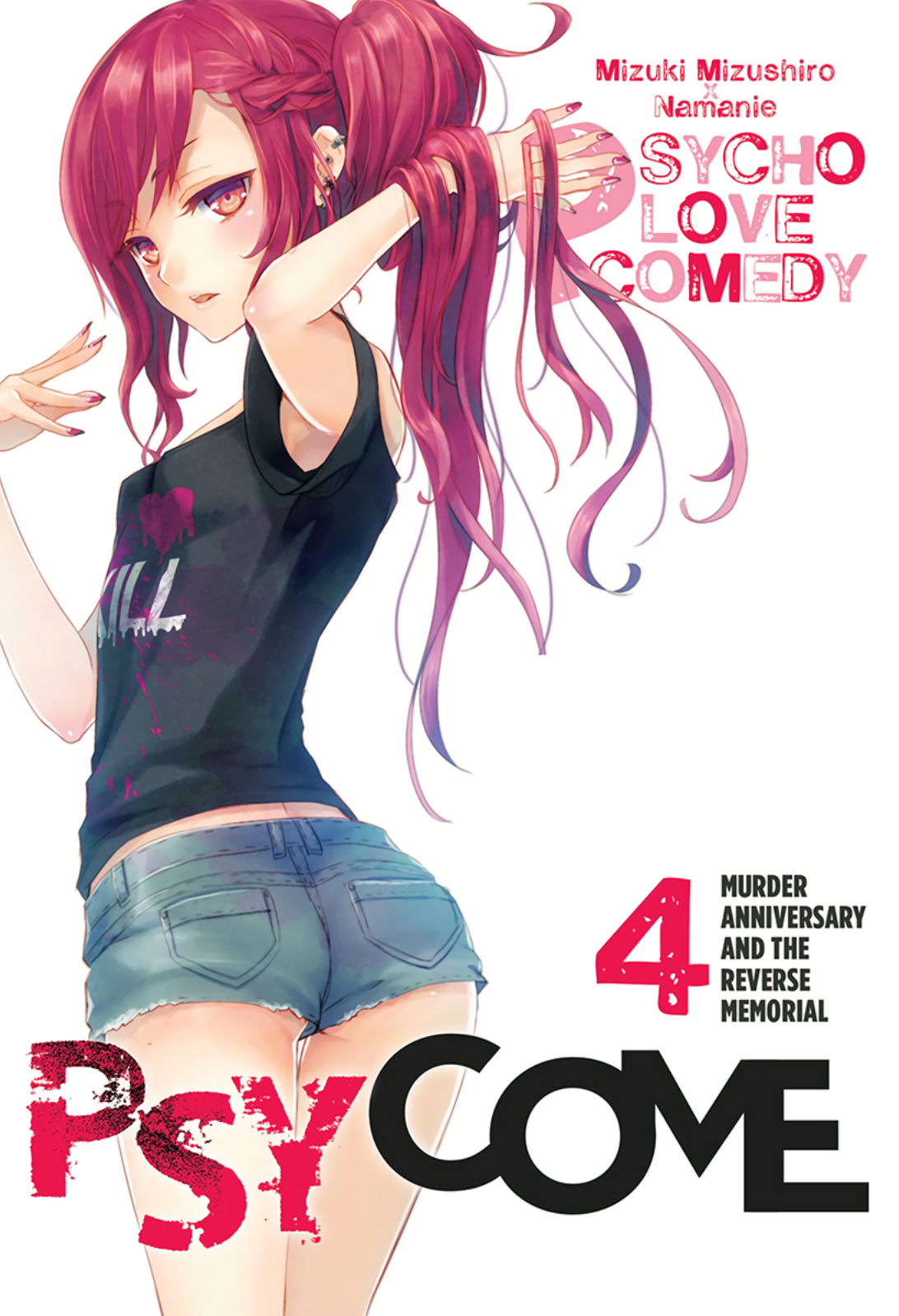

Mizuki Mizushiro
x
Namanie
PSYCHO LOVE COMEDY
4
MURDER ANNIVERSARY AND THE REVERSE MEMORIAL
PSYCOME


PSYCOME
PSYCHO LOVE COMEDY
4
MURDER ANNIVERSARY
AND THE REVERSE MEMORIAL


"AND YOU'RE DEAD."
Basara Akabane
"WE CUT ITS HEAD OFF—"
Ryou Akabane
"PLEASE DIE."
Kagura Akabane
Fuyou Akabane
"WELCOME HOME, EIRI. IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU AFTER SO LONG."
"SLICE!"
Ran Akabane
The Who's Family
THE AKABANE HOUSEHOLD


"LOOK, LOOK, WE'RE GOING TO MISS IT!! HURRY, HURRY, BIG BROTHER!"
"WAH?! HEY, DON'T PULL—"
"DOESN'T THIS LOOK SO RIDICULOUSLY FUN? LET'S GET IN THERE RIGHT AWAY, KYOUSUKE!!"
Scarlet Scar to the Sky
RUST-EATEN NAILS
ACT THREE


This was a defenseless, unarmed form that Eiri would never have shown them while she was awake.
"...ZZZ... ZZZ... UNN..."
Fear and the Loathing of Loss
BROKEN WINGS
ACT TWO

PSYCOME

4

MURDER ANNIVERSARY AND THE REVERSE MEMORIAL

Mizuki Mizushiro
x
Namanie

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Contents





It was Monday, and less than a week remained until the end of the semester—and summer vacation.

Since early that morning, the entryway of the old school building at Purgatorium Remedial Academy had been bustling with students. The air was filled with the stench of their sweat, born of hard manual labor.

"...Just in the nick of time, huh?"

Changing from sneakers to hallway slippers, Kyousuke swallowed hard. Sweat, brought on by more than just the heat and exercise, rolled down his back, following the curve of his spine.

"It's okay, big brother! Don't worry!"

"O-oh...yeah. I guess we did what we could, so it'll be all right, right?"

Encouraged by Ayaka—his beloved younger sister—Kyousuke steadied himself and stepped forward. He headed for the bulletin board in front of the shoe lockers, around which everyone had gathered.

Posted to the board was a single sheet of paper, big enough to cover the entire surface. Tension was inescapably high.

"Ah. Kyousuke, Ayaka!" Noticing the siblings, the female student in the back row turned to them, her flax-colored eyes opened wide.

Kyousuke raised a hand in greeting to the girl, who had her hands pressed together in front of her chest, as if in prayer.

"Morning, Maina."

“G-good mourning... Oh my.”

“.....?”

Ayaka looked at Maina, who was mixing up her words for some reason.

“What is it, Crafty Cat? Were your results no good or something?”

“N-no! My results weren’t good or bad. Actually, they’re quite good for me. I did do my best, but—”

Maina shut her mouth tight, as if alarmed, and looked to her neighbor on the left. Following Maina’s gaze, Kyousuke’s and Ayaka’s eyes came to a stop.

“...Huu...hu-hu...bu-hu-hu-hu-hu...”

Standing stock-still, staring up at the paper with a completely blank, burned-out look, was a female student. Her eyes were empty, and she let out a dry laugh. At her feet lay a backpack, dropped and forgotten.

“Eiri, Eiri! Snap out of it, Eiriii!”

Renko, wearing as always her black gas mask, shook the dazed schoolgirl’s shoulders. But Eiri did not react. She stayed frozen in place, laughing mindlessly. Her usual air of detachment had dissipated without a trace.

“A-awful...” Ayaka covered her mouth with both hands.

“Eiri...” Maina choked with emotion.

“Waaah!” Renko cried.

Just looking at Eiri’s miserable figure, so completely changed, gave Kyousuke a bad feeling. “Hey, hey. I don’t think it’s possible, but did she—?”

“Ohh, why...? Why, Eiri?!” Renko wailed. “I gave you so much instruction, so how...? How did you get this resuuult?!”

Turning away from Renko’s lamentations, Kyousuke took a deep breath and looked up at the likely source of this disaster—the bulletin board that displayed the results of the final exams they had taken the week before.

Purgatorium Remedial Academy First Semester Final Exam Results (Combined Scores in Ten Subjects)

First Place	First-year Class B	Renko Hikawa	1,000 points	
Second Place	First-year Class A	Shinji Saotome	989 points	
Third Place	First-year Class A	Ayaka Kamiya	982 points	
Fourth Place	First-year Class B	Mari Akutsu	920 points	
Fifth Place	First-year Class B	Ayame Gouriki	868 points	
Sixth Place	First-year Class A	Kyousuke Kamiya	855 points	

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~ omitted ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Fifteenth Place	First-year Class A	Maina Igarashi	794 points	
Fifteenth Place	First-year Class B	Chihiro Andou	794 points	

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~ omitted ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Thirty-second Place	First-year Class A	Eiri Akabane	305 points	diediediediedie diediediediedie
Thirty-third Place	First-year Class A	Touma Sakagami	0 points	diediediediedie diediediediedie

“Oh, I did well to get sixth place! No way I could make it in the top three, though.”

“That’s…wha—? Third place? Impooossible!!”

They were both surprised at their results, better and worse than expected, respectively. Soon, however, the siblings with the disparate reactions found their attentions drawn to a single point.

“First place… That’s incredible! To get a perfect one-thousand-point score, she must have something weird going on up there.”

“Renko, you’re amaaazing! Only my big brother’s bride could do such a thing!”

“She’s not my bride, so…”

“Kksshh.”

“Compared to her……”

“————”

Meanwhile, Eiri, ignoring Ayaka’s glares, continued staring at her own score with vacant eyes.

Rank thirty-two out of thirty-three. A sum total of 305 points in ten subjects.

The word *die*, written beside the score, showed the number of failing marks.

“Oh man… Wh-wwwwh-what could have happened, Eiri…?” Maina, who had taken a rank right in the middle, spoke uneasily.

Before the exams had started, their homeroom teacher had told them: *“Don’t think that your answer sheets will be the only things soaked in red!”*

...But it was probably fine.

Purgatorium Remedial Academy was an unconventional school where all the students were murderers.

If the teachers said that they would do something, they would do it no matter what, and if they said they would kill someone—it was almost certain that Eiri, who had scored so dismally, was headed for a bloodbath.

Kyousuke couldn't stand it any longer. "E-Eiri—"

"Sorry." Eiri cut him off, finally snapping out of her trance. She turned to look at Kyousuke and the others. "I'm sorry... It seems like it's all over for me now. Thanks for everything you've done for me. Not even four months have passed since we started school, but it's been pretty fun. I'm glad I spent it with you all. Really, thank you. And good-bye... Live on for me and graduate safely! I'll cheer you on from six feet under."

"....."

Her smiling face was too pitiful. No one could respond.

"—Well, then." Gently unwrapping herself from Renko's firm embrace, Eiri picked up her schoolbag. Her lively tone sounded terribly forced.

"Standing around like this won't change anything, so why don't we hurry up and get to class? We have to make the most of what little time I have left! Before summer vacation starts, I want to make some happy memories... I imagine once the supplementary lessons begin, there won't be anything but pain, enough to make me want to die! Ah-ha...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

A surge of crazy laughter forced its way past Eiri's lips. Her rust-colored eyes showed no signs of burning light.

Kyousuke turned away, unable to bear the sight of her so completely changed. "...We promised that we wouldn't let even one person be a victim, didn't we?!"

"Eiri was destroyed..." Ayaka shuddered.

"E-Eiri..." Maina reopened the floodgates.

Renko sank silently to the floor.

"Lah, lah, laaaaaah. ♪" Leaving Kyousuke and the others behind, Eiri headed for the classroom alone, skipping and humming a wordless tune. As her back grew distant, no one could find the right thing to call to her.

X X X

After school, Kyousuke sat with the others, mourning Eiri in the near-deserted classroom. "I wonder if she'll come back okay...," he mumbled, looking at a sky divided into strips by iron bars.

Despite the earlier scene, Eiri had remained cheerful as their tests were returned. With the exception of ethics, she received failing marks on all of them. Their homeroom teacher, Kurumiya, showered her with abusive language like *stupid*, *idiot*, *fool*, *scum*, *shame of Class A*, *tiny tits*, *boobs and brains of an elementary schooler*, *AAA boobs but F grades*, and *die, bitch!*, but Eiri, who got the worst scores next to Mohawk, just grinned.

That strange reaction cooled Kurumiya's tongue, and by the time the midmorning class had finished, she stopped saying much of anything.

Of course, there was no way she would overlook it just like that...

"—Eiri Akabane. Come here!"

At the end of fifth period, Kurumiya had taken Eiri by the scruff of the neck and dragged her off to the staff room.

About an hour had passed since then, but they had yet to return.

So now, Kyousuke was tying himself into knots over Eiri's safety.

"Kksshh..." Renko let out a sigh as Kyousuke continued wandering restlessly around the classroom. "Now, now... Calm down, Kyousuke."

"She's right. Calm down, big brother."

Ayaka had turned her chair around and was running her pen over her notebook. Renko was seated behind her. The two of them, speaking in unison, were in the middle of an enthusiastic discussion.

"Shopping, karaoke, the amusement park, the aquarium, the zoo, the game center, the maid café, a barbeque, the movie theater, the art museum, the summer festival, swimming in the ocean, the fanzine exhibition and sale, the gas mask exhibit... Is there anywhere else you want to go, Renko?"

"I wonder, hmm... Oh, I want to go to the summer festival! Summer Panic! This year, the mysterious artist known only as 'And More' is supposed to play. Finally, after appearing on so many lineups —and canceling at the last minute every time—And More will reveal themselves and take the stage!"

"Wow, is that really true?! But aren't the tickets already sold out?"

"Don't worry, Ayaka baby! I've got connections."

"Connections?! Don't tell me you're..."

"*Kksshh*. That's right. To tell the truth, I'm GMK48's—"

"Scalper?!"

"No!"

".....What are you two even talking about?"

“Our summer vacation schedule, big brother.”

“We’re planning our dates.”

“Dates?!” His voice cracked into a falsetto.

“Ehhh?!” Maina also exclaimed and fell out of her chair.

“Yep. Miss Renko and I were ranked in the top three of our year, so we were *approved for release on parole*! So since we worked so hard to get it, we started talking about where we should go out together—”

“We’re deciding on our destinations. We have about a week of vacation time, so we can get a lot of action in. We can go to all kinds of places—no limits!”

“Yep, yep! It’s too bad you won’t be there, big brother…but it seems like going on dates with Miss Renko will be fun, too. Tee-hee-hee! I’m looking forward to summer vacatiooooooon!”

“I can’t wait! Hurry up and get here, summer vacation!”

Bam!

Kyousuke’s hand slammed down on top of the desk between them. “Now wait just a minute. I don’t remember signing off on any of that!”

“Eh?”

Ayaka and Renko looked up at him.

“Why do we have to get special permission?”

“She’s right. Approval comes from the school, right? Not from you.”

“Eh…?” Kyousuke faltered in the face of the unexpected counterattack.

Ayaka and Renko quickly pressed their advantage.

"You want me to learn to get along without you, right, big brother? If that's true, then first you have to learn to get along without me!"

"I know you have a sister complex, but don't you think you're meddling too much? Such behavior is narrowing Ayaka's world!"

"No, that's—"

"It's certainly not that you can't trust Miss Renko, right, big brother? Or that you're worried about us being alone together? Are you really saying that now, after all we've been through?"

"*Kksshh*. No way, Ayaka baby... Kyousuke wants you to 'make friends with everyone,' so he would never say something that selfish, would he?"

"Uh—" His weak points exposed, Kyousuke lost his composure. "B-but...look here!" he answered, vexed. "It's shameless for the two of you to be celebrating when Eiri is having such a hard time. Aren't you worried about her?"

"I am, but there's nothing we can do. Eiri's the one who got failing marks, after all."

"Uh-huh. You reap what you sow! Plus, I don't think they'll kill her just because she got failing marks. You and Maina both worry too much. Eiri's got a lot on her plate; we just have to give her some space. Anyway, Renko, where else should we go?"

"...This is hopeless."

It looked like Renko and Ayaka both had their heads full thinking about parole dates.

Although he trusted her, Renko was a hard-core mass murderer. Of course Kyousuke was against such a person spending a week alone with his little sister, away from his watchful eyes. Their release on parole was supposed to be conditional on probation, so he didn't think it would be a serious problem, but...even putting his concern for Eiri

aside, Kyousuke's troubles were growing. He already felt worn down.

"Ah?!"

Just then, Maina stood up with a clatter.

The door at the front of the classroom had opened, and a single student had entered.

"Eiri, are you okay?!"

"Eiriiiiii! Are you hurt—whoooaaa!!"

"Gyah?!"

Eiri dodged Maina, who, rushing over, tripped and nearly tackled her.

Crash! From the hallway came the loud sound of impact.

"Y-yeah…I'm okay. Maina, are you all right?"

"Oh dear. S-sowwy…"

Eiri looked at Maina, who was holding her head where she had crash-landed, and cringed. Her earlier artificial cheer was gone. She looked the same as she always did, in perfect health and showing no sign of Kurumiya's discipline.

Kyousuke looked concerned as he approached her. "Hey, Eiri. That bitch Kurumiya, did she…did she do anything to you?"

"Not really. Just—"

Eiri averted her eyes from Kyousuke and the others.

"I've been exempted from the supplementary lessons and supplementary exams."

"……Huh?"

Everyone's voices overlapped in surprise at Eiri's nonchalant answer. Even Renko and Ayaka stopped their conversation to look at her.

Kyousuke studied her strangely sullen face. "You were exempted…? Really?"

"Yeah. She said I don't have to take the supplementary lessons and exams during summer vacation…though it looks like she's giving me a lot of homework instead."

"Wow, that's great. You avoided the worst of it!"

"Oh my! Th-that's a relief… Congratulations, Eiri!" agreed Maina.

"Weeell, I'm happy, but…it's weird, isn't it? Miss Kurumiya doesn't usually let people off easy."

"Maybe it was too painful, and she felt sorry for you? Or maybe you offered up your body in exchange?"

Eiri glowered at Renko. "…Huh? Of course not." Glaring at Kyousuke and the others, she brushed her hair back.

"I was summoned back home."

She spit out the words in annoyance.

"Wha?!"

Kyousuke, Maina, and Renko reacted in unison.

"When you say 'home'…you mean your former home? Weren't you disinherited?" Kyousuke asked.

"I thought so. But according to Kurumiya, it seems that even now they occasionally ask for me… This is the worst! I'd prefer the

supplementary lessons."

"Oh no!" Maina added. "If you've been summoned back, they must have some business with you, right?"

"Yeah. Apparently they 'want to see my face,' but I wonder... It's suspicious. Why would they go out of their way to call me back after forcing me into the academy in the first place?"

"...Miss Eiri, is your house a dangerous place? Like a yakuza house or something?" Ayaka, the only one among them who didn't know about Eiri's situation, tilted her head.

"Not quite." Eiri smiled bitterly. "Generation after generation, my family has worked as killers—*we're a family of assassins*. Yakuza wouldn't be so bad, but—my relatives are all killers. Their hands are filthy with murder."

"Huh?! What the heck, that's scary..." Taken aback, Ayaka leaned away in fear.

"Kksshh." Renko laughed. "Don't worry, little Ayaka. Eiri *can't kill*. Just like you and Kyousuke, she hasn't killed anyone at all. Though publicly she pretends to have killed six people."

"Whaa?! I-is that really true...?" Ayaka took a long hard look at Eiri. "The same as us...?" she mumbled, puffing out her cheeks. "And I went to all that trouble to keep up...!"

Eiri shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Anyway...that's how it is. While I'm back home during the summer break, I can't attend the supplementary lessons. Oh, and there's one more thing—"

Abruptly, Eiri's tone of voice changed. Her rust-red eyes, sharp as knives, pierced straight through Kyousuke.

"I'm not the only one. Someone else has been summoned... Kyousuke. *They called for you*."

Bloodstained Cage

BLOODSTAINED CAGE

ACT ONE

August 12 (Monday)

Today I got up early in the morning and saw everyone off. I felt really lonely and sad, but I tried to keep my smile from breaking down...

Starting today, I'll be alone for a while.

Everyone around me is so scary.

I can hardly stand it, wondering what kind of terrible things are going to happen...

I spent the whole day locked in my room doing homework.

I'm scared to go outside. I can't even go to the cafeteria or the school store.

If I get hungry, I'll drink the smelly water and try not to think about my empty stomach.

If only I had made it into the top three test scores...When I think about that, my tears won't stop.

I wonder what everyone's doing right now.

I hope they also smile when they think about me.



Bloodstained Cage

BLOODSTAINED CAGE

ACT ONE

Summer break at Purgatorium Remedial Academy lasted one week, from the twelfth of August to the nineteenth, and, because the tenth and eleventh happened to fall on a weekend, it meant nine consecutive days of vacation.

After finishing classes on Friday, Kyousuke and the others spent Saturday and Sunday at the academy, then departed early on Monday morning. They were shuttled to the edge of the island by police van, where they departed on a long boat ride. After more than half a day of being rocked by the waves on a small ferry, they arrived on the Japanese mainland, where they stopped for one night before setting out again in another police van. Inside the vehicle—

"……Fwah."

Eiri yawned. How many times was that? Kyousuke thought it had to be nearing a hundred. Ever since they had left the academy, Eiri had seemed terribly depressed.

"Is the thought of going home really that bad?"

"It's awful. Once you see, you'll understand… I'd rather die." She leaned limply back against her seat. "…It's really the worst. For many reasons."

"Many reasons?"

"Yeah. Just returning home is bad enough, but now I've got *extra*

baggage with me."

"E-extra baggage meaning...?"

"How cruel! We only came along because you were so anxious, Eiri! *Kksshh!*"

"That's right, you're cruel! We even canceled our plans to come with you!! You should be thanking us, you know! Are you the hot-and-cold type?"

Renko and Ayaka objected loudly. They should have been chattering and laughing away on their dates but now sat across from Eiri and Kyousuke, facing them.

Eiri sighed and held her forehead. "Say what you like, you forced yourselves on us because you didn't want me and Kyousuke to be alone together, didn't you? You two are totally transparent."

"Ah...did my facial expression give it away?"

"Come on," Eiri moaned. "Get a grip, Miss Renko. The secret's out, isn't it?"

"Yeah, we can't even see your face because of the gas mask."

—You tell her, little sister.

Truthfully, Kyousuke felt that, ever since the "incident," Ayaka had emotionally attached herself to Renko way too much.

For instance: Despite their extremely abnormal destination—an *assassins' house*—Renko and Ayaka were visibly excited and noisily enthusiastic. They had both decided to use their time on parole to come along to Eiri's house, even though they had not been invited.

Kyousuke, wanting to keep Ayaka out of danger, had firmly objected, but...

"Are you going to leave Ayaka behind, big brother?"

With his little sister looking up at him all teary eyed, Kyousuke's resolve had crumbled. And besides—

"Everyone, we will arrive in another two or three hours! We'll stop at a convenience store once before then. Please inform me of any requests for lunch."

A man addressed them from the driver's seat, speaking through heavy iron bars. It was the homeroom teacher for the first-year Class B at Purgatorium Remedial Academy, Kirito Busujima, in the role of probation officer.

Kyousuke thought they could probably relax a little bit with him accompanying them, since he was a *poison specialist* and elite professional killer, just like Kurumiya.

"—Convenience store!" Ayaka's eyes sparkled when she heard Busujima's remark. "Finally we're free from that disgusting garbage food?!"

Yesterday's lunch and dinner and today's breakfast had been "garbage bentos" (well past the expiration date). For Kyousuke and the others, who had gone so long without normal, decent food, even convenience store lunches would be a treat.

The inside of the car suddenly became animated, as one by one they voiced their orders.

"I'm good with a salted-kalbi bento!"

"I want the most expensive bento!"

"I want something that'll charge me up in ten seconds and keep me going for two hours!"

"...Isn't that what you usually have?"

"Hm? True. Okay, I'll have melon bread!"

“You can’t eat it, though.”

“Kksshh…”

“Mr. Kamiya will have a kalbi bento, Miss Kamiya will have the most expensive bento, Miss Hikawa will have a jelly drink—is that right? Understood. And what will Miss Akabane have?”

“I don’t care. Anything’s fine.”

“Is that so? In that case, I’ll choose based on my good taste.”

“M-Mr. Busujima’s good taste…”

Ayaka looked at Busujima with a doubtful expression.

Busujima was not wearing his usual rumpled suit but was in plain clothes—a gaudy-colored Hawaiian shirt, a pair of sunglasses, and a straw hat on his head.

“What about my good taste?” Noticing Ayaka’s stare, Busujima sounded puzzled. “Ah…perhaps *the clothes* that I picked out for you are not really to your liking?”

“…Mm.” Ayaka was at a loss for a reply. She was wearing a dress with a floral pattern on a light purple background underneath a gauzy white cardigan, alongside caramel-colored gladiator sandals. “Honestly, it’s not that I don’t like it…but—”

“The fact that they’re not bad is exactly what makes it so gross.” Eiri nonchalantly finished the thought that Ayaka had hesitated to speak aloud. “…I mean, what is this? Some new form of sexual harassment?” She frowned, tugging on a sleeve of her own outfit. Like Ayaka, she wore plain clothes—a T-shirt that exposed her shoulders and micromini hot pants.



"Ahm..." Busujima stroked his stubbled chin. "Y-you've got it all wrong! It's nothing like that. It's just that you've got such beautiful legs, Miss Akabane! Wouldn't you agree that this ensemble highlights that wonderful feature? And, since your lower body is largely exposed, I had to pick a top that also exposes much of your upper body! For balance! A-and because Miss Kamiya's name contains the character for *flower*, I incorporated a floral motif—"

"Gross."

Eiri and Ayaka spoke as one.

"Gross?!" Busujima looked shocked.

The two girls glared at him. "Why are you thinking about it that much?! Gross... You're an ugly old geezer. I mean, what the hell?! Do you think you're some kind of stylist now? And yet your usual suit is so shabby...it's gross!"

"It gives me chills to imagine the scene: you staring at a catalog, daydreaming about clothes that would suit us, gross... Mine and Eiri's clothes are even exactly the right size, which is even more gross. And then you took picking them out so seriously—grossest!"

"Ehhhhh..." Busujima looked as if he was going to cry as the girls called him "gross, gross, gross" over and over, an expression that made him look even more disgusting. "S-surely there's no need to say such cruel things? How heartless, and after I spent a whole day just thinking about it... And the clothes do suit you, so what's wrong with that? Girls should be cute and pretty! You agree with me, Mr. Kamiya, don't you?"

"Eh? Ah, well..." Kyousuke looked embarrassed by the subject at hand. His outfit, a simple polo shirt and jeans, was notably plain compared to the girls' clothes. It was obvious that Busujima had chosen Kyousuke's ensemble without much thought. "That's right. I think you did a good job, Mr. Busujima!"

"...Kyousuke?"

"...Big brother?"

He met the girls' angry glares and answered calmly. "I mean, I think your clothes really are nice! Eiri's incredibly beautiful, and Ayaka looks very cute. The clothes suit you both very well. It's a feast for the eyes."

Instantly, both of their cheeks flushed red.

"Wha...? B-beautiful, are you stupid? Don't leer at me, pervert! You're gross! What the hell are you saying?!" Eiri looked flustered and futilely tried to cover her wide swaths of exposed skin.

"Tee-hee-hee! Thanks, big brother! Now that you've said that, all the unpleasant feelings have scattered away!" Ayaka's smile filled her whole face.

"...Those reactions are totally unlike what you showed me. I'm used to it, though." Muttering thusly, Busujima gloomily returned his attention to the road.

"Hey, hey, heeey!" Just then, Renko, who had been waiting and watching, perked up. "Question, question! How about *my* clothes, Kyousuke?"

"Hm? Ah—"

Asked, he turned his gaze on Renko.

Renko wore her own clothes; unlike everyone else, she was not wearing a Busujima ensemble. Instead, she wore a simple tank top, a pair of distressed jeans, and a hooded sweatshirt tied around her waist. But thanks to the tightly packed tribal tattoos on both of her arms, her leather choker, and her overly abundant breasts, Renko still made quite the impression.

"Right. Well, it's...fine?"

“Is that all?”

“Uh...”

“.....”

Renko dropped her runway pose. She sat down without a word and pulled at Ayaka’s hem. “Hey, hey. Kyousuke’s being unkind.”

“Y-you’re right. What’s the matter, big brother?”

Kyousuke could feel her gaze on his averted face, but he stubbornly ignored it. A particular thought filled his mind.

Ah, shit... It’s no good—I can’t think like that. Why me...?

He ground his teeth as he recalled a certain incident that had taken place at the school just a few days ago.

Jealous of Renko and certain other female students, Ayaka had stolen something from a staff room, something she had been expected —even encouraged—to take, and with the stolen shotgun, she had tried to kill those girls.

Renko had been the one to stop her rampage, and now Ayaka had taken a liking to her and was trying very hard to move her relationship with Kyousuke forward.

That much was fine. It was great, but— *How come when I look at her, I...? Why do I get so worked up?*

Ever since then, something had changed in the way Kyousuke felt about Renko. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was, exactly, nor could he put it out of his mind. Her words, actions, behaviors, appearance—everything about Renko caught his eye and made him restless. It didn’t feel good—or rather, it felt bad but kind of good at the same time. He couldn’t make sense of his feelings toward her, and yet— *If I fall for her, she’ll kill me. Get it together, Kyousuke Kamiya!*

In truth, he was beginning to suspect it. He had an inkling that he was really starting to fall in love with the stone-cold killing machine, the Murder Maid—Renko Hikawa.

Desperate to deny his feelings any way he could, Kyousuke slapped his own cheek.

X X X

"We've arrived, everyone. Please exit the vehicle."

After a convenience store stop along the way, the drive had continued for a little over two hours. With an exaggerated clank, the rear door of the prison transport van opened. Bright sunlight came streaming in, along with the cries of cicadas and a rustling sound like the roar of the sea.

"Yaaay, the outside!"

"The sweet, sweet air of freedom!"

Kyousuke followed Ayaka and Renko, who had gone flying out as soon as the door had opened. A gentle, refreshing breeze cooled his flushed skin. As he stretched, the young man looked up at the summer sky above him and the bamboo leaves shining in the sunlight.

"Where is this place...?" The windows of the prison van were heavily tinted and barred, so he wasn't sure which way they had been going or where they were now. "...Mountains?"

As he surveyed their surroundings, one thing in particular immediately caught Kyousuke's eye.

"What is that?"

"It looks like a shrine gate, but..."

"It's awfully...big."

Stepping up beside Renko and Ayaka, who stood upright, Kyousuke peered at the strange structure. In the middle of a dense bamboo thicket was a gate with a tiled roof. At least thirty feet tall, it seemed to loom over them oddly.

The double doors of the gate were made of wood, and small ornaments decorated the metal fixtures. The accumulated rust and patches of moss, as well as the blotches of dirt that covered the thing, seemed to convey a deep sense of history.

The whole thing was *entirely crimson*.

The tiles affixed to the roof, the metal fixtures with their delicate designs, and the time-worn doors were all painted the same shade of red. It was as if they had all been swabbed with fresh blood... Kyousuke and the others stood staring, at a loss for words.

"...Hmph." Behind them, Eiri spoke up. "The gate is tacky as always."

"Hey, Eiri. Is this...your house?" Kyousuke inquired, scarcely able to believe his own eyes.

"...Unfortunately. There's no nameplate, though. See, that's my family crest."

Eiri was pointing at the round ornaments that hung on each of the doors. The crest featured a single bird with its wings folded, sharpening its individual feathers like knives.

"Amazing, that's amazing! You're the daughter of a high-class family, aren't you, Eiri?!"

"What does it look like on the inside?! It can't be an ordinary house!"

Renko and Ayaka shouted with joy at Eiri's nonchalant explanation.

"...Not really. It's nothing special."

"*Kksshh*. You're being modest, yet again."

"Yet again. Isn't your bustline modest enough for the rest of you?"

"Come on, shut up!" Eiri was already fed up.

Busujima approached the excited girls and took off his sunglasses to hang them on the collar of his shirt. "Wow, what a splendid main gate this is...and just how should we go in?" He turned his head, surveying the area.

The doors were closed tight, flanked by a high stone wall, from which a bamboo thicket stretched limitlessly into the distance. There was nothing like an intercom to be found.

"Eiri, do you know?"

"...Tch." Eiri clicked her tongue. "It should open on its own before too long. At any rate, we were noticed long ago... They'll usher us in eventually. Be quiet and wait. There's no need to make a fuss." She glared at Busujima.

"Ah." Busujima winced. "Why are you so snappy?! Err...that is to say, you really ought to speak with deference toward your teachers, even after this long. Though, come to think of it, you always show Miss Kurumiya plenty of respect... Could this be discrimination? Is it bullying? I may be generous, but I'm not a masochist, so if you get too carried away, my discipline—"

Creeeaaak...

As Busujima protested injustice, the double doors swung inward with a loud groan. The group stiffened at once and stared at the gate as it opened.

The first thing they noticed was a paved stone path. Stretching up a

gently sloping hill was an unbelievably long set of stairs leading to the house grounds. Rich greenery surrounded it on either side.

And—

A long line of bright red people.

"……?!"

Kyousuke and the others—and even Eiri—gasped.

Several dozen men and women of all ages stood in rows, on both sides of the stairway, clad in crimson Japanese clothes, apparently come to greet the visitors. Every single one of them bowed wordlessly.

…Silence.

Kyousuke and the others looked on, petrified.

"Welcome."

Suddenly, from out of the shadow of the gate, *a pure white Noh mask appeared.*

"Kyah?!" "Hyah?!" "Whaaa?!"

Ayaka and Renko leaped up in surprise, and even Kyousuke jumped.

A lone woman stood at the entrance to the grounds, her face covered by a mask. She wore a reddish-brown *samue* tunic, the exact color of dried blood.

"Welcome to the Akabane household," the woman greeted all of them in an enigmatic and emotionless voice.

When Kyousuke and the others did not respond, Eiri clicked her tongue—"…Tch"—in place of a reply. Hoisting her bag onto her

shoulder, she passed through the gate and spoke bluntly, as if uncomfortable. "...Don't bother with the irritating reception. Let's hurry up and get to the house."

The woman held her hands clasped in front of her body. Her head was bowed respectfully. "Understood. Welcome home, Lady Eiri."

"Yeah, yeah, here I am." Acting like the woman's greeting was a supreme annoyance, Eiri looked back over her shoulder. "What are you all still standing around for?"

"...O-oh."

Hurried along, the group passed timidly through the gate into the Akabane manor.

"Excuse the intrusiooon..."

"P-pardon uuus..."

"Here we coooooome!"

"Miss Hikawa, please don't cause a commotion."

"...Hmph."

Snorting, Eiri looked ahead again. The woman had moved in front of the stairs and extended her hand toward Kyousuke and the others, as if in invitation.

"This way, please."

The people lined up on both sides of the stairs had never, not a single person, raised their heads since the newcomers had appeared. They did not open their mouths. They did not move even slightly. There was no change, even when the woman set foot on the steps and Kyousuke and the others followed after her.

They nervously ascended the stone stairs, flanked by crimson cloth.

“Hey, big brother. Are these people human? Could they be dolls?”

“Stop that—they can hear you!! Don’t say rude things—”

“Well now...hm? They seem perfectly alive to me! They’re soft and warm. But these people have big breasts! Kyousuke, you try feeling them, too. *Squish, squish*...”

“What the hell are you doing, idiot?! Take your hands off them!”

“Heh-heh. But they don’t react at all! What fun! We came all this way, so you join in, too, Ayaka. Punch a random one in the stomach and work out some stress—”

“Don’t you daaare! Don’t you two value your lives?!”

“...You’re better off dead.”

Eiri wasn’t joking.

X X X

When they had finished climbing the hill, and having just barely managed to restrain Ayaka and Renko along the way, Kyousuke and the others were greeted by an elegant single-story Japanese-style house. Just like the gate, it was entirely red, from the roof tiles to the walls. As they faced the conspicuously large main building, the roofs of several separate structures were visible.

There was a pond in the broad garden, in which scarlet carp were swimming. The flowers blooming here and there were also various shades of red and struck a marvelous contrast with the green of nature in the background.

“Please come in.”

At the urgings of the woman in the Noh mask, they entered the mansion. Walking along the eaves of the veranda, they were soon ushered into a large Japanese-style room some fifteen tatami mats

wide, about two hundred and sixty square feet. At the far end of the room stood an alcove decorated with a hanging scroll and a Japanese sword. The smell of the floor mats mixed with the scent of incense, creating an indescribable fragrance that hung in the air.

"If you would be so kind as to wait in this room."

The woman bowed deeply on the floor and left. Several red cushions had been laid out in a row. Kyousuke and the others looked around the elegant reception room as they took their seats. A single identical red cushion sat unoccupied before them.

As soon as the masked woman was out of the room, Kyousuke and the others began to chat among themselves.

"I-incredible... It looks like a set piece for a period drama. It's completely unreal."

"That sword must be the real deal, right? I want to touch it!"

"Give it up, Akaya. What would you do if it was a cursed sword?"

"Honestly, it probably *has* been used to kill people. It looks like it's got history."

"....."

In the midst of the excited chatter, Eiri remained sullenly silent. From the courtyard, visible from the open room, came the clacking sound of a *shishi-odoshi* as the bamboo rocker arm hit a rock.

Then—

"Welcome, so pleased to have your company."

A graceful voice interrupted their conversation. A lone young woman had appeared—different from the woman who had left before.

"……?!"

Eiri's body stiffened.

Kyousuke and the other girls stopped their chatting and stared at the newcomer.

The first thing that drew their eyes was her pure white hair. Fastened up with an ornate hairpin, it did little to match her otherwise youthful appearance, altogether creating a strangely morbid impression. Next was her attire: Under a long red haori, she wore funeral garb in the same pure white as her hair—a thin, unlined kimono that looked like those worn by the dead.

The woman slowly stepped into the room and took a seat on the unoccupied cushion.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am the twenty-ninth-generation head of House Akabane—my name is Fuyou Akabane. I am ever so pleased to make your acquaintances."

The woman—Fuyou—bowed. She looked at all of them with eyes the color of fresh, dripping blood.

Busujima lowered his head in gratitude. "Very nice to meet you! I am Kirito Busujima, one of the teachers at Purgatorium Remedial Academy. Originally their homeroom teacher was planning to come herself, rather than send me, but…"

"So I have heard. I understand that Miss Kurumiya is dealing with an uncontrollable bronco and is otherwise indisposed."

"…Yes indeed. She is quite utterly perplexed."

The "bronco" in question must have been Mohawk.

At first Kurumiya had been delighted: *"Now I'll get away without having to give that bastard his supplementary lessons!"* But Mohawk

had overheard and thrown a tantrum. The resulting violence had been intense, and as a fortunate consequence, Busujima had been assigned as their replacement probation officer. Kurumiya had been livid—leading to a major incident. In addition to the partial destruction of the old school building, there had been thirteen casualties among the first-year students.

"Ho-ho. Thank you very much for coming all this way during such a busy time. On behalf of House Akabane, you have our gratitude. Well, then..." Fuyou turned her eyes on Eiri and continued in a soft, gentle voice, "Welcome home, Eiri. It's good to see you after so long."

"————"

Eiri stared into the courtyard for a short while, her lips shut tight, before she finally asked, "...What was with that reception?"

Fuyou seemed to take great delight in her answer. "Ah. Well, after you were away for half a year, I wanted to give you a proper greeting upon your return. So I called together everyone from the branch families."

"...I wish you wouldn't go to so much trouble, Mother."

"Motheeerrr?!" Kyousuke and the others exclaimed in unison.

"Yes." Fuyou nodded. "Thank you for taking care of my daughter. I'm pleased to be able to meet you. Miss Renko Hikawa, Miss Ayaka Kamiya, and...Mr. Kyousuke Kamiya." Fuyou's eyes seized on each of them in turn.

Renko looked surprised to be called by name before even introducing herself. "*Kksshh?!* How did you know my name...? Are you a mind reader?!"

"No. I simply asked beforehand, Miss Hikawa. I've heard what kind of person you are."

"...Oh, okay."

Easily brushing off Renko's dumb wit, Fuyou shifted her gaze to Ayaka.

"I'm told that you are a younger sister who loves and appreciates her older brother. I would very much like for my children to follow your example. Isn't it so wonderful to see a brother and sister getting along so harmoniously?"

"Tee-hee-hee! It is, it is!" Ayaka grinned. "We're the most lovey-dovey siblings in the world!"

Fuyou smiled back at her before turning to look at Kyousuke. Exchanging gazes with the head of the Akabane family—with Eiri's mother—he felt tense.

Her eyes, the color of fresh blood, suddenly narrowed. "And you are Kyousuke, right? Ho-ho-ho. I see, I see—" She placed her hand on her chin and carefully looked him over.

"...Mother," Eiri interrupted. "Why did you summon Kyousuke?" Eiri's voice was harsh—unthinkably harsh to one's own mother. "What were you planning to do, inviting only Kyousuke to the house?"

"Come now, Eiri... Of course you already know the answer to that question." Fuyou's red lips remained in a smile. With a fleeting glance at Kyousuke, she continued.

"When I heard my beloved daughter was getting along well with a boy—why, as your mother, of course my interest was piqued! To say nothing of the fact that you are the eldest daughter of House Akabane. It's important for the household that I confirm the quality of your companion, Eiri."

"....."

Eiri was silent in the face of her mother's forceful words.

"Wh-who is her companion—?" "Wait, didn't she turn her back on

him?" "After all this time, what about me...?" the other girls grumbled and complained.

"You're going on about all that, but aren't you planning to *eliminate* Kyousuke?"

Eiri's accusation came suddenly. Naked suspicion filled her eyes as the daughter gazed at her mother.

The Akabane head smiled wryly, apparently unfazed by her daughter's glare. "Look here... We don't eliminate guests—we entertain them. Don't say such troubling things! You make your mother terribly sad."

"....."

Eiri looked sullenly at her mother, who was hiding her eyes with her sleeve and sniffling.

It didn't seem as if she was lying, but it was also clear that she hadn't voiced her true intentions. Kyousuke determined, then, that she was a difficult person to pin down.

The tip of the *shishi-odoshi* struck rock. A sharp wooden sound rang out.

"Speaking of entertainment, everyone, it is ever so warm today. Surely you must all be thirsty? I'll have cold barley tea brought out now... Kagura?"

"...Yes, Lady Fuyou."

An elegant voice answered Fuyou's call as the sliding door was thrown open, revealing the figure of a lone girl.

"Pardon me."

The girl was beautiful, her appearance as delicate as the sound of

her voice. She was wrapped in a bright red kimono, with her copper-colored hair tied up at the nape of her neck. Her eyes, the same rusty shade as her hair, were narrowed into long slits and were filled with a sharp light that did not suit her youthful face.

In her dignified appearance, there was something that reminded Kyousuke and the others of someone they knew well.

"……Ah."

A shocked noise slipped from Eiri's mouth.

The girl Kagura bowed, holding a lacquered tray above the tatami floor. She began handing out glasses full of iced barley tea, one by one.

"Here you are." "Thank you very much."

"Here you are." "Ah, thanks…"

"Here you are." "Thank yooou."

"Here you are." "Wow, thanks!"

She handed glasses to Busujima, Kyousuke, Ayaka, and Renko, and then came to the last person.

"…Here you are."

"Yeah, thanks—"

Kagura held out a glass to Eiri, who prepared to take it.

"Die."

Moving almost too quickly to follow, Kagura swung her arm in a wide arc aimed directly at Eiri's throat.

X X X

—*Clink*.

A strange, high-pitched noise.

Barley tea spilled from the two halves of Eiri's glass, cut horizontally in two.

"...Kuh?!"

Eiri quickly pulled back, avoiding Kagura's weapon. Simultaneously, she brandished her right foot. The *five blades that crowned her toenails*—her "Suzaku" nail blades—arced through the air as she kicked upward, obstructing Kagura's pursuit.

The remains of the glass, spinning through the air, were split vertically this time.

"You're impudent!" Kagura shouted, in hot pursuit. She attacked fiercely, and Eiri righted her stance and jumped out of the way.

The concealed weapon now visible in her hand was an *open iron-ribbed fan*. The silver ribs of the large fan were nearly twelve inches in total length. Like Eiri's nails, they were tipped with razor-sharp blades.

"Please die."

—*Swish!*

The metal fan that Kagura swung tore through the hanging scroll behind Eiri, missing her neck by a scant second. The lower half of the scroll, severed with a straight cut, fell heavily to the alcove floor. Had Eiri bent down just a moment later, it would likely have been her head falling there instead.

"Tch... Well, if you aren't brimming with enthusiasm, Kagura!"

"Naturally!"

Kagura brought the metal fan back around and swung it down on

top of Eiri's head. Eiri grabbed the Japanese sword that had been decorating the alcove below the hanging scroll, and she stopped the blow of the fan with the scabbard.

Her eyes nearly ablaze, Kagura pressed with all her strength. "When I see you, always making an unsightly fool of yourself, it makes me want to kill you. You're such a miserable dunce it's painful to look upon you. Won't you hurry up and disappear?"

"...Hmph, I'll pass. If you want me to disappear, you'd better erase me. That is, if you can."

"Impudent talk!"

Kagura jumped back away from Eiri and then immediately stepped forward and swung the iron-ribbed fan down in a diagonal slash. Eiri evaded, turning the fan aside with the scabbard of the sword, but Kagura pursued her relentlessly.

The fan danced like a butterfly, slashing gracefully through the air.

"Indeed! You are truly! Impertinent! Aren't! Yooouuu?!"

"Kuh—"

Eiri continued to skillfully defend against Kagura's fluid attacks using the sword scabbard. Sometimes the overwhelming flurry of blades grazed Eiri, and the pillars, tatami mats, furniture, and other fixtures in the room were sliced up one after another. The walls of the room around the alcove were soon scored with many cuts and gouges.

".....Huh?"

Finally, a noise leaked from Kyousuke's mouth.

He didn't understand what was going on; it had all happened too suddenly. He'd thought that Kagura was passing out barley tea, and then in an instant they had started slashing at each other.

Leaving Kyousuke and the others behind, dumbfounded, Kagura pressed her attack with ever greater ferocity. As they stepped off the veranda, Kagura's fan sliced off an inch of Eiri's bangs.

"Come on, what's the matter?! If you do nothing but run away, you'll get cornered sooner or later! That thing you're holding, is it just a stick? Why don't you try counterattacking?!"

"...No."

"Why not? Are you afraid you might hurt me?!"

"……Wrong."

"Hah, that's a lie! You're a total coward; you can't even draw the sword, can you? You're afraid you might kill me, so you won't attack —"

"You're wrong."

Crouching, Eiri dodged Kagura's fan and, in the next instant, made her move. Twisting her hips, Eiri pulled down on the scabbard and pushed the hilt of her sword up with her thumb.

"The reason I won't draw my own sword is because *as soon as I do, the fight will be over*."

"……?!"

—Eiri's draw was too fast for their eyes to follow. By the time the sunlight streaming into the room reflected off of it, the blade, which had apparently been fully unsheathed, was coming to a stop against Kagura's throat.

The distance between sword and skin was thinner than a sheet of paper. Kagura stood frozen in an awkward stance, the result of her attempt at defending against the quick-draw attack.

"The deadly single blow is the foundation of assassination, right?"

Eiri said. “Taking them out reliably with the first stroke…if you can’t do that, it’s no different than if you’d failed. It seems your training is still lacking, eh, Kagura?”

Kagura gritted her teeth and glared at Eiri. “Hah! What are you chattering on about…? Deadly single blow? Taking them out with the first stroke? Completely meaningless, coming from *Rusty Nail*, who can’t do either. You can’t kill no matter what you do, so how about I cut you down without worrying about that sword?”

A tense atmosphere circulated between the two of them as they faced off.

In the distance, the *shishi-odoshi* struck a lighthearted note.

Fuyou sighed very deeply.

“What are you two doing…? Eiri and Kagura, both of you, put your blades away.”

“————”

After turning to look at Fuyou, the two girls exchanged glances and lowered their weapons. Kagura folded the iron-ribbed fan, and Eiri returned the sword to its scabbard.

Kagura slipped her concealed weapon, which featured the same Japanese blades as Eiri’s Suzaku nails, into the obi belt of her kimono and clicked her tongue. “…You’d be better off dead,” she said bitterly and separated from Eiri.

Eiri shrugged her shoulders without saying anything, returned the sword to the alcove, then went back to where Kyousuke and the others were sitting.

“Uh, ummm…”

Kyousuke wasn’t sure what he ought to say to her.

“Don’t worry about it,” Eiri reassured him nonchalantly. “It happens all the time.”

“...Huh?”

Kyousuke was at a loss.

The glass, which had fallen next to the cushions, had been neatly severed, ice and all. Even a grazing cut from a blade like that could seriously hurt someone.

...She said this deadly interaction “happens all the time”?

“I’m sorry.” Fuyou apologized to Kyousuke and the others, who were struck dumb. “To make such an unseemly display in front of guests... I did ask Kagura to try to restrain herself as much as was possible, but...I think they were overcome with emotion at seeing each other’s faces after so long. Kagura is a hot-blooded girl, after all.”

Kagura took a seat at her mother’s side. “...My sincerest apologies.” She bowed her head, and when she reopened her eyes, the sharp light that had burned there was already softened.

“I’m late in introducing you, but this girl is Kagura Akabane. She is the second daughter of House Akabane, and Eiri’s younger sister by two years.”

“...Hello.”

Kagura followed Fuyou’s introduction with a perfunctory greeting.

“She is a belligerent girl, but as she has never committed a murder in play, please set your minds at ease,” Fuyou continued with a smile.

“Members of the Akabane family serve the family head and also make assassination attempts to take the head’s life. Members of the main family make attempts on the main family head, and members of the branch families make attempts on the branch family heads—and the branch family head makes attempts on the main family

head. This is because every assassin in the Akabane family *is nothing more than a sword wielded by the head of the main family*."

As Fuyou, the current head of the main Akabane family, explained to them, just as a sword never moves on its own to take a life, the assassins did not kill of their own accord. Only after the "swordsman"—the family head—swung the weapon would they injure or kill.

In other words, in House Akabane, the head of the main family held tremendous power. The family head was the only person who no one, no matter who he or she might be, could disobey.

And if that was the case, then when Kagura had tried to kill Eiri, it must not have been her desire *but was probably Fuyou's command.* She seemed like a good mother, but deep down...Kyousuke felt uneasy.

"Ho-ho. At any rate, that was a splendid fight, wasn't it, Eiri?" Fuyou smiled brightly. "I was concerned that your skills might have grown somewhat dull after being away from us for half a year, but...I can see that was a needless fear. You are still the greatest swordsman of this age, aren't you? If you were to succeed me as the head of House Akabane, I could also set my mind at ease and retire, but—"

"Lady Fuyou!" Kagura raised her voice in protest. "My older sister is not the greatest swordsman! She's rusty and blunt, or dull, like a fake sword. There's no value in a sword that cannot cut people, after all. I will succeed House Akabane... I'll defeat my useless older sister!"

"...Hmph." Eiri averted her gaze from the naked hostility in Kagura's eye. Maintaining her rigid, formal posture, she tightly gripped her knees.

"Oh dear." Fuyou put her hand to her forehead. "You truly are belligerent. I wonder who you take after...? It's good to have that spirit. Surpass your sister soon and become a great swordsman. And you too, Eiri! If you want to become a full-fledged assassin, first you must bring yourself to kill properly."

"...Yes, Lady Fuyou."

"O-okay...Mother."

Kagura wore a hateful expression, but Eiri had one of sadness.

Fuyou sighed heavily at the bowing sisters.

"My, you are on such bad terms. And you used to get along so well."

"....."

Kagura's face distorted when she heard Fuyou's words. She said nothing, but her expression was clearly disagreeable.

"....."

Eiri seemed sad as she looked at her younger sister.

Fuyou's cheerful voice broke the gloomy atmosphere. "Well, leaving aside any sisterly rivalry... Please, enjoy your barley tea. The ice will melt."

"S-sure..."

"Umm...thank you."

"Bottoms up..."

"There's not poison or anything in here, right?" Renko asked as she prepared her straw tube.

Kyousuke and the others, who had been about to drink their barley tea, froze.

"Certainly not!" Fuyou placed a hand over her mouth. "We Akabanes use only hereditary swords as our chosen weapons. We would never utilize poison or other such inelegant tactics."

Busujima frowned at the last remark, but Fuyou did not seem to notice.

"Slandering it as 'inelegant'..." Busujima paused his grumbling and downed his barley tea in one gulp. "...Oh, delicious! I've never had such tasty barley tea before."

"But we only used the cheap tea bags..."

"Eh?! Oh, is that so...?"

"Come now, Kagura! We don't say such things in front of guests!"

"Tee-hee. Mr. Busujima, you're sooo uncool!"

"Well, it seems it does not contain any sort of poison. Do you want to split mine with me, Eiri?"

"……I'm good."

Despite the fact that a sword fight had just taken place, they chatted lightheartedly.

Maybe I'm the only one who's still afraid, Kyousuke thought as he slurped his drink uneasily.

Fuyou smiled at him. "We've been quite impolite, but anyway... welcome to House Akabane, guests from Purgatorium Remedial Academy. You will be staying with us three nights and four days—is that correct? As you can see, this is a bit of a remote location, but it allows us to give you our most heartfelt reception."

X X X

"This way, please."

The woman in the Noh mask—Fuyou had summoned her again; she seemed to be a maid for House Akabane—led them through the vast estate. They had separated from Kagura and Fuyou in the guest room.

“You must be tired from your long journey. Please relax for a while. I will call you when supper is prepared. If you should want anything at all, please help yourselves.”

“……”

The mother, Fuyou, had smiled the whole time, while the younger sister, Kagura, had worn a sour look. It made sense that in a house dedicated to the art of murder, each family member had her own idiosyncrasies.

Also, there were apparently still more siblings—one older brother and two younger brothers, as well as another younger sister. Four more members of a family who would cut you as soon as they’d look at you…

It looked like all the relatives were gathered now, and it was enough to make one’s head hurt just thinking about it.

Eiri did not appear to be taking it well. Deep furrows had lined her brow since she’d left the reception room.

The mood was solemn, until—

“Whoa, amazing! There’s a courtyard here, too!”

“How many is that now? Three? How much extra land can you have?!”

Renko and Ayaka broke up the gloomy atmosphere with their noisy racket. The two of them traipsed along between the maid and the rest of their group, looking around here and there.

“This mansion is really huge… Well, we came all this way, so we ought to do some exploring later, yeah?”

“I’m in! Let’s discover some hidden rooms and stuff!”

“Oh, that’s good, that’s good! It’s like a ninja house, yeah?”

“Totally. With unexpected twists and turns, and secret passageways and stuff.”

“And hidden doors and booby traps? We can take our hide-and-seek game up a notch!”

“……”

Renko and Ayaka paid the maid no attention.

Kyousuke and Eiri exchanged looks.

“…Haa,” Eiri sighed and held her temples. “Don’t those two ever worry?”

“Not a bit. They’re acting like this is a vacation.”

Of course Renko showed no fear, but was Ayaka really not the least bit scared? They were in the house of a famous clan of assassins, a place where anything could happen, and yet…

“My, my. Isn’t that just fine?”

Behind Kyousuke and the others, Busujima, who had been walking leisurely at the end of the line, redonned his straw hat. “Members of House Akabane cannot act without instructions from the family head! So why not relax and put your minds at ease? It’s important not to let your guard down, but it’s also no good being so tense all the time. And besides, you really shouldn’t have to worry. I’m *keeping watch*, after all.”

As he spoke, a pink shape began to wriggle and crawl out from Busujima’s pant legs—a snake, with a triangle-shaped head and round, cute eyes.

“…Ah.” The poisonous snake, which had geometric patterns running down its long, thin body, crawled off the veranda and moved into the courtyard. Slipping over the gravel as if it were swimming, it

hid behind stone lanterns and disappeared. “I’ve set my friends loose all over this place. If there’s anything strange, they’ll notice. The Venom Opera is quietly beginning.”

Sticking his index finger in the air with a “ta-daa,” Busujima winked. He may have been gross, but he was also extraordinarily reliable.

Concealing and raising a veritable horde of toxic creatures on his body, then directing them with total expertise—if Busujima employed his mastery of poisons, he could probably take control of the estate with little trouble.

“Mr. Busujima...just now, for the first time, I started to think you might be cool.”

“...Yeah, well done. I guess you only *look* boring.”

“Hey, you two, I don’t like your tone, but...well, I suppose it’s fine. This is your hard-earned summer vacation. Spread your wings and enjoy yourselves.” Busujima smiled as another creature flew out from his travel bag, flapping a pair of poisonous yellow wings.

Kyousuke felt at least some of the tension ease out of his shoulders, but Eiri’s expression remained cloudy. She looked up at a spiderweb stuck to the ceiling. “...You can skulk around like that, but I think Mother will *see through it*—”

While Eiri was muttering to herself, the maid leading the way came to a stop and opened the sliding doors of two Japanese-style rooms. “These two rooms are where you will be lodging.”

Renko and Ayaka leaped inside and shouted with joy.

“Wah, so pretty! Isn’t this a great room? *Kksshh*.”

“It’s like a high-class hotel! And it’s got a TV, too, yesss!”

Kyousuke and the others caught up with them a moment later and

peered in. Both rooms were about eight tatami mats wide, about one hundred and forty square inches, and in the center of each stood a low table, carefully set with a small teapot, teacups, tea leaves, and even tea cakes. The alcoves were decorated with ikebana flower arrangements and hanging scrolls, and televisions were installed on sets of staggered shelves. Renko and Ayaka were running back and forth through the open sliding doors that separated the rooms.

"Wait, you can't put your luggage in the alcove...," Busujima grumbled as he collected his bags from where they had been strewn about the room.

"Busujima!" Renko shouted. "How should we split up the rooms?"

"Oooh!" Ayaka raised her hand. "I want to share a room with my big brother!"

"I also want to share a room with Kyousuke!"

"Not sharing a room with the teacher."

"....." Busujima was instantly dejected by the simultaneous rejections. He removed his straw hat. "No, no, of course the rooms will be assigned according to gender. Mr. Kamiya and I will be staying together."

"Eh? You've got your eye on Kyousuke, too, Busujima?! Th-that's..."

"Give it up! My big brother isn't like that at all. And with an old man like you...I will absolutely not permit such a room division!!"

"Is the heat messing with your brains?" Kyousuke remarked.

"...Weren't they messed up before?" Eiri added.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Renko Hikawa." The maid interrupted their heated conversation. "But your room is separate."

"……Eh?" Renko tilted her head in confusion. "Separate where?"

"In a storehouse at the corner of the grounds."

"…Storehouse?"

"Yes. A storage room."

"Storage roooooom?!" Renko grew visibly upset at the maid's reply. "Why am I alone in a storage room? I'm human, too, you know!!"

"Yes. I am aware."

"Well, then, don't throw me in a place like that, okay?!"

"No. Your room is in the storehouse."

"Why, though?! I'm telling you, I'm not some kind of inanimate object!"

"My deepest apologies. I am simply following orders from the lady of the house. I was told only that you have unique circumstances. That is the reason for your isolation…"

"……Grrr."

Renko kept silent, offering no rebuttal. When she had her limiter off, Renko was a psycho killer whose every emotion was tied to *the act of murder*. Someone like that could not be allowed to move about freely, so Renko could not stay together with Kyousuke and the others. While she had her mask off, she had to be carefully quarantined.

"Kksshh…"

Eiri clapped a hand on Renko's shoulder. "Don't worry about it." She turned to look at the maid still standing in the doorway. "Well, what about me? Can I use my own room?"

"Please do as you like."

“…I see. Got it.”

“What’s that about Eiri’s room?” Renko abruptly perked up. “What?! I want to know! Where, where? Where’s it at?!”

“…Huh? It doesn’t matter where.”

“I want to see it, too! Please show us, right now!”

“No.”

Eiri’s response was blunt.

“Aw…”

“Why not…?”

“No reason.”

“Is your room a huge mess or something?”

“Are there things in there we wouldn’t want to see?”

“Not really. No means no.”

“No matter what?”

“No.”

“Won’t you please show us?”

“Absolutely not.”

“……”

Renko and Ayaka exchanged looks and nodded.

“In that case, let the exploration commeeeeeeeeence!”

“Find Eiri’s roooooooooooom!”

“Wha...?!”

Slipping past Eiri, Renko and Ayaka flew out of the room. Renko went right, and Ayaka went left. They each ran noisily down opposite ends of the hallway.

“Ah, really, those—Kyousuke!” Eiri, about to follow them at once, stopped in her tracks and pointed at the left-hand hallway. “You take care of your sister! I’ll catch Renko!”

“O-okay!”

Eiri broke into a run as soon as she had given the order, and Kyousuke followed close after her. The clamorous noise of the four students’ footsteps quickly faded.

“.....”

For a moment, Busujima was left alone with the maid, but she quickly bowed and wandered off.

“...Good grief. Well, I guess I’ll just sample some tea cakes.”

Arranging the pot and leaves, he started to prepare tea.

X X X

“Hey, wait! Wait up, Ayaka!”

“...Ah, big brother.” Ahead of him in the long, straight corridor, Ayaka stopped and turned to face Kyousuke, who had been chasing her breathlessly. “What’s wrong?” She tilted her head to one side in confusion.

“Don’t ask me what’s wrong...” He balked at his sister. He followed up this chiding with a rap on the head. “You’re playing around too much, dummy. You don’t suddenly rush out of a room like that...”

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry, sorry.” Ayaka rubbed the place he’d hit. “Eiri’s home is sooo amazing, I just got too excited.” She stuck out her

tongue, then turned to look at their surroundings. They were on a veranda not too far from the guest rooms. Bamboo sunshades hung to their left, and on their right stood sliding doors that obscured other rooms.

"It's not that I don't understand how you feel, but...right now we're in someone else's house, so you can't be too loud. It's a nuisance."

"...I'm sorry." Ayaka nodded despondently. Her pigtails, tied up with purple checkered ribbons, drooped feebly.

"Uh..." Kyousuke scratched the back of his head. "Besides...look, I'm worried about you. This is no ordinary mansion; it's a crazy house filled with assassins. They're nastier than normal murderers! Even if Mr. Busujima is here, we don't know what could happen if you go off half-cocked to explore—"

"Sorry for living in a crazy house."

The cold, emotionless voice felt like a knife in his back.

"Hwah?!" They jumped apart and looked behind Kyousuke.

A pair of rust-red, upturned eyes pierced Kyousuke—Kagura Akabane. Second daughter of House Akabane, and Eiri's younger sister. Clad in scarlet Japanese-style clothing, she had a dangerous disposition. Her hostility toward outsiders was palpable.

"Wh-when did you...?"

They were standing right in the middle of the veranda, but until just that moment, they had neither heard the sound of footsteps nor sensed another presence. Perhaps Ayaka herself had not realized who it was—she had been hanging her head, after all—because a moment after Kyousuke's remark, she shouted, "Ah! She's the one who suddenly attacked Eiri, before she had the tables turned on her!"

"......Huh?" Kagura's eyes grew even sharper as she turned from

elder to younger.

"Eh?!" Kyousuke also turned to stare at his little sister.

"What did you say—?"

"What do you mean, 'what'? You saw it, too, right, big brother? This girl slashed at Eiri with a weapon that looked like a folding fan but was easily outdone. Tee-hee. I was so surprised! Eiri's really strong, huh? Even though you had the element of surprise, she won by a mile—"

"Ayaka!" Kyousuke covered his little sister's mouth, muffling her oblivious commentary. "It's rude to say those kinds of things!! I mean, that is how it went down, but you don't say 'you were easily outdone' to someone's face! What would you do if she came slashing at you?"

"Wouldn't you protect me, big brother?"

"I-I would, but..."

"Well, then, it's fine. It'd be a total rout!"

"...Of which one of us, do you think?" Kagura whispered, glaring at Ayaka.

However, Ayaka was not to be intimidated. With a "hm-hmph," she threw out her chest. "Isn't it obvious? You'd be utterly defeated, of course! My big brother can't lose to anyone, you know. If you can't even beat Eiri, it'll be at least a hundred years before you're ready to take him on!"

"Huuh?!"

"...Oh?" Listening to Ayaka's blunt boasts, Kagura knit her eyebrows. But then, glancing at the near-panicking Kyousuke, she laughed through her nose. "I would lose to this guy...? Hmph. Nonsense! If a lowly peon like this tried to fight my big sister, his

head would go flying in two seconds—never mind a hundred years."

"His head would go flying in two seconds? Laaame. What a dumb line."

"...In your case it wouldn't even take one second!"

"Wanna try?"

"Bring it—"

"Wait a second!" Kyousuke slid his body between them. "We only just met! Let's not start fighting already! Calm down for a minute!"

"I am quite calm!"

"I'm calm, big brother!"

"...No, no."

Kagura's eyes were blazing bright, while Ayaka's were dark and cold. Both of them seemed more than ready to try to kill the other.

Kagura's hand rested on the iron fan tucked into her obi. Nonetheless, it was Ayaka who had snapped at her first, so as the elder, Kyousuke took it upon himself to apologize for her.

"I apologize for my little sister. She said rude things—"

"No way, she's the one who was being rude!" Ayaka pointed at Kagura, if just to undermine his attempted apology. "I only spoke the truth! And then this...this *person* made fun of my big brother...with 'lowly peon' and 'two seconds'...calling him a womanizer and a playboy."

"I never said the last two things."

Ayaka paused at the Freudian slip.

Looking at Kyousuke, who felt a bit hurt, Kagura snorted. "...

Hmph, you said I would lose to this idiot—was that the truth, too? Not only is that total nonsense, it's also a very reckless claim to make... How utterly amazing—an airhead who can't even gauge her opponent's strength."

"I don't want to hear from you. I'm much smarter!"

"Oh, another rash remark? On what do you base such—?"

"Well, she's an idiot—Eiri, I mean."

"……Excuse me?" Kagura's expression changed instantly. "My older sister is…an idiot?"

"Yeah. Her test grades were second from last! And if Eiri's like that, her little sister can't be much different, I think. Tee-hee! Oh, and by the way, I was third from the top."

Relaxing her prim expression, Kagura clicked her tongue.

"…Tch. Don't lump me in with that failure."

"Failure—?"

"She's a failure, isn't she? Because she's an assassin, but she can't kill. By that metric alone, you murderers are probably much more successful. It's shameful." Kagura's voice was filled with disgust. She spit her words in an angry whisper. "Really…it would have been better if she never came home again."

Kagura pulled the iron fan from her obi. "I'm different from my big sister... I have no trouble killing people. In fact I've already done it, many times. I could easily soak this fan—my iron-ribbed fan Kujaku —with your blood. Because that is my job, as an assassin of the Akabane clan."

With a wave of her hand, she opened the folded fan.

"……?!"

Ayaka winced and stepped back, while Kyousuke tensed up.

All expression disappeared from Kagura's face. One foot, clad in a white *tabi* sock, lifted off the floorboards— "...But please, relax. At present, I have not yet received the command to kill you. So enjoy all that our home has to offer. Well, then, good-bye." Flapping wind at them with her open fan, Kagura calmly stepped past Kyousuke and Ayaka, grinning smugly.

"————"

As she crossed them, her quarrelsome rust-red eyes wordlessly told them: *If I was ordered to, I would kill you in a heartbeat.*

The blades set into the iron fan glistened in the summer sunlight. Kagura's murderous intent was just barely visible, like the knife of a killer preparing to strike. Kyousuke and Ayaka stood still, momentarily paralyzed by the intensity of it.

X X X

"Waaaaaahhh, get ooooooffff! Get off meeeeeeeee!"

"...Fwah."

After parting ways with Kagura, Kyousuke and Ayaka quickly made their way back to the guest rooms. As they approached, they heard Renko screaming. Running to see what was the matter, they discovered her squirming and struggling on the floor. Eiri, yawning disinterestedly, had her locked in a perpendicular arm bar.

"...Oh, Kyousuke. Looks like you caught your quarry, too."

"Yeah. You're, um... What are you doing?"

"Nothing really. This one's trying to get away, so I'm just holding her down—see?!"

"Hyghaaa!! Owowowow, when you're so rough it makes my joints

hurt, owww! Stop, forgive me! I won't run away anymore, I won't ruuunnn!"

"……Yeah, fine."

With a sigh, Eiri released her.

Ayaka rushed over to Renko and cradled her head in both arms. "Are you all right, Miss Renko?!"

Holding her shoulder, Renko stretched painfully. "*Kksshh*… A-Ayaka…I'm…already done for… You alone must…run…*cough*."

"Renkooooooooooo?! Whaa…? Understood. I alone must explore the inside of the mansion and find Eiri's room—"

"Hey. We're going back, Ayaka."

"—Ah, okay."

"Ow!"

Ayaka let go of Renko and stood up, leaving her head to crack on the floorboards.

"*Kksshh*…how cruel. I was only going to take a peek inside your room, wasn't I? Why do you hate the idea so much? It's awfully suspicious."

"…No reason. You say you'll just look, but you'd absolutely rummage through it, is all."

"And you have things in there that you wouldn't want anyone rummaging up? *Kksshh*."

"Huh? No, I don't. There's no reason I would have anything like that."

They continued bickering all the way back to their rooms.

However, on the way there, Renko said, “We came all this way, so show us around this part! You know, like where the bathroom is and stuff.” And so it was decided that they would make a few stops along the way.

As they toured the mansion, Kyousuke decided to ask about something that had been bothering him.

“Eiri. Are you on bad terms with your little sister?”

“...Why do you ask?”

“Well, we ran into her in the hallway earlier, and—”

“What did she say about me?”

“...Uh.”

Kyousuke wasn’t sure how to answer. “Failure,” “disgrace,” “it would have been better if she never came home again”—he wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to report Kagura’s abusive words.

“Shame of the Akabane, a disgrace, a coward, a dunce, a failure, defective, an idiot, worthless, incompetent...what else?” Eiri listed nonchalantly. “Let’s see, ‘it would have been better if she never came home again,’ and so on?”

“Eh?”

Eiri smiled bitterly at Kyousuke’s surprise. “...Day after day, at every turn, I’ve been abused by her, you see. I’m keenly aware of the fact that the girl has it in for me. —The Akabane, you see, are a matrilineal family.”

“Matrilineal? Does that mean that the women carry the family line?”

“Yeah. The red represents blood, and blood represents birth, and birth represents women... That’s not the reason behind it, but for a

long time we have had a tendency to give birth to girls, so for generations the responsibility of being the head of the family has belonged to a woman. The line of succession passes from oldest daughter to second daughter to third daughter...then, after the last daughter, it finally goes to the oldest son. Through the generations, of the heads of the main house, there have been five second daughters and one third daughter... The rest have all been first daughters—like my mother, for example."

They walked along the veranda, looking out on the courtyard, where red flowers bloomed. Eiri's voice was clear and dispassionate.

"...But unfortunately I, the first daughter of the main house, cannot bring myself to kill. Nevertheless, I am not without talent, so they still expect things of me, even if it's futile, and the disappointment continues... I think that Kagura, as the second daughter, cannot stand the thought of someone like me. In the past—before she understood that I can't kill people—she idolized me in her own way." Eiri looked hurt as she spoke. Kagura hated Eiri, but Eiri did not appear to hate Kagura. Rather, she seemed to feel guilty.

"...Can't you make up?"

"It's impossible. As long as I can't kill."

"Mmm—"

Eiri turned away from Kyousuke and looked out over the courtyard. It seemed as if she was telling the truth. If only Eiri could bring herself to take a life, Fuyou would have no problem passing on the line of succession. Then Kagura would have no reason to scorn her, and their sisterly relationship could start to improve. It seemed likely that all of Eiri's worries, troubles, and difficulties would be resolved.

"But, Eiri...you yourself, really—"

"—Ah." Eiri stopped walking and fixed her eyes on one corner of the courtyard, as if she had noticed something troubling.

"...Hey, what is it?"

"Did you find something interesting?"

Renko and Ayaka, who had been walking behind them, stopped and followed Eiri's gaze.

It was a spacious courtyard with a gravel pond, decorated with large boulders and stone lanterns. In the corner, in front of the carefully arranged greenery, was something bright red, even more brilliant than the flowers—a pair of scarlet kimonos.

There were two figures squatting down, their backs half-turned. From their size they appeared to be young children.

The two of them were enthusiastically rustling around for something in the bushes.

—*Shink!* There came a strange sound.

Shink, shink, shink, shink...

"……?"

Perhaps they had sensed they were being watched. The two of them stopped their work and turned around.

"Kyah?!" Ayaka screamed.

"Whaaa?!" Renko recoiled.

Even Kyousuke gasped.

The children's faces were thickly plastered with *something that looked like spurts of blood.*

"……Ah."

The next second, their reddish-brown eyes opened wide and round. Their perfectly identical childish faces, stained with bright crimson,

burst into broad smiles.

"Big sister Eiri!"

The children shouted with joy and made a beeline for Eiri. They were each holding a pair of huge scissors painted in contrasting black and white, and as they ran across the courtyard, something that looked like fresh blood dripped from the blades. "It's big sister Eiri, it's big sister Eiri!" Shaking their weapons overhead, the young children quickly closed the distance between them.

"H-hey…they're coming over here!!"

"To kill us all?!"

"No, no! Let's run, Ayaka! Hurry!"

"It's big sister Eiri, it's big sister Eiri! It's big sister Eiri, it's big sister Eiri, it's big sister Eiri, it's big sister Eiriiiii, yaaaaaayyy!"

The young children drew closer as Kyousuke and the others dashed away. The children kicked off their geta footwear, climbed up on the veranda, and ran in circles around Eiri.

"Big sister Eiri, welcome home!"

"Welcome home, big sister Eiri!"

They made an impressive racket. They looked as if they wanted to jump on her right away but couldn't do so because of the scissors and the blood. Their hair and clothes were practically covered with sticky fluids.

Eiri looked unperturbed, as if she was entirely used to it. "I'm home," she said and smiled. "Have you been well, Ryou?"

"Yeah!"

The child she called Ryou waved his black scissors in the air.

“You haven’t caught a cold or anything, Ran?”

“Nope!”

The child she called Ran gripped her white scissors tightly.

The two of them, with their reddish-brown hair cut to about the tops of their shoulders, had exactly the same face. They were naturally the same height, and even their voices were identical. It would have been impossible to tell them apart except for their scissors.

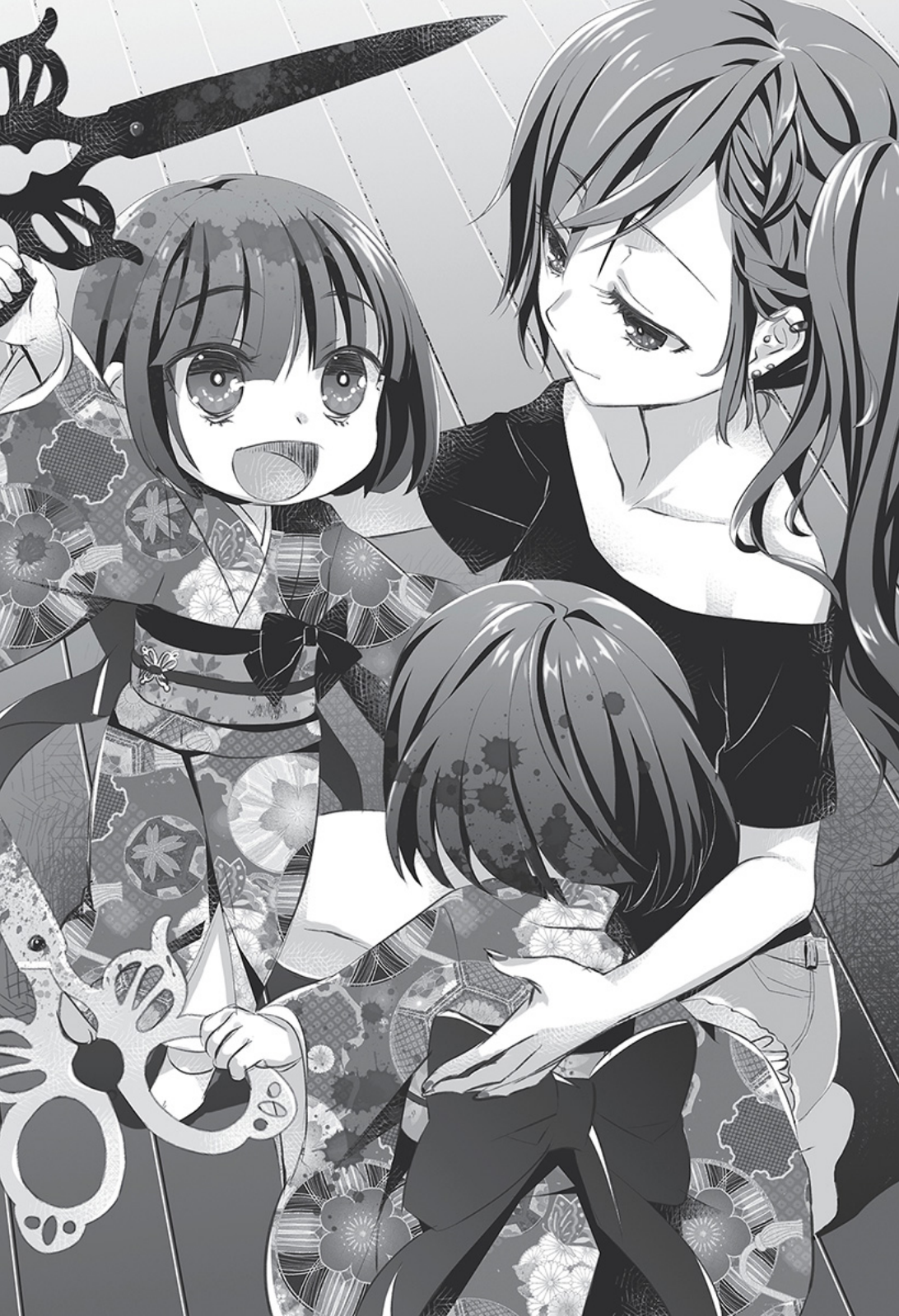
The twins chattered noisily, ignoring Kyousuke and the others. “Big sister Eiri, big sister Eiri,” “listen, listen!” “In the bushes just now,” “there were strange things!” *Shink, shink, shink*, went their scissors as they talked.

“...Strange things?”

“Yeah!” Ryou and Ran answered in unison. Even their breathing was perfectly in sync. “They were red and yellow,” “and purple and green,” “spiders and centipedes and things like we’ve never seen,” “snakes and frogs and things like we’ve never seen.” “They were weird, and there were lots,” “looooooots of them!”

“……Ah.”

Furrows appeared on Eiri’s brow.



Exchanging looks, the twins continued. “The snake we found just now was great, wasn’t it?” “Yeah, it had really pretty colors!” “Like freshly scooped-out intestines.” “A pink color like small intestines!”

“……?!”

A pink snake. One of the poisonous serpents that Busujima had released on the way back to their rooms. Which meant that the blood the twins were bathed in— “But it seemed like it was gonna bite at us, so…” *“we killed it!”* “We cut its head off—” *“Slice!”* “But it was still alive,” “wiggling around,” “it was gross, so…” *“we cut it up!”* “With Ryou’s Kurosagi cutters and” “Ran’s Shirosagi cutters!” “Taking turns, from front and back,” “slice, slice!”

They smiled innocently, and opened and closed their scissors, *shink, shink, shink*. The blood and fluids dirtying their scissors and clothes must have belonged to the poisonous creatures Busujima had let loose to investigate the mansion.

“…*Ahh*. You took care of them, huh?” Eiri sighed.

Kyousuke and the others were at a loss for words.

Finally, the twins noticed them. “Ah!” they shouted. “These people, could they be…?” “Uh-huh, they’ve gotta be!”

Whisper, whisper, whisper, whisper. Bringing their faces close together, they started conferring in secret.

Eiri took the opportunity to introduce the twins to the dumbfounded group. “These two are my little brother and sister. As you can see, they’re twins, and they’re nine years old. The boy holding the black scissors is the older brother Ryou, and the girl holding the white scissors is the younger sister, Ran.”

“Nice to meet you, mister!”

“Nice to meet you, miss!”

The twins cut their private conversation short and hastily bowed.

“N-nice to meet you…”

“A pleasure.”

“Pleased to meet you!”

Kyousuke and the others greeted them uneasily, while the twins looked over with immense curiosity. The strange contrast between their clear eyes and their blood-spattered faces was disturbing.

“Hey, mister,” “hey, miss!” “Ryou knows about you,” “Ran knows about you!” “Mister, you’re a murderer, right?” “Miss, you’re all murderers, right?!”

Reeking of blood, the twins drew closer, looking up at Kyousuke and the others with glistening eyes.

“What kind of weapons do you kill with?” “How do you kill?” “Why do you kill?” “I’m curious, Ran!” “I’m curious, Ryou!” “Tell us tell us tell us tell us tell us tell us tell us!” “We wanna know we wanna know we wanna know we wanna know we wanna know we wanna know we wanna know we wanna know!”

Shink, shink. Shink, shink.

Kyousuke and the others tried to retreat, but the twins pressed in on them, opening and closing their scissors.

“…You two.” Eiri clapped a hand on each twin. “First go wipe off all that gore and change your clothes.”

“Wah?!” After rubbing their heads, the twins looked at each other, snickered conspiratorially, and then smiled enthusiastically. “Okaaaaaayyy!” Clasping blood-soaked hands, they pattered off.

Kyousuke and the others could do nothing but stare in mute amazement at the twins’ backs as they disappeared.

"……What is with them?"

"They're too excited! I can't keep up with them like that!"

"What incredible kids… Young people these days are scary."

"Kids have always been like that. More importantly, should we tell him about that?"

Eiri pointed at the puddle of blood spreading out from the corner of the courtyard.

Several seconds passed.

"What happened?! I heard from my friends that there was an emergency…" Right on cue, Busujima rushed in. Upon seeing the sad state of his beloved pet, he crumpled to the ground, shedding ugly tears. "Eeeeeeeeeeeeah, Loverboy?! Loverbooooooyyy! Oh…why, why, why like this…?! Uuu…waaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

X X X

"You have my deepest apologies."

"Apologies!"

Fuyou prostrated herself on the floor of the guest room. The twins copied her and got to their knees, bowing their heads.

Busujima sat before them cross-legged, his arms folded, appearing to ignore them. He was righteously angry at the massacre of his beloved pets.

Upon investigation, the maid had discovered six more corpses littered throughout the mansion. Like the poisonous snake, they had been hacked to death, chopped up by the twins' scissors.

Fuyou raised her head from the tatami and spoke in a sorrowful tone. "I'm always telling them not to kill in vain, but…these children have somewhat sadistic tastes. I'm afraid they take to killing small

animals whenever you let your attention drift. They are novices who cannot yet control their deadly urges. I am truly sorry that my lapse in oversight led to such an outcome."

"Truly sorry!"

"....."

Kyousuke and the others sat at the low table, drinking tea and attentively watching the proceedings. Eiri nibbled at a *manju* confection and stared at her kneeling relatives with a blank expression.

Silence.

Eventually, Busujima answered in a serious tone. "...That's enough —please sit up. No matter how much you apologize, it won't bring them back. But...I am also at fault for letting dangerous, poisonous creatures run free. Yes, that certainly was not my finest idea... Given the circumstances, I should have released my more combative friends. If I had, they may have been able to fight back..." Busujima hung his head but grumbled and complained even as he admitted his own part in the tragedy. The death of his pets was surely a great shock.

Fuyou bent toward him and reached out to touch his cheek. "As I had feared, you cannot completely forgive us? In that case, there is no other way... Allow me to apologize directly." She stroked Busujima's face provocatively as she whispered. "In return for you forgiving my children's foolish actions, I will allow you *any kind of brutality*. Ho-ho-ho...please, do as you like tonight."

"...What?" Busujima looked shocked, mouth agape. Seeming to have forgotten all about his pets' deaths, he ran his eyes, with undisguised intentions, over Fuyou's entire body, so youthful and voluptuous that it didn't seem possible she could be Eiri's mother. "R-ready and willing." Quickly he accepted the offer.

"Just die already!"

Eiri nailed Busujima with her *manju*.

“Gyah?!”

“Mother!! What do you think you’re doing?!” Eiri scolded, her face flushed. “Saying that kind of thing to a man like this…? Have you lost your mind?! You might allow it, but I will not!!”

Fuyou smiled. “Oh, my.” Withdrawing her arm, she covered her mouth. “Of course it was only a joke, Eiri. My goodness.”

“……Mother.”

“A joke? Jeez…”

“—Mr. Busujima?”

Eiri turned her angry glare from Fuyou toward the obviously disappointed Busujima, who proceeded to wave his hands madly.

“No, no, I was joking, too! Of course I was! Ha-ha-ha…no matter what kind of impression I may give, I am a teacher, after all. No matter how beautiful she may be, committing adultery with your mother would—”

“It would not be adultery.”

“Huh?”

“You see, my husband has *already left this world*.”

“……?!”

For a moment, Eiri’s shoulders shook.

Busujima made a panicked face.

“Your father has…passed on? So then, in other words—”

“Yes,” Fuyou answered. “Six years ago, in the middle of a job. He was thirty-two when he died.” She continued with downcast eyes. “When you make your livelihood as an assassin, danger is inherent in the job. Generally, one’s lifespan in this industry is short… He died at thirty-two, but, still, that means he got to live. But because my husband was an assassin of unparalleled skill, fate did not smile upon him… His eldest daughter, Eiri, was ten years old at the time, while Ryou and Ran were only three.”

“————”

Not knowing how they should respond, Kyousuke and the others could only hang their heads.

The twins also made sad faces.

A gloomy silence descended upon the group.

The sound of Fuyou clapping her hands swept away the dismal atmosphere. “My apologies. I’ve caused our guests to concern themselves with private matters… Please do not worry about my husband. The children and I have already worked through our feelings. It happened six years ago, after all. Isn’t that right, Eiri?”

“……”

Eiri answered Fuyou with silence. Biting her lip so hard it turned white, she hung her head.

Seated next to her, Kyousuke grew concerned. “…Eiri?”

“My, my.” Fuyou smiled bitterly. “Eiri was something of a daddy’s girl, you see…” She narrowed her sanguine eyes. “However, I think your father would be sad to see you making such a face. Obon starts today: the time when departed ancestors return to this side. Come, Eiri. Why don’t we greet your father with smiling faces?”

X X X

The maid in the Noh mask carried dishes out one after another. Stewed vegetables, stir-fry, deep-fried food, seasoned side dishes, vinegary side dishes, soup, pickles…served on red lacquerware dishes, the food was abundant in variety and amount. Before they knew it, the long, low table was completely covered.

“Wow! Incredible… What a treat this is.”

“Even the food is high class. It looks delicious!”

“What is this, torture? I’m the only one who can’t eat here!!”

“…What if you eat in the storehouse?”

“Eh?! No way, I don’t want to eat alone. A meal is not about what you’re eating—what matters is who you’re eating with! So I’m not annoyed…not…a-annoyed.”

“Now, now. Wipe your tears.”

“I can’t! The mask is in the waaaaaayyy!”

Renko continued making a noisy fuss as she plopped down on one of the cushions.

Seated in order from left to right were Busujima, Kyousuke, Renko, then Ayaka.

And Eiri was—

“……Tch.”

—Sitting across from Busujima, to the left of Kagura.

Kagura had clicked her tongue loud enough for Eiri to hear, but Eiri acted completely unconcerned.

Previously, Kyousuke and the others, after burying the corpses of Busujima’s pets in graves dug for them behind the mansion, had relaxed comfortably in the guest rooms until dinner. They’d spent the

time watching television, which they didn't have at the academy; chatting idly; and discussing their plans for the coming days.

No one had made any reference to the father who passed away six years earlier. Eiri herself showed no sign of her usual brooding as they retired to their rooms.

"...Fwah."

Now, too, with half-lidded eyes, she yawned placidly.

"I'm hungry. Aren't you, Ryou?"

"I want to eat soon. Don't you, Ran?"

The twins had taken their place to Kagura's right, and the two of them lightheartedly chattered together.

Fuyou, who had appeared last, sat at the head of the table—where she could look out over all of them. "Thank you for your patience, everyone. I've already dismissed the branch families, so assembled here are all members of House Akabane present in this home. Well, then, shall we eat?"

Following Fuyou's example, Kyousuke and the others pressed their hands together. "Thank you for the food!" they shouted in unison, before taking up their red lacquered chopsticks.

Six o'clock. In the guest room of the Akabane main house, nine people began a harmonious meal together.

Eiri turned to Fuyou, who was pouring local sake into a small cup for Busujima. "...Mother. Are big brother and Muramasa not here?"

"Yes, both of them are out on assignment. If everything goes as planned, Basara will return midmorning tomorrow, I believe? Muramasa is in another country, so he will probably be away for the whole of Obon."

“I see… They seem busy as always.”

Of course, the “assignments” that Fuyou had mentioned were assassinations. Eiri, the only one in her family who was unable to kill people, wore a complicated expression.

“And you seem to be idle as always,” Kagura ridiculed.

Fuyou continued in an unexpected direction. “To tell the truth, Kagura was also supposed to be on assignment until late tonight, but…she finished early, perhaps because she wanted to see her sister as soon as possible. The poor girl tossed and turned and barely slept, even after returning home in the early hours, you know!”

“—Bah?!” Kagura spit out a piece of fried tofu. “Lady Fuyou?! Please do not speak in such a misleading way! I only finished my assignment early simply because the conditions were surprisingly favorable, and I was only restless and unable to sleep because I was so eager to attack her the moment that we met! Th-there’s no way I wanted to see—”

“You have tofu on your lips, Kagura.”

“Don’t touch me!”

Kagura angrily smacked the damp towel out of Eiri’s hand. Roughly dabbing at her own mouth, she leaned far away from Eiri. Flushed and scowling, she wiped the tabletop.

Pouring sake into her own cup, Fuyou smiled. “My, my…” Her gaze shifted to the other side of the table, where Kyousuke and the others sat. “How is our cooking, everyone? I hope that it suits your palates.”

“Yes, it’s really delicious!” Ayaka answered, wearing a satisfied smile, her cheeks stuffed with stewed kabocha squash.

Kyousuke also nodded, moving a piece of tomato aspic toward his mouth. “It’s good!”

Everything on the table seemed too good to be home cooking; they must have employed a professional chef. After the garbage food served at Purgatorium Remedial, this meal tasted especially delicious.

"My, the sake and the food are both delicious, aren't they?" remarked Busujima earnestly, savoring horse-meat sashimi along with his locally brewed sake. "These dishes, they were prepared by…"

"Yes. Though there was quite a lot to make this evening, so I also asked Kagura to help."

"Eh?!"

Kyousuke, Renko, and Ayaka all simultaneously looked at Kagura.

"……What?"

"Well, I mean, that's—" Kyousuke stammered.

"Unexpected," Ayaka said. "You can really make decent food."

"Hmm, I wonder…?" Renko mused. "Maybe we just haven't gotten to the dishes she made yet. It's possible that some disgusting failures slipped in among all this delicious cooking—"

"No, it's not. When cooking, you just have to follow a set process, right? I don't understand how someone could fail at it. No one's that stupid."

Kyousuke and the others pointed wordlessly at Kagura's neighbor.

"…Wh-what?" Eiri, who was chewing on a piece of tempura, frowned.

"Don't tell me…" Kagura stopped eating. "You can't cook?"

"————"

Eiri sat stiffly, averting her gaze. "Maybe I can, maybe I can't…," she eventually answered. "So what?"

Kagura's chopsticks dropped from her hand.

"Big sister...? You must be joking. You can't cook, you can't study, you can't even kill. I mean, really, what can you do?"

"...I can breathe and stuff."

"Breathing?! Even bugs can do that! Just how incompetent can one person be?! It would make our ancestors laugh to see the eldest daughter of House Akabane in such a state. You're the disgrace of the living family. We'd be better off if you just stopped breathing and died...or if you like, I can stop your breath for you?"

"Impossible. Even when you had the element of surprise, you couldn't stop it, right?"

"Why you... B-bring it on! Right here, right now, I'll slice you—"

"Come, Kagura! We do not draw our blades while seated for a meal!"

"……Yes. Deepest apologies, Lady Fuyou."

Kagura made a bitter face and took her seat. Eiri, who had been moments from a fight, sat sipping her soup without the slightest change in expression. It was an exchange between two eccentric sisters.

Kyousuke was feeling chilly despite the humidity, when Renko pulled at his sleeve.

"Hey, hey, Kyousuke. Want me to feed you?"

"...Feed me? No thanks, I can eat by myself."

"Come on. It'll be nice, won't it, Kyousukeeeeee? For our relationship?"

"Shut up. You be quiet and drink your jelly pack."

“Okay, open wiiide…”

“I said no thanks!! Plus, that’s not food, it’s jelly!”

“Yeah. It’s an indirect kiss, see? *Oh yeah*.”

“You use a straw, so it’s not even an indirect kiss.”

“Well, then, how about a direct kiss? *Smooooooch*…”

“The gas mask is in the way! Don’t get near me—it’s scary!”

“————”

Rust-red upturned eyes pierced Kyousuke and Renko as they made their racket. It was not only Eiri’s eyes, however. Kagura also glared at them.

“U-um…what is it?”

“Aren’t you *my big sister’s boyfriend*?”

“Eh?!”

“Ehhh?!”

“—Buh?!”

While Kyousuke and Renko looked startled, Eiri spit out her soup.

“…Huh?” Kagura seemed confused. “I thought for sure you had that kind of relationship. That you were a reckless jerk who would flirt with another girl while dating my sister…but it seems I was mistaken. You’re dating that gas mask girl, aren’t you?”

“Yep, that’s right. *Kksshh*.”

“No way! I’m not dating anyone!”

"...Is that true, big sister?"

When Kagura turned to face her neighbor, Eiri was in the process of cleaning her mess on the tabletop with her towel. Red all the way to her ears, she spoke in a shrill voice. "Of course it is!! Wh-wwwwh-who would go out with this useless asshole...? No way. Don't say stupid things, Kagura! Are you dumb?!"

"S-sorry..." Unexpectedly, Kagura apologized obediently. "Surely there's no way that you would end up liking a worthless guy like this, judging from his looks. Even if you are my big sister, that would just be too much."

"...*Sigh*. That's right. There are some things you can say and some you shouldn't, Kagura!"

"Yes...I'm really sorry."

"Do you guys really hate me that much?"

In Kagura's venomous words, *just too much* had to mean... Kyousuke's feelings were seriously wounded by this roundabout insult.

"Apologize."

—*Whoosh!*

A dark crimson shape passed by them in a blur.

"……?!"

Kagura tilted her head almost instantly. A long, thin weapon swooped through the air where her eyeball had been just a moment before. The sound of a small splash came from the pond in the courtyard adjacent to the veranda.

Kagura looked in the direction from which the shape had come flying. "Wha—?"

Ayaka, sitting up on her knees with her right arm extended, was staring at Kagura with lightless eyes. The red lacquered chopsticks were gone from her hand. “I demand that you apologize to my big brother. Will you die, or will you apologize?”

Ayaka threw the chopsticks right at Kagura’s eyeball! A cold sweat broke out on Kyousuke’s forehead. “H-hey…Ayaka, calm—”

—Whizz!

A white flash passed before Kyousuke’s eyes as he bent forward. Cutting through the air, the thing sliced off several millimeters of Ayaka’s pigtail before lodging in the sliding screen. *It was an iron-ribbed fan tipped with blades.*

Kagura slowly stood up and scrutinized her opponent with bloodthirsty eyes.

“…If that was an attack intended to kill me, then of course you are also prepared to die, right? Once an Akabane turns their deadly gaze upon you, they’ll make you regret ever being born.”

“Same to you. For the sin of mocking my brother, fall into hell and stay there for all eternity.”

“Ayaka! What the hell are you doing all of a sudden?! Stop it!”

Rushing madly around the table, Kyousuke subdued his sister.

“Kagura! Put your blades away! What would you do if you seriously took an amateur opponent?!”

Jumping in front of Kagura, Eiri frantically tried to pacify her.

As Ayaka’s and Kagura’s eyes met, angry sparks flew between them.

“I don’t like this girl. Shall I cut her impertinent throat to pieces?”

“Tee-hee. We’re hitting it off, aren’t we? Ayaka also dislikes you. So

prepare to die!”

“This is a fun dinner, huh, Ryou?! Open wiiide.”

“It’s always fun when you’re around, Ran. Open wiiide.”

Completely ignoring the words and weapons flying over the dining table, the twins brought food to each other’s mouths.

Busujima turned to Fuyou, who was pouring more sake. “...Is it all right to let them go on like that?”

“It’s fine. The matter should settle itself without intervention. More importantly, sir, I rarely get to speak to someone in the same profession, so there’s a great deal I’d like to discuss.”

“S-sure...”

“Hey, hey. Could I get some of that sake?”

“Of course not! You’re a minor, aren’t you?”

“He’s right. Drinking sake is strictly forbidden! But... Oh, this is just perfect. I want to ask so many things about you. To hear your story, as someone created to be a pure *killing machine*... Won’t you let us hear it, as accompaniment to our sake, Miss Murder Maid?”

“Stop! That is also not allowed! Miss Hikawa is a top proprietary secret. It’s not like we can readily provide you with information regarding—”

“You...can’t?” Fuyou reached out and took Busujima’s hand.

“Whoa! Th-that’s right! W-well, maybe if it was just a little bit...”

“...You’re leering again. What a slob.” Renko shook her head in disgust at Busujima, who appeared flustered by Fuyou’s advances.

Meanwhile, Kyousuke and Eiri continued the arbitration between their little sisters.

“Sorry, my little sister was wrong! I’ll scold her later, so would you please forgive us?”

“No way, that girl was the one in the wrong. There’s no need for you to apologize, big brother!”

“...Sure. And I’m sorry that my younger sister acted poorly. I didn’t help the situation, either—”

“Why are you apologizing, big sister?! If you concede here, the Akabane name will die out!”

Kagura and Ayaka continued glaring at each other across the low table. They had only just met, but they were fighting like cats and dogs. Their immediate bloodlust had died down, but their anger did not yet show any signs of subsiding.

By the time they somehow got the two of them to calm down, quite a while later, the food was nearly cold.

X X X

“*Kksshh*. That was a fun dinner, wasn’t it, Kyousuke?”

“...Yeah.”

The rowdy evening meal was over, and it was now past eight PM. Renko had started talking to Kyousuke, who was watching a variety show on TV.

Eiri and Ayaka had gone to the bath, and Busujima was in the restroom, leaving Kyousuke and Renko alone in the guest room, where the low table had been moved out of the way to make room for the laid out futons. Already, the two had taken their turn at the bath, so they were in sleepwear, not their regular clothes. The white *yukata* robes, dyed with dark blue designs, gave the impression they were staying at a fancy inn.

The presence of the sinister-looking gas mask was spoiling the

mood, though.

"*Kksshh*...I wanted to get in the bath with everyone else. At dinner, too, I just had to watch without eating anything, and even my room is separate from yours. The way they're treating me is so cruel, don't you think? Hey, don't you think it's cruel?"

"...Yeah."

"It is, isn't it? It's cruel! I mean, it's sweltering in this mask! I can't take it off no matter how much I sweat, and it's stuffy, and it's in the way, and it's irritating, aaaaaargh, come on!" Growing frustrated, Renko began tugging at the mask.

"Hhhnnn!" She rolled around on top of a futon, pulling with both hands. The straps, however, were locked in place: There was no way she could take it off. Her yukata, on the other hand, quickly came loose.

Renko sprawled out on the futon, her exposed chest heaving up and down. "*Kksshh*...*kksshh*...ugh. Like I thought, the mask isn't going anywhere...so maybe I can get them to let me sleep here? Being shut away in a storehouse is lonely, no matter what the reason. And if I'm wearing the mask, there shouldn't be a problem with me sleeping in here with you guys, right?"

"...Yeah."

"Yeah, yeah! Well, but if I leave it on, I get stressed out, you know... Hmm, what should I do? Which would make you happier, Kyousuke?"

"...Yeah."

"Don't just say 'yeah.' Are you listening to what I'm saying?"

"...Yeah."

"————"

Wordlessly, Renko sat up and glared at Kyousuke, whose eyes were glued to the variety program, the type of pleasure one couldn't enjoy at the academy. His occasional snickers punctuated the jokes. He didn't seem to even notice Renko.

From somewhere around the temple of the gas mask came a snapping sound.

"Ha-ha-ha! This *Manson Hearts* show sure is funny... Wait, they have a two-hour special next week?! But we won't be able to watch it... What a letdown."

"I'm the one who's being let doooooown!"

"Awwwaaagh?!"

Renko threw herself at Kyousuke in a frenzy. Catching him by surprise, she pushed him down onto the futon and straddled him. Her yukata was disheveled, very nearly revealing her chest. The strong scent of soap wafted from her body as she sat astride his stomach.

"Me or the TV—which is more important?! Even though we have a rare moment alone!"

"Y-you say that, but...first of all, could you move?"

"No! I won't move! I absolutely will not move until you say you like me!"

"...Heh."

"Don't watch the TV shoooooow!"

Renko raged at Kyousuke, who had turned his head and was still watching TV even as she held him down. Then, putting her hands on the collar of her yukata, she started to strip naked.

"Just a... Hey, stupid, stop it! What do you think you're doing?!"



"*Kksshh*. It was careless of you to get caught alone with me! If you won't look at me, I'll just have to make it so you can't pull your eyes away. Come on, Kyousuke, take a good look... I'm telling you that *I'll let you do whatever you like with this body*. You are a man, after all, so how can you object?"

".....Uh."

Kyousuke was instantly overcome. His gaze was drawn back to Renko. It was more than just her chest. Her slightly wet silver hair and flushed skin, her seductive collarbone and slim shoulders, and on top of all that, the gas mask. Imagining the face that was under the mask, he couldn't pull his eyes away.

Even though he supposedly understood that reciprocating would mean his death...

"Huh? You're resisting less than I thought." Renko extended a hand toward Kyousuke's cheek, brushing her supple fingers across his skin. "See, I knew you really want to do it, too! Goooooood... As you can see, I can't use my mouth, but I'll make you feel plenty great using everything else—"

"I'm back, big brother!"

Right when he was about to be consumed, Ayaka returned, just in the nick of time. Fresh out of the bath, she had undone her pigtails and changed into a yukata. "The bath in Eiri's house is amaaazing, isn't it? I was surprised that they have an open-air bath. And the bathtub is made of cypress wood! Of course, I ended up staying a lot longer than I meant to—"

Seeing Kyousuke and Renko, Ayaka froze, still smiling.

One second, two seconds, three seconds, four seconds passed...

"Excuse the intrusion."

—*Slam!* She shut the sliding door and left.

Kyousuke quickly pushed Renko aside and dashed out into the hallway.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait up! You've got it all wrong—that was just a misunderstanding!"

"……Hm, what was? Ayaka didn't see anything." Looking back at him, his sister's eyes were blank, her voice quiet. She had clearly misunderstood the situation, 100 percent.

"Tee-hee." Ayaka smiled. "Anyway, I think you'd better get back to the room right away. It's all right, big brother. I won't let anyone get close for a while. I'll stand watch right here, so you can do it all to your heart's content."

"You're totally misreading things!! First of all, come back!"

"Ehh?!" Renko interjected. "A th-th-th-th-th-threesome?! We can't do that all of a sudden—it's too much! J-just hold on! At least let me prepare my miiiiiind!"

"Don't make the misunderstanding worse! Seriously, we weren't doing anything!"

"...What are you doing?"

A voice tinged with disgust interrupted the siblings' racket. Eiri scowled at them, fresh out of the bath like Ayaka.

"...Well, I don't really care. I brought some ice cream, so let's not waste time standing around in the hallway. It'll melt."

"O-oh...?"

Holding up ice cream bars by the wrappers, Eiri was dressed in a white yukata decorated with strawberries and hearts. The ribbonlike sash tied around the front of her body was printed with a red tartan

pattern. This was not a guest yukata like Kyousuke and the others were wearing—it must have been Eiri's personal attire. In addition to the overly childish pajamas, her ponytail had been let down and she wasn't wearing any of her typical makeup. She looked much younger than usual.

Kyousuke and Ayaka could not help but stare, and Eiri glared back at them.

"What?"

"N-nothing..."

"Sorry, I don't have any makeup on!" Eiri spit. "It can't be helped, since I just got out of the bath... D-don't stare at me like that! It's embarrassing... It's a-annoying!" She turned her face away as her cheeks, still flushed from the bath, grew slightly redder. Her prickly attitude was less intimidating without her usual made-up appearance.

"Eiri, you—"

"...Wh-what is it?"

"You're cuter without makeup on, you know?"

"……?!"

Eiri opened her eyes wide, momentarily frozen in surprise.

"...Hmph," she eventually snorted. "Wh-what kind of nonsense is this? You don't have to...you don't have to say that! Stop it. You're too transparent. I'm not amused. Not at all. Did you think I'd be pleased by that kind of flattery? A-are you stupid?!" Eiri cursed at him, pointlessly smoothing her hair.

Kyousuke shook his head in denial. "It's not flattery!" he insisted earnestly. "When you're wearing makeup, you look beautiful. Right now you look cute. Your eyes are softer, and it seems like you're less grown-up. You're plenty attractive just like this, so you don't need to

go to so much trouble, yeah?"

"....."

Eiri hung her head.

Kyousuke grew flustered, afraid that he had said something that hurt her feelings. "But, uh...umm...of course I think you're cute how you normally look, too! The difference between your outward appearance and inner nature is cute—I mean, maybe I should say that it's surprisingly charming. If you're cute even without makeup, there's no reason not to think that you don't need to go to the trouble of putting it on—I mean...leaving that aside, your pajamas are also cute! What are those, strawberries? Hearts? And it even has flowers and sweets on it! It suits you too well. A cute yukata on cute you, it's too cute, supercute!"

".....Enough."

Eiri's voice was quiet.

Kyousuke had been trying to patch things up by praising her. Now he was perplexed. "Ah, um...Eiri? Why do you look so displeased—?"

"Shut up, you idiot!" Eiri shouted, raising her eyes. Her face was flushed with rage, the same color as the strawberries on her yukata. "Cute, cute, cute, cute... What the hell? Is your vocabulary really that small? It hurts my ears, and it's annoying, and it makes my skin crawl, so shut the hell up, stupiiiiiid!"

Eiri jammed an ice cream bar, still in the wrapper, into Kyousuke's mouth.

"Bwuh?!"

Leaving Kyousuke behind, suffocating in agony, she stormed off with a "hmph!"

"*Cough, cough,* gaaa... What did you do that for?!" Kyousuke

choked as he pulled the spit-covered Mr. Icee bar (banana flavor) out of his mouth.

"Don't worry about it, big brother." Ayaka, who had done nothing but watch the scene play out, patted him on the back. "Miss Eiri is really innocent, huh...? Tee-hee!"

"...What are you laughing at? Do you really think it's that funny seeing your older brother with an ice cream bar crammed in his mouth?"

"Uh-uh. No, I'm talking about something else! Indeed, indeed... Her family is rich, so maybe Miss Eiri is also, surprisingly, not a bad pick? But then, that's counterbalanced by her stupidity and the fact that she can't cook, so she doesn't quite bump Miss Renko from first place. Though, from where I'm standing, it's a pretty close contest..."

Ayaka pulled a memo notebook and pen out from somewhere and wrote something down. Mumbling to herself, she started to walk back toward the direction of their rooms. She seemed to be ranking Renko and Eiri, but he couldn't say for sure.

Following after her, Kyousuke scratched the back of his head. "Agh?! It's already melting..." He peeled the wrapper off the ice cream and headed back to the room, eating it.

X X X

"And that's revolution! I win!"

"Aw, too bad, I've got counterrevolution! It won't be that easy, Miss Renko!"

"Counter-counterrevolutiooooooon!"

"Wh-wwwwh-what did you say?!"

"*Kksshh*. Looks like I did you one better, little Ayaka!"

"...Counter-counter-counterrevolution."

"No way!! That's too many turnarounds! Crap, I can't counter it...*kksshh*. There's nothing more I can do with this hand."

Renko tossed away her remaining two cards and threw herself down on the futon. They were a three of hearts and a four of spades.

"...Okay, get up. You'd better flee the capital," Eiri gloated as she nonchalantly placed her last card.

"Grrrrrr..." Sitting up, Renko ground her teeth in frustration. "This is crap, it's all because of Miss Big Tiny Breasts!"

"Big tiny breasts? Are they big or small? Which is it?"

"Isn't it obvious...?"

"...S-sure is."

"Both of you can go to hell together."

Glaring, Eiri grabbed some snacks.

It was ten o'clock at night. Kyousuke and the others were gathered in one room, playing cards. Old Maid, Sevens, Concentration, Pig's Tail, Extreme Needy... As they played, they drank the juice and ate the snacks that Eiri had brought.

It was a luxury that would absolutely not have been permitted at Purgatorium Remedial Academy. Kyousuke and the others enjoyed their vacation to the fullest, partying enough for Maina, who had not been able to come with them.

Meanwhile, their probation officer, Busujima, was—

"Ah-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! These spoiled children!" He was playing and fooling around with his poisonous creatures in the next room. Since they had closed the sliding screens to hide the ugly animals, they could only hear his voice.

Fortunately, Eiri would be sleeping in her own bedroom, which allowed Kyousuke and Ayaka to stay together in one guest room, with Busujima alone in the other. They were thoroughly relieved not to have to be alone with a man like that.

"By the way, what time are you guys planning to go to sleep tonight?" Renko asked as she shuffled the cards.

"...Well, we should go to sleep whenever we get tired, shouldn't we?"

"Hmm...I guess we shouldn't stay up too late, huh? Miss Renko probably wants to go to the storehouse and take off her mask, after all."

"That's right. Although I can bear it for one night..."

"Not me. Sleepless nights are bad for the skin."

"Ohh, just as I thought, you're fussy about that, aren't you? It's because your looks are your only strong suit."

"Right, right. Eiri's cute, isn't she? And twice as cute without makeup!"

"...?! C-cu—?"

Dropping her snacks, Eiri's face went red.

"Cute, cute, Miss Eiri is cute! And three times as cute in a yukata!"

"Yo, yukata beauty! Japanese clothes suit you really well! You're four times as cute because of your tiny mounds!"

"Huh?! S-stop that... What the hell?! Every one of you is making fun of me!! Saying I'm cute, that's—"

"I'm going to the bathroom."

"————"

The moment he started to stand, Kyousuke felt the cold stares of all three girls bearing down on him. “Eh?!” He froze in place, half standing, wondering what he’d done wrong. *Since they all seemed to be preoccupied, I thought I’d go take care of that now, but…*

“Wh-what is it? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“……No reason.”

“Ahh, Kyousuke…you blew your chance to make Eiri blush.”

“You had the perfect chance to deliver a knockout blow! It would have been great… You really can’t read the room, can you, big brother?”

“Uh…? I don’t get it, but…can I go now?”

“Why do you even feel the need to ask something like that?! You can’t piss here, so if you’re going, get gone, you latecomer!”

“…Latecomer? All things considered, doesn’t Kyousuke seem more like an *early* comer?”

“Um, excuse me, aren’t you forgetting Ayaka, who has seen her *big brother’s thing* with her own eyes—?”

“Shut up! Don’t get all worked up over a weird topic…” Wincing at the girl talk mixed with dirty jokes, Kyousuke made a swift exit. He walked down the deserted hallway toward the bathroom at the far end.

Creak, creak… The sound of his footsteps on the floorboards echoed through the quiet darkness. The mansion must have been built a long time ago, judging by the poor condition of the wooden floor.

Even without imagining that the whole house reeked of blood, Kyousuke couldn’t help but feel like something was always about to jump out at him. Of course, it was possible that the Akabane family was just waiting for the perfect moment to attack him when he was

all alone. The thought made him feel helpless.

Kyousuke quickened his pace and peered back and forth as if it would make any difference. *I was right—someone must be coming after me!* He was starting to regret setting out on his own.

When he turned back around, there stood a figure clad in deep crimson.

"Aaaaaaaaaaahhh!!"

Kyousuke screamed and tried to retreat, but his feet got tangled up and he toppled over onto his backside. Rust-red eyes peered down at him.

"……What was that reaction?" It was Eiri's younger sister—Kagura. Her tone was as hard and dry as her gaze. She must have come from around the corner while he was looking in the other direction.

The young woman, wearing a dark red yukata, clicked her tongue audibly. "…Tch. Screaming when you see someone's face… You sure are rude. And on top of that, you act like an utter coward. I have no taste for raising my hand against a weakling, so you don't need to be frightened!" She laughed at him derisively, then started to turn back.

"Hey, Kagura! Wait a sec—"

"…Yes?" She stopped walking and looked back. Her distant, half-lidded eyes fixed on him. "And please do not be so familiar with me. It's uncomfortable."

"Oh. S-sorry…then, Akabane?"

"Please do not speak my family name. It's inappropriate."

"R-really…? My bad, Kagura…dear?"

"Please stop. It makes my skin crawl to hear you call me 'dear.'"

"……Eiri's little sister."

"Rejected. Please do not bring the dunce's name into this."

"What should I call you…?"

"Please don't call me."

"Just hang on."

—*She's so hateful.* Since her clash with Ayaka at the dinner table, Kagura had been hostile toward Kyousuke as well. She and Ayaka had yet to make peace.

Kagura heaved a sigh at Kyousuke's obvious bemusement. "Where is the good in a guy like this…?" she muttered, starting to walk quickly away in the direction she had come from just a moment before.

"…Huh? What are you doing here, anyway?" Kyousuke inquired. Kagura should not have normally had any reason to visit the wing of the mansion containing the guest rooms. Even assuming that she was visiting on some errand, he didn't understand why she would turn back the moment they ran into each other.

"…Tch." Kagura clicked her tongue at Kyousuke as he thought the question over. Her mannerisms reminded him almost exactly of her older sister, Eiri. "…Nothing in particular. Certainly nothing to do with you."

"Right, of course. Just curious."

At any rate, Kagura was an assassin. She being who she was, Kyousuke suspected that, among other things, she might have been figuring out what to do about them.

"…You sure are suspicious. I thought I told you it has nothing to do with you. It's not for you to worry about. Please go back to your silly pillow fights."

The atmosphere was undeniably melancholy.

—Pillow fights? Is this a school trip?

"Well, we're not having any pillow fights, but…right now everyone's playing cards. If you like, why don't you play with us? Eiri's there, too."

"I'm fine." Kagura's response was immediate. He had only tried inviting her because there was nothing to lose by it, but… "Why would I want to spend any time with you all…? And your sister, that impertinent little girl, is there, too, right? I'm likely to kill her if I see her again."

"Little girl…? Aren't you and Ayaka the same age? Plus, didn't you just say that you 'have no taste for raising your hand against a weakling'?"

"You sure are talkative." Kagura glared at Kyousuke with scornful eyes. "…If we're talking about mental age, I'm older. I have no intention of raising my hand against a weakling, but if a hand is raised against me, that's another matter. I will counterattack without mercy!"

"Please forgive her. I've apologized for my little sister's rudeness."

"…Hmph. I'm still bothered by it even if you apologized." Kagura brushed her hair back, unsatisfied. "Conversing with you only causes me undue stress, so I'll be taking my leave. Please tell my sister I said that if she has time to cut playing cards, she ought to work on being able to cut down people. Well, then—"

"If Eiri managed to kill someone, would it change the way you feel about her?" Kyousuke asked her departing figure.

After a short, contemplative pause, Kagura agreed, "…It would. She would finally be worthy of my approval. In all likelihood it's impossible, but…no, there's no way that a loser like her could kill

someone, after all."

"I agree."

"……What?"

Kagura looked back at Kyousuke with a puzzled expression.

Ignoring her stinging gaze, Kyousuke laughed. "Eiri is a gentle person. I can't even imagine her hurting or killing another human being. Isn't that right, Kagura?"

"————"

Kagura's mouth clamped shut, and her eyes widened ever so slightly. Then she looked away. "…I thought I told you not to address me so familiarly," she answered sullenly, before turning and walking off.

Good-bye— As he watched her back fade from sight, Kyousuke suddenly had an absurd thought. Had Kagura been visiting this wing of the mansion because she was concerned about Eiri spending time with Kyousuke and the others? She had been planning to observe them unnoticed but had run into Kyousuke and reluctantly turned back, hadn't she…? The notion circled around in his head unbidden.

When he had said that Eiri was "a gentle person," for a moment it looked as though a happy expression had appeared on Kagura's face. It had probably been an optical illusion, but at least she had not denied it. Kyousuke decided to believe that it had been real.

"They're blood sisters… That's for sure." Since she was Eiri's little sister, she was probably not a bad person, deep down.

Wishing for that to be true, Kyousuke started walking back.

Fear and the Loathing of Loss

BROKEN WINGS

ACT TWO

August 13 (Tuesday)

Today I was so hungry I thought I was going to die, so I went outside. Right away, I got mixed up with someone. It was Michirou, who's always talking nonsense to his left hand. I didn't really understand what he was going on about, so I was in trouble, but luckily Bob showed up to bail me out. Chihiro was there, too. After that, the four of us (Michirou tagged along) ate a meal together and did our homework and talked a lot. Chihiro tried to eat me several times, but Bob always saved me. Michirou used me as a shield several times. They are very strange people, but I had a lot of fun. It would be nice if tomorrow could be like this again.





Fear and the Loathing of Loss

BROKEN WINGS

ACT TWO

"Good morning, everyone! Did you sleep well last night? *Kksshh*."

As Kyousuke and Ayaka were folding up their futons the next morning, Renko, excited this morning as always, barged in, accompanied by the maid. Unlike the siblings, who were still wearing their pajamas, Renko was in a tank top and distressed jeans. Her gas mask neatly completed her ensemble.

"Good morning, Miss Renko!" Ayaka greeted her energetically.

Kyousuke looked back at her with bleary eyes. "……Morning."

"Hm?" Renko tilted her head, tossing her unruly hair, which always had just one section sticking out. "You look sleepy, Kyousuke. Didn't you go to bed right after the games?"

"Hm. No—"

"Everyone split up around midnight, but we went to sleep closer to dawn."

They had awoken at seven AM, which meant they had gotten only about three hours of sleep.

"…Fwah." Kyousuke yawned and rubbed his heavy eyelids. "Ayaka wouldn't let me get any sleep…"

"Heh-heh-heh. It's because it's been so long since I slept alone with you, big brother! And you really let me enjoy it to my heart's

content."

"Ehhhhhh?! Just what did you two siblings do?!"

"Tee-hee. It's a seeecret. You may be Miss Renko, but I'm not teeelling!"

"……Shady."

Whether it was shady or not, they had just spent the night chatting in bed. Every time Kyousuke had started to fall asleep, Ayaka had gently slapped his cheeks. She'd gotten into the same futon with him, bringing them more than a little too close together, demanding to touch him all over. Which was not to say there was nothing worrisome about that—but honestly, they hadn't been doing anything to be guilty about.

Leaving her protesting aside for the moment, Renko turned to the maid still standing in the doorway. "Which reminds me, where's Eiri? Is she still sleeping?"

The maid shook her Noh mask. "No. Earlier I went to wake her, so she should be along soon," she replied matter-of-factly.

"…I see. Well, then, why don't we also get dressed?"

"Okaaay! Miss Renko, let's do warm-up exercises please; it's summer vacation-y."

Thirty minutes later:

"……She's not coming, huh?"

"Seems like she's not coming. Wonder what she's doing…"

"One, two, three, four!"

Kyousuke and Ayaka had finished dressing, and Renko was starting on a fifth round of exercises, but there was not the least indication of Eiri's arrival. *Maybe she's taking her time getting dressed…*

The maid, who had returned after putting the futons away, looked around the room. “My, my, Miss Eiri is still not here...? It’s likely she fell asleep again. I will go wake her once more.”

“Wait a minuuuuuute!” Renko stopped her warm-up and called the departing maid to a halt. “You’re going to Eiri’s room right now?”

“Yes, that is what I said.”

“Well, then! Well, then! Take me with you, too.”

“Stop it. Wouldn’t Eiri hate that—?”

“Yes, yes, yeees!” Ayaka interrupted, floundering Kyousuke’s efforts to put the brakes on Renko’s proposal. “I want to go, too! I want to go wake Eiri uuuuuuppp!”

The maid nodded readily.

“Understood. Well, then, I will lead the way.”

“Hey, hey...” Kyousuke tried to object, but Renko and Ayaka were already gleefully following the maid down the hall, leaving him behind. Kyousuke roughly scratched his head. “...Geez. If she gets mad, I don’t know you, okay?” Talking to himself, he followed after Renko and the others.

Obviously, the only reason he was going along was to keep an eye on the two of them, to make sure that they didn’t do anything reckless. It was certainly not because he had any interest in Eiri’s—in a girl’s room.

“Listen up, you guys, don’t do anything weird when we get to her room!”

“Is that a joke?”

“Not at all.”

“*Kksshh*. Whaaaaaat? You don’t have to worry—right, Ayaka?”

“Right. We’re only going to thoroughly investigate the disorderly state and interior design of her room, as well as the whereabouts of anything suspicious or embarrassing.”

“P-please don’t…”

…Ayaka’s inspections are relentless, after all.

Some time ago, Ayaka had easily discovered a photogravure magazine that Kyousuke had been pretty confident he had hidden.

“I suppose that side dish *should be plenty for you tonight, big brother?”*

He’d gone quite pale when she’d placed the magazine next to his supper. Unfortunately their parents had also been in the house, so—he didn’t wish to recall the ensuing disaster. It was known as the “Big-Breasted Bikini Model Side-Dish Substitution Incident,” one of many traumatic memories etched into his mind.

While Kyousuke had been lost in the agony of this and other memories, they had traveled quite far from the guest rooms. They had arrived at a distant corner of the splendid main house.

“We have arrived.”

Kyousuke and the others came to a stop in front of a closed door. The inside of the room was deathly silent, and they couldn’t hear a single sound. Eiri must have been sleeping after all…

Renko, with her ear pressed against the sliding door, flashed an “all clear” sign at Ayaka, who was on the other side, awaiting orders. Ayaka returned a “roger” signal, and the two of them looked at Kyousuke simultaneously. It somehow seemed as if they were seeking his approval.

Kyousuke closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Nodding, he jerked his thumb toward the room.

Charge.

Renko and Ayaka, at the ready on either side of the door, slid each side open at the same instant. The scene that greeted them was—

A different dimension.

It was another world, completely covered in white and pastel pink.

"....."

Renko and Ayaka froze in place. In the center of the open sliding doors, their commanding officer, Kyousuke, stood with his arms folded and his mouth hanging open.

Spread out before their eyes was a Japanese room arranged in the Western style. A pure white carpet covered the floor, and the walls were pasted with pastel pink wallpaper. Fixtures like the desk and shelves were also painted the same color and decorated with adorable small animals and mascot characters. A chandelier sparkled from the ceiling overhead, and a dizzyingly sweet fragrance filled the air. In the corner of the princess-chic room—

"...Zzz...zzz..."

They could hear the faint sounds of snoring coming from a canopied bed. White lace curtains obscured the details of the situation, but there was no doubt that she was in there.

"———"

Kyousuke and the girls exchanged silent looks and crept closer, trying to keep their footsteps muted. Renko, who was in the lead, placed a hand on the curtain and slowly pulled it back.

"...Zzz...zzz...uun..."

There, just as they had expected, was Eiri, asleep in her pajamas. Oblivious to their invasion, she continued breathing peacefully. Clutched in her arms was a *huge teddy bear*.

"……You faker," Ayaka mumbled, the first thing she had said since seeing the spectacle with her own eyes.

Eiri was sound asleep, tightly embracing the child-sized stuffed animal, which she had turned sideways. Renko timidly poked her cheek, but she did not wake. Then she tried gently slapping her, but she did not wake. Renko pinched and squished, but still she did not wake. Eiri did not react in the least.

"*Kksshh*…looks like she's sound asleep."

"…Sure does. But is this really Eiri? Are we sure it's not someone else who just looks like her?"

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. I wonder if it's a twin sister or something…"

Kyousuke and Renko stood side by side, staring at this creature that closely resembled their friend. Long eyelashes fringed her closed eyelids, and rust-red hair fell messily across her face. Her lips were half-open, releasing a small trickle of clear drool. She had one cheek pressed against the teddy bear's face and was clutching it tightly.

The hem of her negligee had shifted in her sleep, provocatively exposing her beautiful legs. The thin fabric of her pajamas only barely preserved her modesty. This was a defenseless, unarmed form that Eiri would never have shown them while she was awake.

"Uh, umm…are we going to…wake her up?"

"She'll definitely murder us the instant she's awake, though."

"Y-yeah, that's right! We saw nothing, and we know nothing. This was not Eiri's room. We'll leave the rest up to the servants and get the hell outta here—"

Realizing that her companions had lost their nerve, Ayaka pushed Kyousuke and Renko aside.

“Wake up, Eiriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

“……Uuh…un…?”

The shouting in Eiri’s ear made her stir slightly.

“What are you doing?! Waking her up is suicide! Cut it out!”

“He’s right, he’s right—this is no good! Let’s run!! Like, now!!”

Ayaka ignored their protestations. Shaking Eiri’s shoulder, she started shouting in an even louder voice. “It’s morning, it’s morning, it’s mooorniiinggg!! How long are you going to sleeeeeeppp?! Hey, wake up, wake up, wake uuuuuuppp!”

Somehow Eiri still did not awake. Furrowing her brow intensely, she groaned, “Unnn…” and squeezed the stuffed animal even tighter.

Something snapped in Ayaka’s brain. She grabbed the arm of the soft, fluffy teddy bear in both hands and began to pull. “Aaaaaagghh, geez! I said waaaaaake uuuuuuppp!!”

Eiri resisted at first, but she could only do so much while still asleep. Eventually her grip on the bear loosened, until finally Ayaka snatched it away.

“……Pooh Bear?”

Eiri’s eyes opened ever so slightly. Still clouded by sleep, she wiped at a bit of the drool hanging from her mouth. Her expression instantly changed when she realized that the teddy bear was missing from her arms. Bolting upright, she began to frantically search the bed. “Pooh Bear?! Where did you go, Pooh Bear?! Hey, Pooh—”

“———”

The moment Eiri caught sight of Kyousuke, Ayaka, and Renko standing stock-still by her bedside, she froze. The blood drained from her face, turning her from pale to pallid before their eyes.

"Wha…wh-wwwwh-wwwwwwwwha…?" she gasped, mouth flapping open and shut. A deep blush spread over her face from the neck up. "Gah――――ha!" she screamed, now bright red. "Why are you here, all of you?!"

Clutching a pillow, Eiri retreated to the far edge of the bed, her eyes darting about the room. "Huh, no way…no, no, no, no, why?! Why are these people in my room?! I don't understand, I don't understand, what, what, what, what…wait. Please, wait! Umm, uhh…what is this, what is this, what the hell is this?! Aaaaaahhh…"

Meanwhile, Kyousuke and the others stood there looking shaken.

"…Pooh Bear? Is this bear some kind of mascot character with that name?"

"It's a teddy bear, so I don't think so. It sounds like a name that Eiri gave it herself."

"Ehh?! Naming a stuffed animal…? How old did you say you are?"

"Uuuh…stop! Don't look at me like that!"

Eiri tried to escape by burying her face in the pillow.

"Hmm, you must really like this Pooh Bear…sleeping with him in your arms."

"You're such a faker. Though this sure is soft and feels nice…soft and fluffy."

"Aah, stingy! Let me hold it, too!"

"Just a… Do you think you can just go squeezing whatever you want?! Give me back my Pooh Bear!"

“Hyah?!”

Eiri shot Ayaka a menacing glare and snatched back her Pooh Bear. Immediately withdrawing to her previous position, she hugged the recaptured teddy bear tightly.

“...How violent.” Ayaka frowned.

“You’re too possessive, Miss Eiri. Those were the movements of an angry lion that’s had its meat taken away! You must really love Pooh Bear.”

“Sh-shut up!” Red all the way out to her ears, Eiri squeezed tighter and glared at Ayaka. “That’s right, I love Pooh Bear! I can’t sleep well without him! Sorry for being a child!! Sorry for being a faker!! Yes, yes, sorry, sorry. What’s wrong with liking stuffed animals?! It’s fine, isn’t it? Who cares! They’re cute. Do you have something to say about it?! What? Seriously, what’s your excuse for barging in here and making a fool of me?! You should all die!”

Eiri’s eyes were wide as she ranted and raved. It was completely unlike the languid expression she always wore at school. Perhaps the lack of her stuffed animal friend was the reason she always looked so sleepy?

“.....I wish I was dead.”

Kyousuke, Ayaka, and Renko could do nothing but stand silently in the pink and white room, watching Eiri sob with her head buried in Pooh Bear’s chest.

X X X

“...Ah, geez, this is the worst,” Eiri groaned miserably. “Really just the worst...” She sat at the table in the banquet hall, her pajamas changed out for regular clothes. Five-grain rice, lightly pickled vegetables, grilled fish, small bowls of miso soup—she had not once touched her chopsticks to the sumptuous breakfast laid out before her.

Eiri kept her head hung low, looking greatly troubled. “I just knew you would all tease me if you saw it, so I tried to hide it, but...why? Why did you all have to come and wake me up? Aaah...I want to disappear. I want to disappeeeaaarrr...!” She twisted and writhed in apparent agony.

Kyousuke smiled bitterly as he stirred his *natto*. “I don’t get why you’re so upset. I think your stuffed animal is really cute. And your super-girly room, too...I think it’s totally fine.”

“Ehh...really?”

Ayaka, however, couldn’t keep to herself. Setting a memo book down onto the table, she began reading out her notes. “An enormous three-foot teddy bear, heart-shaped cushions, a strawberry-shaped alarm clock, floral lighting fixtures, a sparkly jewelry box, various things shaped like pastries, a bookshelf full of *shoujo* manga—”

Eiri covered her ears with both hands. “Lalalala, I can’t heeear you.”

“And the list goes on,” Ayaka continued. “I do think you might be overdoing it a little. Too many sweets will sour your stomach. I mean, I’m sorry, but that’s just how it is! What do you think, Miss Renko?”

“Huh, me? L-let me see...,” Renko answered in a fluster. “Well, I think it might not be that bad, yeah.” She slurped up her jelly pack. Contrary to all expectations, Renko did not seem comfortable teasing Eiri over her girlish tastes. Even she must have decided that it made for poor comedy material.

Renko’s unusual restraint seemed to torment Eiri even more. “Stop it!” she cried. “Don’t you cover for her! This is the point where you crack up laughing and make fun of me, isn’t it? Why are you being all serious and considerate...? I hatehatehate it! It makes me really uncomfortable! S-stop... I’m begging you, give it up already...” She hung her head somberly.

Kagura, who had been eating silently, spoke up. "...What are you so embarrassed about, big sister?" She sounded incredulous and looked at Eiri with scornful eyes. "It's not like your girly tastes are a recent thing, right? Didn't big brother and his friends use to tease you rather relentlessly?"

"Eh?" Eiri lifted her face at this unexpected attack.

"And you weren't just satisfied redecorating your room," Kagura continued, while gracefully lifting food to her mouth. "You even tried changing the way you dressed, didn't you? What was it you were into...? Gothic Lolita, I believe? You wore big, frilly, Western-style clothes and carried an umbrella even when it wasn't raining... I can't say I really understood it, but you did make quite an impression. Don't you dress like that anymore, big sister?"

"Wha—?"

Eiri's eyes were wide.

Kyousuke and the others couldn't help but stare at her.

...Gothic Lolita clothes in a purely Japanese-style house? It seemed like the style would suit Eiri's appearance just fine but wouldn't match the surroundings at all. They could almost picture it.

"Now that you mention it," Ayaka mumbled, "I'm sure that her closet was full of all sorts of...frilly dresses, and skirts with panniers, and garter belts! I have a feeling there might have even been headdresses and bonnets and cat-ear headbands!"

"Yes. And she wasn't content to enjoy it herself. She insisted on making me wear it as well... It was Sweet Lolita, right? I remember it well even now, how she dressed me up like a baby and took tons of pictures. It was the ultimate humiliation..." Kagura gripped her chopsticks tightly, trembling.

"Huh?!" Eiri grew angry. "Humiliation...? You're the one who begged me to do it! 'Not fair that you're the only one who gets to wear

cute clothes,' you said. 'I want to wear them, too,' you said."

"Wha—?" Now it was Kagura's turn to be at a loss for words. "D-don't say such stupid things! I recall nothing of the sort! Could you stop making up false stories about the past?!" She slammed her chopsticks down and scowled at Eiri. "If you mock me any further, I'll be forced to expose the fact that you once wrote a love story starring yourself as the main character."

"Forced to expose—yeah right! You just did!!" Eiri slapped her palm against the table. "It's already done! You sit there making fun of me, but you know...you used to be a faint-hearted crybaby, always running around after me with snot dripping from your nose, crying, 'Big sister'!! I won't stand to be mocked by someone like that."

"I was not dripping snot! N-nonsense... Who was it who, the night after watching a horror show, said, 'I'm scared to be alone, and I can't sleep,' and dived under my futon?"

"Oh, no. That wasn't me. It was you, Kagura! I'm totally fine with scary things. Remember how you used to wake me up in the middle of the night, saying, 'I'm scared to go to the bathroom by myself' and how I would have to go along with you? Do you even know what you're talking about?"

"Guh—" Kagura seemed to lose her momentum. She kept silent, blushing furiously, eyebrows furrowed. Her expression was, for once, appropriately childish for her age.

The twins, who were eating next to Kagura, looked at each other.

"Is it true that big sister Kagura used to really like big sister Eiri, Ran?"

"Seems that way, Ryou. I don't really remember, though. I can't imagine something like that!"

"Yeah, I can't imagine it. It's surprising, isn't it, Ran?"

“Uh-huh. So surprising, Ryou!”

“Oh, I never liked her that much.” Kagura glared, but the twins seemed to have reached their own conclusion.

Fuyou was conspicuously absent from breakfast, apparently gone out to meet her oldest son at the conclusion of his assignment early that morning. Busujima, who had lost his conversation partner, ate his meal in silence. There was no one who could lend Kagura a helping hand.

“Hmph…who would ever like our big sister?” Kagura spit. “She should be embarrassed of her past.” She angrily resumed eating, sipping her miso soup with a sour expression.

“Tee-hee,” Ayaka snickered. “Could Crappy Kagura be the sweet-and-sour type? You certainly look embarrassed.”

“I am not embarrassed! Please be quiet, Offal Ayaka.”

Ayaka and Kagura had started giving each other insulting nicknames—it appeared their rivalry had not diminished in the slightest. The situation between Eiri and Kagura, on the other hand, seemed a little different.

Even hurling abusive language, Kagura seemed livelier as she reminisced with her sister. One might even have imagined that she was enjoying herself. And though she seemed to detest Eiri now, it was clear that, some time ago, the two of them had been very close—their amiable banter certainly gave that impression.

“…Hey, is there something you find amusing, big sister?”

“No, not really.”

“…Tch. I’m surrounded by idiots.” Kagura clicked her tongue and chewed on a pickle.

“By the way,” Kyousuke asked, turning to face her, “I’ve been

wondering this whole time... That love story that Eiri wrote a long time ago, what kind of story was it?"

"Oh, Kyousuke...you really want to die, don't you?" Eiri seethed at the revival of that particular topic.

Kagura made a triumphant gesture with her chopsticks and launched into an enthusiastic description. "Ah, big sister's first work of literature, huh? The title was *Assassin's Love*, just like that. The tale of forbidden love between my assassin sister and the ordinary boy she had her eye on—"

X X X

".....I'm never going to forgive you."

After liberally describing Eiri's shameful episode, Kagura had left the room wearing a smugly satisfied expression. Eiri threw herself over the low table, now cleared of breakfast dishes, and groaned.

"I absolutely will not forgive you, Kyousuke."

"Me?"

"...Yes, you." Eiri propped herself up on the tabletop and glared at him with angry upturned eyes. "If you hadn't brought up the stupid subject, I wouldn't have been humiliated like that... Mind your own damn business, blockhead. You'd be better off dead."

Kyousuke, who had been relaxing and drinking more barley tea, flinched under her resentful gaze. "S-sorry...but it was a good story! And the conclusion, where you just couldn't bring yourself to kill him and tearfully confessed your feelings..."

"Yeah, yeah! There was real genius in your signature phrase: 'Before I could slay you, I had my heart slain by you (bitter smile).'"

"And his answer, 'No, I was slain long ago. When I first met you, my heart was killed on the spot (bashful smile),' was also incredible!"

Inspired by Kyousuke's commentary, Renko and Ayaka tore into the story with enthusiasm.

"....."

Tears welled up in the corners of Eiri's eyes.

"Kyousukeeeeee!!"

"M-my bad... Maybe that wasn't the best way to apologize." Kyousuke had brought up the story in the first place only because he wanted to hear Kagura talk about her sister—but he'd ended up stepping on a landmine.

Don't tell me it was that embarrassing of a subject...

Eiri felt as if her life were over. So much of her past had been revealed, including her first novel. She sighed listlessly, resting her cheek on the table. "What an unlucky day..." Then, still grumbling, she sat up and stretched, then got to her feet. "Well, then, I'm going to go visit a grave, but...what about you guys?"

"Us? Hm, well—"

"I want to investigate Eiri's room again and try to discover some treasure!"

"Treasure? You must mean the original copy of *Assassin's Love*, right, Ayaka?! Let me hunt with you. If we're lucky, we'll find a whole treasure trove!"

"...Right, I see. I'll be sure to ask the maids to guard my room, then! So that not even a bug can get inside!"

"Aww."

Ayaka and Renko sounded their disappointment in unison, and Eiri clicked her tongue at them. "...Tch. Don't whine. I'll be back in about an hour, so why don't you go to the guest rooms? It'll be a pain if

you're wandering around the inside of the mansion looking for things on your own."

"Aww."

"I told you to stop whining! Kyousuke, I'm leaving this to you."

"Sure. I'll keep a close eye on the two of them, so don't worry."

"...Yeah, thanks."

The probation officer responsible for looking after them was conspicuously absent. As soon as the meal was finished, he had simply said, "I'm going for a stroll," and left. And while he could probably use his poisonous creatures to monitor them without their knowing, he was the kind of person who clearly preferred working alone. He didn't seem to like being with other people.

"—Um."

Eiri's countenance suddenly changed.

The twins, who had been giggling and chasing a butterfly in the courtyard, also stopped.

The *shishi-odoshi* tilted with the weight of the water, making a refreshing *clack*.

"I'm home."

The next moment, a man appeared.

Wearing a dark red haori jacket over scarlet *hakama* pants, he was a young man in his twenties. His hair was two-tone red and black and lay on the right side of his head in a braid. He had silver piercings in his ears, and his haori was tied with a silver chain. He had a handsome face like a model's and smiled faintly.

".....Big brother," Eiri mumbled.

“Big brother Basara!” the twins shouted, running over to him.

The man in scarlet *hakama*—Basara—rubbed the tops of the children’s heads in turn. “It’s been four days, hasn’t it? Were you well, you two?”

“Yeah!” “Yeah!”

“Ha-ha. You’re in sync, huh?”

Narrowing his dark red eyes, Basara turned his gaze toward Eiri. Instantly, his smile evaporated. He took his hand off Ran’s head and moved to approach her. “My my, Eiri…I haven’t seen you in half a year, right? I feel like you’ve changed quite a bit in so little time. Will you let me see for myself?!”

As he stepped into the room, Basara kicked off the tatami floor, launching toward her with arms spread wide—

“I’ll pass.”

Eiri nimbly evaded him.

The man’s arms struck empty air and crossed futilely in front of his chest.

“…Tch. What a cruel little sister you are. Surely you could let me give you a hug.”

“No way. You stink of perfume, big brother.”

“Eh? No way, really?” Basara looked surprised. He sniffed himself a few times. “I think this is a pretty light level of scent, for me, anyway… Plus it’s not perfume; it’s incense! Used for fragrance. It’s a nice fresh and spicy scent, right?”

“…Not really. You’re gaudy as always, big brother.”

“And you’re just as cold as always. But—” He paused and folded his arms, eyeing her up and down as he stroked his chin. “As always,

quite pretty."

"...Where exactly are you looking?"

"At your legs. Your thighs."

"Don't you have any shame?"

"No, but...I mean, isn't it a little strange to insist that I don't look when you're wearing short hot pants that just scream 'look at me!'?"

"Huh?"

"Besides, isn't that how it works? You actually want people to look, but you're embarrassed to say so directly, so you communicate it with your clothes instead of your words, right? You're shy for the hot-and-cold type!"

"...Are you trying to make me angry, big brother?"

"I want to eat you up."

"Just die already," Eiri cursed, turning away sharply.

Basara closed his eyes and pressed his hands together as if in prayer. "I humbly receive my first 'just die already' of the day." When he opened his eyes again, he was looking not at Eiri but at Kyousuke and the others. "...Then these must be the guests I've heard so much about?" Kyousuke, Ayaka, Renko...Basara looked each of them over in turn. "Hm-hm, I see. Well, well—"

When he reached Renko, Basara's eyes came to an abrupt stop. Any trace of expression vanished from his face as he scrutinized her. "... *You're no amateur*, are you?"

He saw through her immediately.

"Eh?" Kyousuke and Ayaka were surprised.

"Kksshh!" Renko laughed. "And what makes you say that?"

"Why? Hah...it's obvious, of course. When you get to be a veteran like me, you can tell everything at a glance. Rough guess, *three digits*... I'm amazed you could reach that at your young age. I don't get many chances to meet a girl this impressive, you see. For the first time in a good while, I'm starting to get a little excited."

"Wha...?!" Kyousuke shuddered. *Does that mean that this man even saw through Renko's kill count?* But Basara was not finished yet.

"It's also easy for me to guess why you're wearing a mask... That gas mask is more than just a strange fashion statement. Your bare face—*your true character*—the mask is there to *hide* it, right? But that's too bad... I see right through it. Because I see everything."

Basara wore a bold smile. He stared at Renko with starstruck eyes. "Right, you're definitely no amateur... *You're a gravure idol with her face hidden by a mask!*"

"————"

The group stood silently gaping at Basara's blunt assertion.

The *shishi-odoshi* made a dull clacking noise.

"...Big brother? What are you going on about?" Eiri's face was flushed, and her shoulders trembled with rage.

"Hah!" Basara brushed his hair back, looking immensely self-satisfied. "I'm telling you, that's this girl's true character. No matter how she hides her bare face to stay incognito, it's clear once you've seen these boobs. Her bust is probably pushing three digits. Such magnificent, huge—no, enormous—breasts! There's no way a girl with breasts like that could be an amateur!! She's still a middle school or high school student, but she's unbelievably well developed!"

"No, big brother. What's unbelievable is your train of thought." Eiri pressed on her forehead as if seized by a sudden migraine.

"Kksshh…" Renko sighed and lifted her plentiful breasts up. "It's too bad, but I'm not a gravure idol! They're just ordinary, humble, beautiful breasts."

"What…did you say?" Basara staggered, wearing an expression of pure astonishment. He stared at Renko's chest, made all the more impressive by her hoisting each half. "An amateur with that rack… you say? Hey now, you must be joking, dynamite honey. You're the complete opposite of our Eiri, aren't you? I can't believe it…but did you say 'beautiful' big breeeaaasts?! I can't just take your word for it, so if you'll just let me confirm for myself—"

"Wait." Eiri grabbed Basara by the ear as he tried to approach Renko with eager hands.

"Owwwwww! That hurts!! Don't stop your big brother!"

"No, you'll stop and think sensibly. Are you stupid? If you keep struggling, I might slip and slice your ear off with my fingernail blades."

"……Fiiiiiine."

Basara reluctantly stopped resisting.

"…Tch." Eiri clicked her tongue and let go of Basara's ear. "You're an irredeemable pervert, aren't you…? Don't you think you ought to do something about your nasty habit of hitting on anyone you think you can lure into your clutches, no matter who they might be?"

"How rude! I'm only interested in girls with exceptional looks. Forget 'luring into my clutches'—" Basara pointed at Ayaka. "I hadn't even paid that one any mind! Plus, I don't have a Lolita complex, you know? No matter how cute someone is, I would die before unleashing my desires on a little girl like her or Ran!"

Basara's excuses didn't do much to vindicate him.

The expression disappeared from Ayaka's face, and the light went

out of her dark eyes. “What a disgusting person you are…” She started to stand, gripping her empty glass. “If you’d rather die than unleash your desires, then will you please die?”

“Easy now, Ayaka,” Kyousuke said, moving to restrain his sister. “Don’t get carried away!”

“Which reminds me…” Basara looked at Kyousuke. “It’s not like Eiri to bring a guy home… In fact, I think this might be the first time she’s gotten to know a guy outside of our family. How far have you two gone?”

“…What do you mean by ‘how far’?”

“Obviously I mean kissing, or physical contact, or se—”

“Just die already.”

Eiri took a swing at Basara, who only narrowly avoided her right fist.

“Hey! That’s dangerous! You seriously almost took my head off!!”

“It’s because you’re spouting stupid shit!” Eiri was blushing, holding her nails close to her chest. “Kissing and physical contact and… I don’t have that kind of relationship with Kyousuke! We’re just normal classmates! Wh-wwwwh-who would think such perverted…?”

“…Perverted? I see, so he’s got some peculiar dispositions.”

“It’s not like that!” Kyousuke insisted. *Geez, looking at me like we’re two of a kind…*

“Hmm…well, that’s fine, I guess. I assume that I’ll hear all the details over lunch anyway. I’m pretty exhausted after spending all night out on assignment.” Basara yawned, *“…Fwah.”* There was no need to bother asking what kind of work he had been doing.

Still, the man’s lips curled upward into a sadistic smile as he leaned

in and whispered:

"It'd be good if you *sorted yourself out* soon, eh—Rusty Nail?"

"....."

Eiri's face twisted slightly.

Slipping past his stunned sister, Basara moved onto the veranda. "Well, I'll catch you later. We can talk another time. I know it's a little late, but let me introduce myself. I'm the oldest son of the main Akabane family—Basara Akabane. I'm eighteen years old, and I have a girlfriend, but I'm still taking applications. I'm glad that Eiri managed to make friends with all of you...a nice young group of apprentice assassins. For now, good night." His one-sided introduction complete, Basara waved and left with a smile.

"Big brother Basara, big brother Basara!"

The twins followed after him, barraging him with questions.

"How many people did you kill this time?" "How many swords did you use?"

"It must have been ten people, including the guard. I used one sword per person, so exactly ten."

"Were they strong?" "Were they weak?"

"There's no need to answer that."

"How many girlfriends do you have now?" "More than the number of people you've killed? Fewer?"

"That's a secret."

"Aww. Tell us!"

And so on. The twins were brimming with curiosity, and Basara

casually answered their inquiries. It might have been a normal chat except for the gruesome details. Although, in House Akabane, where assassinations were a part of everyday life, that probably *was* normal.

"....."

Eiri chewed on her lip until the noisy trio had disappeared.

X X X

The grounds of House Akabane were vast.

Entry onto the private estate was prohibited to outsiders. This included not only the land on which the mansion was built but also several mountains that belonged entirely to the family.

There was very little exchange with the people at the foot of the mountain, and only the family doctor, private tutors, and a few select others had been granted special permission to enter the mansion. Nobody outside of the criminal underworld knew the reality of House Akabane or had any reason to know about the family's "other face."

Murder was the sole business of House Akabane. Consequently, "kill" or "don't kill" was the only judgment that mattered in most situations. And the one single-handedly shouldering the burden of that decision was—

"Mother is always gentle and kind, but...despite appearances, she's really ruthless! She mercilessly slaughters anyone who would harm the Akabane, and if it will benefit the family, there's nobody she won't have killed."

—Fuyou Akabane. Eiri's mother and the twenty-ninth head of the main family of House Akabane. Perhaps because of her overwhelming authority, Eiri's voice as she described Fuyou was filled more with awe than affection.

After visiting her father's grave, Eiri had taken Kyousuke and the others on a tour of the spacious grounds. As they walked, she told

them about the environment in which she was born and raised, and about her family.

"I never have any idea what Mother is thinking. Neither her expression nor her demeanor ever changes in the least, so I can't read her feelings... *It's really scary*. It was even the same way when I failed. Even though I couldn't kill, despite trying many times, she always said, 'There, there' or something with a carefree smile...but the sixth time I failed to kill someone, Mother didn't do anything at all. Then, just when I thought I had been sent away, abandoned...this. I'm suddenly called back home, and everyone acts like nothing even happened... I really don't understand it at all."

Eiri seemed very melancholy. She had been like this the whole time, after seeing Basara and finishing her grave visit. Of course, the house must have been a difficult place for Eiri to be. Too much time alone with her thoughts had put her in low spirits.

Kyousuke caught up to Eiri, who had been walking ahead of them. "If you don't understand her, why don't you ask her directly? Surely she'd be willing to talk to you."

"...Well, that's true." Eiri made a bitter face, absently winding her hair around her index finger as she answered.

"It's just...I'm not especially good at talking to Mother. Ever since I was young, I've had to endure cruelty in the name of assassin 'training.' Whether sleeping or waking, it was train, train, train, train, working hard until I fainted and starting again when I came to. Being stranded alone deep in the mountains or showered by a rain of blades or attacked by wild animals or locked into complicated restraints...the curriculum at school is nothing compared to my education. I came close to dying more than once."

"...Seriously? That's not education; that's abuse."

"Yeah. Mother boasted that 'your suffering now will prevent your death in the future,' but I wonder... It wouldn't have been as bad if she had acted strict like Kurumiya, but it was all the more frightening

because she was always so peaceful."

"F-for sure..."

It was a disturbing duality. It was no wonder that Eiri didn't like talking to her. Kyousuke had thought that something seemed a little off about Fuyou, and now his suspicions were confirmed: She was a terrible mother.

"—However, Father was different."

Eiri's expression softened. "His eyes were sharp and aggressive, and he always looked displeased. He was usually taciturn and didn't talk much, but his voice was loud when he yelled, and I trembled with fear whenever he scolded me. He was the exact opposite of Mother, a moody, unsparing person. But you know..."

Her tone was gentle and had a quality to it that he had never heard before now, a sense of loneliness and longing. It was clear she held a deep affection for her father. "He was a really kind person. He was away a lot for work, but when I was crying or feeling depressed, he would silently stroke my head and stay with me. Keeping it a secret from Mother, he would let me go outside with him, too."

"...What a good father."


KILL

“Yeah. Apparently he originally had a job as a bodyguard, and since he was an outsider, he didn’t live by Akabane values... Whenever Father was around, those were the only times I felt any sort of peace. I can clearly remember the feeling of his big, rugged hands even now —”

Eiri stopped walking and stared at her palm, sorrow welling up in her downcast eyes. “...I remember it.” Her voice was vanishingly quiet.

“Eiri...?”

Kyousuke turned to face her. Renko and Ayaka, who had been walking behind them, also caught up.

“Hey, are you okay? If you want to cry, I’ll lend you my boobs.”

“So Eiri had a father complex, huh...? Don’t worry about it.”

“Sh-shut up!” Clapping her hands to her cheeks, Eiri rushed away from Renko and Ayaka. “It’s nothing! Nothing at all. I visited his grave for the first time in a while and just got a bit sentimental... It’s nothing to worry about.”

She sighed as she pushed past Kyousuke. Her face looked angry and sour.

“...I see. If you say so, that’s fine, but...”

“*Kksshh*...so you don’t need my boobs? Aww, that’s too bad.”

“Well if Eiri won’t, I will... Yay! *Squishy, squishy, squishy!*”

“Hyah?! A-Ayaka...it’s hard to walk like this. Take your hands off— huuhh?!”

“Tee-hee-hee. Your boobs are pretty sensitive for how big they are, huh? Hey, hey heyyy!”

“What the heck are you girls doing together…?”

The conversation about Eiri’s father was already half forgotten as Kyousuke and the others followed behind her. However, when they passed in front of a certain Japanese-style room—

“…Hm?” Kyousuke stopped walking again. “Hey, shouldn’t we stop by here?”

The room appeared to house a Buddhist family altar. The paper sliding doors had been left open, and the room was about eight mats wide. The faint scent of incense hung in the air. In front of the altar stood an offering shelf decorated with vegetables, fruits, Chinese lantern plants, and so on. It was an altar to greet the spirits of the Akabane ancestors.

The offering shelf is an altar to greet the spirits of their ancestors, so Eiri’s father will also be there during Obon—or he should be, anyway. If so, shouldn’t Eiri be visiting this place *instead of his grave?*

“……”

For a moment, Eiri’s gaze darted around as if she was searching for something to say. “—It’s fine. I already went,” she eventually answered, before casually continuing on her way.

“Is that so…?”

With a nod, Kyousuke followed after her. As he passed by the room, he looked at the offering shelf. A meal, the same as they had all eaten that morning, was laid out on vermilion plates. The untouched dishes had long since gone cold.

Kyousuke’s gaze shifted from the offering of food back to Eiri’s receding figure. He sighed.

I already went, Eiri had said.

That's probably a lie—

X X X

After finishing their tour around the main building, Kyousuke and the others headed outside through the front door.

A tall stone wall surrounded the unsurprisingly enormous manor grounds. In addition to the central mansion, the landscape was dotted here and there with smaller buildings like sheds and storehouses, as well as a number of separate tearooms and shrines.

Among these facilities, the one surely put to the most use by the members of House Akabane was the martial arts dojo, which stood in a conspicuous location near the main house. In front of the dojo was a basin for ritual hand washing and an outhouse, all connected by a path of stepping stones set into red gravel.

"Someone's here...," Eiri muttered as they emerged from the bamboo. "Kagura, maybe?" She paused, as if hesitant to intrude...

"Hya-haaa! It's water, water!"

"Cold wateeer!"

Running past their guide, Renko and Ayaka swarmed around the ritual hand bath. Snatching up the ladles, they began splashing each other with water.

Eiri looked deflated as she watched her fellow students frolic in the hand bath. "...What the hell are you doing? What terrible manners."

Taking the ladle from Renko, she carefully scooped up some water and poured it over her left hand. Then, passing the ladle from one hand to the other, she doused her right hand. Passing the ladle back again, she collected water in her palm, gently rinsed her mouth, and spit it out. Finally, she replaced the ladle with both hands. Her actions were fluid and graceful. This was clearly a ritual she had repeated many times.

“Do it like that, with one scoop of water,” she instructed, turning back to the other girls with a proud expression. “Got it?”

“Slurp, slurp, slurp, slurp…”

Renko had stuck her straw tube directly into the water basin and was intently sucking. Next to her, Ayaka was scooping the water up with two hands and drinking it.

“……Listen—” Eiri tried to intervene.

“Wahh, that’s cold! What are you doing, Eiri?”

“Really! You people have no common sense, do you?!” Eiri, who had showered the two of them with the icy spring water, replaced the ladle. “…Hmph.” Leaving the purification station like that, she turned toward the dojo.

Kyousuke carefully washed his hands, more or less copying what he had seen Eiri do, and then followed her to the front entrance. “Wow, even this building is really big…”

The splendid tile-roofed building was, of course, entirely red. From behind the lattice door, they could hear the sounds of someone kicking off the floorboards and voices shouting “Hi-yah!” and “Take that!” and so on.

“…Ryou and Ran? They’re energetic as always.” Eiri smiled as she opened the door and stepped into the dojo.

When she did—

“Oh, it’s you guys. Welcome.”

A young man wearing scarlet *hakama* and a dark red haori smiled at them in a carefree manner. Kyousuke immediately stiffened.

Eiri clicked her tongue. “…Tch. Are you still awake, big brother? You really ought to hurry up and get some sleep.”

“Believe me, I’d like to.” Basara shrugged. “But *these little ones* wouldn’t let me sleep—”

As Basara gestured at the twins, a white blade cut through the air just beside his tilted head. “My goodness. It’s hard being such a popular figure,” he boasted as he ducked and dodged the flashing weapons.

“...Is that so?” Eiri said. “Well, how about sleeping now? I’ll send you to an eternal rest.”

“Ah-ha-ha. To be honest, I keep dozing off. I’ve been awake all night, so I’m incredibly sleepy...though I might wake up if you dealt me some damage.” Covering his mouth with his right hand, Basara yawned, shifting slightly.

A black blade cut through the air where Basara’s wrist had been just a moment before. Almost simultaneously, the white blade swung downward in a follow-up attack that harmlessly sliced through Basara’s afterimage.

“U-ummm...”

“Now, now, you two. Your swords are slow! Why, you couldn’t cut a butterfly like that!”

“Shut up and die, big brother Basara!”

“Die die die die die diiie, big brother Basara!”

“We’ve got you nooooooooooowwwwww!”

“.....What the heck is that?”

Before Kyousuke’s bewildered eyes—right in the middle of the dojo floor, Basara stood looking bored while the twins Ryou and Ran furiously tried to cut him down. Black and white blades twirling in their hands, they came at him again and again, slicing in every direction without restraint or hesitation.

Their twin swords each looked like the disassembled pieces of their scissors, and as they leaped at Basara, they spun the blades wildly by their round handles, dizzyingly switching between over-and underhanded grips.

As twins, their coordination was uncanny. Sometimes together and sometimes separately, in sync or out, the brother-and-sister duo attacked again and again, skillfully catching their opponent unguarded—

"Hey, maybe you'd like to stop standing around and give me a hand over here?"

"...No thanks, big brother. I'll try to contain myself."

"Eh? You're so cold, little sister!"

Basara continued to evade the twins' attacks even as he and Eiri exchanged jabs.

With minimal footwork and only the slightest movement, he leisurely avoided their tempestuous assault. Their dancing blades never once even grazed his skin.

...It was an unbelievable sight.

Renko and Ayaka, who were also peeking into the dojo, were frozen in awe. Eiri alone wore a calm expression as she watched her two young siblings slash at her older brother.

"Hey, Eiri...what are they doing?"

"What do you mean? Isn't it obvious?"

"It's not obvious—that's why I'm asking..."

"They're playing."

"……Eh?"

"It's pretty common in our house. Since *all their toys are real swords*, they're just using those to play. Neither Ryou nor Ran is actually trying to kill him. And even if they did go all out, they wouldn't be able to, you know? The difference in strength is too great."

"How insightful." Basara grinned as he bent over, slipping through an opening in the twins' consecutive attacks.

"Kyah?!"

"Whaaa?!"

Holding his arms out, it looked like Basara was about to block Ran's advance—but the next moment, the twins collided in midair. The two of them crashed into each other head-on. Falling painfully to the floor, they dropped their weapons and cried.

"Waaaaaah, it hurts...it hurts, Ran!"

"I'm the one in pain, Ryou...waaahhh!"

"Ah-ha-ha! You two act exactly the same even when you're hurt. Your problem is that you're too closely synchronized; it makes you too easy to throw off balance." Basara grinned boastfully. "Yet again, the fight was over before I even had to draw my sword, eh, Ryou? Ran?"

"Ooooooowwwwww!" the twins groaned together, glaring at their victorious sibling.

Basara leisurely stretched and yawned. "*Fwah*...damn, I'm tired... I'm really sleepy. You hear that? Your big brother is sleepy! So I'm asking you, Eiri—would you please help drive away my sleepiness?"

"I'll pass. If you're so tired, surely you should hurry up and get to bed."

"Well, that's true I suppose, but even if I go to bed now, it would

feel like I was leaving things halfway done. I'm seeing you for the first time in almost half a year. As your older brother, I definitely want to be allowed to evaluate your development."

"...No need. I haven't developed very much anyway."

"Sorry. I'm not talking about your chest—"

"I know that!" Eiri insisted angrily. Then, in a small voice: "...That part is growing just fine."

Without a moment's delay, Renko jabbed back, "Doubtful."

"Huh?!" Eiri turned around, red faced. "It's not a lie! They grew about a centimeter—"

"And you're dead."

"……?!"

Eiri's body suddenly shook, and she doubled over.

When they looked at Basara, he had pulled a concealed hand out of the left sleeve of his kimono and stood sneering *in a pose like he had just finished throwing something.*

His narrowed eyes stared at Eiri's back—piercing her directly opposite her heart. "You were caught off guard just now, right? How careless of you! No true assassin would ever expose her back like that. I was able to kill you easily, despite your suspicions that it was a trap."

"……Ah." Eiri put her arms around her own back and slowly turned to face her older brother.

"Growing accustomed to a lenient environment, spending time with a lenient group, lacking proper guidance... Have you grown soft, Eiri? Not only have you failed to develop, you've actually gotten weaker. Don't laugh, Rusty Nail. If you take away your skills, when

you don't have the courage to kill someone, what do you have left?"

Eiri bit her lip, offering no answer to his relentless reprimands.

...*Nothing* was stuck in her back.

Basara had only gone through the action of throwing a concealed weapon; he hadn't actually pulled it out and flung it. However, the lethal intent in his eyes and fingers was undeniably real.

If Basara had actually hurled a weapon, Eiri would likely be dead, pierced through the heart from behind—his deadly intentions had pierced her as convincingly as any sword.

"Good grief," Basara sighed, lowering his arm. "I don't know about your physical skills, but it looks like your mind has gone soft, hasn't it, Eiri? I'm disappointed... Oh, too bad, too bad."

Stepping toward the entryway where Eiri and the others stood, he yawned, his expression softening. "*Fwah*...I'm way too sleepy. I think I'll go nap until this afternoon..." Still yawning and stretching, Basara passed Eiri, and after putting on his geta sandals, he hurried off.

"————"

Eiri stood unresponsive.

"U-ummm...sorry about that. It's just, your boobs are, um... Well, I wonder if they aren't developing a bit after all. About a centimeter for sure, yeah."

"She's right! And not just one centimeter... I bet they've grown two, maybe even three!! Don't worry about what that dirtbag had to say!"

Renko clapped Eiri on the shoulder, and Ayaka frantically offered reassurance.

Their voices did not seem to reach her. Eyes downcast, Eiri did not move.

X X X

“Okay, here they come!”

Fuyou’s cheerful voice rang out over the garden filled with red flowers. Noodles, white and beautiful like raw silk, floated downstream in a gentle current.

“Got ’emmmmmm!”

Crimson chopsticks quickly scooped up every last noodle and dropped them into amber-colored liquid. After dunking them in the broth that was full of ground sesame, chives, and Japanese ginger, the chopsticks lifted the noodles up and out, bringing them to the girl’s mouth.

“*Kksshh*...the mask is in the way! I can’t even eat them.” Once again confounded by the jet-black gas mask, Renko lowered the noodles dejectedly.

Ayaka, who had taken up a position downstream, glared at her with chopsticks still at the ready. “...Then why did you take them?”

Clear water flowed continuously down the tilted length of split bamboo. At the head of the trough, Fuyou stood smiling, holding a pair of long chopsticks.

“We’ve prepared plenty of noodles, okay? Please eat a great deal.”

The maid stood next to her, holding a wooden basin filled with noodles in ice water. Fuyou scooped noodles up from the basin and dropped them in the bamboo chute. These were called flume noodles.

“Okay, Ayaka. Open wide...”

“Nom! Yum, yum, yum.”

“Delicious?”

“Yeah, they’re cold and delicious! I feel so refreshed!”

Renko was feeding Ayaka the noodles that she had just taken.

Passing in front of the harmonious couple, Kyousuke scooped up his own flowing white ribbons.

“Hey. Cheer up.”

He dropped the noodles into Eiri’s bowl. She sat idly next to him downstream.

Eiri looked up at him with half-closed eyes. “Hmm…th-thanks.” She slurped up the noodles without making a sound.

It was now afternoon. Only about an hour had passed since they had left the dojo.

Downstream from her depressed sister, Kagura snorted. “…Hmph. So you can’t even scoop up your own noodles, big sister? Stuff like this is why that womanizer makes fun of you all the time. How careless.”

Basara was absent, probably still asleep. Ryou and Ran were sitting and eating on the veranda, too young for all the effort of the flume. Busujima was waiting on standby with a draining basket at the far end of the bamboo chute.

Beneath the cloudless blue sky, Eiri’s expression did not clear. “Sorry I’m so careless…”

“Don’t apologize, geez… You really are a fool, aren’t you? How far will you disgrace yourself before you’re satisfied? You’re an idiot beyond saving.”

“……Sorry.”

“I told you, don’t apologize. Is that the only thing you can say? Your face looks like a corpse… Was the fight with Basara enough to break you? Honestly, your mental state is just too fragile. You’re the dirty secret of House Akabane. Oh, it’s so embarrassing.”

"Hey, Kagura—"

"What?" Kagura glared at Kyousuke, who had tried to get between them. "Don't you think that a complete stranger like you ought to avoid butting in on conversations between sisters? Also, please don't speak to me so familiarly. Calling a girl you just met by her given name... For some reason you give off the same smell as big brother Basara! Are you also a womanizer?"

"Huh? Of course not—!"

"Then why are you the only boy here?" Kagura demanded, interrupting Kyousuke's objection. "My big sister, Gas Mask Girl, Offal Ayaka... Other than the teacher, everyone around you is a girl, aren't they? And leaving aside my sister, those other two are madly in love with you. I'm sure you've already made plans to gut and devour my big sister?"

"……Devour?"

"Yes. I'm talking about you ravishing her."

"Huh?!" Eiri squeaked.

"Y-you idiot! No way! That's not what I was thinking!" Kyousuke shouted.

"'R-ravish'... You can't just come out and say a word like that, Kagura!" Eiri added.

Kyousuke and Eiri both furiously objected.

On the other hand, Kagura was calm. She deftly grabbed more noodles. "Big sister...why are you so embarrassed just hearing the word *ravish*? As always, the inside of your head is pastel pink, isn't it...? You've never read past a kiss in your *shoujo* manga, but you still try way too hard and just end up looking ridiculous!" Kagura gracefully slurped up her noodles as she ridiculed her sister.

"Uh..." Eiri looked embarrassed.

"Listen here, big sister. Men are beasts. Just a moment ago, this man said, 'No way, that's not what I was thinking,' but you and I both know that was a lie. It was just lip service. The truth is, whether he's asleep or awake, that boy is thinking of nothing but erotic thoughts twenty-four seven. Leering at your beautiful legs and your slim waist and your delicate collarbone and the sensual nape of your neck... He's a lewd beast whose carnal desires grow ever stronger."

"Lewd beast?"

...Where did she learn words like that? Isn't she only thirteen?

Ignoring Kyousuke's astounded interjection, Kagura continued.

"Of course, it doesn't matter whether you plan to let a beast like that savor your body or allow him to foul your maidenly virtue... I don't care. Just please don't disgrace the Akabane bloodline."

"...I-I know that."

"Do you? Please see to it that you consistently use contraception."

"Contraception?!"

"Yes. You mustn't do it raw."

"Raw?"

"And make sure you don't finish inside, okay?"

"...Oh come on."

Don't be so graphic...! Although she is *already a full-fledged assassin, come of age in the criminal underworld. I guess it makes sense that she's already mature when it comes to certain subjects.*

As Kyousuke was thinking to himself, Eiri spoke up. "H-hmm...you certainly have turned into a knowledgeable young woman in the half

year I've been gone, haven't you? I wonder if you learned everything you told us from that *little book*?"

"—Huh?"

Kagura's face immediately changed color.

Eiri scooped up more noodles flowing down the trough. "This morning," she continued, sounding as if it pained her to do so, "I peeked into your room before I went to visit his grave, and…when I did, I accidentally discovered… Oh, what should I call it? That… slightly abnormal comic. The contents were…well… When I saw the cover and title, I quickly put it back where I had found it… S-sorry?"

"Wha—?!" The chopsticks fell from Kagura's hand, and she spilled her sauce. "Y-you…! What were you doing hunting through a room… through *my* room, without permission—?"

"…Sorry."

Kagura pressed in on Eiri, who stared downward, averting her eyes.

"What was the title you saw?"

"I-I can't say… I don't remember."

"What was the picture on the cover?"

"W-well…"

"Confess!"

She gripped Eiri's shoulders as Eiri's eyes darted around. But Eiri did not answer. She just squirmed, looking ashamed.

Kagura hung her head, wearing a slight smile. "…I see. So you're going to continue to feign ignorance to the end?"

Her rust-red bangs hung down, casting a dark shadow over her eyes. Slowly, she stretched her left hand toward her waist sash.

“In that case, there’s nothing to be done. Exactly which comic did you see…did you *accidentally* see? I’ll make you tell me with brute force, big sister!!”

That instant, Kagura drew her iron-ribbed fan. Eiri tried to jump out of the way, but Kagura followed, swinging wildly with her specialized weapon.

“Just a… I told you, I don’t remember! I-I don’t remember anything—”

“That’s a lie! If so, then why do you look so self-conscious?!”

“N-no reason—”

“There certainly *is* a reason!”

Eiri stooped to avoid a blow, and behind her, one of the slender garden trees was sliced to pieces.

“……”

Kyousuke, who had been entirely forgotten, stood watching, jaw hanging open, as the two sisters fought. *The Akabane family can’t even eat a meal normally…*

Eiri retreated, and Kagura pursued. Renko and Ayaka moved closer, hoping to get a better view of the scene, which from a distance did not appear to be at all playful.

“*Kksshh*. Eiri’s looking fired up, huh? Great, great.”

“Ah-ah. And after I went to the trouble to get her alone with big brother…a stupid obstacle got in the way, huh…? Crappy Kagura sticks to Eiri one way or another!”

They each took up a position next to Kyousuke, Ayaka slurping up noodles and Renko drinking the sauce through her straw tube.

On the veranda, Ryou and Ran chatted pleasantly while feeding

each other noodles.

"How nice, big sister Kagura. I want to play with big sister Eiri, too!"

"How nice, big sister Eiri. I want to play with big sister Kagura, too!"

"...Should we join in, Ran?"

"Yes. Let's join in, Ryou!"

"Yaaaaaayyy!"

The twins stood up, scissors in hand, and ran headlong toward Eiri and Kagura, still barefoot.

"Don't get in the way! First I've got to put her down!!"

"H-how bothersome... I just want to eat noodles—"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

In a flash, the sisters' game of tag had turned into a melee.

Fuyou smiled bitterly as she watched her children running through the garden, brandishing blades, and trying to strike each other down. "My, my, and we were just sitting down to a meal, too..." She continued pouring the noodles. "These children can get so very restless. Pay attention not to bother our guests!"

Busujima grabbed some pink noodles out of the chute. "The sounds of swordplay make the most elegant wind chimes... Oh, it's plum flavored!" He leisurely savored the cold dish.

It was an entirely chaotic scene, and yet it seemed as though everybody was calm, each enjoying the time in their own way—except for Kyousuke.

Am I the only one who's normal here...? He missed his former

classmates terribly. They had had ordinary sensibilities like him. Here he was alone in a crazy situation.

He thought of Maina holding down the fort at the academy and looked up at the summer sky filled with soaring cumulonimbus clouds.

X X X

"……I'm completely exhausted, body and mind," Eiri mumbled weakly, throwing herself down on the veranda. She wasn't wounded, but after avoiding the twins' attacks and Kagura's insistent cross-examination, Eiri was haggard. She lay on her back, covered in sweat, and Renko fanned her briskly.

"You must be tired, Eiri. Do you want some watermelon juice?"

"…No thanks. I'll eat it like a normal person."

Pushing away the glass full of red liquid, Eiri sat up. Opposite Renko—sitting next to her on the right—Ayaka and Kyousuke were biting into the crescent-shaped pieces of fruit.

"Wow, so sweet! It's chilly and delicious, isn't it, big brother?"

"Yeah. Summer in Japan definitely means watermelon."

"Right, right, that it does! It means watermelon, yeaaahhh! Speaking of which… Kyousuke, after you enjoy this juicy watermelon, how about you—?"

"Play watermelon splitting?"

"*Kksshh?!* Watch where you're looking when you say that, Eiri! My watermelons are soft and delicate, so I'd appreciate it if you'd treat them tenderly!!"

"…Sure thing."

Finished with Renko, Eiri reached and took one of the eight

uniform slices of watermelon from atop the tray that had been placed on the veranda. She began removing the small seeds with a fingernail.

"Wh-whoa...that's a girly way of eating, Eiri. You can't get them all out, anyway, so it's best to just dig in."

"Be quiet, you. It's nobody's business but mine how I choose to eat."

"Sure, to each their own. Incidentally, your way looks to be the same as Busujima's."

In the direction that Renko was pointing, a little ways away from them on the veranda, Busujima was grappling with his watermelon. Picking out the seeds with a spoon in one hand, he was feeding them to the poisonous creatures that swarmed at his feet.

Eiri froze for a second.

"...Time to eat."

She stopped picking at the seeds and bit into her watermelon whole. Acting like their teacher was utterly unthinkable.

From Kyousuke's point of view, however, it was hard not to pity Busujima for his lack of popularity among the female students. Unlike Kurumiya, the man didn't actively interfere with them, so Kyousuke couldn't find him all that disagreeable...

With the sympathetic young man sitting among them, the three girls chatted away amiably as they looked out upon the garden. It showed traces here and there of the fierce "play" from earlier.

"I'm guessing a hot temper runs in your family, right? Have you slashed at one another with swords like that ever since you were born?"

"...Basically. Everyone in the Akabane family starts holding a blade

around age three, then around age five we start slashing at people. After that, we swing a blade at every opportunity… The first time that we're sent to the scene of a killing is age ten. At age twelve, we begin activities as full-fledged assassins."

"Wow, that's really incredible… How old did you say Crappy Kagura is?"

"She's the same age as you. She'll turn fourteen this year, so she has almost three years' experience as an assassin."

"And the twins?"

"Nine years old. They'll make their debut soon, I think."

"Hmm…"

Ayaka bit into her watermelon. Renko slurped up her watermelon juice. Eiri hung her head and looked down at her toes.

"…And yet at sixteen…"

Eventually, Eiri let those words slip. Her voice was dry and cracking, and she sounded as if she might crumble at any moment.

There was no need to ask what she meant. Eiri was sixteen, and she faced another birthday this summer. It was the age of someone who should already be in her sixth year as an assassin.

However, Eiri was—

"…*Sigh*. In the end, I'll be overtaken by those kids, too. By the time I'm able to kill my first person, I'll be bested by children who have only just gripped their blades…ha-ha. You really have to laugh. When you're this pathetic, you have to laugh."

"Eiri…"

"—It's been six years! It's already been six years since I started

trying, and failing, to kill. And in all that time, I haven't made even a tiny bit of progress…and in the meantime, I've been consigned to that incomprehensible facility, and hung out with you all, and sat around eating watermelon… What the hell am I doing? If I stay like this, I'll probably spend my whole life as Rusty Nail."

"……"

She beat herself up in a cheerful tone of voice, her words mingled with laughter.

With her in such a state, they couldn't find the right words to say.

Not Renko, who, despite being in similar circumstances, could just as soon kill a person as breathe.

Not Ayaka, whose circumstances were completely different, but who thought absolutely nothing of total strangers' lives.

Not Kyousuke, who felt repulsed by the thought of murder but had been born and raised completely differently from Eiri.

Each of them was different in subtle ways. Who could possibly understand Eiri's distress at wanting to kill and yet being unable to do so?

The pain that Eiri had been holding on to these past six years…

……*Hm?* Suddenly, something tugged at Kyousuke's heart. *Six years.* That was the number of years that Eiri had spent trying and failing to kill. *Six years ago, Eiri would have only just turned ten years old. That was the age that Eiri was forced to commit her first murder—*

"Gah?! The noodle flume is already put away, is it?!"

A hysterical masculine voice cut Kyousuke's musings short.

Behind the veranda where they all sat, directly behind Eiri, stood a

young man in crimson *hakama*, his shoulders drooping in disappointment.

"Aww, too bad... If I'd known you were doing flume noodles, I would have pushed through without sleep. Isn't it terrible of Kagura to wait until after the fact to tell me? She must have some kind of grudge against me, that witch!! She's going to get a spanking later as punishment!"

"Big brother—"

"Hey. Morning, Eiri. Was it fun, eating flume noodles?"

"...Not really."

"That's not possible, surely. And here she sits eating watermelon, the liar."

"Just a... S-stop it!"

Eiri brushed away Basara's arm in irritation as he tousled her hair.

"Ha-ha," Basara laughed and picked up a piece of watermelon from the tray. "May I be allowed to impose myself by your side, Miss Enormous Boobs?" He sat down cross-legged next to Renko.

Instantly, Ayaka stood up and snapped at him. "Hang on! Where do you get off taking the seat next to Miss Renko?! That's not a place where garbage like you is allowed to sit. Please move!"

"Garbage?! Why are you suddenly snapping at me...?"

"Because you shamelessly sat down next to Miss Renko! Also, because you teased Eiri and made fun of her. And me too—"

"Ah! Are you sulking because I called you a little girl and said I didn't desire you and so on when we first met? Sorry, sorry... I certainly think you're cute! It's just that you're too young—it can't be helped! And unlike Kagura, you look like a kid, appropriate for your

age."

Ayaka's eyes went dark. "...Do you want to have your head crushed like a watermelon?"

"Now, now." Renko pacified her, trying to prevent a rampage. "There's nothing to be done about him sitting next to me. So don't get so angry about it. Okay?"

"……Hmph. If you say so, Renko."

Puffing out her cheeks, Ayaka sat back down.

"Okay!" Basara was delighted and grinned at Renko. "Thanks, Miss Enormous—no, Miss Renko! I'm happy you stuck up for me. I'm always surrounded by strong women, you see. Kindness makes a deep impression..."

"*Kksshh*. My boobs are big, and so is my heart!"

"I see! Now that you mention it, Eiri and Kagura and Ayaka are girls with formidable natures, and all of them are washboards. You're very clever."

"Dickless bastard."

"...You're better off dead."

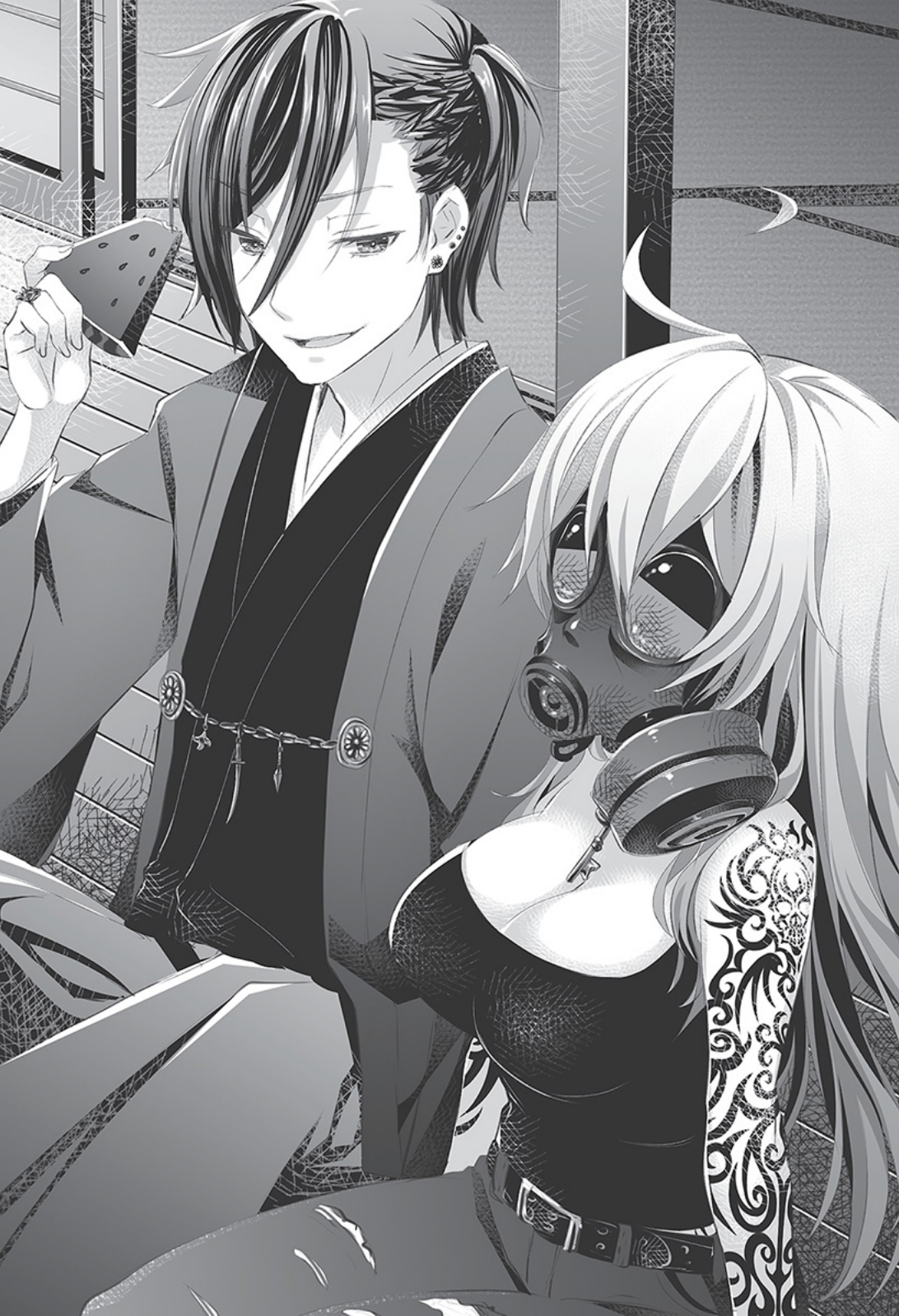
Ayaka insulted him, and Eiri swore.

"Oh, scary, scary," Basara said and bit into his watermelon. "Setting aside the issue of breasticles, Renko dear, you can call me 'Basara' like everyone else! It's okay if you don't add 'Mr.' or anything. No need to stand on formalities."

"Sure, sure. I got it, Basara. You're probably nervous, being in the company of such a beautiful girl, but try not to be too stiff, okay?"

"I mean, I can't even see your face for the gas mask! I can see way more of your breasts than of your face! And they really are big, aren't

they? I’m sure to be stiff one way or another…”



“Rrrrrrrrrrrgh!” Ayaka growled at Basara, whose ulterior motives were more than obvious. She tugged hard at Kyousuke’s sleeve. “Big brother, big brother! Are you going to let that dirtbag get away with that? Don’t you feel anything when he looks at Renko with filthy eyes?!”

“.....Yeah.”

Ayaka’s question made Kyousuke realize that he couldn’t help but get irritated watching Renko flirt with Basara—with another guy. He realized that *he was starting to feel something like jealousy*. It was a terrifying revelation.

No, no, no, no! No way, nuh-uh, that can’t be it! He immediately denied it, shaking his head. It was absolutely impossible. There was no way it could be true. For a totally normal, ordinary person like him to fall in love with a psycho killer assassin who would kill him if he reciprocated her love—it would be completely unthinkable.

Admitting this feeling would mean the end for him. There would be no going back. He would go rolling down the hill of ruin, barreling full speed toward his own bad end, the end of his life. In conclusion, he flatly refused. Which was why—

“...No? I don’t feel anything. As for her chest...well, any man would look. Don’t make such a fuss. Leave it be.” Kyousuke turned his gaze away from Renko’s overly friendly conversation with Basara and bit into his watermelon.

“Hm?” Ayaka swung her pigtails. “...Big brother, why are you so irritated?”

“Huh? I’m not.”

“Y-you are too...”

“Am not.”

Kyousuke turned away from her and took another bite.

Ayaka blinked, then turned to Eiri, who was on her other side. "... He is, isn't he, Eiri?"

"Yeah, you're right. No matter how you look at it, he is...hmph."

"Oh no. Are you irritated, too, Eiri?"

"Not really."

"I-is that so...?" Moving past her nonchalant rejection, Ayaka put a finger to her cheek. "Tee-hee! Big brother and Eiri are both obstinate people, huh...? Well, it's interesting to watch, from my perspective, anyway!"

She smiled broadly, looking content, then opened her mouth wide and bit into her watermelon slice.

"—Come to think of it, what are you all planning to do today after this?"

The watermelon on the tray was quickly eaten down to the rinds. Basara posed the question to the group.

"Hmm." Renko folded her arms. "I don't think we decided on anything in particular. I thought I might get a tour of the rest of the place, but we don't really have any plans aside from that. Maybe just spend the next three days relaxing like this."

"...Oh yeah. We haven't done any homework or anything."

"You say we haven't done any, but it's seriously a joke how much there is, right?"

Summer vacation at Purgatorium Remedial Academy was short, only one week long, but they had been given mountains of homework. On top of book reports and research projects, they had all been assigned Summer Vacation Enemy workbooks that were as

thick as dictionaries.

They had finished everything else together before leaving the academy but had only made it about halfway through the workbooks. If they didn't seriously tackle them before too long, it would be bad.

...At least, that's what Kyousuke thought.

"The Summer Vacation Enemy book? I crushed that a long time ago."

"You still haven't finished it yet, big brother?"

"Uh..."

That was just like the first-and third-ranked students, so easily dispatching such a formidable enemy against which everyone else struggled so desperately...

"I've still got almost a thousand pages left—"

"I see! You really don't get the point, do you?"

"What...did you say?"

Kyousuke was astonished by Eiri's condescending tone—she had been second to last in the class rankings. *I can't believe this. I was sure that, on top of the Summer Vacation Enemy book, Eiri had* nine extra workbooks *in subjects that she failed. How on earth is she so calm?*

"You'd better copy down the answers quickly."

"...If you're caught cheating, you'll be butchered!"

"Miss Akabonehead could never get all the answers right, so she'll be caught right away."

"Are you going back to that nickname, Ayaka? Although Eiri is

definitely a dummy."

"I'm not worried." Eiri wore a bold smile. "Because I only answered maybe one question every couple hundred pages. *I left all the rest blank*. I just said I didn't understand. If you do it that way, you can finish a workbook before you know it!"

"……I see."

It was settled: She would be beaten to death.

"Wah, amaaazing," Ayaka admired in a sarcastic monotone.

Renko nodded in agreement. "Yep. Amazingly stupid."

On the other hand, since it was highly unlikely that she could finish ten volumes of three thousand pages each even if she copied the answers normally, Eiri's approach was not necessarily that misguided. Either way, discipline was probably a foregone conclusion…

"Ha-ha-ha! Looks like you don't have any plans after all, hm?"

Basara, who had been listening to their conversation, laughed cheerfully and twisted his lips into a broad smile. Rustling the sleeves of his kimono, he withdrew a scrap of paper.

"…In that case, why don't we give this a try tonight? I found it this morning, posted on a bulletin board at the foot of the mountain."

Kyousuke and the others looked at one another. On the paper that Basara was holding up was written in huge letters—

COOL SUMMER EVENING BON DANCE FESTIVAL

X X X

A tranquil village with no connection to the criminal underworld stretched out around the base of the mountain owned by House

Akabane. The people living there rarely had an occasion to call on the clan, but members of the family frequently visited the village to purchase food and other daily necessities, although that was largely the servants' job.

Eiri and the other children of the main house, before they came of age—that is, before they reached the age of twelve, when they became independent assassins—were not permitted to go out for such frivolous reasons. However, since Basara, the eldest son; Eiri, the eldest daughter; and Kagura, the second daughter, had all passed the age of twelve, they could leave the estate if they received permission from Fuyou, the head of the household.

On the other hand, Kyousuke and the others, who were supposed to be serving their prison sentences for murder, needed Busujima's consent.

"...Go out? Sure, you can go out. I'll have to stay with you the whole time, of course."

That's how it was. Renko and Ayaka were already on parole, and it didn't sound as though it would be a problem to treat Kyousuke and Eiri the same way, as long as Busujima was willing to accompany them. And so—

"Yaaay, freedom!"

"We're freeeeee!"

As soon as the maids opened the gates, Ayaka and Renko rushed out ahead, shouting with joy.

"You're a little too excited."

"...Fwah."

Kyousuke and Eiri were still standing inside the gate, watching the other two make a fuss.

Making a picture frame with his fingers, Basara squinted his rust-red eyes. “Wow, how nice... This is really magnificent scenery!”

Noticing his conduct, Eiri looked back and scowled. “...What are you doing, big brother?”

“Heh-heh-heh. I’m burning this into my memory. Renko, Ayaka, and my darling Eiri all dressed in yukata! The nape of your neck is so pretty...” Basara reduced the size of his “frame” as if to magnify the image of the back of his sister’s neck.

“...Tch.” Eiri clicked her tongue and, glaring at her brother, moved out of frame. “You’re an unredeemable pervert, you know that? Please don’t turn your vulgar gaze on me.”

Eiri had replaced her Western clothes with Japanese garb. She was clad in a deep red peony-patterned yukata, with white flower decorations in her bound-up hair. She was not wearing nearly as much makeup as usual. Overall it was a tidy look.

When he had first seen her in a yukata, Kyousuke couldn’t help but give her rave reviews, and Eiri had bluntly rebuffed him, saying, “Hmm...I’m not at all pleased to be praised by someone like you. Not the least bit pleased! And the fact that I’m wearing less makeup than usual has absolutely nothing to do with you, okay?!”

Basara, who had just been rebuked as Kyousuke had been, shook his head. “Good grief. They sure aren’t docile, my little sisters... Well, they’re cute that way, huh?”

Eiri wasn’t the only one who had changed clothes. Kyousuke and Busujima wore *jinbei* sets, while Renko and Ayaka had also put on yukata.

Renko, who had stopped soon after exiting the gate, looked down at her own figure. “This is the first time I’ve worn Japanese clothing, but it’s really breezy, isn’t it? I can’t get comfortable. Not wearing anything on the bottom is, well, um...embarrassing.”

“Tee-hee! Forget about our clothes—your hem is sooo short! No wonder you feel uncomfortable. I mean, why did you choose one like that?”

The yukata that Ayaka was wearing featured irises drawn on a pale purple background. At the base of each of her black pigtails she had fastened purple flower decorations. If Eiri’s yukata figure was “pretty,” Ayaka’s gave a “sweet” impression. Finally, when it came to Renko—

“Really?! Isn’t it so cool?! *Kksshh!*”

She wore her constant companions, the gas mask and headphones. *Well, I guess those are fine, but…*

This time, though, her outfit was a real piece of work. Her yukata, which had a white-and-pink cherry-blossom pattern scattered on a bright light blue background, was short like a miniskirt and decorated at the collar, sleeves, hem, and belt with frilly lace.

Ayaka frowned at the Busty One, who was striking a pose with her hand on her hip. “Ehh… No matter how much I support you, I have to say this is a little…cheap looking, or should I say cosplay-like, or… well, you look like a prostitute.”

“Prostitute?! Watch your word choice!”

“You’re the one who should choose more carefully. What the hell is with this outfit…? Your tastes are unfathomable. Honestly, I’m not even sure why a yukata like that was available in the first place.”

Basara raised his hand.

“Ah, that’s one that I bought,” he confessed. “I was planning to have my girlfriend wear it. It’s sexy, right? I think it’s perfect for Miss Renko’s voluptuous figure, though. And the combination of yukata and gas mask is so avant-garde and thrilling. I like it, Renko honey!” He grinned, flashing white teeth.

"Kksshh!" Renko laughed at the praise. "Yep, yep, that's how it is! Of course a boy would like something like this. Say what you like, you must really like it, too, huh, Kyousuke?"

"……Mm."

Kyousuke was at a loss for a reply. Honestly, he didn't like it all that much. He thought that a normal yukata was definitely better than the mini length and that the lace decorations distributed here and there were of questionable taste and poorly suited for Japanese clothes. Also, there was the gas mask, which completely ruined her face. There was nothing charming about her appearance. Despite that, he found himself answering almost automatically. "…R-right. It's not that bad. I don't hate it…but…"

He didn't really understand why. As soon as Basara's words of praise for Renko reached his ears, he'd gotten really angry—by the time he had regained his senses, he'd already answered her question.

"Really?!" Renko shouted happily, throwing her arms up. "Yaaay, all right! I got a compliment from Kyousukeee! *Kksshh*. See, see, my yukata choice wasn't wrong after all, Ayaka. Not in the least!"

"Huh. I think it's because you're the one wearing it, and not anything to do with the yukata, though," Ayaka stated. "Wasn't that a questionable reaction to seeing it for the first time?"

"Huh, his reaction *is* a little bit off, isn't it?" Basara added coyly. "Weird…I think he ought to give her rave reviews. Could it be, Renko darling, that Kyousuke here is in love with you?!"

"……"

Ayaka got in a calm jab, while Basara looked back and forth between Renko and Kyousuke. Eiri, for her part, stuck out her lip in a pout and fiddled with her ponytail.

"I'm sorry for making you wait."

Kagura approached them. Like Eiri and the other girls, she was in a yukata, decorated with deep crimson birds fluttering around on a white background. As if it was completely normal, her concealed weapon—the iron-ribbed fan Kujaku—was stuck in her obi.

"I was training until the very last minute. Should we get going?"

"Yeah, let's," Basara answered. "It takes about ten minutes to get from the house to the foot of the mountain by car, and another twenty to walk from the foot of the mountain to the festival grounds, so I think we'll arrive just at the right time."

"Hmm..." Kagura sighed. "Big brother Basara, you certainly have strange tastes, don't you? To go so far as to descend to the foot of the mountain just to participate in a commoners' festival. Are you going because you want to pick up girls or something?"

Smiling, Basara spread out both arms. "Ha-ha. No, no. I just want to enjoy a summer evening with such splendid company."

From six thirty to nine PM that evening, a Bon dance festival was being held at a junior high school at the foot of the mountain. They had all gathered with plans to attend. Given that it had been Basara's idea, Kyousuke and Eiri had not been too keen on it, but—

"Bon dance?! What's that? I wanna go, I really wanna go! Kksshh!"

"Me too, me too! I want to scoop up goldfish with Renko and eat shaved ice!"

—Renko and Ayaka had really gotten into the idea, and so it had been decided that they would attend. They all had changed into their borrowed Japanese clothes and assembled at the front of the gate.

"But..." Basara looked at Kagura.

"It's surprising that you're coming, too, hm? You're always training, day and night. It's just *so rare* to see the indifferent Kagura

up for something like this. What a stroke of luck."

"Not really." Kagura nonchalantly turned away. "It's because Mother thought it would be a good idea. 'Relax once in a while,' she said... There's no reason above or beyond that. I certainly didn't intend to go of my own accord."

"Is that so...?"

Ignoring her faintly smiling brother, Kagura began to walk.

A perfectly bright red limousine was parked in front of the gate. One of the maids stood holding open the door to the backseat. Ayaka cheered and got in with Renko.

"Well, let's go, too."

"S-sure..."

Shuddering at the wealth of House Akabane, Kyousuke also got in, following after Eiri. Basara and Busujima were left behind.

Glancing at the unattractive middle-aged man, Basara held his forehead. "Huh, that's strange. I was planning to be surrounded by girls in yukata and have them fawn over me, but...instead of hanging out with them, I've been excluded together with their teacher?"

"Wha...? I've been excluded as well?!"

"...Probably. But you were never included in their conversations to begin with."

"Huh?! Y-you're right—"

"...Good grief. Just like Kagura said, I guess I'm picking people up."

Busujima was shocked, while Basara felt dejected. He stared at the limousine, in which Kyousuke was surrounded by girls who were fussing over *him* instead.

X X X

When they reached the base of the mountain, they shuffled out of the limousine and then set off for the festival site. Leaving the maid to wait in place for their return, Kyousuke and the others started walking through the tranquil village.

A lush rural landscape stretched out around them, scattered with houses. Dark gray power transmission towers stood close together, backed by the verdant ridgeline. It was almost sunset, but a few gentle sunbeams still streamed down from the pale summer sky.

With Basara in the lead, they progressed in succession down an asphalt-paved path that cut between rice fields. Kyousuke, Renko, Ayaka, Eiri, Kagura, Basara, Busujima...it was quite a large group. As they passed, the surprised locals stared and whispered.

"Hey, that's—" "Those aren't faces I'm used to seeing." "Actually, there are some people whose faces I've never even seen." "Are there people like that in the village?" "It's probably them, right? You know, the ones who live in the mountains—" "Ah, the Akabane...aren't they? The incredibly rich ones?" "Right, right! I only catch sight of them occasionally, when their classy red car goes up the mountain." "Have you tried talking to them?" "Never, never!" "My gramps said never to get involved with that house." "So did my granny." "Mama, do you see those girls? They're interesting, aren't they?" "Shh! You mustn't look!"

And so on and so forth. Their extravagant appearances attracted quite a lot of attention. As they approached the festival grounds, the crowds grew thicker, until Kyousuke and the others could practically feel the weight of their inquisitive gazes.

Gradually, however, the sun set, and by the time that the sounds of singers and *taiko* drums could be heard, they had stopped drawing much attention thanks to the dim light.

"Oh...it's more crowded than I was expecting!"

Thanks to the abundance of land available out in the countryside, the junior high school where the festival was being held had a spacious campus. Centered on a high wooden stage in the middle of the grounds, the space was decorated with a great number of hanging paper lanterns, and the twilight was tinged orange by their light. Around the stage stood a multitude of street stalls—*yakisoba*, fried chicken, grilled corn, buttered potatoes, ring toss, yo-yo fishing, goldfish scooping, and many others. People were lined up at the crowded booths.

Basara turned back to look at the rest of the group, the crowds coming and going at his back. "Well, how do you want to go around? Seven is a lot of people, so let's split into two groups—"

"Amazing, amazing! What is this? It's amaaaaaazing!" Renko shouted with joy and grabbed Kyousuke's hand. "Doesn't this look so ridiculously fun? Let's get in there right away, Kyousuke!!"

"Wah?! Hey, don't pull—"

"Look, look, we're going to miss it!! Hurry, hurry, big brother!" Ayaka grabbed his other hand without a moment's delay, and together they slipped past Basara's side.

"Ah, wait up!!" Eiri shouted and followed the three of them as they rushed headlong toward the stalls.

"....."

After Basara had watched the four of them disappear into the distance, he turned back to face whoever remained, putting a finger to his twitching cheek as he smiled. "Ah, okay. We split up just fine, then, ha-ha... Is it all right if I go off on my own?"

"...Yes. I don't mind, big brother Basara," Kagura agreed with a serious look. "Because I will also act on my own. I have no desire to go around with the two of you."

"Huh? What's this now? There was no point in coming together,

then…”

Leaving the stunned Busujima behind, Basara and Kagura each began walking in a different direction.

“Well, I was planning all along to walk around by myself, anyway!” Kagura huffed. “Who would want to circulate around the booths with those girls…? Hmph, how stupid!”

“I can’t believe he’s been completely carried away by them,” Basara added. “Well, then, there’s nothing to do but seduce a girl! Kyousuke, watch thiiiiiis!!”

“…I guess I’ll drink some beer.”

Following Kagura and Basara, Busujima headed into the festival grounds, where happy voices and cheerful laughter mixed with music playing from a boom box and the sound of *taiko* drums.

× × ×

“Kyousuke, Kyousuke! What’s that?”

“It’s cotton candy. Being sold in mascot character–decorated bags.”

“Ohh. And what’s that food that looks like a ruby?”

“Those are candy apples. You coat a raw apple in sugar and—”

“Whaaat?! Look, look, they’re selling some kind of obscene *things*!!”

“…Those are hot dogs. They’re not obscene at all.”

“Ahh, over there, too!! There are lots of dark, thick things!”

“Chocolate bananas. I told you not to talk weird.”

“Hey, Kyousuke…doesn’t it smell a little bit like squid?”

“It’s because they’re cooking it right in front of you! That last one

was a joke, wasn't it...?"

Kyousuke laughed sarcastically as Renko pointed out absolutely everything that she laid her eyes on, as if it were the first time in her life that she had ever come to a festival like this. She was completely conspicuous as always, but, as if people thought that Renko's gas mask was one of the types of masks being sold at the stalls, she didn't seem too out of place.

"...So what do you want to eat?" Kyousuke asked Renko, who had grabbed his arm and was sticking to him. "If there's something that catches your eye, don't hold back—"

"She can't eat anything, big brother," Ayaka reminded him, pulling on his sleeve from the opposite side.

He stared at the gas mask that Renko always wore. "Ah, that's right...sorry. Well, do you want something to drink? Or we could play ring toss or targets or something, too. We came all the way here, so let's enjoy ourselves!"

"We can't, though, big brother. Right now, *we don't have any money*, do we?"

"...Ah."

That was right. No matter what they might want to do at the stalls, they were unfortunately penniless. That meant that they could do nothing but look on enviously...

"Lick, lick."

"...Hey. What's that?"

Contrary to expectations, Eiri was licking a red candy on a stick.

Eiri looked at him as if to say, *You don't know?*

"What do you mean 'what'? It's a candy apple."

"Did you steal it?!"

"...Huh? I did nothing of the sort."

"Well, then, what? Did you beg it off the person running the stall?! No matter how pretty you are, behavior like that—"

"Here." Cutting off Kyousuke's rant, Eiri handed him a purse. "... Money. Mother said, 'Use it as you please.' There's five hundred bucks in all. I bought a candy apple, so there's four hundred ninety-seven dollars left."

"Uh."

...Five hundred? That's way more than enough to eat and drink at the stalls.

As Kyousuke stared, surprised, Ayaka took the purse with a smile.

"Wow, thank yooou! Heh-heh-heh...but is it really okay?"

"Yeah. It's pocket change," Eiri answered nonchalantly. "Spend it however you like." She continued licking her candy apple.

"So loaded...," Ayaka said with eyes sparkling and gripped the purse.

Kyousuke, in mute amazement at the Akabane family's attitude toward money, bowed his head in gratitude. "Thank you, Mistress Eiri."

"Don't call me that. Anyway, how about thanking my mother?"

"Thanks to both of you! Because of this, we can really enjoy the Bon dance festival. I love you, Eiri! I'm in love with yooouuu! *Kksshh*."

"Wait...don't hang on me, you're so annoying!!" Tearing off the clinging Renko, Eiri clicked her tongue. "...Tch." She licked her candy apple again as if to collect herself. "...First of all, why don't you all buy something, too?"

“Mm. That’s right—”

“Hey, hey.” Renko pulled at Kyousuke’s sleeve as he looked around the area. “Kyousuke, what’s that?” She pointed at a shallow tub of water standing on the ground. In front of the tub, two children in yukata squatted, peering into the water, struggling intently with something unseen.

“...Ah, that’s goldfish scooping. It’s a game where you compete to see who can catch the most goldfish using paper that is easily torn when it gets wet.”

“Hmm? Doesn’t that seem fun? I want to try it!”

“Oh, all right. Ayaka, what about you...? Uh, what?”

When Kyousuke looked away from Renko, Ayaka had disappeared. She was holding on to the purse, so without her they couldn’t even get some goldfish. While Kyousuke looked around restlessly, searching for his missing sister, Ayaka returned, half jogging.

“Sorry I kept you waiting!” In each hand she gripped a long, thin glass bottle filled with blue liquid. Holding them up on either side of her face, Ayaka grinned. “Speaking of food stalls, we’ve got to have these. Here you go!”

“O-oh...thanks.”

“...Thank you.”

“What is this stuff?” Renko curiously scrutinized the bottle that Ayaka had handed her. She held the dripping glass up to the lantern light, peering through it inquisitively. “Umm, it’s a drink...I think? Carbonated? It’s got a funny shape, though. It’s super narrow! What is this stuff, Ayaka?”

“It’s Ramune.”

“...Ramune?”

"*Oui.* It's a drink that they typically have at festivals."

"Ohh? Well, then, let's hurry up and...uh, huh? Where do you drink from?"

"It opens like this. Watch closely!"

Kyousuke demonstrated for a perplexed Renko, whose straw tube was already prepared. Peeling off the wrapping paper, he lined up the convex opening tool with the mouth of the bottle and pushed it in all at once.

Clink! With a pleasant sound, the marble that had been plugging the mouth fell, and the drink bubbled with carbonation.

"Kksshh?!" Renko threw her head back. "Wha? Something came out! ...A crystal?"

"A glass marble. It's pretty, right?"

"Yeah, very pretty... How cool. I want to try it, too!" Enthusiastically, Renko set about opening her own Ramune. Copying what she had seen, she tore off the wrapping paper and lined up the opening tool with the mouth of the bottle.

"Waaahhhhhh?!" The moment that she pushed on it, vigorous bubbles gushed out and overflowed. Now dripping with the bottle's contents, Renko was visibly shaken. "Wh-wwwwh-what the hell happened?! It exploded!! Only mine exploded!! Waaahhh...help meee!"

"Oh no. I had a feeling that might happen..."

"Tee-hee. It's no good if you don't push it in right—"

"Kyah?!"

"You too, Eiri?!"

"J-just die..."

Her hand sticky with Ramune, Eiri glared at the bottle where it had fallen on the ground. It seemed that she had been startled when she opened it, and she had taken her hand off the top without thinking.

Ayaka picked up the bottle and frowned.

"Oh, the mouth of the bottle got dirty, didn't it? Want me to go buy you a new one?"

"...It's fine. I'll go by myself."

"Don't worry about it! *Kksshh*."

"I don't want to hear it from you."

"Ha-ha-ha. Well, if you're not used to it, it can't be helped. Hey, Eiri, is it also your first time to a Bon dance?"

"It's my—" Eiri broke off and hesitated briefly, as if she was thinking about something. "...My second time. But it almost seems like my first time." Taking her Ramune from Ayaka's hand, she turned on her heel and walked off.

"Ah—hey, where are you going?"

"I'm going to throw out the bottle... Why don't you guys go ahead and do goldfish scooping? We've got plenty of ponds at home, so it's no problem if you catch a lot."

× × ×

"Okay!"

Squatting before the tub of water, Renko gave a shout and brandished her weapon. The plastic frame dipped energetically into the water, slipped past the pop-eyed goldfish, and jumped back out again.

It sent up a sheet of water, prompting Ayaka, who was squatting next to Renko, to yelp, "Cold!!" and leap aside.

"...Huh? It broke already?"

"Of course it did. Why are you going in suddenly at full swing...? It broke the second it hit the water!"

There was an enormous hole in the paper on Renko's scoop. Wiping her wet face with her yukata sleeve, Ayaka readied her own paddle.

"Okay, Renko. Goldfish scooping is a game that demands delicate skill. The first thing is to choose your target. Aim for a stupid one that's swimming aimlessly near the surface. They can escape if you try to scoop them from behind, so it's better to scoop from the front. Then move the frame, paying attention to how much water pressure you put on it, and quickly scoop it up...like this!"

—*Slip*. The goldfish slid across the top of the paper and escaped the scoop.

After standing there for several seconds, Ayaka broke into an embarrassed grin. "H-huh...that's strange! It's been a long time since I did this, so maybe my skills have dulled. Well, then, let's go again... ehh!"

—*Slide*. She aimed for the same goldfish, and again it escaped.

All expression disappeared from Ayaka's face as she stared at the fish.

"....."

She tried again and again, silently wielding her scoop. However, she didn't catch a thing. As she grew visibly annoyed, Ayaka's approach grew more forceful with each attempt until—

"Ah?!"

Finally the paper broke.

As she looked back and forth between the now-useless frame and

the gracefully swimming red goldfish, Ayaka's eyes grew dark. The next instant, she burst into a flurry of motion.

"Okay, mister goldfish. Playtime is oveeeeeer!!"

Ayaka thrust the frame with its broken paper into the water. Taking aim at the goldfish that had escaped her time and again, she swung the frame side to side.

"Yeeeah, I caught you! Tee-hee..."

Pinching the goldfish between the side of the water tub and the frame, she slowly lifted it up and, after letting the forcibly elevated goldfish gasp plenty in the air, she dropped the weakened animal into a bowl. The pitiful goldfish floated feebly in the water.

"—So you scoop them sort of like that! Understand?"

"Yeah. I understand that you're not delicate at all."

"...Goldfish are alive, you know! You shouldn't be so cruel..."

"Pressing them against the wall is prohibited, miss. Though you're cute, so I'll let it slide."

"Hee-hee-hee. Sorryyy." Ayaka stuck her tongue out at the middle-aged stall keeper's warning.

Admonishing his sister not to make too much trouble, Kyousuke passed a ten-dollar bill to the shopkeeper. "Take this, please. And if you don't mind, would you let them each try once more?"

"You got it. Won't you give it a try, too, son?"

"No, I'm fine... I'm having plenty of fun just watching."

Kyousuke, whose fingers were devastatingly awkward, hated goldfish scooping.

"*Fnkksshh!* I'll catch the next one," Renko boasted, taking a new

scoop from the stall keeper. “I’ll show you I’m serious!”

“Tee-hee. I’m finally getting warmed up, too! I’m going to catch plenty of goldfish, even more than I would if I used the surefire method of scooping them against the wall.” Wearing a faint, wicked smile, Ayaka also readied her new paper and frame.

The girls immersed themselves in goldfish scooping for a while.

Renko, despite her earlier difficulties, seemed to immediately get the hang of it, and by the time she received her third frame, she was able to scoop the goldfish up with agility.

Ayaka, on the other hand, couldn’t scoop one no matter how much time passed—every one escaped her. After several attempts, she completely abandoned all legitimate methods of pursuit and switched to cheating.

She tried hitting the fish with the frame, scooping up fish and water alike with a bowl, weakening the fish by poking them with the handle of the scoop, and finally catching them with her hands when the stall keeper wasn’t looking.

Kyousuke stood behind the two of them and watched them clamor excitedly.

Before his eyes—

“...Here, I’ll give you one.”

Yakisoba appeared, courtesy of Eiri. Besides the *yakisoba*, she was holding *takoyaki*, *okonomiyaki*, and a hot dog. He had thought that she had been awfully slow coming back, but it seemed she had made some stops along the way.

“Oh, thank you. I just got hungry, too...but, Eiri, what did you do about money?”

“I kept just a hundred dollars. It would be careless to have one

person hold the whole amount, right?"

"Ah, I see... You pay attention to the fine details, don't you?"

"Not really." Eiri turned her face away nonchalantly, looking down at Renko and Ayaka. "...Have they been scooping goldfish this whole time?"

The two of them were completely absorbed in chasing goldfish and hadn't even realized that Eiri had returned.

Breaking his chopsticks apart with his teeth, Kyousuke nodded. "Yep. They're on about their fifth turn. Why don't you give it a try?"

"...Nah. I'm not interested," Eiri answered bluntly and stuffed her cheeks with *takoyaki*.

Kyousuke also slurped up some *yakisoba*. *Delicious*. The fragrance of the sauce and the sweetness of the vegetables, the savory flavor of the meat, topped with the accent of the seaweed—all the elements were in perfect harmony.

They had eaten so many delicious things in the past couple of days that the thought of returning to the academy was heartbreaking. *All the food there is terrible...*

"There's something strange about this," Kyousuke mumbled to himself.

Eiri frowned at him and returned the hot dog she had been about to eat back to its packaging. "...What is it?"

"Doing things like this, with all of you, in such a normal place."

"Ah, that's right... To you, this is normal, isn't it?" Eiri whispered, turning to look at their surroundings.

The people coming and going, parents with children, smiling boys, happy couples, men and women of all ages dancing around the

wooden stage, clusters of paper lanterns glowing orange. And—

"....."

Eiri's eyes stopped on the shadow of the school building standing dark in the background of the festival. It was not a facility like Purgatorium Remedial Academy but a proper school—the kind that children of decent families would attend. To Eiri, who had been born into the criminal underworld, was raised there, and lived there still, this was especially strange—a wholly unfamiliar world. Kyousuke wondered what Eiri was thinking as she stared intently at the school building...

"Ah, Eiri!"

Renko's voice brought Kyousuke back to his senses, and he realized that he had been unintentionally staring at Eiri's profile.

"...Hm." Eiri also seemed to snap back to reality.

"When did you get back? And you bought all kinds of things on the sly! How nice, it looks delicious. I want to eat, too...but I can't!" Renko noticed the hot dog and *okonomiyaki* and stamped her feet in frustration.

"Ah-ha!" Ayaka also shouted and pointed at Eiri. "Eiri, you're slick! To get so many delicious-looking things—"

"Here." Eiri held out the *okonomiyaki* to Ayaka, who had stood up to protest. It seemed that she had neatly prepared it, complete with wooden chopsticks, for her junior. "...No way was I planning to eat it all by myself! You looked busy with goldfish scooping, so I just bought enough for everybody."

"Eiri..." Ayaka's eyes sparkled as she took the *okonomiyaki*.

Renko groaned in displeasure. "Ohhh, why is there nothing for me? Wasn't there anything that I might have been able to eat with my mask on?!"

"...No, there was. They have shaved ice and stuff. But even if I had bought it, it would have melted, and I didn't know what flavor you'd like, so I didn't get it. You go buy it yourself."

"Hmph. Well in that case, I guess it's okay..."

Grumbling, Renko returned her scoop, with a hole in the paper, to the stall keeper. Ayaka also returned hers, and Kyousuke and the others left the booth carrying their spoils.

"*Kksshh*. Boy, we sure did catch a lot."

"That's for sure. Ayaka plus Renko makes a formidable team!"

"...You caused a lot of trouble for the guy running the booth, though."

The stall keeper's face had definitely been twitching, even as he smiled professionally when they left.

While they were buying shaved ice for Renko, Kyousuke and the others discussed which stall to test their skill at next.

"—Oh?"

They had found someone familiar.

A girl wearing a yukata that depicted deep crimson birds fluttering across a white background—Kagura was standing in front of a stall, getting a candy apple. Her seemingly bored copper eyes seized on Kyousuke and the others.

"...Hmph." She immediately looked away. Before they could try to call out to her, Kagura promptly turned and walked off.

"I guess she's going around by herself."

"...It's understandable, given her other choices for company, right?"

In the direction that Eiri jerked her chin, Basara stood being

fawned over by three unfamiliar girls at the target-practice stall. When he noticed Kyousuke and the others looking, he put on a smug, self-satisfied look and readied his rifle.

I guess he wants to boast about his success at picking up girls...

Farther back, Busujima was idling about with a beer in one hand, absently mumbling to himself. It certainly seemed that Kagura would not have much fun going around with those two, either.

"But even so, isn't it lonely to be all by yourself? She didn't even say hi—"

"I already talked to her."

"Oh?"

"I ran across her when I went to throw away my bottle, so I invited her to join us. I said, 'Why don't you come hang out with us?' She turned me down without even hesitating. She just seems to hate the idea of the two of us being together. So let's leave her alone."

".....I see."

If they had been rejected, there was nothing to be done about it. However, if that was the case, why had she come along in the first place? Even if Fuyou had recommended it, it didn't seem to have been an order...

"It's no gooood—I can't drink it! Does this mean I have to wait until it melts?"

While Kyousuke was lost in thought, Renko was busy complaining. Although she had stuck her straw tube in a Blue Hawaii–flavored shaved ice and was trying to suck it up, it didn't seem to be going well.

Taking her lemon shaved ice from the shopkeeper, Ayaka laughed. "Tee-hee! That's terrible, Renko. Why don't you try attempting suicide? Won't that force your limiter to come off?"

“Good idea! I’ll go kill myself now.”

“Wait right there.” Kyousuke grabbed the back of Renko’s neck, holding her in place. If she removed her limiter in a place like this, it would be no joking matter.

Ayaka held out a treat to Kyousuke, who looked genuinely worried. “Here, big brother! And Eiri, too.”

“Thank you.”

“...Thanks.”

Kyousuke got melon, and Eiri strawberry.

“Sweet...it’s so tasty. Can I have a bit of your lemon one?”

“Please do! If you want, you can also taste my big brother’s.”

“Uh. Th-that’s okay...”

“Tee-hee. Are you embarrassed about giving him an indirect kiss?”

“Huh?! N-nnnn-no! It’s not like that! That’s stupid!!” Eiri fumed.

Renko pulled her hair in frustration as Kyousuke and the others enjoyed their snacks. “Ohhh, c’mon, what the hell is this? All of you are so slick, aren’t you?! I want to eat unmelted shaved ice, too! I want to eat *yakisoba*; I want to eat *takoyaki*; I want to eat *ikayaki*; I want to eat *okonomiyaki*; I want to eat a hot dog; I want to eat a chocolate banana; I want to eat crepes; I want to eat candy applessssss!”

“Well,” interrupted the oblivious shopkeeper, “...why don’t you take off that mask, miss?”

“Shut up!”

Renko was completely livid.

X X X

After finishing their ice-chip snacks, Kyousuke and the others visited the yo-yo fishing stall.

Multicolored yo-yo water balloons in red, blue, yellow, green, white, and pink bobbed around a vinyl pool. The object was to fish them out with a hooked tool. It was an easy game compared to goldfish scooping, and both Renko and Ayaka were able to quickly get the balloons they were aiming for. Renko got a blue-and-pink balloon, and Ayaka got a purple-and-orange one. As with the goldfish scooping, Eiri refused to participate, but the two of them fished out a red-and-white balloon for her.

Next they tried their hands at target shooting, which, again, Eiri opted only to spectate, despite Kyousuke's encouragement to join.

"...I'm fine," she refused, absently dangling her yo-yo balloon. "Guns aren't exactly my forte." She looked distracted, hardly even watching them shoot, not even eating or drinking anything.

Kyousuke was worried about Eiri and couldn't focus on the game. He felt restless wedged between the excited duo of Renko and Ayaka.

"———"

Eiri silently left the booth.

"Hey, Eiri!" Kyousuke called to her, setting down his cork gun. "Where are you going?"

Eiri looked down for just a second. "Bathroom," she answered nonchalantly.

"O-oh...I see."

Renko and Ayaka called out to Eiri's back, "See you when you get back!" and immediately returned to their target practice.

Kyousuke hesitated for a moment, debating whether to return to the game as well. “Ah…sorry, I’ll hit up the bathroom, too,” he said, setting down his cork gun. He was still worried about Eiri’s behavior.

Renko and Ayaka seemed to be entirely preoccupied with their targets.

“See you when you get back! Okay, this time for sure… Aww, why can’t I knock it over?!”

“This is one of those games, huh…? It’s the type where there’s a trick behind the targets. Cheeky… Let’s take it down by concentrating our firepower! …Oh. See you when you get back, big brother.”

They barely paused in planning their strategy and reloading their cork guns to give him even those hurried answers. Judging by their enthusiasm, there wouldn’t be any problem with leaving them for a short while.

“If I take a while getting back, you can wander around as you please, okay?”

Leaving them with those words, Kyousuke turned his back on the target-practice booth. He looked around for Eiri but couldn’t immediately find her. Setting out in the direction that she’d gone, he attentively searched the crowd—

“Eiri!”

He finally caught up with her at the edge of the grounds, where she had escaped the throngs of people.

“……Kyousuke?” His friend turned around, looking puzzled. “Why are you following me? Did you need something?”

“No, I also wanted to use the bathroom.”

“Really?” Eiri’s attitude was even colder than usual. Looking away from Kyousuke, she pointed off to the right. “…The bathrooms are

that way, so see you later."

She promptly walked off, heading left—toward the exit, in the direction of the school gate. Kyousuke followed after her in a panic.

"Hey, where are you going?!"

"Nowhere."

"Wait up!"

But Eiri didn't stop. Ignoring Kyousuke's shouts, she hurriedly left the festival grounds, though he deftly followed her.

"Weren't you going to the bathroom?"

"I should ask you the same thing."

"...I'm fine, though."

"Well, then, I'm also not doing too badly!"

"Yes you are."

"...Why?"

"Because I'm worried about you."

"—Huh?"

Eiri came to a halt and glared at Kyousuke.

"Worried...? Huh? There's no reason for you to be worried. I don't understand what you mean... This meddling is so annoying. You'd better cut it out."

"A-annoying...?"

"Annoying." Averting her eyes, Eiri fiddled with her hair. "...What did I say? I didn't say anything to you, did I? And yet you butt right

in and extend your hand to me without hesitation… What is this? Do you want to die? I'm doing what everyone wants, so why do you—?"

"You're trying too hard, dummy," Kyousuke said, interrupting Eiri's irritated rambling. With just a touch of anger in his voice, he continued. "You're too worried about what everyone around you thinks… That can't be fun at all. I mean, since we got here, you haven't smiled once! So isn't it absurd for you to say crap like 'don't worry about me'…? And you went so far as to lie to us, just to get some time alone. Even if you don't say anything, I understand perfectly."

"Mm—"

Eiri bit her lip.

Standing in the way to block her path, Kyousuke continued. "Back when I was having trouble with Ayaka, you told me this—remember? 'Fawn over her more,' you said… Allow me to turn those words right back around at you. Depend on us more, Eiri. I don't know whether or not we can help, but it definitely can't hurt to try. If there's something you're worried about or troubled by, I want you to ask for help and not take it all upon yourself!"

"Kyousuke…" Eiri stared at him. A few moments passed in silence. "…Hmph. You're a hopeless simpleton after all." She brushed Kyousuke aside, heading for the school gate at a brisk pace.

"H-hey—"

"I'm getting out of here!"

Rebuffing Kyousuke's call to stop, Eiri let a sigh slip out.

X X X

The sharp crescent of the moon hung slender in the silvery-blue night sky. The hustle of the crowds died out just a short distance from the fairgrounds, where there were far fewer streetlights illuminating

the darkness. The cheerful noise of the Bon dance was quickly replaced by a chorus of frogs and insects.

Eiri walked on in silence, and Kyousuke followed her down the raised paths between rice paddies. The wind strummed the green stalks, playing a gentle melody. But suddenly, she turned to face him. “Hey, Kyousuke…”

“…Do you want to run away like this?”

Her expression was grave. There was not a hint of sarcasm in her voice as she stared at him with an inscrutable gaze.

“Run away…?” Kyousuke asked, perplexed. “Are you…serious?”

“Of course not,” Eiri quickly amended, turning her back on him once more. Her gaze dropped to her feet. “I understand… I know that we can’t run away,” she mumbled. Her voice seemed as if it would vanish into the summer air.

In the middle of the deserted path, Eiri took a deep breath.

“You know, I… Exactly six years ago, I came out on a night just like this.”

She slowly exhaled. The things that Eiri had secretly accumulated—

“At the time, I had just turned ten years old—it was right before I was to be taken to the site of my first assignment… I’d been training every day, from morning to night, refining my skills. I was the eldest daughter of the main branch of the Akabane clan, after all, and the whole family expected me to perform well, even on my first attempt. I couldn’t afford to fail.”

As she spoke, Eiri stared up at the night sky, her ponytail fluttering in the wind. “My father said something to me back then. He said, ‘Let’s take tonight off’… He was probably only thinking about my

well-being, but to tell the truth I honestly wasn't interested. I'd spent most of my life before then at home, and my head was full of thoughts of murder. But when I actually went outside and came to see the Bon dance, all those thoughts were brushed aside."

Eiri's voice had taken on a certain tenderness as she recalled her past emotions. "Everything that met my eyes was so fresh and fun and exhilarating. I was so excited, just like Renko. Tugging on my father's hand, we went around to all the different stalls. Of course, since we were traveling incognito, I wasn't allowed to do anything that would leave evidence of our being here. There was just one thing that I begged for at all costs... Do you know what that was?"

Kyousuke pondered her question, looking at the water balloon dangling from Eiri's hand.

"Yo-yo fishing?"

"Wrong."

"...Goldfish scooping?"

"Wrong."

"Um...target shooting?"

"Not quite." Eiri smiled mischievously. "It was a stuffed animal."

"...Stuffed animal?"

"Yeah. An extra-large stuffed animal, a prize at the target-shooting booth... I wanted that thing no matter what, and I begged him to get it for me. That stuffed animal was Pooh Bear—the *last present* I ever received from my father."

"Ah..."

Kyousuke remembered Eiri sleeping with Pooh Bear in her arms. The stuffed animal gave her such a sense of security. *"If I don't have*

this, I can't sleep well." It must have been a treasured possession, heavy with memories of her father. And that father, whom Eiri had valued even more than Pooh Bear, was—

"The next week after the Bon dance, my father went out on a job. He promised that when he got back, he would take me with him on the next one... Leaving it at that, he never came home again. Well... what they did bring back...it wasn't my father anymore."

"……I see."

Eiri's tone had grown utterly placid. Kyousuke thought that she must have repeated this story many times; it must have carried many well-worn emotions. Her voice was dark and sad. "—I thought that I would kill them. That I would make the bastards who did that to my father suffer the same fate. Day after day, I kept swinging my sword, in a trance...but despite all that..."

Eiri's slender shoulders trembled slightly as her voice swelled with new feeling. "Despite all that, I couldn't kill. Forget about my father's enemies; I couldn't even kill powerless, ordinary people! Just before my blade would cut into their vitals, I would think of my father—of how I felt when I lost my father—and I would *project those feelings onto my target*! After all, I know perfectly well how badly it hurts to have something important suddenly taken from you one day. I know how deeply sad it makes you... I understand it completely."

"Eiri..."

Kyousuke recalled their frank conversation in the school infirmary some time ago. He remembered the girl who confessed that she "couldn't kill" while barely holding back a fit of tears.

At the root of that was anger at the loss of her beloved father, and a sorrow so great that she couldn't burn through it with that anger.

"Heh-heh...I really look like an idiot, don't I?" Eiri muttered derisively. "Putting the feelings of total strangers before vengeance for my father... I lose my nerve. I'm softhearted, worth even less than

you! I can't do anything like this; I've got no purpose. I can't show my face in public—I'm so ashamed. Not to Mother, or Kagura, or big brother, or Muramasa, or Ryou, or Ran, or the branch families...or even to my father."

"....."

So Eiri didn't visit the family altar after all. She felt as though she had brought shame not only on House Akabane but also on her father, so she couldn't go near the place where his soul was supposed to return, and she had visited only his empty grave.

"—Look here," Kyousuke said, simply speaking his mind. "Did your family want you to become an assassin? Did they expect you to get revenge? Did your father—?"

"Of course," Eiri answered immediately. When she turned to face him, her eyes were like daggers. "We're a famous family of assassins! I was trained to kill from the time I was a child, and I was fledged into a world reeking of blood... That was normal. There's no way that they didn't want me to!! And Father, too, surely...he must have wished that I would become a full-fledged assassin and kill the bastard who killed him."

"What about you?"

"......Huh?"

"What do you want, Eiri? Do you still want to become an assassin, even if it means thinking painful thoughts and causing others the same pain? Do you want to become a murderer? Forget about where you were born and how you were raised and what other people think of you, and consider what *you* want—"

"I want to kill!"

Eiri bellowed the words, bearing down on Kyousuke with a furious glare. "I want to kill the man who killed my father! I want to be able

to kill anyone at all! I want to become a full-fledged assassin and fulfill everyone's expectations! I want to puff up my chest with pride as the eldest daughter and true heir! I want to become the head of the main house and protect everyone…protect the ones I love. In order to do that, I have to kill… I have to be able to kill! So I—"

Abruptly ending her long-winded rant, Eiri suddenly clapped her mouth shut and was still. Her eyes opened wide, and she stared out into the twilight toward the approaching sound of geta sandals against asphalt.

Someone was walking slowly down the raised path that stretched straight through the rice fields. Under a burned-out streetlight, the person who gradually emerged was—

"Is that so? In that case, hurry up and do it, big sister."

"Kagura…"

Her rust-red eyes looked almost exactly like Eiri's as they gazed at them scornfully.

"…Who is that girl?" Eiri demanded.

Kagura had an unfamiliar girl with her. She was probably not even ten years old. Grasping Kagura's hand tightly, she looked at Kyousuke and Eiri with inquisitive eyes.

"Ah." Kagura looked down at the girl. "She's a lost child. She spoke to me when I was bored, and I grew attached to her company. Her name is Hina, apparently."

The girl, wearing a pale yellow yukata, pointed at them. "Miss Kagura, who are these people?"

"That's my older sister and her friend, Hina dear," Kagura answered gently. She sounded like an entirely different person.

“Oh, neat!” She gazed at them with overflowing curiosity.

“……?”

Kyousuke and Eiri looked at each other.

“U-ummm…” Eiri furrowed her brow. “What are you doing bringing a girl like that to this kind of place?” she asked.

“We’re taking a walk. When I followed you, she followed me. I thought it was just too perfect, so I agreed to bring her along.”

“Too…perfect?”

“I thought you could *use her*.”

Kagura thrust the heel of her hand into the girl’s solar plexus. The girl gave a muffled cry, then crumpled to the ground. Flat on her face, she did not so much as twitch.

“Just a…!” Eiri’s expression changed.

“Kagura?! What the hell are you doing with that child—?”

“Make your choice.” Kagura advanced.

“Huh?”

Kagura glanced at the unconscious girl, then fixed her gaze on Eiri.

“*Will you kill this child or not?* Make your choice now.”

“……Eh?”

Kagura stood firm before her older sister. And then, pulling the iron-ribbed fan out of her obi belt, she pointed at Kyousuke and added the catch:

“Now, if you refuse—*I will kill this boy*.”



Scarlet Scarred the Sky

RUST-EATEN NAILS

ACT THREE

August 14 (Wednesday)

Like yesterday, I spent today with Bob and the others. And we talked about all kinds of things! The one that's really stuck in my mind is murder. It sounds like Bob is too strong, and when she tries to hug someone she likes, she squeezes them to death. Oh no... Apparently Chihiro likes meat too much and devoured three people just like that (Chihiro is little, but she is a glutton and is always hungry). Michirou didn't tell me anything, but according to what Bob told me in secret, it sounds like he believes his homicidal rage was somehow caused by the demon (or angel?) living in his arm. I guess that's how he keeps the guilt from tearing him apart... Hearing their stories gave me a lot to think about.



Scarlet Scarred the Sky

RUST-EATEN NAILS

ACT THREE

"You're going to kill……Kyousuke?"

"Yes. If you don't kill the little girl, I will kill this boy instead. It's a simple choice between two alternatives, isn't it? To take the life of a complete stranger or that of an acquaintance. One of two possibilities. Well, please make your choice, big sister."

The sisters' voices echoed down the deserted footpath. The elder sister, Eiri, looked dumbfounded, while the younger sister, Kagura, remained aloof. Standing between them, Kyousuke could not interfere, and looked back and forth from one to the other.

"…Huh? What is that…? If I don't want Kyousuke to die, I have to kill that girl right now? R-ridiculous… There's no way I can make such a choice, can I?!"

"Is that so?" Kagura stared at Eiri, her face stony and unchanging. "Well, in that case, this boy will simply have to die."

"Don't joke around!" Eiri screamed.

Kagura's countenance did not waver. "I'm not joking," she answered dismissively, advancing on her sister. "Do I look like I'm joking? Too bad for you, but this is an order. An official assignment, as commanded by Lady Fuyou. She instructed me to seize the opportunity, to place before you a choice *between a stranger's life and a life that you hold dear*."

“Ah…”

Eiri had lost all words.

Fuyou’s image rose in Kyousuke’s mind. Could Eiri’s mother really have been plotting all this behind her amiable smile? Like an assassin who doesn’t reveal her secret weapon until the moment before the kill, had she kept her true face hidden, without showing the smallest sign of her insanity?

“…Why? Why would Mother do such a thing—?”

“*So that you can finally kill someone, of course*, big sister. This is something that Lady Fuyou has always desired. You should share her wishes. There’s no need to hesitate, is there? Kill the girl. If you don’t, this boy will die. *He will die because of you*. In other words, you can’t run away… You will either kill with your own hands or cause someone to die by mine. Those are the only two options available to you.”

“……No matter what?”

“No matter what. I thought I told you, big sister… This task was given to me by Lady Fuyou. To an assassin of House Akabane, the orders of the family head are absolute… It’s useless to try to persuade me, so I have no intention of bending an ear to your nonsense. Blades are made to be wielded. You yourself are the same way, so I’m sure you understand perfectly well.”

“————”

Silence. With a pale face, Eiri looked at Kagura, Kyousuke, and the fallen girl in turn. She hung her head and bit her lip. “……I understand.”

Ending her hesitation, Eiri lifted her face. Tossing the water balloon away, she faced the girl who was to be her target. “You’re right, Kagura… I can’t just keep running away, no matter how much time passes, can I? Once I start running, I’ll never be able to stop.”

“H-hey—” Kyousuke put a hand on Eiri’s wrist, as if to restrain her.

“You get out of here,” Eiri ordered him. Her half-lidded eyes shone with piercing defiance. “...This is my problem. It’s not your place to intrude. I’m asking you to stay out of this, Kyousuke—don’t get in my way.”

“Eiri...”

Shaking her wrist out of his slackened hand, Eiri moved past Kyousuke. “...I’m sorry,” she apologized, so quietly that only he could hear.

Kagura unfolded her fan, waving her yukata sleeves. “It’s as my big sister said. There’s nothing wrong with saving your own life. Why would a murderer who has killed twelve people try to stop another from killing...? Well, you don’t have to worry about me breaking my promise. If my big sister can finally cast aside the stigma of being a Rusty Nail, then I won’t lay a single finger on you. I have no desire to, anyway.”

“—Really?” Eiri demanded, finally reaching her sister’s position.

“Yes.” Kagura flapped her folding fan. “The only orders that I received from Lady Fuyou were the commands I spoke of just now. If you do your duty and kill the girl, you will save his life!”

“...I see.” Eiri assented, “Well, all right, then.” Her gaze dropped to the girl in the pale yellow yukata, still lying on the ground where she had fallen, unconscious. Taking a knee beside her, Eiri turned the girl over.

“Uh—” A small noise escaped Eiri’s mouth as she saw the girl’s cherubic face. Her eyes were closed, and her chest rose and fell slightly with each breath. Perhaps owing to the excellence of Kagura’s skills, the girl’s expression was peaceful.

“Your name was Hina...was it?” Eiri stretched out a hand toward the girl timidly. She softly stroked her cheek, careful of the tips of her

nails, treating her like a fragile object.

"What exactly are you doing? I thought I said, 'Kill her'—"

"Shut up." Eiri's voice was quiet, but her tone was blunt and forceful. She did not lift her eyes from the child.

Kagura seemed to falter for just an instant, but she quickly hid her mouth behind the folding fan. "...Hmph."

Eiri took her hands off the girl and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her whole countenance had completely changed.

"I'll kill her."

Her voice was emotionless, inhuman. It felt as though even the sound of the wind had stopped. Eiri slowly raised her right hand. The three blades affixed to her index finger, middle finger, and ring finger sparkled in the starlight.

Eiri had her sights set on the girl's white throat. Without hesitation, she prepared to swing her nails down toward the defenseless carotid artery.

"Don't kill her."

Eiri jumped, startled by the sudden interjection. Stiffening, with her hand still raised, she turned to looked at Kyousuke with eyes like one possessed—though it quickly fell away, and she came back to herself. Unfortunately, her expression very quickly turned to anger.

"Y-you... Didn't I tell you not to get in the way?!"

"Shut up."

Eiri jerked at Kyousuke's curt retort.

"I know that you didn't want me to interfere. And I know that you wanted to kill someone—*but I refuse*. Killing a girl in order to save my life? That's not something you get to decide on your own! Aren't I

just as much a murderer if I stand by and let you do that?!"

"Ah—"

Eiri lowered her hand.

Kyousuke heaved a sigh and looked into his friend's rust-red eyes. "Sorry, but if I have to, I'll stop you by force. Unfortunately I can't just stand by obediently when someone's life is on the line. If you insist on weighing two lives on your ridiculous scale...I'll smash that scale with my own hands!"

"Kyousuke..."

"—You bastard."

Anger swirled like raging fire in Kagura's eyes as she stared daggers at Kyousuke, her voice low. "What the hell are you butting in for? A lowborn, vulgar bastard like you, acting like a big shot... You're the one who's ridiculous. Has that prison school really reformed you? Those are some awfully noble words you're spitting...despite being a murderer who's taken a dozen lives."

"Wrong."

"In what way am I wrong?"

"I've never even killed one person. I'm just an...ordinary guy."

"....."

For a moment, Kagura said nothing, letting Kyousuke's confession hang in the air.

"Ah, is that the case?" she eventually replied. "Well, that's just fine! Whether you're a murderer or not doesn't change your role in this equation. If you won't sit on the scale where you belong, I'll just have to knock you out and put you there!"

Closing her fan, Kagura stared Kyousuke down. “The penalty for interfering with my assignment is quite severe, you know? You may be lowborn, but I won’t be merciful with you.”

“Bring it on. Come at me! You said it before, right? You said, ‘Eiri has only two choices.’ However—” He clenched his fists, damp with sweat, and clamped together his chattering molars. Kicking off the awkward, unfamiliar sandals, Kyousuke planted bare feet on the ground and grinned defiantly. “There’s one more option available! There’s the option where *Eiri doesn’t have to choose, because I turn the tables on you*!”

“.....Eh?” Eiri stood wide eyed, astonished.

“—What?” Kagura narrowed her eyes. “Are you serious? If so, you’re a fool beyond saving. Even when you’re worked up, you’ve got to stay within the bounds of reason, surely? Allow me to teach you where you stand.”

Clatter, clatter. Her sandals echoed on the pavement as Kagura approached Kyousuke. One step, two steps, three steps...

Kyousuke warily followed her movement, his fists at the ready.

Four steps, five steps, six steps, seven steps, that moment.

—*Clatter!* With an especially loud noise, Kagura’s figure *disappeared*.

“Wha—?!”

Suddenly, a powerful blow connected with his left temple. His skull rattled from heavy impact, as if he had taken a hit from a metal bat in full swing. Kyousuke’s body lurched over.

“Gah?!”

Then came the follow-up attack. His head snapped around in the

opposite direction as a strike to the right temple sent him flying. The thing that struck him felt so hard that he couldn't believe it was a human fist. As stars flew around on the edges of his vision, a silver crescent flashed past.

"Guh?!"

Another attack, blasting him from underneath the chin. The vibrations carried straight to his brain, and the world went white. His consciousness threatened to forsake him. Staggering backward, Kyousuke collapsed onto his backside. His discarded geta clattered underfoot.

Kagura calmly looked down at him. "...Oh? Weren't you going to turn the tables on me? You couldn't even react to my attacks, though." In her right hand she was gripping...*the closed iron-ribbed fan*. "If I had opened up the blades, you would have died without even realizing that you were cut! You only survived thanks to my compassion."

Still talking, Kagura swung her signature weapon. Kyousuke went flying, taking the blow on his left cheek, and tumbled across the asphalt.

"Kyousuke?!" Eiri screamed.

Kagura flicked away the blood that had stuck to her fan. "Dear sister. I'm going to start beating this boy to death. If you want to save him, you will kill that child, okay? This is a splendid weapon, even if I'm striking with the back end, so...if you laze around too long, you'll be too late. Will I kill the boy first, or will you kill the girl first? Now, let's have a good match."

Laughing, Kagura swung the metal fan down on the bridge of Kyousuke's nose.

X X X

"Guh—"

The attack was too quick to follow with the naked eye, but Kyousuke somehow managed to dodge it, if only by a hair's breadth. The instant that Kagura's weapon struck the ground he leaped up and, without any regard for life and limb, tackled her.

"Don't underestimate meeeeeeeee!"

"You're an idiot." Kagura easily evaded him. "Do you think you can grab me with a move like that? How ridiculous!" As Kyousuke stumbled past her, she landed another blow with her fan on his right cheek, sending him toppling to the ground once more. Kagura stepped on the back of his head with her geta. "You seem like you don't have much interest in the martial arts," she teased. "Why, aren't you a genuine amateur?"

"Shut up!" Kyousuke roared. Lifting his head with all his might, he pushed Kagura's leg away.

"……?!"

Kagura momentarily lost her footing. Kyousuke seized his chance and drew back to deliver a right straight punch, but—

"I'm telling you, you're too slow!" Kagura nimbly avoided the assault and took hold of Kyousuke's arm. She seized his right wrist and forced his arm into a lock around the iron fan.

"Guh...aaaaaaaaahhh!"

Kagura twisted Kyousuke's arm around behind his back, grinding his joint against the iron-ribbed fan. Kyousuke screamed and dropped to his knees on the ground.

Kagura sighed, still holding his right arm behind his body. "Can't you do anything other than swing your fists around like an idiot...? Honestly, I'm amazed. You do seem strong, but your talents are completely and utterly wasted. On the other hand, I may not have much strength, but if I apply it just right...well, this is what happens!" Kagura applied more pressure to her grip, sending pain throughout

his arm.

"Gaaahhh!!"

Watching Kyousuke's anguish, Eiri shouted her sister's name. However, Eiri immediately hung her head and continued in a frail voice. "...Stop it. I'm begging you, stop already... Don't hurt Kyousuke any more. I'll kill her... I'll kill this child right now, so...please."

"...Big sister." Kagura raised an eyebrow, looking displeased. "You still don't seem to understand, do you? You shouldn't be pleading right now—you should be killing! If you want me to stop, then hurry up and kill her. Sounds like you need some more encouragement. I'll take the liberty of breaking his arm!"

Kagura applied the full weight of her body to Kyousuke's secured wrist.

"Gwaaaaaaaaahhh!!"

"Kyousukeee?!"

The pressure from the iron-ribbed fan could have easily shattered a person's bones—*or it should have.*

However, Kyousuke's arm did not break. His bones were unyielding.

"……?!"

Kagura was astonished by the incredible strength of Kyousuke's body.

"Get off meeeeee!"

"Ah—!"

Seizing the opportunity, Kyousuke struggled free of the agonizing hold and stumbled to his feet, facing Kagura. Grasping his aching wrist, he called out to Eiri, "Don't worry about me! You don't have to

kill her if you don't want to. There's no way I'm gonna die here…so just worry about yourself!"

"Kyo-Kyousuke—"

"Silence!" Kagura swung her iron-ribbed fan and struck at Kyousuke—who deflected the blow with his *arm*.

"Don't kill just to save my life!" he shouted. "Don't kill just because Kagura tries to force you to! Why do you want to kill?! Why do you want to kill this child?!"

"Th-that's…"

"Because Eiri's an *Akabane*, of course!" Kagura answered in her sister's stead, sweeping at Kyousuke with her fan as she interrupted.

Though he instantly raised his arm in defense, the iron fan crashed into his left flank— "Gah-ha?!" Kyousuke staggered back as Kagura rained a tempest of strikes down upon him.

"Our family lineage is steeped in murder, our entire raison d'être is assassination… Those of us who were born into that line are not human. We are *weapons*. We were made to *kill*. We are tools, finely honed tools! For a blade to ask why it cuts is beyond absurd! That is its *entire purpose*! A blade that cannot cut has no value, surely. It has no meaning, right, big sister?!"

"Kagura—"

"Shut the hell up!" Kyousuke shouted, unleashing a fist that rocketed through the deadly dance of Kagura's iron fan. "You two aren't weapons—you're human beings!! You have your own emotions, just like everyone else! Forget about the Akabane name and your ancestors and your environment: They have nothing to do with this!! What do you truly believe?! If you kill that girl, you can never take it back. Think hard about—"

"What could you possibly understand?!" Evading a left hook and an

uppercut, Kagura countered Kyousuke's blows with her iron-ribbed fan. "An outsider who's known an Akabane for only a few months shouldn't speak like he knows everything! My big sister and I have been refining our killing techniques together since we were born. You could never begin to imagine the strength and ferocity of our discipline…and despite that, what's happened to you, big sister?! You were born to kill, raised to kill, and you lived to kill… If you take away murder, then what's left?!"

Eiri's eyesight blurred. Her gaze drifted back and forth between Kagura, Kyousuke, and the girl.

Kagura bit her lip. Channeling her fury through the hand that gripped her weapon, her assault became even more ferocious. "There's no way that you can be such a weak person, is there?! You, who out of all of your brothers and sisters are the fastest of anyone, the strongest of anyone… You, who everyone believes is likely to surpass even Lady Fuyou… How long do you plan to carry on in this sad state?! Enough! Please don't disappoint the Akabane family… Please don't disappoint me anymore."

"……Kagura?"

Kagura's taunts had abruptly turned into quiet entreaties. Though she clearly held the upper hand in their battle, her composure had crumbled, and her expression had grown desperate.

Seeing Kagura like this seemed to bring a change over Eiri. Holding her nails to her chest, she stared at the little girl's white throat.

"Hey, wait! Don't be rash—"

"I thought I told you to shut up!" Kagura struck Kyousuke in the front of the chin with the palm of her hand. "You, who know nothing about the Akabane, will not interfere!"

Again and again Kagura struck Kyousuke's face with the iron-ribbed fan. He reeled from the impacts but did not fall. Gritting his teeth and bracing his legs, he unleashed a powerful roundhouse kick.

“Shut uuuuuuppp!”

He missed. Kyousuke’s leg didn’t come anywhere close to Kagura. Even so, he continued to fight and struggle desperately. “Ah, that’s right! An ordinary person like me who was born and raised in decent society could never understand you assassins or the criminal underworld in the slightest! And I don’t know much about your family’s affairs! But when it comes to the feelings of someone who can’t kill people, even I understand just fine!”

“Kyousuke……”

Eiri’s eyes shimmered, wet with tears.

Here was a girl who was unable to kill, because she cared too much about her victim’s feelings—however, she’d still said she wanted to kill. Could that be her true opinion? Could it be her true feeling? Could it be her honest desire?

This girl, who was obstinate and tactless and tenderhearted—when classmates had bullied Kyousuke, when Shamaya and Renko had teased him, when he’d worried over Ayaka—as he thought back, she had always been watching from nearby.

On the other hand, she revealed almost nothing about herself and tried to solve all her problems on her own.

He recalled how Eiri had looked when she had tried to silently sneak away from the Bon dance.

“You’re afraid to kill a person, aren’t you? You hate the idea, don’t you? Then why do you insist on killing?! Aren’t you too concerned with what everyone else wants? Aren’t you ignoring your own needs if you take on that burden against your will?! You should—”

“Silence!”

Kagura’s iron-ribbed fan struck Kyousuke’s temple, opening a large wound. But he fervently ignored the flow of blood. “Think about

yourself for a change, you stupid idiot!" he shouted, his gaze still fixed on Eiri. "Forget about the Akabane and Kagura and me—all of it—and turn to face your own seeeelf!"

"……?!"

As he let out a fierce scream, Kyousuke swung with his right arm, giving it everything he had left. Kagura couldn't possibly escape. Kyousuke's fist headed for her side—

And the next instant, Kyousuke's body was flying through the air.

"—Eh?"

He wasn't sure what had happened.

The fist that should have hit Kagura caught nothing but air, and before he knew it, Kyousuke's world had flipped upside down. By the time he comprehended that he had been *thrown*, he was crashing down into a rice field, right shoulder first, in a splash of muddy water. Kyousuke's body sank down into a sea of green.

He was more astonished than hurt. When he sat up, spitting out mud that had gotten into his mouth, Kagura was looking down at him from the path. The instant that he met her eyes, a shiver ran up Kyousuke's spine.

"Shall we finish this already…?"

Kagura reached a hand around to the back of her waist and pulled a second iron-ribbed fan out of her obi. She opened the two fans simultaneously. A metallic sound rang out, and silver flowers bloomed in the twilight. The tips of the fans, sharpened to points, shone with the brilliance of Japanese swords.

"I have grown quite tired of your stubbornness. How long before you fall…? You must be made of steel. I can't believe you are human.

However, the blades of the Akabane clan can cut through even metal. That is to say, your strength is meaningless—”

“Kagura!”

“……Big sister.” Kagura slowly turned her head to look at Eiri, her face clouding over. “This is the last of my mercy. If you say that you won’t kill, I’ll carve this boy up in an instant! I’ll meticulously slice him to death right before your eyes, bit by bit. I don’t much care which it is… Please choose your preferred outcome.”

“————”

Eiri gasped. She had been driven into a corner. She stared back at Kagura, but the younger sister kept her mouth shut. Kyousuke was also silent. He had said all he wanted to say. There was nothing to do but leave the rest to Eiri.

“I-I will…”

Eiri stared at the girl. Silence descended upon them. The calls of frogs and bugs, the rustling of leaves, and the distant tumult of the festival were all that could be heard.

“……”

Finally, Eiri stretched out an arm toward the girl’s white throat—she pushed a nail against her carotid artery and closed her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was vanishingly small.

“I’m sorry.”

Who were those words meant for?

She opened her eyes.

And then—

X X X

"……I'm sorry."

Repeating her words of apology, Eiri drew her nail back—not horizontally. She removed her finger from the girl and clutched her secret weapon to her chest.

"It's impossible after all...," she mumbled weakly, sinking to the ground. "...I can't kill her."

"……Huh?" Kagura was at a loss for words. "Wh-what are you... what are you saying?!" she shouted suddenly. Her emotions laid bare, the composure she had maintained when she'd informed Eiri that she "didn't mind either option" was nowhere to be seen.

"You just have to put a little strength into it and move your finger!! That's all you have to do, so why can't you just do it?! Don't get carried away and lose your nerve...you loser! Coward! Gutless wimp! How many times do you think that is now?! Exactly how long do you plan to remain a Rusty Nail, blunt and useless—?"

"I don't want to kill!"

Eiri interrupted Kagura's string of abuse. A cascade of tears fell from her eyes. "It's not that I can't kill despite wanting to... *I can't kill because I don't want to do it!* Hurting someone is painful—it's scary, and I hate it! I'd rather stay rusty my whole life than do such a thing! I'd rather be despised! That's right, I...I'm a loser! A cowardly, gutless wimp, a worthless defective! So I'm sorry... I'm sorry, Kagura... I cannot kill this child. I don't want to kill...anyone."

"B-big sister—"

"It's like Kyousuke said... I've been fooling myself this whole time. Thinking I've got to live up to everyone's expectations and do right as the eldest daughter and not disappoint you, Kagura, and get revenge for Father...but it's impossible after all. I can't do it! No matter how much I try to deceive myself, I can't do it. Stopping up my ears against my own heart's screaming, pretending like I can't hear it,

continuously killing myself instead of anyone else, holding it in... I'm at my limit... I'm so sorry, Kagura. I'm sorry, Mother. I'm sorry... Father."

"...Wh-what the.....?"

Kagura let her iron fans drop as she listened to Eiri's apologetic weeping. She stared absently, as if her spirit had escaped. Finally, through gritted teeth, a quiet voice slipped out of her tightly closed lips.

".....Ah, is that so?"

Kagura turned her head sluggishly and looked at Kyousuke. In her deep crimson irises and jet-black pupils, anger and hatred were distilled into murderous intent, piercing through any obstruction.

"Understood," she announced coldly. "Then I will kill this boy. I shall slice to pieces this menial wretch who caused your fall, big sister. I'll shred him finely, starting with his extremities, carve him up into small pieces, chop him to bits, tear him apart, shred him up, make him into sashimi, and make you eat him when I serve up the dish... I'll let you savor it with your tongue and your heart. You'll taste what a foolish decision you've made. I prescribe this boy's last moments to be flesh and blood, which you will take to cure you."

Kagura stepped forward. Her two fans, one dangling from each of her hands, fluttered as she leaped toward Kyousuke.

The next instant—

"Stop iiiiiiiiit!"

A crimson figure jumped into Kagura's path as she was closing in on her target.

".....?!"

Kagura's eyes went wide and she barely managed to halt her deadly

downward swing. The blades of the iron-ribbed fan came to a stop after carving a shallow cut into the throat of the interloper—Eiri.

Eiri's slim, soft frame trembled slightly. She still clung to Kyousuke, sheltering him with her own body. Blood trickled from the cut on her neck and ran in rivulets down her pure white skin.

"E-Eiri—"

"You're in the way. Move aside." Kagura lowered the fan, scowling at Eiri's back. "You're only making it more difficult. Stop this useless resistance and move already—"

"Nooo!" Eiri held Kyousuke's body tight, as if she would not part with it by any means. Tears falling from her eyes, throwing away all pride, she wailed like a child. "I won't move! I absolutely will not. No, no, no, I won't move!"

"Y-you—!" The coldhearted Kagura's face went red. Raising her fans overhead, she let out an angry roar. "Give up already, sister!! How unsightly... If you don't move, I'll just have to make you, and even if you don't, I can still easily kill him."

"I'll die, you know."

".....What?"

"If Kyousuke dies, I'll die, too! If that's okay with you, then go ahead and kill us!!"

"That's—" Kagura's mouth hung open. "N-nonsense... That's a foolish threat! There's no way that someone like you, who can't even take another's life, could ever extinguish your own!! Don't joke around."



"I'm not joking at all!"

"Don't sound so certain! If that's true, then why don't you do it right now?! If you're able to end your own life, I can turn a blind eye to him."

"Understood."

".....What?"

Standing up, Eiri brought a nail to her own throat, pressing the fingertip down with no hesitation.

"Big sister?!"

Kagura flung the iron-ribbed fans aside and grabbed Eiri's arm in a mad rush. A shallow wound ran under the nail as it was pulled away. Fresh blood trickled out.

"Sigh..." After a moment of relief, Kagura's expression changed and she shouted. "Just a minute! What are you doing?!"

"You told me to do it, so I was committing suicide—"

"Don't actually go through with it! Are you an idiot?! M-my heart nearly stopped, too..."

"Are you relieved now?"

"I am not!" Kagura shouted, then clicked her tongue. "...Tch." Still gripping Eiri's wrist, she hung her head. A powerless mumble escaped her lips. "Saying you don't want to kill, what is that...? What the hell is that, big sister?"

Kagura's voice was tearful. She turned away, staring at the ground. "Our whole lives, we've honed our skills toward the purpose of killing, right? Every day and every night, enduring difficult training and building discipline...nearly dying on more than one occasion. Even so, did we not push through together? And after all that, at this late hour,

you stand there and say, 'I don't want to kill'—"

"……I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it!" Kagura scowled at Eiri. "Don't you apologize to me! Don't show me yourself like that… It's an eyesore. Crying and sad and worried and suffering… I don't want to see a big sister like that! Aren't you supposed to be strong and dignified and noble, the kind of person who can overcome any kind of hardship like it's nothing?! For the longest time, I've always admired that kind of big sister… That's the sister I've continued to follow."

"Kagura…"

"—Do you remember the day that Master Masato died?" The Masato she spoke of was likely the name of their father, who had passed away six years ago. "I was seven years old at the time, and you were ten… You said something to me as I bawled and cried, didn't you? 'I'm going to avenge him,' you said. 'I will kill the bastard who killed our father. So don't cry.' I was reassured when I heard those words, and they eased my sadness and fear. 'Big sister can do it. She will definitely kill him,' I thought… That's what I believed. Despite that—"

Kagura faced Eiri again. Releasing her wrist, she grabbed the collar of her yukata. "Despite that, you couldn't kill! Not even one person… to say nothing of Master Masato's enemy. I was so shocked. I thought I had been betrayed. I felt resentment. The guide I had been following suddenly disappeared. I was terrified at being left behind. You, who I had been aspiring toward for so long…your unsightly degradation… I couldn't look."

"……I see."

"That's why I hate you." Kagura chewed on her lower lip. Pulling Eiri's collar toward her, she poured on the abuse. "I really hate you! Until now I thoroughly despised you, but after this? I've completely given up on you… I have no more hope for you. I expect nothing of you. I request nothing of you! I'm asking you, please never enter my

sight again. Because I can't stand the sight of you! From now on, please have absolutely nothing to do with me."

"...Sure, I understand. If that's what you want, Kagura, that's what I'll do."

"……!" Kagura's eyes seethed, and she glared at Eiri, who was wearing a lonely smile. As if thrusting her away, she let go of Eiri's collar and picked up the iron-ribbed fans she had dropped. She closed the weapons, stuck them into her obi, and turned on her heel.

"I will be reporting about this to Lady Fuyou, you know? I have no way of knowing what will happen to you because of that... If you died, that would be good." Spitting out the words, Kagura walked away.

"Wait," Kyousuke called to her back.

"...Yes?" Kagura halted and looked back dismally. "What is it?"

"Do you really hate Eiri?"

"I hate her so much."

Kagura's response was curt. However, Kyousuke did not back down.

"Just because Eiri cannot kill people? Hm...if that's the case, it doesn't seem like your feelings for Eiri were ever really that strong."

"—What did you say?"

Her rust-red eyes filled with murderous rage.

Steeling himself, Kyousuke met Kagura's gaze without flinching. "I mean, that's right, isn't it? If you really loved Eiri, from the bottom of your heart, there's no way you would ever grow to hate her just for that one reason. That sounds like a downright lie."

"……Huh?"

"J-just a—"

Kagura seethed with anger, and Eiri tried to interrupt him, but Kyousuke ignored both of them and continued. "I also had a similar experience recently. In my case, it was my little sister... I found out that Ayaka, who until then I had thought was an ordinary girl, is someone who can kill people without a second thought. That's the opposite of you two, right?"

Carrying a shotgun, Ayaka tried to shoot Renko and the others. Tried to kill them. I'll never forget the shock I felt. It seemed like my little sister was some kind of strange monster, and it felt like in one instant a gulf opened between us, but—

"...Even so, I love Ayaka. I don't understand how she could kill people, and it even scares me. But of course she is precious to me. She is so important to me! My feelings of love have always been greater... stronger than any hate or fear. Because I also know lots of good things about her. There was never any way that I could come to hate her."

"Kyousuke..."

"————"

Kagura continued to wordlessly glare at Kyousuke.

"Aren't you the same way, Kagura? Surely the truth is that even now you don't completely hate Eiri?! Even as you say one thing or another, you're not trying to hurt Eiri... You try to act cold and indifferent, but honestly, looking at you right now, it doesn't look like it was entirely genuine! Could your unwillingness to be upfront about your feelings be something you inherited from your sister?"

"You talk too much." Kagura grimaced in discomfort. "I don't know about your situation with your sister. Nor do I care. In the same way, you know nothing about the relationship between my sister and me. Is there nothing that will get you to stop chattering away as if you do?"

"But—"

"No buts. Hear me now: I hate my older sister. I despise her. I do not admire her; I do not value her. That is all."

Shutting down Kyousuke's attempt to restrain her, Kagura resumed walking. She was about to take her leave, just like that.

"Glad to hear it."

A voice came from the darkness on the other side. Something shone for an instant in front of Kagura.

"……?!"

Kagura pulled an iron-ribbed fan out of her obi and sliced through the air.

—*Ching!* A high-pitched sound rang out. Next, the sound of a splash as something fell into the rice paddy.

Kagura opened the fan. "...What do you think you are doing?" she asked in annoyance.

"Oh, nothing," answered the voice of an easygoing young man.

From out of the darkness stepped—

"Since you two are acting like spoiled children, I thought I might give you a little encouragement, see? The time for the festival is over. Now it's *time for the bloodbath*."

It was a fashionable young man in scarlet *hakama* pants and a deep crimson haori jacket. Fiddling with a special weapon that resembled *shuriken*, Basara Akabane wore a frivolous smile.

X X X

"...Acting like spoiled children?" Kagura's voice was tinged with insecurity.

Basara's smile widened, and he shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah. The eldest daughter spits out foolish nonsense like 'I don't want to kill' after yet again failing to do the deed, and the second daughter overlooks it without a second thought. Don't you find that so sweetly sentimental that it makes you want to puke?"

"I do not." Immediately cutting down Basara's question, Kagura flapped her iron-ribbed fan. "There was nothing to be done, was there? She threatened suicide if I killed the boy, so I almost made her go through with it. The alternative to withdrawing—"

"Wouldn't it be better to let her kill herself?"

"—What?"

"If she wants to die, it's better to let her die. It's not for you to do the thinking. You're under orders from Lady Fuyou, right? 'Make her choose between Kyousuke's life or the life of another,' she said. Eiri chose the latter. So to complete your assignment, you have to kill him. Even if Eiri dies in the process, what is there to do but follow instructions?"

".....Hmm." Kagura hesitated.

"You said it yourself, didn't you?" Basara relentlessly pressed her for an answer.

"You said, 'I hate Eiri.' You said, 'It's none of my business what happens to her.' So if Eiri were to commit suicide, you wouldn't really care, right?"

"Th-that's—" Kagura averted her eyes. "That certainly is the case, but since her talent is undeniable...losing her in this way would be a big loss for the Akabane—"

"Not at all. A rusted sword has no value." Basara cut through her

flustered objections with a single stroke.

"B-but...isn't it Lady Fuyou's decision, and not ours, what to do with her?"

"Yes. We merely follow orders. So follow yours now. As instructed by Lady Fuyou, kill Kyousuke, and if Eiri dies in the process, we'll deal with that when the time comes. Whether to strike or not isn't up to us swords to decide, surely?"

"———"

Gaping, Kagura lowered her readied fan.

After nodding in satisfaction, Basara shifted his gaze to Eiri. "... Anyway, sorry. Allow me to kill Kyousuke, since Kagura cannot. If you decide to commit suicide, well, that'd be just fine." He looked at her injured throat and smiled.

Eiri moved into position to protect Kyousuke and spread out her arms as if to shield him. "I won't let you. No way will I let you kill Kyousuke!"

"Eiri..."

"Ha-ha!" Basara burst into raucous laughter. "You seem to be appropriately enthusiastic! As your older brother, I have mixed feelings about this, but...yeah, that's good. If he's such a big deal, the shock of his death will be all the more meaningful. As far as I can tell, *simple violence is the easiest solution*."

Narrowing his copper-red eyes, he gestured toward Kyousuke. "If I destroy something so important to you, right before your eyes, it ought to break your heart. Once your heart is broken, you can feel at ease, without experiencing any unnecessary emotions... You can become a tool that kills without hesitation. And if you end up so broken that you're useless, well, we can just throw you away."

"B-big brother..."

"Asshole!"

The corners of Basara's mouth curled upward at Kyousuke's indignant interjection. "Hmm, you shouldn't get so riled up so quickly, Kyousuke. If you lose your cool, your judgment gets clouded, you know. The tendency to get excited is a hallmark of low breeding."

"Shut up! Quit running your mouth—"

As Kyousuke moved to push Eiri aside and step forward, Basara casually flicked his arm. Something grazed Kyousuke's left cheek. When he held his hand to it, it had the slippery feeling of blood. Then, belatedly, came the pain.

When Kyousuke looked, the *shuriken* had vanished from Basara's hand. The black blade had been almost invisible as it had flown through the darkness and torn into his skin.

"...The next time you get excited, I'll go for your throat, okay? That was my three-sided *shuriken* just now—a Yatagarasu throwing star—but I have many other blades as well. One bad move, and you'll be bloodied before you can blink."

"Kuh—"

"Big brother!" Forcing Kyousuke back as he grit his teeth, Eiri spoke angrily. "Stop it, please! Don't injure Kyousuke any further..."

"Ha-ha. What will you do? Will you kill me?"

"No. *I'll half kill you.*"

Eiri flashed the nails on both her hands. The tips of her toes were also fitted with secret weapons; readying a total of sixteen blades, she assumed a combat stance.

"Hmm...how interesting. But I'm not aiming for you, Eiri. I aim only for Kyousuke. My blades cover all distances, long range, midrange, short range, and point-blank. That you will get within

striking distance of me, or that I will take down Kyousuke: Which do you think will happen first? Even you can't move faster than a projectile weapon!"

"....."

"Your Suzaku blades are not made to defend against my daggers and the like. They're concealed weapons specialized for making attacks. The best you could hope for is a draw, right? As your blades would grasp me, Kyousuke—who you left behind—would send up a fountain of blood."

"Th-that's... We won't know until we try." Eiri gave a stout-hearted reply, but her tone of voice was stiff. Even the tips of her fingers were trembling.

If they were to have any chance of success, Kyousuke would have to avoid Basara's blades on his own...

"Ah, by the way, I can throw many Yatagarasu at the same time, you know? Earlier I threw only one, but this time I think I'll try eight at once. If I really try, I can probably throw about three times that many."

".....?!"

One was hard enough; there was no way he could handle that many. As Kyousuke and Eiri watched in despair, Basara folded his arms into the sleeves of his kimono, preparing to fire off his blades. And then—

"Okay, let's go. Fly, Yatagarasu!"

Basara pulled both arms out. Numerous lethal weapons flew through the air, nearly invisible in the darkness. Moving one instant faster than them, Eiri turned around and *thrust* Kyousuke's body away.

".....Eh?"

Eiri smiled briefly at Kyousuke's befuddlement. Her lips moved into the shape of *sorry*. She slowly leaned forward. Before Kyousuke's eyes, the swarm of blades showered down like rain in the darkness, threatening to *slice Eiri up in a shower of blood.*

"Dance, Kujaku!"

But that very instant, a figure leaped between them, performing a splendid dance. A fierce chorus of swordplay rang out under the starry sky as folding fans fluttered like wings.

".....Huh?"

Kyousuke and Eiri were not the only ones taken aback.

Basara also looked with a flabbergasted expression at the intrusion as the girl commanding an iron-ribbed fan in each hand *blocked every dagger that he had thrown*.

"Kagura? Why are you—?"

"I don't know." Speaking brusquely, she lowered the fans. "My body moved of its own accord. It's quite aggravating, but, big sister...it seems that for some reason I don't want you to die."

"Eh?"

".....I'm sorry," Kagura apologized and lowered her voice. Her back was still turned to Eiri. "When I learned that you could not kill, after denouncing you...I was probably lying the whole time. About hating you and about scorning you. About not admiring you and not thinking you were important... I just continued to be stubborn, probably, I don't know." Just like when Eiri had confessed for the first time that she didn't want to kill—Kagura, too, gave voice to feelings that she had kept hidden.

"At first I intended to apologize to you right away. It was an honest mistake, your failure that first time. If you were able to kill your

second time, I was planning to apologize. However, you couldn't go through with it...and then the third time, and the fourth time, each time I abused you and missed my chance to apologize... While I was unable to offer any kind words, six years passed."

"Kagura..."

"Will you let me ask you one thing?" Kagura looked over her shoulder at Eiri. "You shrink from murder, do you not?" she asked tensely. "What do you think about me...someone who calmly kills people? Of course, you must have unpleasant feelings toward—"

"Dummy. It's not like that at all."

"Eh?"

"I have loved you just the same ever since you were born, and thought the world of you. Of course I have! You're my precious little sister, after all."

"Big sister—" Kagura's eyes opened wide. She looked down for a moment as if restraining herself.

"Is that so? Thank you...and I'm sorry for everything up to now. I like you, too, sister. My tenderhearted big sister, so kind that she cannot snatch away a person's life."

Still a bit stiff, her cheeks relaxed. It was the first time Kyousuke had seen Kagura smile since he and the others had come to House Akabane.

—*Clapclapclapclapclapclapclapclap.*

Kagura stiffened at the mocking applause.

Spreading out his hands, Basara spoke theatrically. "My, my. Congratulations on your reconciliation! Your big brother is deeply moved... The six-year sisterly quarrel finally comes to an end. Truly,

you've shown me something great! I feel like my heart has been washed clean. And they all lived happily ever after. They stopped Kyousuke's murder, and everyone returned home on good terms! Is that it? My word! But...you didn't really think it could end like that, did you?"

His smile abruptly faded, and though his frivolous air remained, his eyes displayed brutality. "You two...aren't both of you sisters being too lenient? With the eldest and second daughters of House Akabane in such sorry states, the Akabane name will fall into the dirt. At this juncture I, as the eldest son, must correct the state of things without a moment's delay! I've determined that I must put Kyousuke to the sword as planned and half kill both Eiri and Kagura. Your big brother will whet your blunted souls."

Basara folded his arms slightly, gripping the concealed weapons that were hidden in his sleeves.

"...Hmph." Kagura readied her fans. "If you can, that is. I'll beat you at your own game, big brother Basara—"

"Stand down." Gently pushing aside the furious Kagura, Eiri advanced forward.

"...Big sister?"

Eiri smiled at the puzzled Kagura. "I'll settle this alone. I'm entrusting Kyousuke to you."

"Huh?! Hey, Eiri...," Kyousuke called.

"Understood."

...Is this okay?

Kagura nodded in assent faster than Kyousuke could ask. "He won't sustain a single injury. You do not need to worry about us, so please fight with all your heart."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"...Oh? That's quite some confidence. I mean, certainly your abilities are outstanding, even among we Akabane. However, unfortunately—" Basara's bloodlust was palpable. "While you were rotting and rusting away, I've been working in the field the whole time. Eight years. Eight years of cutting down countless people and soaking up an immense quantity of blood... My blades have been honed on the point between life and death. And you, who can't even kill a single person, are going to take me down? How amusing. Ha-ha-HA! It's a masterpiece—hey!"

As he laughed, Basara whipped his arms out of his sleeves. The knives, flying as fast as bullets, were impossible to see. Their number, trajectory, angle, and direction obscured by the darkness, the swarm of concealed weapons closed in from top and bottom, left and right.

"...Fwah."

Eiri yawned as she *casually evaded each and every one*. Head tilted, ponytail swaying, bending and twisting at the waist, holding a sleeve up, ducking and weaving at a varied pace, lifting her feet and stamping them back down, sounding her geta sandals against the ground, she closed in on Basara. Guiding every flowing movement of her slim physique, perfectly manipulating every single joint from the tips of her extremities all the way to her core, Eiri slipped through the heavy rain of blades.

"Guh... Don't make light of me, Rusty Nail!!" Basara bellowed, flustered, and poured on his attacks again and again. However, the result was the same. Basara's bullet-like blades flew through the air without so much as grazing Eiri's body.

"—Huh?"

Instead, they rained down on Kyousuke, who, standing in the background, could scarcely believe his eyes. However, Kagura wielded her fans without a moment's hesitation, and those, too, were knocked away. They flashed and twinkled with each stroke, as if they were

dancing.

The two sisters were both unbelievable acrobats.

However, Basara was not so easily defeated.

“Peck, Flamingo!”

Immediately after firing off a throwing dagger from his right sleeve, he drew a red sickle and chain from his left. Eiri nimbly stooped to avoid the blade as it carved an arc that would have mowed through her neck.

The next instant, Basara pulled on the chain. The blade that had passed her just a moment before came rocketing back, attacking Eiri from outside her field of vision. At the same time, he drew a second sickle and chain and tried to trap her in a pincer attack.

His pale pink lips curved into the shape of a crescent moon.

“Ha! Got you—”

“Too slow.”

Eiri burst into motion. Kyousuke tried to follow the action from a distance, but it was all happening too fast.

“Shit, a sudden change—”

Eiri, who in an instant slipped into Basara’s blind spot, bounced off the ground and closed in on him.

“Sever, Suzaku!”

Before Basara could draw a new weapon, Eiri ran the nails on her right hand from his inseam to the top of his head in a long vertical stroke. Next was her left hand, right foot, left foot—four attacks, all in the space of an instant.

“……?!”

Basara fell on his backside as the blades flashed just a skin's breadth away from him. *Shuriken* and *chakram*, throwing knives and blades, and other concealed weapons spilled out from his torn sleeves and hems and scattered on the ground.

Looking down at her astonished brother, Eiri brushed her hair back. "It's my win, isn't it, big brother?"

"Ha...ha-ha...s-so it is. Looks like it's your victory—*fwah!!*"

With his mouth Basara spit an ultra-mini blade like a blow dart. Eiri tilted her head to dodge it, then brought her geta down on Basara's cheek.

"Guh! Buh?!"

"Please stop your pitiful struggles. It's futile."

"Flap—"

"I said it's futile."

"Guh?!"

Trampling on her fallen brother's face, Eiri grinned. "It's my win, isn't it, big brother?"

"……I lose," Basara answered in a powerless voice, finally relenting.

Eiri exhaled as if in disgust and removed her foot from Basara's face. Kyousuke still had the feeling that he was dreaming as he stared absently at her figure. "I-incredible... Was she always that strong?"

"Of course."

Kagura closed her iron-ribbed fans and threw her chest out proudly. "My big sister's a prodigy, you know. Though her weakness is that she's just too kind and can't help but go easy on people... When she really goes for it, this is the result. There's no one who can stand a chance against her." Her expression was bright, and she looked like a

different person from the Kagura they had seen before. Eyes narrowed as if she was looking at something radiant, she stared at Eiri.

"...Wh-what should we do? Restrain big brother just in case—?"

"Aah?! Found them, found them—it's the runaways! You're all under arreeest!"

A boisterous voice interrupted Eiri's words. Renko and Ayaka ran toward them at full speed, with Busujima in tow.

"Oh, wonderful! You really shocked us... We got so caught up with the Bon dance, before we knew it you had simply disappeared. You nearly made a getaway... Oh, huh? Looking around, it seems like there was something of a quarrel, but could it be that we've arrived too late?"

"Yeah, it's over. While you were off having a good time, we were caught in a struggle for life and death—"

"O-oooo-oveeer?! But what did you do with the...you know, stuff?! I want you to give me all the juicy details!! *Kksshh!*"

"We thought it was suspicious when you didn't come back, big brother, and when we tried to make a report... But to find you two out in the open air...well, there are some things you can do and some you should not, Eiriiiiii!!"

"Huh?! Idiot, it's not like that!" Eiri furiously protested Renko and Ayaka's accusations. "My brother Basara was trying to attack Kyousuke, so Kagura and I protected him! If we hadn't stopped him, there's no doubting that he would have killed Kyousuke, so how about some thanks?!"

"————"

Renko and Ayaka suddenly froze and stared at Basara, who was

still lying on the ground.

"Ah, Miss Renko!" Basara's face brightened, and he spread his arms. "Eiri is so cruel, really! She tore me to pieces. Comfort me with your voluptuous breasts, Renko baaaby!"

"Die, gay boy."

Renko kicked Basara with all her strength.

"Keep your hands off my big brother, homo."

Ayaka landed a dropkick on his face.

"Ehh?! Wait, no...I like girls just like normal—aaaaaahhh!!"

Basara frantically tried to explain, eyes darting back and forth in confusion, but Renko and Ayaka did not listen. With a chorus of angry shouts and geta impacts, they showered Basara in blows.

"If you want to do it with Kyousuke, you'd better ready yourself to get done in by meee!!"

"Let's smash his groin so that he can never lay his hands on big brother again!"

Eiri and Kagura quickly joined in.

"Even better, he can die right here!"

"For the crime of mocking my big sister, I sentence you to pulverization, big brother Basara!"

Before long Basara was rendered completely immobile. By the time Kyousuke reached him, his eyes were rolled back, and he was unconscious.

"H-how cruel..."

"Not really," Eiri answered nonchalantly. "He deserved it." Bringing

her hand to Kyousuke's injured cheek, she stroked it slowly. "I'm just glad you were unharmed...really glad."

"Eiri—"

"It's early yet to be relieved, big sister." Kagura cut into the conversation. She glanced at Basara—who was still suffering under Renko's and Ayaka's repeated kicks, despite having lost consciousness—and continued with a meek expression, "We don't know what Lady Fuyou will say after hearing about what happened here. At best, exile...at worst, immediate decapitation. I think it's best to prepare yourself."

X X X

"...I see."

Kyousuke and Eiri kneeled before Fuyou in a guest room in the Akabane mansion. Renko, Ayaka, and Busujima were lined up behind them, while Kagura and Basara were stationed on either side of Fuyou.

After returning from the Bon dance, Kyousuke and the others had finished treating their wounds, bathed, and were now, a short time later, explaining the circumstances to Lady Fuyou.

"Not that you 'can't kill' but that you 'don't want to kill'... In other words, you no longer desire to become an assassin, and you have no intention of succeeding me in House Akabane—that's what you want to say, is it, Eiri?"

"……Y-yes."

"Understood."

Nodding, Fuyou took a sip of green tea and was silent.

"Um, Lady Fuyou...would you please pardon my big sister? I know that you had high hopes for her. I also understand your feelings of

disappointment. However, well...if she herself has no desire to kill, couldn't you say it would be futile to force her...?"

"————"

Fuyou did not give the slightest response.

"Excuse me!"

Kagura rose halfway to her feet. Leaning her body off the cushion where she was seated, she peered into her mother's face. "I'll work hard to fill my big sister's shoes! I'll refine my techniques, surpass my big sister, and become an elite assassin so that you, Lady Fuyou, can relax and leave the rest to me! So...so I'm begging you. Please forgive my big sister! I won't go so far as to say I wish you wouldn't disown her. Just please pardon her from corporal punishment or death—"

"What are you saying?" Fuyou opened her closed eyes. With irises the color of fresh blood, she stared down at Kagura. "There is no need to do anything like that, is there?"

".....Huh?" Kagura was bewildered by her mother's smile.

Fuyou shifted her gaze to Eiri.

"I understand, Eiri," she announced in a tone of voice no different from usual. "If you do not wish to kill people, I won't make you do it anymore. Nor will I force you to succeed me. You find the thing that you want to do, *and live the way you want to live*."

".....Huh?!"

Everyone in the guest room wore an expression of disbelief. For a moment, Eiri remained tense and on edge. It took some time for her to wake from the shock. "U-umm...that is, in other words...what do you mean?" she eventually asked, timidly.



“Exactly what I said! You don’t have to kill anyone. There also is no need for you to succeed me as head of House Akabane. Having said that, I have no intention of expelling you from the family.”

“...Eh? No, but...um, Mother? I can’t become an assassin! Doesn’t that mean you should abandon me? A useless defective like me—”

“Eiri.” Fuyou called her name as if rebuking her. A sigh escaped her lips, which were the same sanguine hue as her eyes. “You are my precious daughter, my own flesh and blood, who I suffered to bring into the world! To abandon you would be... Stop joking around. The Akabane are certainly a family of assassins. We give children born into that lineage a gifted education in the art of murder and raise them such that they will become assassins. However...don’t you think it’s too extreme to say that children who do not become assassins are useless and unneeded?”

“But...you tried so hard to make me kill, Mother—”

“Because you wanted to.”

“Eh?”

“Eiri, did you not say it yourself? ‘I want to kill, but I can’t kill,’ you said. That’s why I tried everything I could think of to somehow get you to take a life. I enrolled you in Purgatorium Remedial Academy, hoping that you would find some encouragement by spending time with murderers your own age. If you don’t want to kill, I have no intention of pressuring you to do so.”

“Mother—”

Eiri was overcome with surprise at Fuyou’s true meaning. The mother who she had thought was wicked had, in reality, only wanted to grant her child’s wish. In that instant, she seemed to have genuinely good intentions. However—

“...Was putting Kyousuke’s life at stake also part of your plan to

help me learn to kill? Would the lives of outsiders mean nothing to you, so long as you could make that happen?"

"Yes," Fuyou immediately answered. "Professional assassins, if we believe it to be necessary, will take a life without hesitation."

Fuyou's calm explanation only illustrated her reasoning to be fundamentally out of alignment with polite society. It was not without its own kind of logic, but it was totally out of *alignment*. Murder, to her, was nothing more than one possible means to an end. Common sense, ordinary morals, and ethics never even entered the equation.

"But in your case, Kyousuke...in a sense, I can hardly call you a complete outsider. After all, I expect that you may be the one to marry Eiri in the future—*and become a member of House Akabane*. I did not order them to try to kill you only for the sake of getting Eiri to take a life, you know."

"……Eh?"

Kyousuke's and Eiri's pupils shrunk to the size of pinpricks.

Fuyou held a hand over her mouth and chuckled. "What do you think allowed House Akabane to become such a noted family of assassins? The deadly education that our children receive from the first moment they can understand it? The secret assassination techniques honed to lethal perfection? The method of refining inherited steel handed down through the generations?" She smiled. "No—it's *blood*."

A thin red line suddenly appeared on Fuyou's right cheek. Thick blood oozed from the narrow wound. "Our lineage of assassins has been fostered over twenty-nine generations. We partner people with outstanding qualities and eliminate those who show no promise. Depending on the situation, that can mean pairing blood relatives, but through this careful cultivation we breed perfect killers. No matter how many times you strike inferior iron, you can only achieve inferior strength... On the other hand, the blades of the Akabane boast

unparalleled edges, forged from meticulously refined high-purity steel. Therein lies the difference between one of our weapons and a mass-produced inferior blade."

Fuyou stared pointedly at Busujima. The program at Purgatorium Remedial Academy was designed to recycle a jumble of good and bad murderers into assassins, the very act of mass-producing cheap goods—perhaps she had intended some offense. Busujima, a teacher at the academy, smiled ingratiatingly, as if embarrassed.

Ignoring the blood running down her cheek, Fuyou continued on. "That's exactly why...we carefully choose our children's partners. To ensure that their blood—that their genes—offer something of value to the Akabane clan. They must be free of any impurity. It is essential to be sure of this. That is why we put it to the test. To see whether Kyousuke could survive if my children tried to kill him, you see? *If he was the sort of person who could be so easily killed, the Akabane would have no need of him*."

Kyousuke's blood ran cold. Though her demeanor suggested that she would not even kill a bug, Fuyou had said the unthinkable.

"However, you survived...and for now you have passed the trial to become Eiri's husband. I'm truly delighted. It comes as no surprise, of course, considering that the academy wanted its hands on your incredible talents badly enough to frame you for murder—I was correct after all to invite you here. Ho-ho! I extend my warmest welcome to you. Come back as a bridegroom anytime, won't you, Kyousuke?"

"Ha...ha-ha..." Kyousuke could only smile stiffly.

"Wait a minute," Basara, who had held his tongue up to that point, cut in. He screwed up his bruised face and glared at Kyousuke. "Even if he did survive, it wasn't because of his own ability, right? When I attacked the boy, he did nothing but allow others to protect him... Accepting him on that basis is a little too rash, I think." Basara stood, tucking his hands into his sleeves. "In any event, I should test him

again right here—”

“Stand down,” Fuyou chided.

Instantly, Basara froze. Half-risen, he did not so much as budge. Shallow cuts formed on his forehead and left cheek, beside his right eye and on the tip of his nose. Thin lines of blood trickled down his face.

Fuyou scolded him in a quiet voice. “I’ve given my approval, Basara. Do not interject.”

“……S-sorry.”

“And do not move without my instruction. Understood?”

“…Yes.”

Satisfied with his response, Fuyou moved her left ring finger and right middle finger, and Basara crumpled to the floor.

“My son was rude…but please be at ease. I will not allow meddling from the others. Because on this estate, *my blades stretch to every nook and cranny*. If there is any suspicious movement, I can sense it, and I can lacerate with but a finger.”

“Ah…” Kyousuke reflexively looked around the room but couldn’t see anything like that anywhere.

“It’s useless,” Eiri spoke up. “Mother’s special weapon—the razor wires Shijuukara are as thin as hairs. You won’t notice them unless you search for them from close-up. And yet, they are extraordinarily sharp.”

“…Seriously?”

There was no defense against something like that. What cut Fuyou’s cheek earlier and wounded Basara must have been the aforementioned steel threads. It seemed that she could attack entirely

at her leisure.

It was the weapon nicknamed the Crimson Cradle. It was said that, manipulating these invisible blades at will, she could instantly cut her target up into hunks of meat. Living up to her reputation as the head of House Akabane, she was an unparalleled assassin.

Even Busujima trembled. "...I wouldn't want to come around here as an enemy."

Fuyou smiled gently and picked up her teacup. "Ho-ho. Assassination is, first of all, a matter of stealth, isn't it? In most cases they notice you as they are dying. Once targeted by an Akabane blade, no one can escape death."

Draining her cup of green tea, Fuyou quietly cast her eyes downward, apparently deep in thought as she enjoyed the aroma of the tea leaves. "Even so, my husband tried ten times to outdo me. My husband the bodyguard and I had a bitterly hostile relationship... again and again our meetings turned into conflicts. And before I knew it, he had slain my heart. Ho-ho..."

...That phrase seems familiar somehow.

Behind Kyousuke and Eiri, Renko and Ayaka were chatting. "... Could it be the inspiration behind *Assassin's Love*?" "Or maybe they just had the same train of thought," "Like parent like child," "Like parent like child, yeah. Tee-hee," and so on, but Fuyou continued her reminiscence without paying them any heed.

"At first, he stubbornly refused, but he eventually gave in to my persistent attacks—or rather, my enthusiasm, and finally I was able to bring him into the family as an adopted son-in-law. His face and body turned bright red as my expert blades made him into fine sashimi. He was confined to House Akabane—or rather, welcomed into it—his heart slain by my passionate torture—or rather, proposal—which led, of course, to our marriage. My dear Masato was truly the hot-and-cold type, and wouldn't be so easily tamed! Ho-ho-ho."

"....."

For nearly an hour after that, Fuyou told them everything about her husband. It was hard to tell exactly what was going on in Fuyou's mind, but she sounded less like a girl in love and more like a demented stalker. Eiri's father had tried to (coldly) resist, but his willpower had been sapped away by (heated) violence... It seemed more like assault than courtship.

Even so, she said, their father couldn't help but shower affection upon his precious children.

"About your father, Eiri...he was always worried about you. He said, 'That one's too nice.' He said you probably weren't the kind of person who could take the life of another. He asked me that, if in the future you wanted to choose a different path—something other than the path of an assassin—to allow it. I couldn't tell you until now, but that was your father's last request."

"*Fwah*...huh?" Bored by Fuyou's reminiscence, Eiri had been yawning. "F-Father's...last request?" she stammered, looking utterly confused.

"Yes. Six years ago, the night before he headed out on his last assignment—he was worried about his daughter, who was to become an assassin very soon. I do not understand the reason why you would stifle your true feelings and try to become an assassin anyway. However, Eiri...it was not your father's only hope that you become a splendid assassin. He would not be disappointed even if you didn't choose that path. I don't think he wanted you to seek revenge at all... That's why, Eiri, there is no need for you to feel *guilty* toward your father because you cannot kill."

"......?!"

The moment she heard Fuyou's words, Eiri's eyes opened wide. She covered her mouth with both hands. Her rust-red eyes quickly blurred, and she hid her face in her hands. "Oh—" The lump in her chest that had been there ever since she had confessed her true

feelings to Kagura and Fuyou finally dissolved, and she burst into tears. It was like the breaking of a dam.

"Big sister…," Kagura uttered painfully.

"There, there…" Fuyou smiled bitterly.

"…Hmph," Basara snorted.

Renko sighed, *"Kksshh…"*

"Big brother!" Ayaka prodded Kyousuke, who timidly stretched his hand out toward Eiri and gently rubbed her back. An unwitting smile spread across his face.

Obon: the time when one's ancestors could return. Eiri's father was probably also smiling with relief as he looked down upon his daughter.



"...You're really all right?"

It was just past noon, two days after the fray at the Bon dance. Kyousuke and the others stood in front of the main gate of the Akabane estate, preparing for their departure.

"Yes, Mother," Eiri answered, nodding forcefully.

"I see...ho-ho. All right, then. As long as it's what you've decided, Eiri."

...Dropping out of Purgatorium Remedial Academy.

That had been Fuyou's suggestion upon learning that Eiri had chosen not to be an assassin. Since Fuyou had paid to enroll Eiri at the academy in the first place, it seemed that, unlike the other students, she was free to leave. After all, if there was no need for her to kill people, then there was no need for her to go to a school for murderers.

And yet, Eiri had refused. She wanted to graduate together with everyone, she had said. Also—

"There is someone who I want to protect."

Eiri's answer had been clear.

Her little sister Kagura had strongly opposed the idea. Kagura had spent the time since trying frantically to persuade her older sister otherwise. It seemed as though she'd finally given it up, but...

"Big sister, please take care of yourself, okay? Not only against injury but colds and illnesses as well... And if that bunch of shitheads

does or says anything to you, just let me know. I'll make every one of them into mincemeat for you! And while I'm at it I'll make hamburger out of any teacher who raises their hand to you. Speaking of which, the food there is awful, too, isn't it...? Should we pressure them from the Akabane side and make them change the menu for you? And, and—"

"You worry too much."

"Ow! ...That hurt."

Kagura glared bitterly at Eiri, who had hit her on the forehead with a well-placed chop. Ever since they had reconciled, Kagura had dropped her prickly posturing in favor of fawning over Eiri almost nonstop.

"Tee-hee. She's a hopeless sister-complex case, that Crappy Kagura. Eww."

"I don't want to hear it from you, Offal Ayaka. Do you want me to gut you right here?"

"Hey, hey..."

Kyousuke balked at the girls, who were still spewing venom at each other. Their relationship had not improved a bit since the moment they had met. It seemed that it would still take some time for things between them to mend.

Kagura glanced at him with half-closed eyes. "Don't 'hey, hey' at me. Pull yourself together."

"Eh...me?"

"Yes, you. My big sister is surprisingly fragile, so it's up to you to be her support. If she gets hurt, I will never forgive you."

"O-oh..."

Kagura was as severe as always toward Kyousuke.

"I have not yet deemed you acceptable, after all. Do not let Lady Fuyou's approval go to your head, understand? If you're to become my big sister's husband, you need to be ready for anything. Specifically, you'd better be ready to face death at my hands!"

"Hey, hey, wait just a second! I never said a single word about becoming her husband—"

"Are you implying that she's not good enough for you?" Kagura placed one hand on her iron-ribbed fan.

"Eh?! No, um, that's not what I—"

"That's right, that's right! Kyousuke has his heart set on someone named Renko Hikawa! What do you think you're doing, disregarding the number one contender for his bride—me?!"

"It's true! Eiri certainly did earn some points, but she doesn't compare to Renko. And when it comes to my big brother's marriage, all decisions go through Ayaka first!"

"...I, uh, think they should probably go through *me* first. My mind's not made up anyway." Kyousuke scratched his head at Renko and Ayaka's squawking. "Sorry about all this... You must be pretty annoyed, too, Eiri. I mean, having a guy like me forced on you as a candidate for marriage. Setting aside my own feelings, when I think about yours—"

"Not really." Eiri casually interrupted Kyousuke's apology. She stood hugging her Pooh Bear close, intending to take him back with her to the student dorms.

"I a-actually...don't mind?"

She blushed.

Kyousuke, who had been sure that she would respond with “It’s really a bother. You should just die,” was bewildered by Eiri’s apparently favorable reaction. “No, no. If you say that, it sounds like you’d be all right with having me as your husband.”

“Yeah.”

“Wh-what do you mean ‘yeah’...?”

Kyousuke understood her less and less.

Eiri squeezed her bear even harder. Burying the tip of her nose in Pooh Bear’s forehead, she fidgeted bashfully. “I’ve decided, based on recent events, that I’m going to stop being so obstinate and be more honest. I’ve come to understand that trying to hide what I really think is not a good way to live...and so I’ve thought it over and...my feelings for you, well I...d-don’t hate you, it seems. So, well...as long as it was all right with you, I wouldn’t really mind? ...Wh-what do you think, Kyousuke? Would you hate it if I were your...bride?”

“Eh—”

The destructive power of her words took Kyousuke’s breath away. The surprise attack made his mind go blank.

Yet Eiri’s expression was enthusiastic as she looked at him with upturned eyes. He didn’t feel any of her usual barbs. Rather, her nervous expression was gentle and sweet.

Kyousuke felt his own face grow hot as his eyes darted back and forth. “Th-that’s...umm, well you see...” Eiri and Kagura and Fuyou and every member of House Akabane were intently watching him blush. A cold sweat broke out on Kyousuke’s back. “T-to have someone like Eiri as my bride, t-to be honest—”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh?! Oh noooooooooooooooooooooo!!” Renko screamed deliberately. She grabbed Kyousuke’s right hand and started pulling. “Oh no, it’s already so late! If we don’t get going, we’ll be late! Hurry up, Kyousuke! Come on, quickly! We don’t have time

for sappy good-byes! *Fnnkksshh!*”



“Huh?! Hey, just a—”

“Aaaaaahhh! She’s right—this is bad!” Ayaka grabbed his left hand. “We’re pressed, pressed, seriously pressed for time! If we don’t leave right away, we won’t make it!! Hurry, hurry, big brother!”

Ayaka and Renko together began dragging him out through the gate.

Busujima checked his wristwatch. “No, we’re still just fine. There’s really no need to hurry—buh?!”

Renko shut her teacher up with a powerful body blow. “Come now, Eiri. You hurry, too! Surely you don’t want to face Miss Kurumiya’s discipline?!” she said as she and Ayaka continued to manhandle Kyousuke away.

“Y-yeah...well...” Mumbling indecisively, Eiri turned to Fuyou. “Well, I’m going now, Mother. Um...thank you very much! It seems I misunderstood you. I thought you were more of a frightening person, so...I’m sorry.” She bowed her head.

Fuyou covered her mouth and softly laughed. “Ho-ho. I don’t care about all that. There’s no denying that I can be quite ruthless. However, Eiri...you are my beloved daughter, born of me and your father, whom I loved. Never forget that.”

“Yes, Mother...”

“—And...” Fuyou lowered her voice and narrowed her eyes. The color of fresh blood stared at the girl wearing the black gas mask. Bringing her lips close to Eiri’s ear, she whispered, *“Don’t lose, all right?”*

“.....Yes.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be an easy victory for my big sister. If she makes a serious effort, it’ll be an instant kill... You should teach them a

lesson. Show them your charm and strength."

"Ah-ha-ha...r-right? Okay, I'll give it my best."

"Good. But it'll be lonely with only that boy to take care of you, so... come home once in a while, okay? I will hold the day when I can see you again in my heart."

"Sure. Me too. Be well, Kagura!"

"Okay. You be well yourself—"

Leaving Pooh Bear on the ground, Eiri embraced her sister. Kagura embraced Eiri back, and they pressed their cheeks together lovingly.

"My, my." Fuyou smiled and waved her hand at Kyousuke and the others. "Everyone, thank you for your visit. Come again any time, all right? Kyousuke, you come back as a groom for certain. Ho-ho-ho."

"Ha...ha-ha..."

"Please take care of my daughter." Fuyou bowed very deeply, and Kyousuke could only respond with a stiff smile.

A noted family of the criminal underworld, famous for their great number of assassins. With that seal of approval from the family head, Kyousuke felt his life drifting further and further away from normalcy...



"*Ahhhh*, this is sheer bliss. It feels so good…"

—Meanwhile, across the ocean from Japan, in a certain country, in a certain location, in a certain luxury hotel, lying sprawled on a towel-covered bed, Reiko Hikawa enjoyed a luxurious massage.

She was not wearing a stitch of clothing. Rugged hands like rocks caressed her soft skin, made even softer by slippery essential oils. From her narrow waist, up to her shoulder blades…

As the masseur moved back and forth, skillfully applying his strength, he melted away the exhaustion accumulated in the course of the day.

Reiko inhaled the aroma of chamomile, which closely resembled apples. She breathed deeply through her nostrils, drinking in the heady scent.

"…Hey, you. What the hell have you been doing this whole time?" Coming from the cell phone on top of the table, a lisping Lolita voice interrupted the background music.

Facing the device set to speaker mode, Reiko answered in a carefree tone, "Getting a massage. I'm right in the middle of it, in fact, in the hotel's very best suite room, having my fill of the very best sweet time!"

"I see. How nice to have that kind of status…well, whatever. Hurry up and say what you needed to say. You're the one who called me, so you must have something important on your mind."

"Yep. The truth is, Hijiri dear…I have a very important request for you."

"...Hm."

"Won't you help me out?" she asked, an edge to her voice.

The answer came back right away. *"Of course. If there's anything I can do, please tell me."*

"...Thank you. Then, I'd like to ask—" She paused. In the quiet, the masseur's hands moved from her back to her shoulders. The huge palms, nearly twice the size of Reiko's, massaged her stiff muscles with expert skill.

If only time could stop just like this...

"...Hey. How long are you planning to wait?"

"Huh?! Sorry, the massage felt too good, and I...spaced out. Anyway, what were we talking about?"

"About your request, moron! Piss off and die!"

"I said I'm sorry. Don't get so upset. You'll build up stress!"

"...Hmph, thanks to you. I'm having a miserable time every day during Mohawk's supplementary lessons. I'm the one who needs a massage."

"Ah-ha-ha. That must be the problem child you mentioned before! He's head over heels for you, is he...? Hee-hee. You two are far more compatible than I anticipated, you know? I'm sure you'll make a good couple."

"————————————"

"……Hijiri?"

*"*Don't say that again. *I know you were probably kidding, but I won't let you get away with that shit."* Like an echo from the depths of hell, Kurumiya's menacing voice was dark and angry. Talk of that particular student awakened a terrible wrath engraved deep upon her

heart.

"Eee?! S-sorry..."

"—And? What's the thing you wanted to ask me?"

"Ah, umm, that's...well... It's no big deal, though."

"I don't mind. Hurry up and say it."

"Y-yeah...but I'd like you to hear me out without getting angry, okay?"

"Sure. Don't mind my slip just now; I promise it won't happen again. I won't get angry anymore. It's you and me, right? You can be honest with me, Reiko."

"I want you to sing a song for me."

".....What did you say?"

"I said, I want you to sing me a song in your cute, soothing voice. You know how they always play background music during a massage? I want to hear you instead of that."

"—Anything else?"

"Nope."

"....."

"Oh, one thing, it looks like I'll be able to come there around next month... That's about it. Now about my first request, surely—"

"I refuse."

"Ehhhhhhhh?! No waaayyy! You said, 'If there's anything I can do,' didn't you? Just now?! Why won't you help me oooouuut?!"

"As if I would help you with that, dumbass! Unlike you, idling your

carcass in the spa, I'm busy… Listen to your favorite music on your own, bitch! Is this conversation over? If so, I'm hanging up, slacker."

"Ah, wait! Wait, Hijiri dear! You don't have to sing, but at least talk to me… I want you to soothe my ears with your sweeeeeet Lolita voice—whaaaaaaa?!"

Reiko's body was suddenly flipped faceup. The masseur, who had mostly finished loosening up her back side, had taken more essential oils in hand and started working on the opposite side. He spread the oil without hesitation onto her bust, which had been pressed between the bed and her body—over her voluptuous breasts, which could not fit in even his enormous hands.

"Ehh?! You're going there now?! Just a—eeeeeekkk!"

"……Later."

"Aaah, stooop! Cut it ooooooout! Please wait! Wait, Hijiriiiiiiiiiii!"

—*Click*. Ignoring Reiko's pleas, she hung up the phone.

"……"

The masseur continued silently massaging Reiko's body, which had gone slack. From her chest to her collarbone, from her collarbone down her arms, from her arms to her fingertips—Reiko looked up at the masseur as he left no part of her body unattended.

He stood more than six feet tall, with muscles like steel. The GMK48 band T-shirt that he wore looked as if it might burst at any moment. His massively muscled body *was completely covered with tattoos*, from the ends of his extremities to the underside of his chin.

"Heh-heh. I taught you this just the other day, but you've already mastered it, have you? You really have amazing learning abilitiiieees! What will you learn next?"

"……"

The mute man did not respond to Reiko's words.

His face, as he silently continued his mistress's massage, was...

...Wearing an ivory-white gas mask.

"But that's great, isn't it, Renji? It sounds like I can get them to let you come with me. If you do a good job for just a little longer, you can see your beloved *older sister*. Won't that be fun?"

"....."

As before, Renji did not respond. However, the touch of his hands seemed to grow somehow gentler as he continued the massage.

Reiko closed her ice-blue eyes. "I'm looking forward to it, too, Renji...because even among GMK48—among 'murderers' murders'—you two are the children I feel especially attached to. I want to see her soon... I have to see her and get rid of him. Get rid of *that undesirable clinging to my daughter*."

Surrendering her body to her own child's fingers, she fell into a deep slumber.

Psycome 4: Murder Anniversary and the Reverse Memorial / End

AFTERWORD Master of Ceremonies

Hello, or perhaps nice to meet you. I am Mizuki Mizushiro.

In the dead of winter we have the year-end ceremonies, and at the height of summer we have Obon. Eiri graces the cover of Volume 4, which has been sent out without regard to any sense of the seasons. However, she's wearing not a uniform but civilian clothes! Those hot pants are outrageous, aren't they?

Furthermore, this time the story happens in a fixed location, almost like an out-of-continuity issue, and aside from the cover it's quite different from previous volumes. The stage is not set at the academy, the players are not murderers but assassins, the frontispiece is a centerfold, our main heroine, Maina, has been excluded...

Among all these changes, as always I have only one page for the afterword, so I'll move ahead to the thank-yous.

To the person in charge, Ms. Gibu; the illustrator, Namanie; the designers at musicago graphics; the proofreaders; the PR team; my friends; my family; all my relatives; everyone who had anything to do with the publication of this book; the readers who support me by picking up this publication—truly, thank you very much! Thanks to you, it looks as though I will be able to continue the series just a little while longer.

Volume 5 comes out next spring. The Killer Queen and Exalted Executioner and Suited Slayer... Shamaya and all the other upperclassmen will run riot at the athletic festival. At the same time, a certain person who acted behind the scenes of Volumes 3 and 4 will make an appearance on center stage—and with that, see you next time.

Mizuki Mizushiro ~Written while listening to Enter Shikari~


Did you all die of cuteness, too?
Namanie