
Rokakoen
FESTIVAL
OF
HERESIES

Festival of Heresies

Rokakoen

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Festival of Heresies

Rokakoen

Translation by Linda Liu

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Main Characters

Emi Shimamoto:

Twenty-three. Adept at botching job interviews. Manages to land a position at a major corporation, Moriya Foods. However…

Youta Shimamoto:

Emi's older brother. Worried about how strangely his sister has been acting since getting involved with Moriya, he consults the Sasaki Agency.

Rumi Sasaki:

Head of the Sasaki Agency, which deals with paranormal phenomena. Androgynous. In her early thirties, but hard to tell by her looks.

Kouki Aoyama:

Twenty-seven. Rumi's assistant. Good-natured and sensible. Always dragged around at Rumi's pace.

Ishigami:

Medium who is devoted to the Mishaguji deity.
Rumi asks him to rescue Emi.

Monobe:

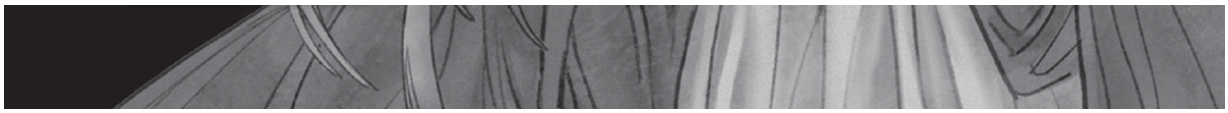
Young shaman living in Shikoku. Rumi goes to him for advice.

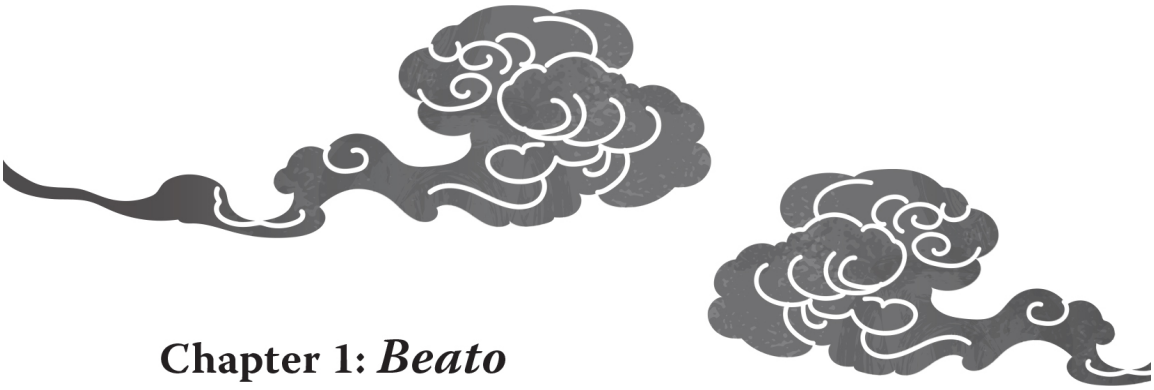
Jan (pronounced *Yahn*):

A slim man. The employees of Moriya Foods treat him as the president.




FESTIVAL
OF
HERESIES





Chapter 1: *Beato*

Three high school girls were chatting excitedly on the train.

"*That's* when Remi broke the news."

"For real? That's crazy."

"Seriously, right? I can't believe it."

Two of them were sitting with their legs stretched out in front of them. The first had a bob, and the second wore her brown hair cut blunt at the ends. The last girl had long black hair and was standing between the others.

"Do you have your club after school?" Bob Hair asked Blunt Cut.

"Nah, I'm free today. Wanna go somewhere?"

"I want pancakes," Black Hair cut in. "Pancakes sound good."

"I'm broke. Let's go to McDonald's," Bob Hair said.

"Same. Plus, there's Wi-Fi," Blunt Cut said.

"'Kay," said Bob Hair.

"I want pancakes. Pancakes!" Black Hair protested.

It was an ordinary scene that could take place anywhere. Most likely, none of the other riders were paying any attention to them, except for Emi Shimamoto.

Emi was listening to the girls' conversation, a dark mood falling over her like a shadow. *Ah, I've been in her shoes so often*, she thought. The entire time, Bob Hair and Blunt Cut had been talking by themselves, ignoring Black Hair completely. Emi didn't know anything about their relationship, but she couldn't help but see herself in Black Hair.

Her mom had given her the name Emi, hoping that she would be

a child with a beautiful smile, and yet she had never once smiled genuinely in her life.

Looking back, her childhood had been fine. Her silent father, cheerful mother, kind brother—several years her elder—and doting grandparents had been her entire world. But that all changed in elementary school.

Everything she did required her to communicate with others.

Emi was not good at speaking or responding. Her classmates and "teachers," the grown-ups who weren't her parents, inspired nothing less than dread in her. She used to huddle in the corner of the classroom alone.

Maybe she could have been considered "quirky" in the city, but that wasn't the case in the countryside, where she had grown up. A gloomy girl like her who never spoke to anyone was a natural target for bullying.

Her classmates would ignore her, scribble in her textbooks, and hide her belongings. At their nastiest, they used to get together and pelt her with balls.

The grown-ups wouldn't defend an unappealing girl like her, either. When Emi hadn't been able to bear the bullying any longer, she turned to a teacher for help, only for them to tell her "It's all in your head" and "They're only joking around." Worse still, her plea for help resulted in a forum being held, during which she was openly bashed. She stopped believing adults. In the end, the bullying continued throughout middle school.

In high school, however, the bullying stopped, and she was even taken in by a group of social butterflies.

A graduate of her school named Yamaike took a liking to her—or more specifically, to her voluptuous figure. He was a well-known "bad boy" in her town, and once he publicly declared his interest in her, the bullying ceased. She was then approached by a clique of girls, who figured they would have more opportunity to talk with Yamaike if she joined the group.

Regardless, it didn't change the fact that Emi was saved.

Yamaike would look after her. Maybe he had taken an interest in her only for her body, but he never tried to force her to go out with

him or have sex. Whenever he ran into her, he would talk to her a little. The two, three words she exchanged with him were all that kept her going. Although she hung around the popular kids, it would be hard to say she got along with them.

The other girls were interested in fashion, romance, and trends. By comparison, Emi was—in a word—bland. Her only interest was shogi; her brother had left his set behind when he had moved to Tokyo.

She tried her best despite knowing she had nothing in common with the others. Against her brother's protest, she dyed her hair brown. She perused magazines for trendy jewelry and accessories and made them herself.

All her efforts were futile.

The others looked at her hair with disgust and said, "Can you not copy us?" They sneered at her beadwork, declared that it reeked of poverty, and threw out her handmade accessories. Nonetheless, Emi didn't protest. She continued to follow the girls around with an ingratiating smile.

In the group, Emi might as well have been air. Unlike in elementary school, she was no longer blatantly ignored or harassed. The others would talk to her. She moved with them between classrooms and during in-school activities. However, they would never listen to her opinions, and while she was one of the group in school, they would never hang out with her outside it.

Her class went to Tokyo for their field trip. When they'd had some free time, Emi's friend group came up with an excuse to get rid of her. She would never forget the five hours she spent at the cafe in Nagatacho, listlessly scrolling on her phone. The memory surfaced occasionally to stab at her heart.

Emi went to college in Tokyo, partially because of her parents' advice. Her mom was originally from Suginami Ward and told her, "Tokyo could be just the place for an introvert like you." Emi had never gone to her mom for help about the bullying or her interpersonal relationships, but it seemed her mom had noticed her struggling anyway.

Fortunately, Emi had decent grades. She qualified for the regional

scholarships offered for academic achievement and was able to enroll in a private college of some repute.

And her mom had been right. In Tokyo, there was no shortage of people with poor communication skills, just like her. She didn't have to get to know her neighbors—no one else bothered—and while she had a little trouble with group projects, she was managing to survive college one way or another. She worked part-time at a busy restaurant located near a major publishing company, where communication ability came second to how fast one could serve and clear plates and prepare food. Thank goodness she'd moved to the city.

Emi didn't mind studying or homework, either. Her grades were good, and her job brought her a sense of purpose. She felt fulfilled, more so than she ever had before. She might not have had friends, but she had her brother, who had moved to Tokyo before her. He was already working, so he had money, and he would show Emi around the city. She didn't feel lonely at all.

However, her idyllic existence came to an end the summer of her junior year. That was when job hunting started. She had assumed that everything would work out as long as she had a strong academic history and qualifications. By the time she realized her naïveté, it was too late.

She figured it out during her internship. Her classmates who had worse grades, partied every day, and only attended the bare minimum of their classes were considered much more of an "asset" than she was. They worked with enthusiasm and were well liked by their coworkers.

On the last day of her internship, one of the full-time employees told her something she would never forget: "If you're not interested, you don't have to force yourself to work here. There are plenty of other companies."

Her timidity had been chalked up to lack of motivation.

Emi asked her brother for advice and started practicing for interviews. She read a mountain of psychology books and consulted with a career counselor. Though she threw herself into interviewing, her true disposition always managed to show itself despite her

attempts to change it.

She left a gloomy impression. If the interviewer asked even a single question outside the usual script, she would fall apart. It didn't matter how many companies she applied to. Not one hired her. Thus passed her senior year, and before she knew it, she had already graduated. Job hunting when you were no longer a fresh graduate was unbelievably difficult under the best of circumstances, but when you added Emi's personality to the equation…

Rocked by the motion of the train, Emi was feeling somber as usual today. How many companies had she applied to? She'd stopped counting after fifty.

Her melancholy was only heightened by the presence of the high school girl with the long black hair who reminded her of herself. Bob Hair and Blunt Cut were scrolling on their phones silently, but Black Hair was still trying to strike up a conversation with them.

Emi empathized with that desperate desire to be *seen*. It made her ache with understanding.

"Let's go," Bob Hair said.

"Okay," Blunt Cut said.

"We're going to get pancakes, right?" Black Hair said. "Come on, let's talk."

The two who'd been sitting stood up. At that moment, a key chain–like trinket tumbled out of Bob Hair's bag and rolled to a stop at Emi's feet. It looked like the tail of a black rabbit.

Emi tapped Bob Hair's shoulder and held out the key chain. "You dropped this."

The girl batted away her hand. "What? Are you crazy?" she spat.

Even though Emi had once been that age, too, the savagery of teenage girls still terrified her. Was it because of their baseless assurance that they were right—a trait Emi lacked—that they were able to say such cruel things?

"But you dropped this," Emi said again, trying to keep calm.

Blunt Cut flashed an unsettled look at Emi, tugged forcefully at Bob Hair's hand, and pulled her off the train.

Were all high school girls such mannerless creatures? Had they thought Emi was suspicious? Her appearance was drab, but she

shouldn’t have looked out of place; she was wearing a suit for her interview and a light layer of makeup.

Blunt Cut said sharply to Bob Cut, “You shouldn’t get involved with her kind!”

The two of them glanced back at Emi as they scurried out of sight.

Who would hire a woman whom high school girls were creeped out by?

Today’s interview is going to be another dud, Emi thought with a self-deprecating smile.

She gripped the key chain the girl had dropped. Contrary to its fluffy appearance, it was rough to the touch. It was like it was made of hair—

“Eat pancakes with me,” the black-haired girl said next to her ear. “Let’s get pancakes together.”

Her mouth was stretched in an ear-to-ear grin. She stared fixedly at Emi and repeated, “Eat pancakes with me, pancakes, I’ll follow you, forever and ever together together I’ll follow you follow you follow you follow you—”

Emi could not tell the living from the dead.

She was definitely going to be late to her interview. Despite that, when Emi called ahead to convey this, the receptionist who oversaw the interviewees told her they would continue with the interview anyway.

The black-haired girl was stalking Emi like she had promised. Emi tried to pretend she hadn’t noticed the girl, but she knew it was pointless. That hair ball—she wished she could forget how it had felt—had been a trap.

For as long as she could remember, Emi had been unable to tell the difference between people who were living and people who weren’t.

If the dead looked the way spirits were said to—grotesque, transparent—if there were any hints that made them distinct from the living, then maybe she would be able to identify them. Some were obviously abnormal, but most looked no different from any other human, no different from Emi herself.

Emi was terrified of both speaking to and being spoken to by strangers. Her fear couldn't be blamed entirely on her sensitivity to the supernatural, but it no doubt played a part in why she had been bullied in elementary and middle school. Why she had spent her high school years like she was air. Why she was failing to find a job.

If there was one difference between the living and the unliving, it was that the latter was desperate for conversation. They would harangue with chatter anybody who paid them a sliver of attention. The target of the monologue would find their body growing heavier and heavier. As they spoke, the unliving slowly morphed into the kind of aberrations depicted in horror stories.

Her parents, grandparents, and brother never mocked Emi for her questions as a child and would take them in stride. They had brought her everywhere, from shrines and temples to exorcists, in search of answers. However, she quickly realized it was futile.

Not a single one of them could see the dead.

Once, a famous psychic with a mind-boggling fee came to see her. Emi nearly burst out laughing. The psychic had gone on and on about how Emi was tainted by the grudge of a woman slandered and murdered by one of her family's ancestors, that the spirit was clutching onto her back, and so on, all while facing the wrong direction. Right behind the psychic had stood a middle-aged man with an inflated head, grousing endlessly about his boss.

None of the others had seen anything, either. If they couldn't see the problem, then they surely weren't going to fix it. So no matter how irritating the spirit was, no matter if it had holes for eyes or a mouth split to their ears or exposed brains or a bifurcated head, all Emi could do was swallow her fear and wait for time to pass. It varied case by case, but the majority of the time, the spirits would vanish after a week at most. Luckily—if you could call it that—the worst they did to her was make her tired.

From experience, Emi guessed that the girl with the long black hair who was raving on about pancakes was the persistent type. First, the girl harassed people who couldn't even see her, which made it clear that she was even more starved for human interaction than usual. Also, she was particularly disfigured. She must have been ignored for months, years, or possibly even decades. The girl had needed to resort to laying a trap for Emi to at last stumble across her path.

Emi's body felt abnormally heavy. She could barely stand. She had never felt this way. But being late for an interview was out of the question. She managed to drag herself forward on her hands and knees. In the end, she wound up at the company's doorstep ten minutes later than her scheduled time slot, despite her plans to arrive half an hour early.

The only reason she wasn't in complete despair was because she had given up on passing the interview from the start. She looked up at the building, overwhelmed by its size.

I knew it. Someone who's failed over fifty interviews like me could never make it here, she thought with a sigh.

Besides, Emi wouldn't have been able to focus anyway, not with Pancake Girl around.

She loomed in front of Emi, her mouth gaping wide. "Can we eat pancakes here? Pancakes. Gimme pancakes, please. Yummy, yummy, in my tummy. Gimme, gimme. Chewy, chewy. Just a bite. Please. Listen to me. Listen. Listen listen listen listen li—"

The moment Emi stepped into the building, the girl disappeared, as though she had been vaporized.

"Huh—?" Emi gasped.

Flustered, she stepped back outside. However, Pancake Girl was nowhere to be found. She checked above her, too, but couldn't see her at all.

Maybe Pancake Girl was hiding in the building to lull Emi into a false sense of complacency so she could scare her when she went back inside.

Emi took a deep breath before passing through the automatic doors again.

"Are you Emi Shimamoto?"

At the front desk was a stylish beauty who seemed extremely competent. She told Emi to enter in a cold voice. Emi was too embarrassed to raise her head. Not only was she late, but her suspicious behavior at the entrance must have driven the receptionist past anger and straight to exasperation.

If she's gone, she's gone. Good riddance, Emi thought, pushing the Pancake Girl's disappearance to the back of her mind. She trailed after the receptionist as directed.

When she got in the elevator, she was shocked and intimidated all over again. The building was forty stories from floor to roof. She had really stepped into a different world.

The elevator stopped on the thirty-eighth floor. From there, she proceeded alone to the interview room. As she made her way down the long corridor, she realized her nervousness had completely dissipated. A minute ago, she had been on edge over her tardiness—a catastrophic failure—and the enormity of the office. She had felt cold from head to toe, but now she was warm enough that she had broken into a light sweat.

This floor smelled pleasant. Maybe that was why she was at ease. She had once tried a free treatment at a beauty salon, and the soothing scent in the hall reminded her of the incense the salon had used (at the same time, it also reminded her of the expensive multipack salon passes she had been forced to buy, which killed her good mood).

The mark of large enterprises is their attention to detail, Emi thought appreciatively, taking another deep breath. She felt awake and alert. She hadn't had any hope from the start, but maybe the interview would go well for once. Hope in her heart, she knocked on the door to the interview room.

"Come in," a voice called from inside.

"Excuse me," Emi said.

There were three interviewers, all men: a young man slightly older than Emi, a clean-cut man in the prime of his life, and a portly elderly man. They all had affable smiles on their faces.

"Please take a seat," the young man said.

Emi bowed and apologized for being late, but the interviewers brushed it off with smiles.

Tardiness was normally unacceptable. According to the interview manual, the convention when an interviewee was running late was to inform the company and then give up on it. Her interview was likely just a formality, but they had still rearranged the schedule and were letting her proceed. That alone was more than enough. Why did they have to be so kind, too? She felt like she was going to cry. As she took her seat, she resolved to make it to the end of the interview without embarrassing herself.

The interviewers asked Emi a series of standard questions. All of her answers were by the book and cliché, but the interviewers listened to her intently, their eyes never leaving her face. She forgot all about the interviews she had failed. She was able to relax and answer everything properly. The interviewers watched her with kind eyes like she was their child. It was possible, objectively speaking, that she had a shot.

At the end, the youngest of three asked, "Lastly, do you have any questions for us?"

Emi opened her mouth to respond. At that moment, she was assailed by an overwhelming pressure. "*Ack… Guh…*," she groaned. Her lungs were being squeezed. It was hard to breathe.

"What's wrong?" the man asked.

However, Emi couldn't reply. Breathing hurt. It took everything she had just to open her eyes.

Just barely managing to squint, she glimpsed the door beyond the interviewers ease open. That was where the pressure crushing her lungs was coming from.

"Sir," someone said.

All the interviewers stood up and greeted the visitor, who was apparently the president of the company.

A pair of polished leather shoes—most likely the president's—stepped into the edge of Emi's field of vision. From his perspective, he must have dropped by on a whim only to find a strange woman

hyperventilating.

Emi tried desperately to correct her posture, but breathing was excruciating and standing was impossible.

The leather shoes drew closer. Emi grew more and more panicked. Her behavior was beyond the pale. But what she thought didn't matter. The pulverizing force only grew more intense.

"It's all right," he said.

He has a nice voice, Emi thought.

It was a voice like spring sunshine.

Suddenly, she felt a weight on her head. A hand. The president had laid his hand on her head. Warmth bloomed from his touch. It felt like her blood was circulating through her entire body from that point of contact.

Emi was finally able to take a deep breath. She looked up.

"*Uck*—," she gasped.

She wanted to throw up, but the nausea was unrelated to the pressure that had been battering her until a moment ago.

Emi wasn't looking at the president but at the *monster* floating in front of him.

Its eyes were enormous, cavernous pits that took up over half its face. From its long hair and refined nose and mouth, it was most likely a female spirit, but it was so grotesque that it was hard to believe it had ever been human. It was monstrously misshapen. Beneath its giant head hung crude hands and toylike feet.

Emi had plenty of experience with the unliving, but she had never seen anything as deformed as this. She was so terrified her voice wouldn't come out.

The spirit was close enough for their breaths to mingle. Its hair draped over Emi's face, clinging to her skin.

"Seet. Mee. Hee." The sounds emerged from the monster's puny mouth. *"Seet. Mee. Hee."*

It turned the pitch-black craters of its eyes toward Emi—

"Can you start tomorrow?" The clear voice resounded through the room.

The monster vanished at the same time.

The president, whom Emi could see at last, had a bland appearance, which contrasted with his sonorous voice. He looked completely different from his picture on the company website. The CEO of the company—Moriya Foods—was Hidemitsu Moriya, a man in his sixties with a stern face. But the man before her could not have been more than thirty. In fact, he looked younger than Emi. He could have been a high schooler.

The president removed his glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief from his breast pocket. Without his glasses, his appearance was even less memorable, but for some reason, he left a good impression on Emi.

The next thing she knew, she was already agreeing to his employment offer. She had never made a spontaneous decision before. It normally took her ages to decide. Playing things by ear was beyond her.

Unsurprisingly, the interviewers were troubled by the turn of events as well.

"But we are still in the middle of the interview, sir…," the middle-aged one said.

"Didn't I tell you not to call me *sir*?" the president said.

The interviewer fell silent, his eyes darting about restlessly.

"I finally found you," the president said to Emi. "You are marvelous. I could not be more pleased."

He wrapped Emi's hand in both of his and smiled at her softly. Like earlier, when he had rested his hand on her, warmth flooded from his touch all through her body. She had never felt happier.

Her cheeks were wet; she was crying. When she lifted a finger to wipe away her tears, the president took hold of it gently and blotted her cheek with his handkerchief instead.

"Please call me Jan," he said.

Emi nodded dazedly, filled with joy. Jan. The name sounded Chinese.

Why did the others refer to him as the president when he wasn't? What was the abomination from earlier? At the moment, none of those things mattered.

With her head in a fog, Emi went home and messaged her brother, Youta.

I got an offer. Sorry to worry you.

Where? came the reply.

Moriya Foods, she swiped on the keyboard. Just by pressing *M*, she felt pride so fierce it made her fingers shake.

No one from their hometown would ever have imagined she could land a job at Moriya Foods. She herself found it hard to believe, but as she typed out the company name, fantasy became reality, and she felt happy.

You're lying, Youta replied. A sticker of a cat with a befuddled expression popped up on her screen.

No, I'm not, she messaged back.

Prove it.

Emi took a screenshot of the email with her offer and sent it to him. After a minute, he responded, *I guess I'm convinced, but the time and place are insane.*

The email instructed her to report to work the next day at six in the morning at a location far from the office she had visited. In fact, it wasn't even in Tokyo proper.

The company seems exploitative. Best not, he sent.

Emi responded with a sticker of a girl with a noncommittal smile before tossing her phone on the couch.

So what if she had to go in a little early? They were talking about a workplace that had embraced someone like her. On top of that, Moriya Foods was an elite company and a household name. There weren't any bad rumors about it on the job-hunting forums or the recruitment boards, either.

Emi looked at the clock. It was ten at night. Where had the time gone? Floating in her contented haze, she hadn't noticed the time passing at all. She wasn't even hungry.

The next day, she would have to leave the house at five at the latest. It was time to brush her teeth and go to sleep.

She plugged in her phone to charge it and got ready for bed.

Even after lying down, she found herself thinking about how happy Jan's touch had made her.

When was the last time I felt that way? she wondered, a faint smile playing at her lips as she drifted off to sleep.

The station in the early morning was deserted. Emi stifled a yawn as she boarded her train.

Then it hit her.

She hadn't seen anything that morning. What in the world?

Emi's life was plagued by the unliving. While spirits rarely latched on to her like Pancake Girl had the previous day, as she made a habit of walking with her head down to avoid drawing attention, she had never once gone a day without seeing one.

Between leaving the house and arriving at the station, however, she hadn't run into any.

The dead were starved for conversation, even if they weren't usually as desperate as Pancake Girl. Therefore, they favored crowded places over desolate ones and were always looking for someone to respond to them.

Emi would have understood if there had been fewer of them than usual, but *none* was an abnormality.

On her way to the station, she hadn't even seen the little girl who was always shrieking her head off, fixated on something in the trees on the street.

Perhaps she was finally rid of her abominable, good-for-nothing ability. *That has to be it*, Emi thought, smiling.

She didn't know how or why, but this blessing must be related to her offer from Moriya—to Jan. She couldn't imagine otherwise. The proof was the way Pancake Girl had disappeared when Emi had stepped inside the building.

The office had smelled good. The interviewers had been kind.

The gentle and pure atmosphere around Jan must sanctify the space and ward off the undesirables—the nonhuman and dreadful.

She felt joy come over her as she recalled the warmth of Jan's palm. She had completely forgotten the eerie female spirit that had manifested before he'd touched her head.

"Hey, you."

Emi's good mood was ruined by an old man who sidled up to her without a sound. He must have been at least seventy. Wrinkles were carved into the sunbaked face. It was hard to say if he was indeed a man, but his short, shaved hair suggested he was. He was wearing filthy work clothes and a thin-lipped smile. Given his solid physical presence, he was likely a living human being. A pervert. She pretended she hadn't heard him.

She walked through life shrunk in on herself. Inconspicuous and friendless, Emi had always been a magnet for lechers, especially gropers. They singled her out as the perfect victim. All she could do was adamantly ignore them, the same way she did the unliving, and wait for them to lose interest.

"I know you can hear me," the man said. There was a strange lilt in his speech. Contrary to his disgusting appearance, he smelled fresh and woodsy. She felt no telltale weight on her shoulders, either. He was human.

The man continued, "If you can hear me, that's good enough. Where are you going, my child?"

Why the hell would I tell you? she thought, screwing her eyes closed. Maybe she should pretend she was sleeping.

"I see. ■■■, is it?"

Emi looked up reflexively. The old man had guessed correctly.

"You finally looked at me," he said, still wearing the same faint smile. "■■■… Must you go?"

What's he going on about?

"What indeed? I was simply wondering whether that is really the place for you."

The place for me? I don't get it.

"But if you have to, you have to."

Of course I have to. This is the company that was charitable enough to choose someone like me.

"An employer… I suppose that's just how it is, but it would be better not to, really."

Why is he still talking to me? This geezer's—

Emi was struck by a realization. *She hadn't said a single word the entire time.* Yet they had been conversing.

No way. Is he reading my—?

"I'm worried for you." He was rifling through her mind again.

She was disgusted.

The ingratiating smirk on his face made her want to throw up. That woodsy scent of his, which she had at first thought refreshing, was now only unpleasant.

"Disgusting? How rude. What you'll be doing after this is far more revolting." He did not stop there. "The man is like a…god to you? A god. But you should choose the god you believe in… Since you won't listen to anything I say at this time, however, I'll give you this."

Everything fell into place. He was part of a cult. She attracted zealots and scammers as often as gropers.

Emi didn't know how the man was reading her mind, but he must have been a spiritual salesman. His ploy was to unsettle his victims using honeyed words and prey on their unease to sell his wares.

She was happier than she had ever been, yet here this man was, warning her that it was dangerous for her to go to the person who had shown her such happiness. It was nothing short of malicious.

He had said he was going to give her something. It would probably be an amulet or talisman of some sort, for which he would undoubtedly charge her an absurd amount. She looked back down. Surely, he wouldn't hand her anything as long as she avoided eye contact.

The man seemed persistent, however, considering how he had insistently talked to her even though she had feigned obliviousness. He might refuse to give up and leave the object on the seat instead. If he did, she would walk away from it.

Emi braced herself.

But nothing happened. After what felt like ten minutes had passed, she nervously looked up. The old man had disappeared. She scanned her surroundings, but there was only a handful of other passengers.

She couldn't see anything that he could have given her, either. It

was as if the entire exchange had been an illusion.

Emi decided the old man was one of the unliving. That would explain how he had appeared out of nowhere to harangue her, how he had known what she was thinking, and how he had disappeared without a trace.

There was no way he had been a flesh-and-blood human. She must have been the only one who could see him. Emi tried to convince herself of that over and over again.

Suddenly, she thought back to Jan again.

His warm hand. The joy she had felt after exchanging only two or three words with him.

He had called her marvelous.

Maybe she could open up to him about her ability. He would understand her suffering. He might even tell her that this disposition of hers was wonderful.

Everyone says you're a liar.

The unrecognizable voice tore through her fantasy.

No one believes you. You poor thing.

That was right.

She had always been alone because of her ability. Her brother was the only person she could trust.

Emi slapped her hands to her face. This made a louder sound than she was expecting. She jumped, but the other passengers were engrossed in their phones and did not so much as glance at her.

Yes. I'm gloomy. Dull. Useless. Invisible to everyone. It's a miracle that I met a genuinely kind person, but if he found out about my ability, he would be disgusted. No matter how kind he is, he'll flee from a freak like me.

"There's only one person on my side," Emi said aloud. A somber mood fell over her, familiar and reassuring.

Just then, the conductor announced that they were about to arrive at her destination.

Using the window as a mirror, she adjusted her bangs and waited for the doors to open.

* * *

"Is this really the right place?" Emi wondered aloud.

She had felt vaguely unsettled even before disembarking, but the location was completely different from what she had imagined. From the address, she knew that it was outside the city, but she hadn't seen a single convenience store from the train station. There had been one antiquated diner, but it was empty and lifeless; she doubted whether it was even in business.

As per the email, someone from the company had come to pick her up, so she had not gotten lost. However desolate the station had been, though, the branch office was even more so.

In the middle of a forest that could not have seen the hands of a landscaper sat a building that resembled the oversize gymnasium of Emi's high school.

Strangely, the employee who had driven didn't say a word to her on the way. She'd figured that he was focused on the road, and since she was an introvert, she preferred silence anyway. However, it had been a shock when he dropped her off and left her alone in such a cheerless place without any explanation. Plus, he'd jerked in surprise when she thanked him.

Emi had on a suit just like the one she'd worn for the interview. The email had said to wear her everyday clothes, but it would have been shameful, according to the rules of Japanese society, to show up in casual clothing.

She didn't think she looked suspicious enough to warrant surprise by saying a few words, so why had the driver reacted so poorly?

Despair crept over her.

She checked the time on her phone and walked around the perimeter of the building. No one could blame her for being anxious at having been abandoned in a remote and unfamiliar place. Five minutes felt like an hour.

Every scrape of the tree branches against one another had her worrying that a bear would appear.

But that wasn't the only thing she was afraid of.

She feared that her brother was right about Moriya being an exploitative company, and that she was walking into a hazing ritual disguised as an orientation. According to the job-hunting forums, there was a major fast-food chain that intentionally terrorized new hires to weed them out based on their reactions…if she recalled correctly.

Had she been completely duped? She was swamped with doubt. From the location to the time, none of it made sense. Maybe a malicious person had forged her offer email. It had been sent from a legitimate domain, but in this day and age, that could be easily spoofed. Once she gave in to her paranoia, it consumed her.

There was one detail that was more suspicious than all the rest.

In the eerie grove, there wasn't a single unliving in sight.

I knew it. My ability is gone, Emi thought.

She had always hoped she could be rid of her disposition, but now and only now did she wish for the opposite. The mundane was reassuring; the unusual was dreadful. She hadn't realized how terrifying it was when the things that should have been present—should have been visible—weren't.

People who were afraid of ghosts and demons thought unseen sounds and voices were scary. Emi, who could see the unseeable, always thought that sounded like a luxury. For her, ghosts were not scary. They were nuisances she wished would disappear. But now she finally understood. To be unable to see was frightening, and to be irritated was far better than to be afraid.

The old man from before popped into Emi's mind. He had said that she should stay away from this place.

They hadn't exchanged a single word, but he had left an indelible impression on her. Like a rock in the road, he was an impediment that had shown up just when her life was starting to go well.

He had seen through her, given her a token—or so he had said—and vanished without a sound. There was no doubt that he had some kind of mysterious power. He must have done something to Emi.

Everyone says you're a liar.

It was the same voice from earlier.

"I'm a liar."

Saying it aloud gave her relief.

"I'm a liar. I'm a liar. I'm a liar." Emi chanted over and over again to dismiss the unease in her heart.

Rustle, rustle.

Suddenly, Emi heard a noise coming from behind her.

It was different from the sound of the trees. Something was coming. This time, it could actually be a bear.

However, the footsteps were unhurried, and they didn't sound like they belonged to a large animal.

The road Emi had taken was maintained—or at least it had been at one point—and was wide enough for two cars, if barely. But the road was to her left, and the building that resembled a gym was in front of her. The sound had come not from the road, but from a direction where there shouldn't have been anything.

Just then, a possibility that was far more horrifying than any bear came to her.

What if it was the imposter that had sent her the scam email to lure her here?

She had an unremarkable face, but the kind of body that men desired; it had certainly caught the attention of her roguish upperclassman. Whoever had tricked her might have had *those kinds* of intentions.

Resignation welled up inside her at the thought.

Maybe this was her fate. Maybe the disappearance of her ability for the day was God's gift to her before she died. If she was assaulted, she decided to die obediently without a fight.

Once she made her resolution, she found herself slightly less afraid.

Emi took a deep breath.

She turned around to find the woman with the giant face in front of her eyes.

The empty, yawning sockets that could swallow a person whole. The misshapen figure.

It dawned on her that in the face of true terror, humans are unable to make a sound.

All the strength flooded out of her body, and she fell backward on her butt. A moment before she hit the ground, however, someone wrapped their arm around her.

"Are you all right?"

It was Jan. Unlike when she had seen him during her interview, he was dressed in loose white clothing.

Emi was undeniably relieved. The woman that had been looming in front of her a moment ago had vanished right when Jan appeared. However…

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm…so, so sorry," she babbled.

She hadn't been able to bring herself to use the dirty restrooms at the desolate station, but that had been a mistake. The shock had made her lose control of her bladder.

She continued to apologize profusely through tears. In middle school, her bullies had once locked her in a supply shed, and unable to hold it in, she had peed herself. She had cried, desperate and ashamed, until her brother had come to pick her up.

She was far more pathetic now than then. She was already an adult. To have done the unthinkable on her first day…

"Oh, I see. You came here in a suit." Jan smiled at Emi. "What a proper person you are. However, I will be having you perform a few simple chores today, so please change. I've prepared some spare clothing for you."

Emi was taken aback. Jan wasn't disgusted by her accident. Far from it. He didn't even seem surprised. She was unable to find the words to say, and when she didn't respond, he guided her inside the building with a gentle hand on her waist.

"You must have traveled far. I must apologize for making you wait," Jan said.

"It—it's nothing…"

Emi found herself tongue-tied. Jan smelled mellow, sweet, and good, just like he had on the day of her interview. She forgot she had been crying not moments ago and walked forward in a trance.

The clothes he gave her fit perfectly. They were white and loose

like his.

The changing room had not only showers but pairs of one-size underwear. Jan had told her to take her time, so she did, carefully washing away the grime and getting dressed.

Normally, she would have been too preoccupied by her unfortunate accident to take a leisurely shower, but for some reason, she didn't feel a hint of her usual anxiety around Jan.

Jan would accept everything about her. That was how he made her feel.

This unusual sense of comfort had lingered with her since her interview.

Perhaps it was because she could picture his saintly, affectionate smile. Everyone she'd ever met wore their irritation or sadistic desires plain on their faces. He was different.

Plus, Jan was neither remarkably attractive nor hideous. Unlike Emi's parents and brother, who had the contemporary attractiveness of minor celebrities, he had a forgettable face. It was a refreshing change from the people who had been by her side until now. She didn't feel inferior around him.

And then there was his smell.

The same quiet, pleasant fragrance drifted off the collar of the white shirt she was wearing. His scent. That alone made Emi feel euphoric. What did it smell like? She felt like she had experienced it before. It was possibly her favorite scent in the world. She could breathe it in forever.

Intoxicated by bliss, Emi left the changing room.

"Are the clothes tight or scratchy?" Jan asked her.

"Not at all," she said. "They're perfect… Thank you."

He smiled softly. "Then come this way. There's a task I would like for us to do together." He took her by the hand and pulled her forward.

From the outside, the building looked like a gymnasium, but the interior was quite complex. There were many other rooms in addition to the changing and shower rooms.

What looked like a wall was actually a door. Stairs that weren't visible from outside led to a whole basement. Emi looked around in

amazement as she walked. Whenever she would come to a standstill, Jan would squeeze her hand and shake his head. The warmth of his palm made her happy, and she stopped several times deliberately.

Shortly, they arrived at a room the size of a college lecture hall, with a blue tarp spread on the floor.

Emi was dumbfounded. She had requested to be placed in the R&D department. What were they going to do in this room, just the two of them?

"First, we'll make mud," Jan declared.

He dragged a heavy burlap sack over from the corner and dumped its contents—soil—onto the tarp.

"Um, by *mud*, do you mean…?" Emi asked without thinking.

He stopped. "What's wrong?"

"Uh…er…I was only wondering what I should do…"

He stared blankly at her for a few moments, before his lips curved into his usual smile. "You don't have to do anything yet. I can handle the tedious stuff. I won't need your help until later."

"Oh, that isn't what I meant. Quite the opposite. If I may offer my assistance…," she said timidly. "But what does making…mud…is it?—have to do with product development…?"

"Nothing," he answered bluntly, still smiling.

"I see… Of course. I shouldn't expect to be given any responsibility on my first day… This must be part of the orientation __"

"What we are doing is far more marvelous than work," he interrupted. "And it's something that only you can do."

"Only I can… But what exactly…?"

Just then, Jan stepped forward and took her into his arms.

Her heart leaped.

The rustle of cloth against cloth. The comforting pressure. The faint hint of warm skin through their clothing.

Emi had never been so close to another person.

Jan was not much taller than her. His looks were unassuming, and his build was slender. At a glance, he would pass for a high school student. He could not be said to be masculine, and yet she

felt toward him an unnamable emotion that was not exactly love or lust.

It was abnormal to hold such intense feelings for someone she had just met.

On the heels of her doubt, Jan asked, "Do you dislike this?" His arms tightened almost imperceptibly around her. Their cheeks nearly touched. "If you do, I'll stop. If product development is what you desire, I will introduce you to the department. But I would like to make one request of you. Spend one day with—"

"I don't dislike it." The words came crisply. Conviction drove her tongue. "Not one bit, sir."

It wasn't flattery. It was the truth.

She was dreary by nature. She couldn't look people in the eyes. No one understood her, no matter where she went. How could she possibly refuse a request from someone who had taken her in and called her brilliant?

"Don't call me *sir*. It's Jan," he whispered, so close their breath mingled. He then loosened his hold.

"Yes, sir… Jan…," she mumbled, mourning the loss of his warmth.

"You don't have to be so hesitant. Also, just speak to me like we're friends. I don't mind."

"I…I couldn't possibly…"

"But you are an angel from above."

"I see…" Emi smiled noncommittally and brushed off the compliment. However, Jan's eyes were serious, and her cooling body became flushed with heat again.

At the same time, she realized why he had been treating her so nicely since her interview: He liked her as a man does a woman.

In recent times, hiring a woman because of physical attraction—a hotness hire—was recognized as a form of discrimination. Even supposing that was why she had been hired, Jan's actions—entreating her to work alone with him, holding her hand, embracing her—would clearly be considered sexual harassment.

But that applied only when the other person was unwilling.

Emi was not in the least.

Not even a blatant pickup line like "You're an angel" made her

uncomfortable. Far from it. Her happiness ratcheted up a notch.

Will you settle for anyone who shows you kindness?

The voice filled her head, so frosty it made her quiver.

No one would want you buttering up to them. It's unsightly. Control yourself.

Emi shoved Jan away instinctively.

She had been so happy. She hadn't disliked his touch in the slightest.

But she had become conscious of her own repulsiveness, and with that knowledge came guilt. Regardless of whether his intentions had been sexual from the start, she couldn't in good conscience let a compassionate man like Jan waste his kindness on her.

When Emi didn't speak, Jan turned away and began to move the burlap sacks again.

"I apologize. I was overeager," he said.

She tried to string together a sentence, but given her clumsiness with words, she didn't believe she could improve the situation. Seeing Jan so despondent made her want to cry. Still, she couldn't leave him to work alone, so she tried to put the situation behind her.

"I-I'll help," Emi said.

She watched and mimicked him, strewing the dirt over the tarp. After ten minutes, about half the tarp around the room was covered with soil.

Jan told her to wait and stepped out of the room. He returned holding a hose with a spray nozzle.

"Let's make the mud," he said.

"All right." She didn't question him this time.

Without another word, she began to mix the water from the hose and the dirt together.

"Please aim for this consistency," Jan said, handing Emi a ball of mud to squeeze.

The heat of his hand seemed to linger on the muddy clump, and she dropped it without thinking. He reassured her that it was all right, his smile never leaving his lips.

Jan's hands were elegant as they kneaded the mud. She couldn't take her eyes off them. In the movie *Ghost*, there is a famous scene

where the two protagonists make pottery. She had watched it when she was little, so her memory was hazy. Back then, she hadn't gotten the point of the scene at all, but watching his hands, she understood. Hands were intensely arousing parts of the human body.

Everyone says you're disgusting.

The voice reverberated in her head. She knew that Jan wasn't the kind of person to say something so horrible. However, he might be repulsed by her staring.

Emi shoved down the wicked desires growing inside her and focused on mixing the water and soil.

After a while, they finished incorporating the water. The result was a large quantity of mud.

"First, we'll make birds. I'll show you," Jan said. He shaped the thick mud into a small bird in an instant.

Doubt wriggled anew in Emi's mind.

The bird Jan had made was superb—there was no question about it. If it weren't brown, it could be mistaken for the real thing. She couldn't believe he could craft so elaborate a figurine in minutes.

But what for? Why a bird?

What was this ability of his for?

Of course, Moriya Foods manufactured and sold DIY candy kits and cute, eye-catching confectionaries. But while illustration was one thing, 3D modeling seemed like work that would be contracted out.

Emi hadn't gone to art school. If anything, her artistic ability was on the low end of the spectrum. Sculpting birds couldn't possibly be the "something wonderful" only she could do.

In the end, she kept her questions to herself and copied Jan. She couldn't disappoint the man who had taken an interest in her.

Her finished product was a hunk of mud that could pass for a bird if one squinted. As she set it next to Jan's, she felt like she was at a public execution.

"I'm terrible at this," she said.

"You are not. Very well done. Keep going, just like that." Jan began to mold the mud again, churning out birds in the blink of an eye.

"That's amazing," she exclaimed in spite of herself.

He lowered his eyes bashfully, an expression that was charming in a different way than his gentle smile.

"I do not deserve your praise. I feel somewhat self-conscious."

She met his wide-eyed gaze. "But you have shown me the same courtesy from the start, sir…Jan."

"I am delighted, if abashed."

They cracked up simultaneously.

For a while, they shared a gut-busting laugh together. She felt like she was a preschooler again, playing in the mud with the boy she had a crush on.

"Let's stop here for today."

Jan's voice snapped Emi out of her trance. They were both covered in mud.

She eyeballed his intricately crafted birds. There were seventeen in total. She, on the other hand, had made only twelve crude lumps.

"I'm sorry. I'm no good at this… I didn't even make very many…," Emi said.

Now that she'd come to her senses, she was embarrassed. She had gotten worked up over a bit of attention and had made a fool of herself. She had even deluded herself with mortifying fantasies.

Self-pity and humiliation bloomed in her heart. Once she gave voice to these feelings, she found that she couldn't stop talking. "I… I've always struggled with reading the room, ever since I was little. Nothing has ever worked out for me… Everyone h-hated me. I studied hard and got into college, but I had no friends…"

Logically, Emi knew that haranguing her boss, whom she had only recently met, with her masochistic tirade was rude as well, but as she spoke, all the anguish and sorrow she had suffered came pouring out.

"That's why I've never really talked to men, and…I got excited just because you were a little nice to me… I'm disgusting, aren't I?" Tears dripped down her cheeks. "Back home, they said I was creepy for sucking up… That I was an ugly, stupid, useless liar who always

got ahead of myself…”

Jan opened his mouth. “Who was it? Who cursed you this way?” A quiet rage burned in his eyes. “Why do you go so far to put yourself down? Whose fault is it? I’ll make them pay.”

He took her hand and laid it on his own cheek; he paid no mind that the mud caked on her skin was getting on him.

She noticed he was trembling. Jan’s anger appeared to be genuine.

His face twisted in fury, he chanted under his breath, “Before the pit. Cask. Side by side…”

Emi shrieked and shook off his hand. It had grown hot enough to burn.

Jan’s expression cleared. “I’m sorry. I lost control of myself.” In the next moment, his usual kind smile returned to his face. “But you shouldn’t speak badly of yourself. Please stop.”

“Yes…,” Emi answered hesitantly. Her tears had dried up.

“This may be inappropriate to say, but I hadn’t anticipated the strength of the curse you’re under, so I won’t mince words.” He knelt before her. “I love you.”

She broke out in a sweat. She tried to reply, but no words would come out of her mouth, just air.

“I’m in love with you. There is no one more precious than you on this earth.”

She had to respond, but she was tongue-tied. Nothing she said would be meaningful anyway.

I love you. The words were seared into her mind. She couldn’t think.

Emi opened and closed her mouth, unable to form a single sentence.

Jan broke out in laughter that was high and childlike, as if he found the situation comical. “I don’t expect you to respond, nor do I need you to. It’s all right. I only wanted you to know. I adore you from the bottom of my heart.”

“But how could you…when I’m so…?” she managed to wrench out.

“You mustn’t say that,” he chided lightly. “Anyway, it has gotten

dark indeed. Let's clean up and head back. I'll see you home."

Jan refused to take no for an answer, so Emi ended up going along with his plans.

Instead of cleaning off in the showers, she used a large bath on the premises, after which she changed into brand-name clothing she could have never afforded and returned to her cheap apartment in the kind of black luxury car she had only ever seen in movies.

As soon as she opened her door, she was swamped by a sense of cloying exhaustion, and she toppled over.

She had never felt so drained.

Why? How?

Was it because of first-day nerves?

But she hadn't been nervous. Jan had been kind and warm from the beginning. He had done nothing but try to soothe her.

Was it because she hadn't been used to the labor?

But the room had been comfortable and her clothes loose and breathable.

On top of that, she had warmed up in a spacious bath and taken a nap on the way home in a lavish car.

It just didn't make sense, no matter how much she thought about it.

Emi didn't have the strength to move a finger.

Whatever. She had already bathed, and her clothes and underwear were brand-new. If thinking didn't help, then why bother?

Her eyelids drooped. She gave in and fell asleep.

○

Emi is flying. Beneath her is a sea of red.

After a time, she begins to descend, and the details on the ground slowly come into view.

It is a pasture. It's night, so she can't see any cattle or horses,

but it is almost definitely a pasture. She flies toward it.

The next thing she knows, she's landing in front of a ramshackle building. It's lit.

Somehow she senses that no matter what, no matter what happens, she must not go inside.

"Help me."

Someone is behind her. She turns around to find a crowd.

The field was empty only seconds ago, but now, a throng of women are jostling for space.

"Help me," one woman begs, wrapping herself around Emi's leg.

"They murdered my baby," another screams.

"They skewered him whole."

"My baby was tender."

"My baby was so tender. They skewered her so deep."

"I crushed my baby."

"They skewered him."

"He was so tender."

"They skewered her."

"They skewered her."

"She was so tender; they skewered her deep."

"They skewered him."

All the women cradle infants who are skewered from their anuses, the stakes protruding from their mouths.

Unable to stay quiet any longer, Emi asks, "Did you really believe you would be saved if you offered up a soft, scrumptious baby?"

The woman at her feet wails, her cries filled with so much anguish it hurts to hear.

"There is none righteous," Emi proclaims.

The tempest of their howls grows ever more violent.

Emi steps forward to enter the building, but a crushing force bears down on her head. She falls to her knees.

"It is not yet time." The voice echoes in her head. "It is not yet time."

It is so.

"Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation."

She is pulled back into the air. She looks down at the city as it is

consumed by flames.

○

Emi jerked out of her dreams—literally jerked—and tumbled out of her bed, hitting her knee hard.

Gone was the fatigue that had sunk into her like mud from the night before. In its place was a splitting headache and overwhelming nausea.

She ran to the bathroom and tried to vomit, but all that came up was a dribble of thin, clear, and sour bile. It did not relieve her headache or nausea.

She dragged herself back to bed and checked the clock by her pillow.

Eight thirty AM. Oh, hell.

The previous night, Jan had said a car would come for her at nine in the morning.

She was still wearing the clothes she had come home in, not to mention she was drenched in sweat… Going to work in her state was out of the question. She had to get ready, but the pain in her head made all her movements sluggish.

Somehow she managed to wash her face, brush her teeth, and wipe off her sweat with a towelette; she wouldn't have been able to shower in time.

She hung up the clothes Jan had given her. Valentino. The brand had gotten a lot of buzz when Satomi Ishihara wore it.

Why had Jan given her clothing that a star actress would wear? No matter how much he liked her, there was no reason to go so far. She knew she had to return them. Yet they fit so perfectly, they seemed to have been tailored for her.

And then there was the fact that Jan had said he loved her.

The intercom rang while Emi was lost in her thoughts. The video

monitor showed the man who had driven her from the station to the facility the day prior. He was wearing the same vacant expression.

As she picked up her bag, she realized she might throw up if she got into the car in her condition. She dug through a plastic drawer for nausea medication.

At that moment, her arm moved of its own volition and threw the drawer to the ground.

Completely ignoring what Emi wanted, the rebellious limb flapped violently, scattering things in her vicinity throughout the room.

"Stop it. Stop it." Her screams did nothing.

Not even a minute passed before the room became a wreck. Only then did her arm stop.

The mug on the desk, the neatly arranged figurines, the amulet from a shrine, even one of the glass rabbits her brother had given her were shattered to pieces.

Why did this happen? Her apartment was small, but it had been orderly. A clean room was one of the few things she could be proud of, given her uselessness. That pride lay in tatters before her, ruined by none other than her own arm.

Emi ran a finger aimlessly along the edges of the floorboards. She hadn't lost sensation. Nonetheless, her arm felt more like an alien creature than a part of her body. She wanted to tear it off.

She stayed sitting on the floor. Then the doorbell rang again.

"Is everything all right?" the man asked, sounding bored and irritated.

"I'm coming…," Emi answered.

She got to her feet, averting her eyes from the disaster that was her room. Her headache wasn't gone, but it had dulled slightly from the shock. She wanted to clean up more than anything, but she had to go to work.

Melancholic, Emi slipped on her shoes. "Ouch—"

Stabbed deep into her heel was a shard of glass.

The journey was nothing short of awful.

Just as she'd anticipated, Emi felt ill the entire time. Whenever the car stopped at a light, she felt like she would throw up and would press her hand to her mouth. Each time this happened, the driver would glare at her. He didn't say anything to her directly, but she felt apologetic and would always mumble a quiet "I'm sorry." He never responded.

The repetition drained her mentally. She had no hope of recovering.

She fought her nausea as the car rumbled and rocked for the better part of an hour. The driver dropped her off in a wide field. The location was different from the day before. She hadn't had the luxury of enjoying the scenery during the ride, but the place appeared to be far from the city center once again.

The car sped away, leaving Emi behind. Despite knowing that it was meaningless, she nevertheless stayed bowing until she could no longer see the taillights.

A hand landed on her shoulder from behind.

"Good morning."

It was Jan.

The shoulder he had touched warmed. *He has a remarkable power like the sun*, Emi thought. In fact, seeing his face blew away the fatigue that clung to her, though her headache still remained.

"Oh, you're injured." Jan took her hand without fuss. "Does it hurt? You have grazes everywhere."

"I-I'm fine."

On the contrary, Emi's heart leaped every time she looked in his eyes. The situation may have been normal for him, but she felt embarrassed. As he had said he loved her, however, it didn't seem like she could stop being hyperaware of him.

He could stand to be more bashful. However, he merely stood there with his typical warm smile.

He might be a major ladies' man, Emi thought.

She thought back to Yamaike, who had been incredibly popular. Bad boys had been all the rage in her hometown, but more than his heartthrob image, it must have been his indiscriminate kindness that made him attractive to women.

Maybe Jan was the same way.

Yes, he had a plain face, but Emi couldn't imagine a woman who wouldn't fall for his compassion and smile.

It was surely hubris for her to think she was special. She tried to regain her composure by reminding herself of that fact.

"How could you be fine? Let me treat you," Jan said. "Come this way." He gestured to a hut a short way off.

She stepped forward to follow him. "Ow," she cried inadvertently.

A pebble had entered her shoe and struck her wound from the glass shard with pinpoint accuracy.

"I knew you weren't okay," Jan said.

"It's just a pebble…"

"This won't do." His expression was solemn. "In places such as this, it is easy for pollutants to invade you."

By *pollutants*, did he mean bacteria or viruses?

All of a sudden, Jan sank to his knees. He grabbed Emi's foot and dragged her closer, so that she was nearly stepping on his forehead. Flustered, she tried to straighten herself, but he had her in a viselike grip, and she couldn't pull away.

He took off her socks in the blink of an eye and leaned in close to her injured foot. Something moist and soft started to probe her wound.

Before she could ask what on earth was happening, she heard, "Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation."

Jan repeated in a quiet but clear voice, "Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation."

Like the day before, her body started to heat up, but this time, it felt pleasant. Her fatigue and pain receded. Though on a rational level she understood that it was horribly creepy for a man she'd known for only a few days to lick her bare foot, oddly she didn't feel uncomfortable about it at all.

More importantly…

"Those words… Why do you…?"

The memory came back to her slowly.

Her dream from last night. She had overlooked a city in flames. She had spoken with its inhabitants. It had been her own dream, but

her will had not been her own. It had felt like she was controlled by an outside force, a force whose voice she had heard.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

Those had been the words.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

Why had Jan chanted them?

Her pain was gone, she didn't feel even a modicum of discomfort, and yet her heart was beating far faster than it had been earlier.

Despite Emi's uneasiness, Jan answered with a smile. "Think of it as a good luck charm. Have you heard 'Pain, pain, go away' or the idea of kissing something to make it better? It's similar."

"But I…my dream…"

His face lit up, and he looked straight at her. "Splendid." He took her hand and said in singsong: "Dreams are like prophecies. You've made so much progress."

His smile was pure and beautiful. Emi swallowed.

"You are as brilliant as I thought," Jan said.

"I don't…"

His affectionate gaze bore into her. "I love you."

All the questions Emi had wanted to fling at Jan and the memory of her dream flew out the window. Just those three little words from his mouth made her feel like she could fly. She could no longer think of anything but him.

What was so brilliant? What about her did he love?

None of those things mattered. His praise and love for her made her feel triumphant.

Emi didn't know why she adored so deeply a man she had just met, a man who looked like a mere teenager.

Words tumbled out of her mouth. "I love—"

"You mustn't," he cut her off. "You must not say those words recklessly. Nor do I wish for them."

Her eyes filled with tears. Emi felt like she was going to cry.

She was used to rude treatment. She was used to botching conversations. But it still hurt terribly that she couldn't express that she felt the same way as Jan. A moment ago, she'd been euphoric, but now, besieged by misery, she wanted nothing more than to be

gone.

A teardrop fell on the ground. She could no longer hold back. She started to sob loudly, as if she were a child.

"Please don't cry," Jan said. "I phrased that poorly."

He took out a wooden mallet from who knows where and slammed it down on his left hand. It made a sickening sound. The base of his thumb began to visibly swell.

Expressionless, he swung the mallet again. Two, three times he struck. His fingers bent in impossible directions.

"Stop," Emi said.

But he didn't. A drop of blood, then a second dripped down his hand.

"Please stop…"

The dull crack of bone breaking. The smack of skin against a hard object. The *drip-drop* of blood.

Jan didn't cry out in pain. In fact, his lips were curved in a shallow smile.

He hit his hand again and again.

"Stop it!" Emi shrieked after the umpteenth time. She grabbed his arm, and only then did his brutal, mechanical self-mutilation stop. "Why would you do that?!"

"It's simple." Jan smiled. "Because I hurt you."

He slipped the mallet back into his jacket. She hadn't been able to tell because of his slight frame, but he was wearing a belt bag underneath.

"If you tell me to stop, I'll stop."

"Who cares what I… What does it matter?"

"It matters. Because I love you. And…I misspoke earlier. I apologize. What I had wanted to say was that I am not worthy of your love."

He then said, "Come with me," and walked forward, pulling on Emi's hand with the hand that hadn't been pulverized beyond recognition. Disoriented, she could do nothing but follow him.

"You and I are not equals. I love you, but I do not want you to love me. You belong to a different stratum," Jan said.

"I don't understand," Emi choked out.

Her words had no impact on him. He didn't seem inclined to explain further.

She fumbled for what to say next. "Your hand… It's in bad shape. Are you all right? We should go to the hospital straightaway."

"I'm fine. That won't be necessary," he said decisively. "That said…it is true that my hand has sustained some harm. Will you pardon my insolence?"

Jan stopped and turned to stare at Emi. She instinctively averted her eyes.

"There's nothing to forgive. What insolence? You haven't done anything to me… Never mind that. I'm just worried about you. Why…? Out of nowhere, you…"

A smile bloomed on his face. "I knew you were kind."

"Memorial. Eternal slumber. Insulation."

After chanting those words again, Jan stretched his hand, which was nothing more than a violet lump. What was going on? His injuries didn't look better at all, but his hand could now move smoothly.

"This should be sufficient," he said.

"Don't move it too much…," Emi said.

"It's okay. We will only be *watching* this time, not to say that watching isn't important."

She didn't understand what he was saying. It wasn't just his words, either. His actions, the way he treated her—she couldn't read him at all.

He had shattered his own hand without warning as *atonement* for causing her anguish. On top of that, he had told her he wanted to love her one-sidedly.

If only his love for her weren't so complicated…

Emi glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, but he was only smiling mildly.

"Let's wait for a moment. They should be coming soon…," Jan said. Then, "Ah, they're here."

Who's coming? she wondered. She traced his gaze to see four men and women in the distance walking toward them.

Suddenly, she was assaulted with a vicious surge of nausea.

“No, I don’t like this. No. No, no, no, no. No.” Words of rejection gushed from her mouth like a muddy stream.

It was sickening. From the group wafted a horrible stench the likes of which she had never smelled before.

When she breathed in, the stench invaded her entire body, burning it from inside out. It was unbearable. They smelled the same as the monstrous woman with hollow caverns for eyes.

“No. No way. Please. I’ll do anything, so please, just stop,” Emi babbled.

Jan embraced her. “I can’t convince you otherwise?”

She shook her head vigorously.

“Then we shall stop here,” he said lightly. “I wanted to introduce you to my brothers and sisters, but the watching is important. Introductions can wait.”

Brothers and sisters? Introductions? Watching?

Emi had a lot she wanted to ask, but the revulsion won out, and she stayed quiet.

She clung to Jan’s arm as they walked back along the road they had come on. After a while, she recovered from the stench and could finally breathe again. She never thought she would find the earthy smell of soil so delightful.

Jan rubbed her back, staring off into the distance.

Shortly, her breathing returned to normal.

“We’ll be heading to that building,” he declared, gesturing to the left at a building made of raw concrete standing inside a greenhouse. “My brothers and sisters will come, but they won’t be able to see you. You won’t have to meet or talk to them. Rest assured.”

Jan wrapped an arm around Emi’s shoulders. Unable to say a word, she merely followed his lead.

The greenhouse was packed with lilies with no space between them.

Unlike the scent from before, this new one wasn’t unpleasant, but it was terribly sweet.

Jan and Emi passed through the blossoms, heading for the building.

"What do you think of them?" Jan asked as they walked.

"They're pretty…," Emi replied genuinely. She had never seen lilies so huge and gorgeous before.

"I'm happy they are to your liking. This place is for you."

"For me…?"

He nodded firmly before striding forward again.

Even if she were to ask, "What do you mean it's for me?" no doubt he would only say, "I love you." She stayed silent, but she squeezed his arm a little harder as she walked with him.

The inside of the building resembled the college Emi had attended. Like the exterior, the floor and walls were made of raw concrete, and there was a room that looked like a lecture hall. She wandered toward it, thinking there must be an explanation for everything she was seeing, but Jan said, "This way," and guided her to a set of stairs instead.

They climbed three flights, and he showed her into a small room. It was similar to a broadcast room in schools or a recording studio. There was a machine that could have been a mixing console and a number of microphones. It was that kind of place.

The front wall of the room was glass. It looked down into the lecture hall from before. That being said, there weren't any chairs or other furniture. There was only a stage at the front. Most likely, folding chairs were brought in for any seminars.

In addition, the floor in the center of the room was boxed off and a different color from the rest of the room.

Emi was about to ask a question, but Jan had carried in a sofa from somewhere and set it up in front of the glass.

"Please sit," he said. "Now we'll watch my brothers and sisters perform their task together."

"By *brothers and sisters*, do you mean your siblings, si—…Jan?"

"They are who they are," he said simply and pointed below them. "They'll be entering soon."

As he predicted, the four-person group soon filed in.

"*Uck*—," Emi groaned, struck again by the indescribable

queasiness, but unlike earlier, it was tolerable. It was the kind of nausea one felt a day after eating too much greasy food.

"I'm sure it's painful, but…please watch," Jan said. "Take everything in, until the end."

"Y-yes…," she said.

He smiled at her reply. "First, the rooster will crow."

What rooster? she wanted to ask, but before she could, the tallest man in the group moved.

"*Cock-a-kroh*," he yelled.

The other three echoed in kind.

Emi burst out laughing despite herself. Seeing grown adults mimic a rooster was stupidly funny. She composed herself, fearing that Jan would get mad at her for laughing when he had told her to pay attention. She peeked over at him, but he was focused on the group of four, his expression grave, and did not rebuke her.

"Cock-aaa-kroooh."

That one had been slightly longer. And louder. Despite the absurdity of their actions, the four people's faces were unreadable. They began to walk in a circle.

"*Cock-a-cock-aaa-krooooh!*" they screamed, loud enough for the glass to shake.

Emi flinched instinctively. Jan laid a hand on her back. "This is where it starts."

The men and women stopped walking and got down on their hands and knees.

At nearly the same time, a long pillar was brought into the lecture hall from the entrance. It looked like the trunk of a large tree that had been felled.

A group of people in white work clothes brought it and several more logs in on a cart. They assembled the logs at a rapid pace. It seemed like they were building something on top of the foundation that had been laid in the center of the room.

Watching them work, Emi grew more nauseated. Her breathing became labored, as if her lungs were filled with mud that she could not expel. However, she couldn't avert her eyes. Not only had Jan instructed her to watch until the end, but the scene was also too

mesmerizing to be ignored, despite the discomfort it caused her.

Emi enjoyed watching cooking videos. That wasn't because she liked cooking, but rather because she liked seeing the process of how things were made. The scene before her fit that criteria as well.

To Emi, it felt like no more than an hour had passed, but the clock showed that five hours had come and gone.

In that time, the laborers had worked without a break. At last, they finished the construction.

The result resembled the turret of a castle, though it was too bizarre to call it that. The logs had been erected to form a thin tower. From the side, one could see the ends of the logs sticking out of the center in a spiral. But for what purpose? It did not seem like they were meant for people to climb.

Emi looked at Jan beside her to see him gazing kindly back at her.

"You paid close attention," he said.

"Yes…" The compassion in his eyes was too much for her, so she turned forward again. "How amazing, the speed at which they… Oh, but…" She looked around the tower and noticed something strange. "Those people are still on all fours… Are they all right?"

"They're fine," Jan answered immediately.

"Wha—? Well, I wasn't watching them the entire time, but…that position must be difficult to hold for a long time…"

"They're fine," he repeated, without any change in his tone.

"I see," she said. In the face of his blunt insistence, she had no choice but to accept it.

Each of the four men and women was wearing a different color, and they stood out among the workers in white. Emi had to make a conscious effort to drive them from her mind.

"You are dismissed." Jan's voice resounded through the building. At some point, he had moved in front of a microphone.

The workers cleaned up after themselves and left as quickly as they had come. The group of four trailed after them, tottering on their feet.

The tower stood in the middle of the empty lecture hall, deliberately constructed as a bizarre consecration.

Once the four had left, the feeling of suffocation that Emi had

been struggling with faded. It was replaced with unease.

Upon reflection, bizarre things had been happening to her in succession. She had gone with the flow the day before, but the experience had been undeniably peculiar. Playing in the mud was not working.

Today's events were even stranger.

The appearance of the ominous men and women, the strange ritual—yes, ritual—they had been forced to participate in.

This wasn't corporate exploitation. It was far more abnormal—

"Is something wrong?" Jan asked, meeting her eyes.

And then there was *this*.

Jan's eyes were a rich brown. Whenever Emi looked in his eyes, she felt like they were sucking her in, rendering her speechless. Her blood flowed quicker, her body grew hotter, and she became permeated with euphoria.

It was a sense of happiness so profound that it far exceeded the sum of all the joy she had ever felt in her life.

There was no question about it. Jan was *abnormal*!

And yet Emi was intoxicated by him. Her brain became useless junk, filled with nothing but thoughts of him.

He was a suspicious character. His words were nonsensical, and he refused to explain anything no matter what she asked.

He had repeatedly professed his love to her, but even that was questionable.

He had invited the four men and women closer despite her revulsion to them.

Not to mention, he had destroyed his own hand as "atonement," even though she had never wished for such a thing.

Emi looked at Jan's hand. It had almost healed entirely.

It was terrifying.

Why was he the president even though he still looked like a teenager?

Why wouldn't he give her any normal work?

Why had he called the men and women siblings?

Why had he chanted the bizarre incantation over and over again?

Why had he made her sculpt birds out of mud?

Why had he built the tower?

Why did he love her?

Why did he act in response to her emotions?

Why did his injuries heal so quickly?

Why did she love him so much?

Yes. He was suspicious. Abnormal. Yet Emi would do anything for him. *Anything*, if it would make him happy.

She had always scorned fools who lost their head for the opposite sex and acted absurdly out of love, but now she understood.

Now she knew. The emotion called love, more than anything else, was irreplaceable. And love had nothing to do with the length of the relationship.

Everyone calls you a liar. No one believes you. Poor thing.

Yes. Emi had never been loved by anyone. No matter how long she lived, she doubted she would ever meet anyone as *kind* as Jan. But…

If she told him that, he would surely furrow his brows and say to her in a soft voice, "You mustn't say that."

Just imagining it filled her with joy.

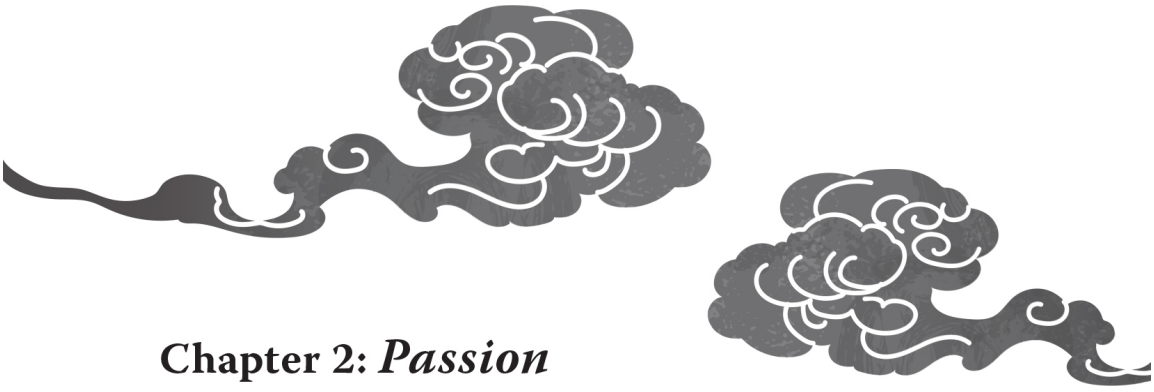
Emi was truly happy.

"Nothing's wrong," she said. "Where and when shall I go tomorrow?"

Hearing her response, Jan smiled.

They walked back hand in hand. Emi felt like she could walk anywhere.

She could no longer hear the voice in her head.



Chapter 2: *Passion*

◆ ◆ ◆

"Man, we're not getting any cases at all," Rumi Sasaki said.

"Of course not," Kouki Aoyama said curtly to his boss, who complained about the same thing every day. "You haven't advertised at all. Plus, you wanted the website I built for you to be old-fashioned and fishy. How many webpages play background music these days? It's completely unnecessary!"

"I'm so bored," Rumi grumbled, ignoring Aoyama entirely.

Even as Aoyama complained, he was making a special caramel macchiato with extra whipped cream just for her for the umpteenth time that day.

In fact, Rumi was most likely tuning out his lecture entirely. She whistled as she flipped open a magazine splashed with the headline Another Victim Gone Missing! A Mysterious, Lucrative Part-Time Job? The Organ Black Market Edition. Aoyama couldn't believe that a magazine like that even existed in this day and age, let alone had a readership.

Sasaki Agency, the castle that Rumi and Aoyama had built, was located on the third floor of a building shared with a Turkish restaurant and a massage parlor, on the outskirts of the Iidabashi business district in Tokyo.

The two of them had gone to the same college. Rumi had majored in literature, and Aoyama in theology.

Aoyama's family ran a Protestant church. He was slowly heading down the path to becoming a minister one day, but out of curiosity, he had taken a seminar on folklore, though it had been completely unrelated to him. That was where he'd met Rumi, who had been a graduate student and tutor at the time.

As her name suggested, Rumi was a woman. She habitually dressed in gray sweats, kept her hair in a sloppy ponytail, and wore thick glasses. Her figure and features were both androgynous, so nearly everyone mistook her for a man when they met her for the first time. She was in her early thirties, but she could have plausibly passed for a teenager or a fifty-year-old.

In contrast, Aoyama's looks strongly reflected his great-grandfather's Caucasian genes. He was pale and looked like a high school student even though he was twenty-seven.

They made for a conspicuous pair—so conspicuous that someone had once reported them to the police, claiming that a suspicious man was dragging around a boy.

The cherry on top was Rumi's flamboyant way of speaking. She sounded like she was acting all the time. And she was loud, which made her stand out even more.

Rumi might have lacked all and any shred of traditional feminine charm, but Aoyama respected her. She had been famous for her intellect in their college, and she truly knew everything.

The professor of the folklore seminar, Haruhiko Saitou, was calm and kind, but eccentric. He was also terrible at explaining things. No matter what question a student asked him, his answer would inevitably diverge further and further from the topic, leaving them as good as stranded in outer space. The appropriate evaluation of him was that he was a brilliant academic, but a middling instructor.

So when the seminar's students hit a dead end with their assignments, Rumi Sasaki was the person they could count on.

If one overlooked her quirky manner of speech, she was the ideal tutor. Aoyama had assumed that she would become a professor after completing her doctorate, but she decided on a different profession.

Sasaki Agency was a consulting business for spiritual affairs. They used to get a lot of inquirers who would come in thinking they were

a detective agency. On Aoyama's suggestion, he and Rumi added a signboard reading SPIRITUAL CONSULTATIONS, after which they stopped receiving customers entirely.

In fact, the reason Rumi had specialized in folklore in college wasn't because she had an interest in local customs, but because she had wanted to study under Professor Saitou.

Professor Saitou was far more renowned for his side job—making appearances on television and in magazines—than his academic position. He was featured in most if not all special reports about the supernatural and paranormal phenomena. Rumi's encounters with his media appearances had sparked in her an interest in talking to him.

And as a matter of fact, Rumi got along with Professor Saitou better than anyone else, for they were similar in their approach to the otherworldly. They both tackled occult mysteries from the perspective of folklore.

Aoyama had been on the outside of Rumi's and Professor Saitou's orbit, but in a strange turn of events, his grandfather got wrapped up in one of her dilemmas. One thing led to another, their relationship deepened, and they'd been together ever since.

Objectively, Rumi was crude and uncomely, her every action suspicious. Nonetheless, Aoyama idolized her. During the course of aforementioned dilemma, she had saved his life. However, technically, she had been the one who put him in danger in the first place, and she had just been cleaning up her own mess and turning lemons into lemonade. One could argue he had no reason to thank her, but he fiercely believed she was his savior.

When Rumi had told him she was considering going into paranormal consulting full-time, he voluntarily took on all the agency's administrative tasks.

He had seen her work up close only a handful of times, but he was positive that her powers were the real thing. By *powers*, he didn't mean psychic abilities. Of course, she was able to sense the paranormal, but what was impressive more than anything else was her ability to accurately identify the source of a curse and deal with

it instantly. Sometimes she would handle the case herself; other times she would call in another expert. However, he had never seen her fail once. Every client of theirs went home with a cheery smile.

Moreover, Rumi did not accept large sums of money in exchange for her services. She said she took on these cases "as a hobby," but Aoyama thought that was merely a cover for her embarrassment, and that the *real* reason was that she was a do-gooder who wanted to help others.

He believed, genuinely, that the reason she didn't get the recognition she deserved was not because of her appearance or conduct, but because they didn't advertise the agency's services enough.

"I barely have enough to make this month's rent…," Aoyama said. "It isn't ideal, but we may have to search for clients more aggressively."

Rumi closed her magazine. "That won't be necessary," she said with a grin. "We received a commission today. The client will be paying us a visit soon."

"You should have told me that earlier. What about my sche—?"

"Aren't we both free every day?"

"That's true, but…"

Rumi downed her caramel macchiato. "Aoyama, you can go home if you have plans."

"No, I'll stay with you. I work here, too."

The building's owner had rented the office to Rumi at a discount after she had resolved a case. Somehow she was always able to find people who were truly in need of help and swiftly take care of their problems. It was thanks to her clients, who pulled strings for them out of gratitude, that the agency was able to continue operating. In truth, it was difficult to say whether the website Aoyama had made was helpful at all. He was dependent on Rumi and was unsure whether his efforts had any impact on the business.

Aoyama sighed deeply. "Anyway, what's the client like?"

Rumi showed him her tablet screen. It showed a picture of a young man with bronze skin and sharp features.

"Youta Shimamoto. We were classmates. You wouldn't have

known each other, though."

"No, I know of him. My friend used to gush about how handsome he was… He used to be in the swim team, if I recall correctly. He worked as a model, right? I didn't realize you were close."

"I wouldn't say close." She flicked the screen with a finger. "People afflicted by the supernatural are always desperate to find a middleman. He doesn't know any monks or priests—neither Shinto nor Catholic—to call on, so he contacted me. That's all, I'm sure."

"Is that so?"

She nodded. "He should be here soon."

Just then, the buzzer rang.

*

I hadn't heard anything from my little sister, Emi, lately. This was highly unusual.

The two of us were raised in a rural town that had hardly any children. We were ten years apart, but I doted on her.

Emi was…a bit of a problem child.

That was part of why we figured she might be better suited for city life. Tokyoites are detached, in a good way, you know? They leave the oddballs alone. My sister never fit in where we grew up. She'd always been bullied. But she had a good head on her shoulders and moved to Tokyo for college.

I'd been working here all this time, too, so it made sense. Actually, I'd wanted to live together with her, but our mom said people would draw the wrong conclusions about a young man and woman of our ages living under the same roof. But, yes, we saw each other almost every day.

My sister couldn't decide anything by herself. She asked me about everything. From college to job hunting, I'd helped her with all of it.

Regardless, her search for a job in Tokyo hadn't gone smoothly. In my opinion, she could have taken her time to think about her future, but…three months back, she suddenly announced that she

had been accepted by a company. Not just any company, mind you, but Moriya Foods. It didn't make sense, no matter how you thought about it. She didn't have any noteworthy experience. A prestigious company like that wouldn't hire someone on good grades alone.

When I'd asked her about it, she'd said she was moved around to different offices and made to participate in incomprehensible rituals. I told her that this was abnormal, but she insisted it was just an orientation.

Sure, I'd heard of companies that force new employees to do bizarre recreational activities for whatever purpose. Polar bear swims, for example, or making newbies shout out their flaws and have the rest of the group refute them—torture, in other words.

But this was different. Making bird figurines out of mud, building log towers, harvesting wheat… It might have been nonsense, but it was creepy, right?

And it was weird how happy Emi was when she talked about it.

She might not have found the job unpleasant, but her enthusiasm was obviously unusual. I couldn't imagine all of that going on at the famous Moriya Foods, either.

Could you blame me for thinking she was being fooled by the company name?

When I'd said as much to her, she glared at me with an expression I'd never seen on her face before and told me "Jan is a good person" and "Don't insult him."

I asked her who Jan was, and she told me he was the president. But Moriya Foods' president was Hidemitsu Moriya, right? Ah, you don't know…? Anyway, he was famous. Both his name and his face.

Jan wasn't anywhere in his name, which only reaffirmed my suspicions that Emi was being deceived.

But she was too agitated. It didn't seem like she was going to listen to a word I said, so I did my best to calm her down and sent her home after telling her to contact me if anything happened.

That was the last I'd heard from her.

Up until then, we would meet almost every day, and we literally never go a day without speaking to each other. But three days passed of radio silence. Of course I was worried. She hadn't read my

messages or returned my calls.

I had no choice. I followed her. What was I supposed to do?

I staked out her apartment the whole night. Nothing happened, so I decided to leave. But before I did—around eight in the morning, I think—a black sedan stopped in front of her building. A pallid man got out of the car. He shuffled up to Emi's door and rang her bell. She came out immediately, looking just as pale, and climbed into the back seat. He got in the driver's seat.

I originally thought the man was "Jan," but I soon changed my mind. When Emi talked about "Jan," she seemed almost intoxicated. In any case, she sounded happy.

When she spoke to the driver, however, she kept her head down, and she seemed sick.

They drove off, and I scrambled to follow. The car went farther and farther from downtown, and we ended up in an area surrounded by a forest. The other cars gradually disappeared as well.

I planned to turn around and try again another day if I was spotted, but the man showed no interest in me even when I got pretty close.

After a while, a building came into view. The outside looked like an event venue, a modern sort of building. It was extremely out of place in the middle of the woods.

Obviously, I had no excuses for driving onto private property, so I saved my location in my GPS and went home for the day. Emi didn't contact me that day, either.

I wondered if there wasn't any way I could tour the inside of the premises without arousing suspicion, so I searched the location without giving it too much thought. The search turned up a job listing for an event-staff position, hiring urgently.

The building was an event venue, as I had suspected. They were hiring anyone regardless of age, education, and experience, so I called right away. They told me they needed people immediately, and they welcomed me on board without so much as an interview. Talk about suspicious. They didn't even explain what the job entailed.

I had taken two weeks off to investigate, so I was able to work

out the details right away. Just in case, I looked up the owner of the building and discovered that it did indeed belong to Moriya.

On the day of, the designated meeting place was Shinjuku. When I arrived, I found the group immediately because of the strange air around them.

As for what I mean by *strange*, this is a bad way to put it, but they seemed devoid of hope, like their heads were full of cotton. A negative aura, in any case. Almost all of them were dressed oddly. There were a few young people, but a lot of them were older than me.

Why did the listing attract only odd people? The reason was simple. Age, prior experience, and academic background weren't factors in the hiring process, and yet the hourly wage was unusually high. Five thousand yen, the most I'd ever seen. Despite that, the company had a shortage of workers. Anyone with common sense would have found it suspicious and wouldn't have applied. Only people truly in need would jump on such an opportunity.

When the time came, a minibus arrived to pick up the whole fishy bunch, myself included. I stayed quiet and watched the passing scenery along with the rest of them. On our way there, we were each given a paper bag. Inside were two large rice balls. They were neat, like they had been shaped by a machine, so I figured they were probably safe to eat. I ate them with the seaweed that came in the package. One was pickled plum, and one was salted kelp. They were good.

We took the same road I had driven the day before to get to the building. When we disembarked, there was a group of men who looked as sickly as Emi's driver had. They were probably employees or part-time workers—people with experience. They instructed us to line up single file, as if we were livestock. They placed a name tag on the front of each of us. Mine said FROG. The person to my right had FROG, too, but the person to my left had RABBIT.

Then the man who seemed to be in charge finally gave us a rundown.

We were going to be taken to rooms with the animal written on

our signs, and there we would live for a week. That's right. I forgot to mention that the job included accommodations for a week.

We were shown to the designated "frog" room, and there were really a lot of frogs inside. They looked like the ones used for dissections in science class in elementary school. They covered the inside of a large glass case. Needless to say, it was a revolting sight. The frogs were packed together, with no space between them. And they weren't cute little tree frogs, either. We're talking large, brown, and slimy frogs.

But what was worse was the croaking. The noise was unbelievable. I looked around at my roommates, thinking that if someone from the boonies like me felt uncomfortable, then the others must have found it unbearable.

There were five other people there, including the person who had been on the right of me in line. Each and every one of them was unpacking their belongings with a glum expression. Apparently, I was the only one disturbed by the frogs.

Other than the scheduled meal, bath, and interview times, we were free to do as we pleased. If we continued to spend it in silence, it would only get more awkward, so I had us do a round of introductions.

The conspicuously giant man was Wakui. He had been bullied ever since he was a child. His high school days had been miserable, and he'd dropped out halfway. He couldn't find a full-time job and was making ends meet doing a heavy-lifting gig.

On the other side of the spectrum was Tamada, who was terribly thin. He had been arrested previously for drug use and was figuring out his life while going through rehab.

Seiichi and Ryuuji, who vaguely resembled each other, turned out to be brothers. I asked why they were participating, but they dodged the question. Surprisingly, however, they kept up their end of the conversation and were easy to get along with.

And there was a man named Okada, who had awful body odor and looked like he couldn't have been under fifty. He had poor communication skills, so I wasn't able to talk to him at all.

The six of us had to make it through the next week together. The

mood in the room had softened, so I asked the question that was at the top of my mind: Don't the frogs gross you out?

"But we have no choice," someone said. I forget who.

Exactly. I was talking to the kind of people who would apply to a job that reeked of bad news. Everyone was desperate for cash, no matter what they had to do to get it. That was the end of that. The conversation died.

I hadn't been able to have a heart-to-heart with my fellow part-timers, but I was able to kill time by scrolling on my phone and reading instead. The next thing I knew, it was time for dinner.

I made my way slowly to the dining hall to find a long table that had been prepared for us. Including the meals for the people in the other rooms, a dozen or so portions were arranged side by side on the table. It made for a bizarre sight.

It was an elaborate traditional Japanese meal. Everything was delicious. However, the croaking of the frogs never stopped, and I was sick of it. A few people ate very little, and I didn't blame them. We weren't allowed to talk during meals, so the only sound in the room was the croaking. It made for a horrible soundtrack.

We headed for the baths immediately after dinner. There were five individual shower stalls and a large tub, which wasn't quite as big as a shared public bath. People outside the Frog group were there, too. I assumed there was a separate facility for the women, rather than a separate time slot. Several women had been on the bus.

I spotted the Rabbit participant I had met in the morning, and I struck up a conversation. Like the others, he looked cheerless, but he brightened slightly when I spoke to him.

Unsurprisingly, like us in the Frog group, the Rabbit group had been told to live a week with a herd of rabbits in cages.

"Rabbits are quiet. Must be nice," I commented.

"But they stink," he told me.

True. The rabbit hut in my elementary school had always had a particular animal funk. Living with that stench seemed depressing.

When I whispered to him, "There's an old man who stinks even worse," he relaxed a little. His name was Yokokawa.

He told me there were three people in the Rabbit group, and that he knew there were Fish, Bird, and Deer groups.

"You're observant," I complimented him.

"It's written over there," he said bashfully.

He was right. Upon closer inspection, I saw signs by the bath entrance.

"Apparently, they prepared different outfits for each group," he continued.

After I finished soaking, I checked out the clothing to find that they were indeed separated by group. Above the baskets of clothing were signs reading, DEER, RABBIT, BIRD, FROG, and FISH. Mysteriously, all the clothes were white. I wondered what would happen if we were to wear outfits from the wrong group, but there was a possibility that even if we couldn't tell them apart, the staff still could. I did as I was told and put on the clothing for the Frog group.

I had not come here to work a part-time job. My goal was to investigate that suspicious facility. It was only the first day, but the things we were being made to do were already more bizarre than I could have imagined. I planned to tell Emi everything when I returned and have her quit that fishy workplace as soon as possible.

I left the baths after telling Yokokawa I'd talk to him the next day.

That aside, the Rabbit, Bird, Fish, and Frog groups were one thing, but what in the world was with the Deer group? Living with deer seemed impossible. They were wild animals, and unlike the other creatures, they were large. I wanted to speak with the Deer group members, but it was difficult because the only opportunity was in the baths.

Before we retired for the night, we were interviewed individually. The staff came while we were in our room and escorted us to a separate room one by one. I was third.

Disturbingly, I have no memories of the interview—not how many people were in the room and not what we talked about. I hardly remember a thing. When I try to think back on that time, it feels like my head is shrouded in a haze. Maybe they'd mixed something into our food… I do remember them taking my temperature and blood

pressure.

If it had been, what, a paid clinical trial? If that had been the case, this would be a violation of GCP. Have you heard of it? It stands for "good clinical practices." It's a ministerial ordinance that specifies the basic standards for pharmaceutical trials. I'm not an expert, but it includes common sense criteria such as obtaining consent from the participant and disclosing side effects. Holding a clinical study under the pretense of hiring staff for an event is a clear violation of the ordinance.

That being said, I felt nothing unusual in my body. If anything, I felt healthier than usual.

That night, I fell asleep in an instant and woke up feeling refreshed.

Day two.

I still wasn't used to the croaking of the frogs. On top of that, the staff told us to pick out a frog, observe it closely, and draw it. I approached the case with hesitation. The frogs were crammed together, squelching against one another. That alone made me want to throw up. They hadn't been fed, but they seemed to be doing fine. That was creepy.

I avoided looking at them the best I could and grabbed one that happened to jump toward me. I transferred it to the case we were provided for observation and shut the lid. Its slimy skin was disgusting… I washed my hands immediately. I never imagined I would touch a frog with my bare hands at this age. Why hadn't it bothered me as a kid…? Was it the same for you? I was raised in the middle of nowhere, so I was fine with touching roly-polies and the like. Sorry, I got sidetracked.

The frog wouldn't settle down and struggled in the small case.

It was impossible to draw. Since we were told it wouldn't be a problem if the drawing sucked, I gave in and did my best to put something down on the paper. Once in a while, I peeked at the others, who were all struggling, too. One of us, Okada, kept pacing in front of the giant case packed with frogs. Apparently, he hadn't been able to catch a frog and was in a bind. His BO grew even more pungent, to the point that I could smell him from where I was

sitting. I felt bad for him, but I wasn't inclined to help, either. I gave up watching him and focused on my own sketch, and gradually, the smell stopped bothering me.

I finished in just under an hour. Around then, the staff returned to the room and collected our drawings. They collected Okada's paper, too. As awful as my sketch was, his was far worse, so perhaps he hadn't been able to look at one up close.

The rest of the day was the same as the first. We bummed around, ate lunch, and bummed around some more. Then came dinner, baths, and the interviews. I spoke to Yokokawa from the Rabbit group again. They had been told to study and draw a rabbit, like we had been asked to do with the frogs. Besides Yokokawa, I talked to two others who were non-Frog participants, but both were Fish members. I didn't find out anything about the Deer group. The Fish members said they had the same experience; they'd drawn a fish that resembled a crucian carp.

My memory of the interview from that day is vague as well. The only thing I remember is being told, "Tomorrow is patrol day."

The next day, I alone was taken from the Frog room and shown to a different room. A man from the Fish group and a woman from Bird were there.

The man had no distinguishing features. He said, "I'm glad I got fish. I can't stand frogs." His name was Sano, if I recall correctly. The woman introduced herself as Kana. She was cute, but her pink hair was messy and dull, and she had self-harm scars on both wrists. She told me without my asking that she was a sex worker who was living with her boyfriend, a host. Her boyfriend wanted to switch to a normal job, which was why she needed money. I felt sad for her. She reminded me of Emi. My sister might have been smarter than Kana, but their dependency on others and gullibility were extremely similar. But Kana seemed more sociable.

The three of us made small talk for a while longer, but eventually, we grew bored and broke off to do our own thing. There was no lunch break, but we were given another paper bag with sandwiches and snacks, so we didn't go hungry. Around seven o'clock, just when I was thinking that it had gotten dark outside, some of the staff

came into the room and announced that it was time for work.

As a group of three, we were to make a round through the woods. Apparently, it was for a group having a banquet outside.

Throwing a feast in the middle of the forest was far outside the realm of common sense, but none of us said anything. I might be repeating myself, but again, everyone was desperate. We would receive payment for seven days of proper work, and although we were allowed to leave at any time, if we quit, the only compensation we would receive would be for the commute, according to the contract.

The three of us entered the forest single file, with me, the oldest, in front and the woman, Kana, in the middle. There was a rough, trampled path, so it was easy to walk. In addition, since there were LED lights marking our way, we didn't get lost, either.

We made our way toward a faint glow, which resolved as we got closer. Gradually, we started hearing voices, too, and, for some reason, the continuous croaking of frogs, just like in the Frog room.

We continued forward, putting up with the unpleasant scratching of the tall grass and the croaking that permeated our ears, and arrived at a banquet space. In the forest was a small stage, the kind you find at festivals that are thrown together on the spot. Set apart from it was a long table where a dozen or so people in white clothing of all different ages and genders were sitting.

We had been instructed that we could return once we verified that the banquet was proceeding without trouble. When we turned to go back the way we had come, we noticed something unusual.

We could hear voices, but no one was speaking.

But their mouths were moving, and from their mouths came the *grribbit grribbit* guttural croaking of frogs.

Kana let out an aborted shriek. She covered her mouth in a panic and ducked under the shadow of the grass.

No one at the banquet seemed to have noticed. They were still croaking away.

"This is insane…," Kana mumbled quietly.

I couldn't have said it better myself. The sound of talking got louder and louder. We could even hear laughter, but we had no idea

where it was coming from.

As befitting a banquet, there were several dishes arranged on the table and decorations strung around the area. However, no one was eating or enjoying themselves. They merely continued croaking, their faces devoid of any color.

Sano whispered, "Let's run." The voices were so close at that point that it was like we were a part of the feast.

Dragging along Kana, who was too frightened to stand, we left the woods. Thankfully, the voices didn't follow us.

A staff member was standing at the building entrance. "Good work," he greeted us. "You may go and wash up."

He showed us to private bathrooms that were different from the bathing facilities we had been using. We rinsed off. I had no chance to talk with the other two before we were directed to the interview rooms. Sano was one thing, but I wondered if Kana would be able to work the next day considering the state she was in. I was worried about her even though it wasn't any of my business.

Of course, I was scared, too, but upon reflection, it had been dark, so we might have seen it wrong.

Anyway, the interview. As always, my memories of the session are blurry. However, I was able to give a proper response when they asked how the patrol was. I answered, "I want to do this every day." Think about it. Rather than spending time with frogs indoors, patrolling outside was a more effective way to uncover the mysteries of the facility, no matter how you sliced it.

From that day on, besides when we were sleeping, I started spending my time apart from the other Frog members.

In the sliver of time before bed, I asked the brothers Seiichi and Ryuuji what they did that day. Unsurprisingly, they'd spent it observing the frogs.

On top of that, though I had been gone for only a day, the relationships between the others had soured. Wakui had ultimately snapped at Okada, the man with the awful body odor. The stench had been too much to bear. The two of them fought. When Okada punched Wakui, the other three, who were also sick of putting up with Okada's smell, jumped in, and they ganged up on him.

I was stunned. They were all grown men, but they couldn't even have an adult conversation.

"We can't get along without you," Seiichi said to me.

"But I'll be working outside starting tomorrow," I said.

To which he replied, "We're screwed."

It dawned on me then that they really were all social outcasts.

The next day, I went to the same waiting room, but neither Sano nor Kana was there. Two people who hadn't come on the bus with me were in the room. When I asked about Sano and Kana, I was told they had been part of the staff from before.

One of them explained, "The other two said they didn't want to continue, so we had them return. From now on, you'll be patrolling with us."

Return to where? What kinds of jobs did they do there? They ignored me after that no matter what I asked.

Then night fell.

The three of us cut our way through the grass into the woods, with me in the rear. The atmosphere was far heavier than the previous day. It wasn't long before the croaking of frogs reached our ears. Though I guess they weren't really frogs…

Just like the day before, we went to the banquet site to check the situation, and once again, we found the croaking people sitting at the table without touching the feast. One difference was that there were more dishes on the table. That and there were more guests, I thought. I saw a young woman near the center of the table who definitely hadn't been there. I tried to take a closer look, but the two staff warned me not to and led me back the way we had come. The voices were creepy anyway, so I did as I was told.

We returned to the facility. I immediately showered and went to the interview.

They asked me the same question again, and I gave the same response. "I want to keep patrolling."

When I went back to the Frog room, I found Okada in the corner, naked and trembling. For some reason, he was dripping wet.

I asked what the hell happened, and Seiichi said, "The old fart stinks and won't wash himself, so we did it for him."

I saw that Ryuuji, Wakui, and Tamada all looked smug and self-satisfied.

"Don't you feel bad for him? He must be cold," I said.

I covered Okada with a towel that had been lying around, and he burst out crying.

"Y-y-y-y-you! You can't be! Are you—taking his side?! B-b-b-but he's the one! B-b-bothering us!" Wakui stuttered, extremely worked up.

Once again, I was astonished.

It wasn't just the elementary school bullying that shocked me. When Wakui had introduced himself, he told us that he had always been bullied. I supposed the idea that people who are bullied understand others' pain and grow to be kind is nothing more than a fantasy. Maybe it's more accurate to say that people who are bullied for a long time forget how to be kind to others.

"It's not about taking sides," I said. "We're all adults. If there's something you don't like, you should talk it out and find a solution."

Wakui snorted in annoyance.

I helped Okada up. Thanks to the involuntary bath, he stank a little less.

"You're at fault for not bathing, too," I said. "Bathing is essential for people, especially adults. It's true. You smell. Telling you to wash up is perfectly reasonable. You fought against a sensible request. That's why this happened."

He nodded while sobbing.

I told them to apologize to each other, and they said "Sorry" reluctantly. Inside, I was fed up, but I said, "There's only a few days left. Let's get along," and we turned in for the night.

Though I was exhausted from dealing with the foolish drama, I wasn't able to sleep well and woke up at an odd hour of the night.

I tried to fall asleep again, but I was strangely alert and couldn't. Then I was struck by a thought. Maybe this was my chance to uncover everything there was to know about the facility.

I slipped out of bed, taking care not to wake the others. Wakui was snoring unbelievably loudly. I was impressed at myself for being able to sleep with such noise.

That was when I noticed something strange. The croaking that had driven me up the wall was gone. Unlike humans, frogs weren't guaranteed to sleep during the night. While the croaking might be expected to die down overnight, it was unusual for it to be silent.

I looked at the glass case to find that, shockingly, there wasn't a single frog inside. How had they carried out the mass of frogs without waking anyone…? It was more than odd. It was downright eerie.

Anyway, I told myself I had to fulfill my mission—the reconnaissance, in other words—and left the room.

There was no one around. There wasn't a single light. The moonlight reflecting off the concrete floor gave me the creeps. I debated using the flashlight on my phone, but there were sure to be a few people awake. I would be screwed if I was discovered, so I relied on the moonlight and my hand on the wall to guide me.

As I went down the stairs, I heard a sound. I was wearing the socks that had been distributed to us, so my footsteps should have been perfectly silent. I hadn't heard anything on the way to the stairs, either.

Just then, I heard the stomping of hard-soled shoes on one of the floors above me. Thinking that it might have been a security patrol, I hunched in on myself to try to make myself inconspicuous and quickly fled down the stairs. However, I heard the pounding footsteps grow closer; it was like they had seen through my plan. I was proud about being pretty athletic, but… When it seemed like they were going to catch up to me, I hid myself in a gap in the wall next to the stairs.

But the footsteps stopped on the floor above me, the one I had been on where the Frog room was. I held my breath, and shortly thereafter, I heard the door open and shut.

Damn, I thought, *they're going to find out that I'm missing*. But it was also too late for me to go back. As I was spinning my wheels, I heard the door opening again. Mixed in with the footsteps was the sound of something heavy being dragged along the floor. *Fwssst. Fwssst. Fwssst.*

It was a very unpleasant sound. I no longer cared about being

caught. All I cared about was getting to a place where I couldn't hear the dull dragging noise any longer. I ran down the stairs all the way to the entrance and went outside.

I regretted it immediately.

I could hear voices from all over, the same voices from the banquet.

I could hear voices, but the people to whom they belonged were nowhere to be found.

Even more disturbing was the fact that the conversations were clearly audible, but I couldn't understand a word of what they were saying. It didn't sound like a foreign language, either.

It sounded like…like nonhuman creatures borrowing the human language and abusing it for their own purposes.

I decided to go back inside. But my body wouldn't move. No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't move a muscle.

The voices grew closer and closer.

From above me.

From below.

From the front.

From behind.

Suddenly.

Something grabbed my shoulder.

And then—

—I opened my eyes. I was in bed.

I was the one closest to the entrance of the Frog room. I leaped out of bed. The others were already up. "Someone's a late riser today," they laughed. The frogs that had been missing in the night were back inside the glass case.

I figured everything had been a dream. According to one theory, dreams are images the brain conjures in order to process the information from the day. My brain must have been scrambled from living in this bizarre environment.

I took a deep breath. That was when I realized.

"Where's Okada?" I asked.

He wasn't in the room.

"Oh. That geezer ran away during the night," Ryuuji said with a

contemptuous smile. “Look. His stuff is gone. We must’ve scared him.”

I didn’t respond. My mind had put two and two together to arrive at a horrifying conclusion.

The noise had been the sound of Okada’s body being dragged.

The moment the thought passed through my head, my vision seemed to flicker, and I unconsciously sat down on the floor. The others were worried for me and suggested that I take the day off. I wanted to rest, too—more than that, I thoroughly wanted to give up on investigating Moriya Foods and go home.

Supposing that the sound had actually been Okada’s body, then the disembodied voices I had heard outside had been real, too. So was the fact that someone or something had grabbed my shoulder.

Needless to say, it wasn’t that I missed the presence of that smelly middle-aged man.

I told you that my bed was closest to the entrance, right?

Well, Okada had been sleeping next to me.

In other words, I could have been the one who had been discarded. That was what I was thinking.

Even so, what stopped me from running was the image of Emi in my mind.

For her sake, I had to expose the truth of the facility at any cost.

So I gave up on leaving.

The day I fortified my resolve was my fifth at the facility. The patrol that day was…disappointingly uneventful. Just like the previous days, the group of people were croaking among the creepy voices. Well, there was both more food and more banqueters, and there was a stench that smelled like dirty rags, but…that was it.

The previous day, I had been grabbed by someone, and on top of that, Okada had disappeared. I had imagined more terrifying developments, not such trivial changes. A monster attack, for example. But that was really all for the night.

However, during the interview, I was told there would be no more patrolling after that day.

I did it, I thought. I was filled with a sense of accomplishment.

It was a shame that I couldn’t see the outside area anymore, but

I had been able to get the voices at the banquet and the facility on video for the most part. With the proof I had, anyone would understand that the place was abnormal.

Just in case, I asked Tamada to switch beds with me. He was fed up with Wakui's loud snoring, so he readily agreed.

We safely turned in for the night.

The next morning, I checked the bed beside me. Tamada had not disappeared—there had been nothing out of the ordinary. He had drifted off to sleep with a peaceful expression, so I was relieved. Even if he was a social outcast, I would not have been able to rest easy knowing I had sentenced someone to die in my place.

That brings us, as it were, to the morning of the sixth day.

Day six.

That day, after breakfast, we gathered in a large hall.

There had been a dozen or so of us at the start, but about half were gone. Yokokawa from the Rabbit group was gone, too.

A peculiar object was stood in the center of the hall. It resembled a tapered tower, but it was sloppily constructed with wood, so it wasn't so much a "tower" as a wooden structure. I'm five foot ten, so I think it was roughly thirty feet tall.

Anyway, we were directed to stand around the mysterious structure with its strange aura and wait. After some time, a few staff members entered the hall. One dumped a grimy bag in front of me. The others had been given similar bags.

"Please follow the staff members' directions and begin the assignment."

The broadcast came out of nowhere.

What shocked me was the voice.

It belonged to a young man and was slightly high in pitch. Listening to it sent a shudder through my mind and filled me with a strange sensation.

That was why, at first, I wasn't bothered by the contents of the bags or the bizarre instructions.

Inside the bags were frog carcasses, a large number of them.

All the frogs were dead. They didn't so much as twitch.

"Dissect them," the man in front of me said.

He handed me a sheet of paper, on which was printed a dissection diagram and directions.

"You may take your time. Please dissect them all," he said firmly.

The unbelievable thing was, I followed his order without any questions. Weird, right? It's strange, no matter how you think about it. But at the time, I believed that it was my natural duty to obey that voice.

First, I carefully skinned the corpse. I removed its innards to turn it into flesh and bone. Then rinse and repeat. I wasn't even disgusted. I was simply convinced that it was the proper thing to do.

After the fifth frog, when I had five carcasses stripped down to their meat and bones, that changed. I was struck by an awful feeling. It wasn't revulsion from the dead frogs or the dissection.

The night I had slipped outside, when something had grabbed my shoulder—it was the same presence from back then.

That was when I snapped out of it.

What on earth am I doing? I thought. My hands were covered with slimy frog guts. I raised my head, looked around, and took a breath. I felt like I was going to vomit.

The harsh smell of blood and viscera filled the room.

The man next to me was cutting open a bunch of rabbits. The one next to him was dissecting some large animal.

More than the stench, I felt a presence far more awful and horrifying near me. It spoke with that voice, that beautiful voice. "Move aside."

I looked up to see the owner, who was, as I had imagined, a man whose face still contained traces of youth. He pushed through the staff overseeing us to come stand right in front of me.

"I will see to him," he said with a contrived smile plastered on his face. "You can continue, right?"

Sour bile welled up inside my throat. I felt like I was going to throw up at any second, but inexplicably, my hand started to move. My body followed his orders, betraying my own will.

And it was then I knew.

He was "Jan."

That was the only possibility.

I've always had good instincts. I'm sure that was why I noticed the vile atmosphere around him and how I was able to stop acting abnormally.

When I realized he was Jan, I thought back to Emi.

She must have been brainwashed by the man's voice and been compelled to do bizarre things like we were.

A violent rage welled up inside me at the thought. I could move my hands freely again.

I stood up and said, "You must be Jan."

He looked at me in confusion. "Huh… Did I give you my name? Indeed. I'm Jan…" After a pause, he smiled. "You may be suited for a more productive conversation. Of course, your current task is wonderful work as well."

I was filled with a burning indignation. Denigrating other people without a care was like second nature to him. He preyed upon the weakhearted like Emi and the part-timers who had come here.

Still furious, I said, "Give Emi back."

His expression changed. His lips, which had been drawn in a beautiful arc, started to quiver. His gaze focused on one point.

This man knew Emi. He had involved her in something nasty. I was sure of it.

"Emi can't do anything by herself. You're taking advantage of her. What are you trying to do to her? You pervert. I have proof of everything that's transpired here. Give her back imme—"

That was all I could say.

Suddenly, my lungs were crushed by a great pressure. I could barely breathe.

"So, it was you," he said.

Slowly. Slowly, Jan leaned in toward me. So slow that I felt my consciousness slipping away.

Meanwhile, I was convulsing, searching for air, like a fish thrown out of water.

"It's you."

He raised three fingers and touched them to his lip. He sucked in a deep breath—

"Anate."

In the space of that breath, I bolted.

My vision flickered. My ears rang; it felt like my eardrums were going to rupture. I threw on a pair of shoes belonging to God knows who and burst outside. I ran with all my might.

I remembered the area because I had tailed Emi. A ways down the road were restaurants and a local bus stop.

We hadn't been allowed to bring our wallets and phones to the dissection ritual, but I had anyway. I was glad from the bottom of my heart that I hadn't left them behind.

With my body in turmoil, I fled the place and returned home.

…Earlier, I told you I have good instincts.

They help me read the room and avoid awkward situations, of course, but they also allow me to perceive supernatural phenomena.

I can't see ghosts, per se, but when a place is filled with malignant energy, I know right away.

When I'd met Jan, I was hit by a wave of discomfort; it made me want to puke… I don't think he's human.

He was moving, walking. Other people could see him, too, so he probably isn't a ghost. Even so, I'm certain he's not human.

That's why I came to you. Sharp though my instincts might be, I can only avoid the issue. I can't resolve it.

Please. Save my precious little sister from that devil, I beg of you.

◆ ◆ ◆

"The deposit is two million yen."

That was the first thing Rumi said after listening to Youta Shimamoto's monologue.

Aoyama looked at her, startled. She had never requested such high compensation before, let alone at the outset. Up until then, she wouldn't broach the subject of money with the client until the case was fully wrapped up. If he weren't with her, she probably wouldn't take any money even if she did solve the case, and the agency would have doubtlessly gone bankrupt a long time ago.

"Rumi, that's…," Aoyama said.

"We aren't a charity, Aoyama," Rumi said, parroting his usual response. She nailed the delivery. "Mr. Shimamoto, from your account, I have been able to broadly identify the root cause. This case is a nasty one… Your sister's brainwashing is certainly part of the problem. I'll have to call in an expert."

"But two million is too… What do you possibly need it for?" Youta asked.

"I have no choice. You can pay in installments if you'd like, as long as I have it in writing."

"That's not the problem. Wait a second. Aren't you the expert?" he asked dubiously.

"My job is to identify the problem. That's it. It is only sensible to solicit a specialist for the solution. It's the referral fee. Plus…" She paused, crunching on the candy in her mouth. "Suppose we solve the case. Do you know how to care for a person who's been brainwashed?"

"Emi's my sister!" Youta shouted, his face flushed. "I'll provide the evidence. Once your expert deals with that bastard, I'm sure it'll work out, one way or the other. We'll talk it out."

"It seems like you're underestimating brainwashing." Rumi stood and scoured the bookshelves. She threw a few volumes at Youta. "*Children of the Cult* explains it well, in my opinion. It's about children who were raised in a religious cult. Even after they cut off ties with their parents, they continued to believe the abnormal doctrines of the group, despite their hatred of the religion and their parents.

"And that's not all there is," she said, launching into an explanation of the book.

For a while, Youta listened to her with his mouth hanging open in astonishment, but as she gushed on like a broken dam, he grew fed up and held up a hand to stop her.

"I get it, I get it. Sorry. I was naive. It seems like it will be too much for me to handle alone," he said.

"Good. The fee includes the aftercare. I wanted to make you aware of that," Rumi said. "Anyway…Aoyama, give me the contract."

“Right. Okay!” Aoyama said.

Rumi quickly drafted the documents and had Youta sign. She smiled in satisfaction. “I’m on the case! Good things come to those who wait, they say. Try to kick back and relax at home.”

Then, while Youta was hesitating, she expelled him from the office.

“All right. Let’s get going,” Rumi said, hoisting a worn deep-green backpack and making for the door immediately.

Aoyama scrambled to get ready. “To where?”

“Weren’t you listening?!” she exclaimed with exaggeration, miming falling over in shock. “We’re going to meet the specialist. The person who will solve the case for us.”

He nodded once. Then he thought better of it and shook his head instead. “Are we going on a trip? Please give me a little more time to prepare. You should wear something heavier, too.”

“It won’t be far. Coincidentally, he’s in Tokyo right now.”

“Really? In that case…is he a difficult person to work with?”

“No? He’s a pretty friendly old man, though he can be particular.”

The mystery deepened. Aoyama asked Rumi point-blank, “Then why the high commission…? Could it be that he’s nice, but he takes offerings for charity…?”

“No, he’s genuinely kind. He’s the type of person who would step in even if he wasn’t asked. If he heard someone was in trouble, I bet he would help for free,” Rumi said. “Enough of that. Hurry up. Let’s go.”

He felt like she had just dodged his question, but she was already halfway out the door. He rushed to follow her.

What surprised Aoyama was that the man was there.

After leaving the office, Rumi had wandered this way and that like a fickle-hearted cat with Aoyama somehow managing to keep up with her. She didn’t give him any explanation. What was the solution to the problem? Who was the specialist?

He had no choice but to follow her. There was nothing he could do by himself.

When she finally stopped at a family restaurant, he figured it was because she wanted to take a break after they had made the rounds to various places.

Rumi ordered a large spaghetti napolitan, a Mexican pilaf, a beef curry, a Japanese-style hamburg steak set meal, a corn and bacon pizza, and a seasonal parfait.

"Can you eat all of that?" Aoyama asked.

"Don't worry," she said.

It was in the middle of their usual exchange when he thought it happened.

The man was there.

A scent like the forest.

Sitting next to Aoyama was an old man with a smile on his face.

"What the—?" Aoyama exclaimed, his reaction delayed.

"There's no need to shout," the old man said, still grinning. He was wearing work clothes.

Aoyama looked at Rumi sitting across from him. She didn't appear particularly surprised and was mumbling about being hungry.

Was it possible he was the only one who could see the man?

The thought made him shudder.

"I'm human," the old man said, leaning closer and forcing Aoyama to meet his gaze.

Aoyama pulled back instinctively, and the man laughed out loud. His eyes crinkled along the handful of laugh lines carved into his sunbaked skin.

"How cute," he said.

"Don't tease him too much," Rumi said around the straw in her mouth.

"R-Rumi, is he…?" Aoyama asked.

"Yes, this is him."

The old man looked between the two of them, still wearing a smile. Rumi's eyes were fixed on Aoyama's shoulder, as if the last thing she wanted was to meet the man's eyes.

"Won't you introduce me?" the man said.

"You can do it, can't you?" Rumi said frostily.

Aoyama thought that was peculiar.

Rumi's speech and mannerisms may have been eccentric, but she was not a rude person. Once, they'd had an arrogant client who complained about the payment, yet she had still treated him with a certain level of courtesy.

Sure, the old man was a little weird, but he seemed generally affable… Why was she so cold to him? Plus, judging from the course of the conversation, this was the specialist they were planning to commission to solve the case.

The man set a piece of paper on the table. "This is who I am and what I do."

It was probably meant to be a business card, but it was no more than a scrap torn from the corner of a notebook page.

"'Ishigami'…er…," Aoyama read aloud.

"Hyakkou," the old man finished. "You can call me Ishigami, Hyakkou, or Geezer. Whatever pleases you."

All that was written on the paper slip was:

Consultations.

Anytime.

Ishigami Hyakkou.

Ishigami snatched the "business card" from Aoyama's hand and slipped it back into his sleeve.

"So, you're a medium?" Aoyama asked.

He regretted asking the question as soon as it left his mouth. It was an idiotic thing to ask even as filler. What else would Ishigami be?

"Who knows?" Ishigami mumbled, his eyes focused on something in the distance. "Certainly, I perceive more than most… But the power I wield is that of the Serpent, not my own." He continued without looking at Aoyama's expression. "I was young, really young. My mother was not the brightest. She was jilted by a man with a

wife and child and had to raise me all alone. She was dealt a rough hand, it seemed, and she threw me away. In the middle of the mountain. I was taken into custody by the warden of the mountain… He said he was lured by a white snake, and it led him to me. Interesting, no?"

"That…must have been tough," Aoyama said, unsure of what to say.

"Not at all. *Tough* is an understatement!" Ishigami adopted a thinking pose. "I lived in the mountains for two weeks. I was a four-year-old child, all alone. Two weeks! Amazing, right? Not me, but the Serpent."

"Y-yeah…" Aoyama tried to keep his emotions from showing on his face, but his voice wavered.

Ishigami's narrative resembled a folktale or fable. Had those events really happened? His story didn't seem credible.

However, his eyes sparkled as he spoke about his past.

Aoyama had met several other people who had had this same look in their eyes. They were the eyes of a religious fanatic.

Aoyama had been born to a lineage of Protestant ministers. He knew himself to be a devout believer. He would not deny another their faith, no matter the religion they chose. In fact, he believed that all people needed religion—whether it was Christianity or not—as spiritual support.

Still, there was a significant difference between piety and obsession. In times of suffering, sorrow, or joy, fanatics do not pray to their god; they entrust their god with their whole life.

His family's church had seen their share of such devotees. A particularly extreme example among them was a housewife named Mrs. Sakurai. Tormented by her husband's chronic infidelity and unable to turn to family for help, she was able to derive solace only from the counseling of Aoyama's grandfather, through which she took an interest in Christian teachings.

She began to devotedly attend church services and study the Bible in his father's youth class. So passionate was she that she continued asking Aoyama's father questions even after the classes were over. Gradually, she grew dissatisfied with merely going to

church once a week and started showing up nearly every day. She helped out with yard sales and charity events, too. "Why don't you take a page from her book?" his sister would say to him.

Then, one morning, Aoyama went to the chapel to clean, only to find it in disarray and littered with broken glass. He thought a thief had broken in but quickly realized that wasn't the case. Mrs. Sakurai was tearing through the hall, brandishing a steel pipe.

"What are you doing? Stop it!" he cried.

She turned around. She said something, but her voice was strange, and he couldn't make it out. Aoyama's father came running in to help, and the two managed to pacify her and coax out an explanation.

She said, "No matter how fervently I pray, God hasn't put an end to my husband's infidelity, so I wanted to draw God's attention however I could."

However, the Bible didn't contain techniques to prevent one's spouse from cheating, and neither Aoyama's grandfather nor his father had ever preached on the subject matter.

The church only offered aid in maintaining a tranquil heart. That was the original purpose of religion.

After that, Mrs. Sakurai said she had no need for a god who wouldn't listen to her, and she stopped going to church. Since she lived in the neighborhood, Aoyama heard about her life thereafter. Apparently, she became a follower of a new age religion, which solicited a large offering from her, only to quit soon after. Presently, she was enrolled in a behavioral psychology seminar. She had invited Aoyama to enroll as well. At that time, he had been surprised to see the burning in her eyes.

Religion or seminar, the function was surely the same: to offer a place of spiritual support. But support was all they were. It was best not to throw your everything into either. Regular people understood that, but fanatics were different. Their identities became defined by the target of their faith.

Aoyama sensed that same zeal from Ishigami and was slightly repulsed.

Ishigami didn't notice the change in Aoyama's expression and

continued his spiel.

"Back then, I spoke with the Serpent about a variety of subjects. That is why, you see, our hearts are connected. My lord teaches me all."

"That's enough idle chatter," Rumi said, her tone still frigid. "You have one month. The fee is a million yen. I will give you five hundred thousand up front. If you cannot complete the assignment within the time frame, I'll have you return the deposit minus any expenses including transportation fees, so please keep your receipts… In the case of failure, you will still receive compensation equal to Tokyo's minimum rent level…one hundred forty-three thousand yen plus expenditures. Do we have an agreement?"

She rattled out the terms without pause. Unlike the rapid-fire way Rumi talked about her beloved occult stories, her acerbic tone conveyed that she merely wanted to get the conversation over with.

"I've told you time and time again: I don't need money," Ishigami replied leisurely, unconcerned by Rumi's attitude. His calmness only made the mood more tense. "I will do what I can, no more, no less."

Rumi clicked her teeth. She must have been extremely irritated because she was bouncing her leg. This was the first time Aoyama had seen her so annoyed.

The atmosphere was dreadful.

Aoyama tried to cut the tension by saying, "Rumi, didn't you say you've already pinpointed the general cause, so we'll be able to commission the appropriate specialist?"

"Yeah, I did. So what?"

She had never snapped at him so harshly before. Internally disheartened by her tone, he nonetheless continued. "I don't know what the cause is or what makes Mr. Ishigami the right person for the job… It would be nice if you could explain…"

"I've got a large spaghetti napolitan!" the waiter said brightly, bringing their food at the perfect moment.

As Rumi watched the stream of dishes, she appeared to soften slightly. "That's right. I haven't explained anything yet," she said in her usual tone. "It may be too early to conclude that we're dealing with a new religion, but from Mr. Shimamoto's story, the possibility is

extremely high."

Rumi shoveled food into her mouth as she spoke. It made Aoyama feel better to see.

"Since we don't know all the details of the rituals, and it's all hearsay, I can't say anything for sure. But…deer, rabbit, bird, frog, fish—these are all animals offered as live sacrifices in Suwa Grand Shrine's religious festivals… The biggest giveaway is the army of frogs."

"What about the frogs…?" Aoyama asked.

"Frogs are the Serpent's favorite food," Ishigami interjected.

The tension returned to the air, just when it had finally gone back to normal.

"It is called the Frog-Hunting Ritual…," he said. "Frogs are skewered with bamboo arrows and dedicated to the shrine god… Suwa Grand Shrine's deity, you see, is the Serpent."

"That's the long and short of it," Rumi said. "I can't say with certainty that the Serpent is the shrine's deity of worship, but that is one hypothesis. Therefore, Mr. Ishigami, who practices ophiolatry, may be able to help."

Her tone was polite, but she was clearly displeased that he had interrupted her. Her large, thick glasses hid her face, making her expression unreadable. Nonetheless, it was plain to see that she was glaring at Ishigami.

Aoyama typed *Suwa Grand Shrine festival* into his phone's search engine. The Ontou Festival was one of the first results. He had heard the name before. It was infamous for being a wild event. The illustrations he saw actually showed five different animals impaled on skewers and offered as live sacrifices.

He was about to search *Frog-Hunting Ritual* when Ishigami said, "They worship the Serpent. He is my deity, so I'm positive about this. You're the one requesting my aid. Please have some faith in me."

Rumi clicked her teeth again.

"I perceive more than most, so…I have already started my preparations," he said.

Her countenance changed. "What…?"

"Your client's…younger sister, is it? I met her a little while ago. It was really a coincidence. The Serpent sensed something sour in the air, so I boarded the same train as her. She was wearing a suit… She seemed stretched to the breaking point. Carrying so much tension that I felt sorry for her… So that was how we met. Your case concerns her, right? Oh-ho, I knew it."

"You do quick work," Rumi said dryly.

"Your compliment delights me," Ishigami said. "In any case, I planted a seed. It should have taken effect to an extent."

"Um, what do you mean by *seed*?" Aoyama interjected quickly, trying not to get left behind.

"Simply put, it's a protective amulet. I designed it to alert me if she is approached by unsavory elements… Ideally, I would have liked to prevent the encounter entirely."

"But in the end, the fact that my client came to me for help must mean it was ineffective," Rumi said.

Ishigami's expression clouded over. "You are right… However, despite how I look, I have never once failed… Either the opposition is extremely strong, or…this outcome is what the young lady desires."

"It's pointless to speculate," Rumi declared flatly.

"Heh, my apologies. People's hearts intrigue me. Call it a bad habit of mine." His smile didn't waver, even in the face of the frost in her voice. "Anyway, I will borrow the Serpent's powers and handle it."

"…Then we have an agreement. I'll draw up a contract with the terms we discussed."

"I don't need any money," Ishigami insisted again.

Rumi ignored him. She got up and went to the register. The veritable feast on the table had been picked clean. When Aoyama glanced at the seat next to him, Ishigami was gone. He had vanished without a sound, just like when he had appeared.

He sat there in confusion until Rumi called for him, and he scrambled to follow. She was faster than her physique would suggest, but he managed to catch up to her by sprinting.

"Wai—… Wait!" he panted.

Rumi's demeanor softened minutely when she saw him out of breath. "What is it, Aoyama?"

"I still don't understand anything about Mr. Ishigami, but more important—"

She took out a bottle of tea from her backpack and handed it to him. He gulped it down and took a deep breath. Now that she was being so considerate, her earlier attitude seemed like a dream.

But that made his question all the more vital.

"Why did you act like that just now? You went a little too far… Did Ishigami upset you somehow?"

"He's altruistic. Everything he does is altruistic."

Aoyama didn't understand. He stayed silent.

Rumi looked at him and smiled. "You're a good person. A genuinely kind person… I love people like you. They're a different breed—people driven by altruism, that is."

She was quiet for a moment, walking in step with him.

Aoyama's heart was pounding from being told out of the blue that she loved him, never mind the context of the conversation. Not to mention, she had been speaking uncharacteristically seriously, which made it even harder for him to look her in the face. For a while, he floundered, until Rumi spoke again.

"Now then, who is Uncle Ishigami exactly?" She had returned to her usual rapid-fire speech pattern, which made him feel far more at ease. "He is a devotee of the Mishaguji and a medium. He might have denied it, and I'm sure you thought he was fishy, too, right? But his powers are the real deal.

"You've heard of the Mishaguji, no?" she asked.

Aoyama frantically searched through the shelves of his memory and hit upon a hazy recollection from his student days. That was right. He had learned about it from Professor Saitou.

"It's a deity that originates in animism, a belief that already existed in the jomon period…combined with the Sosou deity, which is indigenous to the Suwa area and takes the form of a white snake, if I recall correctly…"

"Hah-hah, good job remembering even though I'm sure you had no interest in the subject."

Aoyama certainly couldn't say that he had listened to Professor Saitou's lectures diligently or with interest. He tried to protest that Rumi was wrong, but she continued speaking.

"I mentioned this earlier, but the group Mr. Shimamoto's little sister is obsessed with…or rather, the group she's been dragged into…their ceremonies are based on the practices of Suwa Grand Shrine, I believe. However, this is nothing more than conjecture, since I'm only going off Mr. Shimamoto's story."

"You said you can't say for sure, but…we must be dealing with a serpent deity, right?"

"No. You said it yourself. It is a combination. Yes, the Mishaguji also manifests as a snake, and there are many tales about dragons and serpents around Suwa, so the serpent is a very strong candidate. However, we must not jump to any conclusions."

Rumi fiddled with the drawstrings on her sweatshirt.

"Undoubtedly, identifying the root cause of a problem and countering it with the appropriate method is extremely important, and it's what I try to do. That was my approach this time as well, but we must not make assumptions. When push comes to shove, we need to use every avenue available to us… That being said, on a fundamental level, monks deal with evil spirits, Shinto priests deal with deities, and the clergy deal with demons. If you don't follow the rules, there won't be any effect. That's common sense."

Rumi stopped there. Then she added, "I've said too much. Please forget about it," and quickened her pace. "Despite the way he acts, that geezer is actually a remarkable person. The way he goes on and on about the Serpent is annoying, but his story might be true. That's why we should forget all about the case. More importantly, we finally got our hands on a fortune. Let's go eat *yakiniku*."

"You want to eat *again*?" Aoyama asked.

Without responding, Rumi ran off toward the station.

○

The earth is falling into desolation.

The glittering age of peak prosperity has passed. None are righteous here.

Poison pervades every corner. The wealthy become poor. The poor become destitute and are bled dry.

Here, there is corruption, degeneration, and depravity. Virtue, effort, and sincerity are not to be found.

I ask, “Are there any righteous here?”

Everyone gives the same answer. “There are righteous here.”

There is none righteous, no, not one.

I am holding a flame.

There are no righteous among the living and mobile.

The unrighteous must be burned.

“Wait,” says a man carrying a corpse to me. “There must be righteous here. A hundred, no, fifty, no, ten.”

The body in his arms is that of a woman, pale and pure.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

I repeat, “There is none righteous.”

Behind the man still clinging to my legs, I can see the masses.

They are carrying spears, alcohol, and sheep.

They say: *Kill. Rape.*

The man proffers them the body.

The crowd cackles. Through their laughter, they drink her blood. They must drink the blood.

Once they have drained her, they reach toward me and rip off my clothes.

The man breaks down crying.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

“There is none righteous.”

And even if there are, I turn around and try to enter the building.

“It is not yet time.”

I nod.

It is not yet time.

○

It had become routine for Emi to jolt awake from these strange dreams.

The subject was incomprehensible, as always. The Emi of her dreams certainly had a sense of self. She could think and act according to her will. However, dream Emi felt like a completely different entity from her waking self.

"Good morning."

Waking up to see Jan waiting beside the bed was also becoming part of her everyday scenery.

"Good morning, Jan," Emi said, gripping his hand.

A clean, spacious room that filled with light during the afternoons. A wide bed that could easily sleep three grown adults.

She hadn't returned to her cheap apartment in over two months.

Occasionally, Jan would go out alone, saying, "I have to have a discussion," which meant he would talk with his "brothers and sisters" and give them "guidance." Otherwise, they were always together.

Emi never found out his occupation, age, or full name. Needless to say, the R&D work she had requested had never materialized, either.

But none of that mattered to her now.

Jan knelt and turned Emi's palm to face the ceiling. He kissed her fingertips one by one, over and over again.

She smiled, feeling content.

Since they started living together, he would do this every morning.

"What are today's plans?" she asked.

"Today is the harvest," he replied, wearing his usual smile.

Ah, he had *mentioned that before*, she recalled. That day, they would be harvesting the crops his siblings had planted a while back.

"We'll only be watching from the usual room, so it will be the two of us again," he added.

"I see," she said, trying to stay impassive.

"Two of us" meant the two of them *alone*. She was happy, of course.

However, she couldn't say "Hooray" or "I'm glad." Jan hated it

when he did something to change Emi's mood. No, it wasn't that he hated it, but rather, when her moods fluctuated based on something he did, he would punish himself, even though she didn't want that at all.

Calmly, but imperiously. That was the goal.

Emi conducted herself the way Jan wanted her to.

"Incidentally, were you able to enter today?" he asked.

He was referring to the building in her dream. He was always interested in it.

"I was told, 'It is not yet time,'" she answered.

She chose not to question the things he said or did. At first, she had so much to ask that she couldn't bear not knowing. Questions like "Why do you know what I dream about?" But she realized it was pointless to ask. He would evade her questions anyway.

Jan's every word and action was correct. It was wrong for her to doubt him.

"I see…," he said, falling silent with a complicated look on his face.

Emi panicked internally. It was clear from his expression that he wasn't satisfied with her answer. The way things were, he would end up disappointed in her. He would end up hating her. He would stop loving her. The way things were, that was.

She desperately pieced together a defense. "But today, I spoke of my own volition."

Jan's expression softened once more. "Your own volition…? What do you mean?"

She wanted to grin from relief, but she smothered her excitement before continuing. "Usually…when I'm dreaming, it's like watching a movie… It's from my perspective, of course, but my mouth and body move independently of me. But this time, I spoke because I wanted to. 'There is none righteous.' I drew the conclusion myself."

Jan immediately praised her. "Wonderful!" He repeated it again and again. Then he said, "It appears we are ready."

"What does that mean…?"

"That the preparations for the next stage are complete."

His statements were as impenetrable to her as always. Still, he

was finally smiling again, and she didn't want to jeopardize his good mood.

"I see…," she agreed vaguely, before changing her mind. If she feigned understanding only to disappoint him down the line, she wouldn't be able to bear it. "But I was told, 'It is not yet time,'" she said honestly.

Fortunately, he stayed smiling. He shook his head, the corners of his mouth still upturned. "That is a different matter. We are not at the end but the beginning."

He handed her some clothing and said, "Please prepare." He meant for her to change, it seemed.

She didn't ask anything and quietly slipped on the white dress.

Jan's brothers and sisters were, in a word, numerous. Just counting the ones Emi had seen in the last few months, there were no fewer than fifty of them. However, no matter how many times she asked about them, he dodged the question.

They were who they were.

That was what he always said.

In addition, he had told her, "You must not call them brothers and sisters." It was only the once, but she vividly remembered that his tone had been unusually severe—that, and a feeling of horrible loneliness at being excluded.

If she were to tell him that, he might hurt himself again. But even if he didn't—even then, she didn't want to displease him at all.

Emi walked through the greenhouse full of lilies with Jan leading her by the hand. As always, the intense sweetness of the fragrance seared through her brain. He had said that the greenhouse was for her, that the lilies exemplified her. In the beginning, she hadn't understood what part of the lusty scent and virile blooms resembled her at all, but lately, she had begun to think that, indeed, the lilies were *for her* and *represented her*. She couldn't explain why herself.

She hummed a melody that rose to her mind, and Jan joined in. He seemed to understand everything about her. Emi, too, wished to understand everything about him.

Intoxicated by the heat of their joined hands, Emi didn't notice the journey to the PA room until they had arrived.

Every time they came, Jan would have to let go of her hand to set up the equipment, which saddened her greatly.

"Now then, my brothers and sisters, you may begin," Jan said into the microphone.

The people in the lecture hall sluggishly began to move.

"*Cock-a-kroh*," someone crowed thrice.

The men and women in white, red, blue, and black knelt on all fours around the towerlike object that had been fabricated so swiftly.

The ceremony always began that way.

Emi felt slightly nauseated when she looked at his siblings as usual. Nonetheless, it was better than the first day, when she'd been unable to get near them at all. The other day, she had even personally passed tea out to them.

His siblings were kind and full of smiles. They were completely different from the people who had bullied and ignored her. So why was she repulsed by them, nice as they were? She felt apologetic. She hoped she would soon stop reacting with disgust. Then she could be friends with them. Jan had told her she would get used to them gradually, but she hated that she was the only one left out.

"Watch carefully."

Emi jerked her head up to see Jan sitting next to her.

She was about to say sorry, but she remembered he didn't like it when she apologized.

"You were able to find that place even without seeing anything, so perhaps it is fine if you don't w— No. Fundamentally, everything begins with watching." Jan looked her straight in the eyes and smiled. "Those who believe without seeing are wonderful."

His voice was sweet. Soft. Hearing it made Emi feel as if she could forget every misfortune that had ever befallen her.

She'd met him only a few months ago, and he might have been far younger than she. That she held such a deep love for him anyway could be blamed on his voice. No, she wasn't sure.

Emi found everything about him charming. She would never say as much to Jan, but she wasn't confident she would be able to

answer if he asked her, “What about me do you like?”

What about him? Everything.

In high school, one of the glitzy girls in the clique had said, “Time has nothing to do with falling in love.” On the inside, Emi had scorned how lovesick the girl was, but she had begun to think there was truth in that statement. Until now, she had never cherished anyone other than her brother—

Not good. If she continued daydreaming, Jan would warn her to watch carefully again.

Emi pulled herself together and concentrated on the ceremony.

It was difficult to wrap her head around.

It had nothing to do with “harvesting crops.” But that was no different from usual. Neither the “fishing” nor the “tree killing” had… In any case, none of the ceremonies she had observed had ever been what they were said to be.

In every ceremony, the four men and women would get down on their hands and knees by the tower. Among the ever-changing cast of Jan’s brothers and sisters, only they stayed constant. Then the men in white work clothes would bring in some kind of material. After the first ceremony Emi witnessed, they had never again done anything as extravagant as building the tower.

Unlike when his siblings were chatting with her, during the ceremony, their expressions were perfectly unreadable. Their eyes focused on a spot in the air, and their movements were stiff. Emi thought it looked like someone was moving them.

In the meantime, the work was proceeding apace. Most of the crops had been brought into the room.

Bundles of what appeared to be grain from a distance had been stacked in front of the tower.

“Good work. You may return,” Jan said.

His siblings disbanded and left the hall.

“Is it over?” Emi asked, slightly surprised.

Jan nodded. “The two of us have a task to do today.”

“What kind of task…?”

“To proceed to the next stage.”

Jan raised three fingers and slowly brought them to his lips.

Occasionally, he would make the same gesture when talking to his siblings. She looked around the room, but they were alone.

"Thee. Uh. Tow. Kos," he said, enunciating every syllable.

She instantly broke into goose bumps. Her body felt heavy, as if she had been dunked in water. In contrast, it felt like there was an electric current running through her brain. She was strangely awake, and her vision was sharp. It seemed like she could see impossibly far into the distance. She could even make out the layer of skin peeling off Jan's lips.

"Thee. Uh. Tow. Kos."

She heard the sound of a bucket of water being dumped on the floor. She looked down. The liquid had spilled from her own body. She had thrown up from the unbearable discomfort. Filthy, sludge-like puke covered the floor. She had no memories of eating that much food.

Normally, a single cough would bring Jan to her side, asking her if she was all right, telling her to rest, and holding her in his arms. At that moment, however, he wasn't even looking at her.

Why? Help me.

As much as she wanted to ask, it took everything she had just to breathe through her nose so as not to choke on her vomit.

"Thee. Uh. Tow. Kows."

There was nothing left in Emi's stomach, but she was assaulted by a wave of nausea so vicious it made the first one seem cute. She didn't know if she was standing or sitting on the floor. Her head was swimming. Sparks went off in her eyes. Her vision was gone, filled with a bright, blinding light that made her head hurt.

That *thing* appeared, blocking her view of Jan.

That *woman*.

Enormous eye sockets that took up half her face. A puny nose and mouth that looked like they had been added as an afterthought. Hands and feet that dangled uselessly.

The blinding light was definitely coming from it.

Emi suddenly had a terrifying realization.

The woman was slowly, slowly tottering closer to her.

Go away, she wanted to say, but her mouth only opened and shut

like a carp, soundlessly.

She somehow managed to use her arms to scramble backward and ended up covered in the slimy puke on the floor.

I want to die, she thought. *I will go anywhere as long as I don't have to see that thing anymore. I want to die.*

That was her only wish.

"Don't think like that."

That was Jan's voice. It was terribly calm and only unsettled her more.

"Why are you thinking that way?" he asked, looking like he genuinely didn't understand her at all. "It is abnormal that the sight of her makes you ill or want to die."

"Ab…nor…mal… What…is?"

Perhaps because of the relief she felt when he talked to her, she finally regained the ability to speak, but her voice trembled pathetically.

"You're the one who discovered her," Jan declared.

The woman was standing right in front of Emi's eyes.

"Now say it."

"Say…what…?"

"Say it."

It came from behind her.

"Say it."

It came from above her.

"Say it."

The voice was not Jan's.

"Say it."

The voice was a woman's.

"Say it."

The voice was a man's.

"Say it."

The voice was a child's.

"Say it."

The voice was an old man's.

"Say it."

Everyone.

“Say it.”
Prayed for.
“Say it.”
The woman.
“Say it.”

A■ gra■a ■le■

Her mouth moved on its own.

The woman in front of her smiled. Trails of blood dripped from the gigantic eye sockets.

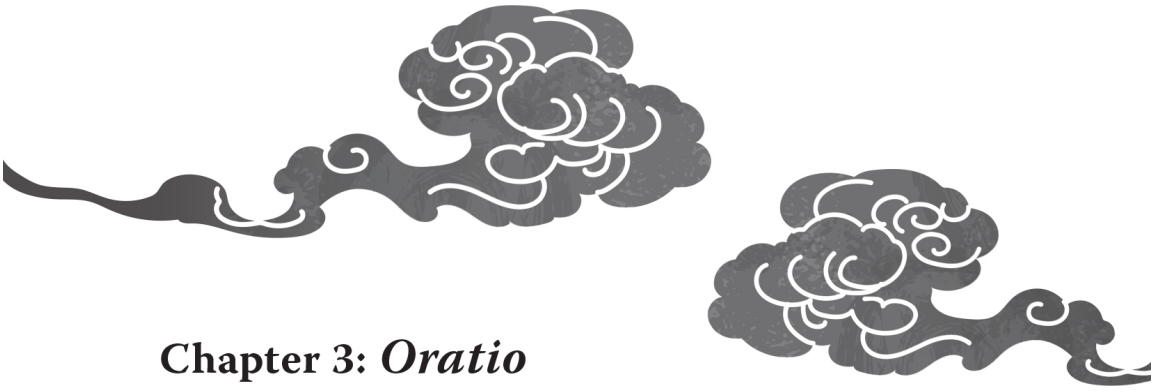
A■ gra■a ■le■

The woman’s eyes squirmed.

There lay pleated strands of meat the intricate color of intestinal walls—pale peach, then red, and sometimes the bluish hue of mulberries—a rainbow spectacle. There lay for all to see: truth, love, the innate goodness of man. Emi didn’t know what would be ■ , but there was nothing more precious. Do you know what is the most blessed happiness a woman can experience, the foundation of happiness is in essence that our Lord created man and woman there is only one do you know?

A■ gra■a ■le■ blessed art thou among women *a■ gra■a ■le■* blessed art thou among women. He shall be great and shall be called the ■ of the Highest. And blessed art thou among women *a■ gra■a ■le■*

Blessed art thou among women.



Chapter 3: *Oratio*

◆ ◆ ◆

Rumi was in a foul mood.

She wasn't being rude to me or throwing things around, but her theatrical manner of speech was making less of an appearance these days. Furthermore, she usually liked to peruse her collection of cursed artifacts with a grin on her face when she had free time (and here at the Sasaki Agency, we always had free time). However, in the past few days, there had been no sign that she had even opened the box.

The cause? (In my opinion, that is.) Thinking about it carefully, her strange behavior hadn't started in the last two days. Ever since we'd taken on Youta Shimamoto's case, she had been swamped with work.

Most cases had been brought to us by Ms. Izumi, the owner of the multi-tenant building the agency operated from.

Rumi had helped Ms. Izumi when she had been haunted by the ghost of a deceased lover who had been unable to move on from his place of death, after which she had become a staunch believer of Rumi Sasaki. Not only was she renting them an entire floor at an absurdly cheap rate, but she also introduced everyone she knew to Rumi. Thanks to her, a good number of women had come calling on their business, but Rumi had driven them away with her sharp tongue.

“I am not a fortune teller,” she would say.

That was true, but her bad attitude from those meetings generated a slew of negative reviews. Hence the barren state of the Sasaki Agency.

However, recently, Rumi had started to voluntarily request work from Ms. Izumi, who was more than happy to send her jobs. Because Ms. Izumi owned several buildings, she was well connected and knew countless cases of *that* nature, or so she had boasted.

Even though Rumi performed the exorcisms, I was the one who did all the administrative work, so I had been drowning in it lately. That may have been why I was slow to realize her unusual behavior.

It was ten PM. Rumi returned to the office, yawning.

If I remembered correctly, she had gone to see a woman whose room was being visited nightly by someone or something.

“Welcome back,” I said.

“Sorry to make you wait,” Rumi replied. “You can go home now.”

Strange. Usually, whether I asked or not and regardless of the time, she would wax poetic about the case until she was satisfied.

I gathered the nerve to talk to her. “Um, isn’t it about time for you to loop me in?”

“About what?” she asked lightly. “Did I do something worth you frowning over?”

I met her gaze. “Why are you doing so much work?”

She seemed ready to play dumb and brush my question off, but seeing the serious expression on my face, she gave up and sighed deeply. “I can’t reach him.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Ishigami.”

Surprised, I checked my phone. Come to think of it, it had been over a month since we had passed off Youta Shimamoto’s case to Ishigami.

“It’s already been a month, so we no longer need to compensate him, but this is no time to jump for joy.”

“I know, but—”

“Yeah, given his personality, it’s weird for him to go off the radar

even if he had failed… The last time he contacted me was when he arrived on-site. Since then, I haven't heard a word." Rumi sat down on the sofa, twiddling her thumbs restlessly. "That's why I've been taking on commissions left and right." She fell silent.

I pondered what she had said, but I didn't understand how Ishigami's probable failure and her large workload were related.

"I…still don't get it. I'm sorry," I said.

Rumi patted the sofa, inviting me to sit. I hesitantly took a seat beside her.

She pulled out a tablet from her bag. There was a list of some sort on the screen.

"Take a look at this," she said.

XMasayuki Komatsu: A tall high school girl with black hair started visiting him every night right after he went to ■■■. → Resolved. Terminated.

XTakashi Wakabayashi: Heard someone crawling on the ceiling and balloons being popped. → Masked palm civet, called animal control services.

○ Saeko Ishida: Friend wouldn't eat, threw a tantrum when client pointed it out. Attended a strange seminar a few weeks ago. → Client cannot be reached.

XNobuyuki Kanazawa: A bloodstain that reappears after washing. Stigmatized property, but no exorcism had been performed. → Contacted Hachiman.

XMasako Takamura: Heard the sound of partying every night even though she lives in a corner apartment. → Mental illness suspected. Contacted the nearest mental health clinic.

XKyouka Iijima: Someone was putting insects in her food every day. Speculated it was the work of her former best friend, whom she had drifted apart from after marriage. → Archetypal victim of substance abuse.

○ Tsubasa Mizuno: Felt like someone was watching his every move. At first, he thought he was imagining it, but gradually, he started thinking he deserved to be punished. After a series of mistakes at work, he was fired.

XRemi Kotani: Pet cat was acting strange. → It was already dead. Contacted the pet cemetery.

XKantarou Iwata: His wife often appeared in his dreams. Wanted to know what she was saying. → Not the client's wife. Resolved. Terminated.

XRyouko Ikuta: Strange things started happening around her after her coworker told her an incomprehensible story. Would curse and insult people without realizing it. → Contacted the Pádraig Aoba Church.

XHitomi Shiokawa: Was hearing weird noises mixed in with radio broadcasts. They've started to sound like voices lately. → Resolved. Terminated.

○ Maimi Murase: Takuma, the client's son, argued with someone when he was out drunk. The next day, he lost his vision. After consulting the hospital, they were told nothing was abnormal.

"Are these…?" I asked.

"Yes. I haven't just been taking any old commissions. They're all jobs that I hypothesized might be related to our current case—the one about Mr. Shimamoto's younger sister. There ended up being only a few meaningful ones, though. Those I marked with a circle."

I was speechless. Rumi was thinking and operating two or three steps ahead.

She continued. "For the time being, I plan to speak to those clients. I had arranged to meet with one this morning, but I can't get in contact with her anymore. I even went to her apartment, but her rooms were dark even after night fell. I had no choice but to come back here defeated." She smiled tiredly.

"Why did you…?" My words shook as I wrung them out from my throat. "Why did you do everything alone?"

I knew I was taking my frustration out on her, but I couldn't stop

myself.

We'd established the agency together. From our student days until now, we had gone out on the field together numerous times.

I remembered the first time we solved a case together.

My first impression of Rumi had been that she was baffling. Her hair was a crow's nest, and she was always wearing gray sweats. I didn't concern myself with appearances, but even I thought she was slovenly. I had talked to her in group settings in the seminar, and it felt like she was the only one from a different dimension. It was only after working with her that I realized her brain worked too quickly for the average person to keep up with. Before that, my friend and I used to refer to her as an alien.

In addition, she was a fast talker, and once she started, she wouldn't stop. It wasn't just her speech that was fast, either; her movements were, too. Whenever she was done with her work on campus, she would jet off to who knows where as quick as an arrow. I heard from Professor Saitou that she operated a website that examined real incidents through an occult lens, for profit, no less. I looked it up and discovered it was a website so famous that even a layperson like me had heard of it.

To me, Rumi was a capable but enigmatic alien, and I stayed away from her. Then one day, I received a private email from her out of the blue.

It said, *I want to speak with your grandfather*.

I read through it. The gist was that her friend had been possessed by a demon, and she wanted my help.

Most people, particularly in Japan, immediately assume a scam is involved when they see the word *demon*. My family operated the Pádraig Aoba Church, a Protestant church that performed exorcisms, which was rare for anywhere in the world. People often laughed at me when I brought it up.

Nonetheless, demons do exist. They are not merely tales from a fantasy universe. According to the doctrines, simply put, demons are any nonhuman entities that oppose Christ. The Catholic Church even has sanctioned exorcists. My grandfather was not sanctioned by the church, but he was an exorcist. However, he did not merely exorcise

every single person who behaved oddly, but instead held proper consultations and referred those who were not possessed to mental health clinics or other experts in the field. He refused all television appearances as well.

Rumi was Professor Saitou's pupil, and Professor Saitou often took TV and magazine jobs. What if, in the worst-case scenario, he used exorcism as material for a summer special, *The Souls and Spirits Edition*? My grandfather couldn't stand the idea and initially turned down the request.

However, Rumi barged in on him uninvited, swore that she would prove her friend was possessed by a demon, and attempted to call out a demon right in front of his eyes. Naturally, he was outraged and told her to stop.

Her mysterious ritual actually invoked a demon (or something like it), and it wrecked the church. I would never forget the disgusting sensation of the demon's gaze on my back; it felt like worms crawling down my spine.

In the end, my grandfather was dragged into the case and cooperated with the exorcism.

The rites took time to prepare, so I helped buy time. It put me in quite a bit of danger.

Rumi's possessed friend was a handsome young man with the kind of good looks you rarely even saw on TV anymore. The demon had borrowed his body. Sugared words poured from his lips, tempting me to abandon my faith.

I had been a staunch Christian my whole life. But at that moment, I realized how fragile my own faith was. Demons, as per their reputation, were malicious spirits who manipulated the human language and spat atrocities while wearing beautiful faces. Tortured by the demon, I easily discarded my belief in a God who would not come to my aid. I looked into the eyes of the demon. They were as fathomless as space and sucked me in.

Before I was devoured completely, Rumi intervened to save my life.

I had been completely useless. I was confused and unable to do anything but sob. She embraced me without a word of blame. She'd

been my angel ever since.

Ironically, my blind devotion to God was slightly diluted by her rescuing me. The demon had not seduced me to throw away my faith entirely.

I understood then that a Protestant minister could only do so much to help those in need. Plus, unlike my grandfather, I merely believed in God. I did not have the power to exorcise demons.

Though Rumi wasn't devout, as I watched her, I realized I wanted to help people directly the way she did. Moreover, I discovered that religion could be more than just a place of spiritual support. For the truly faithful, Christianity was an identity.

I wanted to be with Rumi more, to get to know her better. I wanted to be strong like she was.

She didn't abandon me. Before I graduated, I asked her, "Will you start a paranormal consulting agency with me?" and she agreed.

Together, we solved cases, though they were few in number. Ms. Izumi and Toshihiko, the handsome man from the demon possession incident, provided us with cases once in a while. Thanks to them, we made enough to feed ourselves, if barely.

The cursed Okinawan island. The haunted house in Ehime Prefecture. A family that was cursed such that the wife of the eldest son would always die. The cases we handled weren't always those sorts of supernatural incidents; sometimes they arose from quarrels between humans.

In any case, I tried to keep up with Rumi the best I could. She always looked like she was enjoying herself.

Five years had passed since we'd met.

I thought we'd built an equitable relationship.

Ultimately, Rumi decided everything and anything by herself.

It was as if she was telling me I was no use at all.

"I'm sorry," Rumi apologized in a meek tone I had never heard from her before. "But I didn't want to put you in harm's way."

"I'm not a child." I gripped her hand. "I may not be as knowledgeable as you, and I'm not strong, either. I'm sure you could find a more proficient candidate for the administrative work as well. Even so, we…we're partners…," I said impulsively. My voice shook at

the end, pathetically quiet.

"You might have become a little too important to me," she mumbled, as though she needed to hear the words herself.

I was elated to hear that from Rumi, whom I respected, but only momentarily.

Then I remembered: Her pet theory was that evil spirits liked beautiful things (and considering how handsome the victim of the exorcism incident had been, she wasn't mistaken, either).

Every now and then, she would use me—or a person who was more attractive than me, if one was available—as bait. Since I'd always admired her proactiveness, I never complained. Though if I were to scrutinize things, you could say she didn't treat others as people. Sure, she would never fail to save me in the end, but this arrangement had put my life at risk many times over.

But then, about a year ago, she had stopped using the bait-and-trap tactic. In fact, she stopped bringing me into the field almost entirely. That was why I had been putting all my efforts into promoting the business…

I hadn't realized until she said it herself.

I've become too important.

To Rumi, I wasn't an office clerk who was of limited use, but someone to protect. Given my own powerlessness, it might have been inevitable. Nevertheless, frustration and shame welled up inside me.

"Instead of you treating me as someone in need of protection, I want you to let me help," I said, before adding quickly, "I want to be important to you, too, though."

Rumi smiled softly and took a deep breath before saying with newfound resolve, "We're dealing with a hell of a case this time around. You've looked out for me and stuck by me all this time, and I didn't want to involve you. But…you *have stuck by me*."

She squeezed my hand back. Realizing we had been holding hands the entire time, I quickly withdrew mine. She laughed at seeing me flustered. My skin was pale, so I blushed to the tips of my ears. I was well aware of this, since people teased me about it occasionally.

I tried to hide my embarrassment and pull away, but Rumi stopped me.

She pointed to the tablet. "Now that we're in agreement, let's get straight to business. I'll need your help tomorrow. I was going to visit Ms. Ishida today, but she was a dead end, so…let's go see Mr. Mizuno and Mrs. Murase."

"Got it!" I replied with enthusiasm.

I renewed my determination to avoid dragging her down.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her staring at me.

Taxi Driver Tsubasa Mizuno's Account

I work as a taxi driver. That night, I had a pickup request, so I went to the specified location…only for the client to cancel on me. Of course, I would still get compensated by the company for going out there, but the time I spent on the road was wasted, you know? I was a little pissed off.

So basically…my driving got reckless. I couldn't help it. I know. I know, I know… For trash like me to dare get irritated at good folks and to drive poorly because of it… It's inexcusable.

And then…there was another car turning right that forced me to step on the brakes… I hated the idea of letting them cut ahead of me. My behavior was unacceptable, I know.

When I stopped, the other car did, too. It didn't seem like the driver was going to get out.

It was late at night, so it was extremely quiet, and there was no one around, you see. That was why I decided to get out, too.

The other car was from an expensive-looking foreign manufacturer. I was worried about how things would turn out if they were from the yakuza, but I couldn't back down. My suspicion was wrong, in any case.

Two young people got out of the rear seat. The driver made no move to exit.

I'm a coward and a wretched human being, so when I saw the two, I thought, *I can take them*. I caught up and threatened them.

And one of them said back to me, "You pitiful thing."

They were against the light, and I couldn't see the person's face, but their calm tone angered me. I grabbed them.

What happened next was, let's see, they held up three fingers, just like this—the index, middle, and ring fingers—or it looked like three. They brought their hand to their lips…

"Anatemataru beshi." That's what they said. It's unfamiliar to me, so I could've heard wrong.

The moment they said that, my vision swam, and my legs gave out. I crouched down and puked right there. The two of them didn't do anything but watch me, I think.

Gender? Hmm…I don't know. The light was behind them, but I should have been able to tell by their voice… I remember they were beautiful. Completely different from trash like me.

After I vomited my guts out…I didn't have any desire to argue with them anymore. In fact, I wanted to apologize, or…I wanted to die. That's right. I wanted to die. I still feel that way.

But they had disappeared.

The car was gone, too. It wasn't an electric vehicle or anything. No matter how badly I was puking, I should've heard the car driving away…

I couldn't stay there forever, and the traffic started to increase. Somehow I managed to drive home… But since that day…

…I've been hearing a voice in my head.

It happens whenever I think about running a red light or driving a little faster. It's not just at work, either. The other day, I heard it when a convenience store clerk talked to me. What do I hear? I can't explain it very well, but…basically the voice tells me how insignificant my existence is. Messages to be grateful for.

I think those two are probably watching me.

Does it bother me? I guess…it did until recently. I nearly got into a few accidents, and my job told me not to come anymore.

But what a joyful thing it is to be watching all the time.

The only path left to me is to die, after all.

I'm worthless. Human scum. My existence itself is a nuisance, you see. The fact that I'm being watched means I am forcing my

betters to watch me. Do you think it is permissible for garbage to demand such labor?

If I die, my benefactors' burdens will probably decrease slightly. Probably. Then even a good-for-nothing like me will have done something good. That's how I feel.

Yes. I'm sorry, terribly sorry to have bothered you. Yes, you don't have to worry about me.

I will die.

Housewife Maimi Murase's Account (Lives with Her Son, Takuma)

Maybe it's because his father passed away early… I tried to raise my son with love, but he's a problem child… That's an understatement. That's right. He might be what society would call a "thug." He does have a criminal record… Bodily injury, theft, then there's extortion and fraud. That's right. Maybe I raised him wrong.

I'm sorry… Back to what happened that day.

I was told he was drinking on the streets with his no-good friends as usual and was quite drunk. My son is particularly violent when he's drunk… He'll even raise his hand against me. That's why I'm positive it was one hundred percent his fault. Someone bumped into him. Really, both parties should have apologized, and that would have been the end of it, but my son is incapable of that. I think he tried to punch the other person, though he insists it was out of legitimate self-defense. He's physically strong and good at fighting, so normally, the other person ends up in tatters… However, this time, they dodged him somehow and said to him, "You pitiful thing," in a mocking tone.

What did they look like? Hmm, my son isn't sure, apparently. Initially, he said it was a young woman, but after a while, he started saying it was a man… They were shorter than my son, but that's all. Most people are, so it isn't very helpful. Sorry.

After that, my son tried to punch them again. The other person mumbled some sort of incantation, and suddenly, my son couldn't

see anymore. At first, he said he thought there had been a power outage.

He panicked and lashed out, and someone called the police on him.

I've been used to it since he was young. Picking him up from the police, that is. But I had never seen my son so frail. He kept saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and he was shaking. I took him to the hospital, and the doctor patiently calmed him down. Only then did he tell us what happened.

In the end, they couldn't find out why he couldn't see, but they suspected it was because of drug use, so they had him take a urine test. It makes sense given his prior record. But even after he settled down, his head feels like it's going to split open every time he thinks about the incantation, he told me. When that happens, he relapses and starts repeating "I'm sorry" and "I'm going to be killed" like a robot. It's been a month, but his condition is the same. That's why I'm afraid I couldn't let you meet him in person. I apologize.

Yes, the doctor asked me the same thing. He wanted to know about the person who recited the incantation, since it's likely they have something to do with my son's blindness, as nonsensical as it all sounds. The police are also tentatively investigating the incident.

But I think things are fine the way they are.

I haven't felt so at ease since Takuma was a baby.

He can't do anything without me. He even needs my help to go to the bathroom, so violence is out of the question. The other day, when we were eating together—or more accurately, when I was feeding him—he started crying and said, "Thank you." Thank you. He *said* that.

This is the first time I've enjoyed spending time with my son.

Huh? You want to know why I contacted you? I wanted to thank that person.

In the beginning, I wanted Takuma's eyes to recover, but…but if he can see again, he'll just end up…you know.

Please find the person who recited the incantation. I want to give them my thanks, of course, but I also want to learn the incantation.

◆ ◆ ◆

"What do you think about these two stories?" Rumi asked while scattering sandwich crumbs all over the low table in the coffee shop.

Usually, Aoyama would have scolded her for making a mess or talking while eating. However, since they were at her family's store, he couldn't say anything. Her mother, who looked exactly like Rumi but dressed in frilly, girlie clothing, was watching them with a smile.

"What do I think…? Um, they do seem related," Aoyama said. He wanted to be useful, since he'd sworn he would help, but he could only agree weakly with Rumi. "They both committed a wrongdoing… In Mr. Mizuno's case, it was reckless driving. In Mr. Murase's case, it was violence. And they were punished for their transgressions. Also, for some reason, they were pitied. The other party in both of their stories called them a 'pitiful thing'… So the other party might be the same person."

"Right, right. And that person chanted some mysterious incantation in both stories. That's another similarity." Rumi nodded satisfactorily.

She had chosen the commissions based on which ones she thought were related to Youta Shimamoto's case, but Aoyama didn't understand her criteria.

"But an incantation might be too weak of a link," Aoyama said.

"Of course, that's not all. Thanks to Mr. Mizuno, we now know that the incantation—or part of it, at least—is the same. That proves that we're dealing with the same person or that they belong to the same organization, don't you think?"

"The incantation is the same…?" he parroted.

Rumi cheerfully continued. "According to Mr. Shimamoto, Jan, the enigmatic young man he met, said something that started with *anate*. In his case, driven by instinct, he ran away before hearing the whole thing. I'm sure that if he had stayed behind, he would have suffered the same fate as Mr. Mizuno and Mr. Murase."

Anatemataruberushi.

She typed the phrase on her tablet.

"I'm surprised you remembered…," Aoyama said.

They had listened to the two clients' accounts just recently, but of Youta's story, he could remember only broad strokes. The gulf between him and Rumi was depressingly large. He sighed deeply.

"The *beshi* seems to be some kind of imperative form. The phrase sounds Japanese, but *anatemataru*… I have no idea what it means at this point. It could even be that Mr. Mizuno misheard. But the incantations are the same up through *anate*. Don't you think that's worth investigating?"

Unlike Aoyama, Rumi was excited. She loved solving puzzles. Her eyes twinkled.

To begin with, was *anatemataru**beshi* supposed to be read as *anate mataru beshi* or *ana tema taru beshi* or what? Whatever it was, the phrase must have some connection to Suwa Grand Shrine.

Aoyama had majored in theology. Needless to say, he had studied Christianity as a whole and the Bible in detail, but the curriculum had also touched on the English, Latin, and Aramaic languages.

It had only been in brief, so he wasn't an expert by any means. Nonetheless, he might be able to help Rumi from a linguistics standpoint, or so he was thinking.

"The other thing that piques my interest is the uncompromising, didactic nature of Mr. Mizuno's and Mr. Murase's punishments. The chanter may be a regular Dirty Harry," Rumi said.

"Who's Dirty Harry?" Aoyama asked, feeling pathetic as he once again parroted her words.

"It's a nickname associated with Harry Callahan, who's the protagonist of a western film from the seventies called *Dirty Harry*. Originally, Harry kills villains in the name of justice, but…in time, he becomes convinced he is the enforcer of justice and begins to personally judge who is right and wrong. The archetype describes our perpetrator perfectly."

Aoyama nodded without speaking.

It was true that Mr. Mizuno and Mr. Murase both were guilty of wrongdoings, but punishing them with suicidal thoughts and blindness was obviously going too far.

"But…is there anyone in the world who can do such things?" he

asked.

It was a natural question.

Among the cases he had accompanied Rumi on, there were examples of humans harming other humans. *Ikiryou* were the disembodied spirits of the living.

They were often stronger than *shiryou*, the spirits of the dead. The target of an *ikiryou*'s malice usually grew weak, sometimes to the brink of death (but Rumi did say they were easier to deal with than *shiryou*).

However, he had never seen a flesh-and-blood person do the kind of damage they were seeing in this current case to another human being. They had witnessed incidents where con artists had brainwashed and manipulated their victims using smooth words, but…

Observing a target around the clock and speaking to them in their mind to drive them into despair sounded impossible, to say nothing of causing them to go blind. Any person who could do such things was surely—

"There are people are capable of that," Rumi said, before Aoyama could throw out the words *not human*.

"Who?" he asked.

"Uncle Ishigami," she answered promptly.

"What? Really?"

"Yes. He's not your average person. Since he operates completely out of goodwill, he wouldn't resort to violence, though."

"But that means there are others like Mr. Ishigami…that it wouldn't be impossible for there to be people who can make others do whatever they want using incantations or whatnot."

Rumi nodded.

Aoyama asked a question that had been eating at him this whole time. "Um, how did you pick which cases to take? Mr. Mizuno's and Mr. Murase's cases certainly resemble each other, but the others seem like they could be loosely related, too."

"Instinct," she answered, gulping down the rest of her coffee.

He wanted to ask what she meant in more detail, but before he could, Rumi's mother came over with generous slices of cake.

"Rumi, Kouki, that's enough of the serious talk. Take a break and eat some sweets!"

Rumi pounced on the cakes gleefully.

Aoyama felt like their conversation had been cut short to an extent.

Rumi scarfed down the cake, the chocolate smearing around her mouth, as she mumbled quietly, "The best outcome would be if Uncle Ishigami ends up reaching out to me and making my work irrelevant, though."

He smiled and wiped her face with a wet wipe, thinking about how kind she was.

A classy Western song was playing in the café. He felt relaxed listening to the high, laid-back voice of the female singer. According to Rumi, the shop had been operating for a long time, but they were diligent about cleaning, and both the floors and the walls seemed spotless.

He glanced around to find that there were almost no other customers, even though the shop had been packed a short while ago. Save for a woman sitting on the terrace, Aoyama, Rumi, and her mother, who was in the kitchen, were the only ones around.

It happened soon after Rumi went to the bathroom.

The black phone in the store rang. He had assumed it was merely decorative, but apparently, it was still operational. The *brrriiiinnnggg* of the phone in the quiet space was quite grating on the ears, and strangely, there were no signs of Rumi or her mother coming out to get it.

"Um. The phone's ringing," Aoyama said hesitantly.

There was no response. The phone continued to ring.

It was extremely loud. Violently so.

I might as well answer it. I'll just pick up and ask why they're calling. I help out here sometimes, so it's not as if I'm a complete stranger, Aoyama reasoned as he reached for the receiver.

"Don't pick up."

He instinctively dropped the receiver he had begun to lift.

Rumi's voice was frostier than it had ever been. The call cut off when the phone fell back into its cradle.

"Why not?" he asked.

The phone rang again, interrupting him.

This time, it wasn't only the black one that was ringing, but the landline in the kitchen and the extension on the counter, too. Even his and Rumi's cell phones were going off.

Rumi picked up her own phone and pressed the call button.

"Hello?" said a voice from the other end. She hadn't switched it to speakerphone, but the voice was perfectly clear.

"…Mr. Ishigami," she said.

"It's been a while since we last spoke. You seem well, Rumi," Ishigami said in the same gentle tone from when they had met in the family restaurant.

Nonetheless, to Aoyama, it felt like someone had pulled his cochlea from his ear and was scraping it roughly. The voice was horribly unpleasant. He felt nauseated.

"Mr. Ishigami," Rumi repeated.

"I called because it seemed like you were both together."

"Mr. Ishigami."

"Say. Tell me why. I pulled it off, so why didn't you contact me?"

For a while, Rumi stood stock-still. She was biting on her lips and trembling.

Aoyama realized then that as easygoing and levelheaded as Rumi was, there was no way she wouldn't be afraid in a situation like the one they were in.

He steeled himself and said, "M-Mr. Ishigami. You were the one who didn't pick up."

"Aoyama!" Rumi cried reproachfully, trying to cut him off.

However, it was already too late.

"If it isn't Aoyama. You trying to be brave? You *are* with the person you adore, after all. You wanted to show her your cool side, right? How noble."

Aoyama's face instantly grew hot. Panic settled in, and his words caught in his throat. As he hesitated over what to say, Ishigami spoke again, the harsh, rough edge in his voice growing even more grating.

"It seems like you've been sniffing around. I've noticed. Why

don’t you come out and meet with me directly instead of sneaking about?”

Rumi slowly pulled a memo pad from her bag and wrote something on it. She lifted it up and showed it to Aoyama.

ask him pulled what off

Ask him, “Pulled what off?”

His voice shaking, Aoyama asked, “What did you pull off?”

Ishigami snickered. Even the sound of his breathing was distressing. “Understanding God. I have been learning. Every day I have been learning. As a result, I have stumbled upon the most marvelous realization. I have come to be acquainted with God.”

“God… I thought you worshipped the Ser-Serpent…”

“Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Ishigami howled so piercingly it seemed like his vocal cords had exploded. It was a scornful kind of laughter. “You would exalt a lowly creature like a snake?”

From behind Ishigami came the sound of a crowd of men and women laughing. Every one of them was mocking Aoyama.

“Snakes may be clever, but that’s all. They do not offer solace, not even in one’s final moments! Pathetic! The idea of worshipping such a pitiful creature—”

Before they heard Ishigami to the end, Rumi jammed the hang-up button.

Even then, Ishigami continued speaking, and the masses continued laughing.

Aoyama didn’t know where it was coming from, but he could hear Ishigami loudly singing off-key.

“Hand. In hand. You. And me. That’s. What makes. Us ha. Py.”

The fluorescent lights burst in time to the clapping. Glass scattered all over the floor, and fine shards cut Aoyama’s skin.

Ishigami kept on singing, repeating like a broken record, “Hand in hand. You and me. That’s what makes us happy.”

“Okay,” Rumi said in a firm voice without any trace of fear. “We’ll pay you a visit soon. That will satisfy you, I presume.”

“We’ll be waiting.”

Then the line finally went dead. No…that wasn’t quite right, since the call had already been dropped. In any case, Ishigami’s

unpleasant voice and the raucous laughter coming from all directions was gone.

Aoyama collapsed on the sofa. His heart was still racing. It was pathetic to admit, but he didn't think he would be able to stand.

He heard a *shnick* and looked over to find Rumi lighting a cigarette.

She averted her gaze. She filled her lungs with the smoke before breathing it all out. It stung his eyes, and he blinked repeatedly.

"Sorry. Just one," Rumi said.

Aoyama teared up and choked on the smoke, but he nodded anyway. Rumi had gone through the same experience as him. He detested cigarettes, but he would make an exception this time.

After a while, they heard the sound of footsteps, and Rumi's mother came out from behind the counter. She looked around in bewilderment at the scattered glass shards and the disastrous state of the shop's interior.

"Huh? This is awful. What happened? Everything is a mess. I'm so sorry about all of this. Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes, Ms. Sasaki…," Aoyama said. "Did you not…?"

She looked at him with worry.

The piercing ring of the black phone, Ishigami's booming voice, and the smashing of the glass from the lights on the floor had been far from quiet. Despite that, Rumi's mother hadn't come out at all. It wasn't because she had been afraid, but rather because she hadn't noticed. Even at the moment, she was merely surprised at the havoc.

That meant she might have been unaffected by Ishigami's eerie powers. Aoyama felt a touch of relief.

"Never mind. Um, it's nothing. Don't worry," he said.

"I'll get this cleaned up right away," Rumi's mother said.

"I'll help," he offered.

Seeming blind to Aoyama and her mom, who were happily cleaning, Rumi puffed on her cigarette with a conflicted look on her face. She didn't even notice when the ash fell on her knee and singed her clothing.

After Aoyama finished sweeping up the scattered glass, he sat

back down in front of Rumi. She looked him right in the eye. When he glanced away instinctively, her gaze followed his.

"I won't apologize for getting you involved," she said.

When he heard her say those words, his heart warmed as if a beam of sunlight were falling on him. She was respecting his wishes for her to treat him like an equal.

"But I want to make sure of one thing: Will you really come with me to the place where that monster is?" she asked.

"Monster…? Sure, he was acting a little strange, but that was still Mr. Ishi—"

"Mr. Ishigami no longer exists," she interjected. "I don't mean he is dead. However, we will not see him again."

"That can't be…," he said hesitantly.

She ignored him. "You heard him, too. *A lowly creature like the snake*, he said. He has already thrown away his faith."

"But even if he has, it's still him, no? We might still be able to save him," he insisted, hanging on to hope. "Isn't it too early to say we won't see him again…?"

She laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I know you don't want to believe it, but that was no longer Mr. Ishigami. We might not have even been talking to a person but some other kind of being altogether. For some…throwing away your faith is the same as throwing away your existence as a human being. He's the same as Mr. Mizuno and Mr. Murase now."

"She's right. It's all over. Just give up."

Aoyama saw her the same time he heard the voice.

Long hair clinging around her arms.

It belonged to the woman who had been sitting on the terrace.

Wrong. Not a woman.

She had Ishigami's face.

Only the neck had been swapped for the slender neck of a woman. The aberration grinned from ear to ear.

"Cock-a-kroh."

That was when Aoyama blacked out.

Aoyama opened his eyes to the sensation of something cool against his face. The first thing he saw was Rumi.

"You're awake." She smiled, relieved.

He scrambled to sit up and swiveled to look around him. The sight that met his eyes was the usual shop interior.

"It's okay. That woman is gone," Rumi said.

Aoyama touched his forehead and discovered the source of the cold feeling. It was a cooling gel sheet.

"You had a fever, so I put it on you just in case," she explained.

"Thank you," he said.

He shakily rose to his feet, but he immediately felt dizzy and had to sit back down.

"You should sleep," Rumi said.

"Are you…?"

"You must have taken it hard, since you saw the woman head-on… I'm all right. I didn't see her face."

"That wasn't a woman." Aoyama remembered Ishigami's smirk, and his headache seemed to worsen. "It had Mr. Ishigami's face… It was like only its face had been swapped out."

Rumi sank into silence, thinking. After a while, she opened her mouth. "I feel like I'm beginning to understand, but I still don't completely."

"Amazing. I don't understand anything at all."

The corners of her mouth lifted into a self-deprecating smile. "You're too kind… Anyway, there's no point spinning our wheels about this. We've got to get our blood pumping."

"Are we going now?" Aoyama somehow managed to raise his throbbing head and meet her gaze.

"Yes. We've accepted their declaration of war, so we have no choice. Plus, while you were sleeping, I was sent a further invitation."

Rumi glued herself to his side, supporting him, and showed him her tablet.

Subject: Hello. My name is Rumi Sasaki.

Dear Ms. Emi Shimamoto,

My name is Rumi Sasaki. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I was college classmates with your brother, Youta, and I currently work as a consultant.

Youta is extremely worried about your physical condition and behavior. He asks for you to contact him.

This might be overstepping, but I think there might be matters about which you cannot ask your brother.

I may not be much help, but as one woman to another, please let me know if there is anything worrying you. Of course, I will not speak of anything you share with me to anyone else, including Youta.

I look forward to your reply at your convenience.

Rumi Sasaki

Subject: Re: Hello. My name is Rumi Sasaki.

Dear Ms. Rumi Sasaki,
I've received your email.
Thank you for your concern.
I don't know what you heard from my brother, but I don't have anything to say to him. I have no concerns or questions for you, either.
However, there is someone I would like to introduce you to.
Please come and visit. We'll be waiting.

"I sent an email immediately after we took on Mr. Shimamoto's request, and the reply only came now," Rumi said. "We're being summoned. No doubt about it."

"Then that means Emi is already…," Aoyama said.

"In the thick of it, most likely, though I don't know if she is completely gone, the way Mr. Ishigami is… But the fact that she replied suggests there's a possibility we could still talk with her, unlike in Mr. Ishigami's case. If we can at least do that, we might be able to take her back. However, if it was actually the mastermind who sent the email, not Emi, we're done for," she said quickly without pausing for breath.

Aoyama was relieved to hear her prattle on. It seemed she had regained her equilibrium.

"There's no use thinking about it now. I agree that we should meet with her, but…if someone as remarkable as Mr. Ishigami failed, will she be all right?" he asked.

Rumi didn't answer his amateurish question. "Our general

approach is on the right track, I believe. The animal symbols are from Suwa Grand Shrine's Ontou Festival, and the frogs are related to the Frog-Hunting Ritual… And the utterance from that woman in the café, *cock-a-kroh*, is…reminiscent of the Three Cock Crows. The same applies to the mimicry of the frog croak Mr. Shimamoto heard."

"Hold on. That's an entirely different subject… What's a 'cock crow'?"

"Simply put, it's when a Shinto priest imitates a rooster crowing to symbolize the herald of the dawn. Ise Shrine begins its ceremonies with the Three Cock Crows. Suwa Grand Shrine does, too, of course. *Cock-a-doodle-doo* said three times loud. But I heard *cock-a-kroh* from the woman. It's probably the same idea, though, so—"

Rumi grew more and more excited as she spoke, her words coming out faster and faster. Aoyama had to interject again. "What are you trying to say?"

"We're on the right track. The person who's manipulating people with that strange incantation and has even made a play for us is definitely building on top of these rituals—the religious ceremonies from Suwa Grand Shrine. However, I don't know why Mr. Ishigami failed."

"Doesn't that just mean our opponents are quite formidable?"

Rumi shook her head. "Suwa Grand Shrine and Mr. Ishigami both worship the Serpent. If they follow the same faith, then why did our opponents force Mr. Ishigami to throw away his beliefs and supplant them with new ones? That's the question. That's why I think my deduction may be wrong."

At that moment, Aoyama finally saw an opportunity for him to help. Feeling slightly pleased internally, he said, "Within the same religion, there are often different branches. It's true of Buddhism, and even more so of Christianity."

"Are there cases when the branches worship different gods?" she asked.

He could not respond. There were polytheistic religions, to be sure, but the followers of the various branches of Christianity, including Protestantism, all worshipped God the Father.

"I am worried. I can't promise everything will work out. It's terrifying to not understand the underlying cause, but I'll do what I can…," Rumi said.

Don't worry. I'll be right there with you. Aoyama wished he could reassure her.

Afterward, the two packed their belongings without another word.

◆ ◆ ◆

The facility was in the middle of a dense and wild forest, just like Youta Shimamoto had said.

There was only a single road leading up the hill to where the building was situated. It was wide enough to accommodate cars, but Rumi and Aoyama had their taxi drop them off at the bottom of the hill and continued up on foot.

Tall canes of bamboo loomed over them, blocking out the sun. The road seemed like a tunnel.

The building was farther away than it looked because the road twisted and turned. Aoyama felt like they were walking through a never-ending corridor. Rumi normally talked his head off in situations like this one, and her silence was making Aoyama despondent.

"If we'd known how long a walk it was, we should've had the driver take us up the hill," he commented in a forced bright tone, but Rumi, who was ahead of him, didn't respond.

It felt like an hour or two had passed, when really it must not have been more than ten minutes. All of a sudden, the bamboo tunnel opened up.

In front of them was the modern, raw concrete building. It was sizable up close. It certainly seemed like it could house a crowd.

The building made for a bizarre sight in the middle of the woods. The strangeness was amplified by the greenhouse around it, which was filled with a countless number of lilies.

"Greetings. Thank you for coming all the way out here," someone said from behind them. The voice was serene. It was like spring

sunshine filtering through the trees.

Aoyama turned around to see a pale man who had an air of serenity around him. He was smiling.

"Hello," Aoyama said.

"Please come this way," the man said. "Coffee or black tea. Which would you prefer?"

"Thank you for the offer… I'll have the black tea. What about you, Rumi?" Aoyama asked.

"Oh, we can sit down before you decide," the man said. "I also have donuts the siblings made themselves. I hope they'll be to your liking."

"I can't wait."

They followed the man with the pleasant smile through the glass house of lilies and entered the building.

Judging from the exterior, Aoyama had imagined the interior would have an open atrium like an art museum, but the inside was more like a school with rooms lined up in a row. It was hard to imagine that it contained communal sleeping and bathing spaces the way Youta had described.

The man walked past the classroom-like rooms and proceeded deeper into the building quickly. Aoyama didn't have time to peek into them as he trotted to keep up with the man.

They came to an emergency door at the end of the hall. The man gestured them forward and opened it.

On the other side was a gorgeous garden situated on an overlook. It also had a view of the ocean. Because of the dark slope they had walked to get to the facility, Aoyama had completely forgotten that they were by the shore.

The ocean wasn't the only remarkable thing.

Flowers of every color, not just the lilies from the greenhouse, were in resplendent but elegant bloom.

Situated in the garden were several tables with parasols and chairs. It was the perfect picture of a wealthy family's teatime that every person must have imagined at least once.

Aoyama and Rumi sat down as directed, and a good-looking woman appeared with a cart, on top of which were two pots that

must have contained the coffee and black tea, and triangular pastries, which were probably the donuts the man had mentioned earlier.

"You have good timing. Today is Marty Crawl," the man said.

"You don't say," Aoyama remarked.

He felt an inexplicable happiness when he looked at the man, who was smiling next to him. When you see a person who is overflowing with joy, that joy spreads so that you, too, feel your spirits lift.

Basking in that contentment, Aoyama thanked his host for the food and reached for a donut.

Rumi batted his hand aside. She was staring at the man with eyes frosted over with ice.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

A chill ran down Aoyama's spine.

He finally became conscious of the presence of the man sitting across from him. Until now, he had forgotten what they had come to achieve.

The man had spoken to them with no warning, shown them to the garden, and offered them refreshments. Even though they hadn't announced when they would be coming, he was treating them as if they knew one another. Now that Aoyama thought about it, nothing about this made sense. But he hadn't questioned the series of events at all until Rumi had slapped away his hand.

"I just want to be friends." Without dropping his smile, the man gestured at Rumi and said, "You, in particular, seem capable of the remarkable."

"Who are you?" Rumi asked again, her expression still chilly. "I do not want to be friends with you. I have business with *her*." She got up and walked in front of the woman who had brought in the cart.

The woman ducked to hide in the man's shadow, a scared expression on her face.

"Do not pressure her." The man stood as if to protect the woman from Rumi.

"I am doing no such thing. We only came to bring her back…to bring you back, Ms. Emi Shimamoto."

The woman—Emi Shimamoto—jumped at her name.

Rumi said heatedly, "You must have realized something isn't right."

The man looked at Rumi and sighed deeply. "Why do you assume you are the only one in the right? Why are you incapable of considering others' feelings? Emi is here of her own volition. Outsiders like you and her family are ignoring what she wants."

"Shut up," Rumi said, cutting him off. "Unfortunately, I don't know exactly what your intentions are, but I know they're nothing good. But that's not important. I have absolutely no interest in you."

She directed her words behind him. "I understand that religion can be a place of spiritual support. However, you must choose carefully what to believe in. This man is no different from the people who have hurt you in the past."

Aoyama didn't understand what was happening, stupefied by the tension. He had practically become a statue in his chair.

He couldn't follow the conversation. He had found the man's smile so pleasant a minute ago, but now he only felt like the man was scheming something. More importantly, there was Emi. What had she been hurt by?

From what Rumi was saying and the man's detached demeanor, Aoyama suspected that the man was Jan, the person who had poisoned Emi and potentially Mr. Ishigami. It was likely he had also caused taxi driver Mr. Mizuno's suicidal thoughts and Takuma Murase's blindness. Now that he'd seen Jan in person, Aoyama understood. The man was capable of such feats.

And yet.

How strange. Why didn't he hate Jan? The man had slipped up behind them and taken them through the facility without raising any alarms. Despite how eerie he was, Aoyama didn't feel any hatred for him.

That in itself was terrifying.

Jan could do *anything*, and no one would find it strange, Aoyama realized.

Moreover, Rumi was facing him, with all his incomprehensible powers, alone.

Fortunately, Jan was shorter than Aoyama, who was not particularly tall himself, so it didn't seem like he would lose a contest of strength. All he could do was become a wall of meat to protect Rumi.

"What do you know?" The words were so quiet they seemed to fade into nothing. Emi Shimamoto was trembling, but a strong light shone in her eyes. She was glaring fiercely at Rumi. "I bet y-you… have never wanted to die. Spent day after day hating, *hating* that you're alive. You've never thought that an ugly liar is better off dead. You grew up loved by friends and a variety of people. It's the same even now. What do you mean you want to take me back? That's your job, right? Why bring a cute guy with you on your assignment? You're flaunting your happiness. That's what I think. You can tell just by looking. He won't betray you. He'll always, always love you. But I—I…I've never had anyone. No one believed me. I know, I know. I know it's because I'm disgusting and I'm a liar. But I hate being alone. I hate it. No more. Never."

"It's all right," Jan said, folding Emi up in his arms. "I will pluck out all the thorns that hurt you so." He stood in front of her like a bird protecting its chick. His gentle smile from earlier was gone.

"Emi, are you really okay with the way things are?" Rumi asked Emi, ignoring Jan entirely.

Suddenly, Jan stretched his hand toward Rumi and asked, "Are you two the viper's spawn?"

Aoyama quickly slapped Jan's hand away. He'd used more power than he had intended. The blow was loud, and Jan's hand jerked through the air.

The next words out of his mouth were an apology. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't hurt you," he said immediately.

Now that he really thought about it, it occurred to Aoyama that although his opponent was male, Jan was a teenager or possibly even a middle schooler. The tense atmosphere and Jan's air of danger had stoked Aoyama's hostility, but if he was hounding a boy who was physically weaker than himself, who was the real villain here? Their assumption that Jan had brainwashed Ishigami and snatched Emi away was just that: an assumption. Jan had spoken to

them with composure in a gentle tone, but in return, Aoyama had…

I've lost perspective. Let's discuss this calmly, Aoyama thought.

"It appears you are a good man," Jan said, looking straight into Aoyama's eyes.

Aoyama didn't overlook the softening in Jan's attitude. "Yes. We have no ill will. We only want to talk to Emi. Her family is worried."

Jan nodded.

Talking it out had been the right decision.

"That means you must be possessed by an evil spirit," Jan said.

Aoyama was dumbfounded.

Jan laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "Please do not be concerned. If you work hard, you will be rewarded."

"What do you…?"

While Aoyama was racking his brain for a response, an arm shot out from beside him.

Rumi had grabbed Emi's shoulder, perhaps intending to drag the crouching girl away. Just as he processed what he was seeing, he heard a voice.

"Venideomine."

All of a sudden, he was struck with a pain like his body had been run through with a skewer. His head spun. Blood seemed to stream from his eyes. At the edge of his flickering vision, he saw Jan. The other man was holding three raised fingers to his lips.

That was the only moment he saw Jan clearly.

Aoyama's body rose to stand, disregarding his own volition, and spun to turn away from Jan.

The person walking directly beside him was most likely Rumi, though since he couldn't move even a single finger freely, he couldn't check. If she was in the same condition—

Aoyama resisted desperately, but it was useless. His body moved forward step by step. Ahead of him was the ocean. There was no fence, only a sheer cliff.

He wanted to scream.

He was afraid to die.

If he fell from where they were—

"Good-bye! The next time we meet, I hope you shall produce

fruits that are worthy!”

Fruits that are worthy.

The words triggered a faint memory in Aoyama, but…

…His body was already airborne. As if the ocean were sucking in him, he fell.

“He is beyond my capabilities,” Rumi said without hesitation.

Aoyama was shaking. He nodded feebly. He felt the same way.

The two of them had plummeted into the sea, though they’d managed to avoid hitting the precipitous rock face, escaping certain doom. However, they did slam against the surface of the water.

The physical damage was severe, but the impact brought them back to themselves. They regained control over their bodies again. Otherwise, they would have drowned no matter how much they struggled. They likely wouldn’t have been noticed by the man walking his dog, either.

Their rescuer, Mr. Nagata, was a very kind person. He’d brought them back to his home where he lived with his wife, let them borrow their bath, and sat them down for a scolding while their clothes were drying.

Before the land had been bought up by Moriya Foods, it had been a desolate patch of woods. In the past, the local youths used to dive off the cliff into the ocean as a test of courage. The tradition continued even after Moriya Foods bought the land. There were accidents on occasion where the divers suffered major injuries, so the area was now strictly off-limits.

Influenced by those bitter memories, Mr. Nagata had assumed Rumi and Aoyama were YouTubers and lectured them harshly, saying he hoped they had learned their lesson and wouldn’t try the stunt twice. They could hardly argue back considering that he had just saved them, so the two of them sat quietly wrapped in their towels for nearly an hour, pretending to reflect obediently on their behavior.

However, Aoyama’s mind was filled with fear. The fear from not having been able to move a finger. He hadn’t even been able to fill

his lungs with air. The memory of the horrible pain that had lanced through his body clung to his brain.

Ve ni de o mi ne.

That was what he thought he had heard, but he didn't know if that was right. Jan had been relaxed. His voice had been almost joyful.

Ve ni de o mi ne.

Aoyama had no desire to hear it a second time. Just remembering it made his insides ache.

Once Rumi took on a job, she saw it through to the end, no matter the risk it put her in. This was the first time she was thinking about pulling out, and he didn't blame her.

Evil spirits, demons, even deities—as long as one knew what they were dealing with, there was always a way.

But this time—their opponent, the man called Jan, was human.

They had, in fact, once taken one other case where a flesh-and-blood human had been behind the paranormal phenomenon they were investigating. It was several years ago and happened in a movie theater; several of the moviegoers had lost consciousness in the middle of a film and woken up to find their belongings gone. The culprit had been a man who possessed a minor psychic ability to make people fall asleep. That being said, his power was very limited. It required him to be extremely close to his target and whisper the command "Sleep," so he had been easy to deal with.

They reported him to the police. Needless to say, the police wouldn't have believed them if they had claimed that the man had supernatural powers, so they set up a camera and obtained incontrovertible proof. He was convicted of theft and indecent assault and was currently behind bars.

In other words, when their adversary was a human, they were obliged to take decisively realistic measures.

What could they do about Jan?

In the first place, it was dubious whether he had even committed a crime.

There hadn't been any proof in either the taxi driver's or the hoodlum's cases. And Emi Shimamoto was with him of her own

volition.

Now that Aoyama had experienced Jan's powers firsthand, he knew that Jan was behind everything, but they had no means of proving his guilt. There was no victim who could properly narrate what had happened to them, and they couldn't rely on the police.

What did that leave them? They could contact Youta Shimamoto and connect him with a lawyer.

He had seen news stories of people who joined religious movements and started living with the founder and the other worshippers without any word to their families. Then, when the families took drastic action to take back their loved ones, they were harmed by the organization instead.

It was a complicated situation in the best of circumstances, let alone when the leader in question possessed an actual power—

"We'll have to ask for help," Rumi said.

"What—?!" Aoyama said, louder than he had meant to.

Mrs. Nagata called from another room, "What happened?" to which Rumi replied, "It's nothing."

She then said to Aoyama, "We have no other choice. This has taken longer than expected. Our expenses are piling up, but there's still money remaining from my portion of the commission."

Aoyama looked at Rumi with disbelief. "But do we have to go so far…?"

"You're exaggerating. We have placed our lives in much greater danger in the past."

Rumi was talking about the cases they had previously solved together (granted, Aoyama had mostly observed them from the sidelines or acted as bait). They had indeed resorted to much riskier measures. The only difference was that he had never felt such terror before. When he realized that, he felt slightly better.

"Jan is merely human. If anything, I'm relieved. There's a limit to what humans can do… What we're missing is a specialist."

Rumi gulped down the hot tea Mrs. Nagata had prepared for them. With her glasses fogged up, her expression became unreadable.

"Luckily, I have someone in mind," she said.

“Really? Who?” Aoyama asked, relieved to see her strong demeanor, which showed not even a hint of fear. Just as he got ahold of himself and was about to ask more about her proposal, they heard a phone ring.

Aoyama had lost his phone when he had fallen into the ocean. Even if he still had it, all the data would most likely have been gone. On the other hand, Rumi had placed her phone in the pocket of a fishing vest, and the model itself was water-resistant and strong against impacts. It was still perfectly functional. He found himself admiring her preparedness once again.

Rumi pushed the phone button and answered the call. After a while, she hung up without having said a word.

“We have to hurry.” She stood up and took her clothing, which wasn’t yet fully dry, off the hangers. “Mr. Mizuno, the taxi driver, is going to die.”

○

The man stands in a wasteland. He is dressed in rough rags, and he is stick thin. He scoops ash from the ground. One time, then another. His body is filthy with ash.

He falls to his knees, turning his face toward the heavens, and prays fervently. “We have sinned,” the man says in a hoarse voice. “We obeyed not your voice. O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces. To the men that are near, and that are far off. This is the product of our sins.”

There is no response. I, too, say nothing.

“Therefore, the Lord hath delivered us flames. The Lord our God is righteous in all his works which he doeth: for we obeyed not his voice. We have done wickedly.”

Tears flow from the man’s eyes. They are red and bloodshot. He cries without blinking.

“O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant. Rid this earth of anger and resentment. Cause thy face—and thy face alone—to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate.”

The city burns in mockery of the man.

The people crawl on hands and knees like filthy beasts, scattering seeds on the razed earth. Men kill women. Women kill children. The rich rob the poor. The poor rob the poorer still. From all around comes the sound of malicious laughter.

Shortly, the city burns down. Men and women both turn to ash.

The ash-covered man prays again. "Incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations. This city is yours, and it is for your mercy."

The man says, "O Lord, forgive."

O Lord, forgive. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, forgive.

The man chants it over and over.

With every repetition, my chest aches as if it had been stabbed. His prayers matter not. His words matter not.

The sun sets.

The man's mouth is smeared with ash. My ears burn with the roughened sound of his inhale every time he takes a breath.

The man topples at last. Without partaking in a crumb of bread or a drop of water, his ribs standing out in stark relief, the man topples.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

I hear your voice.

I leap toward the man.

I wipe his ash-covered face and make him sip honey from a petal.

He looks at me, enchanted, in a dreamlike stupor. I look back with sympathy.

I tell him in a lilting voice, "I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding."

The man presses his palms together before his chest. But he mustn't pray to me. I separate his hands tenderly.

"At the beginning of thy supplications, ■■■'s words came forth, and I am come to shew thee," I said.

The man nods, displaying a strength that belies his condition on the edge of death.

How magnificent. He is one of the righteous.

"Thou art greatly beloved by ■■■. Therefore understand the matter. When the determined hour comes to pass, you and your siblings will put an end to sin. You will atone for your unrighteousness and bear worthy fruit, all to anoint the marvelous one to come."

The man smiles with hope-filled eyes. It hurts me to tell him the truth.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

I hear your voice.

I open my mouth again. "The end of the world is nigh. The one who shall come shall destroy the city. The end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. However…" The man's eyes have clouded over with hopelessness. I go on. "The one who is greatly beloved need not despair. He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. Do not waver and do what is right."

His eyes seem to burn. He walks forward, taking one step, and then another.

I turn back.

You are not there.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

It is not yet time.

But the time will come.

○

In the end, they were too late to save the taxi driver, Mr. Mizuno. He had parked his car outside his company. That was where he had died.

"Jesus Christ. Couldn't he have died somewhere else? Don't get me started on the car…," his boss grumbled.

Aoyama was repulsed, but he didn't say anything.

Over the call that Rumi had taken, Mr. Mizuno had said, "Farewell. Thank you for everything," which was effectively a suicide note.

Immediately after, he had in fact died, so the last person in his call history was Rumi.

The cause of death was a ballpoint pen that had been stabbed through his head from his chin. Because of the bizarre method, the police concluded it was possible that he had been murdered or forced to kill himself. They had called in Rumi for questioning as a material witness.

Night had fallen while Aoyama waited for Rumi. Two whole days had passed since they had gone to the enigmatic building where Emi Shimamoto had been taken.

He suggested they go home and rest, but Rumi said repeatedly, "There's no time."

Why wasn't there time? Why was she so intent on bringing Emi back? Aoyama gave up asking such questions. All he had to do was follow her.

The two were now on a train. They had taken the Kodama express from Tokyo to Shizuoka and transferred to the Sunrise Izumo, a sleeper train, bound for Izumo. They would transfer again in Okayama, but that was a matter for the following morning.

They were going to meet a psychic who, according to Ishigami, had genuine psychic powers, and who Rumi dubbed "the ultimate weapon."

They had reserved a single room for the two of them, furnished with a twin-sized bunk bed. Because of their respective physiques, Rumi took the bottom and Aoyama the top.

"Are you still awake, Aoyama?" Rumi asked.

The last two days had been a doozy. Aoyama's mind was racing, and he felt restless. Rumi's voice coming from below him echoed strangely. He couldn't relax.

"There's no way I could sleep in this situation," Aoyama replied.

"You should while you can. We have a long way to walk. Otherwise, there would have been no point in taking a sleeper train," Rumi said. "I'll wake you."

He gave her a vague assent.

Whenever he closed his eyes, he couldn't help but remember what had happened at that religious organization.

What came to mind was his fear of dying, and the sense that it was all connected to something.

I hope you shall produce fruits that are worthy. That was what Jan had said. Aoyama had definitely heard those words before.

Had it been in a book, a manga, or movie?

No, it hadn't been a piece of media, Aoyama thought.

The words were more intimate. They were ones that had soaked into his consciousness.

They were either his father's words or his mother's—but neither felt right.

While he opened and closed the drawers of his mind, his eyelids drooped closed, and soon, he fell into a deep slumber.

Rumi and Aoyama disembarked at Okayama as planned and transferred to the Limited Express Nanpu train. The cars were endearing, decorated as they were with illustrations of Anpanman, a popular cartoon superhero.

Aoyama was eating a rice ball that he had bought at Okayama Station, his head still fogged with sleep. However, he watched the beautiful scenery outside the window, his spirits lifted, and he started to feel more awake.

"Wow, we're crossing over the ocean, Rumi!" Aoyama regretted saying that as soon as the words left his mouth. It was embarrassing for an adult of twenty-seven to make a fuss like a child. On top of that, neither he nor Rumi had taken this trip for leisure. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so excited…"

"No, that's all right," Rumi said, following suit and leaning forward to look out the window. "It's really beautiful… I have a bad habit of overthinking. I'm at the end of my rope, so this is a welcome respite."

Her expression was gentle. She might have said that Jan was "merely human," but in her mind, there was no "merely" about it. It was only natural. She, too, had experienced that overwhelming

power and that terror.

In addition, Ishigami, whom Rumi held in considerable esteem, had been defeated in the face of Jan's power. If the person they were going to see was a psychic who surpassed Ishigami, then just meeting them would be nerve-racking.

In the next two hours to their destination, Aoyama did his best to be cheerful. He rambled on as if they were no more than two friends on vacation, the hours melting away.

"This reminds me of the trip we took with Professor Saitou to Kumano Hongu Taisha," Aoyama said.

"This place is far more out of the way… Well, it's charming."

The two of them had arrived at Tosayamada Station. From there, they walked to the meeting place they had agreed on. In the vicinity of the station, there were shops and school buildings—a typical rural townscape—but once they crossed the red bridge, the scenery changed. Their view was filled with mountains, mountains, and more mountains.

Haruhiko Saitou, the professor of the research group Rumi and Aoyama had belonged to, had regularly brought students he chose at random along with him on outings under the guise of "fieldwork." The field trips were free in nature. There was no need to follow Professor Saitou around. Even if the students had gone sightseeing wherever they wanted, they wouldn't have heard any complaints from him. On top of that, he paid for all the expenses, including travel, so the students he picked were the targets of envy.

That being said, most of the students had joined the group because it aligned with their interests, so there were few people who chose to go off on their own. Even Aoyama, who didn't listen very attentively during the normal lectures, found that Professor Saitou's stories were interesting and engaging outside of class.

Previously, Aoyama had been lucky enough to be selected for the Kumano Hongu Taisha field trip, during which he listened with interest to Professor Saitou's anecdotes about the shrine's large torii gate and conspiracies theories about the *yatagarasu*, the mythical

three-legged crow.

Leaving Aoyama to his memories, Rumi walked off briskly.

The street was minimally maintained, but Aoyama still had the sense that they were cutting through the mountain. Looking up, he saw villages dotting the mountainside, clinging to the slope.

How far were they going? They had only been walking a short while, but he already felt faint.

There was no time to enjoy the scenery. Their journey so far had been long, and he was running out of steam. He couldn't help but think back to the events of three days ago.

Rumi hadn't said a word yet, and Aoyama didn't try to strike up a conversation this time, either.

As they continued walking, buildings came into view in the distance, ramshackle huts with blue roofs of corrugated iron. In the vicinity, there seemed to be several private residences as well.

Aoyama felt a slight relief now that they had reached their destination. At ease, he was able to take in his surroundings better, and he immediately spotted a boulder nearby that looked perfect for sitting.

"We've walked a long way. Why don't we take a break?" he suggested.

At that very moment, he heard a sound.

Cock-a-kroh.

The voice was faint but real.

Cock-a-cock-a-kroh.

He turned around. There was nothing there.

It must have been his imagination. He faced forward.

The wind was blowing, and it rustled the grass. It was a sound that city dwellers weren't used to. That noise combined with recent events and caused his mind to invent sounds he hadn't actually heard.

Cock-aaah-krooh.

Rumi grabbed Aoyama's hand and started sprinting furiously. He ran, desperate.

No matter how far they ran, he heard the voice directly behind them as if it were clinging to their backs.

Rumi jerked to a halt.

There was something evil, something invisible comprising only a voice.

Aoyama's breathing was ragged. He had no idea what to do.

The air was heavy.

From that mouth croaks the frog. Grribbit. Grribbit. Emi Shimamoto's voice echoed in his head.

But he couldn't see her…

"Sokumetsu svaha."

There came a sound like a rubber band snapping. Something black went rolling down the hill.

Distressed, Aoyama gazed down the slope. The black thing was gone.

"Look all you want—you won't see nothin'."

Aoyama turned around to see who had spoken to him. There was a man in a wheelchair.

"Long time no see, Monobe," Rumi said to the man.

Monobe. That was his name, no mistake. Judging by the suppleness of his skin, he seemed to be the same age as them or slightly younger. He was around five and a half feet tall, shorter than Aoyama.

However, as Aoyama faced the stranger, he had the sense that he was confronting a force far greater than he. The handsome youth had a slim frame and clear eyes, but—Aoyama found that he couldn't meet the other man's eyes.

"It's been a while. Y'all have come far," Monobe said in the Hakata dialect. He gestured to Aoyama. "Is this your boyfriend?"

"No!" Aoyama scrambled to say.

Monobe snorted. "I was gonna tell y'all oughta get. We're out in the boonies. There ain't a single thing going for this place. If you ain't dating, though, I might as well save my breath." He snickered.

Aoyama didn't enjoy the sense that he was being made fun of, but the menacing air around Monobe had softened slightly, which

was a relief.

Then he had a realization. It must have been thanks to Monobe that the voice had disappeared.

"Um, thank you," Aoyama said.

"For what?" Monobe asked.

"For your help earlier…"

"Whatever," Monobe spat harshly. His eyes went cold once again. It looked like he was glaring at Aoyama. He grunted and said to Rumi, "I told you over the phone, but there ain't anything I can teach you. There are plenty of folks who are hitting the books proper. Go ask one of them."

"There's a fine line between humility and obsequiousness." Rumi strode up to Monobe. "You're an excellent shaman. I have heard that you performed your first exorcism when you were five…"

"Five?" Aoyama echoed. "He was just a preschooler. He's been working since he was that young? That's amazing… He must be remarkable," he said with genuine amazement.

Rumi gave an exaggerated nod and said quickly, "More than remarkable. He's dealt with it all, from animal spirits to man-eating mermaids, *ikiryou*, and even forsaken gods—do you understand why he's so great?"

"He's very experienced… Is that what you mean?"

"That's certainly one part of it, but that alone can't describe his uniqueness," Rumi said. Aoyama opened his mouth, but she cut him off before he could speak. "We've had this discussion before, I believe. Shamans, exorcists, and the like—be they Shinto priests, monks, or ministers like your grandfather—people like that are usually…"

"I've never done so fancy a thing as exorcism," Monobe said, wheeling away from Rumi.

Upon closer inspection, the hand peeking out from his cuff, which was slightly rolled up, wasn't the color of skin. It looked like he might have been wearing long gloves.

"No, you are remarkable. Even right now, you're… No, I'll go back to what I was just saying. In most cases, a purification rite can be held only once the source of the curse or grudge is identified. That is

why normally, priests exorcise only demons, Shinto priests exorcise only *kegare*—impurities—and monks exorcise only evil spirits. They don't know the other rites. At least, that's what we've talked about before… It's the accepted assumption in this world. Common sense."

Rumi gestured dramatically toward Monobe. "But he's different. He doesn't need any of that process. He can perform exorcisms without knowing the cause. That's why he's remarkable!"

Monobe's expression didn't change at all in response to Rumi's grandstanding. "Aw shucks. I've said this before, but I'll say it again. That's just 'cause I got no head for books. I do what I gotta do. That's all."

Aoyama doubted whether *books* were the solution.

Like Rumi had explained, to deal with supernatural phenomena, investigators worked to the bone to root out the cause and determine the appropriate method. That was exactly what Rumi and Aoyama did.

Once they figured out the mystery, they contacted specialists to take care of the issue.

In many cases, the paranormal activity was a figment of the person's imagination.

Take, for example, the demonic exorcisms performed by the Pádraig Aoba Church, Aoyama's family church. People came to the church for help with not only demonic but also spiritual possessions. However, most of the incidents could be resolved through counseling with Aoyama's father, who was the minister, or a referral to a suitable medical specialist. That was to say, the majority of victims were actually suffering from mental illness or were exhausted from dealing with a chronic physical illness, so much so that they were making the worst out of nothing.

In reality, the exorcism process entailed taking the time to determine whether the cause of the problem was actually supernatural, like the inquirer suspected.

However, among shamans, there were those who boasted they could dispel any and all evil (which, in most cases, meant they wouldn't be able to do anything at all).

In Aoyama's experience, shamans who were quick to perform so-

called exorcisms without following any sort of process or figuring out the cause of paranormal phenomena were nothing more than ignorant quacks.

Judging from what Monobe had said, he could be one of those frauds, but the man had a strange persuasiveness about him.

He exuded an intimidating air that belied his slight frame. Jan was similarly delicate and possessed a great power, but Monobe was different. The former was, above all else, warm; just being by his side, one couldn't help but let down one's guard. In contrast, facing Monobe made one feel a deep anxiety, like their heart was being squeezed.

Monobe's eyes were a deep shade that looked like a mix of many colors. It seemed like they would transport one to another world if one stared at them too long. More than anything, Aoyama didn't think Rumi would lie.

Monobe tilted his head lazily. "So? You came all the way here to compliment me?"

"Course not," Rumi said, mimicking Monobe's dialect.

Monobe furrowed his brows. "Then why are you here?"

"To ask you to perform an exorcism. What else?" Rumi closed the distance Monobe had put between them. "We'll compensate you properly."

"I refuse," Monobe snapped. He spun his wheelchair around with deft movements. "I *told* you. I've never done an exorcism. I've never learned that kind of thing. I don't know if you're dealin' with an *o-shikari* or *suso*, but go talk to my ma or grandpa 'bout that. They've learned proper. They're trained for it, so they'll get it done, unlike me."

"So humble. Didn't you help us earlier, though?" Rumi insisted, refusing to back down.

Monobe sighed deeply, annoyance showing on his face. "We don't want any weird things running around here. I just got rid of the nuisance."

Monobe wasn't even trying to hide his reluctance. To ease the tension, Aoyama deliberately cut in to ask, "What are *o-shikari* and *suso*? Besides, I still don't know what you do."

"Simply put, *o-shikari* refers to the wrath of gods and the Buddha. *Suso* are curses cast by humans," Rumi explained.

She took out her tablet, typed in something, and showed it to Aoyama.

Sokumetsu svaha. Instant destruction, so let it be.

"This is the phrase Monobe recited when he helped us earlier. *Sokumetsu svaha.* It's a statute…an incantation of sorts that his sect uses. The sect's beliefs are closely related to mountain worship," Rumi explained without pausing for breath. "Here, they bury the dead provisionally. Afterward, they'll call the departed back to our world, purify the soul, and send it to the heavens through a rite they call Tomb Revival. *Sokumetsu svaha* is the incantation used in the exorcism. Normally, one has to follow the proper steps and perform a ceremony."

"If you know all of that, then why don't you do it yourself?" Monobe asked, interrupting Rumi. "I only knew half of what you said."

Rumi finally grabbed the handles of the wheelchair. "You didn't study because you didn't need to. I know all about it. I did my research. The shamans in your sect must undergo a decade of harsh training before they can become independent. But you didn't have to. Neither your grandfather nor your mother could complain. Why? Because you have been accomplished at everything since you were born, even if you didn't train… Am I wrong? The average person can't dispel evil through an incantation alone. That's why I don't care if you've studied or trained. I want to hire a person with real strength and power. And you fit the bill."

Monobe heaved another sigh.

He shook Rumi's hands off the handles and spun around to face them again. "Wanna see a magic trick? See this bead?"

Aoyama was thrown by the sudden turn of events. Monobe looked at him sidelong, rolling a clear glass bead in his palm. It was about the size of the beads in Ramune soda bottles.

What drew Aoyama's attention more was the fact that the other man was wearing a glove. It was made of a strange vinyl-like material and reflected the sunlight. Combined with the glare from

the bead, it was so bright that he couldn't fully open his eyes.

"Watch closely now. It's gonna disappear," Monobe said.

Suddenly, the bead vanished, as though it had been sucked into his hand. It might have only looked that way, but Aoyama didn't understand the trick behind it at all.

"A-amazing," Aoyama exclaimed, clapping his hands. Part of his excitement was the novelty; he had never seen a magic trick up close.

"Aoyama… You're adorable," Monobe said.

Aoyama scowled instinctively. He felt like he was being made fun of again, but Monobe was gazing at him with tenderness as one might a young child. He looked down in embarrassment.

Monobe continued, his tone still gentle, "That illusion depends on the light that's reflected, the timing I chose to speak… That's why it worked. You know that, right?"

"Illusion, you say! You call that an illusion?" Rumi cried exaggeratedly.

Monobe ignored her. "The point is, anyone who's lookin' at me—Aoyama, in this case—I can control a bit… I can pull them into my world. I can't explain it well, but…that's the gist."

He rolled the wheelchair and pulled up in front of Aoyama. He reached out, lifted his index finger, and pressed it against Aoyama's forehead.

Aoyama didn't try to avoid it. If anything, he felt relaxed. He even squatted down to ease the strain on Monobe's arm. He was now making direct eye contact with Monobe, whom he had found so frightening before. There was a light shining deep in the youth's dark pupils. He felt embarrassed at himself for thinking that Monobe's eyes could take someone to a different world. Monobe's fingertip was stiff and cold, but warmth seemed to flow into Aoyama from the point of contact.

"My 'exorcism' works similarly. I don't know nothing 'bout nothing. I just make do by forcin' my rules on the other guy." Monobe removed his finger from Aoyama.

He then turned to Rumi. "Let me give you a piece of advice as *your elder*. You better not get involved. Best not to attempt things

that are beyond your control," he said, removing his right glove.

Aoyama yelped involuntarily. He quickly clasped his hands over his mouth.

Monobe's forearms and hands were a metallic gray. His fingertips appeared to be made of a strange black material. When he opened and closed his hands, they moved like living creatures with wills of their own.

"Know your place. Do not think you can do everything. This is what my conceit got me."

Monobe rolled up his pant legs. Metal rods extended from his shoes to his knees.

That meant all four of his limbs were—

"I understand. Well then, let's go home, Aoyama," Rumi said, putting away her tablet. She started to walk away quickly.

Aoyama was about to tell her to wait when Monobe cut in. "What a shame. You've come all the way here." He reached a hand toward Rumi, just like Aoyama had.

"I don't need you. But if you truly think it is a shame, then I'd like you to show us something to make it worth our while."

Monobe stared at Rumi and was quiet for a few moments. Then his expression softened minutely, and he gestured as if to say, *Follow me*. He started to head toward a building farther down the road. The street was barely maintained, but he moved so smoothly one would not think he was in a wheelchair at all.

Aoyama found himself unintentionally mesmerized. In the meantime, the other two pulled farther and farther away from him, and he had to scramble to catch back up.

Monobe led them to a wooden room that was spacious but empty and instructed them to lie down on the rough floor.

Aoyama closed his eyes, feeling the pleasant coolness of the wood against his back.

The air here was pure and sweet even for a mountainous region. Suddenly, he heard a voice from somewhere.

Ushering in the new year, blossoms of plum

Seven flowers flourishing among the winding mountains and valleys
Flowers that bloom not in that world are
In this world, valiant
Vivify the flowers, Sangosaihei gohei, here the Norikura gohei
There is no god who will not bend before them
There is no Buddha who will not bend before them

Aoyama cracked his eyes open. Monobe was there, wearing a crown decorated with colorful paper.

Earlier, he had seemed a modern and beautiful young man. Now the aura around him was mystical. He was singing the melancholy song in a soft whisper.

Overwhelmed by the atmosphere, Aoyama closed his eyes again.

In February, the camellia
In March, blossoms of cherry
In April, the deutzia
In May, five flowering grains
In June, the lily
In July, buckwheat blooms

Even though Monobe's song was so faint as to be barely audible, it had a profound resonance that shook Aoyama's entire body.

Seven flowers flourishing among the winding mountains and valleys
Flowers that bloom not in that world are
In this world, valiant
Vivify the flowers, so they be
There is no god who will not bend before them
There is no Buddha who will not bend before them

Aoyama felt his consciousness drift.

His limbs separated from his body painlessly, and his body dissolved into the darkness.

His mother stroked his head with a warm hand.

Inside, deep down inside, there was a brilliant light.

He stretched out a hand he no longer had.

This was a church.

He was standing inside a church.

Someone was playing the organ. It was a hymn.

"Along the mountain path / alone do I go."

Without realizing it, he started humming along.

"In the Lord's hands / my heart is at ease."

While he sang, he sensed someone coming toward him from afar.

It was his grandfather, who had passed away last year. Aoyama knew him instantly, even without seeing his face. He wanted to run up to his grandfather and embrace him. Aoyama could count the number of times he had spoken to his grandfather since he had started college. A significant reason had been out of a desire to distance himself even a little from the family business he would one day inherit.

Their lack of communication didn't change even after Aoyama started working with Rumi. When Rumi had said she wanted his grandfather's help, he had left all the correspondence to her, speaking to his grandfather only about administrative details.

His grandfather had doted on Aoyama since he was young. He was kind and always wore a smile. Everyone respected him.

He was the one who had convinced Aoyama that demons and gods existed.

Aoyama hadn't realized until after his grandfather died that he ought to have talked to him more and learned from him.

His grandfather had struggled with chronic chest pains, and one day, he went to sleep and never woke up.

In his coffin, he had lain with his face peaceful in sleep, surrounded by flowers.

Aoyama hadn't shed a tear.

Their family, their neighbors, and the crowd of people who had been saved by his exorcisms and had traveled from afar had all

cried, sad to see him go, but Aoyama's eyes had been dry.

It hadn't felt real.

A month, three months, a half year—no matter how much time passed after his grandfather's death, Aoyama would find himself peeking into the reception room every time he visited his family home. He felt as if his grandfather would still be there, alive and well.

Only now did it dawn on him.

His grandfather was dead.

He was gone, and he wasn't coming back.

Aoyama would never see him again.

That was why his grandfather was in such a place.

The moment Aoyama realized all of this, his tears overflowed and wouldn't stop. He wanted to bawl loudly and throw a tantrum.

His grandfather slowly drew closer. His large hand covered Aoyama's forehead. "Don't worry. Stand strong. Be brave."

Aoyama leaped to his feet and shouted, "Grandpa!"

His grandfather was nowhere to be found. The only trace of him was the warmth from his hand on Aoyama's forehead.

Produce fruits that are worthy.

A spark ran through his brain. That was it.

More than anything his father or mother had ever said. The unforgettable words that had become second nature to him.

Seven flowers flourishing among the winding mountains and valleys
Flowers that bloom not in that world are
In this world, valiant
Vivify the flowers, so they be
There is no god who will not bend before them
There is no Buddha who will not bend before them

Aoyama flew awake. He opened his eyes to see a wooden wall, feeling as if he had been transported back to reality.

Monobe stopped singing at the exact same time.

Aoyama was lightheaded, maybe because he had sat up so abruptly. Ignoring his dizziness, however, he exclaimed excitedly, "It's the Bible!"

Monobe looked at him dubiously. "What are you talking about?"

"I got it. That man. He was quoting the Bible."

"Why don't you calm down first?" Monobe said.

Monobe passed him a cup of tea, which he downed in one go. The tea hadn't yet cooled, and it burned his throat, but he paid it no attention. "We were wrong. Suwa Grand Shrine, and…ophiolatry have nothing to do with it. Comparing humans to plants, the talk of producing fruits—that is rhetoric characteristic of the Bible! 'Marty crawl' is Mardi Gras. It's the final day of Carnival…"

At that point, Aoyama became embarrassed that he had been rambling by himself. He looked at Rumi hesitantly.

She was smiling. "That's what I thought," she said with a grin.

"You knew…?"

"It was nothing more than a hypothesis, but thanks to you, now I can be sure. Of course, Monobe was the one who drew it out of you."

"I didn't do a thing," Monobe said, shaking his head with a dumbfounded expression.

Rumi took his hand and gripped it, her face radiant. "That was 'The Flower Song.' I've seen it in the literature, but that was the first time I've heard it. It calls back the soul of the deceased."

"It was nothing. Aoyama just looked like he was sufferin'." Monobe readjusted his headpiece and turned away.

Aoyama was filled with a renewed admiration for the man.

Monobe had noticed Aoyama hadn't accepted his grandfather's death, even though he hadn't said a word about it. And thanks to the song Rumi had called "The Flower Song," Aoyama had been whisked away to parts unknown to meet his grandfather.

Aoyama realizing that Jan had been quoting the Bible was purely a side effect. He felt like Monobe's ritual had liberated his heart. *That* was what he was thankful for.

Additionally, he was sure that if Monobe agreed to help them, they would be able to resolve everything.

Monobe had an aura that was sharp like the naked edge of a blade and a barbed tongue. Nonetheless, he was a good person at his core.

He had called what had happened to his body "the result of his conceit," but to put it another way, he had sacrificed himself to help others.

"Um…Monobe," Aoyama said, looking at the other man straight on. "Won't you come with us? Please, will you—"

Before Aoyama could say the words *help us*, Rumi brought the conversation to an end. "We're going back," she said. "It won't do for us to impose more on you than we have already."

Aoyama had no time to protest. Rumi quickly gathered her belongings—and his—and rushed to the door. He couldn't even thank Monobe properly.

After they put on their shoes, Rumi shoved a thick envelope at Monobe.

"What's this? I don't need this." Monobe pushed it away.

Rumi remained insistent and pushed back harder. They repeated this fruitless exchange several more times before Monobe gave in. He opened the envelope, took out half the contents, and returned the rest into Rumi's bag.

"That's final," he declared. "Are you satisfied? Hurry up and get home."

Rumi smiled. "To be honest, that's a big help. Our budget is stretched pretty thin," she said and finally started back the way they had come.

Monobe shouted after them, "If you're gonna do it, Rumi, then face your adversary seriously."

Rumi didn't turn around.

Aoyama turned back several times, bowing his head. Monobe watched them until he couldn't see them anymore.



Chapter 4: *Tentação*

○

Take, for example, my household. We always pray before we eat.

In Kouhei's, they won't say a single word from the start of a meal to the end. Keiji was the second son of a family of local celebrities, and in his house, they mustn't drink even a single cup of water until his father finishes eating.

That day, the three of us were chatting about our families' unique traditions—every family has them. The traditions of others are sometimes peculiar and incomprehensible, but one shouldn't refute them or be overly shocked.

They are them; we are us.

That being said, I think my family was the most normal.

Kouhei's kin ran a large shrine, and enough was said about Keiji's. Looking at our households, mine was perfectly average compared with theirs. We did the same unspectacular and ordinary things any family did.

Apparently, Kouhei and Keiji each thought the same about their own families. They were bantering with each other, saying things like "Your family dinners sound boring as hell" and "Your father's terrifying." However, they purposefully avoided asking about my family's traditions.

When we went to the bathroom, we announced it to the entire household. If we entered through the front door, we had to leave

through the back. We used soy sauce–pickled vegetables as the garnish for our curry. I had endless stories to tell.

We were all fired up and ended up on the topic of Christmas.

"We don't celebrate Christmas, of course," Kouhei said. "At least that's what I want to say. The truth is, we eat cake, and I've gotten presents since I was a kid." A contented smile rose on his plump face. Maybe he was remembering the taste of a fancy cake.

I might be prejudiced, but it seemed to me that no one neglected traditions more than proprietors of wealthy temples and shrines. Can a Shinto priest be called "worldly," too? I suppose it would do.

"We call up everyone we know and have a party," Keiji said. "But it's not the kind of Christmas party kids would like. It's all about going around shaking hands and greeting people… I can stomach it now, but when I was younger, it was hell."

"Ugh," Kouhei and I both groaned. There were downsides to being too rich, too.

"By the way," I said. There was one question I was dying to ask. "How do you pay respect to the Ascetic of Holy Ablution?"

"The asc…what?" Kouhei was looking at me with wide eyes. He was like a Buddhist statue whose sculptor had put effort only into carving the eyes.

"I'm talking about paying your respects," I said. "In my house, my little brother strips down to his underwear. The Ascetic's legs are—"

"Wait, wait, wait. Hold on," Keiji said, shaking his head. "What ascetic? What ablution? None of that makes sense."

I burst out laughing. "Come on. Even I won't fall for that one."

They did this all the time. Keiji always got Kouhei to play pranks on gullible me.

But not even I would get tricked by such an obvious ploy.

The Ascetic of Holy Ablution came on Christmas. If we didn't pay our respects, our bad luck from the year would accumulate and bring a Catastrophe the following year. Even a preschooler would know that.

"Uh…why are you laughing? You're scaring me, dude." Keiji's voice shook. He was a good actor. It appeared he was still planning on going through with his plan.

"Okay, okay. I'll play along. You've never heard of the Ascetic of Holy Ablution. Sure. There's no way, but that's the story, right?" I said. "Fine, I'll explain. Iēsoûs was born from the Hollow-Eyed Woman and raised by a hound. That's why my brother takes off his clothes—"

"That's enough. Seriously, stop it. That's gross," Keiji said.

Both he and Kouhei had stopped eating and were staring at me. *Gross* was going too far. Even for a prank, they were being rude.

"Don't you think you're being disrespectful? I'm talking about Iēsoûs, you know?" I said. "Well, I guess you practice a heretical religion, so maybe you don't care, Kouhei, but Keiji, you have no excuse. You shouldn't joke around about an event related to Iēsoûs. You'll cause a Catastrophe…"

Kouhei jumped to his feet, kicking his chair. "Who's the one joking around?" he spat. The glass cup in his chubby fingers creaked. It seemed like it would crack at any second. "What do you mean, 'heretical'? I'm not laughing. Are you trying to pick a fight?"

"Oh, my bad, my bad. Practicing heretical religions is a constitutional right," I said. "Seriously. I'm sorry. That was inconsiderate of me.

"But aren't you two the ones at fault? Pretending you don't understand the origin of Christmas? I don't want you playing these crass pranks in the future."

I took the high route and compromised, but Kouhei's eyes were bloodshot and red. They were twitching.

I had heard from Mater that heretics were ignorant, bound by false traditions, and had not the capacity to accept the truth faith, but I hadn't believed it.

Kouhei might believe in a heretical religion, but his family was well off (it was worth repeating that no one neglected traditions more than proprietors of wealthy temples and shrines), so I had let down my guard. What a failure.

"Calm down, Kouhei," Keiji said.

Kouhei sat down again, looking tense. Keiji must have inherited his gravitas, or should I say his skill in controlling people, from his father. Filled with admiration, I waited for what he was going to say

next.

"Let's hear him out until the end," he continued. "Tell us. Who's this Iēsoûs…?"

"You don't even know that? In some countries, he's called Jesus, but his proper name is Iēsoûs, in my opinion," I said.

"…Got it. Iēsoûs is… Actually, tell us what you think Christmas celebrates and what your family does. We don't know a thing. Go slowly."

I was surprised. Keiji's expression showed no signs of lying. Next to him, Kouhei's face was also solemn, though it seemed like he was still angry.

They both seriously had no idea. At their age. We were talking about basics that even my twenty-sixth younger brother knew.

It was what it was. They didn't have a loving mater and a wise pater. Not everyone was raised in fortuitous circumstances.

Innocence was a wondrous thing, but they could not bear worthy fruit in their ignorance.

I was used to educating the ignorant. I suppressed my disappointment toward them and explained everything from the beginning.

As foretold by the red eight-pointed star, the Hollow-Eyed Woman ensconced Iēsoûs, the All-Knowing, in her huge eye sockets.

The Hollow-Eyed Woman fled persecution to the ranch, gave birth to Iēsoûs in a sheepdog's hut, and expired.

That was on Christmas.

Iēsoûs was raised by a sheepdog that had licked a drop of the Hollow-Eyed Woman's blood. Eventually, he was found by Ioan, the Ascetic of Holy Ablution.

Ioan brushed off from the All-Knowing Iēsoûs's feet the dirt from the hut, and Iēsoûs licked the filth from Ioan's feet as thanks. Obviously, their tale of the Salvation and Atonement of all people continues from there, but Christmas is the day Iēsoûs was birthed from the Hollow-Eye Woman's eye sockets. The Ascetic of Holy Ablution is Ioan's present form. He is a god incarnate, to put it in

layman's terms. He visits on Christmas, of course, and we must pay our respects.

"It seems like both of you had the wrong idea, but… You get a lot of visitors to your house, Keiji, so even if you don't know about Ioan, you must at least know about the Ascetic of Holy Ablution. I'm pretty sure all families, no matter who they are, show their gratitude for the Ascetic, unless they are heretics."

I forced a smile and looked at Keiji. He resembled his mother, who was formerly Miss Japan, but his handsome face was covered in sweat. He must have felt shameful and panicked now that he knew how ignorant and inconsiderate he had been.

"I'll ask you again," I said to Keiji. "How do you pay your respects to the Ascetic?"

Keiji looked at me wordlessly for a while. Then he shook his head. "Let's go, Kouhei. He's bad news. He's in a cult. Sorry, man, for inviting him."

Kouhei slowly got to his feet and put on his coat.

Forget answering my question—they ignored me when I tried to talk to them.

I was so angry my blood could boil. What did they mean by *cult*?

They closed their eyes to their own cluelessness. They were going to cause a huge Catastrophe by throwing around slander like that.

Suddenly, I arrived at the truth. It was simple.

They were *diabolos*. Who would have imagined there would be two so close to me?

I fell to my knees right then and there. I wanted to cry.

However, I mustered my courage and stood up.

I was the son of the woman who was baptized as Sabahka, the Sheepdog. I had no justification for not noticing the *diabolos*.

In the name of my mother, it will all be fine, I reassured myself.

Neither Ioan nor Iēsoûs would ever throw away sinners who had *diabolos* by their side.

I steeled myself and rang the handbell.

Brothers and sisters crawled to me as if pulled in by the strange *ting-ting* sound.

Fearing the holy, the *diabolos* ran for the door they had just come in from, their faces messy with sweat and tears, seeking at exit. Unfortunately, they could not open it. The door was an entrance. You could not leave through it.

I smiled lovingly at my two friends who had become *diabolos*.

"Keiji, Kouhei, let us study together until the Ascetic of Holy Ablution comes. Don't worry. You'll get used to it soon. I won't force you to think or do anything. You'll think for yourself and act according to your own will. Let us bear worthy fruit."

◆ ◆ ◆

Their trip home was faster than the trip there. Aoyama and Rumi took the Nozomi Shinkansen instead of the sleeper train.

They were no closer to solving Youta Shimamoto's case, but Aoyama's heart was light.

Jan was quoting the Bible.

The moment Aoyama had realized that, he felt like there was something they could do.

The Bible had been at his side ever since he had been born. He was still studying it himself, so he couldn't say he was an expert, but he understood more about it than about Japan's religions and folk customs.

The expression "to bear worthy fruit" was used in both the New and Old Testaments. It likened humans to plants. Plants raised in a good environment would grow bountiful fruits. Similarly, humans raised with good words and the proper teachings would be virtuous.

Plus, Jan had used the phrase "brothers and sisters," which was very Christian. To be exact, Catholics would refer to fellow church members as brothers and sisters. That being said, it was mostly used during Mass and sermons. There was hardly anyone who used it in everyday conversation.

Everything was starting to come together.

Aoyama related what he was thinking to Rumi, and apparently, she had been thinking the same thing.

They went over Rumi's notes on her tablet and organized the information.

○ Saeko Ishida: Friend wouldn't eat, threw a tantrum when client pointed it out. Attended a strange seminar a few weeks ago. → Client cannot be reached.

The seminar had been held at a rental office owned by Moriya Foods.

They had been unable to contact Ms. Ishida, so they had questioned her family and coworkers. Both she and her friend had behaved oddly and had gone missing. The day before she disappeared, she'd recommended the seminar to her family.

○ Tsubasa Mizuno: Felt like someone was watching his every move. At first, he thought he was imagining it, but gradually, he started thinking he deserved to be punished. After a series of mistakes at work, he was fired.

A core belief of Christianity is the concept of original sin.

Humans are born into a state of sin. Protestants, in particular, believe in total depravity, the idea that humans are corrupted by their sins.

Rumi thought that calling oneself a sinner was "Christian-like." Aoyama had his own feelings on that.

○ Maimi Murase: Takuma, the client's son, argued with someone when he was out drunk. The next day, he lost his vision. After consulting the hospital, they were told nothing was abnormal.

In the New Testament, nonbelievers of God the Father and Jesus were often referred to as being blind. Rumi had made the connection between the verses and Mr. Murase's case, and she had turned out to be right.

"Anyway, if we put together all of this information, nothing is certain, but…it appears that Jan believes himself to be God's representative—Jesus Christ, most likely," Rumi concluded.

Aoyama nodded. "I think so, too. Given that, *anatematarubeshi* starts to make sense, too."

Rumi looked delighted. "Please enlighten me."

Aoyama felt bashful at being prompted by Rumi, whose intellect and acumen he was no match for. He cleared his throat, hoping to hide the grin that threatened to break out.

"He's saying 'Anathema beest you.' *Anathema* originally meant an offering to God, but in the Bible, it takes on the connotation of ruination.

"I get *venideomine* now as well… It's *veni de homine*… It's another biblical reference. Jesus says that when he heals a man who is possessed by evil spirits. It means 'Come out of the man' in Latin. It's not much, but it feels like a relief just to understand something."

"Why?" Rumi asked, running her hand along the window. "That makes me uneasy. If Jan is merely a malicious person with strange powers, I'm sure we'll still be able to do something, but…if he thinks of himself as Christ, then he has no malice, and human tactics likely won't work."

Rumi exhaled, fogging up the window. There she drew a cross. "Jan has many worshippers who believe him to be God. He performs what can only be called miracles. What if he's *the real Jesus Christ*?"

Aoyama pictured Jan in his mind. The man's face had no distinctive features, but he had warm eyes. Though Jan had put Aoyama through the terror of death, he didn't hate Jan, though it was likely the man had made him feel that way by using another one of his powers.

"Do you think we can fight and win against Christ?" Rumi asked.

"No, of course not," Aoyama answered immediately. "I wouldn't dare think such a thing."

She laughed out loud. "Only joking. Besides, winning isn't our goal," she said gently, changing her demeanor in apology for saying something so rude despite knowing that Aoyama was a devout believer of Christ.

Aoyama let it go. “Um, why did you give up and decide to go back?” On the Nozomi train back, Rumi had slept like a log, so he hadn’t had the chance to ask. “I understand that we were imposing, but Monobe would surely have helped us if we had asked, and he seems like a truly remarkable person.”

“He already helped us,” she said with her mouth full of meat from her *sukiyaki* lunch box. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have compensated him.”

“It’s true that he saved me, but…”

Aoyama had come to grips with his grandfather’s death and realized that Jan had been quoting from the Bible. Those might have been major developments, but he didn’t think they would help him and Rumi solve the case.

The key to the solution was Rumi. There was little he could do.

“The situation with your grandfather was a bonus.”

Just when Aoyama was about to ask what else it could be, he felt a discomfort in his throat.

It felt like a burning hot lump was lodged there.

He tried to breathe, but it was choking him so severely that he couldn’t.

Rumi hit him on the back repeatedly. After several strikes, it came flying out of his mouth. He scrambled to pick it up.

It was a clear glass bead—the one that had vanished, sucked into Monobe’s hand.

Aoyama stiffened, gripping the bead tightly.

“Monobe really is amazing.” For some reason, Rumi’s voice was full of pride.

☆ ☆ ☆

“Face your adversary seriously.” So had said the man with the beautiful face.

I agreed. No more playing around.

Remembering my childhood is extremely painful.

I don’t mean to pitybrag, but that’s what it’ll sound like if I tell the story as it is. That’s why I’ve never told anyone.

My dad was garbage.

He had all the qualities of the scumbags depicted in fiction.

In other words, he didn’t work or care about his family. He was loose with women, thoroughly addicted to alcohol and gambling, and swamped in debt.

Needless to say, he was violent, too.

He hit my mom every day.

A woman who makes a family with trash is trash herself.

My mom hit me as much as my dad had hit her. My dad hit me, too, so my entire body was battered by their fits of brutality.

When I was first becoming aware of the world, my home was already a place of violence. I didn’t understand why this subhuman man and woman had bothered to start a family.

But a family we were, by the loosest definition, until the time my molars started growing in.

The scumbags had sex in front of me without a care.

After doing the deed, the repulsive duo’s mood would improve ever so slightly. They would cook a curry with dirty vegetables left half-raw and say to me with infuriating smiles, “Let’s eat together.” I don’t understand how garbage thinks, but maybe they had wanted to play house.

When even that semblance of normal was gone, my dad stopped coming home. Before then, he had wandered off to God knows where several times in the past. His absences gradually grew longer, and by the end, he was at home only once a month, if that.

At first, my mom would throw fits. She must have been furious at being tossed aside, of course, but the root of her anger was from financial unease. I realized that only after becoming an adult.

My dad had a mountain of debt, but he was likely a day laborer, and he’d apparently contributed a bare minimum amount of cash to the household. Without his money, we were looking at certain death.

My mom started selling her body.

She had probably planned to peddle me to people with *those sorts* of hobbies, but I was ugly.

Neither of my parents was bad-looking, but I had a hideous face cobbled together from the worst features of both of them. I didn't care what I looked like, but I remember thinking it was a shame I couldn't help my mom.

My mom was still young, and her figure wasn't bad, either. She seemed to have no problems finding a partner.

She conducted her business in the house. Men paraded through our home.

Of course, I was a nuisance.

Among her customers, there was trash like my mom and dad who liked to have sex while I was watching. Other than those times, my mom would throw me into the closet with all the other junk. In the dark and dusty space, I was forced to listen to my mom's moans.

The door was taped shut with duct tape, so there wasn't a single mote of light. The darkness seemed to expand infinitely despite the tight quarters.

Naturally, in the beginning, I was afraid. I feared being treated like I didn't exist more than being kicked, punched, or screamed at.

I prayed over and over for my mom to help me, though it made me sick. Of course, she never did.

It was after a time when the winds of change visited me.

That day, my mom had shoved me into the closet as usual. The man exchanged a few words with her, and then the entirety of our shabby apartment started to shake. That was also nothing out of the ordinary.

The difference was that along with the squeaking and grating sounds of the room, I heard whispering.

"Mom?" I called in a barely audible voice, but from outside, I heard only a vulgar panting.

All the while, the whispering continued, but it wasn't my mom.

When I realized that, I was instantly terrified.

My parents had shown me a horror movie out of a sadistic urge. Looking back on it now, the story was childish, but the woman with long black hair and a bloodless face who followed you to the ends of the earth was enough to plant fear into my young heart.

She was the one whispering.

No matter how hard I tried to shake the image from my head, her grinning face would not leave my mind. I screwed my eyes shut and tried to distract myself.

"Open your eyes," the voice said.

It was a woman.

Even though it was useless, I made myself smaller and desperately covered my mouth with my hand, trying to breathe silently.

"Open your eyes," she whispered again in a singsong voice.

No, no, no. Hurry up and go away.

"Why would you say that?" Her tone was laced with sorrow. "I'm your friend!"

I felt someone's breath on my ear. *Friend.* I opened my eyes unwittingly when I heard that.

A small face and cute, round eyes. Shapely lips drawn in a pretty curve.

The lower half of her slender body was mantled in what looked like scales.

She was a mermaid.

There in front of me, straight from the cover of the anime picture book my mom had bought for me on a whim, was a beautiful princess.

"Talk with me." Her expression was so gentle I wanted to cry.

I don't remember what we talked about.

The mermaid princess knew what I was thinking even if I didn't say it out loud. I felt like I was tasting "happiness" for the first time since I was born.

I woke up. My mom was there. She said something like "Look at you, sleeping without a care. How nice for you." Then she hit me.

They say that knowing what joy feels like makes any subsequent sorrow more painful, but it wasn't like that. Rather, if anything, I felt like I could live solely for that tiny bit of happiness. Up until that point, I'd thought of myself as my parents' accessory, neither living nor dead. When I was with the mermaid princess, that was the only precious time I didn't exist for my parents but for myself.

From that day on, I started to clean the closet for the mermaid

princess.

When my mom was out, I wiped the dust and dirt with a rag and decorated the space with scrap metal that had fallen on the floor, eggshells, banana peels, and posters of gems.

The mermaid princess was delighted with the crude palace I had built. She laughed with her bell-like voice, and when she laughed, the fish around her danced.

"How about we make more friends?" she said out of the blue.

"We can do that?" I asked.

"Let's make more." She sang cheerfully the answer that wasn't an answer.

As she had suggested, our friends increased more and more.

That being said, none of them were human. Most were floating something or others, be they dogs or cats, or circles or triangles, or entirely shapeless.

I sang and danced with them (I didn't move a muscle, but that was what it had felt like). It was fun. In those times, I, too, became the character of a charming story who existed for the mermaid princess.

However, as they say, happiness is fleeting, and the end soon came.

One day, my dad came home for the first time in a long time.

As soon as he came back, he said, "It stinks in here." Then the arguing began.

My mom accused my dad of being absent, and my dad accused my mom of cheating. He hit her, but she fought back with objects. She wasn't by any means a simple victim.

I felt slightly relieved. Everything had returned to normal.

That was why I sang. The beautiful song that the mermaid princess had taught me.

In that instant, the two of them stopped fighting.

I was happy.

It was just like I had thought. The princess's song had an amazing power, and it made all pain, resentment, and sadness disappear like fog. That was what I stupidly believed.

Of course, it wasn't true. Well, maybe technically it was.

My parents stopped their fighting and started tormenting me instead.

They punched me, kicked me, tried to drown me, and then punched me again without waiting for me to recover. My teeth broke. I spat out the pieces with my blood. That is all I can remember. Humans are weak to pain, so I imagine I was sobbing.

When dusk fell, they stopped torturing me.

They must have gotten tired.

I couldn't move a single finger. It was early spring, so it shouldn't have been cold, but my entire body was shaking. That was how I knew I was still alive.

My mom watched me trembling and said in a scared voice, "She isn't going to die, is she?"

In the news, killers often say, "I didn't mean to kill them." Most people will think it's an excuse, but when I recall my mom's words, I think that might not always be the case.

I'm sure the perpetrators are actually just dumb as a rock. Catastrophically stupid people don't even understand the simple fact that humans are living beings that can die.

"Of course she's not going to die," my dad said, but his words lacked conviction.

Afterward, they discussed my condition among themselves. My ears were ringing, and my vision became bright and dark in turns, so I didn't hear what they said.

As a result of their debate, they decided to throw me in the closet.

My dad yanked on my arm, which was bent at a strange angle. He dragged me in front of the closet doors, my body scraping against the tatami mats.

He pulled open the door with his meaty hand.

"*Ugh!* It stinks!" He recoiled dramatically.

I had built my palace with food scraps, essentially, so that was why it smelled the way it did.

"The least you could do is clean, you cow!" my dad yelled at my mom.

"Whatever! She did this!" My mom pointed at me.

“Shit! It’s filthy,” he cursed, and he kicked my head toward the closet to throw me away.

My mom was still yelling, but my head had become hazy, and I didn’t understand a single word.

“You don’t need them, no?”

The voice rang like a bell.

Glittering gemlike pupils shone from half-slitted eyes. “Come on. You don’t need them, right?”

The mermaid princess was watching me, her expression as kind as always.

“I don’t,” I said, my voice stuffy because my nose was bleeding. “Don’t need either. Go die.”

I heard a thundering sound that shook the floor. Something warm soaked my feet.

My body stopped shaking. The freezing cold was replaced with terror.

Something had been done that couldn’t be taken back. And the person who had done it was…

The sound of clapping echoed in my ears that were supposed to be deaf. A grand applause.

The mermaid princess and the rabble of shapeless servants were clapping, singing, and dancing with abandon.

She was laughing loudly. Sharklike teeth were packed inside her cavernous mouth, glowing like pearls.

As I watched the maniacal banquet, I fell into a deep sleep.

It’s cliché, but the first thing I saw when I woke up was a white ceiling.

I breathed in deeply, and the scent of disinfectant filled my nostrils. I was in a hospital.

At the time, I hadn’t even known what a hospital was, so I thought I had been shut inside a tight white box as a result of the irreversible thing I had done.

In any case, my body was in shambles, so several days passed before I spoke with the adults—the police and my primary doctor, to

be specific.

I didn’t even know how old I was. They must have had their work cut out for them.

I learned this a little before I became a middle school student, but the neighbors had heard an explosion and reported it to the police. The police’s hypothesis had been that an explosion had occurred, and my parents had been pierced by knives that were flung in the resulting shock wave. However, there had been no damage to the room itself, and I had no injuries other than the ones caused by my parents.

Anyhow, I, the product of Garbage One and Garbage Two, failed to die.

After that, I was sent to an orphanage, the same as any other pitiful child who was the victim of abuse.

The staff were all extremely kind. Though I was at an age when I should have started elementary school long ago, I didn’t even know how to conduct myself as a person. Nevertheless, they taught me patiently. If it hadn’t been for their help, I’m sure I wouldn’t even be able to sit still in a chair.

Thanks to my time there, I was finally qualified to exist in this world. With no name nor household, I had to go to domestic court and obtain the right to register myself in the family registry. Normally, there was no need to go through such proceedings, even if you weren’t registered because your parents failed to file your birth certificate, but the scumbags who had birthed me had died, so I had no choice.

Armed with a makeshift name and superficial social skills, I entered elementary school.

Unlike the hospital and the orphanage, school was a place with few kind people, the reason being that most were children, and children are stupid. Stupid people, like my parents, don’t understand that humans are living beings who can die.

I was ugly. I was withdrawn and ruined the mood. I lived in an orphanage. For these three things, I was bullied.

Before I knew it, all my classmates had united against me, but the one who was particularly vicious was the queen bee, a girl

named Hashiguchi. She wasn't a star student, and her looks were average, too, but she was terrifyingly skilled at manipulating and egging on other people.

Not even the homeroom teacher of our fourth-grade class was immune. Looking back on it, he had been fresh out of college and naively passionate, laboring under the delusion that children were pure and innocent. When he saw the kids shoving a mop dripping with dirty water in my face under Hashiguchi's orders, he said, "Nice, Rumi! You're getting along with the class! It makes me so happy you're all friends."

I was shocked.

Hashiguchi continued to torment me cunningly.

I reached my limit soon after we became fifth graders.

That day, I was in charge of looking after the school rabbits. The students on duty had to go to school early to clean their hut and feed them vegetables.

Nobody liked doing it, but I didn't mind. I liked animals. At the very least, animals were less malicious than people, I thought.

I had gotten a basket of vegetable scraps from the custodian and was on my way to the hut when I passed the boy who was on duty with me. For some reason, he was making an awkward expression. He looked away when I met his eyes and ran off.

Having all the work forced on me by my chore partner was nothing new, but this was different from usual. The atmosphere was strange, and I had a bad premonition.

I hastened to the huts. When I got there, a repulsive odor assaulted my nose.

It reeked of iron. Of violence. Of blood.

I didn't want to look at the scene in front of me.

In the middle of the hut was a dirty white lump.

That was where the smell was coming from.

I realized what had happened, but my legs froze and wouldn't move.

I heard a high-pitched voice from behind me. "Good morning, piggy."

I knew who it was without having to turn. It was Hashiguchi.

She circled to stand in front of me, chuckling eerily.

Then she tossed something at my feet.

There were two small chunks of spiky fur. They were filthy with blood and red in places.

"You must be hungry, right?" she said, laughing. "Orphanages don't feed you, right? I felt sorry for you, so I got you breakfast."

A group of girls gathered around her from who knows where. "Wow, you're so kind, Kanae," they said, backing her up.

"Go on. Hurry up and eat." She picked up the hunks of fur again and shoved them in my face. "Here, eat it. Hurry up," she said, irritated.

The other girls covered my nose and pried open my mouth. Then Hashiguchi promptly stuffed the lumps in my mouth.

Stiff fur, mud, dust, and blood—the jumble of horrible things surged into my mouth. I wanted to spit it back out, but the girls didn't seem to have any intention of letting go of my nose.

I was running out of air, and my consciousness was starting to fade. The memory of the day I was on the border between life and death rose up in my mind.

The dusty, cramped closet that let in no light.

My throat spasmed, seeking air. I remembered the inside of the disgusting closet.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha." Someone was laughing loudly. It wasn't Hashiguchi. It wasn't any of her flunkies, either.

A rotten taste permeated my mouth. Vomit rose from my stomach.

The one laughing, her mouth yawning open, was the mermaid princess.

"You don't need her, right?" she asked, her cavernous mouth ringed with pointed, gleaming teeth. "You don't, right?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I thought viciously, *I don't. Just disappear.*

Kanae Hashiguchi died. A flying signboard stabbed her through her torso.

That day, there wasn't any wind. No one had any idea where the signboard had come from. Nonetheless, after she suffered for a while, bleeding from her wound, Hashiguchi died.

Her followers suffered terrible psychological damage from seeing her entrails crushed and spilling out of her body. After that day, I never saw them happy again.

It was like my bullying and the rabbits' deaths had never happened.

From then on, the stupid kids at my school stopped treating me horribly.

In addition to Kanae Hashiguchi's life and the bullying, one more thing had disappeared.

The mermaid princess.

The mermaid princess was gone. I had erased her. I had wished for her to disappear.

The realization struck me out of nowhere.

The mermaid princess hadn't eliminated my parents. It wasn't that she had killed them out of kindness because I had said I didn't need them.

It was me.

I had made up everything.

In retrospect, the mermaid princess had only talked about things that I knew. Her followers were misshapen animals from my indistinct memories. Her song was a jingle from a home electronics store.

The mermaid princess was me. She was a perfect version of myself I had created.

I must have been born with the power to make my fervent thoughts into reality.

In that apartment where I lived with my scum parents, in that clumsy palace inside the closet, I could do anything.

I used my powers frequently after that.

Whenever I disliked something, I imagined my palace and made a wish. That was all it took.

I became arrogant after discovering my ability. I reverted to the wild animal I had been before I entered the orphanage and didn't

listen to what anyone said. It would have been fitting to say I was a garbage girl born from garbage parents.

I eventually learned to conduct myself as a person again thanks to the woman I call my mom, but that's not something I should think about right now.

I have no hesitation about using my powers.

The puppylike guy I work with probably hasn't noticed, but taking on paranormal cases is the perfect outlet for my powers and violent tendencies.

Unlike with people, no matter how brutally you kill a spirit, no one will complain. Besides, most people are different from me; they aren't fully aware of spirits.

Once in a while, there is a person with real ability, like the man with the beautiful face. He's an outlier among outliers, as I am. He saw me deal with a case once. He's been preaching to me ever since. He's a strange one. Even though he is as powerful as—if not more than—me, he uses his ability only for other people, so he doesn't like people like me. From his perspective, I must be the strange one.

Anyway, in contrast to him, I live for myself. Not only do I think it's natural to use my powers for money, but I'm a sadist like my garbage parents, so my methods of "exorcism" are fairly crude.

The problem is that my opponent this time around is human.

The young man who calls himself Jan is most likely another outlier among outliers.

He's the real deal. He suppressed my consciousness and moved me as he wished. I wasn't able to resist at all.

Even though I have to face him and his dreadful powers, I'm unable to harm other people at present.

It was over twenty years ago. I broke my "mom's" arm. That's my last memory of hurting someone with my unique powers.

I've spent the last two decades keeping myself from attacking other people with this ability. My wishes become reality. That's why I mustn't use it.

But that will mean I won't be able to take Emi Shimamoto back from Jan.

Emi is the first person I've truly wanted to save from the bottom of my heart.

That's not only because of her brother.

She resembles me. Left the way she is, she'll become garbage, and garbage must not be allowed to multiply.

And to rescue her, I have to deal with Jan. I've already tried nonviolence. The only option left is—

Assuming I can kill him. If I can kill a human.

Right now, I'm weak. I have people who are important to me.

I'm not confident I'll be able to return to my primal self—the spawn of garbage and garbage, a beast who isn't fully human. I don't have the strength to confront myself.

"Face your adversary seriously."

Yes. Everything Monobe says is always right. I must face him properly.

I visualize the profane and ramshackle closet palace that reeked of decay.

In the palace, I am omnipotent, like the god Jan believes in. Only in the palace.

I am the queen of the closet.

† † †

The week after Aoyama and Rumi returned to Tokyo was hectic.

The instant they got back, Rumi ran off, saying she had research to do. Aoyama had barely had an opportunity to speak to her since.

On his part, Aoyama was swamped with work for his family. He wasn't yet an associate pastor, but no qualifications were necessary to help prepare for the kids' events for Advent.

He set aside the matter of Jan and Emi for the time being and threw everything he had into doing chores at home.

At the moment, he was pausing to take a break, with his sister scolding him, "This amount of work is nothing. You're only exhausted because you don't do anything normally." He found himself walking to the reception room, but this time, he understood.

His grandfather wouldn't be there. He was going only to bask in the memories.

The reception room was warm as usual. It possessed a mysterious air that made its audience feel solemn. A simple chair was set up facing a wooden lattice. Usually, it's Catholic priests who receive confessions, but Aoyama's grandfather used to sit on the other side of the lattice and listen to the sufferers' woes.

When he stepped closer, he saw that dust had accumulated on the frame of the lattice.

Even though it wasn't as often as his grandfather had, his father now used this room. Its current state was unhygienic.

Just as Aoyama was about to remove the lattice to clean the whole thing, he heard a man's voice from the other side.

"Father, hear my prayer."

Callers were normally supposed to make an appointment before they visited. At the very least, they would have rung the bell. Aoyama's family couldn't receive guests at all times of day. That being said, the front door of the church was indeed open. The man's voice was tense. He seemed to be at a breaking point. Whatever he needed was most likely urgent, and he had gone into the first place he had seen.

"I'm not a priest. There aren't any priests here…," Aoyama said. "But you seem to be in trouble. I'll call the minister. Please wait."

He stepped toward the door.

"Wait."

Thin white fingers protruded from the lattice. "Kouki, hear my prayer."

A chill spread from his back to his whole body.

Clunk! The lattice shook. Three fingers were shaking it.

Aoyama had to run. He had to, but his legs seemed rooted to the ground. He could neither advance nor retreat.

"Kouki, why won't you come here?"

A mournful voice.

Shaking was too simple a word. Two hands grabbed the corners of the lattice, throwing it back and forth.

"Kouki, stop right now. Do what's right. The path you are walking

is the Serpent's path."

It was his grandfather's voice. The bony fingers violently rocking the lattice were unmistakably his grandfather's as well.

Tears streamed uncontrollably down Aoyama's face.

"Why are you crying? Do you still believe you're the only one who's right?"

The hands extended from the lattice and toppled the chair.

"Proffer the deer's head. Lick clean the water in the pot. Mana wells. Thus, he makes his preparations. Who are you to interfere?"

His grandfather's voice gradually became inflamed, until at last he was shouting, "Disobeying the son of man may be pardonable, but disobeying the Holy Spirit is not.

"You will be punished," the voice intoned.

Aoyama cracked up. He laughed louder than he ever had before, louder than he had thought he was capable of.

"Jan," Aoyama said. The hands that were even then trying to pull down the lattice froze in place. "Jan, why do you think I cried?" Aoyama reached out with his right hand and grabbed the bony fingers. "It's because my grandfather would never have said those things. He wouldn't judge others to be wrong or righteous."

The fingers squirmed frantically. Now it seemed like they were trying to escape. They dug their nails into Aoyama's palms, and pain shot through him. Even so, he was determined to hold on, and he brought his left hand to grip the fingers, too.

"I'll tell you why I cried. You're convinced that you're the son of God. To flaunt your knowledge, you quote the words of God without permission. And you take it upon yourself to exact punishment. These are proof that you understand neither God nor the Bible at all. It's infantile… It's laughable."

Aoyama squeezed the hands. "The only one who may punish and pardon is God. What you're doing is nothing more than mere violence. You're no different from a toddler throwing a tantrum over something you dislike. You couldn't possibly be the son of God!"

Squelch.

He felt a horrid sensation in his hands, like he was holding on to raw pork. When he opened them instinctively, he found that nothing

was there.

For a while, he stood in a daze. His heart pounded with his every breath.

That had been terrifying.

The voice…those hands… Jan had sent them. There was no mistake. It meant he could appear at any time, in any form he liked. Given that he had been able to mimic the appearance and voice of Aoyama's grandfather, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he could read all of Aoyama's thoughts. He could have been doing so at this very moment.

Driven by fury over the insult to his grandfather, Aoyama had managed to drive away Jan, but…had the other man felt like it, he could have easily killed Aoyama. The thought chilled him to the bone.

One more thing had caught his attention: Jan's words from earlier.

Proffer the head of a deer—a sacrifice, in other words—*lick clean the water in the pot*. Jan had been alluding to the exchange between the prophet Elijah and God in the Book of Kings, a book in the Old Testament that recounts the history of Israel and Judah. Elijah was a prophet from before the birth of Jesus Christ whose renown is on par with Moses. The name Elijah in Hebrew means "Yahweh is my God."

Elijah spent nearly his entire life fighting the believers of Hadad, the god of the region, and protecting Yahwism. It would stand to reason that he wouldn't appear in the New Testament after Jesus's birth, but time and again, he shows up in the New Testament's major stories. In Christianity, not Yahwism (the precursor to Judaism), Elijah's most important role is to herald the coming of the Messiah.

Up until that point, Jan had quoted only from the New Testament, which was primarily focused on Jesus and his disciples.

Like Rumi had said, it seemed Jan believed himself to be Jesus Christ, and his actions were driven by that conviction.

But this time, he had used Elijah's words.

Aoyama felt like he was on the verge of an important realization.

Was Jan really convinced he was Jesus Christ?

Moriya Foods.

Anathema.

The bizarre ritual Youta Shimamoto had participated in that resembled Suwa Grand Shrine's religious festivals.

Jan showed a particular interest in Emi Shimamoto. What was he planning to do with her—no, what was he using her for?

"Hey, how long are you going to rest for? Knock it off and get back to work already." His sister's voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

Right. First, he had to complete the tasks in front of him.

Aoyama followed his sister out of the room.

○

Three men look up at the sky.

The youngest calls himself Kagpha. He has a fistful of gold.

The middle-aged man calls himself Badadakharida. He carries an urn of frankincense. The air around him is fragrant.

The elderly man calls himself Badadilma. He is counting grains of sand, one by one, and he reeks of death.

The three peer up at the sky as one. They point and tell the others to look.

No one looks.

A large red eight-pointed star floats in the sky.

No one looks up.

They are afraid.

The three men part through the ignorant and insolent and enter the building. After a while, they return with arms full of blessings. They are wearing identical smiles of delight.

"He is our light," they intone and leave.

I return my eyes to the building. Standing there is an old couple, each considerate of the other. The two are terribly familiar.

They look at me. Tears spring to their eyes, and they smile.

Then they enter the building as well and return shortly, their arms

overflowing with blessings.

I look up at the sky.

It will not be long before the star is directly over the building.

I leap.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

That's right.

The door is open.

The woman with the giant head drags herself out on her thin arms.

She looks up at the sky.

The star shines, lighting up her cavernous eye sockets. Layer upon layer of tender flesh is squirming. Wonderful.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

Now. Now is the time.

I proclaim loudly, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."

The people finally look up. They raise their voices in exaltation, each in their own way. I hear them, and I sing.

Born from the woman's eyes is a ball of wiggling flesh. She expires, and the dogs swarm Him instead. This is the way her life ends, but nevertheless, she is blessed.

He is the light that illuminates all.

He is blessed by all.

Memoriam. Eternal slumber. Thermal insulation.

He is our glory.

○

The man was recognizable even from afar.

A toned physique complemented by bronzed skin. A small face. Looks that could put a model to shame.

It made perfect sense why he had been popular in college with the entire female student body, crossing year and major lines, Aoyama thought.

Youta Shimamoto seemed to notice Aoyama walking with Rumi

and approached them. He had been lying in wait for them in front of the office.

"Mr. Shimamoto," Rumi started to say.

Youta cut her off, saying loudly, "How long are you going to make me wait?"

Aoyama froze. Since the office was on a backstreet, there was little pedestrian traffic, but the few people around were all glancing their way.

"Calm down, Mr. Shimamoto," Rumi said.

"How could I possibly calm down?" he retorted.

They managed to rein him in and lead him up to the office.

Youta dropped onto the sofa with a *thump* and reclined with his legs outstretched. "Well? How long do I have to wait?"

"I told you the case was tricky. It's written in the contract that it may take time. I warned you verbally about this as well."

Youta slammed his fist loudly on the coffee table, overturning the teacup. "I don't believe you at all. I said it might have to do with the paranormal, but you were the one who spouted nonsense about spirits or whatever, no?"

Rumi gazed at him, saying nothing. Her attitude must have hit a nerve. He grew even more agitated and said insistently, "I dished out a ton of money. Maybe I should sue you for fraud."

She wasn't the least bit intimidated. "Why don't you try?" She looked directly at him and said, "According to you, we're spiritual quacks, right? Go ahead and sue. If you can, that is."

Youta furrowed his brows; a slight wrinkle appeared on his handsome face, and then he relented. He changed his tune and said, as if he were soothing a baby, "There's no need to take me so seriously. I'm not threatening you. I'm just worried about Emi. Worried sick. How do I take her back from that abnormal organization?"

"Abnormal?" Rumi cracked up. She laughed like there was a joke so funny she couldn't help herself. "Who's the abnormal one here?" she asked.

Youta's large eyes opened wider. A smile was pasted on his face, but the corners of his mouth were twitching.

“Come on. Tell me. Who’s abnormal? Is it not abnormal for a brother to keep round-the-clock surveillance on his sister in both their hometown and Tokyo?”

“Where’s your proof?”

“The glass rabbits,” Rumi said coldly.

Aoyama sifted through his memories of Emi’s apartment, which he had visited with Rumi. The guard had been careless. When Rumi had told him, “Her brother asked us to come,” he gave them a spare key without even having them show written proof.

When they opened the door, they saw Emi’s belongings strewn about the room like someone had demolished it. Glittering shards covered the floor.

Rumi picked one up and sighed. “This is something else.”

Aoyama nodded without saying anything.

They quickly figured out that the glass shards were fragments of a broken rabbit figurine. That was because the same figurines—glass with black eyes—were by the bed, on the kitchen shelves, and in a bunch of other places in the room

“Emi seems like…a bit of a hoarder,” Aoyama said.

“That probably isn’t true.” Rumi picked up a rabbit on the desk and pried at the eye with a hairpin. She broke the thin glass around the eye, and a small black object fell out.

Aoyama was stunned. “What the…?”

Rumi merely gave him a sidelong glance and put the object into her fanny pack.

Back in the present, she dumped all the pieces of the figurines she had collected in front of Shimamoto.

“These are surveillance cameras, right? I’m impressed you managed to procure so many.”

A wheeze escaped Youta’s lips. He was sweating profusely.

“Shall I call you Abraham?”

“I’m only worried for my sister… Isn’t it normal to worry?”

“They were in the bathroom and by the bath, too, the rabbits.”

The coffee table toppled over with a bang. Youta had leaped to his feet, knocking the table over in the process. “You don’t have proof it was me.”

Youta could no longer maintain his smile. He looked down at Rumi with a warped expression on his face.

This is what it means to show your true colors, Aoyama thought.

Rumi's comparison of Youta to Abraham was, in a sense, appropriate. Abraham appears in the Old Testament and is known as the patriarch of the Abrahamic religions. Some interpretations claim that his wife Sarah was actually his younger half-sister. Of course, the moral standards from the time of the Old Testament differ greatly from that of modern-day Japan.

Aoyama felt a deep contempt for Youta, so no matter how furious the other man was, he felt no fear. There was only revulsion. However, in case Youta resorted to violence, Aoyama picked up a metal tray so he could be prepared to defend Rumi at any time.

"Yes, this isn't concrete proof," Rumi said. "Not by itself, at least." She smiled wickedly. "But combined with your texts and call records? I wonder."

On Rumi's cue, Aoyama passed her the documents. She flipped through the pages and showed them to Youta.

"Have you no respect for privacy?" Youta demanded.

"Who are you to talk about privacy?" Rumi righted the coffee table. "Now then, shall we talk about Yamaike?"

"Who the hell is that?" he yelled without pause.

"Ryuusei Yamaike. Your friend. He looked after Emi, it seems. Tragically, he died in a car accident right before she graduated… My condolences. You were also injured in the accident, and you were the one who reported it, yes?"

Youta laughed, loud enough to hurt one's ears. He was no longer trying to hide his vulgarity. "I see. You really did your research. About me, that is. But unfortunately, you're wrong. He was certainly my friend, but he was run over by a truck in front of me. That's all that happened."

He sat down and moved forward until he was knee to knee with Rumi. "Sasaki, you're the lowest of the low. To hide the fact that you're a fraud, you would exploit even the story of my deceased friend. It's like you think I killed him."

"Yes, that's right. You didn't kill him. It was the truck driver.

However, you turned on the high beams and signaled Yamaike to get into your car."

Light diffraction. It refers to when a pedestrian appears to vanish between the headlights of one's vehicle and an oncoming car. It happens particularly often on rainy nights and is difficult for drivers to prevent. At least, not by design.

"It was raining that day," Rumi said.

"That means nothing!"

Youta grabbed Rumi's collar. Aoyama rushed in to help, but Rumi waved him off.

"Yes, it is just a supposition. I have no evidence. But do you have any proof that I'm a fraud? Do you want to fight? Speculation versus speculation, until one side falls apart." She slapped away Youta's hand. "I'll say it again. If you can sue, then sue. But no matter what happens, I'll do my job. I'll bring Emi back to this world, as you requested. Surely, we can agree on that."

Shimamoto held his fist up awkwardly for a moment longer and then dropped it on his knee. "Don't mess with me, hag," he spat in a low voice, but his air of superiority from earlier was gone.

"Mr. Shimamoto." Aoyama stepped between him and Rumi. "Apologize to Rumi. You threatened and insulted her… I can't let that slide. Is it because she's a woman, because she seems weaker than you?"

Youta clicked his teeth and glared at Aoyama. The next instant, he rose to his feet. "I don't know about you, but women are terrifying. They're sly and annoying and lie at the drop of a hat. But the moment they're in danger, they hide behind a man and play the victim. They're incorrigible. Hopelessly weak."

"If you won't apologize, then get out of here," Aoyama said, meeting the other man's eyes. He was no longer disgusted, just astounded. He had never met anyone, man or woman, who would boldly proclaim such childish and embarrassing things.

Youta glared at Aoyama, but after seeing the look of utter resignation on Aoyama's face, he violently shoved his way past him, kicked open the door, and left.

From the large window in the office, Aoyama watched until Youta

disappeared into the crowd. He heaved a sigh.

"Sorry. This kind of situation is tough for you, right?" Rumi said.

"There's nothing you need to apologize for," Aoyama said. "In fact, I should thank you."

Confronted by Youta, who was solidly built, Rumi hadn't backed down an inch. She had kept her cool and forced him to retreat using only her words.

Aoyama's only regret was that he hadn't been able to make Youta apologize and reflect. He turned over what Youta had said in his mind, growing upset as he did.

"How do I put this? He's good-looking, but he's rotten on the inside. The fact that he…has incestuous feelings toward Emi… That shocked me."

"Thank goodness he was even more of an idiot than I thought. My supposition was nothing more than a bluff."

They didn't have Youta's call records or texts. All they had found were the surveillance cameras. Yet even without the records, Rumi had figured out what was going on right away.

"What did you think about Emi?" She paused, then said, "…Ah, you're not the type to comment on women's appearances. I won't beat around the bush, then. What did you think of her appearance?"

"I mean…I thought she was *gorgeous*."

Emi Shimamoto was undoubtedly a beauty. Unlike her brother, she didn't draw attention to herself, but she stood out all the same. Huddled next to Jan in her pure-white clothing, she looked like an angel.

"Despite her looks, her self-esteem is at rock bottom… At first, I suspected abuse," Rumi said. "However, according to the locals, her parents seemed to adore her." She looked at the ceiling. "She was well-known for her ability to see spirits, too. And her parents poured both money and time into finding mediums who could rid her of her power. Not that they found any worth their salt. Anyone who would take on an impossible request like erasing someone's spiritual powers is bound to be a phony. She used to be teased in elementary school, but she had good friends, too, and her school life was normal."

"Then why…?"

"I talked to her close friend about this. Well, they were only close until third grade, to be precise."

Rumi took out a voice recorder and hit the play button.

Emi was really nice.

Do you know the Pretty Cure *series? Yeah, there's a lot of different iterations, but the one that was playing then was* PreCure 5*. I was Cure Rouge, and Emi was Cure Dream. Our parents wouldn't buy us the toys, so we made them ourselves to play with.*

Let me think… She said she could see…ghosts. A woman covered in blood, a man with a crushed head, things that I couldn't see. It was scary. But I cried once and told her I was scared. After that, she never said anything again. She used to stare at places where there wasn't anything. She was clearly terrified, but…even when I asked, she'd say it was nothing. She really was a nice girl.

I wanted to stay friends with her, too, but it didn't work out. Her brother is bad news. You're not going to tell anyone, right? It's okay, right?

I…I was coming home from the pool one day. Emi and I were hanging out like usual. When we split up, we said "Bye" and "See you tomorrow"… Then on my way home, I saw Emi's brother walking toward me. I had gone to her house before, so I knew who he was.

He was kind and handsome. I remember saying I wanted an older brother, too… Looking back on it, he was only kind to Emi… Anyway, I thought it would be weird to ignore him, so I said hi.

But even though he had noticed me, he didn't respond. I called out to him again, but he only smiled. That smile was…horrifying.

I have to run*, I thought, so I ran away as fast as I could, even though it was away from my house. But he quickly caught me and dragged me to a rest stop along the road. We were in the boonies… There was no one around to see. He took off my clothes, one by one, and took a bunch of photos.*

He told me not to worry, that he didn't have any perverse intentions. I was just a kid, but I knew he was telling the truth. I still think so. You know how little boys rip the legs off bugs for fun? It was the same for him. To him, I was just a bug.

"Don't talk to Emi anymore," he warned me. "If you break your promise, I'll spread these photos."

All I could do was nod. I went home. Even when I closed my eyes, I could still see his face. I was so scared. So scared…

The next day, Emi came to pick me up before school like always… But I ignored her. Her brother was standing behind her, grinning. He was making the same frightening face as before.

I felt like a bug. He could squash me in an instant. That's what I thought.

After that, whenever Emi talked to me, I ignored her.

She was cute, so she made new friends right away, but…before long, she ended up alone again. Those friends probably went through the same thing I did. Even after we started middle school, I couldn't help her when she was picked on.

I felt bad for her, but whenever I imagined her brother's face, I lost all will to talk to her, I'm sorry to say.

I didn't feel like I was living until he graduated high school and went to Tokyo. Our town was tiny, so Emi and I would pass each other all the time. When our eyes met, she would always wave at me.

Emi's mom and dad are good people, so it hurt to ignore her. How could they give birth to someone like him…?

I think his world consisted of Emi and himself alone. Everyone else was a bug.

Emi lives in Tokyo, right? He…isn't doing anything weird to her, is he? I'm worried. I want to apologize. Emi—

Rumi hit the pause button. "There's no point listening any further."

Aoyama figured the rest was just the "close friend" making excuses.

"Anyway, that's the way it was," Rumi said. "Youta might have gone to university in Tokyo because he was an excellent student, but I bet it was also so that he could control Emi somewhere away from their parents."

Aoyama nodded. "But it's still astonishing. What he did to Yamaike…"

"That was all a bluff. I saw a post by one of Youta's former classmates that was about the anniversary of Yamaike's death, and Youta had commented on it. I looked into it… That was all. All I found out for sure was Yamaike's full name and that it had been raining the day he died. I didn't want to be right, but my guess was spot-on."

Rumi stretched her arms out long. "We lost time because of him. We have to finish our original objective." She jumped to her feet and grinned. "Let's go check our answers."

† † †

■■■■■■ was born into an organization called the Church of the Octagram, which espoused the resurrection of Iēsoûs Khrīstós and the redemption of mankind's sins.

■■■■■■'s father was the head and was already sixty when ■■■■■■ was born. His mother represented the women's group and was in her forties.

The Church of the Octagram was small but rigorously coordinated. Everyone lived together and shared clothing and daily necessities. Anything they wanted was discussed as a group before purchase. There were members with medical licenses as well, so illness was seldom a cause for concern.

Their holy text comprised the Old and New Testaments translated by ■■■■■■'s father, who was a priest. The children who belonged to the church, including ■■■■■■, were only allowed to read the Bible before elementary school. TV, books, manga, video games, and the internet were forbidden as a rule, but other forms of entertainment were allowed.

■■■■■■ studied hard so as not to embarrass his parents. Every day, he would make clay figures of God and the personages

who appeared in the Bible. His parents were delighted when he showed the figures to them, so he continued to make them day after day, until the halls were overflowing with them.

There was no doubt that ■■■■■■ grew up loved by his parents. He entered elementary school.

Some of the church's children struggled with their alienation from society's norms. Among them were children who didn't go to school but instead chose to be taught by the adult members. (Some were teachers at cram schools. Upon reflection, it was an unusually educated group.) Others were exposed to the outside world's knowledge and became *diabolos*.

It was difficult to rehabilitate the *diabolos*. As a child, ■■■■■■ never saw what happened directly, but judging from the state of the brothers and sisters after they received rehabilitation, he could tell it was a sublime process.

Compared with the others, ■■■■■■ was more adaptable. In addition, he had a stronger conviction in the Lord than anyone. Those with a strong faith would not be misled by the mistaken knowledge of the outside. ■■■■■■ had friends, if only a few, and he was on good terms with his teachers.

Only one thing had shocked him at school. The adults didn't have sexual intercourse. In the Church of the Octagram, they followed the teachings of the Lord: Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth. The adults (and in some cases, the children as well) proactively had sex whenever they could.

■■■■■■ asked his third-grade homeroom teacher, Ms. Ishikawa, "Why don't you or the other teachers have sex?"

He would never forget her expression. She was momentarily speechless, but then she took ■■■■■■ to an empty classroom.

She gave him several romance novels and said, her eyes damp, "These are written for adults, but I know you're a smart kid. It would make me happy if you could read them and come to

understand them in your own time."

Once the children of the church entered elementary school, they were permitted to read books from the outside (after mandatory inspection by the adults). There were limitations, but the books his teacher lent him were lauded works of high literature, so he was able to get permission. He read three in one day.

Consequently, he came to understand what she had been trying to tell him.

In the outside world, men and women built a relationship over a long period of time and had sex only after they came to a mutual understanding. The brothers and sisters of the church lived together, so everyone knew everyone inside and out. Even if the depth of the relationship wasn't a problem, apparently, in the outside world, it was considered barbaric to have sex without considering the time or place. It was a value from the outside world, but [redacted] agreed with it. He thought his brothers and sisters were like dogs when they were in the middle of intercourse, even though he knew they were only following the Lord's teachings and sex was a perfectly rational action.

Of course, his faith in the Lord never wavered, nor did he doubt his brothers and sisters who adhered to the Lord's words. The following day, he returned the books to Ms. Ishikawa.

"I get it now. You only do things like that when you're alone with the person you love," he said.

She seemed satisfied with his answer. She was kind as well as clever, so she neither contacted his parents nor made the incident a big deal. She merely told him, "Talk to me if you need anything."

Later, [redacted] wondered how she was doing. In sixth grade, she had died during [redacted]'s Inquisition, unable to withstand it. Since then, she had always been on his mind.

She'd refused to accept the Lord's existence until the bitter end. She was a heretic, so she wouldn't have been able to go to heaven immediately, but those of sound heart and mind would end up in the right place.

At least, that was what he hoped for. The values from the outside world that she had introduced to him had sparked new insight. He was grateful to her.

He was able to realize why those who received the right teachings could sin.

His parents, brothers, and sisters—except for the ones who had become *diabolos*—were righteous. They read the Bible, eschewed the ego, helped one another, and believed in the Lord.

Yet righteous though they might be, many among his sisters suffered, including his mother, who represented the women's group.

His father was kind and righteous, but outside of services, ceremonies, and meals, his parents didn't have sex insofar as he could remember.

One of his sisters, who was around thirty and beautiful, declared one day that she had "seen the light," after which the children in the church took to calling her Mater. That was the reason behind his mother's incredible sadness.

Mater was always spirited and conducted herself like a queen. However, as light made darker the shadow, the number of his sisters with miserable expressions increased.

The followers had no rights to property (everyone on the earth was created by the Lord) and had to renounce their ego. Thus, the jealousy his mother felt toward Mater must not have been righteous, but besides that, it was an error for the sisters to be unhappy as well.

Additionally, some of the brothers would have intercourse with sisters who had just become adults, damaging the sisters' mental conditions. They weren't punished for their transgressions and would quickly repeat the same act with different sisters.

Such behavior was, without a doubt, a sin.

The Lord taught love for man, and love was connected to happiness. For the sisters to be unhappy meant they were going against the word of the Lord.

The solution to the dilemma lay in the inspiration he had gotten from Ms. Ishikawa, which was that to have sex without the consent of both parties was barbaric.

This was not a mistaken belief of outsiders but the truth.

In reality, when ■■■■■■ had been younger, his parents had been overflowing with love and affection, and all his brothers and sisters had worn joyous expressions. However, now the stench of misery and violence was always present.

To nurture the seed of inspiration, ■■■■■■ poured even more effort into his studies. In addition to the Church of the Octagram's holy text, he also read the scriptures of religions who worshipped the same god and even academic texts that were critical of such faiths. He gained a reputation in the organization for his brilliance, which belied his age, and was permitted to read almost any book for the sake of "future reference." Because he was still a child, there was much he didn't understand, but in those cases, he used the laptop in the library room to research further. Consequently, he became aware of numerous demons far more terrifying than those depicted in the Bible. That made him realize why the adults had restricted the use of the internet.

And even in the Old Testament, there were numerous examples of improper behavior from people who had received the Lord's teachings. They doubted and betrayed the Lord and sinned repeatedly.

The son of the Lord, Iēsoûs, took away those wrongs. He was the savior the Lord sent to man. Iēsoûs was crucified and died, taking on all of mankind's sins. The story was written in every text. However, even now, neither the Church of the Octagram's members nor anyone else seemed to have become righteous. ■■■■■■ didn't understand why.

■■■■■■ studied harder. He read the Bible over and over again.

In the midst of his readings, he discovered the difference between the church's holy text and the Bible. The realization changed his life.

It was the tale of Ioan, the Ascetic of Holy Ablution, he who

baptized Iēsoûs.

In the European texts said to have been passed down from the Lord, Ioan is called John, and he, like the Ioan whom [redacted] knew, baptized Iēsoûs. But that was where the texts diverged. In the common Bible, John parts with Iēsoûs. While preaching the word of the Lord, he falls victim to the scheme of a woman named Herodias and is beheaded. His head is brought out on a platter.

However, in the text of the Church of the Octagram, Ioan evangelizes with Iēsoûs and supports him as a servant.

It was difficult to imagine that Ioan, who respected Iēsoûs from the bottom of his heart, would choose of his own accord a different path, so [redacted] intuited that their parting must have been made up after the fact.

What interested [redacted] was Ioan's—or John's—origin.

○

John was born to a Jewish priest named Zacharias and his wife, Elisabeth. They followed the teachings of the Lord, but they were old and childless.

One day, Zacharias burned incense at the temple altar, and the angel Gabriel appeared. The angel faced the terrified Zacharias and said, "Fear not, Zacharias. Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. Many shall rejoice at his birth. Many shall have joy and gladness, and he shall be great in the sight of the Lord."

To which Zacharias answered, "Whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. We do not wish for a child."

Gabriel said, "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. Thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my

words."

Just like Gabriel proclaimed, Zacharias became mute and Elisabeth pregnant.

Elisabeth was related to Mary—Theotokos, or the Mother of God. When Elisabeth's belly had swelled to the point that anyone could tell, Mary paid her a visit. The moment Mary spoke, the baby in her stomach kicked.

The night of the full moon, Elisabeth gave birth to a son, as Gabriel had said. The people around them wanted to name the boy Zacharias after his father, but Elizabeth said, "Not so; but he shall be called John."

"There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name," the others said. "Zacharias, what sayst you?"

However, Zacharias could not speak. He wrote on a tablet in a clear hand, *His name is John*.

Suddenly, he could speak again, and he praised the Lord.

Everyone watching was filled with awe, and the story spread around the mountain region of Judaea.

"What manner of child shall this be?" they wondered. "What must the future hold for him?"

The people acknowledged John. It was clear to all that he was filled with the power of the Lord.

Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and declared to John, "Thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways. To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins."

○

Upon reading the verse, ■■■■■■ was struck by a thought that made his knees weak. The meaning of his own birth became instantly clear.

■■■■■■ was Ioan. He was John.

He understood why he had been born to an elderly father and mother.

He understood why the lives of the Church of the Octagram's members had fallen into disarray. It wasn't limited to the church, either. The smallest thing sparked man's hatred. People robbed, wronged, and killed one another. There was no peace on earth.

The perception that the teachings of the Bible were based on historical truths was, in and of itself, mistaken.

Presently, the world was devastated and crime ridden. It was an unpardonable, hopeless place that had not yet seen the birth of Iēsoûs.

Paradoxically, if Iēsoûs were never born, this sorrowful world would continue forever.

■■■■■■ *had been born to bring the advent of Iēsoûs.* His mission was to bless Iēsoûs and prepare his ways. By doing so, ■■■■■■ was to save the world.

Thus, ■■■■■■ named himself Jan, after John.

† † †

I had to wait until my bar mitzvah. Only after turning thirteen could one take on responsibilities in the eyes of the Church of the Octagram.

During the bar mitzvah, the child who is to join the ranks of the adults gets the opportunity to make a speech.

I poured everything I had into my studies, and on the day of the ceremony, I enlightened my brothers and sisters to my learnings.

At first, they were surprised, but understanding quickly came.

Mater, the embodiment of debauchery, also came to understand God's words, and she stopped behaving like a queen.

As per my suggestion, the church established service once a week, and Mater was given a job. When she gave comfort to the brothers, she was like a saint.

My mother and father regained their smiles.

My happiest discovery was the identity of the woman with the immense eye sockets. If I showed any signs that I had noticed her, she would come close and grab me tight enough to crush my head, wailing unintelligibly all the while. If I didn't react and ignored her, she would go back to hovering in the air, but since she was always by my side, she was extremely troublesome. However, after my bar mitzvah, everything changed.

That woman was Theotokos. Her vast eye sockets were vessels for the conception of Iēsoûs. She was only visible to those with a mission. No one else could see her but me—not my parents, not Mater, and not my brothers and sisters. I needed to get her to conceive Iēsoûs as quickly as possible.

"Theotokos," I called out to her.

She jerked and drew nearer, swinging her head violently left and right, up and down. She was howling with laughter. It was vulgar. It was impossible to see her as the Mother of God.

But just as I was an incomplete Ioan, she was incomplete as well.

Reflecting on this, I knelt before her and taught her how to behave as the Mother of God. She grasped my teachings right away.

Since only those with missions could sense her presence, I used her as a litmus test to gather companions.

Among them, Hidemitsu Moriya—I met him by chance when I was almost struck by his car—was a wonderful comrade. It pleased me that his name resembled the holy land of Moriah, but beyond that, he zealously helped me in my evangelical work. He represented a major food company. With his assistance, I was able to enlighten many more people. Companions they were not, but they became righteous and suitable for the peaceful world that Iēsoûs's birth would bring about.

There were several others who could see Theotokos the way Moriya did, but I met no one who could hear her voice.

Besides, though she was visible to them, they didn't perceive her as keenly as I did. Some described her as a black clump, some a sludge-like liquid, and some a swarm of insects. Only three people felt her presence as strongly as I. It was then I realized they had

been born with the mission of the three wise men, who, in the Bible, observed the star that heralded Iēsoûs's birth before anyone else. Like the biblical figures, they were able to identify the worthy fruit from those who came to Moriya Foods.

Of course, Moriya perceived Theotokos the most clearly—he even knew where her head was—but he already had the critical task of administration. As Iēsoûs himself said, "One thing is needful."

In any case, the only ones who knew that Mary was the Mother of God were Elisabeth's son, John (or Ioan), and the angel Gabriel, who came to deliver the word of God.

In other words, if there was anyone else who could truly see her appearance and hear her voice, as I could, they wouldn't be a companion but an angel, a being who was far beyond the likes of me.

After that, in addition to preparing for Iēsoûs's birth, I began to search for Gabriel, too. Unless Gabriel announced to the Mother of God that she would have a son, Iēsoûs could never be born. I was ashamed to not have realized such a simple thing.

I told the Mother of God how to respond to Gabriel when she met him. Thus it was written in the Bible: *Sit mihi.* Be it unto me according to thy word.

Unfortunately, she was an incomplete version of the Holy Mother, and she quoted the phrase to everyone. Since no one could hear her anyway, it was pardonable.

In the end, it took me five years to find Gabriel.

When I first laid eyes on Emi Shimamoto, Gabriel incarnate, she seemed to glow with a divine light.

Many lost lambs of light—though they could not compare to the Holy Mother—trailed in her wake until she reached the entrance of the Moriya building. Sadly, the moment she set foot inside, they were dispelled by the Holy Mother.

My premonition had been correct.

There was no doubt she could see the Holy Mother. She could even hear the Mother's voice, a feat no one else had managed. Though she was bewildered and shaking with fright, that was only because she had yet to realize her mission.

Despite her beauty and noble bearing, she lacked confidence. I came to understand that she had been cursed, dirtied by a *diabolo*.

My heart ached to see her behave so. I hadn't thought the world had become so filthy. There was no time. I had to bring about Iēsoûs as soon as possible.

I had rid Emi of her unease so that she may become the true Gabriel.

To welcome the salvation that was to come.

To rectify the world.

I devoted my entire self to the cause. It worked. She saw the dreams of prophecy, divined her mission, and announced, if fearfully, to the Holy Mother her conception.

A little more. Only a little more till thou wilt be born.

"Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν. Ego emi ho on."

While listening to Christmas carols written by sinners, I whisper the words of God.



Chapter 5: *Bautismo*

◆ ◆ ◆

The taxi jolted and shuddered along the road. Aoyama got carsick easily, and he kept feeling like he was going to throw up. The taxi should have been taking the same road as before. Did they have a worse driver this time?

As the taxi drove alongside the ocean, he couldn't help but think back to the freezing water and the cursed words (though they were originally meant to be a blessing), which only made him feel more nauseated.

Rumi sat facing forward, her expression strangely serene. She didn't seem to be conscious of Aoyama or the taxi driver, let alone the scenery. Aoyama had tried to ask about her minor misgiving—whether Jan was mimicking Jesus Christ—but her replies had been vague. Maybe it was already too late, seeing as they were already en route to enemy territory. However— Al of a sudden, the taxi braked and jerked to a stop. The side of Aoyama's head slammed into the window, and he groaned. He felt a stomach-churning nausea. He clamped his hand over his mouth and just barely managed to keep down the contents of his stomach.

"Haven't we gone far enough?" the driver said rapidly. "I don't think there's anywhere to go." He turned his head nearly 180 degrees to face them. His black eyes were staring in the wrong direction. Spit dribbled out of the corner of his mouth. "There's

nothing here. You'll only be a nuisance."

"I see. It's already started," Rumi said. She touched her hand to the driver's forehead. "How kind. You stopped the car when you could have easily killed us all instead."

A low moan came escaped the driver's lips. Immediately after, all the energy seemed to drain from him, and his eyelids drooped closed.

Rumi pushed the door lock button and got out of the car. She dragged the driver out from his seat. Aoyama got out, too, and checked his pulse. He was only asleep.

The two of them worked together to lay the man in the back seat. Rumi climbed into the driver's seat, and Aoyama got in next to her.

"This must be Jan's work… It's shocking he can do this when we're still two miles away," Aoyama said, staring at the mountain where the facility was. It was visible off in the distance. "I won't say we should go back, but I've had an awful feeling about this the entire time."

"That's to be expected. But I'm relieved. Jan thinks of us as nothing more than insects buzzing around him. He's watching us, of course, but he doesn't see us as a threat. It doesn't seem like he's going to kill us."

Rumi started the car; Aoyama scrambled to fasten his seatbelt.

"I'm prepared to do anything," she said.

As they got closer, Aoyama's discomfort increased. The driver hadn't been unskilled after all. It was the sickening air that pervaded the area as a whole that was making him nauseated. He gripped the rosary in his pocket. He would not approve of a thug who selfishly used God's words to manipulate others.

Emi Shimamoto was an archetypal victim of grooming. In modern day, the term *toxic parent* was used to refer to parents who obstructed the growth of their own child—though in her case, it was her brother—and she had been raised by a toxic person. Unfortunately, such children were often poor at communicating with others, which became a source of friction in their life, and they fell prey to other abusers even after separating from their toxic

guardian.

Jan wouldn't physically injure her and didn't seem to desire her sexually, like her brother did. However, after hearing Rumi's story, Aoyama was convinced Emi had merely become an outlet for one of Jan's other desires.

"We're close," Rumi said.

Aoyama started getting ready. They didn't stop at the parking space at the foot of the hill like the last time. Instead, they quickly accelerated up the slope.

"What's wrong, Rumi?" he asked.

"Sorry to the driver, but we have no choice. We've got to hurry," she said. "Can't you feel it?"

Aoyama looked out the window, pressing a hand to his throbbing head.

It was the middle of the day, but outside, there was no hint of sun. It looked like it was the middle of the night.

There was one more thing.

"It stinks," he said.

The foul stench of soiled river water wafted in the air.

Without responding, Rumi pushed the accelerator.

† † †

Aoyama and Rumi walked through the lily garden and opened the facility door, only to come across a crowd of people in white clothing prostrating themselves.

"What…?" Aoyama muttered.

"We don't have time for this nonsense. Let's go," Rumi said.

She continued onward, stepping on the people calmly. He joined her, apologizing in his mind.

The throng grew dense around one particular room. Inside was a shocking tableau.

A tower made of logs. Deer. Rabbit. Bird. Fish. Frog. Their bodies were skewered and arranged around the tower.

Aoyama covered his nose. Otherwise, the stench would have

been too much for him to handle. It was coming not from the carcasses but from the tower. He looked up at the structure's peak. A boy who looked like he was still in elementary school was bound to the top. He seemed listless, and despite the great height, he wasn't crying.

"Cock-a-kroh."

Aoyama heard a whisper in his ear, but when he turned around, there was no one there.

"Cock-aaa-kroooh."

This time, the voice came from in front of him, but all he could see was rotting rabbits dotting the room.

"Cock-a-cock-aaa-kroooh!"

The roar reverberated in the air.

Rumi snapped into action.

She dashed furiously around the hall, knocking over the impaled deer heads. She mowed down a man dressed in white who had been in Aoyama's blind spot. The man toppled to the ground. Aoyama heard the sound of something hard falling to the floor. When he looked, he saw a bow and arrows.

Chills ran down his spine. If Rumi hadn't stopped him, the man would have shot the boy.

"Ah, you did me a favor. Thank you," a soft voice said. Jan had appeared out of nowhere. Emi was beside him. "Worthy fruit has not been born, it seems. Your grandfather must be disappointed as well."

Aoyama's blood boiled in rage. He forgot about the stench and got ready to lash out. Before he could, however, Rumi slapped Jan hard on the cheek.

The crisp sound echoed throughout the room. Jan fell.

"Shut up," Rumi said, glaring at the man.

He didn't cower in fear. He merely smiled back at her from where he was on the ground. Emi was smiling faintly, too, as if in agreement.

"You are blessed." Jan stood. He lifted his index, middle, and ring fingers. "May the blessings of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be upon you."

The next thing he knew, Aoyama was on the floor. His body was heavy. There was no chance of him standing up. Nevertheless, he strained his neck and wrenched his torso up. He glanced at Rumi. Even under the immense pressure, she was standing tall.

"You are no doubt the Lord's subjects. However, I am unable to attend to you right now. Please pardon my rudeness. You are not my brother or sister, but…I am happy to share this exalted moment with you."

Emi stepped forward nervously and raised both hands to the sky. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."

The floor rumbled. The animal carcasses fell over, raising dust into the air. Aoyama breathed in the particles and choked. The taste of iron filled his mouth.

The dust got into his eyes. Tears flowed uncontrollably down his face. On the other side of the haze, he saw a giant shadow, the color of all-consuming darkness. It was the source of the odor and was jerking wildly.

"I see. This is the Hollow-Eyed Woman," Rumi said mockingly. "You really are immature through and through, Haruki."

Suddenly, the pressure that was crushing Aoyama's insides dissipated. He scrambled to his feet. The weight might have disappeared, but the shadow still loomed large.

He felt a piercing coldness. Jan's eyes were wide open and fixed on Rumi.

She laughed loudly. "Did I surprise you? Did you think you were the only one who could spy on others as you like, Haruki Kashiwagi? It's because you rely on such childish illusions that you fall prey to hubris."

"Illusions…?" Jan muttered. He raised his three fingers again. "*Ἐγώ—*"

"*Ego emi ho on*, is it?" Aoyama chanted before Jan could finish. "In the words of God the Father, 'I am the one who is.' That's not a phrase people should throw out carelessly. It's the fundamental of all fundamentals written in the Bible. This isn't a matter of learning. You won't even follow the basic rules. As someone who believes in the

same God, I pity and weep for you. Who are you to pass judgment on others?

"I see. You didn't expect this. Every man to his trade, they say." Rumi's tone was back to normal. She laughed melodramatically.

After her bout of laughter, she faced Jan, who had gone still, and said, "I pity you, Haruki Kashiwagi. I read the whole thing for your sake. The Church of the Octagram? That's the name of the patchwork religion you created? I'm sure you read the books of many new religious movements."

She threw a book on the floor. THE HOLY SCRIPTURES OF THE CHURCH OF THE OCTAGRAM was written on the cover.

"It was like an adventure story written by a middle schooler. A fun read. The action-packed journey of Iēsoûs and Ioan. A world where all outsiders had been eliminated. A gentle world for the two of them alone. This is what you dream of, right? Someone who understands you. Someone who is your equal. You didn't have anyone around you who treated you as an equal. Isn't that partially your own fault, though? But as someone who also didn't have a good upbringing, I sympathize with you."

Rumi walked up to Jan and planted herself square in front of him. "So? What will you do next, you poor little wannabe Jesus?"

The floor shook again. It was a stronger quake than before. Aoyama staggered, and Rumi steadied him. Before he could say thanks, he became aware of laughter resonating with the rumbling in the ground.

Yes, Jan was laughing. It wasn't a polite chuckle as befitting the smile he always wore. Instead, he was guffawing with his mouth wide and head thrown back. "Thank you so much," he said, grinning creepily. "It was a terribly fascinating thought experiment. But all of it is wrong! Me? Iēsoûs? Unthinkable! I'm not even worthy of untying the laces on his shoes!"

The black patch was spreading.

Aoyama couldn't even see his own fingertips.

There was a red light in the distance.

"Let us pray."

That was the last thing he heard.

☆ ☆ ☆

Jan's—Haruki Kashiwagi's—ceremony was based on the binding of Isaac.

Isaac was the only son of Abraham, a figure in the Old Testament, and Abraham's wife Sarah, who had him late in life. God commanded Abraham and Sarah to sacrifice Isaac, and though they were conflicted, they abided by his word. Just as Abraham was about to slit his son's throat, God stopped him, recognizing that his faith was true.

What was surprising was that the event closely resembled a ritual performed at Suwa Grand Shrine during the Ontou Festival. During the ceremony, an eight-year-old boy is tied to a pillar and a priest mimes stabbing him with a dagger. Then a second priest rides in on a horse and stops the sacrifice. There the ritual ends.

Not only was Jan's ritual nearly identical, but he even used the rooster call. I didn't know which god Jan believed in.

Even after I had established that Christianity was the root of his faith, some things were unclear to me.

But I had figured it would work out in the end. I was naive.

He was many times more powerful than me. I had known to be on my guard. It was my fault things ended up this way. I was too soft. I sympathized with him.

He, like me, had been born with a strange power. He, like me, was the garbage progeny of garbage parents.

What was more pitiful was that he wasn't even aware of his own powers.

He believed that because of his steadfast faith, his god heard his prayers. He was under the misconception that everything that happened was a miracle performed by his god.

I had thought of him as a poor child. Maybe there had even been a part of me that looked down on him. That was why I had thought that if I revealed the truth and dismantled his beliefs, he would stop

this biblical farce.

It backfired.

I had only managed to redouble his so-called faith.

All of this had been pointless. I had misjudged things.

Not only had I not been able to protect myself, but I hadn't protected Aoyama, either. He was different from us. He was kind, simple as that, and overflowing with love. He loved even trash like me.

Aoyama.

I sent my prayer out into the void.

Aoyama.

I called his name over and over again.

Even as I shouted for him in vain, I felt my consciousness being sucked away.

The Hollow-Eyed Woman, whom Jan likened to the Virgin Mary, was swallowing me whole, killing me.

It was likely nothing more than an evil spirit. It was so disgusting I could puke. Its eyes were empty like caves. Its other parts were an afterthought. A mere spirit it was, and yet it viciously and obediently swallowed me up. That was no doubt a boon of his "faith."

Aoyama.

I screamed, dredging up the last of my energy.

After that, I was—

I heard a sigh in my ear.

I thought it was my imagination, but I was wrong.

My hand was folded up in a larger one.

Color flooded back into my vision.

I saw light.

A light that was pure and white, so unlike the light the Hollow-Eyed Woman emitted.

The glow spread over my entire body from my fingertips.

I could see clearly again.

I was standing, propped up by Aoyama. He was holding my hand in his.

His pale eyes were focused on me.

"You don't listen, do you, woman?" he said, tightening his grip.

This wasn't Aoyama.

Aoyama didn't talk like that. He was—

"I can't do a thing myself. I know you're tired, but gimme a hand."

His appearance, his voice, even the butter-like scent of his body was Aoyama's. Yet he wasn't Aoyama. Monobe was borrowing and speaking through his body.

In the hand he was holding, I could feel something other than the softness of skin, something hard. It was probably the glass bead.

I realized anew how brilliant the man was. I had thought the bead was just a talisman to protect Aoyama. That something so simple could have such a great effect— I shoved my relief into a corner of my mind.

The situation hadn't improved one bit. In fact, it had only worsened.

The darkness from the Hollow-Eyed Woman was starting to suck in Jan, too. The wooden pillars in the tower had cracked, and several had fallen on the floor. It was creaking like it was about to fall down at any second.

Jan was laughing. It didn't seem like he was paying any attention to us anymore.

He was jubilantly chanting something unintelligible (though Aoyama might have made sense of it).

What was even more horrifying was that Emi Shimamoto was still standing there. She had not been brainwashed by Jan's powers. She was just as strong as he was. She didn't understand anything about his faith or doctrine. Plus, she could clearly see the repulsive tableau we were a part of. And *still*, she was standing there, beside Jan, smiling weakly.

"Help…? How?" I asked, half in despair.

"Close your eyes," he whispered in my ear. "It will be there."

I did as I was told. And who should leap into my darkened vision but the mermaid princess.

She was laughing as always, her pearl-like teeth on display.

I grew frightened and opened my eyes.

I felt his hand tighten around mine. "I told you, didn't I? I force them to play by my rules."

My rules.

Inside my closet palace, everything happened according to my will.

I can play God.

When I closed my eyes again, the mermaid princess was gone.

This narrow, reeking, and dark box. That was right. The mermaid princess wasn't the one.

Here and here alone, Jan wasn't the one, either.

Here, I was the queen.

The queen of the closet.

I opened the closet door. "Haruki Kashiwagi," I screamed. "Come on in, Haruki Kashiwagi."

† † †

When I came to, I was in a dark room. The sweet stink of rotting fruit assaulted my nostrils.

The exaltation I had felt until a moment ago at the birth of our Lord quickly withered.

The place of Iēsoûs's birth was far from hygienic—there was no sugarcoating it. However, according to the prophecy, the earth was to quake with the army of angels and the joyful song of those inspired by his birth. His birthplace should have been lit with brilliant light.

It should not have been dark and smelly.

This place was not fitting for Iēsoûs, who was our glory.

But I soon reconsidered.

I was an incomplete Ioan. Thus, this was the last test posed to me by the Lord.

I was to find our savior in this lightless, filthy, and moist place.

Then the perfect kingdom of the righteous would, at last, become whole beneath his rule.

I crawled around, looking for Iēsoûs, but I couldn't find him

anywhere.

This room was cramped. I only had to move a little before I bumped into the end. Yet I couldn't see the four walls that should have demarcated the room. All around me was a deep darkness that seemed to extend endlessly.

I couldn't even stand. Here, my body fell prostrate naturally.

Our Lord. Iēsoûs. Where art thou?

I was a patient man. I had withstood the long years since my realization for the sake of Iēsoûs's birth. Nonetheless, even I could not bear the darkness in which I could not distinguish between earth and sky, let alone left and right.

I could feel the scrapes on my knees and palms.

At my limit, I called out, "Iēsoûs Khrīstós."

Something appeared in front of my eyes.

It was a throne.

The throne was built of cardboard and sloppily decorated.

Ornamented with cicada wings, construction paper, nails, crayons, banana peels, and the like.

Our long-awaited savior would not reign from such a dirty throne.

But what if that was what the Lord wished for?

The Lord had not saved Iēsoûs, not when a crown of thorns was placed on his head, not when he walked the Via Dolorosa to jeering and laughter, not when he was crucified, and not when Longinus stabbed his flank.

"Jan."

I heard my name and looked around.

"Jan."

I heard it again.

Someone was sitting on the throne.

The woman was clothed in rags with her hair outgrown. A woman who was in no way beautiful. *That* woman.

Rumi Sasaki. That was her name.

The woman who had belittled my faith, had made a mockery of it, and had flung it on the ground.

Why was she sitting on the throne prepared for Iēsoûs, for our savior?

“Step down from the throne,” I yelled without thinking. It was unforgivable. The only one who could sit on that throne was Iēsoûs.

“Why?” She looked down at me quizzically. “This is my palace.”

She extended her hand toward me. I rocked my body away to avoid her, but there was nowhere to run.

“Don’t be afraid.”

She placed her hand on my cheek. Somehow, I ended up clinging to her arm, like I had been sucked in.

“Sleep, Jan.”

My eyelids drooped. The warmth spread from my cheek to my core. It was hard to fight.

At that moment, I finally arrived at the truth.

The truth of who Iēsoûs was.

Iēsoûs was the son of God. Yet he took the form of a human and was born from a woman’s womb.

He was born in a barn crowded with livestock. He guided people, was betrayed by people, was defiled, and died taking on our sins.

He was neither beautiful nor divine. However, he loved unconditionally and served mankind.

He walked among the people.

I grew ashamed. The New Testament was correct. Like Rumi had said, THE HOLY SCRIPTURES OF THE CHURCH OF THE OCTAGRAM was nothing more than a childish adventure story.

Someone like me could never hope to surpass him. I could not become the eternal servant.

“Sleep.”

That was right. Rumi Sasaki could see the Mother of God.

Besides Gabriel and me, one other would recognize her for who she was.

“You are Iēsoûs,” I said.

Iēsoûs’s heat scorched away my sins.

Iēsoûs smiled.

Iēsoûs had come.

The world would now assume its proper form.

The world would be ruled peacefully by his hand.

My mission was over at last.

◆ ◆ ◆

"You're awake, Aoyama."

Hearing his name, Aoyama sat up. He took a breath in and choked. His throat hurt terribly like it had been cut. But there was no time to pay attention to the details. He quickly got to his feet.

"Where's Jan…?" he asked.

"It's faster for me to show you than explain," Rumi said. Then she switched tacks. "More importantly…thank you." She bowed.

Her words startled Aoyama, who didn't know what she was talking about. He stopped her. "Don't… I wasn't able to do anything this time, either…"

"No, you're always helping me out. Thanks," she said and hugged him.

His heart beat faster, and he blushed to the tips of his ears.

But before he could wrap his arms around her, she briskly straightened up and walked away.

The spectacle before them was as awful as it had been before.

Broken wood pieces lay everywhere, big enough to cause a life-threatening injury if they had fallen on someone. The tower had almost entirely collapsed. The wood at its core had been tightly packed together, so it had held its shape more or less.

Rumi and Aoyama walked to the door, weaving between the wood splinters and unidentifiable lumps of meat. As they neared the exit, a shadow flung itself at them.

It was Emi.

Her face was covered with dirt, and her white dress was in tatters.

Nevertheless, she was beautiful.

Her large eyes darted left and right. She glared at Rumi.

"Thank goodness you're okay, Emi," Rumi said. "Let's go back."

"No!" she cried, brandishing a wooden stake. Apparently, there was something in Aoyama and Rumi's path that she didn't want

them to see.

"He and I will be turning *that* over to the police," Rumi said.

At the other end of where she was pointing was Jan.

Buried in the debris, Jan was no longer menacing or intimidating. He was sleeping and sucking on his thumb, seeming far younger than nineteen.

"Emi," Rumi said again.

Even then, Emi refused to move out of the way. She spread her arms wide as if to protect him. "Why do people…? They're already so lucky, so why?! Why do they take everything from us? Leave us alone."

"Jan spoke words of succor to people who had hit rock bottom. He manipulated them as he pleased and used them as tools." Rumi took a step closer to Emi. "There are plenty of times in a person's life when things don't go well. Sometimes, people are swayed by the sweet nothings of bad actors and reach a point of no return. Do you think those people only get what they deserve? That it doesn't matter what happens to them?"

In the middle of her speech, it started to sound as if Rumi was trying to convince herself of this.

She continued. "There's no way that's true. There's no one in this world whose life doesn't matter. Jan must be properly punished."

"No!" Emi's scream was earsplitting. She shook her head wildly. "He saved me!" Her eyes filled with tears. She yelled at the top of her lungs, "He said I was beautiful! Precious! He protected me from people who made fun of me. He loved me."

"The way your brother did?"

"That man was no brother to me," Emi snapped. She folded Jan into her arms and hugged him tightly. "I knew he was weird. Day after day after day, he mocked me, but he still checked the color of my underwear and touched me and looked at me lasciviously. But what can I do? I'm hideous. I had to put up with it.

"That's what I thought, but I was wrong. Jan didn't do things like that. He told me I was pretty and that I had value! He said I didn't have to try to please the people who looked down on me! He was always, *always* so kind!"

"That's because you were convenient for him," Rumi said coldly. "You weren't brainwashed, so you must be aware of that, right? He was using real people as characters in a childish puppet show. Emi Shimamoto, the person, was worth nothing to him."

"No. No way. You're wrong."

"I'm not. That man is fundamentally the same as your brother. He set his sights on the weak, controlled them, and played them as he liked. There's nothing more to it."

Emi cut her off. "Enough already." Her voice was weak. Through tears, she said, "I want to live with him forever."

That was all.

Rumi stood frozen for a while. Aoyama watched her. He hadn't been able to help this time around, either. The final decision was not his to make.

After a minute, Rumi took out an envelope from her coat pocket. It was the same one Monobe had shoved back at her.

She threw it down in front of Emi.

"Use this to start your life over…is what I want to say, but there's hardly enough money in there for that."

Upset though Emi was, she still picked up the envelope. "What's this…?"

"I'm letting you go. You're just two pitiful children," Rumi said.

"Who are you to look down on us?" Emi said angrily.

Rumi looked back at her with frosty eyes. "You were born with powers no human should have and were raised in an environment no better than a trash heap. You *are* pitiful."

Rumi's lips were trembling lightly. She looked like she was about to cry. Aoyama jerked toward her, but she held out a hand to stop him.

"You ought to live in a city," she said. "It'll be easier to get government support. Don't go back to your current address. Don't go back to your parents' place, either. Your brother will drag you back without a doubt. If you can, you should quit your job, too. Considering everything that happened, you might have to anyway. I won't say anything. If he comes to me, I promise to chase him off. As for the rest…"

Rumi took a breath and said, "The rest you'll have to figure out yourself."

Emi's face lit up like a flower blooming. "I can have him?"

Rumi didn't answer.

With a brilliant smile, Emi said, "I can ■■■■■ him, right?"

"We're going home," Rumi proclaimed loudly, interrupting her. Aoyama hadn't heard what Emi had said.

Rumi's expression was complicated. She turned her back on the other woman. Aoyama nodded without a word and followed after her.

After leaving the room, he turned around one more time. Emi had Jan resting on her knee. She was crying quietly. The two of them were the only things lit in the room, and they were shining.

"The pietà," Aoyama mumbled without thinking.

Rumi covered his mouth. "You shouldn't say that," she said and walked off without turning around again.

Aoyama didn't turn again, either.

* * *

This kind of work was perfect for me.

Online, there was no shortage of complaints from girls in the same profession.

"How dare he lecture me after we do it? Shitty bastard. Die. You think you're so slick, asking to see me outside the shop when no one's paying attention."

"Got another dirtbag pestering me today! Just one round, he said. What's up with that? No way in hell, idiot."

"Why do I gotta text an old fart who doesn't read Japanese? It's hard labor. Do me a favor and die already."

"Seriously, don't get it twisted. Dating? Are you kidding me? Why did you think I'd go out with you?"

I didn't relate at all.

My customers were all kind and courteous. They never did

anything obscene. We only ever fell asleep together. Then they would thank me, leave me money, and go away satisfied.

The shop told me I would have to be prepared to do *it*, but I haven't had to even once yet.

This job was seriously a blessing. This world was filled with nice people.

I now knew that I had value. I was meant to be loved and cherished.

It was true what they say: If you want to change others, you must first change yourself.

With a simple shift in perspective, people started treating me kindly, and I was able to be kind to them back.

That wasn't because of my job, but there was one reason I was glad I started doing this work.

Money.

My salary at my last job had taken a nosedive. I was told that it was abnormally high to start with, but a fifth of the amount was not enough to feed two mouths.

Even with the money that woman—Sasaki, her name was—had given us, after renting a new apartment and buying clothes, we had almost no money left. She had told us to seek government assistance, but they would have asked questions we didn't want to answer, like what our relationship or household status was. It would have been unbearable. Besides, I was a full-time employee at Moriya Foods, so they wouldn't have given us anything anyway.

That was why, even though I had finally gotten hired by a major company, one whose prestige far surpassed my abilities, I had no choice but to quit.

Instead, I started my current job.

At first, I was afraid. Seeing the naked body of a man reminded me of my brother.

On top of that, I was prejudiced, too. I was working this job to make money as quickly as possible. It was just a one-time gig. I planned to find a proper career.

However.

Upon working up the courage and giving it a try, I realized there

was no better job in the world.

Even though the men and I were both naked, we never did anything dirty. We only held each other as we slept. For so little, I was able to receive money rivaling my old salary.

Come to think of it, he'd told me something long ago.

Humans became ashamed of their nakedness after a monster called Nāḥāš seduced the first woman and she ate the apple. Having eaten the apple, humans came to know evil and became embarrassed of their naked bodies.

I thought about everything that had happened as I went home.

That day, I slept with five men. All of them were cute like infants. I was happy.

I wasn't wrong.

He had told me as much.

"You are Gabriel, the left hand of God, the angel of love."

At the time, I couldn't imagine myself as someone so magnificent.

However, when I started this job, I came to believe it. I bestowed my love upon others, the way he had said.

That was why it wasn't wrong for me to continue in this line of work.

My job was to give love to other people.

That was why he had said what he did.

"I love you, but I do not want you to love me."

It must not be good for me to love a specific person. That was what I thought.

But even so.

"I'm home!" I called as I opened the door.

He jumped at me with nearly enough force to knock me over and wrapped himself around my legs. When I smiled at him, he laughed like he was happy from the bottom of his heart.

There was no one more adorable. There was no one more precious.

He couldn't speak yet, but somehow, while I was away at work, he cleaned the apartment. He cooked, too—simple fare. He was quick to fall asleep, so unfortunately, we weren't able to go out

together.

"What are we having today?" I asked.

He didn't answer, but there was bread on the desk.

Emotion surged up within me, and I embraced him tightly.

Ms. Sasaki might be a good person.

Good intentions or not, he had caused trouble for a lot of people. Apparently, there were people still suffering because of him. Even so, Ms. Sasaki hadn't reported him to the police.

She must have been responsible for his current state as well. I didn't know what or how, but if this was within her means, she should have been able to kill him. But she hadn't. That was why I was sure she was my ally, that she was a good person.

That being said, I couldn't become the person she wanted.

We were not children to be pitied.

I looked at him with his innocent smile. At the moment, he was cute and nothing more.

And yet.

He possessed a magnificent power and a magnificent goal.

The millennium kingdom.

Yes, that was what he called it. I should have asked him more when I had the chance. But even if I had, I might not have understood anyway, seeing as I knew nothing about Christianity.

The millennium kingdom. A glorious world under Jesus Christ's reign. A world free of war and hatred.

That was his dream. His methods might have been wrong, but his motives had been pure and beautiful.

I believed in him. He could surely make it a reality.

Through means that didn't hurt anyone and were far smarter and more righteous than the present ones.

I felt warmth on my cheek. He was pressing his palm on my face. From his touch, warmth bloomed through my entire body.

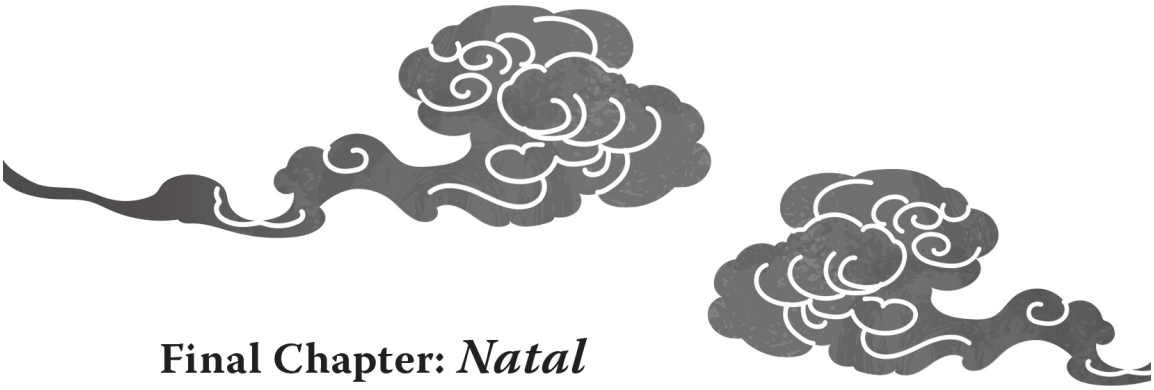
I was so happy I could cry.

He couldn't speak yet, but…someday, he was sure to return to the way he had been.

"I can't wait for you to grow up," I said.

Even when I talked to him, there was never a response.

“I love you, my Lord.”



Final Chapter: *Natal*

† † †

Moriya Foods' employees and the facility staff were successfully freed from the brainwashing and returned to their normal lives. It was happily ever after for everyone.

But of course, that wasn't what happened.

The commotion became a hot story and was widely reported on. After both Rumi and I had reported it as third-party witnesses, we quickly fled the scene. Apparently, the strange towerlike object had collapsed, causing not only injuries but deaths.

On top of that, in the surrounding gloomy and overgrown bamboo grove, they found an esoteric collection of things. For instance—

"They must have been people," Rumi suddenly said to me.

"What?" I said, my voice cracking.

Rumi threw her magazine onto the desk. Written on the cover in large yellow letters was the headline BRAINWASHING FROM A TO Z: THE YOUTHS WHO WASTED THEIR LIVES ON THE SPIRITUAL. She sat down on the couch.

"I'm talking about the 'deer,'" Rumi said.

I paused, not comprehending.

She took a sip of her coffee before going on. "I'm talking about the ritual Shimamoto participated in. On the sixth day of his part-time job, he said they had him dissect frogs. Something about that

story was odd to me. There were people from the Deer, Bird, Rabbit, Fish, and Frog rooms. Presumably, they were all made to dissect the animals of their respective rooms. According to Shimamoto, he saw in his periphery a person dissecting large numbers of rabbits—he was able to identify the carcasses as those of rabbits, but he said the person two away was dissecting 'some large animal.' Why?"

I gave the question some thought and started to feel sick. I hadn't been there, but I could picture the scene in my head. I thought about the magazine Rumi had read: ANOTHER VICTIM GONE MISSING! A MYSTERIOUS, LUCRATIVE PART-TIME JOB? THE ORGAN BLACK MARKET EDITION.

Countless animal carcasses. A room splattered with blood and viscera. Among them, the corpses of—

"I don't like the picture you're hinting at…," I said in a strangled voice.

Rumi laughed. "It's just a guess. A hypothesis. But it could be correct."

That was right. There was no guarantee that it wasn't.

In the woods surrounding the facility overgrown with various trees, they found traces of a number of people.

Jan, the person who had commanded the terrible deeds to be done, was most likely gone. The devotees who had carried out his orders had no memories. The responsibility naturally fell on the owner of the land, Hidemitsu Moriya. However, like the other followers, he had lost his memory, too.

Two weeks after the incident, Mr. Moriya took blanket responsibility and stepped down from his position. Even after his resignation, the investigation into him would no doubt continue. It made my heart hurt to think about it.

We had let the mastermind go. We hadn't told the police the complete truth.

Rumi might have made the final decision, but I was an accomplice, too.

"You look concerned," Rumi said, as if she had read my mind. "I won't tell you not to worry, but…even if we told the truth, no one

would have believed us."

True enough.

There were people who would believe the idea of religious brainwashing, but what Jan had done was different from normal manipulation.

Usually, the perpetrator cuts their victim off from the outside world, makes them believe they have no one to rely on, and controls them with bouts of violence. It happens over a long period of time. However, Jan was different. All it took was hearing a few of his whispered words—no, merely setting eyes on him was enough to turn his victim into a doll that would do as he said.

Who would believe a normal human possessed such a power?

Hypothetically, suppose I told the police, "A nineteen-year-old boy named Haruki Kashiwagi rounded up social outcasts and performed religious rituals. The rituals are suspected to have included illegal acts like murder. Everyone in Moriya Foods, from the executives to the employees, was brainwashed. All Hidemitsu Moriya did was provide a location. He doesn't know anything."

The police would treat my testimonial as the ramblings of a madman, and after cutting out half the details at random, they would conclude that Moriya Foods was a front for a religious group.

If that happened, innocent people would end up heavily punished.

In that case, spinning the incident as gruesome murders perpetrated by a collective of youths with nowhere to go resulted in fewer sacrificial lambs, even if it was a lie.

He was just a victim, but—

I looked at the picture of an emaciated Hidemitsu Moriya on my phone and felt miserable.

"What do you think they're doing now?" I asked, changing the topic to drive the image of Mr. Moriya's face from my head.

A letter came from Emi Shimamoto a few days ago. It contained only what was probably her current address, written tinily in beautiful handwriting that suited her.

"Who knows. I bet they're living a surprisingly normal life," Rumi said.

She said it as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. I was a little taken aback.

"When you say *normal*…?" I ventured.

"Oh, is that unacceptable? I understand how you feel. He denied it, but he probably wanted to be Jesus Christ and save everyone. However, that is an overly childish fantasy. He caused trouble for many people. Looking at it objectively, he was a regular criminal, and criminals don't deserve forgiveness, right?"

"That's not what I meant." I sat down across from her. "I was only wondering whether it was okay to leave a person who had such strong powers alone. I don't know what you did, but…at the time, he just looked like he was sleeping. Now that he's woken up, don't you think he'll do it all again?"

"Don't worry." Rumi socked me on the left side of my chest. "He's inside me."

"What do you mean?"

"I opened the door, took him in, and closed it again."

"That doesn't explain anything…"

She ignored me completely and bit into a slice of roll cake.

Well, I also didn't want to pry any further. I was curious to know, but if Rumi wanted to tell me, she would eventually. That was the kind of person she was. Her silence implied that she didn't feel like talking about it yet. In any case, Jan was no longer dangerous. His disgustingly magnificent powers were gone. For the time being, that was what I gleaned from her explanation.

"All right, enough about Jan," I said. "What about Emi?"

"She's living a normal life. That's what I think." Rumi swallowed some more tea and cake. An animalistic groan came from her throat. "I suppose we should check in on her once in a while. I'm worried her brother might try to do something to her, too."

I scowled in anger toward the other man and remembered what had happened a few days ago.

Youta Shimamoto had paid the Sasaki Agency a visit, bringing with him a blunt weapon like a steel pipe.

Rumi had sensed the danger and called the police. Thanks to her quick thinking, they managed to avoid a physical altercation, but

Youta had intended to break down the door with the pipe, so the entrance to the office was a wreck. He was arrested on charges of criminal damage, unlawful entry, and attempted injury.

Moreover, on top of the physical damage, there was a good chance he had spread bad rumors about their business on the web.

In the last month, there had been a flood of negative comments on the review pages for the agency, and on the building's website, we were now listed as a "public restroom," when we used to be a "fortune teller."

We were going to sue for both the breaking and entering and the slander, but Youta was a first offender, and he was more reputable in the eyes of society than we were. He would most likely get off easy.

Youta had screamed at the police who had responded to our call as they dragged him away. I had never seen an uglier expression on anyone before. More than the creepy religious group Jan had created, more than everything that had happened during the case, his face in the moment was the most terrifying of all.

"You're right," I said to Rumi. "I wish I could help her, but…I don't think there's anything we can do."

"You're a kind person. I'm sure if you were to listen quietly to her talk, that would be help enough," she said. "Why not take that chance to persuade her to join the Pádraig Aoba Church?"

"Hold on, I don't—"

"I'm joking," she said, laughing out loud. Then her expression turned serious. "…But not completely. It's a shame."

"What is?" I asked.

"She has an extremely weak sense of self." Rumi looked off into the distance. "It's understandable. She's a victim. Nonetheless… before she found a job, she was under her brother's thumb. After she joined Moriya Foods, she did what Jan told her… Considering her personality, what do you think will happen to her now that she's been tossed into the world all of a sudden? If you take into account her looks… There are plenty of people in the world as awful as Mr. Shimamoto and as dangerous as Jan. She'll be the perfect target for them. Better for her to be under the control of upright people like your folks than to be caught by fiends. That's what I really believe."

"You're belittling her," I said, looking at her straight on. "You were the one who told her to decide for herself. And she chose to live with Jan. She can make her own decisions. I know you're uneasy, but it'll be okay. I'm sure of it."

"I hope so," she muttered. She placed her fork down on the plate. "It might be easier to understand using a parent-and-child dynamic. Take, for instance, a parent who passes on their dream of being a first-rate pianist to their child and makes their child undergo strict piano lessons—'passing on their dream' is a pretty way to put it—but eventually, the child will start aiming to become a top pianist themselves.

"This is a parent and child we're talking about, so it can be taken as part of the child's education. Besides, the child might actually enjoy piano and work hard for their own sake. Once they develop a sense of self, they might abandon the path of the piano, too. Even so, if the parent forces them to continue, it will become abuse."

"Um, what are you trying to say exactly?"

"The problem is that the same dynamic can occur between two adults. When a person with no will of their own meets a person they can trust, they end up doing whatever the other person says. They are two separate people, but at some point, the weak person ends up adopting their partner's desires as their own. Even when brainwashing isn't involved. Not to mention, at the very end, she—"

The words Rumi had cut off. The words Emi had said with a joyful smile. She had seemed truly happy.

However…

I couldn't sit still anymore. I grabbed my bag and stood up. "I'll contact my dad. I don't know if it'll help, but I'll call her… I'll listen to her."

"You might as well." Rumi seemed like she was about to say something but stopped in the middle. Her hand hung in the air momentarily before she withdrew it. "Good luck," she whispered, forcing a smile onto her face.

"Rumi…"

"If you're going to go, you should hurry up."

I nodded and dashed out the door.

I was worried about Rumi, but Emi was the priority at the moment, surely.

I can raise him, right?

It was exactly as Rumi said.

Emi had replaced her own goals with Jan's.

And according to Rumi, Emi was just as powerful as Jan.

For her to raise a person—to raise Jan, that implied…

Her rapturous smile popped into my head.

Those two should never have met.

* * *

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