward your senior—”

“Googoo, gaga!”

“Stop it.”

“Eiriii, boobies!”

“I’ll kill you.”

“Kyousukeee, boobies!”

“I don’t have any… Hey, don’t press it!”

“You can both just die.”

"……*Sigh*."

Watching Kyousuke and the others engaging in this idiotic back and forth, Shamaya sighed wearily. Turning to face Maina, she spoke in an exasperated, maternal tone. "Listen now, Miss Igarashi…you must not become like these people, understand? You seem like a very good girl, so you ought not to take in such bad influences."

"Uh, yes…th-thank you very much…"

"Good. Now, if anything is ever causing you any distress, please do consult with me on the matter, all right?" Satisfied with Maina's small nods, Shamaya's face broke out into a smile. It seemed that she had decided to stop engaging Renko and Eiri and only get involved with Maina.

Even Maina, who had been nervous at first, seemed to be gradually relaxing around Shamaya, whose outward appearance was mild and gentle. By the time the meal ended, they were even laughing together like good friends.

"My, is that so?! When you were doing laundry in the waterfall, an enormous crocodile… That certainly sounds like a calamity! It was likely Mr. Busujima's dear pet. Were you hurt, Miss Igarashi?"

"No, I'm just fine! The laundry got eaten, though. The underpants and stuff."

"My goodness! Well, don't you worry a thing about it. Everyone makes mistakes; you mustn't get too discouraged! It's best to accept your discipline, and reflect on what happened. It's best to blunder again and again, and be disciplined…and then slowly and carefully learn from it."

"Ah, um…I haven't been disciplined yet, but I'm sure I will be, right?"

"Hmm, I wonder. It was halfway Mr. Busujima's fault after all… If there were no bear-print or bunny-print panties among the lost

underpants, I don't think it will be a problem."

"Eh? Are those the underpants you wear, Miss Shamayaaa?"

"Absolutely not! I do not have such bad taste!"

"—Who has bad taste, Shamaya?"

That moment, from behind Shamaya, a deep yet girlish voice interrupted the conversation. Shamaya suddenly froze, a spoonful of yogurt midway to her mouth. The color drained from her face as she timidly turned to look...

"Ah.....M-Miss Kurumiyaaa?! N-no...it's wrong! It's wrong!"

"Oh? Why don't I let you tell me thoroughly what is wrong? Come!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh, noooooooooooooooo!"

Gripping the nape of Shamaya's neck, Kurumiya dragged her away screaming.

After watching Shamaya, still protesting "It's wrong! It's wrong!" as she was pulled out of sight into the distance, Renko laughed. "*Kksshh!* Not bad, Maina! Pretending to get close with her, then after she let her guard down...dropping her all at once! Wooow, what a great play that was!"

"Wha?! Th-thhhh-that's not it! I was just...oh no."

"...Either way, it serves her right. She ought to be disciplined."

"D-don't worry...Miss Shamaya. But, well..."

No matter how young your outward appearance looks, it's bad taste for someone in their twenties to wear animal-print panties. Kyousuke couldn't help but sympathize with Shamaya.

X X X

"...*Phew*, finally done."

It was after breakfast. Kyousuke wiped the sweat from his brow, surveying his clean, neatly arranged luggage and sparkling room: Not a single piece of dust remained. He took the guidebook out of his rucksack and sat down on the bed.

"Leave both your room and your mind cleaner than when you arrived...hm."

Looking at the line in the program marked "Organize Luggage/Clean," he suddenly frowned. The three-day two-night Prison School Camping Trip was only on its second day. Since they would be using the same rooms today and tomorrow, the phrase "leave them cleaner than when you arrived" seemed somewhat out of place.

A major cleanup like this would ordinarily be done on the day when you leave a facility, wouldn't it? He flipped absently through the guidebook, thinking the quandary over.

"...Kyousuke?"

A reserved voice. Lifting his head, he looked toward the doorway from which the voice had come. There stood a girl with rust-red hair staring down at the ground on the other side of the iron bars.

"Hey, Eiri. What's up? Did you finish cleaning and get bored?"

"Sure, y-yeah...that's about right. Looks like you're done, too." Answering evasively, Eiri pushed the door to his room open.

"What are you acting so nervous about?"

"Shut up." She quickly drew near the puzzled Kyousuke.

"....."

Whump. She sat down next to Kyousuke on the edge of the bed.

"……"

"……"

"U-um…Eiri?"

"What."

"Uh, well…how do I put it, you…"

She was close. Ridiculously close. So close their shoulders were pressed together.

From somewhere close by wafted a sweet scent, like candy.

Sitting next to him, Eiri silently gazed downward and struck the floor with her heels. Rather than bored, she seemed like she was struggling to say something.

Kyousuke decided it would be best if he quietly waited for her to begin talking.

Eventually, Eiri took a deep breath. It was as if she were readying herself to speak.

"…I'm sorry, Kyousuke." Her voice was frail as she mumbled the three words.

Kyousuke stared at her, surprised. Looking at her in profile, severe eyes locked on the floor, she seemed like she might start crying at any moment.

"You're sorry… Wh-what for? I don't think you have anything to apologize for."

"…It's nothing."

"No, it's not nothing…"

"...Sorry."

"No, don't just say 'sorry'..."

"....."

"....."

"U-um...Eiri?" Kyousuke timidly broke the silence.

When he did, Eiri turned her face away.

"I'm sorry that I can't be nice to you."

She said this like she was wringing it out of herself.

"...Huh?

Ignoring Kyousuke's apparent confusion, Eiri continued purposefully, still staring at the floor. "Time and time again, I snap at you... I'm sorry. I always think I've got to be nicer, but the more I think that, the less I'm able to do it, and my words come out harshly... Then I get all irritated with myself for doing that, and my attitude gets even harsher. Recently it's been going on and on like that, so I thought it was making you feel uncomfortable. Even under normal circumstances, things are so hard for you, but...the others and I have to support you, or it won't work...but still I acted like that! I know my egotism makes me disagreeable, and it just adds stress and an unnecessary burden for you... Truly, I'm sorry."

Her tone of voice was dispirited. She was not at all like her normal self.

Indescribable feelings welled up in Kyousuke's chest as he listened to her speak. Something like happiness, and embarrassment, and anger— "Eiri..." Kyousuke replied as Eiri, who was gripping the edge of the bed tightly, bit her lip. "...No, I'm the one in the wrong here, not you. I didn't have even the slightest idea that you were feeling that way... I'm the one adding unnecessary stress. Things are just as

hard for you, after all... I feel like I want to support you, too."

"Kyousuke..." Eiri raised her gaze from the floor and looked at Kyousuke, who stared back into her tearful, rust red–colored eyes.

"And anyway, you don't have to feel like you need to be nice to me! Especially if it doesn't come easily to you. Surely it's best to act naturally. There's no need for you to force it."

"....."

As he spoke, Eiri kept silent, as if she was displeased for some reason, and chewed on her lip. Lowering her head again, she replied in a sulking voice, "You, um... Nice girls like that upperclassman Shamaya are your type, aren't they?"

That's unexpected, coming from her.

Kyousuke couldn't help but stare fixedly at Eiri's profile. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and she continued to glare at the floor.

"...Huh? Y-you mean...in other words—"

"Don't misunderstand me." Eiri turned her half-lidded eyes toward Kyousuke, who was clearly imagining all sorts of things, and starting to get flustered himself. Pausing briefly to sigh and hold her forehead, she then turned her whole body to face Kyousuke. "Look, Kyousuke. You, well... The instant Renko makes you fall in love with her, she's going to kill you, right?"

"Hm? Uh, yeah...that's right. It sounds like I'll be killed if it becomes mutual love."

"...Do you really understand what that means?" Eiri's expression was stiff, and there was a critical tone to her voice. "It would be one thing if it was just Renko, but you're also flirting with upperclassmen that you just met... Nothing could be more careless! When I see you acting like that, I get worried. As you are now, you'll easily be charmed by Renko, and easily be killed...won't you? That's why—"

Suddenly, Eiri leaned over and placed her head on Kyousuke's shoulder. Through the cloth of her uniform, he could feel her slim, supple body, and from her hair, which was right under his nose, wafted the scent of her conditioner. On top of her knees, Eiri tightly clenched her fists.

"That's why I'm just going to do this for you. To make sure that you don't get seduced by Renko or other dangerous girls—there's no way around it—I'm just going to do this for you, got it?"

"....."

Kyousuke remained frozen in place, unable to respond.

Unsettled, her eyes swimming, Eiri asked, "H-hey...what do you want me to do? You had all kinds of things done to you by Renko, I bet. I, too...those things...I should let you do a few more things than that, right?"

"When you say 'all kinds of things'...wh-what are you talking about?"

"I...I don't know stuff like that! I'm asking you because I don't know, aren't I?!" Eiri's face grew more and more flushed as she yelled. And then she immediately looked down despondently, staring at her own legs.

Eventually, breaking the embarrassed silence, Eiri spoke in a mumble.

"For instance, that...lap pillow thing, and stuff?"

"_____"

Time came to a stop. Kyousuke halfway unconsciously looked at Eiri's lap.

Her pure white, bare legs extended from her charcoal gray skirt. During the winter, she wore knee socks to fit with the dress code, but

now, with her summer gear she wore shorter, loose socks. Her smooth, glossy thighs were dazzling. It might have been his imagination, but it seemed like her skirt had gotten even shorter, at least compared to her winter uniform— "...Hey. Could you not stare so much?"

"Uh, sorry..."

Flustered, Kyousuke averted his eyes. Eiri cleared her throat with a cough.

"...W-well? What'll it be, Kyousuke? ...Will you do it? Or not?"

"Do what?"

"The lap pillow thing!"

"O-oh..."

Kyousuke flinched as Eiri, bright red all the way out to her ears, shouted at him.

It seemed like the words themselves made her highly embarrassed.

Impatiently clicking her tongue, Eiri put her hands behind her on the bed.

"...Here. How about a nap?"

She presented her lap—or rather, her thighs, to Kyousuke.

It seemed like the matter was already settled.

Kyousuke gulped hard and nodded. "...O-okay."

Eiri, who was acting as the pillow, and Kyousuke, who was laying his head, were each just as shy as the other.

Straightening up and collecting herself, she took a deep breath.

Cautiously, he laid his head down on her bare, outstretched legs.

"....."

"....."

Both Kyousuke and Eiri were silent.

Finally, Kyousuke's right cheek touched Eiri's soft skin— "...And what might you be doing?"

A pair of emerald eyes glared at them from the edge of the wall of iron bars.

".....?!"

Instantly, Kyousuke and Eiri jumped apart.

Sitting up properly, the two of them shouted in unison, "N-nothing!"

Her eyes wide, Shamaya made no response.

Silently intruding into the room, she looked down at Kyousuke and Eiri.


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"And what might you have been *planning* to do?" she asked, this time in a lower tone of voice than before.

Kyousuke's pulse was beating quickly, and his whole body went white. He could feel Shamaya's gaze on his cheek, but he was too frightened to look back at her.

"...Uh, Miss Shamaya? Um, there's a good reason for this—"

"What might you have been planning to do?"

"Ah, n-nothing... So, well—"

"I'm asking you what you might have been planning to do." Without hesitation, she brought her face closer, and in an even tone of voice, repeated the same question, pressing Kyousuke for an answer as he struggled to find the right words, overwhelmed by her sudden intensity.

"...Nothing. We weren't planning to do anything, we said," Eiri spat disdainfully. "You're just imagining filthy things all of your own accord, aren't you? You covert lecher of an upperclassman..."

Shamaya turned toward Eiri, anger flashing in her eyes. "Wha... Wh-who are you calling a corpulent lecher of an upperclassman?!"

"I said 'covert,' not 'corpulent.' Do you think I care if you're fat?"

"M-my goodness...oh-ho-ho. I say, how terribly impolite of me! It's just that I'm jealous, since your chest is so excessively slim. I beg your pardon, my underdeveloped lecher of an underclassman! Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho."

"Please, don't worry about it, Miss Overdeveloped. It's simply that I don't have any useless blubber."

Their smiles could not hide the ferocity of the argument that Shamaya and Eiri were having as they squared off face-to-face. They

weren't as big as Renko's, but Shamaya calmly folded her arms to emphasize her plentiful breasts, and Eiri placed her hands on her waist, standing in such a way as to show off her slender physique.

It was an explosive situation. Their eyes were locked, as if they might kill each other at any moment.

Even though he was nervous inside, Kyousuke tried valiantly to smooth things over. "H-hey, you two...quit fighting, would you? Okay? Big boobs and small boobs, each one has their charms. A-B-C-D-E-F-G, everyone's different and that's okay with me! Well, that just about solves it. Let's stop fighting? Love and peace and boobies! ... Okay? Understand?"

"FUCK."

"Huh?"

Shamaya and Eiri raised their middle fingers to show Kyousuke what they thought of his intrusion. Kyousuke was shocked and dumbfounded with the scornful eyes of two beautiful girls turned on him.

"...Well? What were the two of you planning to do?"

"We told you, we weren't planning to do anything. Are you deaf?"

—And then they resumed quarreling again. The gulf between the big-breasted Shamaya and tiny-breasted Eiri seemed to be deeper than Renko's cleavage.

"Y-you... At the very least, I am your elder! So be sure to watch your language. Anyway, it's pointless to dodge my question. I saw exactly what you were doing! Mr. Kamiya is interested in nice girls like me—which is to say, seeing you, with your inferiority complex, press that skinny body up against him with a lecherous leer...it's the perfect picture of calculated seduction! That was a splendid example of the sweet-and-sour personality type!"

“Huh?! Wait...wh-where did you see that from, exactly?!”

“Oh-ho-ho. Weeell now, where could it have been, I wonder?”

“Answer me!”

“*You* answer *me*. After the lap pillow, what were you planning to do?”

“Huh...a-after? After the lap pillow...what are you *supposed* to do?”

“Surely everyone knows that. You do XX, and XXX, and then XXXXX and XXX. After that, let’s see...from XXX you move on to XX and so on—”

“Miss Kurumiya, she’s the one who did it!”

“Eeek!! You’ve got it all wrong, that’s wrong! I’ve never done such things, not once! Truly, I’m pure!” Scrambling to look behind her, Shamaya realized that no one was there. “Y-you—! You planned this, didn’t you?!” She glared hatefully at Eiri, who was smiling triumphantly.

“...Not really. You self-destructed all on your own, didn’t you? Well, what are you going to do, Miss Shamaya? Depending on your response, I may decide to communicate the various nasty words that you just uttered, in their entirety and without euphemism, to your beloved Miss Kurumiya.”

“.....?!”

Shamaya bit her lip as Eiri delivered the threat. Her hands, which had been tightly gripping the sides of her body, slackened. Taking a deep breath, she brushed her hair back. “Hmph...n-nothing to do about it, then. The two of you were only planning to engage in the lap pillow maneuver, and are no longer doing so. This time I shall overlook it. However, listen well! This does not mean that I am intimidated by your threats. It is simply that I, with my deeeeeply compassionate heart, have seen fit to forgive your obscene attempts.

You must absolutely not forget this fact."

"...Sure, whatever." Eiri shrugged her shoulders.

Shamaya threw her a sharp glance before turning on her heel. "Mr. Kamiya, you'll do well to remember this! It is fortunate for you that I was the one who found you. Had it been any other member of the Public Morals Committee, you would have been immediately dragged away...and if you had been, you would have had no grounds to complain about being disciplined."

As she heaped abuse on the two of them, Kyousuke, who was sitting on the floor grasping his knees in the corner of the room, lifted his head, eyebrows raised in puzzlement. "Other Public Morals Committee members? ...Discipline?"

"Yes, that's right. We members of the Public Morals Committee, unlike you ordinary students, *are permitted the special privilege of carrying lethal weapons*. Depending on the situation, we are granted the authority to discipline ordinary students on the spot, just like the teachers."

"Wha...?"

Shamaya smiled at the astonished Kyousuke, an affectionate expression that would set anyone who saw it at ease. "However, you needn't worry. I absolutely do not do such things; I can at least promise you that. I'd bet the brassiere I'm wearing now on it, certainly."

"...Do you really mean that?"

"Yes, of course. If you like, I can bet my underpants, too—"

"No, that's not..."

Shamaya giggled her usual pompous string of syllables at Kyousuke, who was drained of strength. "I'm joking. Only the part about not disciplining you is true. I'm a genuine pacifist... I want to

get along well, even with the two of you. You are my dear underclassmen, after all. Let's treat each other well from now on, shall we?" Smiling, Shamaya exited the room, leaving Kyousuke and Eiri with these words.

When her footsteps had faded away, and all signs of her presence had disappeared, Kyousuke breathed a sigh of relief. "That was so close... Good thing we got away with it, huh, Eiri?"

I thought we were done for when she saw the lap pillow thing, but —it seems like Shamaya is not a bad person after all. At least, not as bad as Kurumiya and the other teachers or the rest of the Public Morals Committee.

"...Hm? Her boiling point is relatively low, and her line of tolerance rigidly defined, isn't it? It's a little unexpected." Eiri absently played with her ponytail. "Isn't she supposed to be the sophisticated Public Morals Committee chair?"

It sounded like she objected to the idea that they might get along. Apparently the clash between huge breasts and tiny breasts was troublesome and ongoing. *She's on bad terms with Renko, too, this girl...*

"...Hey, Kyousuke...do you want to die that badly?"

"Did you read my mind?!"

"When you're staring at someone's chest, it's not hard to tell what you're thinking, you creep from the planet Boob! No wonder I can't bring myself to be nice to you... Seriously, you're an idiot, Kyousuke!" She stormed out of the room, ponytail swaying behind her.

Gaping at her receding back, Kyousuke collapsed on the bed. "Maaan, she's really pissed off. But she did save us by speaking her mind..." It was strange, but he found that he could not bring himself to get upset with his normally prickly companion.

A little bit of loneliness, a little bit of relief—a strange feeling washed

over Kyousuke as he once again arranged his luggage and left the room. Walking down the corridor, he recalled the day's schedule.

It was just after ten o'clock. The next item on the schedule was 'Outdoor Cooking,' apparently the main event of the second day. A big curry cookout.

X X X

The Outdoor Cooking event was held at a pavilion on the grounds, which housed both stainless steel kitchen sets and traditional outdoor ovens built from concrete blocks. Under the pavilion roof, Kyousuke and the other freshmen diligently applied themselves to cooking.

"Ah, shit... This really isn't going well. Is this really all we need...?"

"Oh dear, do your best! You can do it, Kyousuke, for sure!"

Maina was putting every effort into cheering on Kyousuke, who was looking despondent. Sitting on the ground with his legs crossed, he struggled with a wooden plank and dowel.

The friction between the upright dowel and the plank was supposed to create a spark—a primitive method for building a fire. They had neither matches nor a lighter; the only other thing that had been provided was a bit of newspaper. Students on hearth duty were expected to start a fire using only the tools they'd been given.

Of course, their squad member Mohawk chose that moment to pull a flamethrower seemingly from thin air. "Hya-ha, let's finish thiiiiiis!" he shouted triumphantly, preparing to set the hearth ablaze.

"I'll finish you!" Kurumiya snatched the flamethrower away, and burned him to a crisp. He was carried away on a stretcher.

Kyousuke, who didn't want to get torched himself, made an honest effort to light the fire as instructed, but... "Hey, you know...is this even possible? I'm getting nothing." He wiped away sweat with the towel

around his neck.

Working in the same cooking area, the other squads on hearth duty also seemed to be fighting hard to light a fire, as weak voices came from here and there, saying things like, “My arms are at their limit…” and “I’m confident when it comes to arson, but…” and “Can’t we just eat it raw?”

Then, from among them:

“Paleo fire staaaaaaaaaaaarteeeeeeeeeeeer!” There was one student who worked the rod with staggering speed. A high-fashion girl with a flour sack on her head—it was Bob. As she dexterously turned the dowel at great speed between her large palms, smoke began to rise before their eyes from a small orange ember. “……?! Now, Renkoooooo!”

“Yeah, leave it to me! *Kksshhhhhh…kksshhhhhh*!” Renko quickly added the newspaper and began blowing on the fledgling coal. However, perhaps because she was wearing a gas mask, she could barely give it any air. Bob’s and Renko’s strenuous efforts seemed futile as their coal began to die…

It’s hopeless, isn’t it?! Everyone looked ready to give up.

“Please leave it to us, GMK!” Two of the male students working on hearth duty nearby abandoned their fire-making tools. Lining their faces up next to Renko’s, they began to blow.

“Y-you guys are…!”

The ember, now fed with plenty of oxygen, began to grow—

“It liiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!”

Before the roaring blaze of a fire, the four of them let out a roar of their own. The leaden mood under the pavilion was lifted by smiling faces, and the air filled with applause and cheers.

Pushing a towel up under her flour sack to wipe away at her sweat, Bob flashed a sideways peace sign and said, “With this, we have once again increased our feminine power!”

In this case it was man power, I think…

Regardless, the two students who had exchanged high fives with Renko were fairly excited.

“We knew it! GMK and Sack-Head Bob are amazing… We wanna be like you!”

“We were really honored to have your help! Please shake my hand!”

“*Kksshh*. Yeah, we should be thanking *you*. If we hadn’t had your help, I don’t think it would have worked. Did you see yesterday’s live show—could you have become fans at our debut performance as ‘Fuckin’ Park’? Please lend us your continued support! *Kksshh*.”

“Ye-yes, ma’am!” Cradling the hands that Renko had shaken with utmost devotion, the boys returned to their original squad.

An amazed mutter slipped from Kyousuke’s mouth as he watched this strange series of events. “Wow…they’re so popular.”

Their campfire “Murder Rap” had apparently been a smash hit, and each member of Class B Squad Four was now being showered with enthusiastic attention from the student body. The group of former misfits had now secured themselves an unusual popularity. *They’re difficult to approach because of their outward appearance and demeanor, but once you try talking to them, they’re an amiable lot…*

“Yoo-hoo! How are you doing, you two?” GMK—Renko—interrupted his thoughts. Kyousuke’s and Renko’s squads had neighboring workspaces, since they were both Squad Four of their respective classrooms.

“As you can see, it’s pointless… Ours just doesn’t want to light.”

“Oh no... Are we going to have to go without lunch...? I’m hungry...”

Renko nodded at Kyousuke’s and Maina’s sorrow. “Is that so? Well, then, we’ll share our fire with you.”

“Huh?”

“Why are you so surprised? It’s only reasonable. It won’t even diminish ours... Everyone else, too, if you want it, come and get it! You can take all the fire you want from our hearth.” Speaking quite indifferently, Renko looked around the outdoor cooking area.

The students fighting hard to light fires lifted their heads, and looked at Renko with wide eyes. “Geeeee—Emmmmmm—Kaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyy!” they shouted in unison, deeply moved.

Throwing down their tools, the students rushed toward their Prometheus. “G-M-K! G-M-K!” they all chanted, and began to lift her onto their shoulders. Renko, abducted in an instant before Kyousuke’s eyes, was thrown into the air over and over again in time with the students’ shouting.

“Tch. What the hell even *is* GMK?” Shinji watched the uproar with a sidelong glance. “How ridiculous; that’s not even a *thing*...” he said, while shrewdly on his way to acquire fire.

Shinji, who had had a terrible time during the Seven Deadly Sins Atonement Orienteering, probably didn’t find the sudden rise in Renko’s popularity very interesting. The other members of his ensemble—Usami and the ditzy girl—also shot hateful glares at Renko and her group. Only the dreadlocked Oonogi seemed uneasy, as if he had mixed emotions...

“...Well, then. For now, it seems like the hearth is not a problem.”

Holding a crackling and popping flame in front of him, Kyousuke breathed a sigh of relief and looked toward the kitchen. There,

standing at the ready next to their outdoor ovens, other students wore aprons atop their uniforms and held large carving knives, looking lost.

Before the students on food preparation duty lay strange, ominous-looking fish, each flapping around on a cutting board. Their round, fat bodies were covered in colorful psychedelic patterns.

"...All right. Each of you has been given a puffer fish, sourced by Busujima. It's a light, flavorful fish with white flesh that is quite delicious! Oh, and it's called a puffer fish, but it contains no neurotoxins like tetrodotoxin, so please don't worry about anything like that. If you make a mistake cutting it, you will only be struck by extreme dizziness, headache, stomachache, and nausea! Now, if you don't want to spew—from both ends at once—the curry that everyone took so much trouble to make, please cut carefully. The toxins are contained in the skin, organs, and blood. If you're unlucky, also in another certain part of the body... Ah, never mind that, it's nothing. In any case, you are not allowed to throw the fish away without eating it. It you try, I will inject the toxin directly into your bloodstream, understand? Well, then, do your best!"

Thus came the announcement.

On food preparation duty for Kyousuke's group was—

"...*Fwah*..."

Yawning and showing no inclination at all toward the task was Eiri, their only option.

Mohawk was absent due to Kurumiya's discipline; Kyousuke had never so much as lifted a cooking knife, having relied entirely on his younger sister, Ayaka; and Maina was obviously out of the question. Process of elimination had made the choice for them.

"...We just have to take these things apart, right?" Eiri wore a bandana and apron that suited her quite well. Nevertheless, her culinary skills were an unknown quality.

Before the outdoor cook-off had begun, Kyousuke had asked her, “Can you cook?” and was met with glaring eyes that seemed to say, “Of course I can. Are you making fun of me?” so he didn’t think it would be a problem, but...

“.....”

Idly toying with her knife, Eiri looked down at the puffer fish quivering on the cutting board. Suddenly, a murderous light flashed in her sleepy eyes. The slow whirling of the blade stopped. Raising the knife high in the air, Eiri shouted, “Diiiiiieeeeeeeeeeee!”

Chop!

The deadly weapon swung downward with incredible speed, faster than the eye could see. “Noooooooooooo!!” Kyousuke screamed, unable to hold back.

The blade struck straight down, bisecting the puffer fish’s head from its body like a guillotine. It stabbed deep into the surface of the cutting board, where it stood lodged on end. The freshly severed head flew through the air, leaving a thin red trail behind it. It fell with a wet thud near Michirou, who was working at the next station over.

“...Huh? Aaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!”

Indifferent to Michirou’s screaming, Eiri gently pulled at the twitching corpse of the headless puffer fish before her as blood gushed from the cross-section cut. “Wh-wha...what is this? It’s so dark.”

“___”

This time, Kyousuke and the others who were watching recoiled. *Uh...what did she say? D-does Eiri not know how to cook? This is too awful.*

“W-well...it’s gross like this, so why don’t I hurry and slice it up?” The knife stuck upright in the cutting board like a gravestone. Extracting the blade, Eiri held it aloft, its edge gleaming in the sun.

She prepared to plunge it downward with all her strength.

"...That's far enough." A hand caught her wrist before she could swing. It was Michirou, wearing an apron, his bandana tied in a triangle.

Eiri glared at him in annoyance. "...Excuse me. Would you please stay out of the way of my cooking?"

"Cooking? That was cooking, you say? Ha! Absurd. Whatever you were doing, it was not cooking. It was a simple atrocity! I'll teach you the true art of cooking!" Michirou snatched away her blade.

"Just a—What are you—? Ouch!"

"Step aside," he said, ignoring Eiri's protests as he pushed her away and stood in front of her cutting board. Holding the knife just like a sword, he confronted the remains of the puffer fish.

A moment of silence passed.

"Puffer fish...you who perished at the hand of this brutal cutthroat...with this hand of mine I shall mourn your soul! Embraced by the melody of the repose of souls, gently drift away to sleep. Now, dance with me, Azrael! The first movement of the hidden esoteric 'Bring Me the Horizon' and 'Pray for Plagues'!"

His lengthy preamble complete, Michirou began to prepare the fish. Thrusting the blade in, he pulled out the internal organs, removed the bones, skinned the fish, and split its body. Perhaps as a kind of requiem, he hummed a tune while he worked; his skill was truly impressive.

"N-no way... How is he—?" Eiri sputtered.

"Michirou's family are caterers. That's why he's so good at cooking..." Chihiro explained, squatting down next to her. With vivid, blood-red eyes, she surveyed Eiri's body.

“Uh…wh-what is it?”

“…You look tasty. Hey, can I eat you?”

“Huh?! Of course you can’t!”

“…I don’t mean sexually or anything.”

“I know that! Either way, the answer’s no! No means no!”

Eyeing the red-faced assassin ravenously, Chihiro slunk back to her own kitchen area. Michirou had finished preparing the puffer fish. “I have pacified its spirit… As for the rest, do as you please.” With these parting words, he followed after Chihiro. Atop the cutting board, clean slices of puffer fish were left neatly arranged.

“…Hmph. I-I’m not going to say thank you or anything! I could have prepared one or two fish on my own, too, you know. I totally could have! …P-probably.” Eiri, standing once more in front of her cutting board, was blustering childishly. She was a sore loser, it seemed.

Still, she transferred the slices of puffer fish into a bowl and started on the vegetables. However, it was obvious that she didn’t really know what she was doing. Looking lost, she imitated Michirou’s stance—

“R-right…let’s meet at the hearth, Maina.”

“Oh dear… Th-that’s right… Are we really going to be able to eat lunch…?”

Chop! Chopchopchopchopchopchop, chop! Accompanying the staccato rhythm of the knife, they could hear Michirou shouting. “The potatoes, the potatooooooeeeeeesss!! That’s completely the wrong shaaaaaape!!”

Glancing around as if planning to flee, Kyousuke and Maina returned to their own station. They wished to see no more of such tragedy.

Thirty minutes had passed since Outdoor Cooking had begun. A despondent atmosphere had already settled over Kyousuke and the other students working at their tasks.

Let's make the rice tasty, at least... If they could manage that, they would be able to avoid the worst-case scenario—going without lunch. At this point, they would have been happy with anything edible, even meager salted rice balls.

Mustering his dispirited heart, Kyousuke poured all of his energy into manning the oven.

X X X

Kyousuke's squad had fallen into despair. Because several minutes later, an unexpected guest appeared at their station.

"How do you do, everyone? Is your curry-making coming along well?"

As Kyousuke was washing rice at the sink, Shamaya had appeared wearing a bandana and apron. Instantly, beautiful flowers bloomed in profusion throughout the sweat-and smoke-filled outdoor cooking area, and the students at work simultaneously looked toward her. "It's Miss Shamaya!" "Miss Shamaya is here!" "Beautiful...!" "Cool!" "Sh-she's too radiant, I can't look directly at her!" The shrill voices of boys and girls alike filled the air.

The ordinary students—aside from Kyousuke and his group—saw Shamaya as the upperclassman they yearned to be. Everyone was enchanted by her elegant smile and sophisticated behavior.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting when you are so busy. I have come to assist any squads who might be suffering a shortage of members. Please, continue to make your curry without paying me any mind! Now...where could Mr. Kamiya and his merry group of friends be—?"

“Hyaaaaaa!”

Swp, whizzzz…thunk!

As Shamaya surveyed her surroundings, a shadow flew across her cheek, then quickly disappeared. “…Hm?” Across her pristine cheek appeared a very thin red line.

Gingerly, she brought her hand to her left cheek, over which the shadow had passed.

“___”

Her fingertips came away smeared with bright crimson. The smile disappeared from her face as she turned to look, blood oozing from her face. Stuck into the ground behind her was *a hatchet*.

“……What on earth is this?”

Shamaya’s growling voice echoed through the silent outdoor cooking area. Slowly turning her head back again, her lightless eyes fixed on the figure there before her—

“Ah, um…that was, well…m-my hand…my hands slipped, um…”

Maina, who had just finished swinging an *empty pair of hands* at a pile of firewood, stood there, stock-still. The moment her eyes met Shamaya’s gaze, she shrieked and curled herself into a ball, trembling.

“…Your hands slipped? Your hands slipped, is that what you said? Attempting to cut firewood, the hatchet slipped and went flying… coincidentally cutting my cheek—is that what you just told me?”

“Yes!! Ah…a-aaaah…” Maina fell on her backside as Shamaya approached, face as expressionless as her voice. Looking pitiful, Maina flapped her mouth in wordless terror.

“Don’t be quiet—give me an answer, please, Miss Igarashi. Did you intentionally throw the hatchet in an attempt to kill me? Or did the

hatchet just happen to fly in my direction entirely by accident? Which is it? Answer me quickly now... If you won't, I'll—"

"It was an accident, an accident!" Kyousuke interrupted, slipping between Maina and Shamaya. "Of course it was just a mishap; these things happen!"

Maina let out a noise—"...ah"—and Shamaya looked wordlessly at Kyousuke, her emerald eyes frowning. "...Accident? Mishap? On what grounds do you speak such words, Mr. Kamiya? I believe I was asking Miss Igarashi, not you. Now kindly stop interjecting, it is totally uncalled for. If you won't—"

"Waaahhh...s-ssss-sowwy!" Maina shouted, interrupting Shamaya's speech. "It was a mishap...an accident! N-not on purpose... It wasn't on purpooooooooose!" She jumped in between Kyousuke and Shamaya, bowing so low her head seemed like it might scrape the ground. "I'm very clumsy, and...that's why I'm always causing everyone a lot of trouble, um...and, Miss Shamaya, you were over there... Oh dear, oh my. So, it wasn't on purpose! I'm very sorry that I hurt you. Especially on your face... Really, really, I'm sowwy!"

"___"

As she looked down at Maina, rolled into a ball on the ground, Shamaya closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "...I understand. If that's how it is, there's no helping it, I suppose." She smiled gently, her emerald eyes shining with a clear light.

As Maina looked up in confusion, Shamaya stroked the girl's head. "Rather, I am the one who acted unforgivably," she continued. "It has been a very long time since I have seen my own blood, so...I unfortunately lost my composure. I do apologize! You needn't worry one bit about the injury. It is not a deep cut, so it won't even leave a scar."

"Mi-Miss Chamawya..." Being smiled at by Shamaya, Maina screwed up her face and began to cry. Shedding fat tears, she held out a light pink hand towel, as if she had suddenly become aware of it.

“Um…h-here! If you like, please use this! For the cut on your cheek…”

“My goodness, oh-ho-ho. Thank you very much. You are a very kind young lady, aren’t you?” Taking the hand towel from Maina, Shamaya smiled happily.

…Seems like that worked out peacefully.

Shamaya bowed her head to Kyousuke, who felt exhausted in the wake of the fading tension. “Mr. Kamiya, I also owe you an apology for my earlier rudeness. Thank you ever so much for putting yourself in between me and Miss Igarashi. You truly saved the day.”

“Hm…? Oh, no, please don’t worry about it. I won’t.”

“Oh-ho-ho. Is that so? Even though you’ve killed twelve people, you’re very kind, aren’t you, Mr. Kamiya? My interest in you grows ever stronger…”

“Huh?”

“……Hm.”

Kyousuke looked dumfounded. Eiri scowled.

Shamaya clapped her hands, and said, “Come now! The fact is, I am here to lend you all a hand! One of your squad members is always being disciplined by Miss Kurumiya… The boy with the Mohawk haircut, right? He’s been sent to the infirmary so many times—will he be all right?”

“Uh…you don’t need to worry about Mohawk. I don’t think his head is all right, but I’m sure his body is fine. That always happens.”

“…Always? Very well, then. For the time being, I am under orders from Miss Kurumiya to help your short-handed group, so…” Adjusting her bandana and retying her apron strings, Shamaya spoke in high spirits. Her eyes glistening, she clenched her fists, apparently

enthusiastic. “Unworthy though I am, I, Saki Shamaya…shall lend you my assistance, to the very best of my ability. Let us combine our strengths and work as one, to make delicious curry! Aim for three stars! Despite how I look, I am somewhat confident in my cooking ability. Oh-ho-ho. You had a bit of a hard time earlier, but now you can redeem yourselves! Be it beef, pork, chicken, fish, or human…my skill at preparing it beautifully is sure to leave a lasting impression!”

X X X

“…And what is this?”

Shamaya had entered the kitchen area with a snort. As soon as she spied the terrible spectacle spread out there, she was instantly in low spirits. Her gauze-bandaged cheek twitched.

“Wh-what do you mean? They’re…vegetables.”

“Oh, I see! They’re vegetables, are they…? I knew that already! What I want to know is how they came to be in such a state! That is my question!” Shamaya slammed her hand down on the kitchen counter—*bam!*—and glared at Eiri.

Eiri folded her arms and, with her face turned away, answered in an unusually timid voice, “…I-I don’t know.” In front of her, cramming the top of the cutting board to capacity, were…

“H-horrible…it’s just like the scene of a mass murder.”

Potatoes, carrots, onions—all now mere shadows of their former selves. Their dissected corpses, unrinsed, bits of skin still clinging to them, lay in uneven piles. Deep cuts from the knife ran every which way on the cutting board, fragments of which had flown off from the force of the blows. They were scattered here and there around the countertop and floor.

It was a genocide, heaps of corpses all around. The murderer who had perpetrated the massacre bit her lip. “‘M-mass murder’… You of

all people can't say something like that." Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

"Uh…sorry. 'Mass murder' was going a bit far. It's not a mass murder, it's, um…a massacre?"

"That's no different, Kyousuke, you idiot! Do you want to become a vegetable, too?!"

"…I sincerely apologize." Having no desire to be chopped up himself, Kyousuke immediately hung his head.

Angry, Eiri raised the knife in the air, and again the deadly weapon was snatched from her hand. "…This is a forfeiture. As long as you are allowed to hold on to such a thing, no ingredient is safe. I suppose it cannot be helped… You and Mr. Kamiya watch the hearth together. You're cut from food preparation duty. And you—"

Shamaya removed her gaze from Eiri and looked at Maina. "…are cut from hearth duty. As the chair of the Public Morals Committee, I cannot allow another incident like earlier, you see. Instead, I shall appoint you to cooking duty. Would you be so kind as to assist me with my cooking, Miss Igarashi?"

"Eh?! M-mmmm-me, cooking?!"

"Huh?! Wait a second, Shamaya!" As Maina's eyes widened, Eiri raised her voice. "Entrusting the cooking to Maina is really idiotic… Have you gone crazy?!"

Letting out a long sigh, as if disgusted to the core, the blond beauty shrugged her shoulders. "…And what are you, the perpetrator of that mass murder, prattling on about?"

Eiri's face flushed. "Sh-shut up!" Nothing she could have said right then would have made a difference; her words carried no weight.

"Um…excuse me, Miss Shamaya, but I have to agree with Eiri. Entrusting the cooking to Maina is a really bad idea. It'll result in

actual corpses."

"...Corpses? Whatever do you mean?" Shamaya tilted her head quizzically at Kyousuke's remark.

They explained the situation to Shamaya, who rapidly blinked in confusion. They told her how the classmate who had eaten Maina's cooking had foamed at the mouth and died, and how absolutely no poison had been detected, and how researchers had tried to investigate the cause but had found it impossible...

Shamaya listened to the whole story. "My goodness. Well, then...if that's the case, there's nothing to be done about it, is there?" Smiling bitterly, she seemed to give up on the idea. After glancing at Maina's face—

"I suppose you thought I'd say something like that, no?"

Gaze sharpening, she glared at Kyousuke. He could clearly see a glint of suspicion in her eyes. "People died from eating food that she prepared, you say...? Think about it sensibly... That couldn't possibly be true. What a terrible joke! Aren't you going a bit far, teasing your senior?"

"Huh? But—when Maina's classmate died after he ate her food—"

"From whom did you hear that story?"

"Well, from Maina herself, but..."

"...What about from other people?"

"No, not really...I just heard it from Maina's own mouth, I think."

"Is that so...? In that case, as expected, it bears no credence." As she made this declaration, Shamaya raised her index finger. "...Listen up! You did not witness Miss Igarashi's cooking kill a person with your own eyes. Neither did you hear the tale from the teachers. Despite these facts, how are you able to state definitively that what you heard

is true? It is probably all *a lie*."

"Wha—"

Kyousuke and Eiri were shocked speechless.

Maina stared at Shamaya blankly.

"It is unfortunately quite common at this academy to attract the interest of their classmates, and to give off the impression that they are really special murderers... People exaggerate their crimes. Or else, to conceal their true nature, they purposely understate... Alas, students here are quite prone to do so! For that reason, you will do well not to simply believe things that you heard only from the person in question!"

"....."

Shamaya gave Kyousuke and the others a stern stare. For a moment, silence reigned.

"Ah, um...s-so, what you're saying is that...that I'm telling lies?"

"No, not at all! What I'm saying is that it is possible. With that in mind, let us step back and examine the situation. There are two possibilities: The first is that someone died from eating food cooked by Miss Igarashi. The second is that she is lying. In the end, which of these do you think is more likely to be true?"

".....?!"

Letting the question hang, Shamaya brushed her bangs aside elegantly. Kyousuke and the others were taken aback, at a loss for a reply as Shamaya continued. "I understand that you want to believe your friend, but I do not believe her. However, if I am wrong, and it is possible to kill with cooking, then I certainly want to see it for myself. Why, I've never even heard of that method of murder... Isn't the idea just fascinating? Oh-ho-ho! This is a perfect opportunity, so why don't we test it out right here and now?"

A wide smile filled her whole face.

“Let’s have curry made by Miss Igarashi! I will sample the food that she prepares first, as a poison tasting. If nothing happens, then we know Miss Igarashi’s story is a lie. If anything strange happens—like if I should die—then Miss Igarashi’s story will be proven true. How about that, hmm? Don’t you think this will be interesting?”

X X X

“...Hey, is this really a good idea?” Squatting before the outdoor oven, Eiri fed in bits of kindling.

Looking troubled, Kyousuke scratched his head. “No, it’s not good, but...”

In the kitchen, Shamaya was keeping a close watch over Maina, who was fearfully attempting to make curry. The vegetables that Eiri had mangled were now completely transformed, the toxic puffer fish had been kindly prepared by Michirou (who had himself tested it for poison upon completion), and the recipe seemed to be coming together.



Ten or so minutes had passed since Maina had commenced cooking, her every movement subject to intense scrutiny. She made mistake after mistake, crying out painfully, “Ahh!! Ohh…s-sowwy!”

Picking up a knife that she had dropped on the ground, Maina went to wash it in the sink. However, the water pressure was too strong, it seemed. “Eeek!!” Surprised by the splashing water, Maina leaped back.

Whoosh! Still gripping the knife, Maina flailed her arms and stumbled into Shamaya, who had been observing her closely, grazing the back of her neck with a blade. “S-ssss-sowwyy!” Her wild, panicky hands thrust out with the blade, again and again. Countless silver flashes sparkled as kitchen utensils were thrown through the air.

“Y…y-you! You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?!” Dodging every utensil, a cold sweat clung to Shamaya as she shouted in frustration. It was a scene that had played out several times already.

“Eh?! N-not on purpose…um, well—ahh!!”

“Dooon’t dooo thaaat!!”

Shamaya’s scolding only made Maina tremble harder, which in turn made her even clumsier—it was an all too familiar pattern. Watching from the sidelines, even Kyousuke and Eiri felt uneasy. If this kept up, they would never get their cooking finished.

“That’s why we told her it was better to stop forcing her, but…if Shamaya was an ordinary person, she would have been killed a long time ago!”

“…If she dies like this, she’s just reaping what she’s sown. Maina may be doing the killing, but she’s the one we should feel sorry for.”

Forcing Maina to cook: Shamaya had been the one to do it, brandishing her position as Public Morals Committee chair to make it happen. It seemed she wanted to verify the authenticity of Maina’s

story at any cost. Kyousuke and Eiri had been completely ignored. “In the unlikely event that anything should happen, I shall take full responsibility,” she had said with a smile…

“*Kksshh*. This is turning into a real circus, isn’t it?” Renko, who was keeping watch over the fire in the next hearth over despite the smoke, wiped the viewports of her gas mask as Kyousuke and Eiri watched the kitchen disaster unfold with pounding hearts.

“Maina’s cooking… To tell the truth, I wasn’t so sure myself. Is it possible, I wonder, to kill people with ordinarily prepared food, not adding in any poison? So this is very exciting! And even if Maina’s story should turn out to be true, the only one who’s gonna die is that creepy upperclassman… No matter how it goes down, it’ll be a tasty outcome!”

Rocking her body back and forth cheerfully, Renko laughed with a “*kksshh*.” The music flowing out of her headphones—she seemed to be giving her body over to it as an alternative to her murderous melody.

Kyousuke stared at her black gas mask in surprise. “This is rare, Renko…you being so bluntly prejudiced against someone.”

“Hm? You’re right… It seems like it might be something like disgust. We’re the same.”

“…Same? You and Shamaya?”

“Yeah. From her I can sense, how do I say… She has the same smell as me. And—” Nodding, Renko calmly folded her arms beneath her two plentiful tracts of real estate. “Her boobs are quite large. That’s why I’m irritated.”

“…I’m irritated with you on that account,” Eiri interrupted.

“That account? Oh, because my boobs are big, right?!”

“…No way. It’s because every time you say something serious, you

immediately crack a joke and throw up a smokescreen."

"Don't worry about it, Eiri."

"Watch where you're looking when you speak, you waste of boobs. You should just die already..."

"Ah-hah, so you *are* irritated because of Renko's chest, aren't you...?" Kyousuke noted.

"...What did you say?"

"Nothing at all." Pierced by Eiri's gaze, which was sharper than any kitchen knife, Kyousuke hung his head.

"...Hmph." Turning away, Eiri changed the subject. "Anyway, I wonder what the truth is...about Maina's cooking."

"I think there's a good chance it'll be edible...at least, it's more likely than your chest ever filling out!"

"....."

"—Hey, Kyousuke? What do you think?"

"Hm? G-good question... You're still in your growth period, so you've probably still got some filling out to do, right? Look, there's the saying that great talents mature late, so—"

"Who told you to talk about my chest?! Maina's cooking! We're talking about Maina's cooking!"

"*Kksshh*. That's what you get for ignoring my joke! They're gonna stay like that no matter how much time passes, so I think you're stuck with tiny breasts."

"...Do you want to be thrown in with the kindling? You can burn to a crisp, fat and all."

"Next, I cut the onion into bite-sized— Ahh!! Y-your eye! I hit your

eeeyeee!!”

“Eeeeee, I’ll kill yooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuu!!”

“...This is a lively outdoor cooking event, isn’t it, Michirou?”

“Right you are...but don’t forget, Chihiro! My true name is ‘Kuuga Makyouin’!”

Everywhere, the cooking area was filled with friendly, boisterous conversation from the students. Michirou, with the curry pot in his hands, was headed to the hearth together with Chihiro. Bob, looking over the state of their cooking utensils, shook her huge body, flour sack and all, with laughter.

“It’s great that we’re such close friends. I’m glad I came to this academy!”

“Heave, ho... Carry the pot, light the fire—whoooaaa!”

“That’s enooooooouuugh, no mooooooooooore!!”

The sound of something breaking echoed through the cooking area, quickly followed by Shamaya’s frantic shouting. In the clear blue summer sky, fluffy cumulonimbus floated by.

X X X

“I-it’s finished... Finished!”

Looking down at the simmering curry, Shamaya shouted with joy. Her appearance was one of total exhaustion. She bore no injuries, but her honey-colored hair was frizzy, her clothes were disheveled, her emerald eyes were overcast, and her cheeks were sunken.

“*Phew*...so t-tired. Cooking sure is hard...” Maina, similarly exhausted, slumped to the floor.

She let out a sigh as she wiped her sweat away. Shamaya, however, turned a scornful eye on her partner. "...I'm the one who ought to be saying that." She looked down at the contents of the pot again. "...It's normal, is it?"

"...It's normal, sure."

"...Normal, yeah."

"...*Kksshh*."

Kyousuke and the others had joined her in peering into the pot, and voiced similar impressions.

Normal. Bite-sized pieces of potato, carrot, onion, and puffer fish floated in a thick, dark-brown roux. By all appearances, a completely normal curry.

"You even pulled the skins off the vegetables. It looks delicious, doesn't it?"

"Yes. And there is no room to question her food preparation methods. By which I mean, there were many dangers along the way, but...as for the food itself, it is absolutely an improvement upon the previous disaster..."

"Oh?! When on earth did you manage to cause such a gruesome incident, Eiri? I was preoccupied with the hearth, so I didn't even notice...*kksshh*."

"Sh-shut up! What does it matter what I did?!" Eiri's face grew red with anger as everyone stared at her.

Looking flustered, Maina asked, "Are you really...going to eat it? I-I think you'd better not—"

"Of course. With utmost gratitude!" Shamaya announced, immediately brushing aside Maina's words—even though her voice was tense. In one hand, she gripped a tasting spoon that she had

procured without anyone noticing.

"....."

Disregarding the nervous Kyousuke and crew, Shamaya herself smiled calmly.

Maintaining her composure, she placed a hand on her chest and spoke slowly. "You need not worry so. I watched her cook with my own two eyes. Start to finish, her every move... I kept a watchful eye on her to ensure that I would absolutely not overlook any suspicious behavior! I did not give her even a single opportunity to add any poison, so her cooking methods cannot be suspected. I can absolutely assure you—nothing will happen to you if you eat this curry, I say!"

Her demeanor full of confidence, Shamaya readied her spoon. There was not a shadow of anxiety anywhere in her expression; her smile did not waver for a moment. "...Well, then, I shall sample it!"

Positioning herself in front of the simmering curry, Shamaya looked around at everyone's faces. Kyousuke gulped loudly, Eiri furrowed her brow, Renko laughed cheerfully—"*kksshh*"—and Maina squeezed her eyes shut very tightly. She pressed her hands together, as if in prayer.

Shamaya lowered her head solemnly, blowing on a spoonful of curry.

"Bon appétit."

Without hesitation, she put it in her mouth.

"....."

For a short moment Shamaya looked upward, carefully tasting the flavor. Her severe expression gradually softened.

Turning toward Maina, who had timidly opened her eyes, Shamaya smiled broadly, satisfied. It was as if to say, "See, there's nothing

wrong with it!” She swallowed down the curry—or tried to.

“.....?!”

Shamaya’s eyes suddenly opened wide. In an instant her expression stiffened, her face went pale, and beads of sweat appeared on her skin.

The spoon fell from Shamaya’s hand. She held her mouth with both hands.

“Bwuh————?!”

She spit out the contents of her mouth in a magnificent spray.

The intense smell of curry enveloped them, and Shamaya crumbled to the ground.

“Ah...gah...ha...be...what is...this...ohh...”

As she lay facedown on the ground, a painful wheezing escaped the blonde’s mouth. Her body trembled slightly, and she tried desperately to spit out what was left of the food.

“Miss Shamaya?! Miss Shamayaaa!”

“Everyone, back up! You must not inhale that poison mist!”

Quickly realizing that something was amiss, Renko held back Kyousuke and the others who were about to rush over to Shamaya. She used all of her strength to keep them at a distance, protecting them from the yellow curry mist that was hanging in the air around her.

“Impossi-ble...impossible, it’s...th-this...taste...ohhh.” Shamaya, abandoned in the sickly curry fog, continued suffering, shedding sweat and tears. Likely unable to breathe, she looked to Kyousuke with imploring eyes.

“...?! Miss Shamaya—”

“I’ll go.”

Intercepting Kyousuke, who was about to take off running, Renko dived into the toxic mist. Equipped with a gas mask, she managed to reach Shamaya despite the dangerous curry. Scooping the twitching upperclassman into her arms, Renko carried her blank-eyed charge out of the mist.

“Midd Chabaya! Midd Chabayaaaaaa!” Maina immediately ran over to them.

“Ah, hey...wait, Maina!”

“Idiot! If you get close to her now—”

Ignoring Kyousuke’s and Eiri’s warnings, Maina charged over to where Shamaya was.

This is bad, Kyousuke thought. *Flustered as she is right now, Maina will surely...*

“Whooooooaaaaaa!”

“When she screams, you know it’s dangerous.”

“Oooph!!”

Maina, whose legs had somehow gotten tangled up, grazed Renko, who jumped out of the way, and fell directly onto Shamaya. Bending over Shamaya, who had turned faceup, she apologized frantically. “Aahhh!! So-sosososo-sowwy—”

“Gruaaaaaaaaahhh, ooooooooooohhh!!”

As if to revive her dead body, Maina pressed her hands into Shamaya’s stomach and delivered a secondary attack. Shamaya writhed in agony, on the receiving end of pressing attack after pressing attack.

Watching the situation from a distance, Renko let out a sigh of

relief.

"...*Kksshh*. Somehow, she still looks to be alive. That's great."

"It's not great! If we don't stop Maina soon, Miss Shamaya is as good as dead!!"

"Waaahhh. So-sosososo—sowwy!"

"Gyah!!"

Jumping up and kneeling on the ground to apologize, Maina's head struck Shamaya in the face.

Kyousuke, who had concluded that it was risky to leave things as they were, quickly restrained his friend.

Busujima, who had heard the uproar and come running, promptly called the medical team—

"I don't...accept...I absolutely do not accept this...gah!"

When Shamaya was loaded onto the stretcher and carried away, the situation finally calmed down. There was only the matter of the curry that had caused the whole uproar.

"...Hm...hm. Quite interesting. You don't mind if I take this?" Busujima, the poison specialist, was very interested in recovering the pot and its contents.

What became of Maina's special Murder Curry after that remains unknown.

X X X

"Um...Miss Shamaya?"

"....."

An hour had passed since the uproar around Maina's cooking. As soon as the outdoor cookout had come to a close, Kyousuke and the remainder of his squad had visited the infirmary. The corner room on the first floor of the House of Limbo was narrow, with three beds standing in a row.

In the bed closest to them slept Mohawk (in critical condition), wearing an artificial respirator. The middle bed was empty, and in the farthest one sat Shamaya, gazing out the window at the forest scenery. They called out to her, but there was no response.

Next to Kyousuke, Maina's eyes teared up, and she vigorously bowed her head to apologize. "...I'm so sorry! Um...I-I just cooked normally, but it turned out like that, and then...I did all those other awful things...but it wasn't on purpose! Truly, truly, I'b sowwy—"

"That's enough."

"...Ehh?" Maina, who had delivered her sobbing apology with her head bowed, raised her tear-streaked face.

Shamaya's voice was dry. She let out a long, thin sigh, shifting her gaze from somewhere outside the window to Maina's face. "I said that you don't need to apologize. The one who forced you to cook was me...the chair of the Public Morals Committee herself. All you did was follow my instructions and act under my careful watch, right? I cannot help but be stunned that such a thing could befall me despite my supervision. So there really is no need for you to apologize. After all, you did nothing wrong...isn't that so?" She smiled gently, as she always had before.

Under her calm gaze, Maina was at a loss for words. "...Ah..."

"However..." Shamaya's eyes dropped. "I was truly surprised by that curry... It had a dreadful taste. It wasn't all that bad at first, but it came from behind later. It was a taste the likes of which I have never experienced before, with dozens or maybe hundreds of flavors assaulting the tongue all at once—I thought I might be *killed by the*

taste! If I had swallowed instead of spitting it out, my digestive organs might have been overwhelmed by the stimulation, and I may well have died of shock. Wh-what a fearful weapon that was…" Perhaps recalling the flavor, Shamaya held a hand over her mouth.

Maina listened with a complicated expression on her face. She herself had thought that she was cooking normally, which made it difficult to respond.

Shamaya nodded reassuringly at her junior, who stood stock-still, stumped. "In any case, I am unharmed. My apologies for causing you any worry. I have no excuse for doubting Miss Igarashi's story… I shall accept the agony that I have suffered as a form of self-admonition. Everyone, please do not be concerned."

"S-sowwy, Mith…" Deeply moved by the warm words, Maina looked like she might start crying again. *What a good-natured person Miss Shamaya is… Thanks to her, we smoothly came to a reconciliation*. Kyousuke and the others let the tension out of their shoulders in tandem.

"By the way, everyone, what did you do about lunch? Certainly there was no way you could have eaten that *Murder Curry*. Of course, on my account the meal was—"

"Oh, don't worry about that!" Renko said proudly, pointing at her own gas mask. "As you can see, due to the fact that I am wearing this mask, I cannot eat anything! Even if it's the curry that everyone worked so hard to make, or the steak that you went out of your way to offer me, the mask is in the way and for the most part I cannot eat, so…I divided up my group's curry and gave it to them."

"My, did you? That's wonderful. Oh-ho-ho!" Not touching on the topic of the steak, Shamaya smiled broadly. She seemed to find it quite disagreeable that Renko would expressly make a snide remark about such a thing.

"W-well…we did boil the rice. When we left the cooking up to Eiri, we had already resigned ourselves to having only white rice for lunch.

Compared to our expectations, their curry was way better."

"Michirou is a great cook, isn't he?"

"Yeah, yeah. My bad for not being the perfect chef... Don't ever let me forget it," Eiri grumbled, glaring at Kyousuke and Maina with scorn.

Watching the scene with a friendly grin, Shamaya narrowed her emerald-colored eyes. "You all certainly are interesting. I would very much like to continue talking this way at our leisure, but...I'm sorry to say that I have no such time. The prison camping schedule is quite tight, you see. The next item on the program is Woodland Exploration, I believe. Do take care not to be late! After I rest just a bit longer, I, too, shall return to my official duties. There are a number of things that I must prepare, so... Yes, all sorts of things. Oh-ho-ho-ho!" Shamaya continued to smile cheerfully.

Casually turning his gaze away from her face, Kyousuke noticed something.

He *unfortunately* noticed.

Placed in the shadow of the medicine shelf, a garbage can. Inside it rested...


PUBLIC MOR
COMMITTE

* * *

...a crushed, discolored, ripped and shredded *light pink hand towel.*

"……?!"

Speechless, Kyousuke gasped. His body stiffened in an instant.

Noticing his expression immediately, Shamaya tilted her head. "... Do I have something on my face?" Just like a skilled murderer, concealing her deadly weapon before the moment of the kill... With her gentle voice and calm demeanor, she had cleverly disguised her murderous intentions.

"Ah...n-no! It's nothing. W-well, then...so sorry, but we should be going now, okay? Now that we've checked in on your well-being Miss Shamaya..."

"...Kyousuke? What's the matter? You look awfully pale—"

"Miss Shamaya mentioned it, too, didn't she, Eiri? We don't have much time. C'mon, let's hurry!" As he spoke, Kyousuke headed directly for the door. He wanted to get away from this place as quickly as possible.

"Hm...th-that's true, but..." Eiri grumbled suspiciously but followed.

Maina said, "Take care, Miss Shamaya! And...th-thank you!" and bowed her head before catching up to them. Renko added, "Okay, see you later!"

Shamaya waved calmly at Kyousuke and the others as they hurriedly left the infirmary. "The pleasure was all mine. Thank you for coming to visit me! Adieu... Oh-ho-ho!"

The last they saw of Shamaya's face, she was wearing a pure smile. Her expression, which had remained perfectly unchanged the whole time, was just like a mask.

X X X

“You must have been mistaken.”

They were sufficiently far away from the infirmary, in a deserted hallway. Eiri questioned Kyousuke suspiciously, having heard his explanation of the situation.

Kyousuke shook his head no and repeated himself. “It was no mistake. The thing in the garbage can was Maina’s hand towel. The pink towel that Maina handed to Shamaya during Outdoor Cooking was...mutilated—”

“No way!” Maina shouted. “That can’t be true...” Her feeble voice trembling, she mumbled frailly as she continued, “Miss Shamaya forgave me with a warm smile, and encouraged me with her kind words... To say that all that was a lie is wrong. It’s absolutely wrong! I won’t accept it! It must be your mistake, Kyousuke—”

“I saw it, too.”

“...Huh?” In surprise, Maina looked at Renko. Her face, concealed by the gas mask, stared back heartlessly. “A pink hand towel, looking like a beat-up dust cloth, was in the garbage can. We don’t know whether it was yours or not, but...at least, he’s not mistaken that such a thing was there.”

“N-no...no way...you’re wrong...”

Eiri rubbed the dejected Maina’s back. “Well, setting aside whether he’s right or wrong...for the time being, I think we’d better be cautious.”

“...Right,” Kyousuke added. “Assuming the worst, if the hand towel was Maina’s, and Miss Shamaya treated it like that and threw it away —”

“Yeah. It’s clear that our upperclassman is holding some dangerous feelings toward Maina. If she had enough with the towel that would

be one thing, but if she wasn't satisfied…she'll probably pick a fight. Next time she'll try to mangle our bodies instead, don't you think?"

"……"

As a heavy silence descended over the group, Renko pulled out a deep red booklet. It was the guidebook for the prison camping trip. Opening to the program for that day and the next, she spread the pages so that Kyousuke and the others could see, tracing the schedule with one finger.

"First up, the program after this is…'Woodland Exploration,' huh? 'Following the teachers and Public Morals Committee members who lead the way, each squad will hike through a broad expanse of dense woodland at their leisure…' It depends on who's leading us, but I already have a bad feeling about this. In the memo box on the side, they wrote, 'If you want to kill yourself, go ahead. When you do, die quietly so as not to cause an inconvenience to others.' What the hell? Anyway, deep in the forest, disposal of bodies isn't any trouble. This is likely where she'll start a fight, right? Or possibly—"

Renko's white fingertip slid smoothly down the program of events. As she looked over the coming schedule, she seemed to be trying to anticipate Shamaya's next moves. Her demeanor again reminded Kyousuke that Renko was a *professional killer*. Not some common psychopath but a real expert—a true master of murder.

"This evening's 'Heart Attack/Test of Courage,' perhaps? I wouldn't expect her to make a move in the presence of the teachers and other Public Morals Committee members, so…I think she'll probably look for a time when each squad is off on its own. If I were going to kill you, that's what I would do. Eiri, what do you think?"

Eiri held her chin in her hand. "Let me see…" Though she'd never actually completed the act, Eiri was similarly knowledgeable when it came to murder, and after a moment of brief contemplation, she nodded. With a finger adorned by a bright red nail, she pointed to the place where "Heart Attack/Test of Courage" was written.

"...I think that if she's coming for us, it'll be at night. Preparation is important for a murder. There's not much time before Woodland Exploration, and she's in a weakened physical state. It's even less likely if she's not the one guiding us... On the other hand, there is time before the Test of Courage, and that activity is done in pairs. It looks like it's taking place in the House of Limbo... If she turned out the lights, it would be pitch-black. Assuming she knows all the best places to launch a sneak attack, it wouldn't be impossible to kill without exposing herself."

"Right. On the third day, it doesn't look like there will be many such opportunities. If we wear ourselves out keeping watch she'll strike when we're weak, so for now let's focus on these two events, shall we? *Kksshh*."

"What is this, you two...? You're scary..."

Their deadly discussion had gone completely over Kyousuke's head. In times like these, he felt there was an unbridgeable distance between himself and the girls. When they were having a fun time together as usual, it was almost too easy forget, but—

There was a definite distance between Kyousuke and everyone else, a deep chasm that no amount of piled up corpses or spilled blood could fill.

"*Kksshh*. What's the problem, Kyousuke? It'd be one thing if we were your enemies, but we're on your side here. An eye for an eye, a blade for a blade—that's the way of the professional killer! We don't expect you and Maina, both novices who have only killed in the double digits, to understand... Don't worry about it."

"...I'm telling you, you're scary when you get like that." He could vividly imagine Renko's ferocious smile lurking beneath the gas mask.

Noticing that Kyousuke had unconsciously leaned away, Eiri said, "Don't worry," and brushed her hair back. "I won't let her kill you. Neither you or Maina... I won't let her lay a finger on you."

"Eiri..."

"Eiri..."

"*Kksshh*. I was planning on killing you, too, though, Eiri! ...Oh well. For now, it looks like we can all agree that we do not want to be killed by Shamaya the Murder Princess. In that case, we should cooperate, shouldn't we? She might not be as experienced as me, but she's had a lot of practice, and she might not be as skilled as Eiri, but I'm sure she's proficient with many deadly weapons. We need to stay vigilant, and if she comes at us with a sudden attack, we have to keep calm and deal with it!" Renko looked around imploringly at everyone in turn.

Kyousuke and Eiri nodded at her.

Maina pouted her lips and clenched her fists. "...Okay. I understand. Thank you. And I'm sorry... Thanks to me, you got mixed up in this, um..." She hung her head.

"It's not because of you." Tousling Maina's hair, Kyousuke smiled. "As Miss Shamaya said, she's only reaping what she's sown. And she certainly has it coming—"

"It's because you made a fool out of her, Kyousuke. She's probably stressed out, don't you think?" Placing a hand on Kyousuke's shoulder, Renko sighed. "*Kksshh*..."

Eiri struck her on the back of the head, hard. "You're the one who really made her look foolish, aren't you?" she accused. "Don't try to lay the blame on other people."

"...You did it, too, Eiri."

"Gyah!! Wha...what the hell are you doing?!" Eiri squirmed and jumped away as Renko jabbed her with a finger.

"Oh my, could you be weak there, Eiri?" Renko seemed amused. "And what about here? Or here, or here, or heeere? *Kksshh*." She

poked at Eiri, all over.

In response, Eiri also extended a finger toward Renko. "...Don't press your luck!"

Watching the two of them make a screeching clamor in the narrow hallway, Maina's expression softened. "Oh dear... N-neither of them have any anxiety, do they?"

"...None at all," Kyousuke answered. "But we don't need to worry. Somehow or other, they're reliable...plus you've got me by your side, too. So cheer up, will you? Okay?"

"Ah...o-okay! You're right... I've got you and everyone else with me! I'll cheer up! And this time I'll also..." *Show you that I can help out, too, huh?*

Maina was in high spirits. Her big flax-colored eyes reflected a strong, dignified resolve.

X X X

"U-um...are we going around in circles? It might just be my imagination, though. It seems like we went down this path before... Oh dear, oh my..." Maina looked restlessly at their surroundings. Her voice sounded like she might start crying at any moment.

The time was 3:12 PM. Kyousuke and the others were now in the midst of Woodland Exploration.

"No, I think it's your imagination...probably. Y-you're imagining it...right?" Walking beside Maina, Kyousuke was drawn in by her worry. He turned his head restlessly, surveying their environment. The full 360-degree panorama of his vision was completely filled with the green of trees, and he couldn't even see the sky for their thick, intertwining branches. Despite the fact that it was still afternoon, their surroundings seemed dull and gloomy.

About an hour had passed since they had started walking deeper

into the woods, and the scenery did not seem to be changing for the better anytime soon. Kyousuke and Maina had already begun feeling uneasy, but Eiri, who was walking at the end of the line, spoke as if she was bored. "...It's your imagination. See how the greenery is getting denser? We're going straight into the middle." As if to emphasize her point, she let out a long yawn.

Eiri was supposed to be keeping a close eye on Shamaya's movements, but she didn't show the slightest bit of tension. Which wasn't surprising, because the Public Morals Committee member who was leading Kyousuke's group was—

"....."

...A female student with her hair in braids, wearing glasses, walking silently forward. It was not Shamaya.

As they had confirmed before departure, Shamaya was in charge of Class B Squad One. It seemed very unlikely that she would make her move during Woodland Exploration. There was no way that she could leave the squad she was in charge of alone—and even if she could, in the middle of such closely growing trees, there was no way she would be able to locate Kyousuke and the others.

And even if she did manage to successfully locate them, they had another member of the Public Morals Committee with them...

"Anyway, that girl...how is she not lost?" They stared doubtfully at the back of their Public Morals Committee member leading the way.

"....."

Looking like she should be reading a book in the corner of a classroom, she nevertheless continued progressing indifferently. She didn't even have a map but still marched confidently forward. *What exactly are the signs she's using to get through this maze of a forest, I wonder...?*

"...Do you think *that* might have something to do with it?" Eiri

pointed to something just ahead of their Public Morals Committee guide.

Slithering along the ground, among exposed tree roots and piled up leaves, was a snake. Sporting a geometric pattern on its poisonous yellow body, it must have belonged to Busujima. As if leading the Public Morals Committee member who was in turn leading them, it slunk along at a leisurely pace.

"Oh, that's right...Mr. Busujima's snake is guiding the way for us. Amazing, that snake. Or is the amazing one Mr. Busujima...? Either way, it's incredible."

"Both the snake and Mr. Busujima are great! We can relax—can't we?"

"...Hm. If the teachers are involved, I think we should be okay. At least, there shouldn't be any worry over getting lost and dying of exposure."

At Eiri's comment, Maina let out a breath of relief. "Th-thank goodness..."

Kyousuke straightened his rucksack, also feeling somewhat relieved. Save for the fear that if they got lost they would never make it out alive, Woodland Exploration was actually a fairly tranquil activity. The pace of their Public Morals Committee guide was fast, but not so fast that they couldn't keep up, and she didn't meddle with Kyousuke and the others.

"....."

About two yards ahead of them, she continued her silent, solitary march. There was definitely something weird about that. Kyousuke spoke up as he stretched. "Wooow, the forest is full of greenery, and the air is sweet, miss!"

".....Yes indeed."

He had tried to speak brightly and energetically, but the upperclassman's response was curt. Kyousuke, undaunted, tried another attempt at communication. "It's so cool and comfortable out here. It makes you feel like you want to stay in the forest forever!"

"……Yes indeed."

You can't just say "yes indeed." Get into it! What is this, some kind of television comedy routine? The forest air was chilly, but her attitude was even colder.

"Uh, umm…by the way, miss, what is your name? Now that I think of it, we haven't introduced ourselves yet, have we? I'll start. I'm Kyousuke Kamiya! Fifteen years old."

"……Yes indeed."

"Ah, okay."

Shut down. Certainly, Kyousuke's name was Kyousuke Kamiya, and he was fifteen years old, but that was as far as he got. A conversation was just not materializing.

Eiri cursed at him and his disappointment. "Trying to make a pass at another upperclassman…you lecher."

"Huh? I wasn't making a pass at her! It was an ordinary conversation."

"……By which you mean I'm such a loser that you don't even see a point in hitting on me… Is that it?"

"L-loser?! No way, that's not what I meant…"

"……"

The upperclassman who had until then said nothing but 'yes indeed' turned around and glared at Kyousuke. *Why does she only speak normally at a time like this…?* A look like sharp needles bored into

him from behind her round glasses. Kyousuke avoided meeting her gaze.

"No, um...you're not exactly striking, but I think you've got what it takes, miss! With some new clothes and a little makeup, you would definitely be pretty! So saying there's no point is absolutely—"

".....Yes indeed."

"Ahh...okay."

It was impossible. There was no chance of having a decent conversation with this upperclassman.

As if nothing had happened, their Public Morals Committee guide—her name was Morita—turned around and resumed her silent march. Kyousuke's shoulders fell.

Eiri clicked her tongue. "Of course you were hitting on her. You're beyond saving."

"Oh dear... Don't worry about it, Eiri..."

"I'm the one you should be saying that to! I don't want to be saved by you anyway, geez..."

Sighing from the bottom of his gut, Kyousuke pulled himself together and moved his feet. For a short while, they continued through the woods in silence. In the break in conversation, the dense forest was blanketed in an uneasy silence, and aside from the sound of their footsteps on the ground, nothing could be heard. How much time could have passed as they continued to walk through the unchanging forest—

".....It's time." Suddenly, Morita came to a halt and said something other than "yes indeed." Her eyes were fixed on her wristwatch. Kyousuke, too, checked the time on the watch he'd been issued.

Four thirty. According to the schedule, it was time to finish

Woodland Exploration and start the next activity, the "Piranha Catching Tournament." But strangely...

What about travel time?

He couldn't remember where the Piranha Catching Tournament was to be held, but looking around, there were no rivers or lakes in sight, nor were there any other students or Public Morals Committee members. If the activities were proceeding according to the schedule, they were definitely late by now.

Turning around to look at the baffled younger students, Morita pushed her glasses up. At her feet, the snake raised its head.

"When you say 'it's time,' miss, you're not lost...are you?"

"……Yes indeed."

"...?! 'Yes indeed'? Why you—"

"If that's how you misunderstand the situation, there's no helping it." Cutting off their angry protests, Morita stepped toward them. Busujima's snake also followed her, and together they drew closer.

"……'Misunderstand'?"

She ignored Eiri's question, which had been hurled at her with a scowl.

Closing her eyes and passing through Kyousuke's group, Morita stopped about ten feet behind them, and turned around again. Standing across from them, she slowly removed her glasses.

After closing the neatly folded glasses in their case, she put the case in her skirt pocket. Her naked eyes arrested Kyousuke and the others, and in them dwelled a fine, sharp light. When Morita spoke, her voice was cold and filled with an apathetic authority.

"……It is time. At this moment, sixteen hundred hours and thirty-

two minutes, this year's Purgatorium Remedial Academy Prison Camping Trip is concluded on schedule. *We shall disband here*. Each of you is to *return on your own* to the school from here by sunset tomorrow. In the unlikely event that you do not make it in time—or if you fail to do so on account of trying to run away—harsh punishment awaits you, so be careful. Well, then, first-year students…please take care on your way back."

Don't you know that prison camping lasts until you get back home?!

"……?!"

She finished talking and, turning on her heels, Morita broke into a furious sprint. Slithering over the ground, the yellow snake chased after her.

"……Shit!! Wait!" Recovering instantly from the surprise, Eiri undauntedly sprang forward. She dashed from one tree root to the next as if she were flying, her ponytail swinging behind her.

Morita's running was splendid, too, but Eiri's was even more impressive. In an instant, she had closed the distance between them, and Eiri was about to overtake Morita—or so it seemed.

"……"

From no one knew where, Morita produced a big black object in the palm of her hand and threw it at Eiri.

Immediately, Eiri put on the emergency brake and covered her ears.

"A stun grenade?! Shit—"

—A flash. Then the sound of an explosion.

From where Kyousuke and Maina were standing, it wasn't too bad, but for Eiri, who had been right in front of the grenade when it

exploded, it was unendurable, and she fell to her knees. Meanwhile, Morita had continued running, and her silhouette was quickly growing distant.

"Ugh, seriously…that's the worst! She really screwed us over, that bitch…"

By the time Eiri was back on her feet, Morita had already disappeared into the trees.

"Eiriiiiiiiiiii!"

"H-hey…are you hurt?!"

"…There's no doubt about it. It was nonlethal. But I was unprepared… So that was the handheld weapon of a Public Morals Committee member, huh? I was planning to capture her and interrogate her about it, but…I screwed up."

When Kyousuke and the others rushed over, they found Eiri gritting her teeth in vexation. Maina was flustered, and she looked around at their surroundings. "Wh-what on earth did she mean… saying the prison camping trip is over now?"

"Plus, didn't she say it was planned this way? But there were those other things on the schedule…" Lowering his rucksack and pulling out the guidebook, Kyousuke opened the tome. No matter how many times he checked, the prison camping was two nights and three days, as expected. There was "Day One in Hell" and "Day Two in Purgatory"—and finally, "Day Three in Heaven."

It was only about midway through the second day, so there should have been many more activities left. *Saying it's finished despite that, what the hell…*

"Could it be a surprise?" Snatching the guidebook from his hands as he stared at the pages, Eiri answered his unstated question.

"……Surprise?"

"Yeah. It's not the least bit happy, though... Look here, at this phrase." Holding the guidebook out to Kyousuke and the others, Eiri pointed at something in the margin of the third day. There, in small characters, was written the following:

*This schedule is approximate. It is subject to change without notice.

"...But she said that it was according to plan!"

"She must have meant that *according to plan, the plan changed!* Wouldn't that mean that, from the beginning, there was no intention of proceeding in accordance with the schedule in the guidebook?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Eiri glared at the schedule. "We passed through hell and purgatory, and last is heaven...but if you don't arrive in heaven, you stay in purgatory...you feel the creator's spite. The activities planned after this are all jokes, too. 'Great Mixed Bathing Competition,' 'Dark Martial Arts/Pillow Fight Match,' 'Summer Panic @ House of Limbo,' 'Mandatory Wet Swimsuit Party' ...If they never meant to put on these activities in the first place, it's no wonder that they're this stupid."

"Stupid? They sound ridiculously fun, though..."

"Mixed bathing," "pillow fight," "summer festival," "dripping," "swimsuit," and so on—the schedule was packed with fascinating keywords. If they actually happened, it certainly would be a kind of heaven...

"...Yeah, I'm sure. To you, that would be heaven, wouldn't it...? Especially the first and last activities." Eiri slammed the guidebook shut violently and thrust it out to him. "I think that's also part of the plan from the academy's side of things. After dangling the possibility of pleasure in front of us, they yank it away with this surprise—it's the same as a surprise attack. Having concealed a deadly weapon, they stab us suddenly, when we don't expect it. If we had known from the start that something like this would happen, we probably could have

prepared our minds for it, but...anyone would be shocked by being unexpectedly abandoned like this and told to find their own way home. Isn't that what they were aiming for?"

"I-I see..."

There was no doubt that Purgatorium Remedial Academy was capable of such a thing. Thinking back, the major room cleanup that Kyousuke had questioned earlier also seemed to indicate that something like this was planned in advance. The second night of the two-night, three-day trip was to be survival camping. It was *serious* prison camping.

"O-Oh dear... Wh-wwwwh-what'll we do...? We're supposed to make our way back from here, but we don't know the way! And it was super far from the academy to the House of Limbo... Do you think we can make it back on time? Oh dear..." Maina looked around despondently.

Most of the students must have been forced into similar situations by now. There had been no advance warning, and the anxiety and uneasiness of being suddenly stranded in a dense wilderness was no ordinary feeling. In his heart, Kyousuke, too, was as flustered as anyone else. Despite that, the reason he was able to somehow feign calm was—

"...*Fwah*. If we have to be back by sunset tomorrow, we've got enough leeway, don't you think? If we hurry, and don't make camp, we could probably arrive tonight. Even if we don't rush, we should make it in plenty of time."

—thanks to the presence of Eiri, who kept her cool; she even yawned as she made this assertion. Her eyes sleepy as ever, Eiri rummaged through the contents of her rucksack. "One chocolate bar, and one sixteen-ounce water bottle...about two-thirds full. If it's not enough, are we just supposed to find more on our own? That'll be a bother, so let's hurry up and get back."

Finished checking the rations that had been allocated to them in the

guise of an “afternoon snack” along with their remaining water, Eiri took off walking at a brisk pace.

Kyousuke, surprised, called to her to halt: “Hey, Eiri! Even if you try to go back, the way—”

“...I know it!”

Eiri turned around, and in one hand she gripped a six-inch dagger. Spinning the concealed weapon by its decorated handle, she winked.

“I *cut marks* into the bark of the trees on the way. That way we would be prepared when we got lost...see?”

Brushing her hair back as if to say “Of course I did!” Eiri started walking again. The dagger had already disappeared from her hand. It seemed that, aside from her nails, she had shrewdly prepared other deadly weapons.

Should I admit that’s expected, or...?

Kyousuke and Maina looked at each other, then followed behind their reliable assassin classmate.

DAY THREE IN HEAVEN

Knockin' On Heaven's Door

DREAM-COLORED PARADISE IN THE PURE LAND♥

CONTINUED: DAY TWO IN PURGATORY

Knockin' On Hell's Door

LIFE IS SHORT—KILL 'EM, GIRLS

05:00	**Dark Martial Arts/Pillow Fight Match** Do your best to get into the spirit of "pillow murder."
08:30	**SUMMER PANIC @ HOUSE OF LIMBO** The Summer Panic Festival will be held at the House of Limbo.
12:15	**Hellfire Barbecue** Be careful you don't get burned.
15:40	**Leaving Hell Ceremony**
17:30	**Mandatory Wet Swimsuit Party** School swimsuits, bikinis, mankinis, budgie smugglers, etc...
20:15	**School Closing Ceremony** Presentation and recognition of the MVP (most valuable prisoner)

Knockin' On Hell's Door

LIFE IS SHORT—KILL 'EM, GIRLS

CONTINUED: DAY TWO IN PURGATORY

"It takes about two hours to get from the forest to the House of Limbo if we walk slowly. The sun sets before seven o'clock, so…just to be safe, let's walk a little quickly. When the sun goes down, it'll be difficult to check the marks."

A gloomy sea of trees surrounded them. They had made it this far with Eiri's guidance. She advanced without hesitation, checking the marks on the trees, while Kyousuke and Maina followed her confidently.

Maina voiced her admiration. "Eiri, you're amazing! You're really not lost at all, are you?"

"There's quite a distance between one mark and the next, but…don't tell me you remember most of the way?" Kyousuke asked.

"…Naturally," Eiri replied nonchalantly, still facing forward. "The marks are only there to confirm what I already know! Long ago, I was abandoned in faraway places as part of my family's 'education,' much deeper in the mountains than this. They made a point to cover my eyes, too…and I didn't have any water or food. Next to those lessons, this is a yawn."

"Geez, that sounds like the kind of stuff they did in ancient Sparta! When you say 'long ago,' how old were you?"

"—Five."

“Five years old?! You weren’t even in kindergarten yet! That’s…It’s amazing you survived.”

“Not really. That was only the beginning. I mean, my family *is* insane, after all.”

“……Right.”

Kyousuke decided not to say anything more on the subject; Eiri remained composed. The Akabane house that Eiri was born and raised in was a noted family of assassins, with distinguished origins.

Born into an abnormal household and raised by an abnormal family, Eiri herself was nonetheless normal. Normal and therefore pure… Within such an abnormal setting, she was practically a heretic. Kyousuke could not even begin to understand how she felt when she pointed to her own brothers and sisters and declared them insane. There was no way he could have understood.

To Kyousuke, his family members were irreplaceable. His love for his dear little sister, Ayaka, went without saying, but his eccentric, unprecedented, world-traveling, free-living parents were also—

“…Anyway, isn’t there something else that we need to be paying attention to?”

Eiri’s strong voice pulled Kyousuke’s attention back to the situation at hand. Dense greenery surrounded them on all sides. Eiri’s severe eyes swept the area, alert for any signs of a presence lurking deeper in the grove. In her profile lay a slight tension.

“—That girl named Shamaya or whatever…if she was planning to do something to us, this would be the perfect opportunity. Or rather, if she’s going to take us out, this is her only chance. Once the prison camping trip is over and we go back to regular classes, we’ll hardly ever have any contact with her.”

“Ah, you’re right…for sure.” Nodding, Kyousuke tightened up his

slacking wariness.

At Purgatorium Remedial Academy, contact between the first-year students like Kyousuke and the upperclassmen was extremely limited. Their school buildings and dorms were of course separate, as were the places where they performed their fatigue duties.

There was no rule that said they could not come into contact, but there were also no opportunities to do so. It was likely that most of the first-years were seeing upperclassmen for the first time during this trip. That was how completely segregated they were. And even if they did come into contact, whether on purpose or not, it would surely draw the attention of the teachers' watchful eyes.

On the other hand, there were no other students or teachers around now, so they could do as they pleased. *That's right, she could kill us as she pleased.* "The academy is pulling a bold stunt here...leaving all of these murderers unsupervised," Kyousuke muttered in disgust. "Isn't this practically a jailbreak? What are they planning to do if some of us actually run away, or hide, or kill other students...?"

"K-kill each other... Oh dear. Wh-wwwwh-what'll we do?!" Maina looked around restlessly, frightened.

While checking the mark on the bark of a tree, Eiri casually replied, "If anyone tried to run away or whatever...the whole island is like one big prison anyway. And if they tried to hide, there would be nowhere to escape to, so there would be no point. As for the rest, I think the school is watching to see what kinds of behavior this exercise brings out in the students. They're probably checking up on the progress of the rehabilitation programs by letting them loose."

"Hm. I see now... 'If they don't follow instructions, just get stricter'... Is that what you mean?"

"Just my guess. Even if I'm wrong, hardly anyone here would kill so recklessly just because they saw an opportunity. All the built-up hatred and animosity... When it finally boils over, isn't that what moves someone to act on their lethal impulses? I myself don't exactly

know, but…unless someone is an irredeemable psycho killer like Renko, I don't think they can be so casual about murder. I mean, if killing was that easy, I—"

"……"

Kyousuke couldn't bring himself to speak to Eiri, who had stopped walking and was staring at her fingernails. Even with her superior skills and training, she was an assassin who couldn't kill.

Eiri, who was disgusted by murder and avoided committing it, spoke in a wishful tone. "To tell you the truth, I…have a feeling that girl won't come. I don't know what Renko thinks about it, though. Even if she's the Murder Princess who murdered twenty-one people, she's the chair of the Public Morals Committee now. She seems to take pride in that and be very aware of it, plus she's been strictly disciplined by Kurumiya and the other teachers for two years. If she comes to kill us despite all that, she's an untrainable wild dog… Wouldn't they also want to test the state of the rehabilitation of that serial killer, just like the rest of us?" When she finished, Eiri began walking again.

"Miss Shamaya's rehabilitation…huh…" Just then, the mutilated hand towel crossed Kyousuke's mind, but he shook his head and dismissed the thought. That had definitely been a product of Shamaya's attempt to contain her murderous impulses—

"…Well, this is all just my conjecture, and it's best to be vigilant, so we can't get careless. Not only because of her… There are other groups who have animosity toward us, and probably also wild animals out here. We need to be careful."

"……Yeah."

"O-okay!"

Kyousuke and Maina nodded, and followed behind Eiri, returning to a single-file line.

Swish.

From behind them came the sounds of vegetation being disturbed.

"……?!"

Instantly the atmosphere grew tense, and together they all turned.

A figure flew out of the shadows of the trees, springing directly for them in an instant.

"Aaaaaagh!!"

"Kyousuke?!"

"Oh no, Kyousuke!"

Kyousuke, thrown completely off balance, tumbled down to the ground. It was there that Eiri's and Maina's screams reached him.

"...Guh?!" Kyousuke groaned as the back of his head slammed into a hard tree root.

Catching him in a powerful, desperate embrace, the figure—*the girl wearing a black gas mask*—spoke in a cheerful, singsong voice.

"Found you! I finally found you, Kyousukeeeeee!"

"Renko?! Y-you... What are you doing here—"

"You should already know thaaaaaat! I was looking for you! I'm so glad I ran into you...so glaaaaaad! Let's kiss! *Mmwwah*."

"...Just die."

"Wha?!"

Renko, who was bringing the exhaust port of the gas mask close to Kyousuke's mouth, quickly leaped out of the way. With a mighty follow-through, the toe of Eiri's loafer smacked Kyousuke directly on

the lips.

"Oofah!! My mooooooouuuth!!"

"...Tch. You were able to dodge again. How irritating. Piss off, you perverted girl." Ignoring Kyousuke, who was rolling around holding his mouth, Eiri shot Renko a loathsome glare.

"*Kksshh*...," Renko sighed, placing her finger coyly on the exhaust port. "How can you say things like 'irritating' and 'piss off' to me when I was so worried about you guys and rushed to find you...? You're so cruel, Eiri! Shouldn't you try to grow your sense of kindness, along with your boobs?"

"Huh? I *am* kind, though! I protected Kyousuke's lips when you tried to take advantage of the confusion and steal them! Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"What the hell do you think *you're* doing, Eiri? You call this protecting my lips?!" Picking up his dirt-covered body, Kyousuke rubbed the parts in question that had suffered Eiri's flying kick.

Maina, meanwhile, was worried. "Oh dear...th-they're swelling up like sausages...how awful!" She brushed the dirt from his tracksuit.

Renko shouted his name hysterically as she ran over to him. "Wow...if they aren't splendid swollen wiener lips! Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right. I've had a horrible accident...and whose fault do you think it is that I'm in such a state?"

"That's right. How about doing a little self-reflection?"

"It's both of your faaaaaauuuuuults!"

They had returned to the subject at hand.

"...Well? Why are you here?"

"I told you already," Renko answered, rubbing a lump on the left

side of Kyousuke's head. "I was worried about you, so I came running."

"When you say you came running...do you mean you found us in the middle of these dense woods?"

"Yep."

"...How?"

"By listening for your heart's scream, which cried out that you wanted to see me."

"……Come again?" Kyousuke asked, raising a clenched fist.

"Hyaa?!" Renko yelped in surprise, bewildered. "Well...first of all, I heard the noise of an explosion—*booom*! Then I thought maybe you might be over here, and when I came to check out the situation, I heard all of you talking... I'm glad I was able to find you! So, umm, Kyousuke...if you understand what I'm saying, how about maybe you lower that fist?"

"...I see. By the way, about how far away were you?"

"Hmm, I think I was probably pretty far, because I heard the explosion and immediately started running...and I just now finally got to you! It looked like there were no other squads nearby!"

"Hmm, is that so...?" Kyousuke lowered his fist and nodded. "If that's true, we probably won't come across anyone else for a while."

Renko sighed with relief. "*Kksshh*..."

Eiri placed a hand on the lump on the side of Kyousuke's head, and furrowed her brow. "...Wait. Hey, you," she said to Renko. "What happened to your squad mates? Don't tell me you left them behind when you came?"

"Yep."

"'Yep'...? Are they okay?"

"Probably."

"Probably...?"

Eiri glared at her reproachfully, but Renko laughed with a "*K-k-kksshh!*" and threw out her chest. "Don't worry. I was also easily able to catch that upperclassman on the Public Morals Committee who was trying to run away!"

"Huh?!" The three of them were shocked.

Got caught pretty good, huh...?

"Right about now, my squad should be doing *this* and *that* to her, really making sure to get everything out of her. It's that girl who always looks like she runs a gang. I stomped on her long skirt, and she tripped over her own feet."

What, is she Maina? What a stupid upperclassman... Turning on her heel after delivering a canned line, and falling magnificently... That's so embarrassing that even if she attempted suicide right here in the woods, nobody would have been surprised. That's too uncool...

"...Well, that's about it. I'm going to head back with you all. We still have little miss Shamaya to worry about after all. I couldn't bear it if Kyousuke's life were to be snatched away while I was leisurely strolling back with my own squad... I will protect you no matter when the danger strikes! ...And instead I will probably be the one to attack you! At night or something... *K-k-kksshh*..."

"Th-that's even more frightening..."

Now I doubly regret getting into a situation like last night. I almost bled to death... That was the luckiest thing that has happened to me since entering school here, and also the greatest danger I've been in.

Eiri got in between Renko, who was drawing closer, and Kyousuke,

who was backing away. “It’s okay, I won’t let her do it. If she tries, I’ll—”

“Will you attack me, Eiri? You think you can mess with the Renko? Huh?”

“Huh?! N-no...no way! What the hell are you saying? Are you stupid?!”

“Waaahh! No fighting, you two!”

“Yeah, Maina’s right... Kyousuke’s only got one body, so why don’t we get along and all three of us enjoy playing with him! All together, let’s make memories AND babies!”

“...H-hey now. W-we need to hurry back! We don’t have time for anything stupid.” Already exhausted, Kyousuke started walking.

The journey to the academy stretched long before them. *I’m begging you*, he wished desperately. *Please don’t let anything happen along the way!*

X X X

“*Kksshh*. That was so great... We really made out well, didn’t we, Kyousuke? Mmhmm!”

“...Yeah, we did. We made it *out* of the *forest*.” Skillfully sidestepping Renko’s attempt at a joke, Kyousuke wiped the sweat from his forehead. They had been walking for about an hour and a half through the dense woodland expanse. Thanks to Eiri’s leadership, they had made it safely through the forest, and Kyousuke and the others were at present headed for the House of Limbo. Daylight was already fading as the sun began to set.

“...So, what should we do? Pass the night at the House of Limbo, or hurry on like this?” Walking in the lead, Eiri turned around, raising the question of how to proceed. “And by the way, I’m in favor of the second option. I’ve had more than enough of camping. I want to

relax and rest after taking a good shower... I can't sleep without taking off my makeup and stuff." Nobody but Eiri could have been able to worry about such things in such a situation. "We probably won't even be able to rest at the House of Limbo... It's probably not open, right?"

"In all likelihood, it's been closed up...," Kyousuke mused. "But just in case, let's go check, and if we can't find a place to stay, we'll push on through the night toward the academy—any problems with that?"

"...Sure, no problem for me. As far as the way back goes, I remember it just fine."

"Fine with me, too! A-as long a-as we take a break once in a while."

"Gotcha. And of course I don't object, so...what about you, Renko?" Returning Eiri's and Maina's nods, Kyousuke looked back at Renko, who was bringing up the rear.

Keeping her distance from Kyousuke and the others, Renko put her hands on her hips and turned her face away with a "hmph!" Her face was hidden by the gas mask, but her feelings were perfectly clear.

".....What're you mad about?"

"Kyousuke, you're cold. I'm trying to tempt you, but you won't get involved with me! You used to be the kind of guy who would come on strong... How cruel, holding out on me!" Renko's shoulders slumped sadly.

Kyousuke and Eiri looked at each other, and sighed deeply.

"Hey, Kyousuke...we don't have to listen to Renko's opinion, right?"

"You're right. Let's continue on and leave Renko here—any problems with that?"

"...Sure, no problem for me. It's a total pain having her along anyway."

“Fine with me, too! ...As long as we check in on her once in a while.”

“Gotcha. No objections from me. What about you, Renko?”

“Of course I objeeeeeect, waaaaaahhh!”

Clapping Renko on the back several times, Kyousuke laughed sarcastically. “Sorry, sorry, it was a joke. But, well...try to control yourself a little more, huh?”

They went on like this all the way back to the academy. Renko would make a bad joke, and everyone else, tired of playing the straight man to her fool, would shut her down.

Renko’s energy was boundless, and Kyousuke was inevitably exhausted first. “Okay, I get it...you’re too caught up pursuing me in the name of lust. From now on, I’m simply going to endure it. And if I get to the point where I can’t endure...I’ll work hard on some ‘private power generation’!”

“.....”

“A-are we just gonna let that one go? Whaddya mean by ‘private power generation’?!”

“.....”

“Oh, h-how embarrassing... I’m so very ashamed to reveal the secret of my ‘private power generation’!”

“.....”

Leaving Renko stranded as both the straight man and the fool, Kyousuke and the others hurried ahead. When they had advanced a little way down the woodland path overgrown with vegetation, they came to an area surrounded by a tall fence of barbed wire. Within its perimeter was the House of Limbo.

~ Welcome to limbo, fuckin' pigs!!! ~

Under the signboard that greeted visitors, the entrance stood firmly closed. As if that wasn't enough, it was crisscrossed with several thick chains and adorned with enormous padlocks.

"Just as I thought...huh. It looks like they've already cleared out." The air beyond the chain-link fence was deathly quiet, without a single sound.

It occurred to him that they did not know what had become of Mohawk, who had been put to bed in the infirmary. Around the time that Woodland Exploration had started, he had still been drifting between life and death. It was possible that he had been transported back along with the luggage. *I don't think they would have left him behind, but...*

In any case, there did not appear to be anyone left at the House of Limbo.

"*Kksshh*. I don't see anyone else, so looks like we're the first to arrive, huh?"

"Yeah. Because we came straight back without getting turned around... About now I bet the other squads are beyond lost in the woods. Eiri saved us, for real."

"Yep, yep, Eiri's amazing! She's reliable, and so cool!"

"Yo, tiny tits! Or, should I say, no tits! Number one example of a flat chest in all of Japaaaaaan!"

After this rapid succession of praise and insults from Kyousuke and the others, Eiri hummed and put a finger to her cheek. "...N-not really? What I did was only normal. Those other guys who weren't on their guard are idiots. So I'm not the least bit pleased to be praised! Also, Renko can just go die!"

Her pleasant smile fading in an instant, Eiri lashed out with a

powerful midheight kick.

"Whaaa?! That's dangerous, geez!! I oppose violence!" Renko shouted.

Smiling bitterly at her, Kyousuke asked, "Well, what should we do? Keep walking until the sun goes down because the path will be hard to make out in the dark? Or rest for the night here…?"

It was presently 6:30. They had less than thirty minutes before sunset.

"Either is fine with me. Once the moon comes out, it probably won't be that dark, but it's also just fine to rest here for a while… How about you, Maina? If you're tired, we'll take a break."

"Uh, no…I'm fine! I'll try to press on a little bit farther!" Maina clenched her fists with enthusiasm, but her bangs were soaked in sweat and stuck to her face.

Renko laughed with a "*kksshh!*" and placed a hand on Maina's shoulder. "You shouldn't push yourself, Maina! If you don't rest when you can, you won't be able to deal with unexpected situations, will you? Our objective is not to arrive quickly at the goal…it's to return safely all together. Relax, and let's do our best!"

Bewildered, Maina stared back at Renko's black gas mask. Then she looked down like she was embarrassed and mumbled shyly, "Ah…o-okay. You're right… Um, if that's how it is, just a bit…just a tiny bit, would it be all right for me to take a break…? Sorry…"

"Sure, I don't mind. Actually, I'm also a very little bit tired…," Eiri agreed.

Nodding, Renko lifted her abundant breasts with both hands as if she was scooping them up. "Good grief. The fact that my boobs are so big is also worth considering… I'm walking with a handicap here. If I was compact and light like Eiri, I guess I wouldn't have so much to carry, but…come to think of it, you've also got quite a rack, too,

Maina. What cup size did you say you are?"

"Eh?! Ah, um...I-I'm...well..." Maina nervously looked back and forth between Renko and Eiri, unprepared to discuss such a topic. As if to block the view of Kyousuke and the others, she hid her chest with both arms.

"I-I'm...certainly not as flat as Eiri, but, um...I'm also not as stylish as Eiri, so, well...uh...and I lose to Miss Shamaya in both areas, so they're really nothing special, I mean—"

"What was that about me, Miss Igarashi?"

"Ah, no...nothing! I was talking about how you completely defeat me in both style and breast size! Someone with a petite body like me can't win no matter how hard I try, I was saying, uh.....huh? Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!! Cha, chachachacha, Chamayaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?! Sh-sh-she's heeeeeeeeeeeere?!"

Maina tumbled over at the sight of Shamaya, who had suddenly appeared without warning from behind her. Unable to stand back up, she scooted away with great speed. Hiding behind Eiri's back, Maina shook like she had a fever.

"……?!"

The air surrounding Kyousuke and the others was thick with tension.

Shamaya on the other hand, as always, gave off an aura of serenity.

"Oh-ho-ho. The moon is lovely this evening, no?"

A smile spread across her pretty white face.

Under a sky that had begun to turn the color of diluted ink, she stood still, wearing her school uniform and holding her rucksack. Combing her hair back with her fingers beneath the light of the

moon, she looked like she belonged in a painting.

"...Miss...Shamaya." Shamaya's joyful look intensified as Kyousuke called her name, entranced.

"Good evening, Mr. Kyousuke Kamiya. Miss Eiri Akabane. Miss Renko Hikawa. And—Miss Maina Igarashi. You've arrived quite early! I'm rather surprised. Indeed, if you carry on like this you'll soon be leaving the forest. You've done very well."

Shamaya looked around at each one of them in turn, clapping her hands in front of her chest. Her air of composure was no different from usual. But it was still strange...

What is Shamaya doing, hanging around by herself in a place like this?

"...Where are the teachers and the other members of the Public Morals Committee?" Eiri asked in a dry voice. "Are they still around here?"

Shamaya shook her head in response. "We Public Morals Committee members, after explaining the situation to each squad, naturally separated... Just like all of you, we are to return to the academy by sunset tomorrow. Likely there is no one here. By this time the teachers will have long since arrived at the academy, and I imagine they are resting and relaxing there."

"...Well, why are you here?" Eiri fired off the same question on Kyousuke's mind.

Self-satisfied, Shamaya looked directly back into her sharp eyes. "I love nature! Especially at night... Moreover, this evening there is a magnificent full moon. I was intending to leisurely head back while enjoying a moonlight bath. Then, by chance, I came across you all. Oh-ho-ho-ho! Yes...by chance."

Shamaya placed a hand on her lower lip. Tilting her head slightly to the side, with a smiling face overflowing with affection, it was as

though she were trying to lure in Kyousuke and the others.

"However, perhaps this was not a coincidence but rather an inevitability... I wonder. What do you think, everyone—? It is said that a meeting by chance is preordained. As a reward for getting out of the dense woodland the fastest, I shall show you the 'shortcut to purgatory'! Oh-ho-ho! Once we return to the academy, we will not have many opportunities to see one another. All I want is to be allowed to travel back with you. I have taken quite a liking to you all. More and more deeply...I want to know all kinds of things about you."

She smiled as if to say, "Please?"

Yet in her emerald-colored eyes was a devilishness that was impossible to resist.

X X X

"Everyone, run toward that full moon. Readyyy...go!" Pointing at the moon shining through the breaks in the foliage, Shamaya broke into a sprint. Following behind her, watching her quickly grow distant, went—not a single one of them.

"She's still a major pain, huh..."

"...Why do we have to go back with that girl?"

"Oh dear... I-it's fine...right? Nothing's going to happen?"

"*Kksshh*. If the Public Morals Committee chair is here, does that mean I can't perform obscene acts with Kyousuke?"

Kyousuke and the others had eventually accepted Shamaya's plan at her insistence. They were walking along a mountain trail following behind her. Though he was no longer worried about being attacked by Renko, Kyousuke still had to be watchful of Shamaya; it was not at all clear what she was thinking. He was doubly anxious. However

—

“Really! What are you all doing over there?! Please stay with me. It’s sure to be hard going if you insist on acting like that! Cheer up, come on!” Looking back at Kyousuke and the others from far ahead, Shamaya pumped her fist. Her mood seemed recklessly enthusiastic.

“Miss Shamaya...why are you so energetic?” Kyousuke asked quickly, tiredly.

“Oh-ho-ho! Isn’t it obvious?” Shamaya answered him with a lively smile. “It is because I had a chance encounter with all of you! The time we spend on the prison camping trip is a precious opportunity for us upperclassmen to intermingle with the new students...and that opportunity has brought us to this! It’s only natural that I would feel uplifted!”

“I-is that so...?” Kyousuke was momentarily overwhelmed by her kind sentiment.

Shamaya nodded vigorously. “Yes! Even among all the new students, with you four in particular...I want to discuss so many things. For example, let’s see—” Placing her index finger on her cheek, she looked up at the night sky. From the gap between her lips, pure white teeth and pale pink gums peeked out.

“What kind of *murders* did each of you commit?”

Glittering in the moonlight, her eyes set upon each one of the four of them in turn. Shamaya placed a hand on her chest, closed her eyes, and quietly spoke her mind: “Personally, I indulged in a great variety. In my killing methods, in the people I killed, in the places where I killed them, variety... However, there was only one motive. Why do you think I did it? Why? My former self committed murders... Oh-ho-ho! The reason is exceedingly simple and amazingly clear!”

That reason was—

"*Because it was fun.*"

She wore a carefree smile, and a clear light filled her now-open eyes. She had spoken so casually that they didn't immediately grasp what she had said.

"...Huh? Wh-wha...? F-fun...?"

The words tumbled from Eiri's dumbfounded mouth.

Shamaya nodded, and calmly replied, "Yes. Surely you all feel the same? Everyone has something they love that allows them to forget themselves and fall into a trance. Reading, music, movies, exercise, cooking, love-making... In my case, *that thing was murder*, and nothing else. Killing was fun, so I killed. There was nothing more to it —a simple motive. My methods, the victims I killed, where I killed them... I changed these things frequently so that I could enjoy a variety of murderous acts. For example—"

Shamaya went on, recounting her previous murders.

With a kitchen knife, with an ice pick, with an ax, with a golf club, with utility scissors, with a wine bottle, with a ribbon, with potassium cyanide, with a brick, with a rifle, with an electric drill, with gasoline, with a bathtub, with sulfuric acid, with an electric guitar, with a chainsaw, with a spoon, with a bow and arrow, with a katana, with a bush knife, with her bare hands—she told them of the people she had murdered.

She talked and she talked and she talked and she talked, and they listened. With animated gestures, she spoke as if possessed. "—For example, take reading. When you finish reading one story, you want to read a different sort next, right? A different story in the same genre, or a different kind of story from a different genre... A true bibliomaniac wouldn't want to continue reading the same book forever and ever. In exactly the same way, after experiencing one murder, I want to try a different kind of murder. Stabbing, beating, strangulation, poisoning, shooting, running over, drowning,

burning... Or perhaps I want to try out the same killing method on a different victim. Gender, age, social status, occupation, nationality, race, religion... I want to enjoy these subtle variations! Oh-ho-ho! Formerly called the Murder Princess, the reason that I have *dispensed with* as many as twenty-one different people using many different weapons, and many different methods, in many different places, is simply that. The feelings of the type of people who commit murder without being passionate about it are unintelligible to me... How about you all? Why did you kill?"

As she asked, Shamaya looked at Kyousuke. In her eyes was a thoroughly genuine inquisitiveness. There was fundamentally no difference between Shamaya as she was now and the bibliomaniac she had mentioned when talking about reading.

However, to love not reading but murder—that was a pure *killing mania.*

This girl who loved murder more than anything else spoke as if she was talking to others of her kind. "Mr. Kamiya...you killed twelve people, did you not? Why did you do it? Surely because you enjoyed it? You couldn't kill that many if you weren't having any fun. And you did it all at once. I murdered twenty-one people over the course of nearly ten years, but the most I ever killed at once was two... I have not had the experience of killing so many at once. I'm extremely curious about it... Won't you allow me to hear that story in detail?"

She peered at him from point-blank range, her pupils fully dilated. Kyousuke gasped. "Ah.....d-details...you say?"

"Yes, in detail. I want to know all about you..."

"—Don't touch him." As Shamaya stretched out her hand toward Kyousuke's cheek, her wrist was grabbed from the side. Furious, Eiri glared at Shamaya. "Don't touch Kyousuke."

"....."

Struck by her naked hostility, Shamaya stared at Eiri with surprise. Her wide-open eyes narrowed, and the corners of her mouth curled up. "...My goodness, oh-ho-ho! I beg your pardon! That reminds me, you also had an interest in Mr. Kamiya, didn't you, Miss Akabane? I am more than a little interested in you as well, you killer of six people. For example, let us discuss your confident attitude. You know that I have murdered twenty-one, and yet you do not act the least bit shy, do you? That is not something I have seen in any other student! Oh-ho-ho-ho!" With her wrist still caught, Shamaya laughed carelessly.

Eiri's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Huh? Wh-what are you saying...? Doesn't that mean the people around you have all been cowards?" She sounded angry—both at Shamaya, and at herself for flinching.

"Indeed it does! As a matter of fact, that's exactly the case!" Shamaya nodded assent in response to Eiri's prickly words. Turning to face Eiri, she continued, "My first day of school here—when I heard from my homeroom teacher, Kurumiya, that this was an academy for murderers, my heart danced for joy! That meant that here I would find many people my own age who shared my tastes and interests. I was delighted, you see, because on the outside I could never speak with anyone about murder—it was completely taboo.

"Listening to all of my classmates' self-introductions, overflowing with personality, I waited eagerly. And then finally, it was my turn... I joyfully revealed my heart! I told them how much I loved murder, how wonderful I thought murder was, what kind of people I had killed up to then, in what situations, with what weapons, and using what methods. I talked about how I felt when I did it, how my victims acted on their deathbeds... I told them everything that I had held inside for so long—it was emotional! And when I finished, what do you think happened?"

Her bright face clouded over, and the tone of her voice dropped as if she was recalling her feelings from that time, and she continued mournfully. "...Every one of my classmates pulled away from me. Fear and shock and disgust... There was none of the longing and

interest and empathy that I had expected. Bewildered and dejected, I called out to one female student. The girl, who had given her self-introduction before me, had said 'killing is a supreme pleasure' and had spoken boastfully about the murders that she herself had committed. Thinking that if we became friends, we could share the joys of killing to our hearts' content, I immediately invited her to spend time with me. However—"

Shamaya's voice sunk even lower. Her face was painted with sorrow and disappointment. "As soon as we were alone together, she suddenly completely changed her behavior, and apologized to me while crying. She had only been acting brave, trying to show that she was a little bit special at this school for murderers... It shouldn't have come as that much of a surprise, really. Well, when I realized it, I almost butchered the girl right then and there! But before I could, I was nearly killed myself by Miss Kurumiya's hand! Oh-ho-ho!"

"....."

As Shamaya stood laughing in a dry voice, Kyousuke and the others sank into silence. They shuddered, thinking how it must have been to be in the same class as Shamaya then. *She says she's been completely rehabilitated, but—*

"After that, the passion for murder that burned inside me quickly cooled. A few others got closer to me, but every time, almost like a bad joke, they would eventually reveal their frail true faces, and drive me to depression. The intense discipline I frequently received caused me to wither even further. And before I knew it, my passion for murder had completely vanished...

"—I thought it had vanished," she mumbled.

Shamaya clasped her hands behind her back, and began to walk slowly around Kyousuke and the others. Kyousuke, Eiri, Maina, Renko... She looked at their faces one by one in turn. "However, somehow or other I... It looks like I misunderstood one thing. What I was missing was not the urge to kill—it was the proper *victims*. If you

don't run across any books that you want to read—that you want to know the insides of—like a bibliomaniac... The only thing I had lost was the opportunity to run across *people* I wanted to kill, *victims whose last moments I wanted to see!*"

"……?!"

Tension sprang to life within Kyousuke and the others as they listened to Shamaya's story. Only one of them, just Renko, laughed. "*K-k-kksshh!* So...to make a *long* story short, you're planning to kill us now, right?"

—Shamaya's pacing abruptly halted. A warm breeze blew, stirring like an ocean current. "Goodness no, Miss Hikawa. Planning to kill you? Oh my! I would never..."

Standing behind Renko, Shamaya smiled strangely.

"Not planning to... I *will* kill you. This is the shortcut to purgatory, after all."

So she whispered. The next moment, Shamaya swung her right arm up toward Renko. In her hand, she gripped a hatchet with a blade of twelve inches or more. The dark gray metal was awash in moonlight, shining wetly.

"Watch out, Renko! Dodge—!"

Whump! Renko had turned to look when she heard Kyousuke's shout. The hatchet struck her in the middle of the head.

As though she were chopping firewood, Shamaya had moved without hesitation. Throwing her full body weight behind the bulky weapon, she delivered a single blow that pulverized Renko's skull with extreme ease.

Accompanying the dull sound of two hard objects striking one another, bright red liquid plumed from the right side of Renko's head. She collapsed to the ground, unresponsive.

It really looked like she had died—she did not so much as twitch.

X X X

"...Oh? Did you already leave us, Miss Hikawa?" Tossing away her rucksack, which was a hindrance, Shamaya sounded disappointed.

Her silver hair streaked with fresh blood, Renko did not even groan.

Looking down suspiciously at the silent gas mask, Shamaya readied the hatchet again. Gripping the specialized weapon not with one hand but with two, she raised it as high as she could in the air. "I haven't heard your death cries yet! Get back up!"

Whump!

Once more, she struck Renko's head with her full strength. A spray of blood leaped through the air, and new streaks dyed Renko's hair. However, Renko did not move even slightly.

Placing a foot on Renko's shoulder, Shamaya extracted the blade that she had stuck into her head and knit her eyebrows. "...Hm?"

She took a long look at the area around the wound, concealed as it was by Renko's hair. "Don't tell me you actually died? Perhaps I hit you in a bad spot. Even so, this is a strange response... Can human bones really be this hard? It's been too long and I'm not quite sure. I'm terribly out of practice! This is a serious situation. In order to regain my sense for such things, after I cut at various places, I'll take apart the pieces—"

"Ah.....a.....ah, ah....."

"...Hm?" Shamaya, hatchet raised aloft, sluggishly moved her head in response to the sudden voice. Her narrowed eyes opened wide, then narrowed again. "Ah, that's right! I of all people forgot, carried away by all the excitement. There is still other prey to be had this evening, isn't there? It's my first time killing so many at once... I'm ever so excited! My heart is pounding! Oh-ho-ho! What kind of *finale* will

you show me? What kind of screams will you let me hear—Miss Igarashi?"

"...Hyah?!" Faced with Shamaya's freakish smile, Maina fell flat on her backside. Face twitching with fear, the girl trembled violently as her upperclassman slowly approached. Fresh blood trickled down to the tip of the lowered hatchet. "Ah...aa...Re, Rererere, Renko is... Renkoooooo..." Maina sobbed as her gaze traveled back and forth between the bloody hatchet and her fallen classmate.

Shamaya grimaced in irritation. "Hey, you...do you intend to continue keeping up that act at this late stage? You just don't know when to give up! Cunning! Show me your true nature."

"...H-huh? Act...true nature...c-cunning?"

"Yes, you're cunning. Foolish, yet clever... During the cookout, you tried many times to kill me, did you not? You pretended it was a total accident! Then finally you used some trick on the food... Your every action, all of it was cunning."

Maina shook her head in denial while Shamaya held her hand to the gauze on her cheek. "Ehh?! N-nnnn-no dat's wwong! I-I just cooked normawwy, Miss Chamaya. I wadn't twying...twying to kill you at all—"

"That's how you made it *seem*, isn't it? Don't 'ehh?!' at me, you cunning little... Well, that's fine. Everyone exposes their true face when they are on the verge of death. Refined, noble gentlemen throw grace to the wind and clumsily plead for their lives. Gentle, mild ladies make furious faces and spew abusive language. Thoughtless, laughable men accept their death with poise... This is what I believe: In their final moments, you can catch a glimpse of a person's true nature. After the mind is stripped bare by fear and bitterness toward death, only then is it possible to thoroughly appreciate it...and that is the true pleasure of murder."

So that's why—

“And as I killed, again and again, witnessing the final moments of so many lives, a certain thought would sometimes creep into my mind. As an only child, my father and mother raised me with great love and care…but *was that love truly real?* I wondered. Would they continue loving me to the end, no matter what hardships they met… or were made to meet? I wondered.”

That’s why Shamaya is—

“Oh, I want to kill…I *want* to kill. Once I accepted that thought, I was unable to contain myself, and immediately I killed the two of them. The outcome was—The outcome was the greatest! Bathed in fresh blood, still gripping the knife, I asked him…and my father still replied ‘I love you’! As gratitude for him opening his heart to me, I *opened up* my father! I was covered in blood, and my mother held me tightly and wailed. From my mother, who called my name again and again, I felt a deep love. And so, I focused all of my love in my fingers, and *strangled* my mother! I was so happy… I was immersed in happiness, feeling my parents’ real love! Words cannot properly describe the feeling…”

“_____”

Kyousuke and the others were at a loss for words. Shamaya looked like she was in a trance as she spoke of her gruesome past.

—This girl is the real deal. She’s a true psychopath. The people she wanted to get to know…she couldn’t help killing them. All of the interests and affections that Shamaya had were tied up with the act of murder. That’s why Shamaya had killed her parents, and why next were Kyousuke and the others…

“Oh-ho-ho! Well, then, allow me to confirm once more, Miss Igarashi, your true self…by means of your death! In gratitude for you nearly killing me, I shall butcher you.” Turning toward Maina’s pale face, Shamaya brandished her bloody lethal weapon. Murderous intent dwelled in her emerald-colored eyes, and she gathered her strength into the hand that gripped the handle of the hatchet.

“Eee…eeeeeeeee!!” Maina shut her eyes tight and squealed, holding her head. It looked like, after Renko, the hatchet would next be wet by Maina’s spurting blood.

“…What the hell are you doing?”

A deep voice—

“…Hm?”

Faster than Shamaya could turn her head—

“What the hell are you doing, you biiiiiiiiiiiitch?!”

—A cry of rage resounded as a swift kick struck Shamaya on the side of the face.

“Gah, oh my!!” Staggered by the force, Shamaya dropped her weapon and stumbled backward. Shortly after her stance had collapsed, in no time, a body blow came down on the tops of her shoulders.

“…?!”

Pressing a very confused Shamaya down onto the ground, the person who had violently attacked her—was Eiri. Straddling her as if burdened by something unseen, the girl leaned over Shamaya’s body and groaned. “You killed her, didn’t you, how dare you…how dare you, to Renko…!” Eiri’s voice quivered, and in her hand was a small knife. She pressed the blade sideways against Shamaya’s windpipe, preventing her from moving.

With a befuddled expression, Shamaya stared back into Eiri’s eyes. “Y-you…you concealed a weapon—”

“Why?”

“…Come again?”

“Why did you go and kill Renko?! You’re the chair of the Public

Morals Committee, aren't you?! Shouldn't you be fully rehabilitated?! You said so yourself, didn't you…? You said that you wouldn't raise a hand against us! That even though you were granted the authority to discipline, you would never do so—"

"Yes," Shamaya answered with a blank look. "And as far as discipline is concerned, I never did! I cannot wield violence against those who I have no desire to kill. And what's more, I am not even interested in violence! I appreciate *murder*. Things like discipline are half measures—violence that does not bring death is something that I absolutely cannot abide! Supposing that I was to try to discipline students…I would surely find it unbearable, *and would kill them on the spot*. Surely it would be a problem for me, as the chair of the Public Morals Committee, to brazenly kill students?"

Eiri bit her lip at Shamaya's shameless boasting. "What the hell…? How are you rehabilitated…? You're not the tiniest bit rehabilitated!"

"Rehabilitated…rehabilitated, hmm…? That's right…oh-ho-ho!" Closing her eyes, as if reflecting on Eiri's words, Shamaya smiled. "Improving my condition…from emotionally and socially unfavorable to completely normal—a rehabilitation like that I have certainly not achieved. However, Miss Akabane…rehabilitation can also mean the 'reworking of something useless into something useful,' can it not?"

"Wha……?" Eiri's eyes widened at the implication. *Reworking something useless and turning it into something useful.* To someone who knew the academy's *true character*, the significance of that phrase was impossible to miss.

Checking Eiri's—and Kyousuke's—reactions, Shamaya let her smile fade. "Goodness… You knew, didn't you? Considering that you were able to conceal a deadly weapon without it being discovered, and considering your splendid physical abilities, and considering the fact that you were easily able to restrain even me…I get the feeling that you are not an amateur. Miss Akabane—you are *already* a professional killer, are you not? How is this possible?"

"……"

Eiri did not answer the question.

Shamaya asked again, trying not to raise her voice. "About the academy… Why do you know that?" As Kyousuke and the others knew, the true character of Purgatorium Remedial Academy was an institution that reworked murderers who were *useless* as they were, and "rehabilitated" them so that they became *useful* as professional killers. From her speech and conduct, it was clear that Shamaya knew the true nature of the academy as well.

Sure enough, Shamaya turned the question of Eiri's presence over in her mind. "Why could that be…? For my part, I cannot hide my surprise at the fact that you all know the truth, but…well, it's fine. Since you tried so hard, I shall tell you the rest. Everyone, why are only the first-year students isolated…do you know?" Her emerald-colored eyes were fixed on Maina.

"Ehh?!" Maina started, a question mark practically floating above her head. She had been the only one who did not know the true nature of the academy. "Th-that's probably…um…because everyone in the first-year class just entered school, and are not very rehabilitated yet… It would be dangewous…"

"Wrong. The second-years are even more dangerous than the first-years, and we third-year students are far and away more frightful yet! Oh-ho-ho! The reason is simple—" Negating Maina's answer with a smile, Shamaya looked at Kyousuke, who stood stock-still, not yet recovered from the tragedy of Renko.

"It is because the *curriculum is different* for first-years and for second-and third-years. While you are a first-year student, the teachers beat your warped nature into shape and reform you; at the same time, you follow a curriculum to *build up a foundation of physical strength*. The fatigue duty that you work morning and night, the teacher's rod wielded without restraint, 'training camps' like this prison camping trip… After they mold and temper your body and

mind through these methods, only at the start of the second year does the *true* 'curriculum to cultivate *professional killers*' actually begin! The world that we graduate into, after being trained for a full two years in the art of murder, is not polite society but the criminal underworld. We flap our wings and fly away as fine hit men!"

"……?!"

Shamaya had spoken the surprising truth.

"…Eh? K-killers? U-underworld…? Wh-what are you talking about…"

"_____"

Naturally, Maina, who was hearing about the true character of the academy for the first time, could not hide her shock. Neither could Kyousuke. *It can't be true that they hold classes on killing…!* He couldn't even imagine such a thing.

The condition that Kurumiya had imposed on Kyousuke's graduation into polite society was to "make it through three years without killing anyone, and without being killed." But with this curriculum—

"…Hmm? Learning murder techniques from the second year, huh…? Well, I suppose that means we're going to be forced to kill? That we…will have classes where we test out the techniques we have learned, and so on…?"

The questions that Eiri had thrown out addressed the concerns that Kyousuke had. If by chance such classes existed, it would be impossible to graduate without killing anyone. The graduation condition that had been imposed on Kyousuke could not possibly be met.

"Committing actual murder, hm…? At present, no such class is being conducted. It's basically training. Practice so that we amateurs can skillfully carry out murders as professionals—when it comes to

murder, we all experienced that before entering school, didn't we? Finally, like you first-year students, we also regularly take general education classes."

"....."

Kyousuke felt relieved at Shamaya's answer. Both Eiri, who was not able to kill people, and Maina, who did not want to kill people, also relaxed just the slightest bit.

Shamaya seemed to be giving off mixed signals. She stared at Eiri, who was still straddling her, with gloomy eyes. "Well, then, I also have questions. Continuing what we were just discussing—this academy is a place created to cultivate murderers into full-fledged professional killers. But this is baffling, Miss Akabane... Why might you be here in such a school?"

".....Um..."

Again Shamaya posed the question, and Eiri hesitated, her weak point exposed.

"You, who are already a professional assassin... Why on earth are you at a vocational school for killers? You seem to be quite finished with your education. Despite that, here you are... Why? There is no way that the teachers don't know—"

"Shut up." Eiri pressed down on the knife that she held to Shamaya's throat, a threat. "Do you understand your situation? You had better quietly answer my questions. If you speak again without permission, I'll kill you. I'll pull on this knife, and slice right through your carotid artery."

"_____"

Looking into Eiri's bloodthirsty eyes, Shamaya shut her mouth. She stared suspiciously into those rust-red orbs, almost close enough to touch. ".....Ah, I see. *That's* how it is." She smiled ferociously. In the openings between the raised corners of her mouth, delicate white

teeth shone wetly. “That’s why you were able to conceal a weapon, is it? It’s not that it wasn’t detected, but rather that *it was overlooked*... Oh-ho-ho! I see, I see, now I understand! Oh-ho ho-ho-ho!”

“……?!”

Eiri’s expression stiffened as Shamaya laughed, looking like she suspected the truth. Biting her lip, she pressed the blade even harder into her captive’s throat.

Blood oozed from her white skin, but Shamaya didn’t stop, despite the pressure on her windpipe. “So that’s how it is... It is not possible that the teachers missed such a weapon, now, is it? Knowing it was there, they must have believed that there was no threat in letting you have it... ‘At this academy, it’s best not to simply believe things that you hear only from the person concerned.’ ...Yes, that certainly is the case.”

“...Shut up.”

“You have killed six people. I heard that from the people in first-year Class A who heard your self-introduction. However, Miss Akabane...you have—”

“I told you to shut the hell up!” Shouting, Eiri tried to plunge the knife down in one go—but she couldn’t do it. The hand that gripped the knife trembled slightly, and her eyes wavered.

Shamaya’s smile intensified further, tinged with insanity. “You can’t kill people. Perhaps you were able to kill in the past, but now it’s impossible. As someone who *can* kill, this is as clear to me as day. Your eyes are not those of a murderer. That is why you will be killed —by me!”

The next instant, Shamaya launched into motion. Ignoring the knife pressing into her, she raised her left arm, and struck Eiri in the side of the face.

“...Guh?!”

As if following Eiri, who had immediately pulled her face away, next came Shamaya's right arm. Eiri tilted her head and evaded the thrust, which had been aiming for her throat.

"Come now, it is time for you to die!" Immediately: a left thrust. Eiri had jumped up off of Shamaya and, having risen, Shamaya pursued her savagely. Her own deadly weapon was lying on the ground—only for her to snatch it up in her right hand. "I'll show you how a model killer does it! Noooooowww!!" She slashed diagonally upward, unleashing her attack from a stance low to the ground.

"...Tch!!"

Eiri dodged by a hair's breadth. On her face was an agitation that she could not fully conceal. She was overwhelmed and overpowered by her opponent's ferocity, and beat retreat after retreat as Shamaya hectically pursued.

She swung the hatchet around as if possessed, slashing and slashing and slashing and slashing and slashing with all her might. "Come, come, come, come on and die already!! Quickly, quickly, quickly, quickly! I want to see you die! I want to watch you cry and scream, you stubborn girl!"

"Gah...this is...!"

Swinging left and right but never too wide, the blade of the hatchet aimed for Eiri's vital areas. She managed to dodge by a paper-thin margin. She leaped around, leaning her body, tilting her head, bending her upper body, blocking the hatchet's trajectory with the small knife in her hand—

"Gyah?!" Tripping over a rock as she landed, she lost her balance. "Ugh?!" Unable to recover, Eiri toppled to the ground. Preoccupied with the blade of the hatchet, she had neglected to pay attention to her footing. It was an error that her usual composure would never have allowed.

"—Tch?!"

Eiri moved to pick up her dropped weapon, but Shamaya was faster. She kicked the small knife lying on the ground and sent it flying, then calmly looked down at Eiri, now disarmed.

"……Ah."

"Oh-ho-ho! I beg your pardon, Miss Akabane! The Public Morals Committee does not select students only on the basis of their good behavior and academic results! Naturally, our records as killers are also considered. I am the chair of the Public Morals Committee, a position for which only the strongest may compete. I have been training diligently since my first year at the academy. You are no match for my strength!" Shamaya looked at Eiri, whom she had cornered, with a satisfied smile.

"But...be that as it may, you...seeing you like this, you look very sweet! You tried so hard, so I want to kill you slowly and deliberately. When I do, what kind of face will you let me see? What kind of voice will you let me hear? What kind of heart will you let me glimpse? Ahh...I'm really looking forward to it! Now, what shall I destroy first? Fingers, arms, legs, shins, thighs, buttocks, belly, shoulders, chin, mouth, cheeks, ears, nose, eyes... Your heart I shall hold in reserve for the very last moments! Oh-ho-ho-ho! Ahh, you truly do have a beautiful body. I really do want to torment you before I destroy it! Ha-ha!"

"……Eee!" Eiri let out a short shriek as Shamaya's eyes, tinged with insanity, crawled all over her body. Her firm expression had fled, and tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

With bloodshot eyes, Shamaya drew closer, her breathing growing increasingly ragged. "Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what is with you?! You're pretty...you're too pretty! Ha-ha! This is truly one of those things... I can't help but kill you, yes... I'm compelled to do it! Before your screaming voice, I will make you raise a different peak...ha-ha. Not a scream, a climax—Huh?! No, stop! Stooop it! I've already set my heart on a girl named Miss Kurumiya...but she really is pretty... I want to tease her, ooooooohhh!"

“N…nooooooooooo!!”

“Wait, heeeeeeyyy!”

Kyousuke shouted at Shamaya, who stood looming over Eiri while still holding the hatchet. His voice was a roar; he hoped to drown out his fear of Shamaya and grief over Renko. He charged in a suicide attack toward the two of them locked in a grapple.

Shamaya stared but quickly regained her composure. “You stay out of my way!” With demonic speed, she swung the hatchet back and forth in a rage. As the thick blade, wet with bright red blood, arced toward him, Kyousuke—

“Aaarrrggghhha!” With the back of his hand, swung at just the right moment, Kyousuke *deflected the blow from below*.

“Wha…?!” Shamaya was astonished at both his unusual courage and his reflexes. As she lost her footing, Kyousuke fired off his right fist, trying unsuccessfully to strike her.

“Don’t underestimate meeeeeeeee!” Using her momentum, Shamaya skillfully spun around. Coming from the other direction, from the back side of her body, again she swung the hatchet in a sideways chop.

“Whoa!!” As he ducked out of the way in panic, the blade passed over Kyousuke’s head—where his neck had been just moments before.

Kyousuke felt a tinge of fear at the width of his narrow escape but kept his eyes fixed ahead. The instant that the hatchet blade passed, he had kicked off the ground like a track runner crouching at the starting line.

“……?!”

Shamaya nimbly avoided a tackle that should have connected. However, perhaps because she had seen the threat of Kyousuke’s potential in his style, she moved to distance herself, retreating about

ten feet. The two of them squared off against one another, having exchanged places.

Shamaya lifted the hatchet up again, and fixed her wary eyes on Kyousuke. Met with unexpected resistance, she tried to calm her wild breathing as she spoke. “You... What the hell are you? You move like an amateur, but you’re formidable. Your physical strength, of course, but also your wits. You seem like you’re extremely *experienced* at this! It’s been a long time since someone has given me this much trouble. I must admit, it’s shaken my confidence a bit...”

However. Shamaya brushed her hair back. Looking at Kyousuke, who was standing as if to protect Eiri, she nodded, in apparent satisfaction. “Mr. Kamiya...you are certainly of great interest to me. Though you face death, rather than run away you enter the fray to help a lady... You’re a dreamy knight in shining armor, aren’t you? I wonder, how long can you maintain that brave composure? I’ll tear off that gallant mask. And your true nature—I’ll show the world your naked face!” Shamaya smiled, licking blood off the hatchet blade.

Kyousuke searched for the words that could somehow persuade her not to kill them, but none came. He didn’t have the slightest idea what to say to get her to stop this killing mania.

“Mi-miss Shamaya...”

As I expected, it looks like there’s no choice but brute force. Against the Murder Princess—who had twenty-one murders to her name, who even now continued to polish her skills, who was considered the foremost killer at the academy—Kyousuke wasn’t sure if he could survive this, especially without killing *her*. But he was driven to continue fighting—by anxiety, by fear. Before his eyes, Shamaya slowly lowered her stance.

“Well, then, here I come again, Mr. Kamiya. The experience cultivated from twenty-one murders, and the crystallization of skills fostered by the guidance of the teachers... I shall show you them both! Your arms, your legs, your head, your heart—I’ll cleanly

remove them for you! Oh-ho-ho!"

In a craze, Shamaya raised the hatchet, preparing to strike. Thick steel the color of fresh blood and eyes the color of emeralds sparkled in the moonlight.

"Please stop, Miss Shamaya!"

At that moment, a heartbroken scream rang out.

X X X

"Stop, please... Please stop, Miss Shamaya..."

At the repeated entreaty, the smile faded from the blonde's face. The voice called out desperately to her as she stood unmoving, hatchet still raised.

"I'm begging you, stop... Please don't hurt them any more than you already have!" Mustering what little strength it had, once again the voice cried out.

Shamaya did not turn to look behind her but just sighed. "...What are you saying this late in the game? Did you think that if you begged me so, that I would say, 'Yes, yes, I understand,' or something, and accede to your pleas? How stupidly optimistic! If you were hoping to persuade me, you've had quite the opposite effect. You can't save them, so just shut up and tremble. That suits you better, Miss Igarashi."

Maina held her tongue and hung her head, clenching her fists. Weakly, she asked, "...This is my fault, isn't it?"

"—What?" Shamaya, who had turned her attention back to Kyousuke, looked back in annoyance.

Maina, who suddenly raised her face, stared into her emerald-colored eyes. "It's my fault, isn't it, Miss Shamaya? Because I did all

kinds of terrible things to you…that's why! This is unbearable—"

"Yes, you could say that."

"……?!"

Her worst fears confirmed without hesitation, Maina's facial expression stiffened.

Lowering the hatchet, Shamaya stroked the gauze on her cheek, face warped with hatred as she spoke. "No matter what the cause, the fact that I was made to endure a disgrace like that in the presence of the general public…it's only natural that I should feel resentment. Of course, that is not the only reason. The attitude of Miss Hikawa, who ridiculed me at every step; the speech and conduct of the defiant Miss Akabane; the existence of the obscene, base, vulgar, savage Mr. Kamiya, who I find so viscerally repulsive…"

Here she went a bit far, clearly twisting the proverbial knife intentionally.

"They made me so angry… Of course I took an interest in them! Even if you had done nothing, I still would have wanted to kill them. Of course, if that particular incident had never happened…at least, I don't think it would have come to this." Brandishing her blood-soaked weapon, Shamaya sneered.

Renko, head caved in, still lay unmoving on the ground where she had fallen.

"All of you piled up the gunpowder together…but *you* were the one who set it alight, Miss Igarashi! Feigning clumsiness, pretending it was an accident… If only you hadn't tried to kill me, your dear friends would never have had to suffer. Yes, that's right… If only you hadn't been there."



“_____”

The moment that she heard those words, Maina’s trembling abruptly stopped. Her flax-colored eyes open wide. She stood silent, frozen in place. Bidding the unresponsive girl farewell with a derisive laugh, Shamaya turned back toward Kyousuke and Eiri.

“.....I’m sorry.”

In a feeble voice, Maina apologized. Closing her eyes and dropping her shoulders, she chewed on her lip.

Shamaya swept her hair back in annoyance. “Huh? Just because you apologize doesn’t mean I’ll forgive—”

“I’m sorry!”

She said it again, louder this time. Her eyes were looking not at Shamaya but at Kyousuke and the others.

Her voice trembling, eyes trembling, fists trembling—Maina shouted. “I only drag everyone down. I’m of no use whatsoever. I’m nothing but a burden... I’m truly sorry! I understand that it’s no use apologizing, I really do. I don’t have the slightest expectation of being forgiven...but! At the very least, please allow me to fix my own terrible mistake! Because even I...even *I* can kill if I want toooooo!”

At that moment, Maina broke into a run.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Wha—?!”

She raised a battle cry like no other and charged straight for Shamaya, who was as stunned as the others.

It was a reckless attack, the kind made by someone with nothing left to lose.

“Maina?!” Kyousuke and Eiri shouted together. Shamaya, meanwhile, turned to her attacker.

“What *are* you doing? Are you stupid? You… Do you want to be killed that badly?”

Brushing her hair aside, she adjusted her grip on the hatchet and prepared herself.

Unsurprisingly, with her eyelids squeeeeeeezed tightly closed, Maina’s attack left her completely vulnerable. Shamaya leisurely raised the hatchet overhead, ready and waiting to bash Maina’s brains in.

“Whooooooaaaaaa?!”

However, predictably, Maina tripped spectacularly en route. She defeated herself before even reaching her opponent.

“…Huh?” Shamaya lowered the hatchet and approached Maina’s position. “Ah. Now I understand. You really are quite the stupid little girl, aren’t you? I shall carve open that unfortunate head for you. Goodness me… Who knows if there’s even anything in there?! I suppose we’ll just have to find out—”

“Whooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaa!” Without realizing how close Shamaya had gotten, Maina tried to leap up into a sprint. Her head smashed into Shamaya’s abdomen, like a head butt.

“Oof!!”

“Ah—ehh?!” Surprised by the unexpected obstacle, Maina reflexively threw her arms around Shamaya, who struggled and fought back with both arms. “Gyaaa!!”

But Maina pushed through her defenses. Shamaya was thrown backward to the ground. Her head smashed dead center against a large rock lying perfectly in her path. She groaned in agony. “Owowowowowowowowowowowowowowow!!”

“Oh dear! Ah…it was a coincidence! Umm, umm…ehh?!” Picking herself up in a fluster, Maina noticed the hatchet. Shamaya must have dropped it, because the bloody lethal weapon was lying within reach, if she just stretched out to take it.

“Wa…waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Maina brandished the hatchet with both hands.

“Huh? Ah…aaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiieeeeee, noooooooooooo!!”

Pinned, Shamaya shrieked and closed her eyes tight.

The blade of the hatchet swung down at her face.

Slam!

“……Oh?”

Voice flat, a nervous Shamaya opened her eyes. The blade that Maina had swung with all her might was stuck in the ground an inch from Shamaya’s cheek. Her eyes followed the blade, up Maina’s arms, to arrive at her face. Maina was—

“……I can’t.”

“Y-you—”

“I can’t do it! *Killing of my own free will* is something…I just can’t do!” Maina screamed, looking like she would burst into tears any second. “Even if this academy really is a place to train professional killers…it’s impossible for me. Absolutely impossible! I-if I ever get to the point where I want to kill, I’d…I’d rather be killed! I’m sorry, you guys… It’s no use, but I’m sorry…waaahh…”

The hand grasping the hatchet was shaking. Eiri mumbled, “Maina…”

Hearing Maina’s words, and seeing her expression, Shamaya’s

bewildered face was instantly tinged with reproach and resentment. "...What was that?" she growled, her teeth grinding. Staring into Maina's eyes, she began to shout. "What the hell are you?! You go about pretending like you won't kill someone, and deceive them, and trick them... What on earth are you after? Even now, you... The way you're behaving is just an act, is it not?"

"It's not an act!"

Maina cried out in a voice loud enough to drown out Shamaya's rage. Staring directly at the daunted-looking upperclassman, and trying hard to hold back her tears, she continued:

"It's not an act... I've always been clumsy, and foolish, and bad at everything except being a bother to everyone else...a worthless human being who ended up being so clumsy she killed people. But let me at least say this. Even I never killed because I *wanted* to... I never killed because I *like* killing!"

"...You killed people because of clumsiness, you say? Of all the stupid things..."

There's no way that can be true! Shamaya's statement continued unspoken as her lips grew taut before suddenly stopping.

Shamaya's face scrunched up as a single drop of clear liquid rolled down her cheek.

"...It started with a boy in my class, my neighbor when we were assigned new seats in middle school. He was a very kind person...he always helped me when I would screw everything up. He would lend me things when I forgot them; when I dropped my pencil box, he would help me pick up everything; he would pat my head when I fell down and hurt myself and give me a bandage. I wanted to repay this kind boy just a little bit, to let him know my feelings of gratitude, so I...for the first time in my life, I cooked—I wanted to make a box lunch for this boy, who was always working hard at club activities.

"That was the start of everything," said Maina, her voice trembling.

"Lunch break on a Monday...I worked up my courage, and presented it to him. His eyes opened wide, two perfect circles, and then he accepted it with a smile. I was so happy, my heart pounded. I watched attentively as he ate the food I'd prepared. I was wondering what kind of expression he would make after tasting it... *What kind of feelings would he express?* I wondered as I watched him excitedly. First, he picked up the rolled omelet with his chopsticks, and brought it to his mouth, and then—"

Pursing her lips tight, Maina choked up. Sniffling and swallowing, she forced herself to continue talking. It was a painful expression, as if she were spitting up blood.

"...After eating my food, he suddenly *grabbed his chest and started groaning*. At first, I thought maybe the egg had blocked up his throat. However, even an idiot like me soon realized that something about the way he looked was off. A heavy sweat broke out all over his face, and he started to shake all over, and his breathing changed...

"—My mind went blank. I don't remember much after that. Only, it seems that in a panic, I triggered the same clumsiness as always, and fired off a rapid succession of incomparable blunders... When I came to my senses, it was all over. The desks and chairs around me were scattered around like a storm had blown through... Several of my classmates who had been eating nearby had collapsed, crushed by the debris. That boy...he died. He had been killed by food that I made. I-I had—"

Her tears flooded over, and Maina let out a scream.

"I killed him! And not only him...my classmates, and teachers, and Miss Shamaya...I killed them, and I hurt them... That's reality, that's a fact! I can't deny it! But I didn't *want* to kill...I didn't *want* to hurt anybody! That boy, or my classmates, or my teachers, or Miss Shamaya, or anyone—I'm not a person who enjoys violence, or

death! The truth about me is...the truth is, I just wanted to get along with everyone!"

"_____"

Shamaya's face was blank. She gazed up at Maina, beneath the girl's shower of tears.

"……Is that all you wanted to say?"

Her voice was emotionless and dry. Even as she said those words, Shamaya's arm moved. Pushing Maina's fingers aside, she took hold of the hatchet's handle.

Her body trembling, Maina tried her best to wipe away her tears. "...*Hic*." She nodded wearily.

A light crossed through Shamaya's eyes. "……Is that so?"

Putting her strength into the fingers that grasped the hatchet, she pushed herself up.

"Well, that's enough of that."

She *gently embraced* Maina's body. Leaving the hatchet stuck in the ground, Shamaya wrapped both of her empty hands around Maina's back.

"Eh?"

Maina let out an anticlimactic sound. She allowed it to happen with a flabbergasted expression, no less.

Softly stroking the back of Maina's head, Shamaya whispered, "Committing murder despite the best intentions...that must be even more painful than being unable to bring yourself to kill despite how much you want to. That's enough, Miss Igarashi. I've completely lost my appetite, so...that's enough. Quite...enough already. It would be

much more painful for you to go on living, wouldn't it?"

"……?!"

Once again, a torrent of tears poured from Maina's eyes. She buried her crumpled face in Shamaya's shoulder. "Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!" She cried with all her heart.

Shamaya's bearing abruptly softened. Her whole body seemed to lose strength, and she smiled bitterly. "My goodness…you really are a hopeless girl, aren't you?" Holding Maina tight, Shamaya buried her nose in her chestnut-colored hair.

Watching the two embracing each other, Kyousuke and Eiri also relaxed. *I thought it was over when Maina charged at Shamaya, but…* Somehow, it seemed that Maina had gotten her to give up the blade. For the moment, the threat of the Murder Princess had passed…

"Ah, thank goodness…*I'm finally healed!*"

Just as everyone was starting to relax, a clear soprano voice, like a glacier at absolute zero, filled the air like a freezing nightmare that makes the evening tremble.

"……?!"

In disbelief, everyone slowly turned to look.

Pale moonlight. Trees rustled, sunk in darkness. In their midst…

"The opening act is over, right? Well, then, let's get tonight's main event started!!"

Her gas mask and headphones tossed away with her school jacket, this *killing machine*—

Renko's ice-blue eyes were ablaze with murderous desire as she

smiled, revealing two perfect canines.

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"Renko, you're…alive—" Looking at her standing there as if nothing had happened, Kyousuke's eyes grew wide.

Smoothing her hair dyed with fresh blood, Renko agreed. "Yep. I'm alive! It seems like I got a concussion and lost consciousness, though, right? The damage was greater than anticipated, so it took some time to reboot. I probably entered sleep mode to accelerate the healing process… Well, whatever! I'm good as new! I was in imminent danger, so my unlimiter kicked in and released the lock. It has to, because the limiter suppresses not only my murderous desires but also my physical abilities, you know?"

The limiter: her black gas mask. Renko picked up a palm-sized stone that was lying near the mask, and casually closed her fist around it.

Crunch. The stone crumbled into sand, spilling through the cracks between her fingers.

Shamaya let slip her surprise. "…Huh? Wha…wh-what *are* you? How… Wh-why are you not dead?! Twice I smashed your head to pieces, but you're still alive—"

"Smashed to pieces? Heh-heh. Don't say such stupid things, Shamaya dear." Renko laughed at the tremble in Shamaya's voice, at her shoulders shaking. Renko pressed an index finger, which could have been considered a small weapon in its own right, against her own temple.

"A few cracks at worst. If you want to break through my bones, you'll have to blast me with a shotgun or something from point-blank range. That would scatter even *my* gray matter, just like the vocalist from that grunge band… I suppose I would die, wouldn't I? But it takes a lot more than one person's strength to smash my bones.

Especially in only two or three blows. That's how I was made, you see." Renko made a gesture like she was pulling a trigger—*bang*—and staggered about.

Shamaya looked more and more confused. "...Shotgun? Made that way...? Wh-wha...? I really just do not understand what you're saying... Wh-what are you...? What the hell *are* you?!" Shamaya shouted, squeezing Maina even tighter. Her countenance was gradually shifting from surprise to fear.

Renko took one step toward the frightened blonde, opening her arms wide. Her jacket had been tossed aside, and on her bare, white arms, close together on her skin, were tribal tattoos that resembled inky chains.

Floating in her ice-blue eyes, her dark pupils were as sharp as knives. "...Me? I'm a *killing machine*, Miss Murder Princess. You and I may seem similar, but we are completely different creatures. See, I was built solely for the purpose of killing people. Why, I was a born, made-to-order Murder Maid! To me, killing is not just a hobby, or a preference, or a life goal—it's my total raison d'être. It's not that I couldn't live without murder...it's not even that I enjoy murder... *It's simply that murder itself is life, and so I enjoy it.* It would be a waste not to enjoy my one-time-only human life, right? Hee-hee-hee!

"—Oh, by the way, my true identity is a secret, so if you try to expose me to anyone else I'll disassemble your body! Even if you don't, I'm going to kill you, though... Heh-heh! But you're not concerned, are you Shamaya dear...? You've murdered twenty-one people, after all, so... You must have long ago resigned yourself to being killed, right?"

The moment she had finished speaking, Renko launched into motion. Her explosive leg strength, far surpassing any ordinary human's abilities, rendered the several-yard distance separating them meaningless.

"Ah.....eee?!"

Renko was upon her in an instant. Shamaya's eyes went wide as Renko's fingers dug into her throat, lifting her into the air as she tried to scream. "Aak—!!"

"Oh dear!! Mi-mith Chamaya?!" Freed from Shamaya's grasp, Maina flew to Renko's feet. "Sto...stop, please Renko! It's already over! I understand your feelings of anger, but... Mith Chamaya awweady said that she won't kill us or anything! So pwease...I'm begging you, pwease sto—"

"Maina," Renko called, still gripping Shamaya's neck with her right hand.

"...Eh?" Maina looked up, her eyes wet with tears.

Renko grinned at her.

"—Be quiet!"

She growled it lowly, looking at Maina like one would look at stone laying by the side of the road. Withering under Renko's murderous gaze, Maina shrieked, and fell down. Renko immediately seemed to lose interest. She turned her eyes back to Shamaya, tightening her strangling grip.

"Kkah—!"

Shamaya's breath was being crushed out of her.

Gazing at her with boredom, Renko shook her head. "*This tone color is so tedious...*" she whispered. "It's a familiar melody, yeah... violent distortion and an irregular breakdown. It's common deathcore, weaving together irritation and anger. At least give us some nice death agony vocals. I have high expectations for you after all, Murder Princess!"

Renko released Shamaya's throat.

She crumpled to the ground gasping for oxygen, and Renko

casually kicked her in the stomach. “Gahh!!”

Eyes wide with the impact, Shamaya doubled over. “Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh, owowowooooooooooowww!! Dy-dying... I’m dying...!!”

She rolled around under the assault, holding her stomach. Renko frowned.

“Huh? What’s with all the commotion? Everything you say is always so fussy. Now, please do allow me to expose you to such exquisite pain that you can no longer maintain that elegant composure—awww, now I’m doing iiiiiiiiiiiit!!”

Ruffling her own hair with both hands, Renko shouted in irritation. “That’s enough...enough! Of course I hate you! You can experience killing many times over, but you can experience dying only once. It would be physiologically impossible! As a reward of sorts for killing so many already, I was gonna let you request your favorite way to die, but...yeah, I gave up on that idea. I’ve made a choice on my own... I’m going to strangle you! I don’t wanna have to listen to your grating voice anymore, is why. I think I’ll crush your vocal cords, and tear your neck to shreds for you! If I do that, I should be able to kill you quietly...no, wait... In any case, if I kill you instantly, even if I’m not specifically aiming for the throat, you won’t have a chance to let out your death wail—”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

“Geez! What a grating, shrill voice...I’ve got it. I’ll completely obliterate your head with a full swing. You also injured my head, so this will make it even, seeeeee?” Renko held up one of the fresh blood highlights in her hair, and fiercely bared her canine teeth.

Shamaya quickly sat up, and looked around in panic.

“.....Ah.”

When she noticed that the hatchet was stuck in the ground in

between her and Renko, her expression changed. Regaining her fighting spirit, Shamaya's mouth twisted into a grin as she kicked off the ground.

"Dieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

With hatchet in hand once again, she slashed at Renko with all her strength.

However, Renko—

"I told you, it's impossible with a toy like that." She boldly stopped the downward-swinging blade with her bare hands, her arms rippling with power. Instantly, the light-colored steel blade cracked, and then shattered.

Still tightly gripping the weapon which had been reduced to nothing but a handle, Shamaya sounded like Maina. "...Eh?" Her expression blank, she looked confused as Renko drew back her right arm.

That arm, colored with tattoos, was tense with power—enough power to smash Shamaya's head to smithereens. "Welcome to death, Murder Princess—make good friends with your victims in the next world!"

Ice-blue eyes narrowed, while emerald-green eyes shut tight. Cutting through the air, Renko swung her right arm, which, slender as it was, was set to pulverize Shamaya's skull.

"*Don't you kill her!*"

—In that instant, a figure had thrust itself in between Renko and Shamaya.

"……?!"

The two of them simultaneously gasped, wide-eyed. But Renko's arm did not stop. Try as she might to steer it away, it was too late,

and Renko's fist collided with the figure that had suddenly appeared—it collided with Kyousuke.

"Guaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!" Kyousuke was sent flying by the impact of a fist that could crush metal and stone. Rolling, he sprawled out on the ground. He could hear Eiri's and Maina's screams.

"...Eh? Kyo-Kyousuke...what are you—"

"Don't kill him, Renko! Kill Miss Shamaya...not him..."

Lifting his face, covered in greasy sweat, Kyousuke groaned. His left arm, which had taken the direct blow, was bright red and swollen. The bones weren't broken, but the muscles in both of his arms hurt terribly, as if they had been torn apart.

Even so, he grit his teeth and sat up, trying to appeal to Renko. "I'm begging you...please stop, Renko... Even if you don't kill her, Miss Shamaya is sure to not kill us anymore...so please stop! Please don't kill Miss Shamaya!"

"—No way!"

Renko answered Kyousuke's pleas like a spoiled child. Puffing up her cheeks, she pointed a finger at the dumbfounded Shamaya, "I had my head struck with a hatchet by that girl! She totally meant to kill me! When it gets dangerous, the safety device on my Limiter kicks in—though I wonder if it's supposed to happen when I'm only slightly threatened—and it's like, suddenly...*bam!*

"Plus, it wasn't just me...Eiri and Maina too—this girl tried to kill you guys, the people important to me! And you know I absolutely cannot allow you to be killed by anyone else, Kyousuke...Absolutely, unconditionally, completely, no way in hell will I ever allow that, so—I have to destroy her, no matter what." Emitting a threatening, guttural sound, Renko glared at Shamaya with blazing eyes

"...Eeek!!" Shamaya curled up into a ball. Her teeth chattered

audibly, and her eyes quickly filled with tears.

Renko was quick to ridicule her: “My oh my…is this the first time you’ve almost died? Hee-hee-hee! Isn’t that great, Murder Princess? In your final moments, you can experience what it’s like to be one of your victims. You’re sure to have a lot to talk about on the other side, hm? Heh-heh! You said it just before you killed me, didn’t you…? That this was a ‘shortcut to purgatory’? Well this time I’m sending you to hell by super express—”

“Renko!” Kyousuke shouted as Renko again extended an arm toward Shamaya.

“…Whaaat?” She glared at him with her beautiful face screwed up in a threatening frown.

“Don’t kill…don’t kill her! If you kill Shamaya—or anyone—in front of me…I’m not sure that I can continue to be close with you like I have been so far… I think I might even start to hate you.”

“_____”

The expression faded from Renko’s face.

“Mr. Kamiya…?” Shamaya mumbled in confusion.

Opening her ice-blue eyes wider than ever before, Renko held her tongue, and slowly…slowly looked down.

“……Heh-heh.”

She twisted her mouth into a warped smile. Ferocious canine teeth peeked from the edges of her lips. “So you think that if you say that, I’m going to stop, huh, Kyousuke? You’ve underestimated me. Certainly, I like you! I love you! However, I’m not such a pushover that I would set my feelings for you aside and just do as you say. In fact, that way of talking, like ‘if you do such and such I’ll start to hate you’ is something I don’t like too much, see. Conversely, I myself *—might start to hate you*, Kyousuke!”

"...No, that's not what I meant when I said that." In reaction to Renko's dazzling, angry eyes, Kyousuke clenched his fist.

It's all right. Renko is a straightforward person.

Telling himself that if he managed to reach her with sincerity, his feelings should make it through to her, Kyousuke continued. "I also like you, Renko. Not LOVE, but LIKE, okay? We have fun when we're together, and I think you're a really great person. Even knowing that you're a murderer, that's how I feel.

"However...if you actually kill someone, and I have to really see you as a murderer, I think I'll probably be disgusted by you. It's selfish, I'm sorry. It's just that I...I want to become even better friends with you! I want to go on laughing with you! That's why I'm begging... I'm begging you, Renko! Please don't make me hate you. If it's about what Miss Shamaya did to us, enough already. Because you're still very much alive! This is enough, without going too far... Won't you please end it here?"



* * *

"Okay, I understand!"

"Huh?" Her reply had been quick. Too quick for him to follow.

Renko ran toward the oblivious Kyousuke with a charming smile on her beautiful face. "Come ooooooon, Kyousuke! You bastaaaaaard! You don't want to start hating me...? You want to confirm your love with me as time goes on...? What is thaaaaaat garbage?!

"And even worse, you're happy I'm still very much alive? I'm so happy to hear thaaat! Mmm, what is this melody...it feels really good! It's too divine, so heavyyyyyy! Man, I really love you, Kyousuke! I love both the honest and sincere you, and the tune you play! I love yooou, Kyousukeeeeee! I want to blast you away right now!"

"...Huh? No, please, at least spare my life... Wait, ooooooowww!"

Kyousuke looked extremely confused as Renko giggled and fawned over him, rubbing his cheeks as she tightly embraced him. He was glad that she was conveying her feelings, but also felt that she might be conveying them too strangely.

"Oh, sorry, sorry! You know the injury I gave you when I hit you? To apologize, I thought I'd take off my bra, and with the boobs that you like so much—" Renko started in on the same old song and dance, and Kyousuke desperately struggled to suppress his interest.

Maina sighed, exhausted. "*Phew*...th-thank goodness."

Eiri glared at Renko. "...She should still just go die."

"I'm...I'm saved...?" Shamaya muttered, before crumpling to the ground and losing consciousness.

X X X

“Hey…why do I have to carry her?”

They were on the return path, where the faint moonlight and shadows of trees were interwoven overhead. Carrying the soundly sleeping Shamaya on her back, Renko sighed. “*Kksshh*…”

“…Process of elimination, duh. Maina and I are helpless girls, and you rejected the idea of Kyousuke giving her a ride, didn’t you? Plus, I believe it was your fault that she fainted in the first place.” Walking next to Renko, Eiri let out a bored yawn. “…*Fwah*.”

Renko, her gas mask reengaged, let out another big sigh. “*Kksshh*… Well, I guess that’s true. But she’s too heavy, and she stinks of perfume, and it’s irritating to have her pointlessly big breasts touching me… Later, let’s secretly dump her somewhere she won’t be found, okay? Also, Eiri, while I have my limiter on, I’m a helpless girl just like you two!”

“…Helpless? Are you sure you don’t mean shameless? And how can you diss her huge breasts, what with your enormous boobs? If we’re going to dump her, first you should throw away all that annoying extra eyesore blubber attached to your own chest,” Eiri cursed in irritation, turning her face away. However, her expression was still visible to Kyousuke and Maina, walking behind them: Her mouth was smiling broadly, perhaps because both she and Renko had somehow come out of that situation safely.

Looking at the two of them making a racket as usual, Kyousuke smiled. “Such good friends that they’re always fighting… That’s how they are, huh? Well, they make a good pair.”

“Ah-ha-ha! You’re right, they’re really great best friends. Really great—” Maina laughed, dazzled at Eiri and Renko’s exchange, which was like a two-person comedy act. In her eyes was a mixture of longing and loneliness.

Kyousuke was searching for the right words, when—

“……I really hate myself.”

Gazing down at her feet, Maina muttered to herself, voice brimming with loathing. “I’m foolish, and dull, and I can’t get the hang of things, and I’m awkward, and I’m timid, and I’m negative… When I think about myself, I can only think of weaknesses. No matter what I do, it doesn’t go well, and the more I try to do my best, the more trouble I cause… I’m a bad person, and I’m connected to bad people. It was also true that time—” Maina’s fists were clenched, her voice filled with a mixture of sorrow and regret.

As she recalled her painful memories, Maina continued, almost confessional. “The box lunch that I made to make him happy killed him. And not only him. Many of my classmates were caught up in it… If I hadn’t tried so hard, I don’t think such a thing would have ever happened. If I never existed, I bet the people around me would never get hurt. Many, many times I have considered suicide, but…

“Each time, I *remember*…” A slight smile came over her bitter expression. “After causing so much destruction with my terrible clumsiness, I returned to my senses, and when I rushed over to where he was…he was still barely alive. I went into a total panic, bawling and screaming, when he…he *smiled* at me. He forced his agonized face to smile as if to set me at ease—he said, ‘It was delicious, thank you.’ Those were the words that I had always wanted to hear since I first made that lunch…and they were his last words.

“I thought it had to be a trick! I thought the lunch was truly bad enough *to kill*. But, since he said such a thing…since he smiled at me…I resolved to never give up on doing my best. I resolved to never give up on living! Even if that meant continuing to be a danger to those around me, no matter how hard it got…I decided to live the best that I could, and continue atoning for my sins.”

Maina’s face still looked pained, but her eyes stared straight ahead. “This academy is not a place of atonement—that was a shock, but… even so, I absolutely will not yield! I’m of the same spirit as you, Kyousuke—without killing anyone, I want to try to survive!” Maina clenched a fist in front of her chest enthusiastically.

As a matter of fact, the reason that Kyousuke and the others had not openly told Maina about the true nature of the academy was not only because they had been sworn to secrecy by Kurumiya. They also had apprehensions about Maina being overwhelmed if she learned the truth, and losing the will to live. However, Maina was...

"—Maina, you're so strong!"

"...Eh?"

"You're strong, Maina... Ordinarily, if someone tried that hard only to fail, they'd probably give up. That's easier, and doesn't cause trouble for anyone else. But you're not like that. You, like everyone around you, have chosen a difficult path. Whether that choice was correct or a mistake isn't clear to me, either. I think you're strong for choosing such a path of your own free will. You're incredibly earnest, and try with all your might... That's why I want to support you." Kyousuke's voice was confident and clear.

"Eh?! No way... S-someone like me...? Oh dear..."

Maina was flustered, but Kyousuke continued. "And it's not just me! Eiri and Renko, too...probably even the boy who ate your boxed lunch thought so, too. Certainly, you have your weak points and flaws. But you also have strong points and advantages that contradict them. If you didn't, you wouldn't be able to smile in the face of all this death."

"Kyousuke..."

"I'm sorry for keeping the stuff about the academy a secret until now, okay? You're a much stronger and more graceful person than we thought, Maina. So, it's all right—that boy smiled at you; your feelings definitely got through to him. I guarantee it. No matter how clumsy you are."

"......?!"

Opening her flax-colored eyes wide, Maina looked up at Kyousuke. She stopped walking, and stood with a vacant expression.

"...Huh? What happened, you two? Why are you standing still over there?"

"Oh dear! It's n-nnnn-nothing!" Maina jumped as Renko called out to her. Her flustered face was flushed bright red. "Ah, um...twuly, id's nuffing! Oh dear." Shaking her head, she ran after Renko and Eiri, who were now some distance away.

"Whooooooaaaaaa!"

—She fell flat.

"Ah..." Renko and Eiri both let out a sigh.

Kyousuke smiled at this expected conclusion and deliberately extended a hand. "...If I help you out like this, it's a little bit easier, right? I'm going to try hard, too, so that I can be helpful to you, who tries so hard, so take my hand. Let's always rise after a fall."

"Ah...o-okay! Th-thank you...Kyousuke." Timidly, she grasped the hand he was offering, and Maina's face grew even redder. Hanging her head like she was trying to escape notice, she spoke hesitantly:

"Renko, Eiri...would it be all right if I did my best from here on out, too?"

Kyousuke tilted his head in confusion at Maina's question. "Try your best...? Maina, you're already doing that, aren't you? Why are you asking the two of them?"

"Ehh?! Ah...n-no reason! What I said just now, that's not what I meant; I was talking to myself... It was n-nothing! Don't pay any attention to me!" Frantically shaking her head, Maina started walking again. Still gripping Kyousuke's hand tightly, she charged forward at a quick pace.

Kyousuke looked perplexed. "Huh? H-hey...! What's with you all of a sudden—?"

Maina was unusually tense. “I told you, it’s nothing! Id-id’s nuffing, I seddd!”

Seeing the two of them walking hand in hand, Renko held her forehead. “*Kksshh*…oh man, it looks like we’ve got ourselves a new rival in love, huh, Eiri?”

“…Huh?” Eiri glared at Renko’s gas mask. “What was that? I don’t understand what you mean… I don’t have any particular interest in such a womanizing, lecherous creep. So what if he’s willfully snatched away? Just, well…” Eiri’s angry, half-lidded eyes bored holes in Renko’s back. “…If there was only one, that would be good.”

Shamaya, her handsome face limply relaxed beneath long eyelashes, began talking in her sleep in a coaxing, fawning voice.

“Wow…how wonderful…it’s so lovely…Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho…”



"It's—it's oooverrr...!"

Kyousuke stretched wearily as he walked along the path leading from the gymnasium to the student dorms. The two-night three-day prison camping trip had come to a close not long ago, at 7:00 PM. The freshmen students had gathered in the gymnasium as they arrived, and a simple closing ceremony had been conducted by the faculty and members of the Public Morals Committee immediately thereafter.

Walking through the campus beneath the illumination of mercury lamps, Maina sighed. "*Phew*, I'm tired... That was an awfully harsh camping trip."

"……*Fwah*, I'm sleepy."

After the incident in the woods, Kyousuke's group had arrived at the academy before dawn. They had been the earliest of the first-year students to arrive, and they should have taken plenty of time to rest, but—now, half a day later, they had yet to get a single wink of sleep. Dealing with the aftermath of what had happened had been difficult.

The attack on Kyousuke and the others at the hands of Shamaya, the chair of the Public Morals Committee, had sparked a major uproar. They had been so occupied with the ongoing investigation that, next thing they knew, it had been time for the closing ceremony.

Combing her hair, which had returned to its silver color now that it was rinsed of blood, Renko laughed. "*K-k-kksshh!* I'm exhausted, but I definitely had fun! It looks like Bob and Chihiro also made it back safely, which is great, too. With everybody back safe, I consider it case closed."

“Yeah, that’s right. In the end, it looks like Shinji and his group didn’t make it in time, though…”

About half of the first-year students had been able to return within the allotted time. Once the remaining students had been forcibly repatriated by the upperclassmen, they were to be subject to extremely harsh punishment, it seemed. According to the second-and third-year students, this was a special lesson in hunting down escaped prisoners, and their grades would be improved according to the number of students they captured.

Furthermore, the next day was Monday, but there would be a two-day recess during which classes would be suspended. This meant that while the tardy students were being hunted in the woods, the other students could rest and recuperate at their leisure.

Heading for the student dorms to rest their exhausted bodies as soon as possible, Kyousuke and the others were able to talk cheerfully about the experience that was behind them now.

“Everyone, thank you for your efforts on the prison camping trip!”

In unison, they stopped walking, and turned to look behind them. Under the lamp illuminating the night path, there stood—

“Th-thank you for your hard work…Miss Shamaya.”

With an angelic smile on her face, the chair of the Public Morals Committee, Saki Shamaya, was standing there. Her entire body was covered in wounds that were covered in bandages. Her soft, honey-colored hair was frizzy, one of her emerald eyes was covered with a patch, and her uniform was torn to shreds.

All of which was evidence of discipline at Kurumiya’s hand. Even at a vocational school for professional murderers, trying to kill one’s fellow students without permission demanded harsh punishment.

Shamaya, who they had brought along on their return to the

academy, had not attended the closing ceremony, and though her expression was sunny, her face, completely covered with scratches and bruises, was painful to look at.

As Kyousuke and the others stood at a loss for words, Shamaya laughed. “Oh-ho-ho! And I still have a full night of discipline yet before me! But it can’t be helped. After all, I did commit a slight sin… As the chair of the Public Morals Committee, it is nothing less than a shameful disgrace. There is simply no excuse for the trouble that I caused you.” She straightened herself, and bowed apologetically.

Arms folded, Eiri snorted contemptuously. “Hmph…! Really, you’re a major pain. Thanks to you, we didn’t get to rest at all, or even take a shower! As if we’ll forgive you just because you apologized. What a naive way of—”

“Well, then, Miss Akabane, what can I do to earn your forgiveness?” In an instant, Shamaya brought herself up close and personal to Eiri.

“Kyah?!”

Eiri was taken aback as Shamaya grabbed her shoulders and peered into her eyes. “What might you like me to do for you? Shall I wash your body for you as we shower together? Or perhaps spend a night in the same bed…? Ha-ha!”

“Huh?! Just a… D-don’t touch me! No to both, you perverted girl!”

“Oh-ho-ho! You’re so cute when you act tough! I thought that it would grate on my nerves, but now that I know your true face I can see that it’s truly charming! Please put your mind at ease; I won’t reveal your secret to anyone. In exchange, let me hear your XXX voice…ha-ha!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

“……”

It seemed that Shamaya, who was now drooling, had taken quite a liking to Eiri. Whining, Maina tried to stop her. “Oh dear! Miss Shamaya! Y-you can’t...because Eiri is very tired!”

“Hmm...? Oh my, I beg your pardon. Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! I forgot myself just now... But my, you are awfully cute as well, Miss Igarashi! Perhaps because you arouse my protective desires, you stir up feelings that I can’t ignore. Oh-ho-ho! So adorable...”

“Ehh?!” Maina stiffened in surprise as Shamaya stroked her hair. It seemed that Shamaya had also taken a liking to Maina.

Renko sighed, looking unconcerned as she watched Shamaya fawn over a flustered Maina right in front of her. “*Kksshh*...good grief! This is a fine situation, isn’t it? The girl was planning to kill us, but instead it looks like she got her heart killed. Geez, I give up, I give—”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeekkk!!” Just at the moment when Renko was about to approach, Shamaya toppled over and fell on her backside. Pointing at Renko with a trembling finger, she spoke in a terrified voice. “A g-g-ghost! How horrible! Please, keep away from me! Don’t point your gas mask at me, pleeeaaase!”

“_____”

Apparently Shamaya had developed a deep phobia of Renko.

“*Kksshh!* It makes me sick that you think Eiri and Maina are fine, but I’m no good, you know!” It seemed that despite her typically insensitive attitude, Renko had taken offense. “Maybe I should kill you after all, Shamaya dear...? And anyway, where the hell do you think you’re going?!”

Shamaya, who had moved away from Renko, was trying to hide behind Kyousuke’s back. Seeing her grow more and more angry, Kyousuke attempted to soothe the Amazon. “Now, now... There’s no helping it, right? Anyone would be scared if they were almost killed by someone like you...” He himself had also almost been killed once by Renko, so he knew there was no helping Shamaya’s fear.

Eiri also seemed to be frightened of Shamaya, and before anyone noticed, she was hiding behind Renko's back. Equidistant between the two of them, Maina stood, flustered. Looking back and forth between Renko and Shamaya, Kyousuke was getting fed up when—

"Ohhh, I'm scared...I'm scaaared, Kyousuke daaarlinggg!"

"Huh?"

Shamaya, whining like a spoiled child, embraced him from behind.

Kyousuke and the others stared, wide-eyed.

"Hey...Miss Shamaya?! What are you doing all of a sudden... Wait. 'Darling'?"

What do you mean by "darling"?!

Shamaya was affectionately rubbing her cheek against the bewildered Kyousuke's back.

"Yes, Kyousuke darling! I must say, I was simply enchanted when you risked your life to protect me from certain death. How kind and brave you are! It is as I told you... 'In their final moments, you can catch a glimpse of a person's true nature.' And in that moment, when you stood on the brink of death, the true face that you showed to me was beautiful! And very cool! And what's more, you are the Warehouse Butcher, who killed twelve people. You're the ideal gentleman to be a companion to me, the Murder Princess, who has killed *twenty-one* people! I want to know you ever so much more deeply... I want you to show me *all kinds* of faces."

"_____"

Kyousuke was speechless as Shamaya snuggled up to him with twinkling eyes. He looked around, searching for help.

"...That's great, isn't it, Kyousuke? You're so popular. Hmph...you should just die, though."

“Oh deaaar. Even Miss Shamaya is after Kyousuke…but I won’t lose!”

“Yep, I’m gonna kill her. I’m definitely gonna kill her. I’m going to ask Kurumiya, and she’s going to let me kill her. She put her hands on my Kyousuke… She must be prepared to die, right? *Kksshh*.”

Eiri spit her words in annoyance, and bit her nails.

Biting her tongue, Maina clenched her fists in front of her chest.

Gas mask viewports shining, Renko gave off a dangerous aura…

Feeling Shamaya’s softness against his back, Kyousuke fully broke into a strange sweat.

With this, I am without a doubt surrounded by enemies on all sides. He looked up at the heavens, hoping to somehow escape the pressure that he did not fully understand, but acutely felt.

The cloudless, deep blue night sky was completely filled with stars. Kyousuke thought of his beloved younger sister, who was even now awaiting his return.

Hey, Ayaka…are you getting along well? I’m making it somehow. I’m surrounded by odd people, and occasionally it seems like I’m going to be killed or something, but…even so, I’m definitely coming back home. So wait for me, Ayaka. Be a good girl, okay?

Though she seemed like the kind of person who always had it together, both at home and outside, Ayaka could be surprisingly jealous. He couldn’t imagine the kind of reaction she’d have if she knew that, right now, he was surrounded by such beautiful girls.

While Kyousuke was absentmindedly considering such things…



The first week of May, two months earlier.

On that day, Ayaka Kamiya was in high spirits.

Glorious spring sunlight was shining down, and a warm breeze was blowing. It seemed as if the chirping of small birds, singing atop the roadside trees, was blessing Ayaka's departure.

"I want to see you, oh, I want to see you soon, I want to see youuu. ♪" Cheerfully singing a catchy pop song, Ayaka walked with a bouncing gait. She was on her way to school for the first time in more than half a year. Her middle school uniform had felt somehow strangely ticklish when she put it on, and Ayaka had giggled to herself.

Fun! This is really fun! She was in such high spirits that she wasn't even bothered by the stares of the other people walking down the road.

"'I wish I could see you whenever I wanted to'... How ridiculouuus!" Taking a jab at the songwriter as she sang, she giggled again. *Really, this world is so stupid.* Despite that and because of it, things that weren't like that—beautiful and refined—were precious, irreplaceable.

I don't want to lose him, she thought. That's why Ayaka was skipping along like this.

She wasn't going to just keep on waiting, thinking, "I want to see him, I want to see him." No, she had decided to go and see him, on her own initiative and on her own two feet. To see the most beloved

person in the world to her…

"I want to see you, oh, I want to see you, soon I'm coming to see youuu. ♪" Continuing her clumsy rendition of the pop song, Ayaka walked on. Leaving the train station for downtown, she moved down side streets off the main road, weaved her way through residential areas and back alleys—and finally, she arrived at her destination.

Mounted on the imposing red brick gate was a black plate.

Written in gold letters:

Seirei Private Girls' School



* * *

She passed through the unguarded gate into the deserted front hall. Students in tracksuits were having PE on the tennis courts; it didn't seem to be Ayaka's class. She watched them from the corner of her eye but continued walking. Near the cubbies, she took off her loafers and was about to change shoes.

"……?!"

Her breath caught in her throat. Ayaka's indoor slippers were —*missing*. Violent nausea welled up in her stomach, and her pulse quickened. Unpleasant words crossed her mind.

Quickly, she reminded herself that this was needless anxiety. Hesitantly, she lifted the cover of the shoe cubby to reveal the loafers of someone in another class. *That's right… We advanced a year, so the classes changed.*

A new question occurred to her: What second-year class was she supposed to be in? She didn't know which classroom to head to from here. She had been out of school since the second semester of her first year and had neglected to check the class assignments. Of course, it wasn't like she needed to go to the trouble of going to the staff room to ask…

"Well, whatever…it's fine! *As long as it's got more than twelve people, any class will do.*"

Nodding to herself, Ayaka strode down the corridor in her bare socks. In one hand, she carried a rectangular briefcase—the kind of black hard case used to store musical instruments. Swinging her clumsy baggage, heavy next to her small body, Ayaka steadily advanced down the hall, her mood nearly ecstatic. Not even once did she look behind her, back toward the path to which she could never return.

“Okay, I’ve decided! I pick…that class.” Ascending the stairs and turning down the hallway, Ayaka entered the nearest restroom, whistling all the way. At present it was 11:09—right in the middle of third period. No one was going to come in now. But still, just in case, she went into a stall and carefully locked the door. “Now then…okay, let’s hurry up and get ready!”

She set the case down on the toilet seat, and opened it. Removing the neatly sorted contents, she hummed a quiet tune while she assembled them. As she worked, thoughts of the person more important to her than anyone else filled Ayaka’s mind.

That person, who it would not be an exaggeration to call Ayaka’s “everything,” had been mercilessly snatched away a little more than half a year ago. Without even a warning, he had suddenly been…

For some reason completely unable to make contact with their parents, who were on an overseas business trip, and with nothing and no one to rely on, Ayaka had shut herself away in his room and shed many tears, continuing to search.

She searched for a way to see him again. She searched and she searched and she searched and she searched and she searched and she searched and she searched and she went on searching—

One day, about two weeks prior, finally—the *hand of providence* had reached out to her.

Ayaka had taken that hand without hesitation. And as she stood there now, resolved determination filled her chest.

“Okay, good…preparations complete!” She nodded, and checked the time again. Not even five minutes had passed since Ayaka had entered the restroom. Smiling in satisfaction, and leaving behind the now-empty case, she exited the stall. Before making her way out of the restroom, she checked the hallway, but as before, there was no one around.

Ayaka stepped forward confidently, headed for the nearest classroom. “I want to see you, oh, I want to see you, want to see you, want to see you, want to see you, want to see you, want to see you, want to see you, even if I can’t see you, I’ll come see you, to the ends of hell, I’ll come and see youuu. ♪” Singing to herself in a whisper, she walked with light footsteps—

“……”

She stopped below a sign that read SECOND-YEAR CLASS 1. Ayaka’s heart pounded. She held fast to her resolve. Taking a deep breath, she placed a hand on the door. She would only get one chance. Failure would not be tolerated. But, Ayaka wanted to see him. She wanted to see him no matter what. She needed to see him. If it meant seeing him, she could do anything.

—She could accomplish anything. That’s why Ayaka set aside her anxiety, and gathered her thoughts, and—

“I’m coming after you now...big brother.”

As she made this pledge, she threw the door open with all her strength. At the clamor of the sliding door slamming open, the classroom fell silent.

“Miss...Kamiya...? Why are you—?”

The homely-looking woman in her forties was their Japanese teacher, Miss Takanashi. She had looked after Ayaka during her first year. There were a number of familiar faces among the students as well.

All of them, to a one, stared at her with confused expressions—stared at the thing that Ayaka was carrying in her arms. It did not register right away exactly what that thing was.

—A twelve-gauge, nine-caliber, continuous firing Browning shotgun.

Even when they understood what was happening, there was nothing they could do. As everyone sat, frozen in place, Ayaka resolved to complete her "work." With a bright, cheerful smile, she pointed the barrel at the nearest target—a girl in black-rimmed glasses who stared at her blankly, still holding her pen to her open notebook.

"...Sorry! I want to see my big brother no matter what. In order to do that, *I have to do the same thing that he did.* So, for my sake... please die!"

—She pulled the trigger.

Psycome 2: Murder Princess and the Summer Death Camp / End

AFTERWORD Master of Ceremonies

The fact that you are reading this afterword must mean that *Psycome*, Volume 2 has already made it to bookstores. Hello! Or should I say, "Nice to meet you." I am Mizuki Mizushiro.

As the subtitle *Murder Princess and the Summer Death Camp* indicates, Volume 2 is a story that takes place at a school camping excursion. The "love" and "comedy" components are present in somewhat larger quantities than before. After all, this is a romantic comedy series.

Even as I say that, it's a house secret that an editorial stop was placed on making the book "too grotesque" or anything like that. On the other hand, at the same time, an editorial stop was placed on making the illustrations "too erotic"—

I hope that you can enjoy *Psycome*, Volume 2, which is being issued with such considerations.

Incidentally, what your author enjoyed most was creating the guidebook. I even wrote details like "How to Fold Your Sheets," but as expected, they could not be included. I also enjoyed the Murder Rap and other such things.

Well, then. Since the afterword is one page again this time, from here on it will be a torrent of thanks. To the person in charge, Ms. Gibu; the illustrator Namanie; the designers at musicago graphics; the PR team; my friends; my family; all of my relatives; everyone who had anything to do with the publication of this book; the readers who kindly read the previous volume; and above all, you who have presently taken this book in hand:

Truly, thank you very much! The next volume will be coming out

sometime during the summer.

Mizuki Mizushiro ~Written while listening to BMTH~


I'M STILL NAMANIE, IN CHARGE OF ILLUSTRATIONS.
I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO VOLUME 3.
I DIDN'T KNOW I LIKED GIRLS WITH GUNS SO MUCH.